

AFTER THE BLACK DEATH

In the centuries succeeding the Black Death, Western Europe underwent profound and lasting changes that saw the demise of the manorial, “feudal” system, serfdom and the limited market based economy of the late medieval period and ushered in a fully capitalist system accompanied by equally critical social and political developments that marked the early modern era as a new stage in European history. For many years, the prevailing academic model for these changes was demographic or “Malthusian.” Scholars such as M.M. Postan and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie argued that the dramatic collapse of population in the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of the second pandemic broke a deadlock that had strangled European development, allowing progress towards new economic and social conditions in Europe.¹ In 1976, Marxist historian Robert Brenner challenged this orthodoxy with an article in the journal *Past and Present*, maintaining that only class struggle in Europe could fully explain the shift from feudalism to capitalism. This set off an academic debate, known as the Brenner Debate, that examined the potential factors involved in this change.² Focusing upon the relationships between the lordly class and the peasantry, historians weighed the importance of demographics, class, politics and economics in European change. More recently however, George Huppert, in *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe*, adds a new and potent factor to this mix.³ Rather than concentrating upon the feudal nobility and its peasantry, he posits that the autonomous cities that emerged in the late medieval period were the true engines of change and that the urban elites constituted the main agents.

¹ T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, Past and Present Publications, Paul Slack, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 64, 101.

² *Ibid.*, *passim*.

³ George Huppert, *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe*, 2nd edition, Interdisciplinary Studies in History, Harvey J. Graff, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998)

To illustrate this model, Huppert draws a broad picture of Western Europe from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries, examining the complex interactions between cities and rural areas and portraying how urban-driven change affected the mentality of the European peoples as well as the political and social configurations of Western European culture. To do so, he utilizes the many local studies undertaken by historians of the Annalist school. Although the geographical spread of such studies is somewhat uneven, he asserts that from them emerge perceptible “fundamental traits” that may be used to construct his generalized model.⁴

The most important factor in Huppert’s model is the autonomous city. Unlike the “parasitical” cities in other parts of the world such as Japan or Russia that relied upon and served feudal princes, the Western cities that had emerged by the fourteenth century remained largely independent of the feudal hierarchy.⁵ Run by communes drawn from the merchant and artisanal classes, cities such as Paris or Valladolid fought hard for their liberties. In doing so, they differentiated between those born and working in the city who became the ruling bourgeois elite and the “foreigners,” those from beyond the city, itinerant and wage labor and those too poor to take part in urban governance.⁶ In such a milieu, new social hierarchies emerged to replace a feudal system that had little relevance for town-dwellers. Nuclear families revolving around a single craft or trading household formed the basic unit of this society. Beyond that, craft fellowships, neighborhoods and the city itself provided not only unity and the locus for loyalty but also the basis for the transmission of status. Interestingly, while the craft fellowships did provide for a “system of graduated honors,” differentiating status both by the different crafts and within a particular guild, not all

⁴ Huppert 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21–24.

groupings differentiated by class.⁷ Neighborhoods – vital units of unity and organization in many cities – cut across class boundaries. Nevertheless, over time internal strains began to breach the earlier egalitarianism within the merchant classes. Huppert notes that ultimately “the rich usurped all power within the cities.”⁸ While Herlihy notes that in the immediate wake of the Black Death, entry into the guilds was relatively open to “new men” due to the need to replenish these groups in the wake of the population collapse,⁹ ultimately the system became more closed. In a city such as Frankfurt, only members of particular “ruling craft” families could hold power.

Divorced from their artisanal or merchant backgrounds, Huppert argues that these families constituted a new class beyond the traditional medieval noble/commoner model.¹⁰ Although these new elites sought noble titles and purchased country estates, he maintains that this was not an attempt to enter into the feudal noble class. Titles conveyed an economic advantage in that they exempted the holder from tax. They also signified “quality,” a useful concept in the legitimation of the power of the elite. However, these families remained “distinct,” marrying among themselves and showing an “intra-class solidarity” that rejected both the workingman and the “frivolous” traditional nobility.¹¹ Further, the new urban elite achieved domination not through the traditional violence of the feudal nobility but through economics, especially their control of property, *rente*, tax farming and offices in royal administrations.

The manipulation of the economy by urban populations was nothing new. Huppert characterizes the cities as “magnets for rural resources,” with its inhabitants “cultivating money not land.”¹² By the sixteenth century, Huppert avers, the urban elite dominated not only the economics of international trade but also the local

economics of the rural areas. Accumulation of wealth allowed them to purchase land in increasing quantities as the rural poor struggled to survive increasing debt and taxes. Dispossessed of their land, the peasantry had to turn to wage labor on the consolidated estates owned by absentee urban elite masters. Those who were able to hold onto their land did so only because of determined population control that prevented the splitting of marginally viable plots of land into smaller plots incapable of sustaining a household.¹³ Under this model, Huppert claims, the serfs of Europe gradually achieved freedom not necessarily because of their own actions but rather because the urban elite needed them to be free so that they could trade in property without interference from the feudal nobility.

This is a stark contrast to the differing views espoused in the Brenner debate essays. Despite their differences in interpretation and their understanding of the driving force behind the move to capitalism, historians as far apart as Brenner and Postan both appear to accept the countryside as the main theater of change and the feudal hierarchy of traditional nobility and peasantry as the agents of change. Moreover, Brenner in particular notes the differences between different regions of Europe – West as opposed to East Germany, France compared to England – to argue for a class-based model of change. Only by analyzing the extra-economic coercive powers of the nobility in different regions can one explain the changes that occurred in each.¹⁴ While this model has its own troubles, it does point to a potentially serious problem with Huppert’s analysis. His model brooks no variety between different regions of Western Europe. By broad generalization – that may well be true for much of Europe but is probably flawed for at least some regions – he loses a measure of complexity and subtlety. If the “urban elite” model is the most important determinant in the shift from feudalism to capitalism, why was the change not equal? Did the different political configurations of rival states have no

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁹ David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 44.

¹⁰ Huppert 49.

¹¹ Ibid., 55.

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Aston, 215.

impact upon development? Why did rural Southern France, for example, differ sharply from rural Southern England? It is possible, of course, that Huppert could explain these differences but by not engaging the argument, he leaves his model open to criticism.

Moreover, Huppert does not consider other potential factors in the late medieval and early modern period that could have influenced the course of events. Although his book is titled *After the Black Death* he does not explain how demographics, in particular the fourteenth century demographic collapse, might have had an impact upon his model. Ladurie, responding to Brenner, argues that research continues to support the link between population, rent, tenancy and wealth in Europe and in turn explain the move away from feudalism. Moreover, his model takes into account the “biological factors” that William McNeil stresses in *Plagues and Peoples* and David Herlihy maintains are vital to understanding the late medieval period.¹⁵ Even if we accept that urban not rural areas were the loci of change did demographics play no part? Boccaccio, for instance, demonstrates the profound changes that occurred in Florence in the wake of the plague.¹⁶ Huppert’s leaving out of the demographic factor thus omits a potentially vital driving force within the cities.

Similarly, Huppert does not appear to consider Guy Bois’ model of “feudal crisis” in which critical blockage within the feudal economy drove change.¹⁷ Bois’ theory, while still favoring the countryside as the locus of change, does have the advantage of explaining the differences between regions with respect to rate of change. Indeed, reading the two in conjunction, scholars may conclude that the two theories are not so antithetical. Arguably, Bois’ model explains how the feudal nobility was so diminished by the fifteenth century that it was unable to better stave off the rising power of the urban elite. Yet Huppert does not engage with Bois.

Likewise, while Huppert’s generalized model agrees with some primary and secondary sources, it is at odds with others. His analysis of family relations, especially between husband and wife and the emergence of the wife as an economic agent, cleaves well to that seen in the Paston family.¹⁸ Similarly, his evaluation of the life of Domenico Scandalla supports his argument that the laity of the period was fundamentally unorthodox and anti-clerical.¹⁹ Yet, he does not consider contrary texts. How, for instance, would the devout Puritan artisan Nehemiah Wallington portrayed so powerfully in Paul Seaver’s *Wallington’s World* fit within Huppert’s assertion that early modern Western European society was “remarkably secular.”²⁰ In addition, Huppert’s model appears to discount the potential political agency of the peasantry that Stephen Justice argues for so persuasively.²¹ While the English Peasants’ Revolt did not achieve its immediate aims, is it conceivable it had no effect at all upon English society? Unfortunately, Huppert handwaving away of exceptions to his model raise many questions.

Despite not considering other potential factors, however, Huppert’s model remains potentially very persuasive. In particular, the “urban elite” model appears to provide an explanation for the developmental differences between Western Europe and the rest of the world that other models cannot fully manage. Considered as an addition to the literature on the late medieval to early-modern transformation, it is a vital and important contribution. Yet Huppert’s broad generalizations and concomitant omission of other potential factors, while necessary to convince the reader of the importance of the

¹⁸ Norman Davis, ed., *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, Oxford World’s Classics Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Huppert, 131.

¹⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and Huppert, 135

²⁰ Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington’s World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth Century London* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), and Huppert 147.

²¹ Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* 27, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), *passim*.

¹⁵ Aston, 103, William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Anchor, 1977) 192 and Herlihy 81.

¹⁶ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, translated by G.H. McWilliam, 2nd Edition (London: Penguin, 1995) 9 and *passim*

¹⁷ Aston, 113.

urban elite model, diminish the usefulness of *After the Black Death* as a stand-alone narrative of early modern society. Scholars should thus consider its arguments alongside those presented in the Brenner debate and within other primary and secondary sources to fully perceive the

complex interplays of factors that contributed to such a fundamental shift in society. One determinist model, whether it be class-based or neo-Malthusian, urban elite or rural, political or economic, does not seem sufficient to truly understand such a multifaceted change.