Chapter 2

PEASANT SOCIETY, PEASANT MOVEMENTS AND FEUDALISM IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

by

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I. THE PEASANT ECONOMY

The European peasantry has been a disappearing class since the dawn of industrial capitalism and the overwhelming majority of peasant economies today are to be found in Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, an examination of peasant economies within the framework of European feudalism is not altogether beside the point when we are considering the general problem of peasant movements. First, the characteristics of the peasant economy in certain parts of medieval Europe are very well documented. The evidence confirms that its fundamental characteristics are found widely separated in time and place, an indication of the strength, almost the indestructibility, of this type of social organisation. Second, we must recognise that, owing to the great influence of European science and culture, at any rate until recently, the ways of looking at peasant economies and at the relationships between peasants and other classes (especially landowners) have been greatly influenced by the historical experience of medieval Europe. This is true of terminology – the terminology associated with feudalism, for example. It is also clear from the writings of modern sociologists and social anthropologists that they frequently have the institutions of medieval feudalism as a framework of reference when they are discussing modern peasants, in Europe or outside. Third, some of the actual institutions and social attitudes of medieval feudal society were transferred by European conquerors to other parts of the world. The Spanish and Portuguese colonies in South and Central America are obvious illustrations of this point.

Peasant economies varied considerably in detail from region to
region of medieval Europe. The Mediterranean zone, with its warm dry climate and light soils, was able to support such crops as the vine and the olive, which could not be easily cultivated in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe. Central and East European agriculture on the other hand was given its special characteristics, not merely by the long winters from which these parts of Europe suffered but also by the importance of the forests until well after the end of the Middle Ages. Within contrasting climatic zones there were other contrasts, between mountains, plains and river valleys. These were chiefly important in determining the balance between arable and pasture in agricultural systems.

But in spite of the differences between peasant economies, which were determined by differences in the natural environment, there were similarities which, from our point of view, were much more important. These similarities arose from the fact that the peasant economy was essentially self-subsistent. Peasant households were family-based, and whether the family was nuclear or extended, its labour was the principal labour force on the holding; the bulk of the produce on the holding was used to sustain the family; and the year-by-year reproduction of the economic life of the holding was based mainly on seed, implements, livestock, and so on, derived from within the holding. Grain provided the cheapest foodstuff for the medieval peasant and consequently, even in areas which were favourably situated for the production of such cash crops as wine, wool, flax, and so on, there was always a strong element of arable farming for subsistence.

A striking illustration of the near-indestructibility of this type of economy in the Middle Ages is provided by the way in which villages which seem to have been completely blotted out of existence during the Hundred Years War in France reappeared after the restoration of relatively peaceful conditions. Crops and livestock had been stolen by marauding soldiers, the buildings had been razed to the ground, the inhabitants had been killed or dispersed, but after the war new immigrants rebuilt the houses and occupied the same arable fields, meadows and pastures which had been allowed to revert to scrub during the fighting.1

The fact that the peasant economy of the Middle Ages was largely self-subsistent meant that peasants could have existed without the help - or interference - of the other classes of feudal society. Village com-

munities were conscious of being immemorial institutions, older than the lords who exacted rents and other payments from them. It is, however, true that lordship in peasant society was also very ancient, and of varied origins, sometimes resulting from conquest, sometimes from social differentiation within peasant communities, sometimes from assertions of power involving the imposition of "protection" when military force openly regulated social relationships. The peasants often accepted overlordship as a natural fact of their existence, but there was always another tradition which corresponded better to the facts: that lords were an unfortunate and unnecessary imposition upon them. The medieval peasant world was, therefore, very self-contained, so that although production for the market by peasants is found very early, it was always possible to make a clear distinction between the product which remained on the holding at the disposal of the direct producers, and that which was taken directly as tithe, or rent in kind, or sold in order to pay rents in cash, taxes, ecclesiastical dues. The amount of cash spent on purchases of luxury was negligible - even peasants with vineyards drank water - and the amount spent on farm equipment or building materials was very small. In other words, when the peasants turned an important part of their product into cash, that cash left their hands almost immediately and they had very little to show for it. Why else is it that, in contrast to Roman villas, excavated medieval village sites hardly ever yield any number of finds of coins?

The settlement patterns of medieval European peasant society was by no means homogeneous. In flat or gently undulating terrain, as in the English Midlands or north-eastern France, where conditions favoured extensive grain production, the characteristic settlement was the large nucleated village. In mountainous or broken terrain where pastoral activity was relatively more important, dispersed settlements in hamlets, or even isolated farmsteads, were to be found. Dispersal was also facilitated where, instead of open fields and intermixed parcels of land, peasant holdings were consolidated and enclosed, so that the farm house could be built on the holding instead of in the village. But these patterns did not invariably result from the conditions described. In Italy and other Mediterranean countries peasants who might be primarily pastoralists often lived together in fortified villages which were almost urban in character, for the sake of protection. Where cash crops, such as the vine, predominated, common rights over the arable were eliminated and dispersal was facilitated.

In spite of all this, probably the majority of peasants inhabited villages and hamlets rather than isolated farms and lived from a combination of arable and pasture farming. This type of mixed farming involved at least some degree — sometimes a considerable amount — of communal regulation of vital aspects of economic life, such as access to common pastures and woodland, routine of ploughing, harrowing, sowing, reaping and harvesting on arable fields, control of quarries, fisheries and other natural resources. These necessary functions of economic life were the basis of the cohesion of the village community. The capacity for organisation in pursuit of social and political demands arose naturally from the day-to-day experience of peasants. So although peasants were much weaker than feudal lords in many different ways — lack of armed force, lack of support from other social groups, inability to fight battles far away from their holdings and over a long period of time — they should not be regarded as completely powerless, for they were capable of tenacious common action. Wace, the twelfth-century writer attributed a consciousness of this capability to the Norman peasants in his verse chronicle of the Dukes of Normandy:

Et s'il nus velent guerrier
Bien avum contre un chevalier
Trente a quarante paisans . . .

II. PEASANTS IN FEUDAL SOCIETY

The European feudal society in which medieval peasants comprised the majority of the population had many specific features not found in other societies based on a peasant economy. All the same, the types of possible relationship between landowning minorities and peasant majorities are fairly limited, so that in spite of the specific features of medieval European feudalism, varying much, of course, from one region to another, many of its characteristics are to be found elsewhere and in other epochs. The term ‘feudalism’ has, of course, provoked much debate. Many medieval historians prefer to reserve it for the institutions which arose from the spread of the hereditary military fief (feudum) in certain West European countries between about the ninth

1 'If they want us to fight, we have 30 or 40 peasants for each knight'. The part of Wace’s chronicle describing the revolt is partly printed as an appendix in L. Delisle, Etudes sur la condition de la classe agricole et l’état de l’agriculture en Normandie au Moyen Age (1851); see also Hugo Anderson’s edition of 1879 for the complete account.
and twelfth centuries.\footnote{R. Coulborn (ed.), Feudalism in History (1956).} This method, by which great landowning lords – kings, dukes, counts, even bishops and abbots – exchanged land for the military service of armed horsemen, gave rise to many social practices and beliefs, in brief the culture known as 'chivalry', which lasted much longer than the original mechanism for mobilising military force. But feudal institutions defined in this way involved only the ruling groups of medieval society, feudal rulers at the top, the knights at the bottom.

'Feudalism', however, is a term which has a much wider and still valid meaning. This wider definition is the one which lays stress on the relationship between all classes of society, not merely on certain relationships within the ruling class. It is therefore useful when discussing the position of the peasantry. In this sense, feudalism is a system of economic and social relationships based on the legalised and institutionalised claim of a ruling group to a substantial part of the surplus of peasant production. The members of the ruling group usually appear as landowners, though the concept of landownership is by no means precise, for it often appears as the ownership of rights over the working occupiers of the land, rather than of ownership of the land itself. Since, as mentioned earlier, the ruling group was not economically necessary to peasants, who already effectively possessed their own means of subsistence (contrasted, for instance, with propertyless wage workers), the element of coercion in the transfer of the peasant surplus to the lord was quite open. It was guaranteed by the possession by the lords of military force – that armed cavalry which was associated with feudal institutions in the narrower sense. But, since the exercise of force is best legitimised by legal sanction, lords from high to low developed rights of private jurisdiction for the regulation of their relations with the peasant communities. At a time when population was scarce and there were great tracts of uncultivated wood and waste, it was necessary to restrain peasant migration, as well as to have a legal basis for demanding personal services, rents in money, in labour and in kind. As far as possible, therefore, peasants were enserfed. In the historical context of early medieval European society this meant the extension to free peasants of laws of slavery derived partly from Roman law, partly from Germanic law and partly newly worked out for the varying circumstances of different European territories.

Although the relations between the lords and the peasants were the
most important determinants of the general character of medieval European feudal society, there were many complicating factors. Other classes grew in importance with the expansion of the European economy. The most important of these, naturally, were those connected with production for the market, merchants interested in international and regional trade, manufacturing artisans, and all the other groups, such as victuallers, who were inseparable from urban growth. But urban specialisation was not the only consequence of growth. Concentrations of political power involved increasing numbers of persons in administrative activity, the beginnings of bureaucracies. These were at first mainly ecclesiastics, the only literate persons. The increasingly complex public and private jurisdictions enlarged the legal profession. Out of a combination of administrative needs and intellectual activity came abbey and cathedral schools, then universities. War, even then, made enormous demands on the resources of the State, giving rise to elaborate taxation systems, credit arrangements with bankers, demands for war supplies, and so on, further complicating the social structure. The political interests of medieval merchants, bankers, lawyers and administrators normally coincided with those of the feudal lords, but this was not invariably the case. Artisan interests would usually be closer to those of the peasant class from which many of them sprang. But again this was not invariably the case. Hence, when there was a confrontation between peasants and lords, other social groups might adopt attitudes which one might not have expected and which, on the surface, might seem contrary to their class interests.

Further complications arose from the fact that neither lords nor peasants were homogeneous social groups with simple aims. The most important divisions within the ranks of both lords and peasants were economic. Lords of great estates whose incomes depended on the exploitation of large numbers of serflike peasants could be expected to have a different attitude to the peasants from the lesser gentry, who are often found to be more dependent for their incomes on the use of hired labour on their demesnes than were the greater lords. They would therefore be more interested in low wages than in maintaining unfree peasant status. It is sometimes suggested that there was a division of attitude as between lay and ecclesiastical lords. This was not normally the case. Old-established monasteries whose income came from the big estates of traditional structure shared the lay aristocrats' distrust of the peasants. Sometimes they were even harsher than the laity. It is not among the great ecclesiastic landlords that we find
more sympathetic attitudes to the peasants, especially not among the monastic landlords. Sympathy was more often found, as one would expect, among the lower clergy, the parish priests. It could also be found among the clerical intelligentsia in the universities, who were perhaps aware of the egalitarian strand in the Christian tradition. A critical attitude towards unfree legal status is also found among some lawyers.

The peasant class also was socially divided. As early as records exist we are aware of the contrast in the medieval village between the rich peasants, the laboureurs, and the smallholders, the manoeuvriers, who supplemented their incomes by wage labour, hunting or the practice of a craft. Again, by no means all peasants were reduced to serfdom. Free peasants are found in varying numbers in all European countries throughout the Middle Ages. Some of the free peasants were rich but many were poorer than serfs. Naturally, different social situations affected the attitudes of different groups among the peasants. On the whole, however, it is remarkable that social differences within the peasantry had fewer political consequences than one might expect. This is due to many factors. For one thing the style of life of rich peasant families with big holdings was always much nearer to that of poorer peasants than it was to that of the gentry. For another, peasant holdings tended to be impermanent. The rich peasants of one generation might be the poor of the next. And even the richest peasants did not hire wage labour on a big scale. Hired labourers were often younger sons of other peasant households. There was no sharp and permanent conflict in peasant society between employers and hired men. The social division between peasants and lords was that which mattered most in rural society, as the history of peasant movements shows.

III. THE CHRONOLOGY OF PEASANT MOVEMENTS

Peasant movements, varying in intensity from armed rebellion to almost imperceptible pressure on seigneurial administration, occurred during the whole of the medieval period. Owing to the uneven distribution of the surviving evidence it is dangerous to compare the

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1 The best and most recent survey of the medieval European peasantry is by G. Duby L'économie rurale et le vie des campagnes dans l'Occident médiéval (1962), translated into English (1968) as The Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West.
amount of peasant discontent in one region with that in another, or in one epoch with another. The general impression given in surveys of medieval social history is that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were the epoch par excellence of open conflict between lords and peasants, as though their relations had been quite idyllic before then. One writer even contrasts the period of peasant war in Germany, in the early sixteenth century, with the situation during the whole of the previous period, which he refers to as the epoch of la bonhonie médiévale. This view of medieval society, though by no means uncommon, is surely unjustified. Not only were there bitter conflicts between lords and peasants in the last two centuries of the Middle Ages, but there are good reasons for supposing that this was also the case in earlier times as well. It may well be, in fact, that our chief reason for supposing an exacerbation of the situation in the later Middle Ages is simply that the surviving evidence is more abundant. It is tempting, of course, to associate the increase in social tension with the crises of the later Middle Ages, whether this is seen in terms of economic stagnation caused by falling population and falling demand for agricultural produce or in terms of increased seigneurial exploitation resulting from the undoubted crisis of the seigneurial economy. An examination of the facts will, however, without necessarily leading us to underestimate the social tensions of the later Middle Ages, show that these were by no means without precedent.

Although Alfonso Dopsch insisted that peasant discontent was by no means unknown in the Dark Ages, the documentary evidence is imprecise. Just as the historians of the Late Empire can say little more than that the revolts of the Bcaudae seem like peasant wars against the State, so Gregory of Tours’ story of the violent reaction of the people of the region of Limoges in 579 against heavy land taxes indicates little more than general rural discontent. But in the Lombardic Edict of Rothari (643) there is already more precise evidence. Chapters 279 and 280 of this edict are entitled De concilio rusticanorum and De rusticanorum seditionem (sic) and refer to organised, armed movements by serfs or slaves under the leadership of free men. Conspiracies (contributiones) of serfs in Flanders and elsewhere are mentioned in an

1 This is the case even in the survey by G. Duby mentioned above.
4 E. A. Thompson, Peasant Movements in Late Roman Gaul and Spain, Past and Present, no. 2 (1929).
imperial capitalary of 821, and the serf owners are instructed to suppress them. Such scattered references not only show the existence of peasant discontent, but indicate that elementary forms of common organisation were already present. These had an important future with the later development of rural communes capable of negotiating on equal terms with the feudality. A better documented example of an early peasant movement comes from northern Italy between 882 and 905. It resembles closely those of a much later date, revealing many of what one might call the classic features of peasant grievances and peasant action against the territorial overlord. It was a quarrel between the peasants of Limonta on Lake Como with their lord, the abbey of St Ambrose, Milan. The main point at issue was the labour services of olive gathering and pressing which the abbey was claiming, and which the peasants resisted. As happened later in other lands, they not only objected to the labour services as such, but brought in the issue of personal status as well, claiming first to be imperial aldones (freedmen), later to be at least imperial serfs. These claims to a protected status, well short of freedom, are analogous to the claims of some English peasants to certain privileges of tenants on alienated crown lands, the 'ancient demesne' of the crown. In both cases they hoped to use the authority of the sovereign to restrain the demands of the immediate lord.¹

Peasant movements of all sorts occur during the formative period of feudal society during the period of expanding trade and urbanisation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, during the period of extreme population pressure before about 1350, as well as during the critical years of the later Middle Ages. We have a peasant war in Normandy at the end of the tenth century as well as in the prosperous regions of maritime Flanders and possibly in northern Italy at the beginning of the fourteenth; rebellions after 1350 in war-ravaged France and in peaceful England; more peasant wars at the end of the Middle Ages in declining Catalonia and in booming southern Germany. It would appear from these facts that, while local or short-term economic and political difficulties could well be precipitating causes of peasant movements, the basic factor must be found in the nature of the relations of the principle classes concerned, peasants and lords.

IV. PEASANT DEMANDS

What happened when peasant movements, violent or not, were precipitated was that peasants or their spokesmen articulated demands for the fulfilment of traditional peasant aims. These can almost entirely be summed up as the demand for land, for freedom, and for the reduction or abolition of rents and services—demands which are by no means confined to the medieval peasantry.

The demand for land, for the division and redistribution of big estates, is familiar in modern and contemporary movements. It is seldom found in the Middle Ages as a peasant demand, at any rate as far as arable land is concerned. Proposals for the confiscation, secularisation and redistribution of monastic estates occurred, of course, but the social backing for these usually came from the lesser and middling nobility. There was, however, a medieval equivalent to later demands for estate confiscation. This usually took the form of a demand for the abolition of lords’ monopoly of hunting and fishing rights and control of access to common pastures. This is quite understandable. Fishing and hunting, important survivals of the pre-agricultural gathering economy, were regarded as natural resources to which all should have access, at any rate all with a stake in the land represented by the arable holding. An aspect of the assertion of seigneurial rights by lords from the tenth century onwards was their claim to overriding property rights in the undivided woods, pastures and rivers within their lordship.

One of the earliest (though not abundantly) documented examples of an outright war between peasants and lords is that which took place in Normandy in 996 at the beginning of the reign of Duke Richard II. The matter at issue seems to have been, according to the earliest description by the chronicler William of Jumièges, the peasants’ assertion of their free hunting and fishing rights. It is unfortunate that the chronicler is not strictly contemporary, since he wrote nearly a century after the events described. He is, however, regarded as one of the most accurate of the historical writers of this period. The rising is described in much greater detail by an even later chronicler, writing in the middle of the twelfth century, the Channel Island versifier, Wace. He emphasises other aspects of peasant resentment at the extension of seigneurial jurisdiction and these may of course represent an interpola-
tion of what Wace knew to be twelfth-century grievances into a tenth-century context.

But this competition for the resources of wood, waste and water continued. It was an issue in movements of peasant discontent in northern Italy between the tenth and the twelfth centuries. It has been suggested that the fierce and implacable war between the heretical Apostles under Fra Dolcino and the armies mobilized by the bishop of Vercelli in 1304–7 was the consequence of the deprivation of peasant common rights by the growing urban communes.1 The demand for hunting and fishing rights occurs again in England in 1381, especially as embodied in the charters of liberties briefly extorted by peasants of the villages on the estate of the Abbot of St Albans. And it occurs in terms which echo previous medieval demands in the Twelve Articles of the German peasants in 1525, where the demand is for hunting and other common rights, not for a re-division of the arable. In fact the nearest approach to a claim for the arable part of landowners’ estates would seem to be the demand by peasants in Catalonia, at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries, that holdings abandoned as a result of population decline (the *casas roces*) should not be resumed by lords into demesne, but reissued to the peasants.2

The two other staple demands of most medieval peasant movements were normally closely connected, though it is not always easy to see which had priority. It was normal to argue that rents and services could not be arbitrarily increased, or indeed increased at all, at the expense of men of free condition. Which did peasants prize most, freedom or low rents? If these were mutually exclusive alternatives the historian could observe which choices, in practice, were made. But precisely because freedom and low rents went together, we cannot always tell which, at any given time, was the crucial issue. And of course in most cases it might be wrong to separate the one from the other.

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2 Gesta Abbatum Monasterii S. Aurelii Albani, tr (1869) pp. 318–31; Articles 4, 5 and 10 of the German peasant demands are in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, 11 (Univ. of Pennsylvania); P. Vilar, “Le déclin catalan du bas Moyen Âge”, *Estudios de Historia Moderna*, vi. For J. Vicenas Vives, however, the quarrel of the *casas roces* was that the landowners tried to make the remaining peasants pay the *casas* from the abandoned holdings.
Here again, the agitation of peasants, often non-violent, but not seldom breaking into violence, seems to differ little in essential character from one medieval epoch to another. In the conflict we have mentioned between the peasants of Limona and the abbey of St Ambrose, at the end of the ninth century, it will be remembered that status was the plea on which the peasants resisted increased labour services. In his account of the 996 peasant rising in Normandy, Wace puts into the mouths of the peasants, as a justification for their war against the whole range of seigneurial exactions, the statement *nus sumes homens come il le sunt*. The whole of the fluctuating battle between lords and peasants in England between the beginning of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century was fought for freedom as the guarantee of fair distribution of the product of the peasants labour. *Nulli servire volumus* was one peasant cry at the end of the thirteenth century in a conflict over increased services; 1 the end of bondage was the first article of the Mile End and Smithfield programmes in 1381; the end of servitude was linked with the abolition of the *malos usos* in fifteenth-century Catalonia; abolish serfdom, said the German peasants in 1525 for ‘Christ has delivered and redeemed us all without exception, the lowly as well as the great’; as late as 1549 the rebels of Norfolk under Kett asked ‘that all bondmen may be made free for God made all free with his precious blood shedding’. 2

V. FUNDAMENTAL CAUSES OF CONFLICT

The nature of the social and political programme of medieval peasants is to be explained, then, in very general terms by the pressures resulting from the lords’ attempts to maximise their incomes. It is of course a commonplace that at least from the tenth century onwards the market for an increasing range of the luxury commodities which were the main staple of international trade was expanding. This market was almost entirely composed of lay and ecclesiastical landowners, the overwhelming bulk of whose incomes was derived directly or indirectly from peasant rent in money, in kind or in labour. As more goods become available, customary expectations in aristocratic living standards rose. At the same time costs of war, of politics and of

administration also increased. Demands on peasants for rent and service were therefore not only always present, but tended always to be growing. Thus, the basic antagonism of landlord and peasant was a permanent element in the situation. This did not, however, exclude the establishment of an accepted equilibrium between the two sides. Peasant movements therefore occurred, not so much because of the permanent antagonism (though without this, there would, of course, have been no reason for them), but because of disturbances from time to time of uneasy equilibrium.

The tendency for demands on the peasant surplus to grow, being a function not only of the needs of individual estate owners but also of the growing needs of governments, was expressed not only as rent, or labour service or tithe but also as an ever-increasing tax burden. But from time to time the pressure could slacken, and peasant conditions could temporarily improve. When an equilibrium which embodied recent improvement of the peasants' conditions of life was disturbed, this could be a serious precipitant of peasant protest movements. Not that this type of disturbed equilibrium was the only one possible. The denial of improvements which might reasonably have been expected consequent on the improved bargaining position of peasants, could also lead to trouble. Too obvious a floating of the expected social role of the lords as the military protectors of rural society also represented a form of equilibrium disturbance. Political disturbances which would seem at first to be internal to the ruling class as a whole could lead to a general breakdown in social equilibrium, stimulating the formulation of traditional peasant aims.

VI. PRECIPITATING CAUSES OF INDIVIDUAL MOVEMENTS

(1) Conflicts over Rents, Services and Taxes

Many peasant uprisings, or movements of protest not necessarily involving violence, were caused by lords increasing their demands for rent of one sort or another. Disturbances in English villages in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries resulted from these circumstances. The peasants concerned almost always alleged a departure from customary practice by the lords. It is true that lords also riposted that they too were simply taking what was their customary right. Where custom ruled, innovations could only be justified by being shown to
be old-established. Who then was speaking the truth? There can be little doubt that in thirteenth-century England the innovators, the disturbers of equilibrium, were the lords. The upward trend of agricultural prices, rents, taxes and other burdens on agriculture is too well documented for us to question the general correctness of peasant complaints about increased services. In fact lords not infrequently took their stand on their customary right to increase rents and taxes arbitrarily. In 1261, peasants in Northamptonshire claimed as freemen the right only to pay a fixed tallage, while a new lord, shortly after acquiring the manor on which the peasants lived, had tallaged the whole village arbitrarily. Arbitrary as against fixed tallage was the issue between the Prior of Harmondsworth (Middlesex) and his tenants in 1278, when the peasants unsuccessfully tried to claim royal protection as former tenants of the crown. In 1279 the Abbot of Halesowen (Worcestershire) imposed an enormous fine in his private court on a servile tenant who had been the leader of a movement of resistance to arbitrary increases in both labour services and other dues (entry fines and marriage fees).  

The small-scale actions of English villagers in the thirteenth century were usually defeated. Supported by the greatest of feudal landowners, the King, the lords normally won in the royal courts, for the tide was running too strongly against peasant interests. This does not seem to have been the case in parts of France, Italy and other European countries. The period was, for some peasants in these countries, an era of stabilisation, marked precisely by gains which the English peasants failed to achieve, namely the fixing of customary rights at an acceptable level.

In the Paris region and northern France, village communities of villains acquired charters which emancipated them from the obligations of mainnere (death duty), chevage (poll tax) and formariage (payment for permission to marry) which were considered servile in character. The charters frequently stabilised, without abolishing, other lordly exactions such as tallage, and even gave limited rights of self-administration. In some cases these charters were acquired by fierce struggle. Seventeen villages of vine cultivators near the wine capital of Laon found themselves, like the burgesses of Laon itself, in conflict with the bishop, who in 1177 had revoked a charter they had already acquired. In 1185 the King intervened. The level of tallage was fixed, as were certain rents, and right of self-government by twelve échevins (judges) was given.

1 Hilton, 'Peasant Movements ...'
Attempts by the bishop to revoke these privileges were countered by threats of mass emigration, and by allying with the cathedral chapter, also the bishop’s antagonist, the villagers regained their privileges.\footnote{M. Bloch, Caractères originaux de l’histoire rurale française (1931), V, 2; A. Lechaire Les communes françaises (1890) pp. 81-96.} Not for long, however, for the monarchy went back on its support for the peasants, and after seventy years (1190-1259) of fluctuating fortunes, only one of the seventeen villages emerged with even minor privileges.

Sometimes collective privileges had to be bought at a heavy price, so that it could be that the gain was the lords’ in the short run.\footnote{Duby, op. cit., p. 479.} The fixing of conditions could, of course, only benefit peasants when the general level of rents and prices was rising. In reverse circumstances, fixed rights could only benefit the lord, particularly when he held jurisdiction and the power to enforce it. Even in the middle of the thirteenth century when the fixing of obligations was preferred by peasants to obligations which fluctuated arbitrarily at the will of the lord, such stabilisation of conditions was not always welcome. The 1247 custumal (statement of customary dues) of the village of Verson, belonging to the abbey of Mont St Michel, fixed peasant rents and services for a century and a half to come. But a contemporary poem written from the standpoint of the monks makes it clear that the background to this fixing of customs was one of peasant protest against the level of rents and services. It suggests that the custumal was imposed on them following the defeat of their protest.\footnote{Delisle, op. cit., Appendix viii for the ‘Courte des Vileins de Verson’; for the custumals, R. Carabie, La propriété foncière dans le très ancien droit normand, 1 (1945).}

On the whole, however, the charters granted to peasant communities seem to represent gains by peasant movements. The movements were not by any means always violent, but all made use of the built-in solidarity of the peasant community to get concessions from the lords. It should be emphasised, of course, that the lords were often in financial need and were prepared to sell privileges for money. Hence the chief beneficiaries on the peasant side were the well-to-do who had accumulated cash gained from production for the market. It is significant that the earliest of the European peasant communal successes were acquired where a market element in the economy was most advanced: in Italy P. S. Leicht saw the outcome of the dispute between the peasants of the Limonta region and the abbey of St Ambrose at the beginning of the tenth century (mentioned above) as heralding the achievement of
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... communal rights, through the acceptance by the lord of fixity of obligations. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, by a combination of pressure and purchase, the rural commune in central and northern Italy had already come into existence, a century or more in advance of the chartered rural communes of northern France.

In some countries, the gains made by the rural communes were long lasting. In spite of the devastations of the Hundred Years War, French peasant rights lasted at any rate until the sixteenth century. In other places there were earlier reversals of fortunes. If it is true that the incredibly bitter struggle in 1304-7 in northern Italy between Fra Dolcino and his followers and the armies of the bishop of Vercelli was the consequence of the usurpation of the rights of the rural communes by the politically and economically dominant urban communes, it would seem to show that previous peasant gains could not be maintained in the face of new and more formidable enemies than the rural lords. It has been observed that the rights of the Italian rural communes in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries were (in spite of the relatively advanced level of market production) essentially a feudal-manorial phenomenon, representing the striking of a balance between lord and peasant. But in the thirteenth century the expanding urban communes introduced a new element into the situation. Their policy now aimed at dissolving the older ties between landlord and tenant so as to eliminate all intermediary power between the city government and the inhabitants of the rural contado. This was a situation unique in medieval Europe and undoubtedly resulted in a deterioration of peasant conditions. In abolishing serfdom and proclaiming the equality of man, the rulers in the towns intensified their hatred and contempt for what they considered to be rural brutishness.¹

Peasant movements which had as their objective the stabilisation or reduction of the level of rent (rent being broadly interpreted here) necessarily involved primarily a confrontation with the lord. But though the historian can make distinctions between public and private authority, it is doubtful whether the peasant of medieval Europe was able to see much distinction between the agents of the State and those of the landed aristocracy. This is well illustrated by an early fourteenth-century English poem known as 'Song of the Husbandman'. Composed perhaps by some cleric close in social condition to the peasants, it lists quite indiscriminately those who take away from

the peasant the product of his toil: the collectors of the King’s taxes, the lord’s bailiff and other manorial officials. But the emphasis of the poem is heavily on the baleful effect of state taxes, to pay which the peasant has to sell off his corn, his stock and the agriculture equipment, for the tax collector ‘hunteth as hound doth the hare’.¹

It should not be a matter of surprise, therefore, that tax impositions were as important as demands for increased rents or services as precipitants of peasant discontent, or that the movements resulting from these impositions led to attacks by the peasants which ranged much more widely than assaults on tax collectors. One of the bitterest peasant wars of medieval Europe was that which occurred in the maritime provinces of Flanders at the beginning of the fourteenth century. This was the conflict which only ended with the defeat of an army of rebellious peasants and artisans by the French King, overlord of Flanders, at Cassel in 1328. The region had been a focus of discontent for a quarter of a century at least, and there must have been memories of the plebeian victory of Courtrai in 1302 against the combined forces of the French monarchy and the Flemish nobility. One of the main subsequent grievances had been the collection of indemnity taxes, begun as early as the Capitulation of Ath shortly after Courtrai (1304) and most recently renewed in 1322. But although densely populated, the area was not poor. The dead rebels after Cassel were well-to-do peasants, not serfs but freemen who hated the apparatus of power represented by the judges of the local courts of the Count of Flanders. By 1324 these officials and the tax collectors were being imprisoned and tithe payments were delayed. A further attempt (at Arques 1326) to impose another indemnity rekindled the revolt, and led to a terror against the pro-French nobility. By this time, to quote Henri Pirenne, it was ‘une guerre de classes entre les paysans et la noblesse’. The King of France intervened not only to punish an anti-French rising but to save the class on which French interests depended.²

It was the repeated imposition of an unaccustomed tax, the poll tax, levied in 1377, 1379 and 1380–1 which sparked off the rising in southeast England in the summer of 1381. As in Flanders, this disturbance of the equilibrium at one point led to a vast extension of the field of action, so that once the rebels had dealt with the tax collectors they turned on the lawyers, the corrupt local jurors, burnt the manor court

² H. Pirenne, *Le soulèvement de la Flandre maritime* (1900).
records and sacked the properties of persons such as the Duke of Lancaster who symbolised for them the evils of the regime. The social strata represented in the rising, including (as in Flanders) both peasants and artisans, were also by no means desperately poor or exceptionally underprivileged. It is probable that there had been attempts at a seigneurial reaction against the consequences of the population collapse— attempts to keep rents up and wages down to an unrealistic level— but these, though unsuccessful, had raised the temperature as far as relations between the ruling and the ruled classes were concerned, so that an extraordinary imposition like the poll tax would inevitably provoke a violent reaction.1

The second and most serious of the wars of the Catalan remensas in 1483 was sparked off in a not dissimilar manner. There had been for many years a seigneurial reaction against the consequences of the population collapse in the second half of the fourteenth century. The lords had attempted to step up rents and services, of which the most recently introduced were the most resented, the malos usos. With support even from the crown of Aragon and some of the crown lawyers the peasants arranged to buy out these exactions. But in 1481, the long drawn out negotiations were suddenly broken off and the lords tried to reimpose the malos usos. This brought about a confrontation between lords and peasants. Peasant leaders like P. J. Sala were no longer content simply to beg for the abolition of the malos usos on condition of compensation for the owners, but to demand the end of all rents and services. This they did not, of course, achieve but the successful waging of war by the militiamen was probably the necessary condition for the achievement of the demands of the ‘moderate’ wing of the remensas who were prepared to negotiate but not to fight. By the Sentence of Guadalupe the malos usos were abolished—after a century of agitation ranging from threats of death to the lords to armed struggle against them.2

(2) Wars and Political Crises

The military organisation of the Catalan peasants and their participation in the civil wars in the second half of the fifteenth century are a unique feature of medieval peasant movements. More frequently peasants were passive sufferers in the wars that were waged over their land by contenders between whom they were unable to make any

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2 J. Vicente Vives, Historia de los Remensas en el siglo XV (1945).
distinction. The peasants in France in the areas devastated in the course of the conflict between Plantagenet and Valois Kings submitted to burning and looting by French and English soldiers and freebooters of varying origin for many years before the outbreak in 1358 of the famous Jacquerie. The situation since the defeat of the French nobility at Poitiers in 1356 had been one of social and political chaos, but there seems to have been a sharp deterioration in the situation in 1358. The few authors who have studied this movement disagree about the precipitating causes. S. Luce thought that it was provoked by an order from the Regent allowing castellans (lords of castles) to requisition peasants' goods to victual their fortresses; J. Flammermont disagreed and suggested that the most likely immediate cause was a fight between peasants and brigands; G. Fourquin, the most recent interpreter of the Jacquerie, draws attention to the consequences of the developing civil war between the supporters of the Regent and the Parisians, allied to the King of Navarre. According to this view, there was in fact an intensification of requisitioning as of pillaging by the rival armies who were living off the country. But Fourquin points out that the rising was generalised over the whole of the Ile de France, including relatively untroubled and prosperous areas. The background of discontent here may, he suggests, have been an economic crisis caused by low grain prices and high industrial prices. However, he sees this as a crisis which dates back to 1315. In this case, the search for a precipitating cause to explain the events of 1358 is imperative. In view of the capacity of peasants even in the Parisian basin to live off their own, market factors hardly seemed to be an adequate explanation for the revolt breaking out.1

Apart from the reaction against the brigandage of a noble class which had shown itself militarily incompetent, the existence of sharp conflict within the French ruling class cannot be ignored as a predisposing factor to this widespread but short-lived uprising. Similar splits in the upper ranks of society are found on the eve of other peasant movements. There is no need to look for this factor in the case of occasional village movements such as one finds in thirteenth-century England, nor perhaps in the case of the type of slow peasant pressure which culminated with the purchase of communal privileges. But it is noteworthy that violent rebellions involving large numbers

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1 S. Luce, La Jacquerie, 3rd ed. (1894); J. Flammermont, 'La Jacquerie in Beauvaisis' Revue Historique (1879); G. Fourquin, Les compagnies de la région parisienne à la fin du Moyen Âge (1964) p. 253.
of peasants over a wide area often follow periods of political crisis which one would have thought would only have been the concern of governments, the landed aristocracy and the merchant capitalists in the towns. The rising of maritime Flanders must be seen in the context, not merely of local class antagonisms, but of the division of those elements among the nobility who had supported the anti-French actions of the Courts of the House of Dampierre, the Chauwaerts faction, and the pro-French Leliaerts, comprising the bulk of the nobility, the Francophile Count Louis de Nevers, who succeeded in 1322, and the patricians of the big towns. The English rising of 1381 in some respects could be seen partly as an outcome of the conflict between the Lancasterian faction of the aristocracy and those who were outside the influential circles at Court, a conflict which came out into the open in 1376 but which was by no means disposed of by 1381. As we have seen, the remensar in Catalonia actually participated, on the side of the crown, in the civil wars of the 1460s. These were political crises with their origins within the ruling groups of society. But there were other crises, too, perhaps even deeper, which also had the effect of releasing the energies of peasant communities and focusing their attention on the possibility of realising long-standing objectives. These crises, very important in a Europe dominated by a powerful institutionalised church, were partly political, but also emotional, spiritual and ideological, usually manifesting themselves as heretical movements.

(3) Religious Crises and Heresy

The relationship between social protest and heresy was by no means simple. No study of heretical movements which were supported by masses of poor people in town and country will get far if the heresies concerned are treated as changing currents of thought and feeling about the purposes of religion, in isolation from a social context. On the other hand, it is insufficient to treat such heresies as if the beliefs proclaimed were simply a more or less consciously assumed expression of social and political aims, thinly disguised in theological terms. All the same, beliefs are often taken up by people for other reasons than those which moved their originators, or early propagators. The acceptance and elaboration of fragments of the beliefs of Joachim, early thirteenth-century abbot of Fiore in Calabria, by the disoriented urban poor of the late medieval Low Countries throws no light on Joachim, but much on the social mentality of such movements as that of the Brethren of the Free Spirit. On the whole, extreme millenarian or
chiliastic beliefs in the Middle Ages seem to belong to urban rather than rural settings.\footnote{G. Leff, 
*Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* (1967); N. Cohn, 
*The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957); M. Rees, 
*Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (1969).} This is not surprising. A kingdom of God on earth in which property was held in common and in which love between the sexes was a matter for free choice was unlikely to appeal to peasants. The peasant communities were rooted socially and economically in the individual family holding which was passed from generation to generation by customary rules of inheritance. These things they wanted to strengthen. They might welcome the abolition of tithes, the expropriation of church property, the abolition of the ecclesiastical as well as the lay hierarchy. These ideas fell short of chiliastic dreams.

The Twelve Articles of the German peasants in 1525 repeat the substance of many peasant demands made in other countries throughout the Middle Ages - the abolition of serfdom, of excessive services, of heriots (death duties), the reduction of rents, enjoyment of common rights. The religious clauses of the Articles, emphasising the way of life of the gospels, demanding an elected priesthood and popular control over the disposal of tithes, shows how important had been the church reformers in influencing the thoughts of the rebels, perhaps in providing an opportunity and a stimulus comparable to the political upheavals which preceded other peasant movements. There is a long history behind these religious attitudes. The evangelical heresies which stressed the study and imitation of the life of Christ and the Apostles as seen in the gospels, and which minimised the sacramental and sacerdotal aspect of Christianity to the extent of advocating the virtual abolition of the institutionalised Church, go back at least as far as the eleventh century. It is not necessary here to answer the question: Did social radicalism precede and determine religious radicalism, or the other way round? The facts simply are that peasant aspirations arising out of their social and economic situation are at least as old as evangelical heresy; that this type of heresy was supported mainly, though not exclusively, by the poor of town and country; and that influential heretical movements sometimes acted as mobilising forces for peasant movements which might otherwise never have begun.

Various twelfth-century movements in which heresy had an obviously plebeian social basis - those associated for instance with Pierre de Brusys in the south of France, with Bon de l'Étoile in Champagne, Flanders and the Rhineland - are not well enough documented for us...
to identify them with rural rather than urban discontent. The movements associated with Arnold of Brescia and Peter Waldo almost certainly were, to begin with, primarily urban. The word texerast, weaver, became a synonym for heretic during this period. But the Pastoureaux in mid-thirteenth-century France were possibly of rural origin, if the biased reports of Adam Marsh are to be believed. There is no indication, however, of a specifically peasant programme; simply the determination to extirpate the clergy, uproot the monastic orders and attack the knights and the nobles. The Apostles of Fra Dolcino who, by the time they were crushed in 1307 seem to have numbered over a thousand, had been in existence as a heretical sect for some forty years. Yet, for all that has been written about the revolutionary character of their movement, they have left no programme with recognisable peasant demands. This is not to deny the relevance of the movement to our theme, since they were certainly a revolutionary element in the society of the time. It was the religious message which brought them together, but it is most unlikely that they could have been mobilised for the apostolic message were they not suffering from the social upheaval in north Italian rural society to which we have already referred.

The same is true of the radical wing of the Hussite movement. The Taborets and their militant millenarian temporary allies, the so-called Pilgrims, were called on to the stage, so to speak, by the politico-religious crisis of early fifteenth-century Bohemia, and through the organisation which religion gave them expressed their social aspirations. As we know, the social struggle was merged into the national war against the Catholic church, the Emperor and the Germans. The so-called extremists were crushed by the knight Jan Ziska and eventually, as the Unity of the Czech Brethren, the peasant evangelicals adopted so extreme a form of pacifism and quietism that it has been thought that their submissiveness encouraged the deterioration in peasant conditions which took place in post-Hussite Bohemia.¹

In many cases these peasant movements were triggered off by religious as well as by political crises. It is not surprising that the egalitarian implications of evangelical heresies should seem to fit their social aims, not to speak of the more direct social and political appeal of religious programmes which included the expropriation of the great

eclesiastical landowners. But the ideology of all medieval peasant movements was not uniformly expressed in terms of religion. J. Vicens Vives noted that the ideology of the Catalan *remens* movement came, surprisingly enough, from lawyers rather than from churchmen. He quotes the jurist Mieres, who is said to have influenced the peasants with the view that all men are free by natural law and have the right to be protected by their king against the nobles. There is no indication of the direct influence of lawyers in England on the peasant movement of 1381, though some of the pleaders hired by peasants to fight cases for them in the courts put forward arguments about all men being in origin free. Such ideas could not be kept in watertight compartments. Hence the rebels' outlook in England in 1381 was not unlike that of the Catalan *remens*. There was the same stress on free status and a clearly held though naïve political conception of a popular monarchy (or regional monarchies) with no intermediaries between the king and his people. In spite of what has been said about the influence of Wycliffe in 1381, the religious attitude of the rebels did not (like the later Lollards) involve doctrinal heresies (with regard to the Eucharist, for instance); they did, however, recommend the expropriation of the church hierarchy, a radical enough measure. The same predominantly social and political character of the ideas of rebels is found during the period of the revolt of maritime Flanders, linked with anti-clerical feeling, though not with heresy. It is perhaps of some significance that in these two last cases (the English and the Flemish risings) where the religious element was least marked, the participants do not seem to have come from disrupted peasant communities, but - and this applies particularly to the leadership - to have been, on the whole, successful producers of agricultural commodities for an urban-industrial market.

**VII. LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATION**

The problem of the ideology of peasant movements is closely connected with that of leadership. The egalitarian and libertarian outlook which is strongly marked in most movements, whether social-political or religious in overt motivation, could, partly at any rate, have been introduced from outside the peasant class. The socially radical strand in Christian thought must, it is often thought, have been brought to the illiterate peasant masses by priests or other members of the clerical order. Doleino was the son of a priest; priests such as John Ball and
John Wrawe were prominent in England in 1381; inevitably in Bohemia leaders and ideologists like Zelivsky and Koranda were drawn from the clergy; and after all Thomas Munzer, the early sixteenth-century German revolutionary was a cleric. Other leaders of peasant risings, not clerics, seem to have come to the peasantry from outside. Such were the members of the gentry at the time of the *Jaquiere* and in East Anglia in 1381, men who may afterwards have pretended to have been forced to assume leadership, but who in fact may very well have seen good reasons for throwing in their lot with revolt at the time. The greatest leader of the Bohemian Taborites was the knight Jean Zizka. Sometimes other classes provided leadership; the artisan Wat Tyler is often cited. But are there enough examples of leaders from outside the peasant class to enable us to make it a rule that peasant movements cannot throw up their own leadership?

One difficulty, naturally, is the vagueness of the descriptions of the origins of rebel leaders to be found in the medieval evidence. Artisans were probably not far removed from peasants even in the towns, not to speak of village artisans who were often enough also tillers of the soil. The lower clergy were often recruited from the younger sons of the lesser gentry, but boys of free or even unfree peasant families could occasionally achieve clerical status. But apart from the possibility of close family links between leaders from other groups and the peasants, there is in any case plenty of evidence that peasants themselves assumed the leadership of these movements. Wace's detailed description of the Norman rising of 996 gives no indication of any others than peasants being involved in the affair – and this is significant whether the chronicle reflects authentic tenth-century tradition or the social conditions of the twelfth century. Oisbert, the leader of the peasants of Verson in their struggle against the abbey of Mont St Michel, was *un vilain felon*. The isolated village rebellions in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England were normally led by a man or a group of men from the village community, the sort of people who were capable of organising a common fund and hiring a lawyer to plead for them. Zauncker, leader of the peasants of maritime Flanders, was a peasant, although one of the relatively well-to-do, as was Guillaume Karle, the principal leader of the Jaques in 1358. For all Vernetallat's *hidalgo* connections, he and Sali, leaders of the Catalan *remences*, were essentially peasants.

The origins of the leaders of peasant risings were, then, mixed. For various reasons, clerics, townsmen and members of the gentry
might identify themselves with these movements and emerge as leaders. But the peasants were not an inert and unthinking mass. They were capable of producing their own leaders whom they would probably trust more than they would trust outsiders, in spite of the fact that the leading peasants were almost certainly drawn from the ranks of the village rich. But such persons, as has already been suggested, were not divided by any great gulf from the poorer members of the community and were in any case those who were accustomed to the direction of village affairs in the local courts.

And so we find that an outstanding feature of many revolts in the Middle Ages was the firmness of organisation. Let us take the rising in maritime Flanders. Here was no undisciplined or easily dispersed mob. The existing administrative structure of the maritime regions of the county of Flanders were kept in being, the counts' bailifs simply being replaced by captains chosen by the peasants themselves. There was a proper military organisation, discipline was maintained and there was no drift to anarchy. But this should not surprise us. Stable village communities, even when not formally given rights of self-administration (as in some of the French or Italian charters), had a long tradition of common management based on the collective routines of husbandry. Even where village or manorial assemblies were presided over by the lords' officials, the conduct of affairs was normally in the hands of the villagers, those, that is, who knew and could declare local custom. Therefore, although peasant rebels might not wish to operate far from their home base or during periods when they had agricultural work to do, their capacity for organisation would be greater than that of uprooted persons who had lost their village base, or of urban artisans or journeymen whose life had less of collective routine about it.

During the English rising of 1381 various forms of organisation can be discerned. In a number of cases the subdivision of the shire, the hundred, appears faintly as the organisational basis of peasant mobilisation. In the Isle of Thanet (Kent) the parish organisation was used. The confederate townships in Hertfordshire who supported the townspeople of St Albans against the abbot were no doubt those owing suit to the abbey court under the ash tree; here, therefore, the organisational framework was seigneurial. But this was not all. New forms of organisation developed. It seems that, after the first mobilisation by village, parish and hundred, the movement was kept going by militants who organised themselves into companies operating on a regional basis. These are referred to in the judicial records as magnae societates, a phrase
which gave rise to the legend of the whole rising being planned by a ‘Great Society’.

These fairly well documented examples of coherent organisation based on existing, even official, institutions are striking enough. However, they cannot match the organisation of the Catalán remencas, which were more effective and longer lasting. This was partly because one of the main issues throughout the fifteenth century was the redemption of the malos usos by means of a money payment as compensation to the lords. This could only be discussed and eventually assessed at meetings of peasants. It was the policy of the Crown of Aragon and the jurists who were its advisers to promote this redemption in the interests of social peace. Peasant assemblies, therefore, had a legal basis derived from the patronage of the monarchy. In 1448, for instance, assemblies of fifty peasants, attended by royal officials, were to elect syndics for the discussion of the redemption payment. The nobles, of course, were hostile to the very idea of peasant assemblies, the monarchy’s attitude was not always favourable, but from this moment on peasant assemblies became unavoidable. By 1462 armed mobilisation was beginning which the monarchy had to accept in view of its difficulties with the nobility. The peasant leader Francisco Vermallat organised his army in the Montans on the basis of one man from every three households, and both politically and militarily the peasant forces kept their independence of the royal administration. This army was in existence until the nobles were defeated in 1471 and was capable of re-mobilisation in future periods of crisis, as in 1475 when sworn associations (sacramentales) of peasants refused to pay dues demanded by the church of Gerona, and of course in the 1480s under P. J. Sala.

When we move back in time we rely on chroniclers’ accounts rather than on the judicial and administrative records which illuminate fourteenth- and fifteenth-century movements. Now chroniclers who describe peasant movements were normally so appalled by the enormity of these subversions of the established social hierarchy that they paid little attention to forms of organisation. Ra Dolcino and his lieutenants must have had exceptionally good organisation and discipline to keep a large force in embattled existence for two or more years. But the writers describing the movement were more interested in denouncing it than in describing it accurately, so we get no convincing picture of organisational forms. However, the description by William of Jumièges of the movement of 996, short as it is, gives a brief insight
into a quite sophisticated form of organisation. There were several
assemblies (comitientia) in each of the counties into which Normandy
was divided. From each of these, two delegates were elected to repre-
sent their decisions at a central gathering. It was these delegates who
were captured by the agents of the Duke, mutilated, and sent back to
their districts as a result of which 'the peasants returned to their
ploughs'. The exact social background of the rising is unknown;
D. C. Douglas thought it might be a last anti-feudal stand of freemen
of Scandinavian descent. This was a guess. However, it seems likely
that here again we have an organised movement of established peasant
communities quite different from the wandering bands of disoriented
millenarians found in France in the following century.

It is an obvious difficulty for the historian of peasant movements in
the Middle Ages that the evidence is unreliable in the sense that he
cannot know whether or not it is complete. Apart from the fact that
much evidence must simply not have survived, what does survive has
not yet been systematically collected together. We are not therefore
in a position to prove that conflict between peasants and the many
persons and institutions who claimed a share in the product of their
labour was as constant and inevitable as (say) strikes in modern capitalist
industry. Some historians who recognise the disturbed and violent
tenor of medieval life in general hesitate to accept that this violence,
so easily resorted to by aristocratic rivals for land, power or even
wives, could enter (regularly at any rate) into the relationships between
rulers and ruled. Our assessment of the situation must, for the time
being, be qualitative rather than quantitative. But, as has been shown,
this takes us quite a long way. Whilst not underestimating the rich
variety of the various situations in which lords, governments and
peasants found themselves in conflict, it would seem clear that the
basically unchanging character of peasant society over many centuries
was matched by a consistency of type of peasant movements, under-
lying which were simply demands for freedom, for lower rents and
services and for access to agricultural resources that were withheld
from them. The variety between one movement and another is
provided by differences, not in fundamental but in immediate or pre-
cipitating causes; by variation in ideological motivation; by differing
relationships with other contemporary social or political movements;
by changes in the balance of social power between the contending
parties, and so on.

It is because there are basic underlying similarities between the problems of peasant societies at all times, in the early or late Middle Ages, in the modern or contemporary epochs, that a study of medieval movements may be suggestive to the student of the contemporary underdeveloped world. No perceptive historian would, of course, wish to oversimplify the consistencies observable in peasant movements in widely separated centuries. The variations are as interesting and as important as the similarities. However, the differentiating factors between one movement and the next are not without their own pattern, especially if seen over a long period and over a wide area.