

9/Agrarian Societies: Part II

*The art of taxation consists in so plucking
the goose as to get the most feathers
for the least hissing.*
Colbert

The Retainer Class

IN EVERY AGRARIAN SOCIETY the ruler and governing class employed or otherwise maintained a small army of officials, professional soldiers, household servants, and personal retainers, all of whom served them in a variety of more or less specialized capacities. These individuals, together with their families, constituted what might be called "the retainer class or classes." Though this is not a familiar label, it communicates better than any of the alternatives the most important characteristic of this class, namely its dependence on the political elite.

On first inspection, it may seem strange to lump such diverse occupational groups together when their specific functions were so different. However, despite such differences, their basic function was always the same—service to the political elite. In return for this, they were separated from, and elevated above, the mass of common people, and to a limited degree

shared in the economic surplus. It should also be noted that in many agrarian societies the boundaries between the several specialties which formed the retainer class were not nearly so sharp or well defined as members of modern industrial societies might suppose them to have been. In societies with a "matter-of-course confusion of public business with private enterprise," there was nothing at all strange about the use of personal retainers or household servants in official capacities, whether civil or military. Also, in societies where war was an almost continuous feature of life for the governing class, the mingling of civil and military functions is hardly surprising.¹

If the boundaries between the several segments of the retainer class were often fuzzy, so, too, was the boundary between the retainer class and the governing class. High-ranking servants of powerful members of the governing class or of the ruler often enjoyed a much greater measure of power and privilege than the lower-ranking members of the governing class. This can be seen in the case of certain of the household servants or slaves of the Roman emperors who, on occasion, exercised considerable political influence and enjoyed many privileges. For example, it is reported that a slave of Tiberius, a bachelor named Musicus, occupied "the not very elevated position of a dispensator in the *fuscus Gallicus provinciae Lugdunensis*," but nevertheless received from the emperor a household staff of sixteen consisting of a *negotiator* to manage his business affairs, a *sumptuarius* to control his household expenditure, two cooks, two footmen, a valet, two chamberlains, two butlers, three secretaries, a doctor, and a lady "whose functions are discreetly veiled."² Similar patterns can be observed in the Chinese Empire, especially in the case of the imperial eunuchs, who, though servants, sometimes wielded considerable power, or in medieval Europe where the serving men of powerful princes often shared in their lord's power. In a number of instances, lesser members of the governing class voluntarily entered the service of more powerful members of their own class, in the hope of thereby improving their fortunes.³

¹ See, for example, A. E. R. Boak, *A History of Rome to 565 A.D.*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1943), pp. 344f. or Harold Mattingly, *Roman Imperial Civilization* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), pp. 152f. on the use of household servants in official capacities in Rome, or Adolf Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, translated by H. M. Tirard (London: Macmillan, 1894), pp. 105f., on ancient Egypt. On the mingling of civil and military functions and functionaries, see A. H. M. Jones, *Studies in Roman Government and Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), pp. 161f. These examples are chiefly from the Roman Empire, where specialization was, by agrarian standards, rather highly developed. Where there was less specialization, as in medieval Europe, distinctions were even less clear.

² Jones, p. 160.

³ Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society*, translated by L. A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), provides valuable insights into this phenomenon as it developed in western Europe. See especially part 4.

Because of the constant movement of men in both directions, it is often difficult to say exactly where one class began and the other ended.

At the other extreme, the retainer class was bounded by the peasant class, and here, too, it is sometimes difficult to define the boundary. In medieval England, for example, reeves and haywards were neither fish nor fowl, much like the modern foreman. On the one hand, they served the lord of the manor in an official capacity and sometimes derived a significant portion of their income for this. On the other hand, they were from the peasant class and usually returned to it after a relatively brief term of office. Furthermore, even while serving in these offices, they usually found it necessary to carry on their own farming activities. In short, they were marginal to both classes.⁴ Similarly, within the lord's household the most menial chores were often performed by individuals who functioned at other times as mere peasants. Finally, the masses of common soldiers were recruited from the peasantry and, if they survived, returned to civilian life as peasants, with little or no sense of deprivation.

As might be expected, the character of the retainer class varied according to the character of the governing class. In societies where bureaucratic officials were more powerful, the retainer class tended to take on a bureaucratic character. By contrast, in societies where an hereditary nobility was dominant, the retainer class tended to reflect the particularistic values of that group.

It is almost impossible to obtain from the historical record reliable figures on the size of the retainer class. On both theoretical and empirical grounds, however, it seems likely that it was usually several times the size of the governing class. If governing classes averaged about 1 per cent of the total population, the retainer class probably averaged somewhere in the neighborhood of 5 per cent. Much less than this seems unlikely, in view of the many functions this class was expected to perform; much more seems unlikely because of the strain such numbers would place on the economy.⁵

⁴ For good discussions of these offices and the individuals who filled them, see H. S. Bennett, *Life on the English Manor: A Study of Peasant Conditions, 1150-1400* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 166f., or George C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), pp. 292f.

⁵ Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957), reports that minor civil officials numbered 1.7 million in the last days of the Chinese Empire (p. 307). This indicates that they, with their families, equaled about 2 per cent of the population. If servants and soldiers were added, the total would probably not be far from 5 per cent. In nineteenth-century Russia, household servants in the homes of the rich constituted 2 to 3 per cent of the population. See Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 460.

Collectively, the members of the retainer class were very important, especially from the standpoint of the maintenance of the distributive system. To begin with, they provided badly needed numerical support for the ruler and governing class in their efforts to maintain their essentially exploitative position in society. It seems unlikely that the military technology of these societies was advanced to the point where a minority of only 1 to 2 per cent of the population, no matter how well organized, could effectively subordinate the other 98 or 99 per cent (a ratio of 50 or 100 to 1). However, their technology may well have permitted an organized minority of 6 or 7 per cent, i.e., the governing class and its retainers, to dominate the rest of the population (a ratio of about 15 to 1), especially if the latter were unorganized.

Collectively the retainer class was also important because it performed the crucial task of mediating relations between the governing class and the common people. It was the retainers who actually performed most of the work involved in effecting the transfer of the economic surplus from the producers to the political elite. How efficiently this was done depended in large measure on their skill and diligence. Furthermore, because they were the intermediaries, the retainers deflected much of the hostility and resentment which otherwise would have been directed at the political elite. Peasants and other members of the lower orders could never be certain whether the difficulties they experienced were due to the tax collectors, petty officials, and other members of the retainer class with whom they interacted, or to those higher up. Because of their lack of contact with the governing class, the peasants were likely to give them at least some of the benefit of the doubt. By deflecting and diffusing hostility in this way, the retainer class contributed still further to the survival and stability of the highly exploitative agrarian distributive system.

Though collectively the members of this class were terribly important to their superiors, individually most of them were expendable. Except perhaps for clerks and others whose work required literacy, their skills were usually ones which could be mastered by others without too much difficulty. This greatly weakened their bargaining position with the governing class. In general, the wages paid retainers were quite modest, though there is evidence that they took advantage of every possible opportunity for "honest graft," just as their superiors did.⁶ In medieval England,

⁶ See, for example, Bennett, pp. 174-175 or F. R. Cowell, *Cicero and the Roman Republic* (London: Penguin, 1956), p. 64. Sometimes more than "honest graft" was involved, as shown by Francois Ganshof, "Medieval Agrarian Society in Its Prime: France, the Low Countries, and Western Germany," in *The Cambridge Economic History*, vol. I, pp. 293-294, or Erman, p. 127, on ancient Egypt.

the seneschal, chief official in the service of a wealthy lord, received a salary of about £15 a year, plus most of his living expenses and other perquisites.⁷ This, together with a certain amount of "honest graft," afforded him an income equal to that of the average squire a century later.⁸ A bailiff supervising a single manor was paid £4 to £6 a year plus most of his living expenses, from perfectly legitimate income alone, while a reeve, the lowest-ranking manorial official, received £1 a year or less (supplemented, of course, by income from his own land).⁹ As modest as these incomes seem by modern standards, the bailiff received as much as some of the poorest gentlemen and more than was required to support a scholar comfortably, while the reeve's income was "at least double that received by plowmen or carters," and four times that of shepherds.¹⁰ There were, of course, far more reeves than bailiffs, and far more bailiffs than seneschals.

Within the retainer class, rewards varied inversely with the ease with which the individual could be replaced. Thus, those positions which required the least ability and training commanded the fewest rewards, while those requiring considerable ability, unusual talents, or extensive training commanded more. Superficially, this seems a confirmation of the functionalists' theory of rewards, but, in effect, it is nothing of the kind, because what was rewarded was service to the elite, not service to society at large.

Members of this class, like those above them, constantly sought to maximize their rights and privileges. Various methods were used depending upon the particular subclass involved. Of all the subclasses, the most threatening to the political elite was the military. *Whenever the governing class abdicated its military responsibilities and allowed the officer corps of the army to become dominated by professional soldiers up from the ranks, they created a dangerous situation for themselves.* Unless these professionals were highly rewarded, even perhaps to the point of admission into the governing class, they were likely to use the resources at their command to seize control of the state.¹¹ This was the experience of the later Roman Empire, where professional soldiers, who were not a part of

⁷ Bennett, p. 158.

⁸ H. L. Gray, "Incomes from Land in England in 1436," *English Historical Review*, 49 (1934), p. 630.

⁹ Bennett, pp. 163 and 175, or May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 317.

¹⁰ Gray, p. 630, Sidney Painter, *Studies in the History of the English Feudal Barony* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1943), p. 172, and Bennett, p. 163.

¹¹ On this point, see Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, translated by Hannah Kahn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), pp. 235-237, and Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Reason Why* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953), pp. 25-29.

the governing class, often intervened in domestic politics, either to seize the throne for themselves or for someone of their choosing. A similar situation developed in Egypt at the time of the Mamluk seizure of power, in Turkey under the Janissaries, and in the later Abbasid Empire at Samarra.¹²

The civilian segments of the retainer class never posed such a serious threat to the political elite as a whole, though individual rulers and members of the governing class were sometimes assassinated by household servants or other retainers. Such events, though vitally important to the individuals concerned, seldom had any significant effect on the distributive system.

Significant and enduring gains by the civilian members of the retainer class were much more likely to come "a drop at a time." Through a gradual process of attrition, minor officials and servants slowly transformed special favors or opportunities into precedents, temporary advantages into permanent, and permanent advantages into hereditary. These gains were symptomatic of the difficulties encountered by a tiny governing class striving to preserve its many and far-flung interests. *Such gains by retainers were likely to be greatest during periods when the governing class was dominated by a hedonistic ethic, and least when an ethic of responsibility and duty held sway.* If Pareto and others are correct in stating that the sterner qualities prevail in the earlier generations of a regime and are gradually replaced by a less responsible attitude, then the gains of the retainer class should have been greater in the later stages of most regimes and less in the earlier stages. In fact, one might expect the appearance of a new regime to result in a sharp reversal in the usual pattern, with the retainers' gains of a century or more wiped out in a single generation.

The Merchant Class

Though the rulers and governing classes of agrarian societies generally sought to achieve complete control over the economic surplus, they seldom succeeded. Virtually always, others arose to contest their claims, and usually with some measure of success. None was more successful than the members of the merchant class, a segment of the population whose activities the political elite usually found it difficult to direct and control.

Much ink has been spilled in scholarly debates over the origins of this class, and while the issue is still not finally settled, it seems clear that the

¹² See Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 466-467 on the Abbasid dynasty and chap. 47 on the Mamluks. See A. D. Alderson, *The Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), chap. 10 on Turkey.

great majority of its earliest members came from humble backgrounds. Henri Pirenne, for example, argues that in Europe they "were originally recruited from among landless men," the younger sons of peasants who were not destined to inherit their father's land.¹³ Such men were forced to choose between living out their lives in straitened circumstance as bachelors and semiservants dependent on their elder brother, or taking their chances elsewhere.¹⁴ Given the age at which such decisions were typically made (from about fifteen to twenty-five), it is hardly surprising that large numbers took to the highways, where they sought whatever means of livelihood they could find. Although the great majority were probably reduced to beggary or worse, a few apparently discovered that the mobility of the disinherited could be turned to advantage, at least by the clever. For example, as Pirenne has noted, "in an age when local famines were continual, one had only to buy a very small quantity of grain cheaply in regions where it was abundant, to realize fabulous profits, which could then be increased by the same methods."¹⁵ Or, a man might get his start by becoming a beachcomber, as did St. Godric of Finchale, selling items of value salvaged from the not uncommon shipwrecks.¹⁶

In some instances the merchant class seems to have evolved slowly from the ranks of peasants who, during slack periods, engaged in mercantile activities on a limited basis to make ends meet.¹⁷ This pattern of activity, it will be recalled, was not uncommon in advanced horticultural societies. With the greater economic opportunities afforded by agrarian societies, some peasants took the step from part- to full-time commercial activity.

One indication of the humble origins of the merchant class is found in the low prestige accorded "mere merchants," i.e., those engaged in mercantile activity but not members of the governing class, almost everywhere in the early agrarian world. In the traditional status systems of China and Japan, merchants were ranked at or near the bottom of the social scale, and clearly below both peasant farmers and artisans.¹⁸ Though there is reason to doubt that the merchant class was really re-

¹³ Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Harvest Books, n.d., originally published in 1933), p. 45.

¹⁴ See, for example, Homans, pp. 137f.

¹⁵ Pirenne, p. 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See James Westfall Thompson, *Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1928), p. 772, or Blum, pp. 288f.

¹⁸ See, for example, Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-industrial Japan* (New York: Free Press, 1957), pp. 24-25; Morton Fried, *The Fabric of Chinese Society: A Study of the Social Life of a Chinese County Seat* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1953), p. 211; Robert K. Douglas, *Society in China* (London: Innes, 1894), pp. 139-140; or Wolfram Eberhard, *Social Mobility in Traditional China* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1962), p. 6.

garded so poorly by the majority of men,¹⁹ it is doubtful that they would ever have been ranked in this way if their origins had not originally been rather humble.²⁰ In medieval Europe, merchants were not treated with the same measure of official disdain, but even there the merchant class was viewed as definitely inferior to the governing class, and so regarded itself, as evidenced by the eagerness with which its members adopted the ways of life of the governing class and sought to marry into noble families.

Whatever its origins, the merchant class aspired to better things, and in time attained them. In virtually every mature agrarian society merchants managed to acquire a considerable portion of the wealth, and in a few instances a measure of political power as well.

The reasons for their success are not altogether clear but were linked, apparently, with certain peculiar features of their role. To begin with, from a very early date merchants managed to free themselves from the direct and immediate authority of the ruler and governing class. This meant that, in the economic sphere, merchants stood in a *market* relationship with the governing class, not an *authority* relationship.²¹ This made it possible for the merchant class to deal with the governing class, in part at least, on terms more favorable to themselves than to their opponents.

In authority relations, the political elite had a distinct advantage. They held nearly all the high cards, so to speak, and thus could largely dictate terms, as they did with the retainer class. By contrast, they were not nearly so well equipped in market relations. In fact, their efforts to acquire the resources needed to dominate authority relations may have weakened their position in market relations.

As has long been recognized, these two types of relations call for very different skills and resources. Control of a large body of armed retainers is tremendously helpful in authority relations, but not very useful in market relations. Conversely, familiarity with subtle variations in the

¹⁹ On the basis of descriptions of these societies it is difficult to believe that these traditional prestige systems were not devices developed by the governing classes, with the assistance of scholars, to put the troublesome merchant class in "its place." In other words, they were apparently weapons used in the struggle between classes more than they were objective rating devices as some modern scholars seem to regard them.

²⁰ Robert Bellah suggests that the low status of merchants was due chiefly to their preoccupation with money, which "runs counter to both the upper class ethic and the religious ethic." This may well have been an added factor but I find it somewhat difficult to document an indifference to wealth on the part of the upper class—though obviously they were averse to working for it. See also Gideon Sjoberg, *The Pre-industrial City* (New York: Free Press, 1960), p. 136, and elsewhere for a view somewhat similar to Bellah's.

²¹ I do not mean to suggest that the merchant class completely escaped the authority relationship: politically they were still subject to the governing class. For economic purposes, however, they were not.

quality of merchandise, skill in the manipulation of weights and measures, and knowledge of prices in other markets and the costs of moving goods between them are great assets in market relations, but of little account in authority relations. Much of the success of the merchant class depended on these differences.²²

It is interesting to consider why members of the merchant class were able to escape the employee status when so many others were not. At this stage we can only speculate, since detailed historical evidence is still largely lacking. Probably the foremost factor responsible for the independent entrepreneurial status of merchants was the mobile character of their occupation. Given the relatively primitive character of transportation and communication, the political elite may have found that it was not worth the effort to try to maintain the same detailed supervision over the activities of merchants that they did over the activities of their retainers. Furthermore, unlike most of the members of the retainer class, the merchants were not active in the political realm, and hence posed no obvious threat. Finally, in some cases merchants were obliged to cross national boundaries as a normal part of their business. At such times, they were beyond the control of the political elite of their own country. All these factors undoubtedly helped the merchant class establish a different kind of relationship to the political elite from that of the retainer class.

Other factors may also have been involved. The nontraditional character of the role, together with the substantial financial risks involved, may have contributed to the willingness of the political elite to grant merchants a freedom denied to others.

Whatever the reasons, this development was not without benefits for both parties. The wealth which could be acquired through mercantile activity has become proverbial. The literature and other records of the great agrarian societies of the past are filled with accounts of wealthy merchants whose riches rivaled those of the political elite. For example, the Japanese historian, Takekoshi, provides a detailed list of the property of the house of Yodoya at the time it was confiscated by the fifth Tokugawa shogun. Among the items listed were the following: storehouses with contents valued at 730,000 ryo of gold, 21 solid gold hens with 10 chicks (7,300 ryo), 277 large junks (263,500 ryo), 150 gold-leaf folding screens (15,000 ryo), 10 paintings by the Emperor Kiso of China (20,000 ryo), 150,000 pounds of quicksilver (25,000 ryo), 3,500,000 ryo in gold coin, 1,500,000 kwamme of silver (14,166,000 ryo), plus numerous houses, farms, and forests, and countless other artifacts. This family was also reported to have over 100 million ryo in outstanding loans to members of

²² See, for example, Fried, pp. 126 and 161-162.

the governing class, though this figure is believed to be an exaggeration.²³

Though obviously the Yodoya family was exceptional, in most agrarian societies there was an appreciable overlap between the wealth of the merchant class and that of the governing class. How great this overlap was, is difficult to say, though it is clear that leading members of the merchant class were usually much wealthier than the lesser members of the governing class.²⁴

Naturally, not all merchants became rich. Many remained quite poor. This was especially true of those who served the poorer classes, as in the case of itinerant peddlers in the countryside and self-employed merchant-artisans in the cities.^{24a} Thus the merchant class cannot be thought of as a single stratum forming a distinctive layer within a neatly stratified structure of superimposed classes. Rather, as Figure 1 (page 284) suggests, its members covered a considerable portion of the social scale. Nevertheless, they constituted a single class in the sense set forth in Chapter 4 since all depended ultimately on the same essential resource—their special knowledge and skills in the buying and selling of goods—and it was this which gave them a definite advantage in relations in the market place and made possible the rise of some to fame and fortune.

If the merchants benefited from their distinctive entrepreneurial status, so, too, did the political elite. Not only did they enjoy ready access to commodities which otherwise would have been rare or unobtainable, they also shared in the profits of mercantile activity through taxes placed on the merchants' goods. Besides providing an important source of revenue, taxation of this kind had the added advantage of *shifting to the merchants part of the responsibility for extracting the economic surplus from the common people*. This made it more difficult for the common people to fix the blame for their unhappy situation on the political elite and thus increased the safety and stability of the entire sociopolitical system.

The political elite was not always content with what it could obtain from merchants through taxation and often turned to other devices. For example, they sometimes resorted to confiscation of the merchants' prop-

²³ Yosoburo Takekoshi, *The Economic Aspects of the History of the Civilization of Japan* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), vol. II, pp. 252-254.

²⁴ See, for example, the account of the Baghdad jeweler who remained wealthy even after 16 million dinars of his property were confiscated (Hitti, p. 344). See also, Blum, p. 473; Douglas, p. 140; A. Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 80; Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1962), pp. 11 and 110f.; or Alan Simpson, *The Wealth of the Gentry 1540-1660* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961), chap. 3. Compare such accounts with those of the poorer members of the nobility (see p. 238 above).

^{24a} See, for example, Sjoberg, pp. 201-202.

erty.²⁵ Another practice was to borrow substantial sums and refuse repayment.²⁶ Still another practice was to marry noble sons to merchants' daughters, an honor for which they charged dearly.²⁷ Wealthy merchants were also separated from large sums, given eagerly, in exchange for titles of nobility.²⁸

All of these methods proved to be effective in separating the merchant class from a portion of its gains, but only a portion. In the end, a political elite always had to weigh its desire for the merchants' wealth against its need for their services. No ruler or governing class could ever really enjoy the fruits of political power unless merchants were available to provide them with those rare and unusual commodities which elevated the life of the privileged classes above that of the common herd and caused them to be envied and admired. Thus there were always limits beyond which a political elite would not go in their efforts to appropriate the wealth of the merchant class. Like the goose which laid the golden eggs, the merchant class was protected by its intrinsic utility against all but the most short-sighted and foolish of elites,

As one would expect, merchants were not indifferent to the efforts of the elite to cut themselves in on mercantile profits. They always resisted, though the methods of resistance varied considerably. Where the ruler and governing class were extremely strong and greedy, merchants were

²⁵ This practice was especially common in Mughal India, where any visible accumulation of wealth by merchants invited confiscation. See B. B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 25-27. Also see Takekoshi, vol. II, pp. 251f. on Japan, or Painter, *Barony*, p. 186, or Sir James H. Ramsay, *A History of the Revenues of the Kings of England 1066-1399* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), vol. I, p. 58 on medieval England, where the confiscation of the property of Jewish moneylenders and merchants was a fairly common practice.

²⁶ This was a common practice in Tokugawa Japan. See, for example, Takekoshi, vol. II, pp. 258f., or Bellah, pp. 28-29. See, also, Blum, pp. 384-385 on Russia, or Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, pp. 53 and 259 on England.

²⁷ This practice was especially common in Europe, though it was adopted elsewhere. On Europe, see Elinor Barber, *The Bourgeoisie in 18th Century France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 100f.; Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, pp. 265-269; H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The Gentry 1540-1640," *The Economic History Review Supplements*, No. 1 (n.d.), p. 26; or Jean Hippolyte Mariéjol, *The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella*, translated and edited by Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961), p. 42 (who reports intermarriages between Spanish nobles and wealthy Jewish merchants' daughters). For an earlier period, the Roman era, see Cowell, p. 340.

²⁸ This practice was especially common in France and China, but was practiced in many other countries as well. On France, see E. Barber, pp. 106ff., Louis Gottschalk, *The Era of the French Revolution* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1929), pp. 52-53, or J. McManners, "France," in A. Goodwin (ed.), *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Black, 1953), pp. 22f. On China, see Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1955), pp. 102f., etc., or Robert Marsh, *The Mandarins: The Circulation of Elites in China, 1600-1900* (New York: Free Press, 1961), pp. 5, 13, 64, etc. See, also, Takekoshi, vol. II, pp. 454-456 on Japan, or Cowell, p. 237 on Rome.

forced to rely on wit and cunning, one resource in which they were likely to enjoy an advantage. In Mughal India, for example, wealthy merchants usually pretended to be poor, and buried their wealth to prevent its confiscation.²⁹ By contrast, in medieval Europe, where political elites were not so strong, the merchant class sometimes rose in armed rebellion and seized political rights for themselves.³⁰ In less extreme cases, the merchant class even bought political privileges from hard pressed rulers. For example, in the early thirteenth century the merchants of London paid King John the substantial sum of £2,000 for a charter granting them certain fundamental political rights.³¹

In short, just as rulers and governing classes constantly struggled with one another to enlarge their respective rights and privileges, so, too, the merchant class struggled with both segments of the political elite. The ultimate objective of the merchant class was to maximize the area in which market relations prevailed and minimize the area of authority relations, while the aim of the political elite was the reverse.

Little effort has been made to determine why the results of these struggles varied as they did. As noted above, the outcomes have ranged from the situation in Mughal India where merchants did not dare show their wealth for fear of confiscation, to that in late medieval Europe where merchants became, in effect, the governing class in the newly emerging urban centers. The modal pattern apparently lay between these two extremes, and was one in which merchants were able to accumulate wealth with relative freedom from the threat of confiscation (though not without numerous "gifts" to the political elite and substantial taxes), but were denied any appreciable measure of political power.

On theoretical grounds there are several hypotheses regarding the causes of these variations which suggest themselves, and are supported by a casual and unsystematic historical survey. To begin with, if wit and cunning were the basic resources of the merchant class, and control of the means of violence the basic resource of the political elite, then it follows that *any developments which increased the opportunities and need for wit and cunning, and reduced the opportunities and need for violence, should have improved the position of the merchant class.*³² For example,

²⁹ Misra, pp. 25-26.

³⁰ See, for example, Thompson, p. 780; Pirenne, p. 54; or Max Weber, *The City*, translated by Dan Martindale and Gertrude Neuwirth (New York: Free Press, 1958), pp. 157f.

³¹ G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 285. For other examples, see Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, p. 87.

³² I hesitate to extend this generalization to include a decline in warfare between nations, since merchants often profited greatly from supplying munitions. War was a threat to the merchant class only when the habits developed in war were employed in domestic affairs.

the existence of orderly procedures governing succession to the throne, such as prevailed in most of Europe but were conspicuously lacking in Mughal India, should have strengthened the position of merchants, other things being equal. Similarly, the growth in the power of a centralized political authority and the decline of feudalism should have improved the position of the merchant class by reducing the opportunities for the profitable exercise of violence in the political life of the nation.

Using the same logic, one would predict that *anything which facilitated the growth of trade and commerce would enhance the position of the merchant class in relation to the elite*, once again if other things were equal. This follows from the fact that one of the basic resources of the merchant class was its wealth. Since wealth tended to be proportional to profits and profits proportional to the volume of business, anything which increased the volume of business was likely to increase the power of the merchant class. Thus, one would expect the position of merchants to improve after the early medieval period in Europe, owing to the reestablishment of law and order and the resulting increase in the volume of trade and commerce. One would also expect that in general the position of the merchant class would be much better in agrarian societies approaching industrialism than in those not far removed from the horticultural level. In short, technological advance within agrarian societies stimulated commerce and thereby favored the merchant class.

On the basis of the foregoing, one might suppose that merchants were the implacable enemies of political elites. Actually, the struggle between the merchant class and the political elite was more like a contest between brothers than a fight between strangers. In addition to the things which divided them and set them at enmity, there were other elements which united them and tended to hold the divisive elements in check. To begin with, the merchant class, like the elite, was a privileged class in society and hence was dependent on the power of the elite to hold the hostility of the lower classes in check. In addition, the political elite were the best customers of the merchant class. As noted earlier in the chapter, much of the trade and commerce in agrarian societies involved luxury goods which only the wealthy could afford. Finally, members of the merchant class were drawn to the political elite by admiration for their way of life. Though there were some exceptions, the great majority of merchants in agrarian societies seem to have had the consuming desire to be like the members of the governing class, to be accepted by them as equals, and eventually, if possible, to become one with them.³³

³³ See, for example, E. Barber, p. 89. Of course, this usually was not possible for members of the merchant class who were members of minority status groups, such as the Jews.

For their part, members of the political elite found the merchant class indispensable. Without them, political power would not have been nearly so desirable. Furthermore, the merchant class could always be counted on to defend the fundamental principle of social inequality and most of the institutions which gave it expression. This was no small matter in societies where those who held political power were as badly outnumbered as in agrarian societies. Finally, as we have noted before, merchants played a valuable role in the important process of extracting the economic surplus from the common people. For all these reasons, then, the political elite was not anxious to destroy the merchant class. Their struggles were therefore limited struggles of the kind which develops whenever the parties involved are united by important ties of mutual dependence.

Before concluding this discussion of the merchant class, there is one important qualification which should be added. In many agrarian societies the merchant class included considerable numbers of persons from minority status groups, such as the Jews in Europe or the Parsis in India. By virtue of their membership in these groups, such individuals were usually prevented from entering the governing class through purchase or marriage, no matter how successful they might have been from an economic standpoint. Furthermore, by virtue of the barrier which set them apart and the stigma attached to them, they tended to be more vulnerable than other members of their class to forcible expropriation and other hardships.

The Priestly Class

Last but not least among the privileged elements in agrarian societies was that composed of the leaders of organized religion, the priestly class. Strictly speaking, this term refers only to those who mediate relations between God, or the gods, and men through the performance of sacrificial rites. I shall use the term more broadly, however, to include monks, ministers, rabbis, imams, and all other religious leaders whose livelihood and status in society were dependent primarily on their leadership role in the religious system.

The nature of the priestly class varied considerably from one agrarian society to another, especially where religious traditions diverged. In some societies it mediated the basic relations between God and man; in others it had little more than a teaching function. In some it controlled access to spiritual resources essential to salvation; in others it completely lacked such powers. In some it was a celibate, nonhereditary order; in others marriage was allowed for all or for certain subclasses. Where marriage was permitted, an hereditary priestly class often developed, though

not invariably. In some societies the priestly class was organized into a fairly well-coordinated national hierarchy; in others this was absent, and members of the priestly class were either equal in status or differentiated only on the basis of local hierarchies. Finally, over and above all of these variations there were vitally important differences in doctrine and differences in relations between the priestly class and the rest of the population, e.g., whether it enjoyed the support of the majority or only a small minority, and whether or not it enjoyed the support of the political elite. Because of all these variations, it is extremely dangerous to generalize about the role of the priestly class. It may even be that the nature of this class was the most variable feature of importance in agrarian societies, when viewed from the standpoint of the distributive process.

When this class enjoyed the favor of the political elite, as some segment of it usually did, its opportunities for accumulating wealth were enormous. Though Ramses III, founder of the twentieth dynasty in ancient Egypt, ranks among the most generous benefactors of the priestly class, his gifts reveal the potentialities.³⁴ According to the record prepared at the time of his death, his gifts to the gods and to their servants, the priests, included 169 towns, 113,433 slaves, 493,386 cattle, 1,071,780 plots of ground, 2,756 images of the gods containing 1,400 pounds of gold and 2,200 pounds of silver, and a vast array of other things.

Though Ramses was unusually generous, others in all walks of life bestowed gifts on the priestly class, with the result that it was often one of the wealthiest in agrarian societies. For example, in Egypt in the century after Ramses III, in the twelfth century B.C., the priestly class owned 15 per cent of the land.³⁵ The same figure is reported for France in the eighteenth century.³⁶ In the early Islamic state, 20 per cent of all the booty won in war was claimed for the support of the priestly class.³⁷ In Ottoman Turkey, as much as a third of all the land was set aside as *vakf*, i.e., as a religious endowment.³⁸ At the time of Charles Martel, it is estimated that the Church in France owned a third of the land, and a similar figure is reported for England in the fourteenth century.³⁹ The Church in

³⁴ See Erman, pp. 299-305.

³⁵ Ralph Turner, *The Great Cultural Traditions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941), p. 288.

³⁶ Shepard B. Clough, *The Economic Development of Western Civilization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 298.

³⁷ Albert H. Lybyer, *The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the Time of Suleiman the Magnificent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), p. 276.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

³⁹ On France, see Coulton, p. 53. On England, see Philip Lindsay and Reg Groves, *The Peasants' Revolt, 1381* (London: Hutchinson, n.d.), p. 76. See, also, Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, p. 182, who reports that in London in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Church owned a quarter or more of the land.

pre-Reformation Sweden owned 21 per cent of the land, while in sixteenth-century Russia, it owned 40 per cent or more in certain districts (though on a national basis the figure was not nearly this high).⁴⁰ The Primate of the Spains, the Archbishop of Toledo, is reported to have ranked "immediately below the king in point of power, wealth, and the extent of his dominions" in the early sixteenth century.⁴¹ In Ceylon, Buddhist monasteries are reported to have controlled about a third of the land.⁴² It is difficult to find reliable estimates of the total wealth of the priestly class in India, China, and Japan, but it seems clear from reports that it was substantial, in some periods at least.⁴³ In addition to their great wealth, members of the priestly class often enjoyed tax exemption, which greatly enhanced the economic value of their property.

Though the holdings of the priestly class as a whole were often immense, all members of the class did not share equally in them. In medieval Europe, for example, there was a division between the upper clergy and the lower clergy which duplicated the cleavage between the governing class and the peasantry. The upper clergy were usually recruited from the governing class and lived in a style commensurate with their background, while the lower clergy, the parish priests who served the common people, were generally recruited from the common people and lived but little better than their kinsmen.⁴⁴ Even in the monasteries, where one would expect class distinctions to have broken down, they often remained very pronounced. For example, in a church council convened in Moscow in 1503 the question was debated whether monasticism and wealth were necessarily incompatible. The two chief protagonists at this council were Nil Sorskii, a monk and son of a peasant, and Joseph Sanin, also a monk

⁴⁰ On Sweden, see Eli F. Heckscher, *An Economic History of Sweden*, translated by Goram Ohlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 67. On Russia, see Blum, pp. 177-178 and 188f.

⁴¹ Mariéjol, p. 251.

⁴² Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, translated by Hans Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1958), p. 257.

⁴³ See, for example, D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the History of India* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1956), pp. 291-308, or McKim Marriott (ed.), *Village India: Studies in the Little Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 5, 11-12, 38, 41, and 212 on India; Wolfram Eberhard, *A History of China*, 2d ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 134 and 188 on China; and Takekoshi, vol. I, chap. 8 on Japan.

⁴⁴ The extent to which the ranks of the upper clergy were open to men of humble birth varied considerably from period to period and from country to country but there seems never to have been true equality of opportunity. For discussions of the subject, see S. E. Gleason, *An Ecclesiastical Barony in the Middle Ages: The Bishopric of Bayeux, 1066-1204* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), pp. 36f.; E. Barber, pp. 126f.; Mariéjol, pp. 162 and 254; Thompson, pp. 642, 658, and 678; McKisack, p. 262; Homans, p. 135; or George Vernadsky, *History of Russia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1958), vol. IV, pp. 270-271.

but of upper-class origins. Nil argued that monks should "resist and avoid like deadly poison the desire to possess earthly goods." Joseph replied, "If a monastery does not own villages, how can an honorable and well-born man become a monk, and if there are no monks of noble origin, where will men be gotten who are worthy of becoming metropolitans, archbishops, bishops, or of filling other high church offices?"⁴⁵ Similar problems plagued the Western Church, where certain monastic orders were closed to anyone not of noble birth.⁴⁶ In countries where an hereditary priestly class held sway, as in India, equally great differences were evident, usually a reflection of differences in the individual's or temple's relation to the political elite.

The holdings of the upper segment of the priestly class, though often extensive, were seldom secure. The histories of agrarian societies are filled with acts of confiscation by political elites. Henry VIII was but one of the rulers of Europe who seized the far-flung properties of the Church. As early as the eighth century, Charles Martel and also the dukes of Bavaria confiscated many Church properties.⁴⁷ During the medieval period, the so-called Age of Faith, the properties and incomes of the Church were often taken by members of the governing class, and even by retainers employed by the monasteries, by either force or deceit.⁴⁸ The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century resulted in widespread confiscations of monastery properties throughout the whole area in which Protestantism became dominant.⁴⁹ In Russia, the fortunes of the Church varied from century to century and even from ruler to ruler, but the most extensive confiscations occurred in the eighteenth century under such rulers as Peter the Great and Catherine, who deprived the Orthodox Church of virtually all its land.⁵⁰ There are also reports of wholesale confiscations in China on several occasions. Prior to the twentieth century, the most extensive may have been one in the ninth century which drove more than a quarter of a million Buddhist monks from the monasteries and secularized millions of acres of tax-exempt monastery lands.⁵¹

The highly variable fortunes of the priestly class were a reflection of

⁴⁵ See Blum, pp. 194-196.

⁴⁶ Thompson, p. 680.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 649.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 604 and 651ff.; Ganshof, pp. 293-294; Hans Nabholz, "Medieval Agrarian Society in Transitions," in *The Cambridge Economic History*, vol. I, pp. 527 and 537; or Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), p. 136.

⁴⁹ See, for example, the confiscations of Christian III in Denmark or Gustavus Vasa in Sweden.

⁵⁰ Blum, pp. 362-366.

⁵¹ Eberhard, *History*, p. 188. For another example of large-scale confiscations, see p. 246.

its members' heavy involvement in politics, since only the political elite was capable of bestowing land and other forms of wealth in such lavish fashion, and only the political elite was capable of such massive confiscations. This involvement in politics points up the complementary character of the needs of these two classes. Each needed what the other, and only the other, could supply. For its part, the political elite badly needed the blessing of the priestly class. Only the latter could establish the legitimacy of a regime which constantly used its power to separate the common people from the major part of what they produced. The significance of this power to confer legitimacy is difficult to exaggerate. One need only recall the discussion (see pages 51 to 52) of the costliness of efforts to rule by naked force, to realize the benefits which accrued to a political elite when it could obtain the blessing of the priestly class.⁵²

The priestly class also performed other functions of great value to the political elite, and sometimes also to society at large. In societies where limited literacy was the rule, the clergy were often called upon to perform those administrative tasks which required a mastery of the art of writing. Our modern term "clerk" reflects the historical association between this activity and the priestly class, or clergy. The clergy were also called upon to serve as diplomats, officials, educators, and even military leaders.⁵³ In some instances they played an important role in effecting the pacification, civilization, and subjugation of primitive peoples on the borders of agrarian states, thus contributing to the extension of the political influence of the elite with whom they were allied.⁵⁴

For their part, the political elite were able to do much to assist the priestly class. Above all, they used their skills in the art of violence to defend or spread the faith. Although it is true that some faiths, such as early Christianity and Buddhism, spread to some degree without political support, and some, like later Judaism, survived for extended periods without such support, there was usually a high correlation between the measure of political support received by agrarian religions and their numerical

⁵² See, for example, Kosambi, p. 291, who says of the Brahmin that he "was an essential adjunct of the state in reducing the mechanism of violence; his preaching of submission reduced the total administrative cost." See also Polybius, a Greek observer of the Roman scene in the second century B.C., who said of Roman religion that "I regard it as an instrument of government" (quoted by Cowell, p. 184). For a very good discussion of the nature of ideology and its social significance, see Homans, pp. 340f.

⁵³ See, for example, Thompson, p. 649; Marc Bloch, p. 350; or David M. Lang, *The Last Years of the Georgian Monarchy, 1658-1832* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 77-79.

⁵⁴ This happened both in India and in Europe. In India, the Brahmins played this important role on a number of occasions. See, for example, Kosambi, pp. 291f. For Russia, see Blum, p. 76. For Central Europe, see Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), pp. 397f.

and geographical spread. Few religious leaders were able to resist the temptation to spread the "true faith" swiftly and surely with the aid of the sword, rather than to rely on the slower and less certain techniques of persuasion. The support of the political elite also proved invaluable when the established faith was challenged by heresies or new faiths, since a vigorous display of force against the dissidents was usually enough to put down the threat.

The support of the political elite proved valuable in yet another way. Few members of the priestly class did not seek to honor God with splendid temples, statues, and works of art, all of which were extremely costly. Here, again, the political elite was singularly equipped to satisfy this desire. In short, there was a natural basis for a symbiotic relationship between these two classes.

Had this been all there was to the relationship, however, there would never have been the massive confiscations noted earlier, nor the many struggles between church and state which fill the historical record. These struggles had many causes, but the underlying one was the fact of divided authority. Except in those cases where the ruler was the human, or semi-divine, head of the religious organization, priestly powers were derived from a source other than the ruler. This meant that whenever the interests of the priestly class and the ruler diverged, as sooner or later they invariably did, the problem arose as to which was the higher authority. In most cases, this could be settled only by a protracted struggle for power. Usually the secular authorities won,^{54a} though not without making substantial concessions to the priestly class. Sometimes, however, the religious authorities triumphed, as in ancient Egypt, for example, where the successors of Ramses III in the twentieth dynasty were little more than figurehead rulers manipulated by the priests of Amon, and where, in the twenty-first dynasty, the priests themselves actually occupied the throne.⁵⁵ In Europe, following the Gregorian reform, various popes, notably Innocent III, were also able to command the kings and princes of their day, and until the nineteenth century, the popes continued to function as rulers over the Papal States.

It is difficult to say today what factors were responsible for the variations in the outcomes of these struggles. Obviously, *much depended on the religious beliefs of the rulers themselves*. To the degree that they accepted the claims of the priestly class at face value, they were vulner-

^{54a} Robert Bellah adds, "This is true only in the short run. Religious organizations have been more resilient than political ones and have survived the downfall of many political regimes, often overtly or covertly contributing to their downfall" (personal communication).

⁵⁵ Erman, pp. 50 and 305.

able to its pressure. If they believed that their fate in this life or the next would be determined by their treatment of a particular religious group and its leaders, they would unhesitatingly extend themselves to accord them favors. This, of course, raises the additional question of why some rulers were pious men, subject to priestly influence, while others were not. Many factors were undoubtedly involved, but several stand out. First, piety in rulers, as in other men, was likely to depend on childhood training. Thus, to the degree that kings and princes were trained in childhood by the clergy, and more especially by politically minded clerics, to that degree they were likely to be responsive to priestly pressures in later years. Second, piety in rulers, as in other men, probably depended on the homogeneity of the religious influences to which they were exposed. Those raised in religiously homogeneous societies were likely to be more supportive of the priesthood than those raised in societies where various faiths competed.⁵⁶ Finally, rulers, like other men, were greatly influenced by individuals in whom they placed special trust, and the attitudes and beliefs of such persons were likely to be transmitted to the rulers themselves. Thus, wives, mothers, ministers, and close friends undoubtedly influenced their actions in this area.

The position of the clergy also seems to have been a function of a number of factors other than the religious beliefs of the ruler. It probably varied directly with the degree of popular support the clergy enjoyed, as well as with the extent of the ruler's need for support of the kind the priestly class could provide, whether for political struggles with the governing class at home or with foreign enemies abroad. The classic case of the latter is found in the efforts of the Roman emperors from Constantine's day on to mobilize the resources of the Christian Church behind the increasingly shaky standard of imperial rule.

In their many struggles for power, the motives of the priestly class were usually rather mixed. In part, its members were often motivated by a desire to glorify and serve God, or the gods. At the same time they were often motivated by a desire for personal power and privilege. The best proof of this is found in the many voices raised by devout men of many faiths, often members of the priestly class themselves, protesting against the materialism, power grabbing, and self-seeking of so many religious leaders.⁵⁷ It can also be seen in the spread of practices such as simony, or

⁵⁶ The great Mughal emperor, Akbar, is a classic example of a ruler who came to distrust the priestly class of his own faith as a result of exposure to other faiths.

⁵⁷ This theme recurred again and again in the Judaic-Christian tradition, from the days of such early Hebrew prophets as Amos and Micah, down to the days of Peter Waldo, St. Francis, Wyclif, Hus, Erasmus, Luther, and, in fact, to the end of the agrarian era.

the sale of priestly offices, which was a widespread evil from the early Middle Ages until the Protestant Reformation.⁵⁸

Though it is clear that the clergy usually fell considerably short of the ideals they professed, and furthermore that they contributed to the stability and perpetuation of systems of inequality by legitimizing the rule of the political elite, this is not the whole story. On many occasions, especially in the Judaic-Christian tradition, though not there alone, the priestly class opposed tyranny and injustice and supported the needs and interests of the weaker elements in society.^{58a} For example, though the Christian tradition provided an ideological undergirding for the *status quo*, it also provided an ideological basis for such revolutionary movements as the Peasants' Revolt of the fourteenth century in England, and the Levellers' movement of the seventeenth. One of the important leaders of the earlier movement was the famous priest, John Ball, who used as a text for many of his sermons the popular jingle:

When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?

According to the monk who wrote the *Chronicon Angliae*, Ball's argument was simply,

At the beginning we were all created equal; it is the tyranny of perverse men which has caused servitude to arise, in spite of God's law; if God had willed that there should be serfs He would have said at the beginning who should be serf and who should be lord.⁵⁹

This argument was very similar to that adopted by Gerrard Winstanley and the Levellers, several centuries later (see page 9).

Less extreme, but therefore probably more effective, was the tradition embodied in the Western religions that God is above all a God of justice and that His awesome powers will be used to punish the unjust. One finds this, for example, in the ancient code of Hammurabi, who claimed:

⁵⁸ See, for example, Hughes, p. 85, the noted Catholic historian, who, in writing of the early medieval period, speaks of the many bishops who "bought their nomination to the see," and then made their reign "a long financial torture for the unfortunate subjects, while the prelate endeavored to recoup his initial expenses." See, also, Mercia Macdermott, *A History of Bulgaria* (London: G. Allen, 1962), pp. 51 and 52, who describes how the Ottoman sultans sold bishoprics in the Orthodox Church to the highest bidder, or W. E. D. Allen, *The History of the Georgian People* (London: Routledge, 1932), p. 272, who describes the practice of simony in the Georgian church.

^{58a} See, for example, S. N. Eisenstadt, "Religious Organizations and Political Process in Centralized Empires," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 21 (1962), p. 286.

⁵⁹ Lindsay and Groves, p. 72. Quoted by permission.

At that time Anu and Enlil named me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, the worshipper of gods, to cause righteousness to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from injuring the weak, to go forth like the sun over the blackheaded people, to enlighten the land, and to further the welfare of the people.⁶⁰

The Mosaic code presents the same essential conception of a divine concern for justice and righteousness, and the prophets of ancient Israel poured out bitter condemnations on the political elite and merchant class of their society, all in the name of Yahweh.⁶¹ They charged the members of these privileged classes with selling justice, extortion, bribery, the use of false weights, theft, and, above all, oppression of the poor. Apparently, they gained a hearing, even in the court of the king, and, because they spoke in Yahweh's name, were extremely difficult to silence. Though technically most of the prophets were not priests, and, in fact, criticized the priestly class no less than the others, it was the priestly class which was the basic transmitter of the Mosaic tradition and its concept of Yahweh's concern for justice and righteousness.

These same elements appear in the Christian tradition, even in the most unlikely places. For example, the Russian Church at an early date began urging the humane treatment of slaves and encouraged their emancipation at their owner's death.⁶² Apparently these efforts bore fruit. During the same period, the Western church went further and in the Third Lateran Council of 1179 declared that no Christian could hold a fellow Christian as a slave.⁶³ A century later the English Church took a firm stand in opposition to the thesis that serfs "owned nothing but their bellies" and therefore were not entitled to make a will and transmit property to their heirs. The Church fought for nearly a century to have its more liberal view established as law, despite opposition from Parliament, which argued, in a petition to the king, that such practice "is against reason."⁶⁴

Even the doctrine of the divine right of kings was used by the priestly class to restrain rulers, at least in lands where God was felt to be concerned with justice and where the political elite possessed a measure of

⁶⁰ A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 122. Quoted by permission.

⁶¹ See, for example, the books of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah, and also II Sam. chaps. 11 and 12, for the dramatic account of Nathan's denunciation of King David for his murder of Uriah the Hittite and subsequent marriage to Uriah's widow.

⁶² Blum, pp. 52-54, and 113.

⁶³ Latourette, p. 558.

⁶⁴ Bennett, pp. 249-250.

piety and faith.⁶⁵ For example, during the eleventh century the clergy played a major, though by no means solitary, role in establishing the Peace of God, which brought an end to the constant depredations by the governing class. As one historian put it, "The Church created a category of a specially protected class. It asserted that a defenseless peasantry, however weak, still had rights before the law which the baronage, however violent, would be compelled to respect" on pain of excommunication.⁶⁶ The following is a typical oath imposed on the governing class by the clergy:

I will not carry off either ox or cow or any other beast of burden; I will seize neither peasant nor merchant; I will not take from them their pence, nor oblige them to ransom themselves; I do not wish them to lose their goods because of wars carried on by their seigniors, and I will not beat them to obtain their subsistence. I will seize neither horse, mare, nor colt from the pasture; I will not destroy nor burn their houses; I will not uproot their vines or gather their grapes under pretext of war; I will not destroy mills and I will not take the flour therein, unless they are on my land, or unless I am on war service.⁶⁷

In medieval London the clergy often warned merchants that such practices as the giving of short measure, misrepresentation of goods, and usury were sins in the sight of God. Such sermons evidently were not without influence, as indicated by the many wills and testaments which provided for the restitution of goods or money acquired dishonestly.⁶⁸ Sometimes restitution was made to specific individuals, at other times to the poor in general. The sums involved were often considerable. For example, one man left £1,800 to charity, most of it to be distributed in gifts of half a mark, i.e., nearly seven shillings apiece, to five thousand poor city householders. Though the size of this bequest was unusual, it was long customary for men of means to assign from a third to a half of their movable goods to uses that would benefit their souls. In addition to these individual acts of charity stimulated by the Church, there was also a very substantial amount of charitable work carried on by the monasteries.⁶⁹ Islam, also, has had a tradition of charity on both an individual

⁶⁵ Even in India, where ethical elements have not loomed nearly so large as in the Judaic-Christian tradition, the divine right of kings was linked by the priests with a doctrine of the divine responsibility of kings to their people. See R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The History and Culture of the Indian People* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951, 1953), vol. II, pp. 304f.

⁶⁶ Thompson, p. 668.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* Quoted by permission.

⁶⁸ Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, pp. 174-180.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Thompson, p. 632; Coulton, pp. 266-267; or Latourette, pp. 538 and 558.

and organized basis. To support the latter, Muslims were obliged to give one-fortieth of their income either in money or in kind.⁷⁰

The foregoing is, of course, only one side of the coin. Many members of the priestly class were grasping, mercenary, self-seeking, cruel, tyrannical, and exploitative. James Westfall Thompson best summarized the contradictory elements in the priestly class when he wrote of the medieval Catholic Church, "Democratic, yet aristocratic; charitable, yet exploitative; generous, yet mercenary; humanitarian, yet cruel; indulgent, yet severely repressive of some things; progressive, yet reactionary; radical, yet conservative—all these are qualities of the Church in the Middle Ages."⁷¹

To say even this, however, is to say that the Church and its leaders played a unique role among the privileged classes in agrarian societies. In a type of society in which men of power saw to it that there was a massive flow of goods and services from the many to the few, some members of the priestly class managed to slow this movement and even to stimulate a small flow in the opposite direction. *In this respect, the priestly class tended to function as the preserver of the ancient Redistributive Ethic of primitive societies, where the accumulation of goods in private hands had served as a form of communal insurance rather than as private property.* The extent to which the priestly class performed this important function varied considerably from religion to religion, and within religions from century to century and area to area. Of all the factors responsible for this variation, the most important seems to have been the actual content of a faith and the degree to which God was believed to be concerned with social justice. A second factor of importance seems to have been the power of the spiritual weapons at the command of the clergy. When they had the power to deny men salvation, as in the medieval Catholic Church, they had a singularly potent weapon at their disposal, one which no believing ruler could safely ignore.

The Peasant Class

Ultimately, the burden of supporting the state and the privileged classes fell on the shoulders of the common people, and especially on the peasant farmers who constituted a substantial majority of the population. Even taxes levied on the more prosperous segments of the population were

⁷⁰ See H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), p. 56.

⁷¹ Thompson, p. 684.

usually shifted to the peasants and urban artisans by one means or another.⁷²

One can get a good idea of the extent of the burdens imposed on the peasants by studying the numerous taxes and other obligations they owed. In Japan, during the Tokugawa period and earlier, practices varied considerably from area to area and decade to decade, with the political elite claiming anywhere from 30 to 70 per cent of the crop.⁷³ This spread reflected the operation of a variety of factors, but there is evidence that indicates that the lower rates prevailed when the governing class also employed a number of other methods to acquire the economic surplus, while the higher rates prevailed when reliance was placed on that single tax. For example, in the sixteenth century, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the then effective ruler of Japan, abolished all taxes except the land tax, which he then set at two-thirds of the total crop.⁷⁴ This is probably the best indication we have of the *total* take of the political elite (both ruler and governing class) when the land tax was low, but a multiplicity of other taxes were in effect.

In China, peasants traditionally paid rents of 40 to 50 per cent of their total produce to landowners.⁷⁵ In India, both Muslim and Hindu rulers are reported to have customarily demanded from one-third to one-half of the crops in the pre-British era.⁷⁶ During the Sukodhya period in Thailand, peasants were obliged to pay one-fourth of the total yield of their land.⁷⁷ In Hammurabi's Babylon, taxes varied from one-third to one-half of the crop, while according to Hebrew tradition, Egyptian taxes during the captivity equaled one-fifth.⁷⁸ In Achaemenian Persia, taxes varied from

⁷² See, for example, Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 385, who states that in Rome under the Flavians and Antonines "as in Russia under the old regime the privileged classes knew how to escape such burdens and shift them onto the shoulders of the peasants." See, also, Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1954, originally 1924), pp. 19 and 33; W. H. Moreland, "The Revenue System of the Mughul Empire," *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. 4, pp. 470-471; or William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), vol. I, p. 303. Occasionally, however, this proved impossible, as in the late Roman Empire. See Mattingly, p. 152.

⁷³ Takekoshi, vol. I, p. 415, and vol. II, pp. 228, 305, and 311.

⁷⁴ Takekoshi, vol. I, p. 415, and vol. III, p. 386.

⁷⁵ See Eberhard, *History*, pp. 72 and 213 or Chung-li Chang, *The Income of the Chinese Gentry* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1962), pp. 132-133.

⁷⁶ See W. H. Moreland, "Revenue System," p. 453; Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India* (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, n.d.), chap. 8; or Marriott, p. 109.

⁷⁷ John E. de Young, *Village Life in Modern Thailand* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1958), pp. 156-157.

⁷⁸ Turner, p. 309.

20 to 30 per cent.⁷⁹ Many centuries later, in Ottoman Turkey, they varied from 10 to 50 per cent.⁸⁰ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries sharecroppers in Russia paid from one-fifth to one-half.⁸¹

The lowest rate of taxation on peasant production I have been able to discover in agrarian societies was that which the Romans imposed on the provinces of Sicily and Asia in the period when they first assumed control. According to reports, they demanded only a tenth of the total yield, a figure which was actually *less* than the peasants had previously paid.⁸² Some modern historians believe that the Romans deliberately set the rate low in order to win support in these newly conquered countries and thus solidify their base of power. The low rate was probably also a reflection of the impossibility of double-cropping the land, a common practice in most of agrarian Asia.

Another heavy burden laid on peasants in most agrarian societies was the *corvée*, or forced labor. Often this involved a considerable portion of their time and energy. In medieval Europe, for example, peasants were commonly obliged to work on their lord's land from one to seven days a week throughout the year, the average being about three.⁸³ However, usually only one member of the family was required to serve, so that the burden was not so great as it might seem, though it was still substantial. Also, recent research indicates that, in England at least, a "day's work" could often be completed in half a day.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the extent of the obligation commonly varied with the size of the holding, so that peasants with large holdings, and therefore greater resources, were the ones who had the five, six, and seven day obligations, while those with small holdings had the lesser ones.⁸⁵ Perhaps the worst feature of these obligations was the lord's right, in many cases, to shift the burden from one week to the next to suit his own convenience, and especially his tendency to demand more work in the harvest season when time was most precious.⁸⁶

It should also be noted that in addition to his duty to his own lord, the peasant sometimes had obligations to the king or other higher authorities as well. For example, in eighteenth-century France peasants owed

⁷⁹ Olmstead, p. 76.

⁸⁰ Lybyer, p. 31.

⁸¹ Blum, pp. 102 and 221.

⁸² Boak, p. 125, or Mattingly, p. 220.

⁸³ See, for example, Coulton, p. 73; Homans, p. 257; Power, p. 18; Clough and Cole, p. 14; Gottschalk, p. 31; or Blum, pp. 225-227 and 444-445.

⁸⁴ Bennett, pp. 103-104.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 106 and 110.

the king twelve days' labor a year in addition to the several days per week they owed their local lord.⁸⁷

In some instances, forced labor became a very heavy burden. For example, in feudal Thailand adult male peasants were obliged to serve as much as a third of the year in the king's service.⁸⁸ In China, during the building of the Great Wall, peasants were sometimes kept on forced labor projects for most of their adult lives.⁸⁹ In still more extreme cases, peasants were enslaved, as in the American South or Rome, and obliged to devote all of their energies to the service of the state or individual members of the political elite.⁹⁰

When land taxes, rents, and labor services failed to secure the whole of the economic surplus, or left the peasants time or energy to spare, still other taxes and obligations were devised. During the period of Ottoman rule in Bulgaria, for example, the Turks imposed approximately eighty different types of taxes and obligations.⁹¹ These included one known as the "tooth tax," which was leveled on a village by the Turks after they had eaten and drunk their fill, ostensibly for the wear and tear sustained by their teeth during the meal.⁹² The cruelest tax of all was the *ispendzh*, which required that every five years a certain number of the finest Christian children were taken either for slavery or for service in the Corps of Janissaries.⁹³

In Christian Europe, too, the peasants were subject to a great variety of taxes and other obligations during the Middle Ages, though none like the *ispendzh*. When a man died, the lord of the manor could claim his best beast or most valuable movable possession, and the priest could often claim the second best. Often the lord took more than the single beast to which he was entitled, with the result that a third or more of a peasant's estate would be lost at his death.⁹⁴ If his daughter married off the manor, or married without the lord's permission, the father was subject to a fine. If any of his children sought to leave the manor, even for the sake of entering the priesthood, the father was subject to a fine. In eighteenth-century France, if a peasant wished to sell his land, he would often have to

⁸⁷ Gottschalk, p. 24.

⁸⁸ de Young, p. 156.

⁸⁹ See Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, translated by Hans Gerth (New York: Free Press, 1951), p. 52, on the building of the Great Wall. See Eberhard, *History*, pp. 235-237, on the *corvées* levied by the Mongols.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Boak, p. 127.

⁹¹ Macdermott, p. 28.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁹⁴ Bennett, pp. 144-147.

pay the noble who held hereditary title to it a tax equal to as much as 25 per cent of the selling price. At various times during the year, peasants were obliged to provide the lord of the manor with special "gifts," such as eggs at Easter, honey in season, and so forth. Frequently the lord operated a mill, an oven, or a wine press, and peasants were obliged to use these facilities and, of course, to pay dearly for them. When the lord had goods to be carted to market, his peasants would often be made to perform this time-consuming chore without receiving credit as a part of their regular labor services. The Church, meanwhile, commanded a tithe of all they produced (and often a goodly portion of this passed into the hands of the landed aristocracy).⁹⁵ Finally, in certain periods in some countries, the lord claimed the right to take anything he wished from the personal property of his peasants without payment, on the theory that the peasants owned "nothing but their bellies."⁹⁶ In short, the great majority of the political elite sought to use the energies of the peasantry to the full, while depriving them of all but the basic necessities of life.⁹⁷ The only real disagreement concerned the problem of how this might best be done.

In this endeavor, the elite seem to have been highly successful. The great majority of peasant farmers throughout history had little more than the bare necessities of life. The chief exceptions occurred only in those societies where, in the words of Marc Bloch, "every free man remained a warrior, liable to be constantly called into service and distinguished from the pick of the fighting men by nothing essential in his equipment."⁹⁸

For the vast majority, however, life was extremely primitive. For example, one student of medieval England concludes that the diet of the

⁹⁵ Bloch, p. 252.

⁹⁶ For good discussions of the variety of miscellaneous obligations imposed on peasants in various societies, see Bloch, pp. 248-254; Clough and Cole, pp. 14-17; Bennett, chaps. 5 and 6; Blum, pp. 103, 434, 444ff., and 453-455; Gottschalk, pp. 34-37; Lindsay and Groves, chap. 1; Allen, pp. 262ff.; and Takekoshi, vol. III, pp. 386 and 402ff. For expressions of the view that peasants owned "nothing but their bellies," see Coulton, p. 76; Homans, p. 228; Bennett, p. 249; or Blum, p. 289, who reports that this was legally true at one time in Russia.

One finds frequent references to the fact that legal documents from agrarian societies have little to say about the rights of peasants, but much about the rights of their superiors, indicating that at most times, in most of these societies, peasants had few enforceable rights. See, for example, Moreland, "Revenue System," pp. 452-453, on India.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Blum, p. 232, who says of the Russian elite, "their object was to tax the peasant to the maximum of his capacity to pay. . . ." or Moreland, *Agrarian System*, p. 207, who writes of Mughal India that, "The direct result was to take from the peasant whatever he could be made to pay. . . ." Of course, there were exceptions, such as St. Hugh of Lincoln, who reputedly refused on one occasion to take from a peasant woman her only animal, an ox to which he was entitled by virtue of the death of the woman's husband (see Bennett, p. 147). Unfortunately, saints were as rare then as now.

⁹⁸ Bloch, p. 248. See p. 275 below for a further discussion of this subject.

average peasant consisted of little more than the following: a hunk of bread and a mug of ale in the morning; a lump of cheese and bread with perhaps an onion or two to flavor it, and more ale at noon; a thick soup or pottage followed by bread and cheese at the main meal in the evening.⁹⁹ Meat was rare, and the ale was usually thin. Household furniture consisted of a few stools, a table, and a chest to hold the best clothes and other treasured possessions.¹⁰⁰ Beds were uncommon and most peasants simply slept on earthen floors covered with straw. Other household possessions were apparently limited to cooking utensils.

In some cases, the lot of the peasant was not even this good. On many occasions conditions became so oppressive that it was impossible to eke out a livelihood and the peasants were forced to flee the land.¹⁰¹ In China, conditions were so wretched that female infanticide was practiced on a wide scale. One nineteenth-century scholar reported that records indicated that as many as a quarter of the female infants born in some districts were killed at birth.¹⁰² In such areas signs were sometimes posted, "Girls may not be drowned here." Though this was admittedly an extreme practice, the conditions which gave rise to it were by no means limited to China. On the contrary, the great majority of peasants who lived in the various agrarian societies of the past apparently lived at, or close to, the subsistence level.

To compound the misery created by their economic situation, the peasants were often subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment by their superiors. For example, in Russia, as in the American South, families were often split up if it served the economic interests of their masters.¹⁰³ Pretty peasant girls were often sold for immoral purposes, and peasants found it difficult to defend their wives against lustful masters.¹⁰⁴ Finally, peasants were subject at all times to the whims and temper of their superiors. To cite but two examples, admittedly extreme, Ivan Turgenev's mother sent two of her serfs to Siberia simply because they neglected to bow to her when she passed by while they were working, and in medieval England peasants were hanged for stealing a few eggs.¹⁰⁵

From the standpoint of the political elite, all this was only natural.

⁹⁹ Bennett, p. 236.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 232-233.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Bernier on Mughal India as quoted by Moreland, *Agrarian System*, p. 147, or Blum, pp. 163, 266-268, 309-310, and 552f. on Russia.

¹⁰² Douglas, p. 354.

¹⁰³ Blum, pp. 424, 428, etc. See also Lang, p. 69, on European Georgia.

¹⁰⁴ Blum, pp. 426-427 and 437. See also G. M. Carstairs, "A Village in Rajasthan," in M. N. Srinivas (ed.), *India's Villages* (Calcutta: West Bengal Government Press, 1955), pp. 37-38.

¹⁰⁵ Blum, p. 438, and Bennett, p. 196.

In most instances they viewed the peasantry as, at best, a very different breed of people from themselves—people largely or wholly lacking in those qualities of personality which the elite prized and respected. For example, the scribes of ancient Egypt referred to the slaves as being “without heart,” i.e., without understanding, and said that therefore they had to be driven with a stick like cattle.¹⁰⁶ Aristotle argued that “it is clear . . . that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right.”¹⁰⁷ Aristotle also likened slaves to animals, a comparison which recurs time and again in the writings of members of the privileged classes. In legal documents in medieval England, the children of a peasant were not called *familia*, but *sequela*, meaning “brood” or “litter.”¹⁰⁸ In both Europe and Asia there are documents in which the peasants on an estate were listed with the livestock.¹⁰⁹ The same view was taken of the Negro “peasants” in the agrarian South in this country, both before the Civil War and subsequently. Given this view of the peasantry, it is hardly surprising that so civilized a man as Cato the Elder should have argued that slaves, like livestock, should be disposed of when no longer productive.¹¹⁰

As shocking as such views may be to members of modern industrial societies, they were not completely unreasonable, given the nature of the social system. To begin with, there was always a great social and cultural barrier separating the peasants from the political elite. Even in medieval Europe, when the manorial system held sway and the governing class lived on the land, there were few personal contacts between lord and peasants, modern romantic myths to the contrary notwithstanding. Nearly always at least one level of officials of the retainer class intervened, mediating the relation and reducing opportunities for direct contact to a minimum. According to Bloch, such officials were found “even on the smallest manor.”¹¹¹ Furthermore, there were usually great differences in the customs and ways of life of the elite and the peasants. Often these differences resulted from the fact that the peasants were of alien stock

¹⁰⁶ Erman, p. 128.

¹⁰⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1943), p. 60.

¹⁰⁸ Coulton, p. 77, or Thompson, p. 708. In a recent study of an Indian village, the author reports that a Rajput landowner dismissed a lower caste boy with the gesture used in “shooing” animals and adds that “culture encouraged a conception of [such persons] as in some way less human than others.” See Henry Orenstein, *Gaon: Conflict and Cohesion in an Indian Village* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 155–156.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Stubbs, vol. I, p. 454n.; Eberhard, *History*, p. 32; or Takekoshi, vol. I, pp. 60–63.

¹¹⁰ See Boak, p. 127, or Cowell, p. 64. For an example of the application of Cato’s principle in medieval Europe, see Bennett, p. 283.

¹¹¹ Bloch, p. 337. See also Homans, p. 229.

and stigmatized by their defeat in war or, worse yet, by an earlier tradition of servitude (as when one elite destroyed another and seized the latter's already degraded peasantry, thus destroying the memory of a period of independence and freedom). These differences were further compounded by the disparity in life style between an elite which had wealth and leisure at its disposal and could cultivate either the arts of war or of gracious living, and a peasantry utterly lacking in opportunities to acquire good manners, education, military skills, or even literacy. Under such conditions, the surprising thing is that some members of the privileged strata recognized the fact of their common humanity, not that the majority failed to do so.

For their part, the peasants seem to have been highly ambivalent about their status in society. On the one hand, they were aware of the great cultural chasm which separated them from their "betters," and many undoubtedly accepted without question the explanations provided by the dominant ideology. On the other hand, their physical nature created in them an intense desire for survival and, when survival was assured, a desire for a better life. In other words, like their superiors they were motivated to maximize their rewards, insofar as their situation permitted it. Thus, struggles inevitably developed between the peasantry and their masters.

Usually these struggles were nonviolent in character, at least on the peasants' side. For the most part, their efforts consisted of little more than attempts to evade taxes, rents, labor services, and other obligations, usually by concealment of a portion of the harvest, working slowly and sometimes carelessly as well, and similar devices.¹¹² For example, old memorial court records from England reveal fines levied on peasants for failure to come to the harvest, or for coming late, or for performing badly when they did come, for grinding meal at home rather than at the lord's mill, and for a host of other petty offenses aimed at preventing the lord of the manor from obtaining the whole of the surplus.¹¹³

Sometimes, however, the political elite pushed the peasants too far, and they turned from petty trickery to violence. As E. J. Hobsbawn has shown in his fascinating book, *Primitive Rebels*, young peasants, after a brush with the authorities, were often forced to become outlaws and bandits.¹¹⁴ If, then, they limited their attacks to members of the privileged

¹¹² Such practices seem to have been almost universal. See, for example, Fried, pp. 104-105 on China, Moreland, *Agrarian System*, pp. 168 and 207 on India, or Bennett, pp. 100-101, 112-113, and 131ff. on England.

¹¹³ See Bennett, especially pp. 112-113 and 131f.

¹¹⁴ *Primitive Rebels*, 2d ed. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), especially chap. 2.

classes, in the Robin Hood tradition, they could count on the support of most of their fellow peasants. In effect, their struggles with the authorities became a form of class conflict. This pattern was especially likely to develop in mountainous areas and in areas where dense forests provided necessary cover for the operation of outlaw bands; it was rare where such protection was lacking.

A still more extreme response on the part of peasants was open revolt. Though these are often forgotten or ignored, a careful reading of the histories of agrarian societies indicates that they were by no means uncommon.¹¹⁵ One Chinese expert states that "There were peasant rebellions almost every year in China," while a Russian expert reports that in the short period between 1801 and 1861 there were no less than 1,467 peasant risings in various parts of the Russian Empire.¹¹⁶

Though the number of risings was impressive, the number of peasants involved usually was not. For the most part, these risings were local affairs involving at most a few hundred or a few thousand individuals. Thus it would be a mistake to suppose that the peasantry was in a constant state of revolt. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Most of these rebellions were hopeless affairs from the start. Sometimes minor victories were won in isolated local struggles, as when the peasants of Preston, England, burned the steward's house and threatened his life "until he swore not to make exactions [i.e., noncustomary ones] against their will in the future."¹¹⁷ Revolts which spread had less chance of success, since they quickly encountered the organized forces of the political elite. A few, such as the famous English revolt of 1381 or the German Peasants' War of 1524-25, spread more widely and for a time seemed to threaten the existing order, but in the end were crushed. A very, very few succeeded in overthrowing the existing regime. That this did not happen often is indicated by the fact that in all the long history of China, only three succeeded prior to the twentieth century, and even this was a higher incidence than in most societies.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Robert K. Reischauer, *Japan: Government-Politics* (New York: Nelson, 1939), p. 51 on Japan; Wolfram Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers: Social Forces in Medieval China* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1952), p. 52 on China; Cowell, pp. 43-44 and 66 on Rome; Blum, pp. 164, 267f., 365, 368, 555f., and 587 on Russia; Edith M. Link, *The Emancipation of the Austrian Peasant, 1740-1798* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 12 on Austria-Hungary; Mariéjol, p. 273f. on Spain; Lindsay and Groves, pp. 19, 168 and, in fact, the whole book, on England; and Thompson, pp. 681f. on Western Europe generally.

¹¹⁶ Eberhard, *Conquerors*, p. 52 on China, and Blum, p. 558 on Russia.

¹¹⁷ Bennett, p. 170. House burnings were a common peasant tactic, and in the Ukraine before the Revolution were known as "letting out the red rooster."

¹¹⁸ Eberhard, *Conquerors*, p. 52.

Even the handful of peasant revolts which succeeded in overthrowing the existing regime failed to create a new and more equitable social order. On the contrary, they produced nothing more than a change in personnel at the top with the traditional institutional structure remaining virtually unaltered. Thus, though a few individual members of the peasantry rose to riches and power by means of these revolts, the great majority gained little or nothing except insofar as the memory of such revolts survived and made the new elite somewhat more cautious than they might otherwise have been.¹¹⁹

Paradoxically, though peasant revolts seldom accomplished much for the masses, milder forms of pressure sometimes did, especially when they occurred in conjunction with other significant social developments.¹²⁰ Among these related developments, none influenced the economic and political situation of the average peasant more than changes in military tactics and technology. On the basis of both theory and research, a general proposition can be formulated to the effect that *the greater the military importance of the peasant farmer, the better his economic and political situation tended to be, and conversely, the less his military importance, the poorer his economic and political situation.* A peasantry armed and skilled in the use of weapons was a class which could not be ignored politically or exploited economically nearly as easily as one lacking military skills and equipment.

Many examples could be cited from the historical record to illustrate how changing patterns of military organization and tactics, combined with constant pressure from the peasantry, influenced their political and economic situation. In ancient Rome, the rise of the plebeians seems clearly to have been linked with changed methods of warfare.¹²¹ In Western Europe, the growing importance and power of mounted and armored men during the Middle Ages was clearly linked with the decline of the free farmer and the growth of an oppressed class of peasant serfs.¹²² In ancient China, during the Period of the Contending States, the opposite pattern appeared. Here there was a shift from wars fought between small

¹¹⁹ Success was usually achieved only with the aid of a portion of the governing class, with the result that afterwards these same individuals continued in power and only a small number of peasants gained entrée into the political elite. See, for example, Eberhard, *Conquerors*, chap. 3.

¹²⁰ The explanation of this paradox seems to be that peasant revolts were most likely to occur at the very time when conditions were most hopeless. They were, in effect, a last resort, attempted when more moderate efforts had failed, and, since they occurred under the most unfavorable conditions, seldom achieved results.

¹²¹ Stanislaw Andrzejewski, *Military Organization and Society* (London: Routledge, 1954), pp. 53-55.

¹²² See, for example, Bloch.

groups of nobles in war chariots, to ones in which the charioteers were supported by relatively large armies of armed peasant infantry. During the period of this shift, there was apparently a marked decline in the landholdings of the nobility and a substantial increase in small farms owned by free peasants.¹²³

Several other factors also influenced the political and economic situation of the peasant class. The most important seems to have been the demographic factor of mortality. Ironically, though revolutions seldom improved the lot of the ordinary peasant for long, *disasters sometimes did*. Plagues, widespread famines, and devastating wars sometimes had the effect of creating an acute labor shortage, thus driving up the price of peasant labor. Normally, man's reproductive capacity insured a constant oversupply of peasant labor, permitting the political elite to offer them no more than a subsistence income.

Disasters occasionally altered this. Some of the best evidence of the beneficial consequences of disasters is found in connection with the Great Plague which struck Western Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century. Shortly thereafter the records begin to be filled with reports of peasants demanding, *and receiving*, substantially higher wages than formerly.¹²⁴ Parliament was driven to try to control the rise in wages through legislation, but had little success, since landlords were much readier to pay the higher wages than to see their fields sit idle. In France, the Hundred Years' War seems to have had similar beneficial effects for the surviving members of the peasantry.¹²⁵

On a few occasions a labor shortage was created without a major disaster. For example, in the German frontier settlements in the East during the Middle Ages the peasant settlers enjoyed personal liberty, economic independence, and opportunities for amassing a modest measure of wealth.¹²⁶ A similar situation prevailed in Russia during periods of expansion into new eastern territories.¹²⁷

Four other factors also seem to have affected the condition of the peasantry. First, the content of the dominant religious systems apparently had some effect. As noted previously, the religions of the East, especially Hinduism and Confucianism, were compatible with extremes of exploitation in a way that Judaism and Christianity were not; the former

¹²³ Eberhard, *History*, pp. 52-54.

¹²⁴ See, for example, McKisack, pp. 331-340, or Lindsay and Groves, pp. 30, 34, and 63.

¹²⁵ Charles V. Langlois, "History," in Arthur Tilley (ed.), *Medieval France* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 150-151.

¹²⁶ Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience 1660-1815* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 28-29.

¹²⁷ Blum, pp. 61 and 88.

left the peasantry more defenseless than the latter.¹²⁸ Second, the presence of the institution of slavery seems to have had an appreciable influence on the social condition of the peasant class, and, as in the case of religion, this variable was not a simple function of any one other variable. Third, inflation sometimes worked to the advantage of the peasantry, at least when their obligations were fixed in absolute, rather than relative, terms. When peasants owed their lords a fixed sum of money rather than a percentage of their crop, they stood to benefit by an inflation which slowly reduced the value of the lord's income, especially if it was so gradual as to be unnoticeable. A goodly number of economic historians contend that something of this sort occurred in late medieval Europe, though there is some objection to this thesis.¹²⁹ Finally, as noted earlier (see pages 241 to 242), some maintain that the position of the peasantry tended to improve when rulers dominated the governing class, and to decline when the governing class became dominant.¹³⁰

No discussion of the peasant class would be complete if notice were not taken of intraclass differences. Despite the heavy burdens laid on the class, not all its members were reduced to the same level. In most agrarian societies there were important intraclass differences in power, privilege, and honor. In thirteenth-century England, for example, there were three fairly distinct subclasses, sometimes known as franklins, husbandns, and cotters.¹³¹ The franklins were the most prosperous and also, as one would expect, the least numerous. As their name indicates, the franklins were free men, answerable only to the royal court, not the local manorial courts, and free from the servile obligations of villeinage. Often these men owed special services of a more honorable nature, such as overseeing the work of the ordinary peasants on the lord's land. In addition, they usually paid a modest rent for their land, which was two to four times as large as that of the husbandns immediately below them. The term "husbond" referred to a householder, in contrast to the cotters, who lived in a cottage or poorer dwelling. Husbandns usually held from ten to forty acres of land and in return for this owed the lord of the manor several days' work every

¹²⁸ See pp. 263-266 above.

¹²⁹ See, for example, W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 90, 196f.; Langlois, p. 150; Trevor-Roper, p. 13; Simpson, chap. 5. The same may also have occurred in Ottoman Turkey. See Lybyer, p. 177.

¹³⁰ For an interesting discussion of Greek views on this subject, see Andrewes, *op. cit.* For a challenging modern statement of this thesis, see Bertrand de Juvenal, *On Power: Its Nature and the History of Its Growth*, translated by J. F. Huntington (New York: Vikings, 1949), especially chap. 9. For some evidence to support this thesis, see Lang, p. 62.

¹³¹ For good descriptions of these three subclasses, see Homans, pp. 242ff., and Bennett, chap. 3.

week plus various other services. In contrast, cotters normally held five acres of land or less and, unlike the husbandmen, owned no ox for plowing. Though their labor obligations were proportionally lighter than those of the husbandmen, their land holdings were usually too small to support a family and these men were forced to work for wages for others, e.g., the lord of the manor, prosperous franklins, or even the widows of husbandmen. Sometimes they became plowmen or shepherds, other times carpenters, smiths, or millers.

Such differences were found within the peasant class in most agrarian societies, and the pattern was similar in them all: the prosperous peasants were far fewer in numbers than those who lived at or near the bare subsistence level.¹³² Whatever else may be said of these differences, they always served the "useful" function of dividing the peasantry, thus facilitating the efforts of the political elite to maintain its control despite its small numbers.

The Artisan Class

In the traditional status hierarchies of China and Japan, the peasant class was usually followed by the artisan class.¹³³ Despite the fact that there was always considerable overlap between these two classes, this pattern of ranking probably reflected not merely the prejudices of the governing class, but also certain economic realities. In most agrarian societies, the artisan class was originally recruited from the ranks of the dispossessed peasantry and their noninheriting sons and was continually replenished from these sources. Furthermore, despite the substantial overlap between the wealth and income of the peasant and artisan classes, the median income of artisans apparently was not so great as that of peasants. For example, one observer in nineteenth-century China wrote of them as living in "even a deeper state of poverty than that which afflicts agriculturalists," and went on to say that "they live perpetually on the verge of destitution."¹³⁴ Many were so poor that they were unable to marry, with the result that the sex ratio in agrarian cities was sometimes badly out of balance. For example, until fairly recent times men outnumbered women by a nearly 2-to-1 ratio in Peking.¹³⁵ Even in Europe, where the situation of the artisan was generally somewhat better, the city fathers of Bruges in

¹³² See, for example, Blum, chap. 3 and pp. 99f., 232f., and 471f. on Russia.

¹³³ See, for example, Fried, p. 211 on China, or Bellah, pp. 24-25 on Japan.

¹³⁴ Douglas, p. 137.

¹³⁵ Sidney D. Gamble, *Peking: A Social Survey* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1921), p. 30; see also, p. 101. This extreme ratio was probably due to the greater tendency of poor males to migrate to the cities.

the mid-thirteenth century passed a law which linked artisans with thieves and counterfeiters, indicating their low status.¹³⁶

The artisan class was never large. If the estimates reported in the last chapter are accurate (see page 200), and urban populations numbered only 5 to 10 per cent of the total population, then the artisan class could not have numbered more than 3 to 7 per cent.

The majority of artisans were probably employees of the merchant class, though there were nearly always some itinerants traveling about and seeking work where they could find it. The wages of the members of this class were largely a function of the degree of skill involved in their trade and hence of the relative supply of labor. In trades where skills were minimal, and hence the supply of labor abundant, wages were also minimal, while trades which required highly developed skills commanded higher wages. For example, in Peking at the time of World War I, the wages of artisans varied from \$2.50 per month for members of the Incense and Cosmetic Workers Guild to \$36 per month for members of the Gold Foil Beaters Guild.¹³⁷ This difference was probably not due to the inability of the masses of Chinese workers to acquire the skills of goldsmiths, but rather to their inability to acquire them *quickly*. Those who employed the goldsmiths, therefore, could not obtain replacements as readily as those who employed the incense and cosmetic makers, and hence were in a poorer bargaining position.

Sometimes organized groups of artisans attempted to improve their economic situation by controlling admissions to apprenticeship and thus reducing the supply of trained workers.¹³⁸ This happened, for example, in fifteenth-century London. However, it does not seem to have been a very common practice.

Artisans, like peasants, sometimes rebelled against those in authority over them. Sometimes this took the form of strikes, sometimes of riots.¹³⁹ Such reactions did not seem to occur among artisans nearly so often as among peasants, except perhaps in medieval Europe. This may be only an illusion generated by the great difference in size of the two classes, but probably not. If there was a difference, there is no obvious explanation for it on either theoretical or empirical grounds.

The struggles of the artisans differed from those of the peasants in

¹³⁶ Thompson, p. 792.

¹³⁷ Gamble, p. 183.

¹³⁸ Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, p. 113.

¹³⁹ See, for example, H. van Werveke, "The Rise of Towns," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, pp. 34-37; L. Halphen, "Industry and Commerce," in Arthur Tilley (ed.), *Medieval France* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 190-192; Thompson, p. 792; or Pirenne, pp. 187-206.

yet another way, at least in medieval Europe: *they produced some noteworthy benefits for the disadvantaged class*. For example, in the thirteenth century there was a series of struggles between the merchant class and the artisan class in the Low Countries. These culminated in a battle at Courtrai in 1302, where the Flemish artisans crushed the French forces supporting the merchant class, bringing the century-old struggle to a successful conclusion.¹⁴⁰ For the next two decades the artisan class exercised a decisive influence in Flemish towns and, even though a reaction set in after 1320, they continued to play an important role in municipal government for well over a century. Similar developments occurred elsewhere in Europe.

These successes of the artisan class seem to have been due to several factors. To begin with, in the Flemish towns and certain others, their guilds served as the basis of military organization for the defense of the towns.¹⁴¹ Thus they were equipped to defend their rights. Furthermore, the artisans were given support by the rural population. Finally, their guilds provided the benefits of organization, an advantage denied most peasant groups. Probably no one of these factors alone would have been sufficient to achieve victory, but taken together they were.

Unclean and Degraded Classes

In some agrarian societies, especially in the Orient, there were one or more "unclean" classes. The most famous instance of this is found in the untouchables of Hindu society, but there were similar groups in other societies. In Japan there were the *hinin* (literally "nonpeople") and the Eta. In a number of societies, both in the Middle East and Europe, certain necessary but offensive occupational groups, such as the tanners, were forced to live and work more or less separate from the masses of peasants and artisans.

Sometimes these groups were formally and legally hereditary in character, as in the case of the untouchables. In other cases, the basis of the hereditary pattern was more informal and spontaneous, reflecting the tendency of "decent" folk to avoid those in unclean or degraded classes. Sometimes the degraded status of these groups reflected inferior ethnic origins, again as in the case of many of the untouchables; at other times the status reflected obnoxious or offensive characteristics of the occupation of the group. Thus, there was a certain variability in the character of this class. In every case, however, it occupied a position

¹⁴⁰ van Werveke, p. 35.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

in society which was clearly inferior to that of the masses of common people.

One other group which may be mentioned at this point, since its position in the hierarchy of power, privilege, and prestige was roughly comparable, was that made up of persons who had only their bodies and animal energies to sell and who were forced to accept occupations which quickly destroyed them. The classic case of this was the Oriental rickshaw puller, who had a very short work life.¹⁴² One might add to this porters who competed with, or took the place of, pack animals, miners who engaged in heavy work under dangerous conditions, and the prostitutes who serviced the many lower class males too poor to marry. Sometimes such tasks were performed by slaves who had no choice in the matter, but many times "free" laborers who could find no other work gravitated into such employment. For such persons, this type of work was often a transitional step, leading to the ranks of the expendables.

The Expendables

At the bottom of the class system in every agrarian society, except perhaps for brief periods following great disasters, there was a fairly large class of expendable persons for whom the other members of society had little or no need. These included a variety of types, ranging from petty criminals and outlaws to beggars and underemployed itinerant workers, and numbered all those forced to live solely by their wits or by charity. This class, which I shall refer to as the expendables, is inevitable in any society where the possibilities for population growth are severely limited and where methods of limiting population growth fail to prevent more births than are required to satisfy the demand for labor.

This class is often ignored in analyses of agrarian societies, and when dealt with is not usually recognized as possessing the distinctive characteristics of a class, i.e., a common relationship to essential resources. Rather, its members are treated as deviant individuals—individuals who lack either the intelligence or moral character necessary to function as useful members of society. As plausible as this view may appear, it contradicts the facts. The historical record is filled with evidence which clearly indicates that despite high rates of infant mortality, the occasional practice of infanticide, the more frequent practice of celibacy, and adult mortality caused by war, famine, and disease, agrarian societies usually produced *more people than the dominant classes found it profitable to*

¹⁴² In Peking in the early part of this century, the average work life of rickshaw men was only five years, according to one authority. See Gamble, p. 283.

employ.¹⁴³ As the italicized phrase indicates, the problem was not that agrarian economies could not support larger populations, but rather that they could not do so without reducing, and ultimately destroying, the privileges of the upper classes. Eventually, of course, even if the whole population were reduced to the subsistence level, the problem of excess population would have arisen again.

Hobbes's famous statement about the conditions of life for men living in a state of nature aptly describes the conditions of life for the great majority of those who had the misfortune to become members of the expendable class. For them life was usually "poor, nasty, brutish, and short," and sometimes "solitary" as well. The chief exceptions to this were men who organized in outlaw bands in areas where the government's power was weak. Such persons sometimes enjoyed a certain measure of affluence for a time, but in most cases this was short-lived since the authorities usually caught up with them.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that *illegal activity was the best hope of those who fell into this class, and for the poorest peasants as well*.¹⁴⁵

Judging from accounts, the members of this class were seldom able to maintain normal marriages, and owing to infanticide, malnutrition, disease, and deprivation, seldom reproduced themselves.¹⁴⁶ However, such losses as accrued to this class because of high death rates were usually offset by the steady stream of new recruits forced into its ranks from the classes immediately above it. These recruits were largely the sons and

¹⁴³ See, for example, J. J. Jusserand, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, 3d ed., translated by L. T. Smith, (London: Benn, 1925), especially part 2, chap. 3; Homans, chap. 10; Charles J. Ribton-Turner, *A History of Vagrants and Vagrancy and Beggars and Begging* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1887); Frank Aydelotte, *Elizabethan Rogues and Vagabonds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913); Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge, 1961) chaps. 13 and 14; Hobsbawn, especially chap. 2; Pirenne, p. 45; Cowell, pp. 69 and 119 and chap. 17; Thompson, pp. 571, 649, and 715f.; McKisack, p. 204; Lindsay and Groves, p. 64; Gamble, pp. 274-275; Olmstead, p. 78; Mohinder Singh, *The Depressed Classes: Their Economic and Social Condition* (Bombay: Hind Kitabs, 1947), pp. 96-99 and 105-106; Sjoberg, pp. 246-249; Coulton, p. 375; Takekoshi, vol. III, p. 397; and Hsiao-Tung Fei, "Peasantry and Gentry," in Bendix and Lipset, p. 642.

Some recent research suggests that in the past demographers have underestimated the importance of celibacy as a method of population control. See, for example, William Petersen, "The Demographic Transition in the Netherlands," *American Sociological Review*, 25 (1960), especially pp. 341-345. While one can agree with Petersen that celibacy was sometimes a more effective restraint on population growth than has been generally recognized by modern demographers, the almost universal presence of an expendable class indicates that it was not so completely effective as he, at times, seems to suggest.

¹⁴⁴ Hobsbawn, p. 19.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 2, especially pp. 22-23.

¹⁴⁶ See Hobsbawn on the short duration of the careers of bandits and outlaws, who constituted the elite of the expendables (chap. 2).

daughters of poor peasants and artisans who inherited little more than the shirts on their backs and a parental blessing.¹⁴⁷ The best that most of them could hope for was occasional work at planting and harvest time and charity in between. Often the ranks of the expendable class were swelled by the addition of peasants who had got into trouble with the privileged classes and had turned bandits.¹⁴⁸ Sometimes this class was also increased by dispossessed nobles or noninheriting sons of nobles who preferred outlawry and a life of illegal violence to demeaning labor or trade in any form.¹⁴⁹

It is difficult today to determine just how large the class of expendables was in the average agrarian society. However, there are some estimates and some clues. In London, for example, a count made in 1517 revealed a total of 1,000 persons classified as "deserving beggars."¹⁵⁰ A half century later, a report indicated that 13,000 rogues and masterless men had been apprehended during the year, though probably some individuals were arrested more than once. A decade later, in 1577, a writer stated that there were 10,000 beggars in the city, while in 1594 the figure was set at 12,000. In 1545 the total population of the borough of London was reported to be 80,000.¹⁵¹ From these figures it would appear that 10 to 15 per cent of the population of London was in the expendable class. Such figures are probably too high to serve as estimates for the total society since members of the expendable class have always tended to migrate to urban centers. However, lest it be supposed that these figures are much too high, it should be noted that one careful observer of the French scene late in the seventeenth century wrote, "I have concluded with certainty that, in these recent times, close to a tenth part of the population is reduced to beggary, and actually begs."¹⁵²

Probably the best estimate we can make of the situation in agrarian societies is that in normal times from 5 to 10 per cent of the population found itself in this depressed class, with the figure rising as high as 15 per cent on some occasions and falling almost to zero on others. These estimates seem to correspond reasonably well with the general impres-

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, Homans, chap. 10; Hoskins, pp. 75f; Fei, "Peasantry and Gentry," p. 642; or Takekoshi, vol. III, p. 397.

¹⁴⁸ Hobsbawn, chap. 2.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, the stories of Fulk Fitzwarin, the outlawed baron of the days of King John, or the continental Raubritter (see Keen, chap. 4).

¹⁵⁰ This and the following figures are all from Aydelotte, p. 4.

¹⁵¹ J. C. Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 1948), p. 285.

¹⁵² Quoted by Jean Fourastié, *The Causes of Wealth*, translated by Theodore Caplow (New York: Free Press, 1960, first published 1951), p. 27.

sions historical accounts give of the frequency of beggars, criminals, and other unemployed persons. The figures would undoubtedly be much higher, of course, were it not for the very high mortality rates which prevailed in this class.

A Graphic Summary

Because of the complexity of the interrelations among the various classes in agrarian societies, it may prove helpful to attempt a graphic characterization of a "typical" agrarian society.¹⁵³ Despite its limitations, Figure

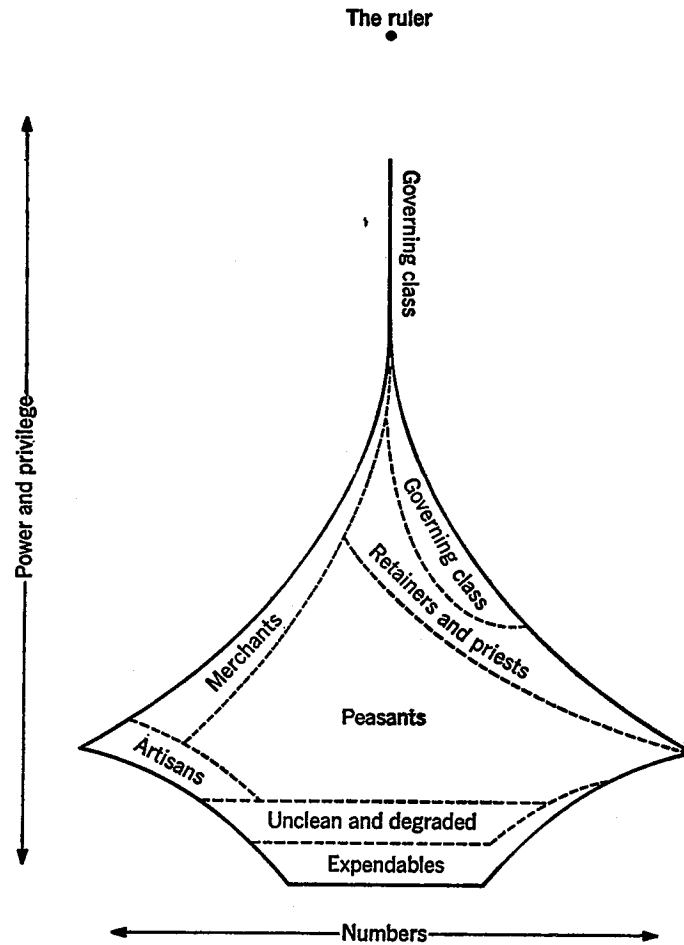


Figure 1 A graphic representation of the relationship among classes in agrarian societies.

¹⁵³ Because of the considerable variability among agrarian societies, any diagram oversimplifies reality. What I have sought to portray are the central tendencies.

I can serve several useful purposes. First, it should help to make clear that the classes within agrarian societies cannot be thought of simply as a series of layers superimposed one on the other. On the contrary, each covers a range of the distributive spectrum, and what is more, each overlaps certain others to some degree. Second, this diagram may serve as a reminder of the inaccuracy of the familiar pyramidal view of societies, which ignores the depressed classes at the very bottom of the social order and minimizes the degree of inequality (which, incidentally, is still minimized by the diagram shown here; it would require a spire far higher and far slenderer than these pages permit to show accurately the relationship between the upper classes and the common people). Finally, this diagram may help to make clear that there is a *continuum* of power and privilege, not a series of separate and distinct strata in the geological sense of that term.

Status Groups

Because agrarian states were generally conquest states, their populations were often divided along ethnic and religious lines. This fact was usually of considerable importance from the distributive standpoint, since ethnic and religious groups often became status groups, and the ethnic and religious identification of an individual tended to become either a resource facilitating his advancement in society or an obstacle hindering it.

Usually those who belonged to the same ethnic or religious group as the ruler were favored, while members of alien, or conquered, groups were at a disadvantage. China during the Ch'ing, or Manchu, dynasty provides a good illustration of this. As one writer put it, "A Manchu would always have his bowl of rice, a small pension at least, paid to the member of the conquering group by the conquered people."¹⁵⁴ This, of course, was the minimum. For those with ability or special connections, far better opportunities were available, as shown in Marsh's study of mobility in China's governing class. In the early part of the Ch'ing dynasty roughly 40 per cent of all officials in the country were Manchus, and though this figure gradually declined, in the last sixty years of the dynasty 20 per cent were still Manchu.¹⁵⁵ As Marsh puts it, "Even this lowest proportion of Manchus in office far over-represented the actual proportion of Manchus

¹⁵⁴ Franz Michael, *The Origin of Manchu Rule in China: Frontier and Bureaucracy as Interacting Forces in the Chinese Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1942), p. 119.

¹⁵⁵ Marsh, p. 48. An even more pronounced pattern of discrimination prevailed during the earlier Mongol dynasty. See Tsui Chi, *A Short History of Chinese Civilization* (New York: Putnam, 1943), p. 184.

in the Chinese population." Marsh's study further shows that they were especially overrepresented in *the highest ranking offices*. For example, he found, in the sample he studied, that 84 per cent of the Manchus achieved the highest rank, compared with only 44 per cent of the Chinese. Furthermore, these Manchu officials averaged more than twenty-one years in this rank, while the Chinese averaged less than nine.¹⁵⁶ These remarkable "achievements" of the Manchus occurred even though only 14 per cent of them had received the Chin-shih degree, awarded to those who passed the most difficult "qualifying" examinations. By contrast, 64 per cent of their less successful Chinese colleagues had been awarded it.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, only 24 per cent of the Manchu officials in his sample had followed the "regular" career path leading through a succession of examinations, while 76 per cent of their Chinese counterparts had done so.¹⁵⁸ The majority of Manchu officials had relied instead on the purchase of office and other "irregular" methods. Beneath the Chinese, it should be noted, were the members of various tribal minorities who were even more subject to discrimination in the distributive realm.¹⁵⁹

Similar practices are evident in many other agrarian societies. For example, in Mughal India under Akbar, the most tolerant of all the Mughal emperors, only 12 per cent of the top 415 officers of the realm, and only 23 per cent of the scholars supported by royal patronage, were Hindus, despite the fact that Hindus constituted the great majority of the population.¹⁶⁰ On a number of occasions, Muslim caliphs in the Middle East forbade Christians to hold public office.¹⁶¹ In addition, Christians and Jews were sometimes required to wear special clothes (a practice similar to the Manchu requirement that Chinese males wear pigtails), affix wooden images of devils to their house, ride without saddles, and suffer a host of other indignities. Furthermore, the testimony of Christians and Jews against Muslims could not be accepted in a court of law. In Europe, many of the same disabilities were imposed on the Jews, and in Latin America a distinction has long been made between Europeans, mestizos, and Indians with the former groups favored in many ways.¹⁶² In short, *access to rewards was often a function of the ethnic or religious*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 133 and 138. To simplify my presentation I have combined his figures for the sons of Chinese officials and the sons of Chinese commoners.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁵⁹ Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies in Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1955), p. 80.

¹⁶⁰ Misra, pp. 45 and 62.

¹⁶¹ Hitti, pp. 234 and 353f.

¹⁶² See, for example, Melvin Tumin, *Caste in a Peasant Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952).

group with which a member of an agrarian society was affiliated and its relationship to the dominant political force in the society.

In many respects the Hindu caste system can be viewed as a slightly variant and extreme form of this same basic mode of stratification.¹⁶³ The chief difference is that in the caste system the group to which the individual belongs is of overriding importance in determining his access to rewards and his opportunities for improving his situation, while in other systems of stratification the collectivity is less important (though sometimes it has been almost as important). There are, of course, other differences, but they seem generally to be of secondary importance. In fact, the more closely one examines the realities of the distributive system in traditional India, instead of Hindu religious theory, the more one is impressed by its similarities to the systems of other agrarian societies, and the less by its differences.

Sometimes, though rarely, membership in a subordinated status group has proven an asset in agrarian societies. The classic case of this occurred in Ottoman Turkey during the era of the Janissaries. When the Janissary system was functioning properly, all of the high officials of state were selected from the ranks of youths taken from Christian families, made slaves of the sultan, trained for military or civil careers, and converted to Islam.¹⁶⁴ High public office was virtually closed to the children of Muslims even though Turkey was a Muslim state.

The explanation for this peculiar pattern seems to lie in the struggles for power between the sultan and the Turkish elements of the governing class. By cutting the latter off from high public office, and filling these positions instead with persons recruited from a despised and conquered minority, the sultan greatly strengthened his own hand. Such officials were much more vulnerable than ones of native Turkish origin would ever have been, and thus more pliant. Furthermore, by denying admission to the corps of Janissaries to persons of Muslim parentage (including the sons of Janissaries), the sultan prevented the establishment of an hereditary nobility in the usual sense. Unfortunately for the sultans, it proved impossible to maintain such an aberrant system indefinitely, and eventually the Janissaries and other prominent Muslim families succeeded in securing the admission of their sons to this elite organization. This marked the beginning of the end of the effectiveness of the system.

The Janissary principle has been applied in varying degrees in cer-

¹⁶³ For an early statement of this view, see Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Fair Lawn, N.J.: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 188-189.

¹⁶⁴ For an excellent description of the system, see Lybyer, chaps. 2-4.

tain other agrarian states, but never with such great success.¹⁶⁵ Probably the best examples are pre-Mamluk Egypt and the Muslim kingdom of Delhi. Of course, in these cases advancement was contingent on conformity to the dominant faith and the culture of the dominant ethnic group.

Another type of variable which often influenced the access of individuals to rewards in agrarian societies was their *legal status*. Three legal statuses which deserve special note were nobility, serfdom, and slavery. The former set certain individuals apart from others by providing them with advantages; the latter two by burdening them with disabilities.

The term slavery has been used to describe a number of quite distinct positions of servitude in horticultural and agrarian societies. For example, the prime ministers and other top officials of Ottoman Turkey were legally slaves of the sultan, but they wielded immense powers. Yet this same term, slave, is applied to Cato's field hands and others who were denied virtually every human satisfaction except survival.¹⁶⁶

At the other extreme, nobility proves an equally variable concept. As one writer said in discussing the concept of nobility in France, "There never had been a general theory of nobility, for if the concept of the noble 'vivant noblement' was recognizable [throughout France], each province had varying customs regarding immunity from *taille* and the privileges resulting from holding a noble fief."¹⁶⁷ If this was true of the various provinces within France, it was even truer of the agrarian world as a whole. The concept of nobility, like the concept of slavery or serfdom, varied considerably from area to area and society to society. The one common denominator was that nobility was always linked with certain legally assured privileges, while slavery and serfdom were always linked with certain legally enforced limitations on freedom. These distinctive benefits and handicaps were written into the legal code of the nation and enforced by the courts and other agencies of societal authority.

When these special statuses were hereditary (and they, as well as religious and ethnic statuses, usually were), the possibility of status discrepancies arose. We know from the historical record that such discrepan-

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, Rosenberg, p. 65, or Sidney Painter, *The Rise of the Feudal Monarchies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1951), p. 52, on its application in Europe.

¹⁶⁶ The concept of serfdom was equally variable. See, for example, D. Kumar, "Caste and Landlessness in South India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4, (1962), pp. 341f.

¹⁶⁷ C. A. J. Armstrong, "France of the Hundred Years War and the Renaissance," in J. M. Wallace-Hadrill and John McManners (eds.), *France: Government and Society* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 94. See also Blum, p. 349, on the various types of nobility in eighteenth-century Russia.

cies were, in fact, a fairly common occurrence. On the one hand, we find ample evidence of impoverished noblemen, far poorer than many commoners; on the other hand there are numerous reports of slaves and serfs who were far wealthier than the vast majority of commoners and even than many of the less wealthy nobility. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia, for example, a number of serfs entered various fields of business and became extremely wealthy.¹⁶⁸ One serf paid 135,000 rubles, plus a factory, land, and serfs (which he owned) for his freedom, and still remained a wealthy man. At that same time, a member of the nobility in the province of Riazin reported that one-fourth of the 1,700 noble families in his province were so poor that "together with their peasants they form one family, eat at one table and live in one hut."¹⁶⁹ Similar comparisons can be found in almost every other agrarian society where statuses of nobility, serfdom, or slavery had been hereditary for generations.¹⁷⁰

Where religious and ethnic statuses were important, they, too, tended to become inconsistent with economic status. Thus, certain members of subordinate religious or ethnic groups, like the Jews in Europe or the Christians and Jews in the Middle East, acquired considerable wealth, while numerous members of the dominant groups lived in poverty. One of the important problems for future research is the determination of the consequences of status inconsistency in these societies.

Vertical Mobility

Agrarian societies have often been depicted as societies in which there was very little vertical mobility. This simply was not so. Any careful examination of the historical record makes it clear that there was considerable mobility, though much of it was of a type which members of modern industrial societies, especially Americans, are likely to overlook. This may explain why agrarian societies are so often misrepresented in sociological writing.

To appreciate the extent of vertical mobility in these societies, one must pay much closer attention to *downward mobility* than is customarily done. The rate of downward mobility is not necessarily equal to the rate of upward mobility, as sometimes is assumed; hence the rate of upward mobility is not always an adequate measure of total societal mobility. It is the tendency to make these assumptions which has caused so much of

¹⁶⁸ Blum, pp. 472-474.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Mariéjol, pp. 266f. on Spain; McManners, "France," p. 36 on France; Rosenberg, pp. 144f. on Prussia; Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, pp. 236f. on England; or Douglas, pp. 30-31 on China.

the confusion in discussions of mobility in agrarian societies. The fact is, unhappily, that *in the long run, in all of these societies, downward mobility was much more frequent than upward*. Failure to recognize this has led to most of the misleading assertions about the low rate of mobility in agrarian societies.

The explanation for this somewhat surprising feature is found in the simple fact of human fecundity. Mankind, unfortunately, is able to produce considerably more offspring than there are positions to be filled in agrarian societies. This is true despite the high levels of infant mortality, the occasional practices of infanticide, the more frequent practices of monasticism and prostitution (the latter of which is a rough equivalent of polyandry from the demographic standpoint), celibacy, and the influence of war, disease, and famine. Though these factors occasionally combined to create brief manpower shortages, over the long run they have not been enough to balance the constant supply of new offspring.^{170a} Therefore, in societies where there are not important new frontiers, either geographical or economic, surplus manpower is usually driven downward in the class system in the direction of the expendable class, which performs the unavoidable function of redressing the demographic balance.

The influence of surplus population can be seen at every class level in agrarian societies. As we have already noted, the common people, and especially the peasants, were constantly faced with this problem. In some societies, as in China, they sought to solve it by dividing the family patrimony more or less equally among all of the sons, but this soon had the effect of reducing individual holdings to the point where they were too small to provide the necessities of life for those who occupied them. At this point, the land passed into the hands of the minority of officials, merchants, or prosperous peasants who were in the process of building estates. However, in the hands of *their* descendants the same cycle was usually repeated. This was true even of families with vast estates when there were many sons, but none especially adept in the difficult art of fortune building.¹⁷¹

Sometimes the problem was dealt with by the practice of primogeni-

^{170a} See the second paragraph of fn. 143 for a comment on recent research on fertility limitation in the Middle Ages.

¹⁷¹ See, for example, Chang, *Income*, pp. 128f. on China; Misra, p. 50 on India; or Blum, pp. 66, 68, 82f., 172, and 376f. on Russia. It should be noted that when a descendant of an estate builder proved skillful in that same way, this usually benefited only his own immediate descendants and not his brothers' and cousins' descendants. The Chinese differed somewhat in this and maintained stronger ties in the extended family, so that all benefited to some extent if any member of the extended kin group recouped the family fortune. Even in China, however, the greatest benefits went to the immediate family of the successful man.

ture or some other system of inheritance which avoided the fragmentation of the family estate. This was the usual practice in Western Europe. The chief effect of this system, however, was to speed the decline of the noninheriting sons while permitting one son to preserve his father's status. *The simple fact is that there is no way to avoid a net downward movement in societies in which all but the lowest classes produce more offspring than there are status vacancies.*

Though downward mobility was the more common form of vertical mobility in agrarian societies, *upward* mobility was not uncommon. Despite the constant downward pressures generated by demographic forces, a certain number of individuals managed to rise. Sometimes they filled new positions, e.g., in the merchant class in an era of expanding trade and commerce, sometimes positions vacated by the death of men who left no heirs, and sometimes positions vacated by individuals who lacked the skills or luck necessary to hold them. Of these three, the second and third patterns were the most common. Compared with industrial societies, the creation of new positions was relatively infrequent.

Upward mobility, whether on an inter- or intragenerational basis, was usually limited to one step in a lifetime, though, as will be noted, there were some cases of "rags to riches." Frequently a step-at-a-time advance was simply movement within a class. As indicated previously, none of the major classes was completely homogeneous; each could be subdivided into several subclasses, as in the peasant class in thirteenth-century England with its subdivisions into franklins, husbonds, and cotters. The majority of advances seem to have been the equivalent of movement from cotter to husbond, from husbond to franklin, or from franklin to the lowest rank of the governing class. As modest as such advances may seem to members of modern industrial societies, they represented no small accomplishment in agrarian societies, where the cards were normally stacked against advances of any kind. In such societies, most men counted themselves fortunate if they were able to pass on to their offspring a patrimony as great as that which they themselves had received.¹⁷²

It is not easy to document at the present time why a few men were upwardly mobile while the majority were not. Differences in innate ability and vitality were undoubtedly important. Chance happenings, too, must surely have played a part. For example, those who escaped serious illnesses and accidents undoubtedly fared better on the average than those who did not. Fertility probably was a factor, favoring the parents of large peasant families, but handicapping their offspring. A large family meant the benefit of more free labor for the parents, but from the children's

¹⁷² See, for example, Chang, *Income*, pp. 128f.

standpoint, it meant a smaller per capita inheritance, especially in those societies where estates were divided equally among the offspring. Finally, there is considerable evidence that sectarian religious movements which stress hard work and asceticism often contributed to the success of their adherents, especially when they constituted a minority in a population which ignored these values. The economic success of the Old Believers in Russia was but one of a number of examples of this.¹⁷³

In most generations, a very small minority managed to make more dramatic advances. Sir Nicholas Bacon, father of Sir Francis Bacon, was born the son of a sheep reeve but rose to become one of the chief officers of state and one of the wealthiest men of his day.¹⁷⁴ St. Godric of Finchale was one of the noninheriting sons of a poor peasant father at the end of the eleventh century, and was forced to live by his wits. In time, however, he became a wealthy merchant doing business in the ports of England, Scotland, Flanders, and Denmark.¹⁷⁵ Robert Grosseteste, a famous bishop of Lincoln, England, was said to have been born a villain.¹⁷⁶ Savva Morozov, founder of the famous Morozov industrial empire in czarist Russia, was the son of a serf and spent his early years fishing and tending cattle, and later was hired as a weaver for food, lodging, and five rubles a year.¹⁷⁷ An eighteenth-century primate of the Catholic Church in Spain was the son of a Gibraltar charcoal burner.¹⁷⁸ In Ottoman Turkey during the heyday of the Janissary system, virtually all of the chief officers of state were the sons of poor Christian peasants.¹⁷⁹ In China, the founders of at least three dynasties appear to have been of peasant origin, while a number of the later emperors of Rome were men "up from the ranks."¹⁸⁰ These are but a few of the thousands of whom we still have record who made dramatic advances.

As these examples suggest, such advances did not come to those who stuck to the plow and the awl. Farming and the crafts promised limited advances at best. Those who made the more dramatic advances did so by turning to occupations with which wealth and power were normally associated—commerce, the army, the Church, or civil government. In fields such as these, a handful, but only a handful, of men found an op-

¹⁷³ See, for example, Valentine Bill, *The Forgotten Class: The Russian Bourgeoisie from the Earliest Beginnings to 1900* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1959), especially chap. 4, or Blum, pp. 301 and 310.

¹⁷⁴ For a fascinating analysis of Bacon's rise, see Simpson, chap. 2.

¹⁷⁵ Pirenne, p. 46.

¹⁷⁶ Homans, p. 135.

¹⁷⁷ Bill, p. 18.

¹⁷⁸ Raymond Carr, "Spain," in A. Goodwin (ed.), *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Black, 1953), p. 47.

¹⁷⁹ Lybyer, chaps. 2-5.

¹⁸⁰ Eberhard, *History*, pp. 71, 203, and 239 and Homo, p. 354.

portunity to rise well above their origins. The great majority in these fields advanced little, if at all, since the positions at the top were usually defended with all the vigor, skill, and resources at their occupants' command.

An important problem, one which deserves far more systematic attention than it has yet received, is the question of the stability, or lack of it, in the composition of the upper classes. Logic and common sense suggest that they were very stable, except perhaps in times of great crises. However, there is a good bit of evidence which suggests this was not the case. For example, we know that even though the Roman nation survived well into the Christian era, the old patrician class did not. Of sixty-one patrician gentes whose existence in the early days of the Republic is historically confirmed, only twenty-four survived to the year 367 B.C., and by the early second century of the Christian era, only a single one of the original patrician families remained.¹⁸¹ A recent study of the French nobility in Forez in south-central France (an area almost coextensive with the Loire department today) revealed that of 215 noble lineages in existence in the thirteenth century, 30 per cent had disappeared by the end of that century. Less than a third survived to the end of the fourteenth century, a seventh to the end of the fifteenth century, and exactly five to the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century.¹⁸² In England few of the great families of the medieval period survived the Wars of the Roses and the proscriptions of the Tudors.¹⁸³ Even in the medieval period, the position of English noble families was far from secure.¹⁸⁴ In Russia, numerous princely families were destroyed by confiscation and by the practice of dividing the family patrimony equally among the male offspring.¹⁸⁵ Such evidence strongly indicates that the position of families in the governing class in many agrarian societies was far from secure. Those families which did not die out naturally were usually destroyed by the death of the heir in battle, by confiscation, fragmentation of the family patrimony, or stupidity or profligacy on the part of the heir.

Before concluding this brief discussion, a few comments are necessary on *variations in rates of vertical mobility*. This subject is extremely difficult to deal with in societies as complex as agrarian ones. To begin with, systematic, quantitative data of a reliable nature are largely lacking. In addition, there is no single rate of mobility in such societies, but liter-

¹⁸¹ Homo, p. 35, and Turner, p. 921.

¹⁸² See Edouard Perroy's fascinating study, "Social Mobility among the French Noblesse in the Later Middle Ages," *Past and Present*, 21 (1962), p. 31.

¹⁸³ H. J. Habakkuk, "England," in Goodwin, p. 18.

¹⁸⁴ Painter, *Barony*, pp. 175-176.

¹⁸⁵ Blum, pp. 66, 68, 82f., 172, 376f., etc.

ally several dozen different rates, e.g., the rate of movement from the peasant class to the merchant class, to the expendable class, to the retainer class, etc. For example, if one considers only the nine major classes defined in this and the preceding chapter,¹⁸⁶ and ignores the various subclasses, there still are 72 (9×8) rates of movement possible between classes; and, while a few of the possibilities may be unrealized in certain periods, none can safely be ignored. Finally, it is not at all certain that any one of these rates is at all typical of the rest. Thus the usual comments about *the* rate of mobility in such societies are often extremely misleading: *there is no single rate and none which can safely be used as an indicator of all the others.*

Because of this, the most that can be done in the brief space available here is to take note of a few of the forces which probably had important consequences for the more important rates of mobility. To begin with, it seems clear that autocracy, or the dominance of the ruler over the governing class, would increase the rate of movement into and out of the governing class.¹⁸⁷ Conversely, oligarchy would probably increase the rate of mobility into and out of the ruler's office. The explanation for this is simply that power tends to increase with tenure, and those who fear the increase of power in others, and have the means to prevent it, are likely to do so. There is one limitation on the application of this principle: when the survival or welfare of both parties in a power struggle is threatened by a third party, the original protagonists are likely to refrain from taking hostile action against each other.

Second, wars, famines, and other disasters would tend to increase the rates of upward mobility, at least when the loss of life is so great that the more privileged classes cannot replace their losses from within their own ranks. At the same time, such disasters would be likely to reduce the rates of downward mobility.

Third, the spread of practices such as infanticide, abortion, celibacy, and prostitution would reduce the rates of downward mobility. They would be less likely to affect the rates of upward mobility since they would probably not prevent the privileged classes from producing sufficient offspring to fill all the higher positions.

Fourth, the opening of new economic opportunities, especially in the area of trade and commerce, would increase the rates of upward movement into the merchant class in the short run, and into the governing class in the long run, as merchants often use their wealth to buy status. Simi-

¹⁸⁶ I am counting the ruler as a separate class, a practice consistent with modern set theory.

¹⁸⁷ See, for example, Misra, p. 51, or Lybyer, chaps. 5 and 6.

larly, the opening of new political opportunities, especially through the conquest of new territories, would increase the rates of movement into the governing and retainer classes of the victorious nation. On the other hand, it would lead to a significant increase in the rate of downward movement in the conquered group.

These, in brief, are a few of the more important factors contributing to variations in the rates of mobility in agrarian societies. While this list is far from complete, it may serve to communicate something of the complexity of the problem.

A Note on Distributive Justice

Before concluding this discussion of stratification in agrarian societies, a few brief comments on the subject of distributive justice are in order. On the whole, agrarian societies give the impression of gross injustice in the distributive realm. As we have seen, a small number of individuals enjoyed immense luxury, consuming in a single day goods and services sufficient to support large numbers of the common people for a year. At the same time a considerable portion of the population was denied the basic necessities of life and was marked out by the social system for a speedy demise. It does not take much imagination to conceive of a more equitable method of distribution.

However, when the demographic factor is introduced into the analysis, we suddenly discover that the problem was never so simple as it sometimes seems to those of us who live in the comfort of a modern industrial society. Despite the ravages of war, famine, plague, and other disasters, and despite the influences of infanticide, abortion, monasticism, and prostitution, those segments of the population which were at, or above, the subsistence level continued to produce more offspring than could be employed except by a steady reduction in privilege. Thus, barring an effective method of controlling fertility, which no agrarian society ever discovered, there seems to have been no alternative to the existence of a class of expendables, as harsh as such a statement may sound to modern ears. The most that could have been achieved, had the elite permitted it, was the temporary elimination of this class for the short time it would take population growth to eliminate the economic surplus.

This line of reasoning also points up an interesting feature of the economic surplus which is often overlooked. The surplus of any society is not determined solely by the means of production available to its members. *It also depends on the nature of the distributive system.* Given the same productive system and identical environments, several societies

could have economic surpluses of very different size depending upon the skill and ruthlessness of the dominant classes. To the degree that the elite permitted the peasantry to retain more than they needed for survival, and to the degree that they permitted them to farm inefficiently small parcels of land, to that degree they would reduce the size of the economic surplus. This is a point which is easily overlooked in societies, such as our own, where productive techniques seem to be regarded as all-important and distributive techniques quite secondary.

One other point should be made in defense of the rulers and governing classes of agrarian societies. Though clearly these persons exploited the common people (in the sense that they used force to obtain what the common people would not have given them in free exchange), nevertheless they did perform one useful function: they maintained a fair degree of *law and order*. This was vitally important in an agrarian society, where the nature of the economy made anarchy intolerable. A single crop failure for any reason (such as delay in planting due to political strife) could mean death for thousands, and two successive failures disaster. As Robert Bellah put it, "When the Islamic ulema said, 'A hundred years of despotism are better than one day of anarchy,' they were not just apologists for the ruling class. They were often deeply opposed to the rulers and entirely alienated from them. But they knew what days of anarchy are like in such societies."¹⁸⁸ One is reminded here of Luther's equally ambivalent view of the German princes of his day. In short, though the rulers and governing classes of agrarian societies clearly charged more for their services than the common people were willing to pay without coercion, they did render certain services of value (one might add, of value to themselves as well as others). Hence, though their relations with the common people were highly exploitative and parasitic, they were not only exploitative and parasitic. This was probably one of the chief reasons for the durability of the agrarian state as an institution. There was really no alternative.

¹⁸⁸ Personal communication in response to an earlier draft of the manuscript. This paragraph was added at his suggestion.