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Peasant Resistance in Medieval Europe
Approaches to the Question of Peasant Resistance

Until recently, peasants of past as well as contemporary times have been regarded by historians and other scholars as lying outside the drama of historical progress. If they *were* involved in important events, it was as uncomprehending victims or as manipulated mobs. Their role in resisting the French Revolution in the Vendée, for example, supposedly epitomized both their attachment to traditional arrangements and the futility of rural organized movements. The disappearance of the peasantry in the twentieth century was thought, by a wide spectrum of learned opinion, to be inevitable. In Western Europe this disappearance has indeed taken place. Ironically (considering the contempt in which they were held for so long), the demise of this ancient class in the West has provoked a good deal of unease, even lamentation. Regional and local identity, national sentiment for the agrarian virtues, and holding back the tide of post-industrial consumer culture are all undermined by the abandonment of the land and its conversion into large-scale corporate farming.¹ From Mexico to Pakistan, however, the contemporary peasantry has shown a degree of resilience not anticipated by most social theorists of either the left or right.

For most of the last century Marxist and non-Marxist social scientists agreed that peasants represented a retrograde factor in economic development and that progress would leave them behind. In orthodox Marxist thinking peasants are either a hinderance to revolutionary progress or at best followers and indirect participants. That the urban proletariat alone could forge a true revolution was reiterated by Stalin, who considered early Russian peasant uprisings as worthy of notice but “tsarist” in motivation hence irrelevant to true revolutionaries.² The forced collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union was a logical, if particularly savage, outcome of an atti-

¹ For France, for example, see Michel Gervais et al., *La fin de la France paysanne de 1914 nos jours*, Histoire de la France rurale, vol. 4 (Paris, 1976); Michael Bess, “Ecology and Artifice: Shifting Perceptions of Nature and High Technology in Postwar France,” *Technology and Culture* 36 (1995), pp. 830-862.

² Notably in correspondence with Emil Ludwig, cited in Leo Yaresh, “The ‘Peasant Wars’ in Soviet Historiography,” *The American Slavic and East European Review* 16 (1957), p. 241.

tude that saw the proletariat as the vanguard of revolution and industrial modernization as possible in a backward society only by destroying its small agricultural proprietors.

Certain peasant movements of the past have been regarded with favor by Marxist thought. There is a tradition exalting the German Peasants' War of 1525 that goes back to Friedrich Engels, however, he interpreted the struggle as a manifestation of the contradictions feudal society and the transition to capitalism. The peasants could not be said to serve as historical actors in their own right. Following Engels, East German historiography saw the revolts of 1525 as an episode in the "early bourgeois revolution" whose origins and real significance lay in the cities and the impetus of the Reformation. The peasant uprising failed but helped usher in the new mode of production.³

For theorists of development in the twentieth-century West, the peasant has also been relegated to a nether-world of historical irrelevance and powerlessness. Progress towards modernity and industrialization is measured by the decrease in rural population and the "rationalization" of agriculture for export and into larger units of cultivation. Experts in the field of economic development viewed with equanimity the breaking apart of the insular world of the village by agricultural, industrial and communications technologies that have reorganized formerly subsistence economies.

Although not conceptually allied with such an aggressive view of progress, historians in the West have agreed with the proponents of industrial development in considering peasant movements as marginal to the real stream of historical change. The German Peasants' War of 1525, according to the once-dominant view, was more a symptom of German political crisis than a peasant movement. The leading historian of the revolt, Günther Franz, regarded it as part of a larger struggle over the fate of the German Reich.⁴ Other historians, while not quite so completely minimizing the social aspects of the war, regarded the peasants as acted on from outside by the Reformation and its concomitant subversive ideas that originated in cities.⁵

³ Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (New York, 1926); Adolf Laube et al., *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen frühbürgerlichen Revolution* (Berlin, 1974); *Die frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland: Referate und Diskussion zum Thema "Probleme der frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland 1476-1535"*, ed. Gerhardt Brendler (Berlin, 1961).

⁴ Günther Franz, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, 12th ed. (Darmstadt, 1984), p. 288.

⁵ Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Durham, N.C., 1982); Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth-Century Germany and Switzerland* (New Haven, 1975); A. G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (New York, 1974); Heiko Oberman, "Tumultus rusticorum: Von 'Klosterkrieg' zum Fürstensieg," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85 (1974), pp. 157-172.

Modern attitudes towards the peasantry in a curious way parallel those of the Middle Ages that saw peasants as hapless, inarticulate, capable of dangerous but irrational and unfocused rebellions, but lacking in any sense of program or progress. Peasant resistance thus was regarded as frequent but futile, an instinctual rage rather the expression of any sort of organized plan.⁶ Such peasant movements as did seem worthy of notice were either irrational outbursts (of which the French *Jacquerie* of 1358 might be taken as a typical example), or dependent on the enterprise of more articulate classes (especially townspeople).

Much of this, however, has changed in recent years as the resourcefulness and rationality of peasants has come to be more positively evaluated. Some of this has come about as the result of a belated disenchantment with the social costs and ecological effects of development. The spectacular failure of Soviet agriculture or the deleterious effects of disinvestment in agriculture in favor of ill-advised or corrupt schemes (in Africa, for example), have weakened some of the confidence in what is "rational" or "irrational" in agricultural practices. The rediscovery of the work of A. V. Chayanov, for example, has inspired a favorable view of the peasant family economy.⁷ Instead of regarding peasants as inefficient or their familial orientation as a bar large-scale mechanized exploitation, Chayanov considered the forms of family agricultural enterprise in terms of perfectly rational and understandable calculations compatible with a self-sustaining working of the land.

But the major shift in how peasant are considered, both in their present and past incarnations, has come about through reexamination of what constitutes peasant resistance. Rather than looking exclusively at rebellions and other overt manifestations, observers of contemporary peasant societies such as James Scott have called attention to the indirect forms of peasant resistance, such things as evasion, foot-dragging, sabotage and other forms of non-cooperation that constitute "everyday forms of resistance."⁸ These may not in the long run be particularly effective. Scott's formulations resulted from field work in Malaysia, a country where arguably the small-scale rice farm-

⁶ E.g. Roland Mousnier, *Fureurs paysannes: les paysans dans les révoltes du XVIIe siècle (France, Russie, Chine)* (Paris, 1967).

⁷ A. V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, trans. Christel Lane and R. E. F. Smith (Homewood, Illinois, 1966; orig. publ. Moscow, 1925).

⁸ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985). See also *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forrest D. Colborn (Armonk, N.Y., 1989); articles on everyday forms of peasant resistance in Southeast Asia collected in *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, no. 2 (1986); *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (Berkeley, 1992).

ers and others who attempted to resist the consolidation of holdings and changes towards heavy technological inputs could only delay rather than hold off the extinction of their way of life. On the other hand, in his later work, which spans historical epochs and continents, Scott has shown not only how redoubtable peasant resistance could be but also its visible historical effects. Crucial events such as the mass desertion from the Russian army in the First World War and its consequent disintegration (which paved the way for the Russian Revolution) must be understood as large-scale examples of indirect resistance that required no over-arching ideology but rather the desire to survive.⁹

It is possible to criticize the emphasis on indirect resistance as disguising how often peasants cooperate with and accept the terms of their subordination.¹⁰ There are also many divisions within the subordinated who do not present an unambiguously united front against a clearly identifiable oppressor. The tendency to ignore these divisions may be seen as romanticizing peasant resistance.¹¹ Finally, in another expression of the disillusionment with twentieth century movements in the name of freeing the peasantry, the Subaltern Studies school questions the degree to which the voices of the subordinated can really be recovered without distortion that serves the interests of those purporting to speak for them.¹²

Of course it is true that not all opposition can be regarded as carefully thought out defiance. Gossip, grumbling, satire can accord with deference and even bolster the terms of a dominant discourse.¹³ Peasants did not necessarily define themselves under all circumstances in terms of a binary opposition between themselves and their lords.

Yet there really is a long-standing struggle that takes several forms although any fixed boundary between "serious" and "complicitous," or even direct and indirect is not easy to draw. A useful result of the emphasis on

⁹ James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," in Colburn, ed. *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Christine Pelzer White, "Everyday Resistance, Socialist Revolution, and Rural Development: The Vietnamese Case," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13:2 (1986), 56 writes of "everyday forms of peasant collaboration."

¹¹ Sherry B. Ortner, "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal," in *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terence J. McDonald (Ann Arbor, 1996), pp. 281-304, especially pp. 287-288.

¹² An overview of Subaltern Studies is given in Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Potcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994), pp. 1475-1490.

¹³ A point made by C. J. Wickham, "Gossip and Resistance Among the Medieval Peasantry," Inaugural Lecture, School of History, University of Birmingham (printed separately, Birmingham, 1995).

everyday resistance is to revise how peasants are thought to regard their own situation; to emphasize their role as historical actors, as agents in their own destiny. Borrowing a term from E. P. Thompson, Scott described the “moral economy” of the peasants, a subsistence ethic neither immutable nor stubbornly irrational but a local response to adversity (including human exploitation).¹⁴ Central to the moral economy is an emphasis on what Scott elsewhere refers to as “the small decencies” of labor, family, community and a desire for some minimal autonomy and control of one’s environment.¹⁵ That these aspirations are not necessarily universal or pure does not render them the figment of a romantic imagination.

Scott has been especially concerned to deny theories of hegemony that assume a deluded acquiescence by the oppressed to their subordination. By attending exclusively to insurrection and other forms of violent resistance, observers wrongly take everything else for acceptance. Behind the formulae of deference there is a rich but hidden vocabulary of resistance. Far from buying into the hegemonic ideology of the dominant classes, the subordinate are capable of creating a space for dissent, forwarding a specifically peasant discourse and action, and even taking advantage of the official justifications for the social order.¹⁶ The claims that the dominant class enjoys its power for legitimate and ethical reasons in the interests of all can be turned against it on the basis of failure to live up to those claims.¹⁷ For example, what Luther and many modern historians have regarded as the German peasants’ over-literal understanding of Christian equality and freedom can be seen as a sincere but also opportunistic use of a widely shared system of ideas.

The peasants in 1525 were not, therefore, deluded in believing that the teachings of the Reformation meant that they should no longer be serfs and that they should govern their own communities and elect their own pastors. Rather they made use of ideas of reform as well as taking advantage of the

¹⁴ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1976).

¹⁵ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p. 350.

¹⁶ Examples of such favorable assessments of peasants’ knowledge of their situation and the actions resulting from that knowledge include Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, 1990); Steve J. Stern, “New Approaches to the Study of Peasant Rebellion and Consciousness: Implications of the Andean Experience,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries* (Madison, 1987), ed. Steve J. Stern (Madison, 1987), pp. 3-25.

¹⁷ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).

confusion of the political order in Germany to press already existing resentments. In this view they are neither passive agents of an essentially urban movement nor naive followers of what they took to be Luther's message of liberation but acted according to passionate but also rational calculation.¹⁸ Similarly peasants in traditional Russia who believed that the tsar would support their rebellions were not simply credulous but rather resourceful in legitimating resistance to authority and fomenting revolts while invoking conservative, pious, traditionalist values.¹⁹

The whole matter of how to consider peasant resistance is affected by the relation between indirect and direct means (evasion versus insurrection) and peasant self-awareness (whether their revolts are to be understood as calculated, stirred up from the outside, or despairing spasms).

This becomes clearer if we look at typologies of peasant resistance developed by medieval and modern historians. Nearly fifty years ago the Soviet historian Boris Porchnev posited a distinction between what he called "primary" and "secondary" forms of peasant resistance. The primary were open rebellions while the secondary correspond to indirect or everyday forms of resistance, within which Porchnev identified particularly non-cooperation and flight.²⁰

For Porchnev the peasants were attacking the feudal system of property holding and exploitation, so that even when disturbances began as protests over royal taxation, they escalated quickly into attempts to end what were regarded as the abusive conditions of the seigneurial regime.²¹

Within the context of Soviet historiography, Porchnev was innovative and courageous in depicting peasant revolts as progressive and motivated by an accurate reading of social conditions. In 1951 this would earn him censure from the historical division of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. He was particularly attacked for minimizing the role of the bourgeoisie and was forced to issue a retraction.²² Even Porchnev at his most daring, however, considered

¹⁸ The work of Peter Blickle has emphasized the communal and social basis of the German Peasants' War while seeing it as profoundly influenced by the movement of Reform. See, for example, his *Die Revolution von 1525* (Munich, 1975), also published as *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective*, trans. Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and H. C. Erik Midelfort (Baltimore, 1981), and *Gemeindereformation: Die Menschen des 16. Jahrhunderts auf dem Weg zum Heil* (Munich, 1985).

¹⁹ Daniel Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston, 1976).

²⁰ Boris Porchnev (Porschnew), "Formen und Wege des bäuerlichen Kampfes gegen die feudale Ausbeutung," *Sowjetwissenschaft, Gesellschaftswissenschaftliche Abteilung* 1952, pp. 440-459. First published in *Izvestija Akademii nauk SSSR: seria istorii i filosofii* 7, no. 3 (1950), pp. 205-221.

²¹ See Porchnev's studies of the early French peasant revolts, *Die Volkauftände in Frankreich vor der Fronde, 1623-1648* (Leipzig, 1954).

²² Described in Yaresh, "The 'Peasant Wars' in Soviet Historiography," pp. 255-256.

peasant uprisings lower forms of the class struggle that were not only unsuccessful but led to the perfection of absolutism rather than any progressive change in agrarian conditions.

Most other typologies have tended to minimize the extent to which such revolts really involve peasants rallied against their masters. Roland Mousnier took issue with Porchnev's approach to French revolts by distinguishing between a few that might be said really to be peasant uprisings and a larger number that were either led by nobles, or manipulated by them, and that expressed local grievances against centralized fiscal exactions rather than a class conflict. Peasants in these latter instances enacted as conservative an agenda as that held by their social superiors. Their demands were for the restoration of customs regarded as beneficial, not the abolition of obligations. The enemy was change and fiscal oppression represented by the growing royal absolutism.²³

This tendency to separate "real" peasant revolts from those that are in fact about something else is at the heart of many typologies. The factor that most appears to vitiate the revolutionary implications of many manifestations of peasant discontent is that demands were traditionalist or reactionary. Invoking "good old law" is thought to imply that a radically different order of things could not be imagined. Demands framed in this fashion would be relevant to only one locality as customs of course changed from one jurisdiction to another. The very frequency and small-scale of early-modern uprisings, for example, might be interpreted as meaning that the grievances behind them were so local as to be incapable of spreading. Peter Burke distinguishes traditional from radical peasant movements, the former amounting to circumscribed demands for restoring the past while the latter envision a new society that ignores custom. The radical movement has more potential to spread, but is less common, certainly in the period after 1525.²⁴

Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* also describes what are seen as archaic forms of resistance limited both geographically and ideologically.²⁵ Their significance lies in how they reflect the aspirations of a large, usually inar-

²³ Mousnier, *Fureurs paysannes*. Discussed in M. O. Gately et al., "Seventeenth Century Peasant 'Furies': Some Problems of Comparative History," *Past and Present* 51 (1971), pp. 63-80; C. S. L. Davies, "Peasant Revolts in France and England: A Comparison," *Agricultural History Review* 21 (1973), pp. 122-134. For a somewhat different French view of Porchnev that even more than Mousnier sees the peasants as frenzied but ineffectual, Robert Mandrou, "Les soulèvements populaires et la société française du XVII^e siècle," *Annales E.-S.-C.* 14 (1959), pp. 756-765.

²⁴ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), pp. 173-178.

²⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959).

ticulate population and only secondarily and exceptionally in any connection to true revolutionary organizations. Hobsbawm identified a few archaic movements (such as millenarian peasant groups) that approach something like revolutionary rather than reformist sentiment as opposed to a majority that are little more than variations on social banditry.²⁶ On the other hand, Hobsbawm did acknowledge elsewhere that peasants could create revolutions without intending to challenge the order of society or the structures of property.²⁷

In discussing the German peasantry and the events preceding the great war of 1525, Günther Franz considered all uprisings before the very end of the fifteenth century to have been motivated by a defense of custom, a justification for revolt based on "Old Law". Beginning with the Bundschuh movements in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, reference was made to "Godly Law" arguments born of a more urgent and drastic desire to make social conditions fit not an imagined past happiness but divine and unalterable natural law. What made medium-scale revolts such as the Bundschuh and the widespread cataclysm of 1525 possible was a common program based not on local bylaws but on the teachings of radical religious reform.²⁸

With regard to the late-medieval peasant uprisings, some of which we will discuss shortly, there has been the same tendency to ascribe the motivation to outside forces, or to deny that they were rebellions altogether. Guy Fourquin, for example, regards these movements either as demands for the social mobility of already affluent elements of the population, or as Messianic (hence irrational), or as the product of extraordinary political crises (a category that would include both the French *Jacquerie* of 1358 and the English Rising of 1381).²⁹ In their study of late-medieval revolutions, Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff take the social demands of the peasants more seriously but mingle them with urban movements such as the Florentine *Ciampi* of 1381 or the anti-Jewish riots in Barcelona in 1391.³⁰

These observers have very different political and methodological predispositions but agree in defining nearly all peasant uprisings as lacking the revolutionary requirement of imagining a complete break with the past. In

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-8.

²⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1 (1973), p. 12.

²⁸ Franz, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, pp. 1-91.

²⁹ Guy Fourquin, *The Anatomy of Popular Rebellion in the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam, 1978; orig. publ. Paris, 1972), pp. 129-160.

³⁰ Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions of the Late Middle Ages*, trans. A. L. Lytton-Sells (London, 1973; orig. publ. Paris, 1970).

describing movements by lower classes generally, not merely peasants, Barrington Moore made use of a similar distinction. The main way in which oppressed groups contest their situation is to criticize the upper orders of society (most frequently particular individuals in power) for not living up to a social contract that was observed in the past. They therefore accept the legitimacy of the dominant stratum rather than making an issue of the claims of that stratum to exert authority.³¹ There is, thus, again an implicit contrast between genuine and traditionalist demands.

Such typologies are undermined by three factors that play an increasingly important role in the discussion of peasants (and broadly the subordinated elements of society): an emphasis on peasant agency (that peasants can act out of a realistic assessment of their situation), on indirect forms of resistance as efficacious rather than as inferior to open defiance, and finally a disillusioned realization of the limitations of radical revolutions. This last deserves some emphasis. In contrast to how things seemed when Hobsbawm or Moore wrote on peasant uprisings, radical revolutions of the twentieth century do not seem to have lived up to their promise, to put it mildly. They have led to disastrous upheavals in which life was transformed, but not for the better and at immense social cost. Where they might naturally have been expected to have the most constructive effects, in the Third World, struggles in the name of the peasantry have singularly failed. The experience of Marxist or *soi-disant* Marxist revolutions has called into question what constitutes effective resistance and false consciousness. As long as we were confident that we knew what a “real” revolutionary ideology looked like, a traditionalist revolt evoking a harmonious past seemed primitive, secondary, or at best a “lower form of class struggle.”

Scott’s “small decencies” of a modest but sufficient tenure, fixed and reasonable obligations and a modicum of human dignity appear less compromised or insufficiently radical in light of the nightmarish consequences for the peasants themselves of revolutions that claimed to be freeing them. Rather than supposing a Gramscian hegemony that imprisons the oppressed rural class in a false consciousness of deference, their conservative demands can be seen as a strategy, producing what Scott calls “a space for a dissident subculture” and a “political disguise.” We have already mentioned Field’s analysis of Russian peasant rebels whose exaltation of the tsar was a strategy of legitimation, the seizing of the moral high ground, rather than a literal,

³¹ Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, N.Y., 1987), p. 84, a statement critiqued in Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. 91-96.

childish faith in a beneficent father figure.³² Far from naive, frenzied or Messianic, the peasant rebels in such circumstances were astute in their expectation that the established order was not likely to be abolished. As Scott points out:

"So long as that expectation prevails, it is impossible to know from the public transcript alone how much of the appeal to hegemonic values is prudence and formula and how much is ethical submission."³³

Ascribing rationality and political or ideological awareness to peasants restores to them a degree of voice, and renders their historical role less helpless or dependent on outside forces. This is important when examining the period of European history with the most serious and widely diffused peasant revolts, that between the Black Death of 1347-1349 and the German Peasants' War of 1525.

Late Medieval Peasant Revolts

Between 1350 and 1515 Europe was convulsed by large-scale peasant revolts. While the medieval agrarian economy, as Marc Bloch remarked, experienced peasant uprisings as frequently as stikes characterize the world of industrial capitalism,³⁴ the geographic extent, scale and duration of the late-medieval revolts was more extensive than those during the earlier periods and would never be repeated after 1525.

These revolts were not the only form in which a space for dissidence was created. The medieval system of exploitation was effective but organized around small-scale units both of cultivation and of jurisdiction. The opportunities for indirect resistance hence were numerous given the absentee nature of lordship. There were also direct actions possible that do not appear as full-scale rebellions but that achieved a certain measure of success. In a study of the occasional murder of lords in medieval France, Robert Jacob has shown that it was surprisingly widely recognized that grossly unjust lords deserved to be resisted, even violently, even by peasants, as long as this was not the signal for some general disobedience.³⁵ Moreover, local uprisings could be presented even by non-peasants as representing a com-

³² Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*.

³³ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 92.

³⁴ March Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics*, trans. Janet Sondheim (Berkeley, 1966; orig. publ. Paris, 1931), p. 170.

³⁵ Robert Jacob, "La meurtre du seigneur dans la société féodale: la mémoire, le rite, la fonction," *Annales E.-S.-C.* 45 (1990), pp. 247-263.

mendable desire for liberty. The revolt of 1476 by villagers of Fuenteovejuna in the region of Córdoba resulted in the death of their oppressive lord, the commander of the Order of Calatrava. Fuenteovejuna would become an emblem of anti-seigneurial rebellion and the defense of liberty, later furnishing the subject for a celebrated play by Lope de Vega.³⁶ Finally there are instances of the establishment of self-governing peasant communities such as the rural cantons of Switzerland.³⁷ Less well known is the creation of a peasant republic at Dithmarschen along the North Sea coast of Holstein. First recognized in the thirteenth century, the *terrae universitatis Dithmarsiae*, as it was known, would last until the mid-sixteenth century.³⁸ Its liberty was defended against the rulers of Schleswig and the king of Denmark so that, like the Swiss, the inhabitants of Dithmarschen formed an effective armed force aided by familiarity with a difficult terrain. That the Swiss conflicts with the Hapsburgs or the Dithmarschers battles with the Danes are not considered peasant revolts is due both to their success and to the eventual recognition accorded to their polities.

There were still other form of medieval rural conflicts in addition to the large, well-known late medieval wars and the peasant confederations. There were frequent local and regional peasant uprisings especially beginning with the fourteenth century. For the German Empire alone Peter Bierbrauer has counted 59 peasant insurrections between 1336 and 1525.³⁹

In what follows, some attempt is made to assess peasant motives and justifications for resistance. The rebellions that have left at least indirect evidence of motivations tend to be those that attracted the more than glancing attention of chroniclers. Therefore, although the distinction between small local revolts and large regional ones is somewhat artificial (a matter of scale more than qualitative difference), I have limited the following discussion to

³⁶ Emilio Cabrera and Andrés Moros, *Fuenteovejuna: La violencia antis señorial en el siglo XV* (Barcelona, 1991).

³⁷ Peter Blickle, "Das Gesetz der Eidgenossen: Überlegungen zur Entstehung der Schweiz, 1200-1400," *Historische Zeitschrift* 225 (1992), pp. 561-586; Guy P. Marchal, "Die Antwort der Bauern: Elemente und Schichtungen des eidgenössischen Geschichtsbewusstseins am Ausgang des Mittelalters," in *Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewusstsein im Spätmittelalter*, ed. Hans Patze, Vorträge und Forschungen 31 (Sigmaringen, 1987), pp. 757-790.

³⁸ On Dithmarschen see William L. Urban, *Dithmarschen: A Medieval Peasant Republic* (Lewiston, N.Y. 1991); Walther Lammers, *Die Schlacht bei Hemmingstedt: Freies Bauerntum und Fürstenmacht im Nordseeraum*, 3rd ed. (Heide im Holstein, 1982).

³⁹ Peter Bierbrauer, "Bäuerliche Revolten im alten Reich. Ein Forschungsbericht," in *Aufbruch und Empörung? Studien zum bäuerlichen Widerstand im Alten Reich*, ed. Peter Blickle et al. (Munich, 1980), pp. 26, 62-65.

the better-known conflicts of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries while at least setting them in the context of a climate of frequent smaller revolts.

The English Rebellion of 1381

The immediate cause of the English Rising was the imposition of a poll tax by the royal government. Resistance to the tax began in May of 1381. Rebels from Kent and Essex marched on London in June, congregating at Blackheath and Mile End. The most dramatic phase of the rebellion—the execution of Archbishop Simon Sudbury, the burning of John of Gaunt's palace, the invasion of the Tower of London and the death of Wat Tyler at Smithfield—took place on and around the Feast of Corpus Christi. The festive inversion of social power and propriety that took place during the rebels' brief hold on the capital has been linked, both by contemporaries and by recent observers, to the traditional celebrations of Corpus Christi.⁴⁰ The significance of the date may have also affected the planning of the convergence on London, which was more a planned, coordinated movement than a spontaneous mob activity.⁴¹

What were the demands of those who revolted? On the one hand they seem to involve a radical political restructuring that would have, in effect, abolished the nobility. Rodney Hilton describes the rebels' goal as that of imposing a state ruled by a king but without nobles and a very circumscribed church, thus essentially the king and common people with few intermediaries.⁴² On the other hand, the agenda of the local rebels (those who did not flock to London to confront the king), was not so different from that of earlier movements that had aimed at restoring a supposed earlier just relation between lords and men without eliminating lordship altogether.⁴³ Recent scholarship has tended to emphasize not only the coher-

⁴⁰ Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, 1992); pp. 45-56; Margaret Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and the Peasants' Revolt," *Past & Present* 143 (1994), pp. 3-47; Stephen Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 156-176.

⁴¹ Nicholas Brooks, "The Organization and Achievements of the Peasants of Kent and Essex in 1381," in Henry Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore, eds., *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis* (London, 1985), pp. 247-270.

⁴² R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry of the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), p. 15.

⁴³ Especially important in this regard is Rosamond Faith, "The 'Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology," in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 43-73.

ence of peasant aims but also their connections to older ideas of justice, especially complaints against arbitrary lordship. We can reconstruct some idea of peasant ideology even from the works of hostile chroniclers who were intent on portraying the peasants as unreasoning savages, a disorganized mob.

While the demands of the peasants in London were for the abolition of lordship, movements in places such as St. Albans were considerably more moderate challenges to onerous and arbitrary incidents and rights of lordship: rights to the use of common woods and meadows, rights to hunt game, an end to monopolies (such as the abbot's prohibition on tenants' possession of hand-mills), an end to death-duties.⁴⁴ What unites these local demands is the revolt against the arbitrary perquisites of lordship. Even seemingly moderate demands, such as over the hand-mills, had radical symbolic (as well as practical) significance and imagery. In an earlier rebellion the abbot of St. Albans had confiscated hand-mills that had allowed tenants to escape his right to compel the milling of grain at his mill (which required a fee), and used them as paving for the floor of his parlor. In 1381, they were dug up and split into fragments to be given out as proof that the rebels (townsmen and peasants) had accomplished their goal and also a symbol of their solidarity, a token of communion.⁴⁵ With the suppression of the rebellion, the millstones were returned.

Studies of the rebels who did not march on London show that their demands concerned seigneurial and manorial jurisdiction and administration, in particular serfdom and claims to levy exactions by reason of lordship over villeins.⁴⁶ Similar to other great rebellions of the period, opportunities afforded by the weakness of government or alliances with other groups did not obscure the issues of status and rural lordship that most concerned peasants. Those who came to London and held the young King Richard II hostage went beyond the expression of grievances against taxation and the corruption of royal officials to demand the abolition of servi-

⁴⁴ Faith, "The 'Great Rumour'", pp. 62-70.

⁴⁵ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, pp. 168-176; Faith, "The 'Great Rumour'", p. 66 (translating from the *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani*): They took the stones outside and handed them over to the commons, breaking them into little pieces and giving a piece to each person, just as the consecrated bread is customarily broken and distributed in the parish churches on Sundays, so that the people, seeing these pieces, would know themselves to be avenged against the abbey in that cause.

⁴⁶ See, for example, the case of Essex in L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society After the Black Death: Essex 1350-1525* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 231-252.

tude and a radical alteration of lordship.⁴⁷ The revolt resulted from a combination of what might be called “political” circumstances, involving grievances against governmental administration, and tensions in the relationship between landlords and tenants.

The Black Death and the consequent radical diminution of population had altered the economic and social relationships in rural society. Landlords were squeezed by rising wages and falling prices for agricultural products and attempted to control more closely those tenants who remained by limiting wage increases, restricting freedom of movement, and levying exactions that could be claimed from servile tenants. Not only were peasants’ expectations of improvement thus frustrated, but in many instances their social condition was lowered as lords either imposed servitude on those previously considered free, or coerced those who had previously been allowed to escape supervision. The seigniorial reaction was motivated by economic considerations rather than a desire for social control, but its effect was to sharpen the resentment of tenants against servitude. Those who were legally of villein status now saw a real disparity between their opportunities and obligations and those of their free neighbors more able to take advantage of a favorable labor and rental market.⁴⁸ Christopher Dyer, a careful observer of the entire sweep of medieval English social and economic history, writes of a “second serfdom” imposed by lords in the years leading up to the great rebellion.⁴⁹ The conjunction of expectations of improved negotiating positions for peasants and attempts of lords to preserve or reimpose servile dues and arbitrary lordship must be seen as the primary motor of revolt.

Questions of freedom and servitude were not exclusively focused on matters of legal status, but neither were they mere rhetorical masks for other demands. What was at issue both before and after 1381 was the ability of lords to constrain their tenants by overturning or undermining traditions and practices favorable to peasants. This gives a seemingly conservative

⁴⁷ On the English Rising and its causes, see Christopher Dyer, “The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381,” in *The English Rising*, pp. 9-42; E. B. Fryde and Natalie Fryde, “Peasant Rebellion and Peasant Discontents,” in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. 3, ed. Edward Miller (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 744-819; Rodney Hilton, *Bondmen Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (New York, 1973); John Hatcher, “England in the Aftermath of the Black Death,” *Past & Present* 144 (1994), pp. 3-35.

⁴⁸ J. H. Tillotson, “Peasant Unrest in the England of Richard II: Some Evidence from Royal Records,” *Historical Studies* (Melbourne) 16 (1974), p. 14.

⁴⁹ Dyer, “Social and Economic Background”, p. 25.

character to the English Rising (as is the case elsewhere), with the peasants defending the “good old law” against attempts to consolidate holdings or to regularize obligations. As argued earlier, it is not profitable to formulate a typology of “reactionary” versus “progressive” social movements. Radical means (violent insurrection) were sometimes deployed toward conservative ends, to restore what was perceived as an earlier just order. It did not require a paradigm shift or a revolutionary religious sentiment to desire the overthrow of at least certain aspects of the seigniorial regime. Only a minority of peasant movements envisioned the complete end of lordship, including some clearly inspired by religious reform. Nevertheless, it is worth taking seriously the range of peasant grievances which made use of commonly agreed definitions of liberty, servitude, human equality and Christ’s sacrifice.

To distinguish sharply between 1381 as a unique occasion and earlier local revolts makes obvious sense in terms of scale, but not ideology. Long before 1381 there had been persistent lawsuits and revolts concerning local grievances that anticipate the agenda of the 1381 rebellion, grievances related to changes in manorial custom imposed by landlords that bolstered their arbitrary power over tenants.⁵⁰ In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, before the economic consequences of the disaster of 1348-1349 were felt, lords attempted to rationalize their holdings and to define their tenants as villeins. In the mid-thirteenth century, Robert de Mares and then his widow, Sibyl, attempted to reduce the status of the villagers of Peatling Magna in Northamptonshire to villeinage, asserting the right to tallage at will and the collection of merchet.⁵¹ The inhabitants of Peatling Magna won their case in 1261. Not so fortunate were their neighbors in Stoughton who lost their claims to freedom to Leicester Abbey in 1276.⁵² A poem written at the Abbey on that occasion asked, “What can a serf do unless serve, and his son?” It continued:

⁵⁰ Rodney Hilton, “Peasant Movements in England Before 1381”, in Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism: Essays in Medieval Social History* (London, 1985), pp. 122-138; Barbara A. Hanawalt, “Peasant Resistance to Royal and Seigniorial Impositions”, in *Social Unrest in the Late Middle Ages: Papers of the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, ed. Francis X Newman (Binghamton, 1986), pp. 30-40.

⁵¹ D. A. Carpenter, “English Peasants in Politics, 1258-1267,” *Past & Present* 136 (1992), repr. Carpenter, *The Reign of Henry III* (London and Rio Grande, Ohio, 1996), pp. 325-326 (of reprint).

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 342; R. H. Hilton, “A Thirteenth-Century Poem on Disputed Villein Services,” *English Historical Review* 56 (1941), pp. 90-97, repr. Hilton, *Class Conflict*, pp. 108-113.

*He shall be a pure serf deprived of freedom.
The law's judgment and the king's court prove this.*

Beginning in around 1277, the men of the villages of Darnell and Over in Cheshire quarrelled with their lord, the abbot of Vale Royal, over his claims that they owed huge death-duties, *leyrwithe* upon marriage of a daughter, and various annoying services (feeding the abbot's puppies, keeping his wild horses and bees).⁵³ The villages had formerly belonged to the crown, and the conditions under their new master were perceived as dramatically inferior. The Darnell villagers had complained to King Edward I shortly after the gift was made. The king is supposed to have told a throng of men carrying plowshares "As villeins you have come, and as villeins you shall return." There ensued a long series of suits and acts of violence. The villagers rose up against the abbey in 1336, complaining that they were free and that the abbot had imposed on them the obligations of villeins. They petitioned the justice of Chester, (Sir Hugh de Fren), King Edward III, parliament, and Queen Phillippa. The queen ordered the abbot to restore what he had despoiled, but after the abbot appeared before the rulers, the villagers were once again declared villeins. They ambushed the abbot in Rutland on his way back from the court, managing to kill a groom before being captured. They threw themselves upon the abbot's mercy and were compelled to perform repeated ceremonies in church demonstrating their unfree status. One is struck not only by the persistence of the unfortunate tenants of Vale Royal but their touching faith in the judicial process of the realm.

Peasant movements to seek legal redress were organized before 1381. Opposition to arbitrary treatment in the fourteenth century is evident in the petition of the villagers of Albury in Hertsfordshire to parliament in 1321-2 over seizures and imprisonment perpetrated by their lord. Numerous complaints were registered by tenants attempting to prove their free status against lords' claims to hold them as serfs, as at Elmham in Suffolk (1360), and Great Leighs in Essex (1378).⁵⁴ No less than forty villages in the south of England in 1377 were swept by what a contemporary called the "great rumor": a movement to assert personal liberty and oppose labor service demands by reference to Domesday Book.⁵⁵ By purchasing certified copies of Domes-

⁵³ On these disputes and the uprising of 1336, *The Ledger-Book of Vale Royal Abbey*, ed. John Brownbill, *Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society* 68 (1914), pp. 37-42, repr. G. G. Coulton, *The Medieval Village*, (Cambridge, 1925, repr. New York, 1989), pp. 132-135; also in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London, 1970), pp. 80-83; also in H. E. Hallam, "The Life of the People", in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* vol. 2, ed. Hallam (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 846-849.

⁵⁴ Examples cited in Dyer, "Social and Economic Background", p. 31.

⁵⁵ Faith, "The 'Great Rumour'", pp. 43-73; Tillotson, "Peasant Unrest", pp. 1-16.

day (exemplifications) referring to their tenancies, the villagers attempted to prove that they formed part of the ancient demesne of former crown lands whose tenants should be protected by the royal courts. The peasants who submitted Domesday exemplifications considered them as proving freedom from villein status altogether. Parliament and the Royal Council rejected attempts to use Domesday in this fashion, but the effort shows the peasants' knowledge of law and belief in its efficacy. There was a continuity between actions at law and local organized opposition which brought pressure by extra-legal means once the courts and appeals seemed fruitless.

Many of the locales involved in the 1381 revolt had experienced earlier suits or acts of insubordination, and a sample of individuals identified as rebels in 1381 shows that many of them already had experienced confrontations with their lords over fines or servile status.⁵⁶ At issue in 1381 and before were questions of rent, service and other obligations of tenants that lords had attempted either to impose, reimpose or preserve in an environment of what can fairly be termed rising expectations. Questions of status were inextricably linked with these quarrels over revenues because if lords could show that those who complained of arbitrary violations of favorable customs were villeins, they could prevent them from appealing to the public courts.⁵⁷ The petitions for freedom from servitude in 1381 were not a cover for more practical, economic conflicts but the point at issue for opposition to arbitrary seigneurial power.

Such demands were couched in conventional terms but the conclusions and programs that followed might be more radical. At the sermon given to the peasants assembled at Blackheath on the day of Corpus Christi itself, the renegade priest John Ball is reported by Thomas Walsingham to have argued on the basis of the well-known couplet "when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" that all were created equal by nature. Servitude had been introduced contrary to God's will, by the wickedness of men (thus not by some primordial, divinely punished trespass). Had God

⁵⁶ Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background", pp. 34-35; John F. Nichols, "An Early Fourteenth Century Petition from the Tenants of Bocking to their Manorial Lord", *Economic History Review* 2 (1929-1930), pp. 300-307. Tillotson, "Peasant Unrest", notes (pp. 7-8) the importance of Wiltshire in the 1377 disturbances, a region that was relatively quiet in 1381.

⁵⁷ Hilton, "Peasant Movements", pp. 127-138 (of reprinted ed.). On the centrality of the demand for the end to serfdom, see also Hilton, "Social Concepts of the English Rising of 1381", in *Class Conflict*, pp. 216-226 (originally published in German in *Historische Zeitschrift*, Beiheft 4 [Munich, 1975], pp. 31-46); Hilton, "Popular Movements in England at the End of the Fourteenth Century", in *Class Conflict*, pp. 152-164 (originally in *Il tumulto dei Ciompi* [Florence, 1981], pp. 223-240).

wished to create serfs, He would right at the beginning have established who was a serf and who was a lord.⁵⁸

Steven Justice has shown how Ball's sermon and letter fit with five English letters preserved in Henry Knighton's chronicle rallying peasants to the cause. They were probably not all written by John Ball, as used to be believed, but by other rebel spokesmen. Justice argues that the very act of fomenting rebellion by means of circular letters and broadsides is a defiant gesture against those who regarded peasants as little better than animals, announcing "the documentary competence of the insurgent population, a determination not to be excluded from documentary rule."⁵⁹ One may not completely accept this valuation placed on literacy as the crux of rebellion. Nevertheless, Justice allows us to appreciate not only that the chroniclers' insistence that the peasants were unreasoning savages is false, but that much of what they report in the way of the burning of documents was something other than the act of frenzied mobs intent on destroying education along with lordship.⁶⁰ Not only were the rebels rather selective in what they destroyed (Walsingham and the author of the *Westminster Chronicle* acknowledged that the burning of the Savoy Palace was carefully policed and that looting was strictly forbidden), they also did not assume that all written records were tools of their subjugation.⁶¹ An exaggerated reverence for charters and ancient documents that inspired earlier movements is apparent again in 1381. The rebels at St. Albans burned charters and rolls listing obligations but demanded an older parchment with azure and gold capital letters that they believed had established their freedom. One can at a safe distance be amused at the villeins' belief that the Mercian King Offa was the author of such a charter and at the abbot's rather bewildered promise to search although he had never seen nor heard of it. Similarly we can be confident that Bury St. Edmunds did not, in fact, have a charter of liberties issued by the monastery's founder King Cnut as the rebels there claimed.⁶² The same reverence before writing is found in the insistence of the rebels when they had the king in their power that he write a charter freeing them of service to their lords and pardon-

⁵⁸ Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley, Rolls Series 28, part 1, vol. 2 (London, 1864), p. 33 and Walsingham, *Chronicon Angliae*, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson, Rolls Series 64 (London, 1874), p. 321.

⁵⁹ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, p. 36.

⁶⁰ A point argued strongly in Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, pp. 43-51.

⁶¹ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, p. 44.

⁶² Described from the works of Thomas of Walsingham by Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, pp. 47-48.

ing them. Dissatisfied with the document they obtained, they then are supposed to have ordered that men of law and others familiar with legal documents be executed.⁶³

The peasants also appear to have been capable of using to their own purposes arguments made with a different intention to a different audience by Wyclif and Langland. This was a process of deliberate shaping, not of ill-digested misunderstanding. Thus Wyclif himself was careful to join his denunciations of excessive church property-holding with provisions for its orderly transfer to secular rulers while the peasants could enunciate his program in terms of a more literal understanding of the canon-law phrase (which Wyclif frequently invoked) that the goods of the Church belong to the poor (*bona ecclesiae sunt bona pauperum*). Wyclif may have meant his words to inspire the king and the great men of his realm to action, but his address to the laity was, as Steven Justice put it “overheard” by the peasants.⁶⁴ Similarly the figure of Piers Plowman could be taken from Langland to serve as a vivid emblem of the virtuous countryman and Langland’s allegory of “Truth” could be adapted to a more activist idea of imposing a new and just social order.⁶⁵

Protection of traditional local rights and protection (or freedom) from servile status were the substance of the revolt. Despite the radical means by which the rebels’ demands were put forward, one observes the same faith in written documents and legal concepts that informed earlier movements such as the “Great Rumor” of 1377. In discerning (if not actually reconstituting) a peasant “voice” from the hostile texts that have survived, recent scholars have often wanted to see an authentic peasant alternative ideology, what Justice calls the “idiom of rural politics” and Strohm refers to as “rebel ideology.”⁶⁶ Such ideas were sufficiently antithetical to the dominant ideologies so that contemporary observers regarded them with fear mingled with ridicule.

Strohm and Justice agree on the chroniclers’ ignorance (willful or otherwise) with regard to peasant demands but I question whether they were indeed so unaware. Naturally it would be hard to argue that Walsingham, Knighton or Froissart displayed any “sympathy” for the rebels, but they put into their mouths arguments that were neither novel nor incomprehensible. Froissart says that the people of Kent, Essex, Sussex and Bedford stirred

⁶³ *Ibid.* pp. 49-50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-90.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-139.

⁶⁶ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, pp. 140-192; Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow*, pp. 51-56.

because they were kept in servitude and declared that no one should be a bondsman unless he betrayed his lord (as Lucifer betrayed God). They were not of this nature for they were men, formed in the same fashion as their masters and so should not be kept like beasts.⁶⁷ That bondage violates divine law, that it was instituted by force, that it amounts to treating humans as animals – these are by no means new ideas and were comprehensible to peasant and lord alike.

It was possible for the chroniclers to imagine the terms in which peasant insurrection would be justified and expressed. This does not minimize their scorn and in some cases hysteria, their portrayal of the rustics as domestic animals who have gone wild, or as vermin. Of course they were aghast at the danger to order and hierarchy but they did not live in a world completely innocent of what the complaints of those under them would be were they to be voiced. Their reports depict this voice in stylized terms, yet authentic details are revealed through chinks in what might seem to be an effective hegemonic discourse.

How hegemonic that discourse was in the first place is open to question. It has been argued that the English chroniclers were more objective in their opinions than the historians of the French *Jacquerie* of 1358 who described this peasant uprising as an act of unmitigated savagery.⁶⁸ Yet even contemporary historians of the *Jacquerie* were varied in their attribution of rational motives for the revolt or the blame to be attached to the nobility for causing the uprising in the first place.⁶⁹ Walsingham, Knighton, Froissart, or the *Anonimale Chronicle* did not have to acknowledge the legitimacy of peasant demands to reproduce them in a way that is legible not only to the modern critic or historian inclined to be sympathetic to the rebels' cause but to contemporary members of the literate elite who were not.

The Catalan Civil War, 1462-1486

This protracted conflict, the only successful peasant revolt on a large scale in late medieval Europe, involved a process of appropriation, contestation and comprehensibility in peasant demands which quite clearly

⁶⁷ Froissart, *Chroniques* X, pp. 97-107, trans. Berners, as reproduced in Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt*, pp. 369-372.

⁶⁸ Neithard Bulst, "'Jacquerie' und 'Peasants' Revolt' in der französischen und englischen Chronistik", in Patze, ed., *Geschichtsschreibung*, pp. 791-817.

⁶⁹ As shown in Marie-Thérèse de Madeiros, *Jacques et chroniqueurs: une étude comparée de récits contemporains relatant la Jacquerie de 1358* (Paris, 1979).

centered on the abolition of servitude.⁷⁰ The servile peasantry of northern Catalonia (“Old Catalonia” as distinguished from the territories conquered from Islam to the south and west in the twelfth century) were known in the late Middle Ages as *Remences*, a Catalanized version of the Latin “redemption” (*redimencia*). These tenants made up about one-half the rural population of Old Catalonia and had been subordinated in several stages, beginning perhaps as early as the eleventh century but culminating in the decades around 1200 when restrictions on their freedom were first effectively defined and enforced.⁷¹ They were subject to a group of customary levies that included a redemption or manumission payment that gave the name to their condition. The exactions were collectively known as the “bad customs,” (*mals usos*) even in official documents. The bad customs included the right to require heavy death payments in the event of there being no adult male heir (*exorquia*) or of intestate death (*intestia*). In addition, lords could confiscate as much as one-third of the property of a peasant whose wife committed adultery and left him (a right with the humiliating name of *cugucia*, i.e. cuckoldry).

The Catalan lords also held a legal right to “mistreat” their servile tenants. The *ius maletractandi* constituted not only a seigneurial right to confiscate and coerce without royal interference but implied a vocabulary of oppressive gestures. In 1462, on the eve of the outbreak of the conflict, a failed attempt at a negotiated settlement produced a list of peasant grievances (drawn up in Catalan) that included the right to “*maltractar*”, compulsory wet-nurse service and the unique example of a complaint by tenants of the *droit de seigneur*.⁷² The lords offered to accept the abolition of the right to mistreatment (a major concession) and renounced any claim to require wet-nurse service. They expressed disbelief that anyone had ever really claimed a right of the first night, but if so abandoned it without further ado. It was the group of “bad customs,” however, that proved intractable because they were valuable rights and also included the key provision of redemption that bound tenants and on which lordship itself seemed to depend.

⁷⁰ Paul Freedman, *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 179-202.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-118.

⁷² The document is El Escorial, Real Biblioteca de San Lorenzo d.II.15, ff. 27r-31v, ed. Eduardo de Hinojosa, *El régimen señorial y la cuestión agraria en Cataluña durante la Edad Media* (Madrid, 1905); repr. in Hinojosa' *Obras*, vol. 2 (Madrid, 1955), appendix 11 (pp. 313-323 of repr.).

The actual success of the sustained peasant revolt is due to the complicated circumstances of the Catalan Civil War that pitted an alliance of urban, noble and parliamentary groups against an unpopular ruler whose political and military survival depended in significant measure on the support of peasant armies.⁷³ The political context of the struggle does not obscure the consistent purpose of the peasant demands over an end to servitude. Indeed, much of the unpopularity of the king was due to a policy instituted by his predecessors that favored the peasants and opportunistically, inconsistently but nevertheless dangerously (from the nobles' point of view) raised the possibility of their liberation. As early as the turn of the fifteenth century the queen of Aragon had attempted to have her kinsman the Avignonese Pope Benedict XIII abolish servitude on Catalan church lands. Even earlier King Joan I in 1388 attempted to find proof in his archives that servitude had been imposed (perhaps by Charlemagne) for a limited time that had by now come to an end.⁷⁴

What we lack from this war (as from every peasant movement before 1525) is substantial evidence of how peasants might have framed their objections to the moral implications and context of their subjugation beyond the general complaints expressed in their position during the 1462 negotiations. There is a curious document from shortly before 1450 regarding the organizing of peasant syndicates. It begins by invoking a familiar excerpt from a letter of Pope Gregory the Great: that Christ assumed human flesh in order to restore to us that original liberty that had been taken from us by the bond of servitude.⁷⁵ The document then refutes a common aristocratic myth attributing serfdom to the cowardice of Christian peasants who failed to aid Charlemagne by the counter-claim that the ancestors of the *Remences* had not been Christians at all but in fact Muslims.

As an argument against serfdom, the prologue follows the pattern of much of the rest of Europe in pointing to Christ's sacrifice (especially as interpreted through the letter of Gregory the Great) as the basis for a Christian liberty that servitude violated. Catalonia as a whole demonstrates the possibility of constructing a moral argument against servitude in the absence of a religious reform movement. Unlike Germany in 1525 or England (if one accepts the connection between Wyclif and the 1381 Rising), there was no

⁷³ On the war, J. Vicens Vives, *Historia de los Remensas (en el siglo XV)* (Barcelona, 1945); Santiago Sobrequés i Vidal and Jaume Sobrequés i Callicó, *La guerra civil catalana del segle XV: Estudis sobre la crisi social i econòmica de la Baixa Edat Mitjana*, 2 vols. (Barcelona, 1973).

⁷⁴ Freedman, *Origins of Peasant Servitude*, pp. 172-173, 179.

⁷⁵ Girona, Arxiu Històric de l'Ajuntament, Secció XXV.2, Llibres manuscrits de tema divers, lligall 1, MS 8, fols. 1r-2v, ed. Freedman, *Origins of Peasant Servitude*, pp. 224-226.

religious revolutionary sentiment in fifteenth-century Catalonia. The Church was, to be sure, a large owner of unfree peasants, but the revolt neither targeted churches nor was it accompanied by any particular anti-clericalism. The Catalan peasant movement shows the possibilities for achieving a radical agenda within a traditional vocabulary.

Catalonia also shows more clearly than anywhere else the fissures that undermined the unity of the powerful classes. The crown was not consistently on the side of the peasants but ultimately its grudging support and dependence on peasant armies led to the abolition of servitude in 1486 after the resolution of the civil war. Even without the opportunistic alliance, however, there were serious doubts among members of the royal court and jurists about whether servitude could be justified and a widespread suspicion that it violated religious, natural and national law.

The Hungarian Revolt of 1514

In a volume dedicated to the memory of the late Bogo Grafenauer, I attempted to describe the course of the Hungarian Peasants' War of 1514 and to use it as an example of peasant ideology.⁷⁶ Not wanting to repeat myself here excessively, I would simply reiterate that this conflict shows quite clearly how a legitimate, in fact reactionary idea, the crusade, could be used to justify an anti-noble uprising. The peasants appropriated the crusade against the Turks proclaimed by Pope Leo X at the instance of the ambitious archbishop of Esztergom. Denouncing the Hungarian nobility for its failure to support the crusade and to allow their tenants to participate, the forces gathered to answer the military appeal at Buda turned their wrath from the Turks to the nobles. The scale of the revolt differentiates it from previous unrest but there are clear connections with earlier ideas. Accusing the nobles of dereliction in the war against the Turks was also a feature of the Belgrade Crusade of 1456.⁷⁷

Although very close in time to the German Peasants' War, the Hungarian uprising has left much less evidence of anything amounting to a peasant program. The Cegléd Proclamation may reflect the ideas motivating György Dózsa, the noble leader of the revolt, but it is not the text of an actual speech in the manner of John Ball's sermon at Blackheath. A letter issued by lead-

⁷⁶ Paul Freedman, "The Hungarian Peasant War of 1514," in *Grafenauerjev Zbornik*, ed. Vincenc Rajsp (Ljubljana, 1996), pp. 431-446.

⁷⁷ As reported by Giovanni de Tagliacozzo, *Annales Minorum seu trium ordinum a S. Francisco institutorum*, ed. Luke Wadding, vol. 12, pt. 3 (Quaracchi, 1932), p. 793.

ers of the crusade (who call themselves the “*principes cruciferorum*”) purporting to be the text of the papal proclamation, roundly condemns those lords who continue to extort unjust revenues from their peasants and calls for their excommunication and rebellion against them.⁷⁸

Themes that are repeatedly underscored insofar as the grievances of the peasants can be reconstructed are the un-Christian behavior of the nobility, its cowardice in face of the Turks, and the injustice of serfdom. As in England, Germany and Catalonia, the rebellion was at least in part directed against the constraints of servile subordination and a response to a seigneurial attempts to use reimpose servitude in order to increase rents and obligations. After the failure of the 1514 revolt, the Hungarian laws ordained permanent servitude for the Hungarian peasantry.⁷⁹

The Hungarian revolt also shows connections between elite and popular concepts of justice. Jenő Szűcs demonstrated that Franciscans in the first years of the fifteenth century elaborated condemnations of seigneurial oppression that appear to have influenced those who led the revolt of 1514.⁸⁰

The German Peasants' War of 1525

Even more than with the English and Catalan revolts, there has been a desire to see the German Peasants' War as something more than merely a peasant insurrection. This stems from several factors, among them an assumption that peasants were unlikely to have acted on their own initiative, and concentration on the two dramatic and lasting aspects of sixteenth-century German history: the Reformation and the inability of the emperor (or anyone else) to achieve a unified rule over German-speaking lands. Regarded as a crucial event in the overall history of the German nation, the 1525 uprising was until recently annexed to the perennial question of the origins of German disunity and early-modern backwardness.

The rediscovery of peasant agency has tended to put back the actual demands of those who revolted to the center of the discussion. Neverthe-

⁷⁸ *Monumenta rusticorum in Hungaria rebellium, anno MDXIV*, ed. Anton Fekete Nagy et al. (Budapest, 1979), no. 49, p. 95.

⁷⁹ István Werbőczy, *Tripartitum* (= *Werbőczy István Hármaskönyve*), ed. Sándor Kolosvári and Kelemen Óvári (Budapest, 1897), part I, tit. 3, pp. 56, 58 and part III, tit. 25, p. 406.

⁸⁰ Jenő Szűcs, “Die oppositionelle Strömung der Franziskaner im Hintergrund des Bauernkrieges und der Reformation in Ungarn,” in *Études historiques hongroises 1985*, vol. 2 (Budapest, 1985), pp. 483-512.

less, it is still often maintained that the revolt of 1525 was not really about agrarian grievances, or that it was touched off by the more progressive and articulate forces of society.

The event that inevitably colors any interpretation is of course the Reformation. The teachings of Luther, Bucer, Karlstadt and Zwingli emphasized the dignity of the laity, the ability of ordinary people to interpret Scripture, the right to question authority and tradition, and a more favorable view of the common man. The Reformation is thought to have galvanized peasant resentment, already prepared by the long habit of anticlericalism.⁸¹

The charged climate of religious ferment that accompanied and immediately preceded 1517 is supposed to have produced a crucial change in the nature of peasant demands. Rather than taking up arms in defense of what were perceived as traditional relations with their lords that protected communal rights ("Old Law"), the peasants were now acting under the influence of more abstract (hence universal), ideas of social-religious justice ("Godly Law"). Instead of defending local privileges or custom, they now demanded a reordering of society in accord with divine justice. Long before the sixteenth century, however, it was possible to imagine justifications for revolt that centered around divine law or that combined particular grievances against exactions, servitude, and arbitrary lordship with a general statement of human liberty. Servitude was among the most important issues in 1525 and the nature of complaints over it was not completely new nor completely dependent for its formulation on the radical energies and vocabulary released by the Reformation.

Servitude and seigniorial rights attendant on serfdom were the major issue in a large number of German revolts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that antedated 1525. What might seem purely economic struggles over taxes or seigniorial revenues were enmeshed in questions of status. Thus, for example, lords attempted to increase revenues by reimposing large succession fines, but to do so required depriving peasants of the right to inherit freely, which in turn meant placing them in servitude. The extension of territorial lordship, the demands of lords in the face of declining revenues, and questions of servile status were intermingled.

As with the English and Catalanian rebellions, the German Peasants' War was connected to an earlier accumulation of grievances and attempts to act on them. There were a large number of similar revolts in small south-

⁸¹ Henry J. Cohn, "Anti-Clericalism in the German Peasants' War, 1525", *Past & Present* 83 (1979), pp. 3-31; Heiko A. Oberman, "Tumultus rusticorum," pp. 157-172; Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Pfaffenhass und gross Geschrei: Die reformatorischen Bewegungen in Deutschland, 1517-1529* (Munich, 1987).

German territories where feudal dues were the principal source of revenues for petty secular and ecclesiastical landlords: Weingarten (1432), Schlussenried (1438), Weissenau (1448), Staufen (1466), Salem (1468), St. Peter (1500), Habsburg lands of Triberg (1500), Ochsenhausen (1501-1502), Berchtesgaden (1506), Rufach (1514), Solothurn (1513-1515).⁸² The conflicts between 1442 and 1517 that go under the name of the "Bundschuh" uprisings also concerned servitude.⁸³ Freedom of movement, inheritance taxes, and the right to impose new seigneurial levies figured in the revolt of Appenzell against the monastery of Saint Gall at the opening of the fifteenth century, an example of a successful radical result stemming from what was perceived as a defence of Old Law (resistance to the monastery's right to change its exactions.)⁸⁴

Seigneurial economic pressure on tenants increased, especially in Swabia and the Upper Rhine, during the fifteenth century aided by a reimposition of servile status, resisted in many cases but with limited effect.⁸⁵ The abbey of Kempten in Upper Swabia attempted to degrade its free tenants (*Muntleute*) to the level of those paying tributes in acknowledgment of lordship (*Freizinser*), and to reduce the latter in turn to the level of serfs (*Eigenleute*).⁸⁶ The peasants were able to obtain a hearing at the imperial

⁸² Peter Blickle, "Peasant Revolts in the German Empire in the Late Middle Ages," *Social History* 4 (1979), p. 232.

⁸³ Their demands are in *Quellen zur Geschichte des deutschen Bauernkrieges*, ed. Günther Franz (Munich, 1963), no. 12, pp. 59-61 (Schliengen, diocese of Constance); no. 13, pp. 61-62 (Hegau); no. 15, pp. 67-70 (Schlettstadt/Seléstat, Alsace); no. 16, pp. 70-76 (Untergrombach, diocese of Speyer); no. 17, pp. 76-79 (Freiburg im Breisgau); no. 18, pp. 79-81 (Upper Rhine).

⁸⁴ Blickle, "Peasant Revolts," pp. 230-231; Walter Schläpfer, "Die Appenzeller Freiheitskriege," in *Appenzeller Geschichte* 1 (Appenzell, 1964; repr. 1976), pp. 123-225.

⁸⁵ Claudia Ulbrich, *Leibherreschaft am Oberrhein im Spätmittelalter* (Göttingen, 1979); Walter Müller, *Entwicklung und Spätformen der Leibeigenschaft am Beispiel der Heiratsbeschränkungen: Die Ehegenossame im alemannisch-schweizerischen Raum* (Sigmaringen, 1974); Peter Blickle, "Agrarkrise und Leibeigenschaft im spätmittelalterlichen deutschen Südwesten," in *Studien zur geschichtlichen Bedeutung des deutschen Bauernstandes*, ed. Blickle (Stuttgart, 1989; article originally publ. 1975), pp. 19-35; Werner Rösener, "Zur Sozialökonomischen Lage der bäuerlichen Bevölkerung im Spätmittelalter," in *Bauerliche Sachkultur des Spätmittelalters*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Kl., Sitzungsberichte 439 (Vienna, 1984), pp. 9-47; Renate Blickle, "Leibeigenschaft: Versuch über Zeitgenossenschaft im Wissenschaft und Wirklichkeit, durchgeführt am Beispiel Altbayerns", in *Gutsherrschaft als soziales Modell: Vergleichende Betrachtungen zur Funktionsweise frühneuzeitlicher Agrargesellschaften*, ed. Jan Peters (Munich, 1995), pp. 53-79.

⁸⁶ On fifteenth-century struggles between Kempten and its tenants, see Franz, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, pp. 11-13.

court in Ulm in 1423 but were defeated when the abbot produced a forged charter of Charlemagne purporting to define *Freizinsler* as the equivalent of *Eigenleute*. The peasants appealed successfully to Pope Martin V. Here again, as with the tenants of Darnell and Over in England or the syndicates of *remences* in Catalonia, the peasants' willingness and ability to argue their case through direct but official forms of resistance is striking.

The struggle at Kempton was renewed in 1460 over marriage and death taxes and labor obligations claimed by the abbot. A rebellion in 1491 was defeated and 1,200 *Freizinsler* were degraded to servitude. Complaints were renewed in January 1525 when a register of no less than 335 complaints (representing 1,220 individuals) was drawn up, centering around arbitrary fines and imprisonment, restrictions on marriage and on movement off the abbey's lands.⁸⁷ The Kempton peasants participated in the general revolt later in 1525, but it should be obvious that they were not suddenly inspired by external ideological stimuli.⁸⁸

Throughout Germany in 1525 many sorts of long-standing grievances came together, from objections to war levies to violation of fixed rents, but the most common issue across the widest territory was serfdom. In an analysis of 54 grievance lists from Upper Swabia (consisting of 550 individual grievances), Peter Blickle found that 90% denounced servitude and frequently demands for its abolition were among the principle articles in petitions. Serfdom, Blickle concludes, was the single most important grievance.⁸⁹ Moreover, this was not merely a negotiating strategy but a crucial demand. Of 20 such texts concerning ecclesiastical jurisdictions in Upper Swabia, 15 (18 articles) call for the abolition of serfdom. Only one envisions its diminution.⁹⁰ Serfdom was the key to other more economic grievances over taxes, exactions or control over hunting, fishing and the collecting of wood. The arbitrary control of the lord and his ability to change the conditions of tenure at will were the essence of servitude as control over the local environment and security in perpetuating what were seen as hallowed customs was the essence of freedom. While the greatest concentration of complaints over servitude comes from southwestern Germany, it was also important in re-

⁸⁷ "Die Kemptener Leibeigenschaftsrodel," ed. Peter Blickle and Heribert Besch, *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte* 42 (1979), pp. 567-629.

⁸⁸ Greivancs presented by Kempton tenants during the revolt are edited in Franz, *Quellen*, no. 27 (pp. 128-129).

⁸⁹ Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525*, pp. 26-27, 202-205.

⁹⁰ André Holenstein, "Äbte und Bauern: Vom Regiment der Klöster im Spätmittelalter," in *Politische Kultur im Oberschwaben*, ed. Peter Blickle (Tübingen, 1993), p. 264.

volts in the diocese of Augsburg, Alsace, and the archepiscopal principality of Salzburg.⁹¹

The peasants of Stühlingen in the Black Forest, where the first revolts began, described their opposition to servitude in these terms:

*"We are by right born free and it is no fault of ours or of our forefathers that we have been subjected to serfdom, yet our lords wish to have and to keep us as their own property, and consider that we should perform everything that they ask, as though we were born serfs; and it may come in time to pass that they will also sell us. It is our plea that you adjudge that we should be released from serfdom, and no one else be forced into it, in which case we will perform for our lords what we are obliged to perform of old, excepting this burden"*⁹²

Here the idea that servitude is punishment for some past or present transgression is rejected and it is the fact of unfreedom, not the payment of seignorial dues that is at issue. The other articles of the grievance list deal with specific exactions, but they follow from the ability of the lords to treat servile tenants with greater harshness and arbitrariness.

The peasants of Stühlingen were not attacking servitude as such but rather denying their particular liability. Their justification for revolt thus combines divine law (the injustice of servitude) with custom (their exemption from servile impositions). While firmly rooted in local history, the Stühlingen grievances, like those of other communities, were intelligible to peasants throughout Germany and facilitated the spread of revolt.

One finds broader complaints against the very nature of servitude based on its arbitrariness. To hold another in subjugation violates Scripture and the unity of all in Christ, for example at Embrach (near Zürich) and in rural lands subject to the imperial city of Rothenburg ob der Tauber.⁹³

Human freedom was defended against servitude without specifically invoking Christian doctrine at Altbirlingen (part of the Baltringen alliance), Wiedergeltingen, Rheinfelden, and Mühlhausen (in Hegau).⁹⁴ Other grievances against serfdom were framed in a more religious language, that only

⁹¹ Franz, *Quellen*, no. 70 (p. 239), no. 94 (pp. 305-309), no. 112 (p. 343); *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkriegs in Deutschirol 1525*, ed. Hermann Wopfner (Innsbruck, 1908), pp. 46, 61, 134-135; Albert Hollaender, "Die vierundzwanzig Artikel gemeiner Landschaft Salzburg, 1525", *Mitteilungen der gesellschaft für Salzburger Landeskunde* 71 (1931), pp. 65-88 (especially p. 83).

⁹² Franz, *Quellen*, no. 25 (pp. 121-122).

⁹³ Embrach: Walter Müller, "Wurzeln und Bedeutung des grundsätzlichen Widerstandes gegen die Leibeigenschaft im Bauernkrieg 1525," *Schriften des Vereins für Geschichte des Bodensees und seiner Umgebung* 93 (1975), p. 12; Rothenburg: Franz, *Quellen*, no. 101 (p. 329).

⁹⁴ Franz, *Quellen*, no. 23 (pp. 97-98); Günther Franz, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg*, vol. 2 Aktenband (Munich and Berlin, 1935; repr. Darmstadt, 1968), pp. 149, 164, 180.

God can licitly own a person; He alone is really Lord. Peasants of the *Gemeinde* of Attenweiler (Baltringen) complained against the abbey of Weingarten that they were:

... burdened with servitude for they wish to have no other lord but Almighty God lone who has created us. For we believe Holy Scripture, which is not to be obscured, that no lord should possess others (*kain Aigenmensch haben soll*), for God is the true Lord.⁹⁵

In the region of Schaffhausen (now part of Switzerland) villagers complained that Scripture prohibited anyone other than God Himself from possessing "*Aigenleute*".⁹⁶

Justifications for open resistance and the self-awareness of the peasants were obviously forwarded by Reformation but not completely dependent on it. The scale of the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 in contrast to earlier local movements or the Bundschuh campaigns may be due as much to the advances in inexpensive printing and the proliferation of pamphlets (*Flugschriften*) as to the Reform itself, although the stimulus to reading and disputation can hardly be separated from the impetus given by the religious upheaval itself.⁹⁷ The language of resistance and the context of its demands remained oriented toward the local community (the *Gemeinde*) even as insurrection became generalized throughout territories beyond individual lordships.⁹⁸ Above all, there is a theological, moral and legal background to the peasants' demands in 1525 that antedates the Reformation. Peter Bierbrauer has argued that the Reformation did not by itself inspire a Godly Law peasant argument in contrast to earlier Old Law local challenges.⁹⁹ The

⁹⁵ Franz, *Quellen*, no. 34b (p. 153): Die seint beschwert mit der Lübaigenschaft, wann sie wellent kain andern Her haben, dann anlain Gott den Allmechtigen, wann der hat uns erschaffen. Wann mir vermeinden auch, das die gotlich Geschrift, das nit auswisse, das kain Hern kain Aigenmensch haben soll, wann Gott ist der recht Her.

⁹⁶ Franz, *Quellen*, no. 87 (p. 263).

⁹⁷ A recent study of the complicated problem of literacy and the Reformation is Bob Scribner, "Heterodoxy, Literacy and Print in the Early German Reformation," in *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530*, ed. Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 255-278.

⁹⁸ The importance of strong local communities in furthering the revolt has been emphasized by Peter Blickle, *Gemeindereformation*.

⁹⁹ Peter Bierbrauer, "Das Göttliche Recht und die naturrechtliche Tradition," in *Bauer, Reich und Reformation: Festschrift für Günther Franz zum 80. Geburtstag am 23. Mai 1982*, ed. Peter Blickle (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. 210-234. Also important in noting the precedents to the Peasants' War antedating the Reformation are Brecht, "Der theologische Hintergrund", pp. 174-208; Müller, "Wurzeln und Bedeutung", pp. 1-41; Herbert Grundmann, "Freiheit als religiöses, politisches und persönliches Postulat im Mittelalter", *Historische Zeitschrift* 183 (1957), pp. 49-53; Hartmut Boockmann, "Zu den geistigen und religiösen Voraussetzungen des Bauernkrieges", in *Bauernkriegs-Studien*, ed. Bernd Moeller (Gütersloh, 1975), pp. 9-27.

real separation was between two types of Christian natural law, relative and absolute; capable of modification (hence legitimating servitude) or inflexible (in which case arbitrary lordship and holding Christian as serfs could not be licit). Controversies over how much divine and natural law might be modified by circumstance, the Fall, human necessity, or sin antedated the Reformation.

For example, the third of the fundamental “Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants” (March, 1525) denounces serfdom in terms similar to what we have seen:

*Third, it has until now been the custom for the lords to own us as their property. This is deplorable, for Christ redeemed us and bought us all with his precious blood, the lowliest shepherd as well as the greatest lord, with no exceptions. Thus the Bible proves that we are free and want to be free.*¹⁰⁰

The text is accompanied by marginal citations to the Bible (Isaiah 53:1; I Peter 1; I Corinthians 7; Romans 13; Wisdom 6; I Peter 2). But, as Walter Müller has suggested, the language invoking Christ’s sufferings that purchased human freedom is more closely derived from the German vernacular law books (the *Sachsenspiegel* and *Schwabenspiegel* notably), along with the *Reformatio Sigismundi* and Erasmus.¹⁰¹ Bierbrauer points to the *Schwabenspiegel* as especially influential, not only because it was widely circulated and accessible in South Germany, but because of its specific formulations. Comparing the south-German lawbook to the articles of the peasants of Äpfingen (part of the Baltringen group, dating from February of 1525) and the Twelve Articles, Bierbrauer notes two key reworked *Schwabenspiegel* passages: 1) that nowhere in Scripture does it say that one man can own another; 2) that God created man after His image and saved him with His sufferings. In addition, the Äpfingen demands repeat the context for the passages in the *Schwabenspiegel* (and its source, the *Sachsenspiegel*), to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s (Mark 12:17).¹⁰²

The “Twelve Articles” and the complaints of the Äpfingen *Gemeinde* recall venerable themes in discourse about equality in servitude, now in a more urgent key. Without in any way minimizing specific socio-economic pressures

¹⁰⁰ Franz, *Quellen*, no. 43 (p. 176): Züm dritten ist der Brauch bisher gewesen, das man für ir aigen Leüt gehalten haben, wölchs zu erbarmen ist, angesehen das uns Christus all mit seinem kostparlichen Plutvergüssen erlösst und erkauf hat, den Hirten gleich als wol als den Höchsten, kain ausgenommen. Darumb erfindt sich mit der Geschrift, das wir frei seien un wöllen sein. The translation is from Blickle, *Revolution of 1525*, p. 197.

¹⁰¹ See the table assembled on p. 29 of Müller, “Wurzeln und Bedeutung.”

¹⁰² Bierbrauer, “Das Göttliche Recht”, table, p. 226.

or the ideological impact of the Reformation, it can be argued that medieval concepts of justice played a role in the German Peasant War, as with those large-scale insurrections that preceded it. Such notions as the ultimate equality of humanity, Christ's sacrifice to release humanity from bondage, the obligation placed upon humanity to labor, and the mutuality of social orders could be brought from the realm of speculation and seemingly remote or self-serving arguments in defense of society as it had been imagined for centuries, and made to serve rather more revolutionary aims which therefore did not depend entirely on a radical new way of looking at the world. In this sense Luther was correct, not that the peasants ignorantly mistook his teachings concerning Christian liberty, but that they applied them in a more immediate way, along with the disquisitions of others who commented on the breakdown of mutuality and the difficulty of explaining the servitude of Christians.

Conclusion

The conceptual means of resistance is not only a product of the delegitimation of authority, but also what Barrington Moore refers to as "the creation of standards of condemnation for explaining and judging current sufferings," and "a new diagnosis and remedy for existing forms of suffering."¹⁰³ That the diagnosis need not be completely new is essentially what I have been arguing. I have tried to show a substratum of resistance to arbitrary lordship that anticipated the great conflicts of the late Middle Ages rather than viewing those conflicts exclusively as the immediate product of particular circumstances. I would also observe that in this era of great political and economic instability, indirect and direct means of resistance were related. The transition from one to the other depended more on perceived opportunity and expectation than the degree of oppression. Finally the evidence from the fourteenth to early sixteenth centuries suggests that local disputes were not so conceptually different from larger conflicts (or at least there is some connection between them) and that peasants did not require an outside stimulus from towns or religious reformers in order to mobilize.

In classic models of peasant insurrection there is little that stands between meek acceptance of a dominant ideology and revolutionary activity born of a sudden collapse of that ideology's inevitability and legitimacy.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Rather than the sudden frenzy of an essentially subjugated population, or the reflection of an apocalyptic irrationality, medieval uprisings should be seen as more planned, opportunistic and even optimistic (if in most instances wrongly so).

The origins of rebellion ceases therefore to be a search for a sudden shift from acceptance of hierarchical legitimacy to revolutionary sentiment, but rather a more continuous change from everyday evasion to public challenge; indirect resistance by other means. The standards of condemnation are key aspects in the construction of a revolt, but those standards develop only secondarily out of religious upheaval, the export of subversive ideologies from the towns, or an internal collapse of the state. They are produced by ideological appropriation and reorientation in the direction of immediacy.

Not every peasant war involved the same set of justifications for rebellion. In England original equality was a way of attacking the servile condition of peasants and what was regarded as the unjust lordship that it made possible. For Catalonia it was argued that servitude violated divine and natural law, in at least one case using the words of Gregory the Great's well-known passage on Christ's sacrifice that liberated all humanity.¹⁰⁴ For Hungary the justification for revolt was linked to accusation of betrayal of mutuality and functional orders. The nobility should be eliminated, having failed to defend the faith and the kingdom. For Germany both equality at Creation and the meaning of Christ's sacrifice were deployed.

What all these wars share (and this is true for many of the smaller conflicts mentioned here only in passing), is the importance of serfdom as a major grievance of the rebellious peasantry. Servile status was either among the direct causes of the conflict in the eyes of chroniclers and the peasants themselves, or provided the point of argumentation against more concrete conditions of lordship perceived as unjust, from restrictions on common lands to the imposition of taxes to attempts to reimpose requirements such as residence or death-duties that had fallen into desuetude. This is because servitude was the point of material and symbolic conflict over human dignity, a practical means as well as symbol of degradation.

¹⁰⁴ Gregory I, *Registrum epistolarum*, Corpus Christianorum 140 (Tournholt, 1982), 6:12, p. 380: "Cum redemptor noster totius conditor creaturae ad hoc propitiatus humanam voluit carnem assumere, ut divinitas suae gratia, disrupto, quo tenebamur capti vinculo servitutis, pristinae nos restitueret libertati." For its use, see Paul Freedman, "The German and Catalan Peasant Revolts," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993), pp. 47-51.

Servitude was important, and in attacking it peasants made use of a vocabulary comprehensible to their masters. What they were saying was not unthinkable across the divide of class or order and did not derive entirely from an autonomous or completely hidden peasant way of reasoning about the world. Peasant resistance did entail a set of everyday evasions, but the extent of the late medieval rebellions and a certain degree of (perhaps indirect) success were due to the ability of the dominant elements of society to comprehend and be intimidated by their subordinates.