The neo-classical and political economy literatures view the post-medieval history of the European peasantry as one of economic dispossession and legal disability. The beneficiaries of long-term commercialization, in this perspective, were landlords and an emergent rural bourgeoisie allied with them. Family farmers and smallholders widely suffered removal or reduction to wage-laborer status. Village communalism dissolved into entrepreneurial atomism, or into class polarization and conflict. East of the Rhine, a semi-feudal neo-serfdom ruled the countryside to the villagers’ cost. In Mediterranean and western Europe, free status availed little against rent/tax oppression and Malthusian down-cycles. In England alone did individualized property rights, free labor, and free markets combine to sustain a long-term development only fitfully advanced elsewhere (notably in the Netherlands) to lay the basis for a revolution in agricultural productivity and breakthrough to factory-based industrialization. Yet, the price of British progress was the death of the historic landed peasantry.

Against this vision, widely shared despite disagreement over causal explanation between the neo-classical and political economy schools, these pages propose a model of early modern European village history which concentrates foremost on the maintenance and reproduction of the self-sufficient family farm. Its proprietors figure here, ideal-typically, as householders free themselves of the necessity to resort extensively to wage-labor and capable of developing their holdings into small-scale engines of market production. Such farms must be conceptualized in an historical setting in which European villagers were everywhere subject to seigneurial lordship or landlordism, whether as serfs, seigneurial subjects, or freemen. So too were they universally, if
variously, subject to rents, taxes, and often conscription too. They occupied their farms under widely differing tenures, with correspondingly varying property rights, though never altogether without some degree of ownership in fixed capital, farm stock, or other mobile goods. Everywhere, individualism and collectivism co-existed in differing proportions.

These pages aim to delineate a sphere of comparative history within which self-sufficient family farms, despite the many ways they differed across Europe, figure as a major stratum of European society which, in the post-medieval half-millenium, did not disintegrate under the advancing tread of capitalism. Instead, many family farmers themselves became successful agrarian entrepreneurs, while others managed at least to survive through market production. In political life, although they inhabited widely differing legal and institutional settings, landed villagers—whether juridically free or feudally hobbled—stubbornly pursued their self-interest, preferring judicial to armed solutions, though (like any human group) not foreign to the temptations of violence.

Some may think the English word yeomanry non-exportable. But if it is understood to refer less to a politically enfranchised freeman agriculturist than to a family farmer (whatever his legal disabilities) living, in good times, in rustic sufficiency, engaged in market production with opportunities for surplus-accumulation (in one or another form), the experimentation-friendly reader will not step down from this train of thought.

AN OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

Viewing the medieval millenium at its pre-plague end-point in the early fourteenth century reveals a virtual universality across Europe of family-farm tenure by conditionally hereditary leasehold under noble, ecclesiastical, or princely lordships collecting from their subject villagers rents in kind and cash, though often too, where large seigneurial manor-farms existed, they demanded labor-service (or labor rents) as well. In principle, and often in practice, these three basic forms of feudal rent were interchangeable. Family farmers’ personal legal status varied from free to servile, but did not in itself determine economic well-being. This varied instead with population, where a low land-to-labor ratio worked to villagers’ advantage (even if land-
lords sought to corral them in serfdom). Important, too, was the larger society’s degree of commercialization. For the richer the urban-based cash economy, and the array of goods available on its markets, the higher the landlords’ cost of living, and the heavier their demands on their village subjects, who were obliged to monetize their surpluses in the market towns so as to pay cash rents (or whose surpluses were skimmed in levies *in natura* which the landlords’ agents themselves marketed).

The ideal-typical high medieval village based on open-field mixed arable farming and pasturage comprised mainly fullholding farmers (with one or more hides or virgates of land, or roughly 25-50+ acres or 10-20+ hectares of fallowed arable). Only farms of such dimensions could maintain the draft-teams necessary to plowing and haulage, both on the farmer’s own account and in manorial service for his lord. Yet, as high medieval seigneurial land was leased to villagers for rents rather than farmed domanially with labor services, the lordship’s interest in sustaining the village fullholdings’ indivisibility waned. The villagers’ preference for partible over impartible inheritance practices, so as to favor several or all heirs with portions of land, asserted itself. Still, communally organized open-field agriculture set lower-end limits to the resultant fragmentation of peasant farms, since small farms could not deliver the necessary draught-teams. Nor could the village farm balloon in its size and labor inputs without limits. Many fullholders kept their farms intact, imposing on successive new household heads payments to departing sibling-heirs.

Nevertheless, as seigneurial lordship contented itself with land rents and other exactions from its villagers deriving from their subject status (whether freemen or not), a pattern emerged in the late middle ages which persisted to the French Revolution and beyond: the countryside, though still seigneurialized, became a patchwork of small, medium, and large peasant holdings, which changed hands according to the fate and fortune of individual families, some maintaining themselves or rising into fullholder status (and beyond), others falling down out of it. The princely or “state” power might take an interest in the size of village farms if it wished to maintain the peasant fullholding as a unit of taxation or conscription. But such considerations were
peripheral before the emergence of the absolute monarchies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The late-medieval social crisis, triggered by catastrophic population collapse resulting from the arrival of virulent bubonic plague in the mid-fourteenth century, enabled the peasantries of the Mediterranean, western European, British, and west German regions to shed (or, at any rate, greatly lighten) the legal bonds of medieval servility. Mostly this was a negotiated process, but in part it entailed peasant revolt (as in the late fifteenth-century Catalan revolt, or the German Peasant War of 1525 and its regional antecedents). Seigneurialism in these regions of Europe slowly turned into a landlordism which itself underwent commodification, falling frequently through sale or leasing into non-noble bourgeois or gentry hands.

Henceforth, across the early-modern era, from roughly 1500 to 1800, the central question in the villages in these regions--that is, in western, central, and southwestern Europe--was how well family farmers could retain their hold on the land in the face of advancing commercialization of agriculture in general. Could they, in the demographic recovery of the long sixteenth century, maintain a foothold in the market so as to pay rising rents, and new state taxes, from earnings on terms of trade in the silver-inflated economy long favorable to commodity producers?

In the long seventeenth century, while taxation to support standing armies sometimes ruined the villages, it was more often war itself which had this effect, for the absolutist state’s self-interest depended on husbanding its villages as sources of revenue and recruits. The greater long-term early modern threat to the family farmer emanated from entrepreneurial rivals in the landlord class. The case of the so-called “second serfdom” in east Germany, and eastern Europe generally, comes first to mind. Here, noble lords as well as administrators of state domain land imposed heavy new labor rents on subject villagers so as to construct entirely new large-scale market-driven manor-farms. The standard literature of western provenance displays rampant confusion over the legal and economic dimensions of this process. Crucial to the present argument is the circumstance that, because of its need for village draught-teams, such commercialized manorialism preserved (while degrading) the fullholding family farm. It also braked population
growth in the lands it came to dominate—an effect favoring the larger holdings’ survival. The hard-fisted interplay of seigneurial, princely, and village interests enabled peasant farms of fullholders and halfholders, both of them continuing to engage on their own account in arable farming with draught teams, to survive in very large numbers to neo-manorialism’s abolition in the nineteenth century’s peasant emancipations. Despite the inequities of the process, emancipation secured the further existence of a massive family farming class to the revolutions of the twentieth century, or even to the present day.

Outside the realm of east European commercialized manorialism—that is, in France, Britain, the Low Countries, western Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Spain, Italy, and the Balkans—the post-medieval family farmer possessed the advantage, ideal-typically, of having escaped the worst economic disabilities and vulnerabilities of servile or subject status, and in many cases of having attained a personal freedom upon which landlordly powers could only impinge through exploitation of local monopolies, as of lower-court jurisdiction, milling, or hunting. To village lands formerly held under longstanding medieval customary, often servile, tenure a regime of fixed money rents now commonly applied whose long-term erosion through price and monetary inflation favored their tenants. Sometimes these farmers, as widely occurred in France and England, gained virtual allodial or undivided property rights in such holdings, though in law they qualified only (though still favorably) as hereditary leaseholds. The danger facing them was to fall into debt or otherwise falter in the early-modern market economy, leaving them, despite their advantageous status as post-feudal freeholders or relatively unencumbered hereditary tenants, no choice but to sell out to a rich village neighbor, or to an entrepreneurial, capitalist-minded landlord, whether noble or bourgeois.

The consequence of such misfortune might be (as in central Italy and southwest France) the farmer’s reduction to sharecropping, or his eviction and replacement by a sharecropper. It might be the conversion of his farm into a short-term tenancy under a lordlord imposing rack rents, that is, market rents, as happened massively in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It might entail the enclosure of his land into a larger farm, withdrawn from the system
of village communalism, and cultivated by a market-oriented tenant farmer (often an upwardly mobile peasant) employing whatever technology contemporary best practice mandated, as happened widely in northern Italy and northern France, and in England and the Low Countries. Post-medieval western and southern European freeholders suffered these various fates to such an extent that, as in France and England, ownership of most village land ended by the eve of the 1789 revolution in the hands of the entrepreneurial nobility and gentry, and the urban bourgeoisie.

Yet the family farmer did not disappear from these and neighboring countries. For the early-modern commercialized (though still seigneurialized) landlordism which superseded full-blooded feudal lordship depended on finding tenant farmers in its villages willing to pay new market rents and take their own entrepreneurial risks. It is common to imagine such cultivators as a small rural elite consisting of the legendary English “capitalist tenant farmer,” or as the grand fermier of northern France, or as short-term leaseholding “bourgeois farmers” in Italy’s Po valley and elsewhere. But the fullholding or largeholding family farmer survived in large numbers everywhere in Europe, including, as we have seen, within the realm of east European neomanorialism. Moreover, in varying measure he possessed those qualities associated with the English family farmer, whether yeoman or tenant. He lived, to a varying but important degree, from the market. He worked his land himself, or closely supervised its cultivation by servants and laborers. His mentality and tastes were not aristocratic, but demotic, separated by rural culture from the truly bourgeois. He consumed most of his net profit, or distributed it in legacies, but was receptive to profit-enhancing opportunities, whether through adoption of new agricultural practices (limited in open-field communities) or entry into specialized market farming (as in grazing, dairying, or milling).

Such fullholding family farmers might be de facto freeholders, subject to only residual, minor landlordly rents, or perhaps none at all, though liable like anyone else to such direct taxes, conscription, ecclesiastical levies, excises, and interest on borrowed money as fate decreed. They were the dominant social group in Switzerland, Scandinavia, and across the countryside of west, central, and south Germany, where post-Reformation state policy sought to maintain such farms
as the pillars of their fiscal economy, tolerating a residual and fossilized noble landlordism, but blocking the path to bourgeois purchase of village farms.

What proportion of Europe’s landed peasantry belonged to such a yeomanry on the eve of 1789? In east-Elbian Europe, including Russia, probably half the villagers holding arable farms possessed fullholdings yielding them and their dependents, in peaceful times, a standard of living of homespun sufficiency and marketable or otherwise transferable surpluses adequate to launch new generations into marriage and householding. There were many village patriarchs who died with coin-filled strongboxes and long lists of debtors. In Balkan Europe, heavy post-sixteenth century Ottoman taxation and local power-struggles among elites converted increasingly numerous village farmers into hard-pressed and vulnerable tenants of chiftlik (market-supplying) landlords, but surplus-harvesting fullholders and prosperous pastoralists, alongside a politically protected frontier peasantry, were nonetheless numerous. In France, the fissiparous effect of partible inheritance worked against yeomanry, but yet every village displayed its well-to-do laboureurs, while entrepreneurial tenant farmers of mainly rural, often peasant origins were a dominating presence in the Paris basin and the north. In England, most of the famous “capitalist tenant farmers” were, by continental standards, big peasants, farming with servants and wage laborers rented holdings of some 40-120 acres. Alongside them were the yeomanry proper, also with mostly rented farms of similar or smaller extent. If, as in France, the mass of post-medieval family holdings had disappeared, or shrunk to wage-laboring cottager status, this had occurred simultaneously with the regrouping of a largeholding tenant class of rural origins whose presence across the European landscape these pages highlight.

It may be objected that, in the end, what matters most are the agricultural preconditions of industrialization, which—as is commonly claimed—were achieved uniquely in England. But it is as mistaken to overestimate productivity gains in English agriculture before the late seventeenth century as it is to overlook them in the agriculture of Italy, the Low Countries, and western Germany both before and after that date. Taking the broad, world-historical view, European industrialization, though first launched by steam and coal in Britain, spread very rapidly across
the European continent. Nor is industrialization in the strict sense of the term the vital prerequi-
site for the higher living standards the concept of modernity evokes. Capitalist development in
nineteenth-century agriculture and related light industry, accompanied by public schooling and
public-health improvements, achieved the same living standards in such continental regions as
west Germany, Scandinavia, France, and the Netherlands, often with less proletarian misery than
in Britain.

Moreover, people’s lives and fates in the pre-industrial past are not uniquely measureable
by a teleology of industrialization, any more than ours should be by a future which genetic engi-
neeering may revolutionize. The question here has been whether, in the post-medieval half-
millenium, a market-integrated yet also more or less self-sufficient largeholding peasantry or vil-
lage farmer class survived in large numbers throughout Europe. The argument, which lends itself
to massive documentation, is that such a broadly conceived European yeomanry doubtless did
evolve and survive.

It is a question which neither the neo-classical literature, with its emphasis on market
forces and property rights, nor the political economy scholarship, with its stress on late-feudal
extra-economic coercion, has thought necessary to raise. But to affirm the yeomanry’s European
character and perseverance is more than a debt owed to empiricism. It is essential in vital ways to
understanding of modern politics and culture. Nor does acknowledging its presence on the social
landscape throw into eclipse the hard fate of the proletarianized smallholding peasantry of early
modern and modern times. But, especially in asking how European agriculture so widely suc-
cceeded in sustaining the continent’s cumulatively great post-1648 population growth, and in ex-
tending beyond England’s borders scholarly recognition of popular purchasing power’s crucial
role in modern capitalist development, and in inquiring into the bases of post-1789 populist de-
mocratization and other political mobilizations, the importance of Europe’s village yeomanry
must burst the bonds of a social science which mistook it as little more than early capitalism’s
(or late feudalism’s) victim.