



RESSENYA A FREDERIC APARISI & VICENT ROYO (EDS.), *BEYOND LORDS AND PEASANTS: RURAL ELITES AND ECONOMIC DIFFERENTIATION IN PRE-MODERN EUROPE*, VALÈNCIA, PUBLICACIONS DE LA UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA, 2014, pp. 256, ISBN: 978-84-370-9261-4

REVIEW TO FREDERIC APARISI & VICENT ROYO (EDS.), *BEYOND LORDS AND PEASANTS: RURAL ELITES AND ECONOMIC DIFFERENTIATION IN PRE-MODERN EUROPE*, VALÈNCIA, PUBLICACIONS DE LA UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA, 2014, pp. 256, ISBN: 978-84-370-9261-4

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Over the past 50 years of rural social and economic history, there have been a number of conceptions of how village communities in pre-industrial Western Europe were organised. For example, there was a spate of literature from the 1960s and 1970s, when localised micro-studies of rural communities were at their height with the Toronto School, suggesting that the medieval village community was essentially harmonious, cooperative, and based more around ideals of egalitarianism and cohesiveness. This view, taken particularly from medieval England, had further support for areas of Northwest Europe in the transition from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period by a number of works by Peter Blickle on the so-called ‘autonomous’ rural commune, the *Gemeinde*. Other early works, in the tradition of Richard Tawney, lamented the impact of the development of agrarian capitalism – loosening in the early modern period the bonds of

cohesiveness and equality that apparently characterised medieval village communities. Elsewhere, the neo-Marxist view, established most clearly in the 1970s by Robert Brenner, highlighted instead the dialectic opposition between rural communities as subordinates to the whims of lordly extra-economic oppression. None of these views are now accepted – at least not in their entirety. What has been made clear, probably in works starting from the 1980s onwards, is that (a) lord and peasant relationships were not always oppositional, but also more importantly (b) the peasant community was never a homogenous whole in the pre-industrial period. Such were the levels of internal stratification between peasants, that some scholars have even doubted the utility of term ‘community’ at all – see the (at the time) revisionist works of Alan McFarlane on the ‘origins of English individualism’.

And that is where this highly valuable book picks up from – moving ‘beyond lords and peasants’ as a simple opposition. The ‘rural elites’ discussed in the various chapters do not concern aristocrats or seigneurial lords, but actually the different forms of differentiation and stratification between the layers of the peasantry, farmers, or ‘common folk’ themselves. It is quite fitting that Christopher Dyer has been enlisted with the task of drawing together the main conclusions of the book, for it is arguably he more than any other rural historian (certainly of the medieval period at least) that has had the most profound influence on establishing a more nuanced vision of the medieval community – something in-between the extreme poles of ‘communalism’ and ‘class conflict’.

What is clear from the chapters, taking in a range of rural societies of the pre-industrial period from the Southern Low Countries, the Kingdom of Valencia, and Southern England, is that notions of cohesiveness and cooperation, or stratification, polarisation, and subordination, were not the same all across Western Europe, and in fact were highly divergent according to social context. Bruce Campbell in a very long and important article published in 2005 in the *Past and Present* journal, once suggested that much of the economic and demographic crises seen in the late Middle Ages in Western Europe were compounded not by lordly extraction from subordinates but actually through tenant on tenant extortion – essentially emphasizing the actions of wealthier or more powerful peasants acting to the detriment of their poorer commoner neighbours. There is much truth to that, and is supported even in some of the chapters of the book – see for example the story presented by Vicent Royo for some regions of late-medieval rural Valencia, where elite peasants used their administrative and local political influences to secure their own private access rights to communal pastures – to the detriment to the rest of the peasant community. What many of the other chapters do though is show that while rural village communities were indeed highly stratified and not homogenous wholes at all, such diversity of different social interest groups did not necessarily lead to a breakdown in community cohesion or elements of imbalanced extortion. A classic example of this is the final two chapters of the book by Maïka De Keyzer and Eline Van Onacker focusing on the rural societies of the Campine region of Brabant, where it is claimed that a form of ‘social equilibrium’ was maintained between tenant farmers, small independent peasants, and cottagers (acting within another favourable power equilibrium of territorial lord, urban governments, and

local lords) in order to maintain the effective functioning of significant communal institutions over the long term such as the common pastures and heaths. Peasant stratification then cannot always be considered an outright proxy for lack of communal cohesiveness.

The quality of the chapters in the book is consistently quite high, but two in particular stand out for their innovation. The most innovative in terms of methodology is a contribution by Kristof Dombrecht, who cleverly is able to use cultural and religious practices – that is the arrangement of funerals within a village of Coastal Flanders in the sixteenth century – in order to reveal elements of social and economic hierarchy within the community. Dombrecht goes on to show that the changing trends toward a particular type of burial (dictated by a particular choice of bell toll) and location of burial (in or outside of the church) was evidence for the increasing economic polarisation of the village community from the 1540s onwards. The most innovative chapter in terms of subject material is arguably that by Vicent Baydal Sala and Ferran Esquilache Martí, focusing on the little-studied area of social stratification in the Kingdom of Valencia among the Muslim peasant communities. As the authors themselves attest, we know at present very little about ‘rural elites’ in Muslim communities of this part of the Iberian Peninsula, and this is a pity, because there are so many interesting avenues to explore – within the very real limitations of the source material. What makes this subject stand out when considering social stratification is of course the very fact that one possibility of political and social ascent for Muslim rural elites was entirely blocked off – Muslims could not scale the feudal hierarchy of the Christian kingdom. The conclusion of the chapter itself is quite open ended and certainly leaves room for further research: essentially the Gini Indexes of distributions of property, wealth and houses are fairly low (in comparison to other regions of Western Europe), suggesting a fairly shallow social and economic hierarchy within the Muslim peasantry. However, at the same time, the authors do suggest that the economic elite of these Muslim communities probably did not reap all of their wealth from agriculture, but more diversified portfolios of economic activity – and therefore we are reminded that property distribution is also not always an accurate indicator of social stratification in itself. A final mention must be made also on the fine chapter by Lies Vervaeet on the still under-researched area of leaseholding in late-medieval Flanders. Vervaeet’s knowledge, expertise and careful handling of the vast amounts of source material is quite exceptional, and her research presents an interesting angle on the exact reasons why institutions (in this case an urban hospital in Bruges) decide to lease out their lands (or not), particularly from the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries onwards. Vervaeet shows curiously that the small scattered lease plots in Inland Flanders were more profit oriented, while the large coherent farms were leased out to wealthier tenant farmers who were responsible for provisioning the hospital with foodstuffs and agricultural produce. One aspect missing from the chapter, perhaps a route for the future, would be to delve more into the reasons why the St. John’s Hospital of Bruges decided around 1330 to transfer from direct management of the farms through friars and sisters, to indirect management through leasehold – what makes this period so significant? How important is it that this happened before the Black Death, and what was the impact of the Great Famine of 1315-22 on their estate administration?

There are of course some aspects of the book that could have been handled with a little more care – on more than a few occasions does one stumble across a spelling mistake – and the book would have benefitted from a little ‘tidy-up’ by a native English copyeditor. Given that the amount of available literature in English is very limited on the medieval Kingdom of Valencia though, we must however be thankful for the appearance of the book rather than nitpick over finer language details. One element that certainly could be improved, however, is the use of measurements and the lack of standardisation. Miriam Müller, like so many working on England, uses acres – and this is always frustrating when trying to compare to mainland European scholars using hectares. More essential than that though is the lack of standardisation when trying to display stratification in farm sizes. Just to use the example of Müller again, in four tables (pp. 75-7) she displays the distribution of landholding sizes for four different manors (two in East Anglia, two in Wiltshire) and yet in every table a different form of categorisation is used. Table 3.1 uses ‘5 acres’, ‘5-10’, ‘11-20’, ‘21+’, ‘unknown’, while table 3.2 uses ‘less than 5 acres’, ‘cottars’, ‘20’, ‘40+’ and table 3.3 uses ‘less than 5 acres’, ‘1/2 virgate’, ‘1 virgate’, ‘more than 1 virgate’, ‘cottars’, ‘cottage and mill’, and ‘unknown’ – table 3.4 is also different. How are we to make comparative sense of this – let alone if we want to compare with other regions of Europe? Particularly when terms such as ‘cottar’ are not even explained to the reader. Notwithstanding this relatively minor criticism, this book has many merits. Indeed, what is particularly encouraging is that the vast majority of the chapters are produced by young rural historians, and is evidence enough that the discipline will have a strong future, if we continue to make interregional comparisons that transcend national historiographies.