5 Society and Economics in Pre-Revolutionary Europe (17th and 18th Centuries)

Society and economics from the 16th to the 18th centuries was based primarily on the traditions that had emerged over the Middle Ages

Traditional life was dominated by aristocratic elites who’s rank, and privileges were determined by ancestral inheritance

The state and the church were not just closely allied with the aristocracy, but was intimately connected to the aristocracy since the crown was the manifestation of the aristocratic and religious hierarchies

In the country a rural peasantry was beholden to feudal lords and were burdened by high taxes and feudal dues

In the towns, citizens were not directly beholden to feudal lords, but were regulated by powerful guilds that regulated commercial and political relationships

Tradition was paramount throughout Europe

Of course, the Protestant Reformation challenged traditions of religion and authority

However, the structure of the association between religion, the authority of the aristocracy and the guilds, and social structure generally remained in place

The past was looked to as providing the best guide for anticipating and planning for the future

Innovation was held in suspicion

And whatever social unrest that appeared was mostly under the auspices of demands that traditional relationships be restored

Nobels tried to defend their regional and local power from the intrusion of the centralized government

And peasants defended their customary feudal privileges such as access to common lands, feudal courts, and other traditional procedures to resolve various grievances

The medieval distinctions of rank, status, and privilege persisted well into the 18th century

In some cases, this system became more rigid

(Due to the erosion of the system, and people defending it?)

The common sentiment, most likely unconsciously understood, was that the state was the effect of interrelated families, or communities, and not simply a conglomeration of individuals

People had few rights as individuals

However, the rights they did have were associated to their inherited status associated with family and the family’s rank, and their status associated with some type of traditional institutional affiliation such as the church, universities (church), and guilds

Different ranks and statuses had their own sets of privileges established by tradition

License to practice a trade

The opportunity to be educated for an occupation

Entitlements to certain streams of income

Exemption from taxation

Or exemption from some types of punishments for crimes

Of course, the aristocracy was the wealthiest and the most influential of the ranks in society since they represented the main organizational lineages associated with the main royal lineage which was instinctually understood to represent the foundational ancestors of the society

By the nature of the geographical longevity of their lineage and their status they were the great landowners

Status gave them access to land

Land didn’t bestow status

And they considered land ownership the most respectable of economic endeavors

They were the stewards of their lands and governed the peoples who lived there

The servants of the land were tied by tradition to the aristocracy and were responsible for the work that provided the lords with their income

The aristocracy defined cultural norms, taste, and behavior

In Britain, the number of aristocratic families numbered about 400 families

The leaders of these families sat in Parliament in the House of Lords, and they had great influence over the election of members of Parliament in the House of Commons

One of the things that was unique in Britain was that British nobles had few exemptions or legal privileges

Therefore, those in Parliament who levied the taxes also had to pay them as well

The control over local government by the nobility provided them with a great amount of influence and allowed them to enter into businesses and the professions

By the eighteenth century they invested in commerce, canals, urban real estate, mines, and industries

Since the eldest sons inherited their titles and lands, the younger sons had to find other careers in business, the military, the professions, and the church

As a result, most positions of social and economic leadership were occupied by men with noble connections

The situation in France was more complex than that in Britain

France had many more members of nobility (about 4000,000)

Those members were divided up into two categories

Nobles of the sword

Derived their status from military service

Nobles of the robe

Derived their status from either purchased titles, or serving in the bureaucracy

Nobles were then further divided up into those who belonged to the royal court at Versailles and those that didn’t

The court nobility monopolized government posts and appointments to the church and the military, reaping great wealth in the process

The provincial nobility was little better off economically than wealthy peasants

Nevertheless, all members of nobility received hereditary privileges that set them off from everyone else in French society

The nobility could collect feudal dues from tenants on their lands

They enjoyed exclusive hunting and fishing rights

Although they had to pay a twentieth of their income to the state in the form of a tax, they were exempt from many other duties

They didn’t pay taxes on their land

Nor could they be called on by royal authority to be forced to work on various public works

In Eastern Europe the customs associated with the nobility were even more complicated and repressive

The aristocracy here was even more associated with the military

There were thousands of nobles in Poland, and they were relatively poor

After 1741 they were exempt from taxes

And until 1768 they had the right of life and death over their serfs

In Austria and Hungary, the nobility exercised judicial authority over the peasants through manorial courts

They also enjoyed being exempt from various forms of taxation

In Prussia, Frederick the Great elevated the status of the land-owning aristocracy, or Junkers

Frederick drew his military officers from the Junker ranks and they enthusiastically provided support for his wars

The government bureaucracy was managed by these nobles and they also exercised extensive authority over the serfs who lived on their estates

In Russia beginning in the late 17th century, Peter the Great sought to reinvent the nobility to consolidate his authority

He tried to link noble status to state service

However, this led to resistance and those demands were eventually reduced to service on a voluntary basis

Reaffirmation of tradition and the rejection of innovation

Of course, Russian aristocracy enjoyed judicial protection of their property, power over their serfs, and exemption from personal taxes

During the 18th century, European nobility responded to the growth of centralized national monarchies

They felt that this centralization threatened their noble privileges

This defense of their status and privileges is known as the Aristocratic Resurgence

The Aristocracy protected their exclusiveness by making it more difficult to acquire noble status

They monopolized appointments to the military, the state bureaucracy, the government ministry, and the church

They also used the aristocratically institutions such as the British Parliament, the French *parlements*, and the diets of Germany and the Habsburg Empire to attempt to limit royal power

In these positions they improved their position by exempting themselves from taxation and by increasing their power over the peasantry

As late as the 18th century, well over ¾ of al Europeans lived in the country, and few people ever traveled more than a few miles from their birthplace

Europe’s rural population was subject to different degrees of dependency

English and French tenants were considered free persons

This was not the case in Germany, Austria, and Russia

Here the peasants were legally bound to particular plots of land and to particular lords

Generally, the power of landlords increased as one moved across Europe from west to east

In France, most serfs owned a little land

However, this was usually not enough to support their families and they had to supplement their land by renting from a lord and pay feudal dues

Nearly all French peasants were subject to obligations that forced them to rent their lord’s mill to grind their grain and the ovens to bake their bread

The lord could also demand their labor for a certain number of days each year

In Prussia and Austria, landlords had almost complete control (responsibility) over their serfs

In southeastern Europe dominated by the Ottoman Empire, peasants had free status, however, in practice they were dependent on their lords

An estate’s owner was often an absentee landlord, so the property was managed by an overseer

During the 17th and 18th centuries these estates were run as commercial operations specializing in cash crops

The scarcity of labor allowed the peasants a certain level of independence as they could migrate to other estates that offered better conditions

However, when political disorder began to spread there in the 17th century, peasants had to turn to their landlords for protection and they became increasingly dependent on the lords for protection, housing, tools, and grain

Serfs were worst off in Russia

Landlords demanded six days a week labor, and had the right to punish serfs as they saw fit

Serfs there had no legal recourse against the demands of the lords and Russian serfdom was hardly discernable from slavery

During the 18th century, the abuse of serfs resulted in many peasant revolts

These revolts were brutally suppressed

However, it wasn’t just Russia that experienced peasant revolts during this time

Similar but smaller uprisings took place in Bohemia, Moravia, Transylvania, and Austria

There were almost no revolts in western Europe, except in England where there were numerous rural riots

The goals of peasant uprisings were conservative

Peasants fought to defend traditional customs against practices they considered as innovations

Unfair pricing

Increased feudal dues

Changes in method of payment or land use

Corrupt officials

Landlord or overseer brutality

None of the peasant uprisings advocated a radical restructuring of society to abolish the traditional classes

Family Structures and the Family Economy

In preindustrial Europe, the household was the basic unit of production and consumption

Most farms and shops were operated by family members

Few farms or shops employed small numbers of non-related persons

Occupations are generally traditional and in caste-based societies like feudal Europe, the occupations are associated with caste ranks which are also determined by descent

Different forms of family organization developed in different parts of Europe (depending on tradition?)

In northwestern Europe, the household centered on the nuclear family

Married couple, their children, and their servants

Family households were small

5 to 6 members

High mortality and late marriage meant that three generations seldom shared the same home

Children lived with their parents until their late teens and entered the workforce as servants, laborers, or apprentices

A servant was a person hired to work for a household in exchange for room, board, and wages

Servants were integral parts of households and ate with the family

Being a servant allowed for young people to acquire training in productive skills and to accumulate savings before they set out on their own

The young men and women who left their parents homes did not return to those homes when they got married

They set up independent homes for themselves

This pattern of marriage is called *neolocalism*

Since it took time to amass the resources needed to fund a household people married late

Men after 26

Women after 23

In Eastern Europe families tended to be larger

These households averaged from 9 to 20 members

Young couples moved in with their parents rather than setting off on their own

Men and women generally married before they turned 20

Three or four generations of family members would live together

The structure of society in Eastern Europe contributed to this characteristic family organization

The lords of the feudal estates could help influence the size of these peasant families as they could forbid marriages with people of other estates, and require that widows and widowers marry

Arranged marriages

Unlike in the west, free labor was not encouraged

Of course, one effect of this was that people could not acquire the resources needed to set up independent households like in the west

The households of the east were dependent on the landlords

Single generation households were discouraged

An effect of this type of household was that death or illness in those households meant that assigned land would not be worked or would go out of cultivation

Throughout Europe almost everyone lived in a household

It was practically impossible for ordinary people to support themselves on their own

People living outside of a household were viewed with suspicion

They were considered a disruptive and possibly criminal element in society (non-social)

Others, such as beggars were considered as drains on community resources

Everyone in the household worked

The frequency of poor harvests and economic slumps prevented most households from accumulating a surplus

The income families produced was to support the household, not to profit individuals

Since few families in western Europe had farms large enough to sustain themselves, members of the family worked elsewhere and sent wages home

To generate additional income, fathers sometimes became migrant workers and left the farm work to the family members left behind

In the towns, the father of the household was usually the chief craftsman

The family might hire servants, but the children were expected to work as well

The oldest child was usually trained in the craft

The wife often sold the wares or opened a small shop on her own

Wives of merchants might run their husband’s business, especially when their husbands were traveling

Of course, when business was poor family members would look for outside employment to support the household

In western Europe the death of a father would create economic hardship

Sometimes a widow or children could take over a farm or a business, but oftentimes widows remarried as soon as possible

High mortality meant that many households were mixes of spouses and children who had survived the breakup of earlier families

Half-brothers and sisters, stepbrothers and sisters could extend kinship connections and lead to communities becoming interconnected

Oftentimes households simply dissolved due to the mortality of a key provider

Widows who could not remarry or provide for themselves became dependent on charity or relatives

Their children entered the workforce at an early age or resorted to crime and begging

Because of the nature of families in Eastern Europe, they provided greater security

There were far fewer artisan and merchant households there and the traditional structure of rural communities of serfs associated with multigenerational families provided a broad base of support for family members

The economic effects of marriage were important for women

Except for aristocrats, few women could support themselves

Girls would begin with the household work by the age of seven if not before

Women helped generally maintain their parents’ household until they either had the skills to become profitable elsewhere or became married and started a family with their husband

Generally, a young woman’s goal was to accumulate sufficient resources for a dowery, and it could take up to ten years to acquire sufficient resources for a dowery

Doweries assisted women and their families in the competition for spouses

Once women established a household with their husbands, a chief concern was ensuring an adequate food supply for the family

People would regulate the sizes of their family through various practices, and women could get back to work shortly after the birth of children through the employment of wet-nurses

Women’s work was in many ways a function of her husband’s occupation and women had to oftentimes assume the primary responsibility for the husband’s work when he had to find outside employment to supplement household income

An artisan’s wife would actively participate in her husband’s trade or enterprise

If the husband died, she might take over the business or hire another artisan to work under her management

The Revolution in Agriculture

The chief concern in peasant society was the maintenance of stable conditions that would ensure the food supply

Even a small increase in the price of food could exert great pressure on a peasant family

Farmers, being tradition, resist change

Traditional methods of cultivation were proven to work over time

New methods were untested and entailed risks that few were prepared to take because it could lead to disaster if it failed

By the 18th century the European population had grown to the point that it put pressure on the food supply, causing a rise in the cost of basic staples like bread

Inflation that had begun to swell in the 16th century and persisted into the 18th century put serious pressure on consumers such as rural peasants and urban laborers

However, as grain prices increased landlords became motivated to disrupt traditional cultivation methods in favor of experimenting with techniques to improve production

Peasants oftentimes resisted these changes and rebelled violently against them

Disruption of traditional way of life

Revolution from above

Whenever peasants rebelled, tax hungry governments and the landed aristocracy called out armies to put down these rebellions in the name of novel practices and progress

In the Netherlands, a growing population, and a shortage of land suitable for cultivation encouraged a search for ways to improve cultivation

In the 16th and 17th centuries Dutch farmers improved methods for building dikes and draining land and experimented with new crops that would increase the supply for livestock feed and restore the soil

In the 18th century in England, landlords copied the methods of the Dutch and innovated several new methods of their own

They began using iron plows and drilling grain into the ground as opposed to broadcasting

They developed fertilizers to make sandy soil productive

They innovated a crop rotating system where certain crops invested the soil with certain nutrients that other crops needed to be productive

This was an innovation from the practice of resting a plot of land so it would recover naturally from nutrient depletion

By planting crops producing animal fodder farmers enabled livestock to be raised through the winter and ensured a year-round supply of meat

Larger herds also mean greater amounts of manure that could be utilized as fertilizer for grain production

Of course, these innovations were incompatible with the traditional practices of agriculture

The traditional practices were aimed at creating a steady supply of food to be consumed locally on the rural estates, and generally not to produce large surpluses

By the middle of the 18th century in England, the rising price of grain encourage landlords to consolidate or enclose their lands to use the new and more efficient means of cultivation

Enclosure meant fencing off common lands that peasants traditionally had access to for their own production to support themselves

These developments created turmoil and resistance among the traditional peasants

Ultimately, the English landlords had to get Parliament to pass legislation to legalize the enclosure of estate lands that had been long leased to peasant families for their own usage

The enclosures permitted the expansion of farming, increased production, and encouraged innovation

However, it disrupted traditional communities and forced some people off the land

The enclosure movement demonstrated a new attitude and approach to agriculture influenced by market economics

This development set the stage for the commercialization of agriculture that would begin to spread across Europe in the 19th century

Of course, these developments would strain the traditional paternal relationships between the aristocracy, the government, and the lower ranks or the peasants

A less traditional system was emerging

The agricultural revolution had little impact in eastern Europe

The traditional relationship between the serfs and their landlords in Prussia, Austria, Poland, and Russia did not encourage innovation

The landlords sought to increase productivity by squeezing more labor from their serfs, and not by increasing productivity from their soil

Production was increased by bringing more land under cultivation

The only changes in agriculture there was the introduction of corn and potatoes from the Americas

These innovations in agriculture from the 16th to the 18th centuries contributed

to significant population growth in Europe

The expansion of grain production and the introduction of the potato from South America especially allowed for increased nutrition and thus lower mortality

A single acre of land could produce enough potatoes to feed a peasant family for a year

More food meant lower infant mortality and the expansion of the population

The expansion in population meant increased demand for other goods, labor, and services

The population growth provided a larger population for workers, and it forced traditional ways of life to be revised

Population growth also encourage migration and political and social discontent

The European world was becoming less traditional based on the traditions of the Middle Ages

These economic developments in association with the consolidation of central governments, the Protestant Reformation, and the emergence of industrialism in the 18th century contributed greatly to the transformation of Western Civilization and the modern world