

'The Group and the Individual in History', Alan Macfarlane

[From: *Space, Hierarchy and Society: Interdisciplinary Studies in Social Area Analysis*, eds. Barry C. Burnham and John Kingsbury, BAR International Series 59 (1979)]

p.17

#### ABSTRACT

Social scientists have suggested two contrasted models of human societies, those based on the 'group' and those on the 'individual'. Peasant and tribal societies are examples of the former, Hunter-Gatherers and modern post-industrial societies of the latter. In the former, the important boundaries are between large units—clans, castes, villages etc. In the latter, the boundaries are between the individual self and the outside world. The major theories of sociology suggest a change from group to individual (De Tocqueville, Riesman). The change is expressed and caused by many other changes: from status to contract (Maine), from community to Society (Tönnies), from peasant/feudal to capitalist (Marx, Weber), from hierarchy to equality (Dumont). In many of these theories the turning point has been either the industrial /urban revolution of the C18-19, or the earlier Protestant/Capitalist revolution of the C16-C17. But all the theories see societies moving along an evolutionary trail from a. to b. This paper will consider the proposition that this is an oversimplification and that while some societies move in this way, others remain predominantly of the 'group' or 'individual' based kind for all of recorded time. Since England has, above all, been taken as an example of the transition from group to individual in the writings of Maine, Marx, Weber, Tönnies, De Tocqueville and others, the paper will provide a very brief examination of the history of England from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries. It will suggest that there has been no such transition and that England has remained essentially individualistic in its social structure as manifested in economics and kinship through the Black Death, Civil War and Industrial Revolution. Consequently the boundaries between the individual and other individuals has been overemphasized and there has been a singular absence of any permanent groupings based on social or geographic criteria. This has implications for the explanation of the origins of Protestantism, Industrialisation, Colonialism etc.

At a very general level indeed we may distinguish between two major types of social/economic/political /religious structure. That is between those societies where the group, a wider set of individuals recruited on kinship or other criteria, dominates the individual,, and those where the individual stands alone. In the anthropological literature these two extremes are represented by the following instances. The major class of societies where the group

p.18

dominates the individual are those termed 'tribal'. Often these are corporate, property-owning groups defined in terms of kinship, for example those described by Africanists. The 'group is the tribe or lineage. Another class is peasant societies. Here the individual is part of a State system, but largely subordinated to a domestic group, which acts as a production, consumption and ownership unit. The individual also belongs to a territorial group, a village community. The obvious examples are traditional India and China, though there are many others.

The second major type is where the individual is largely autonomous and 'free'; the society is composed of loose atoms, much as in Hobbes' vision of the original state of nature, but later, through the social contract, individuals

come to accept certain limitations imposed on them by the 'State' or society. The two major examples of this are, strangely, at the two poles of human societies: certain Hunting-Gathering bands in Africa, (Hadza, Mbuti, Ik) are one example; the industrial democracies of the West are the other. In this situation the rights of the individual are stressed.

People are not content merely to elaborate these as ends of a continuum in space; the history of mankind is often written as a movement in time from group to individual. This is perceived by the major thinkers in many different ways but they are unanimous in seeing an evolution particularly in western civilization, from group to individual based systems. We need only to remember a few of the most famous formulations. Alexis De Tocqueville in both *Democracy in America* and *Ancien Regime* argued that the fluid social structure based on individual rights and the collapse of hierarchy and caste was a new phenomenon in western Europe, occurring at some time between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in England and spreading through the world from there. Sir Henry Maine in his many works saw the gradual progression of all human societies from communal, tribal units based on impersonal 'contract', "Ancient Law ... knows next to nothing of Individuals. It is concerned not with Individuals, but with Families, not with single human beings, but groups".(1) Karl Marx massively documented in *Capital* and elsewhere the transition in western Europe from a feudal/peasant civilization, in which the individual lived embedded in a local community, where resources were communally owned by the household, where private property had not developed and individuals had not been 'set free' from the land, to the modern capitalistic system where each man was alone, a free-floating atom subject to the pressures of the market. The transition, he argued, occurred in the later fifteenth century and early sixteenth century. (2) Max Weber accepted much the same chronology and description as Marx, but investigated more closely the religious and intellectual roots of acquisitive individualism, particularly in ascetic protestantism. F.Tönnies in his famous work on *Community and Society* described the change from a civilisation based on 'Community', that is bonds of Blood (kinship), of Place (neighbourhood) of Mind (friendship) to the modern 'Society' where individuals were set loose and only linked in associations connected in the market by money and contracts. This occurred from the seventeenth century onwards. Marc Bloch in his studies of rural France and the feudal system argued that, earliest in England, the individual gradually separated himself from larger kin groupings and communal ties; "Early societies were made up of groups rather than individuals. A man on his own counted

p.19

for very little".(3) He agreed with the Marx/Weber chronology; the main change occurred with the introduction of private property in land which developed in England in the sixteenth century.

Although there have been minor dissenters, the sequence appears so self-evident and the weight of such names and the documentation so great that the case appears to be established. The main questions to answer are those which all subsequent writers have asked: why the breakdown of groups, why the rise of individualism, why did this happen first in England, and why did it happen in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries? Thus, whether we examine the work of modern anthropologists who have considered the history of western societies, for example Louis Dumont in *Homo Hierarchicus*, or the work of sociologists, for instance David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*, or of social historians, for instance the work of R. H. Tawney and his followers in the early modern period, or of political theorists such as J. G. A. Pocock or C. B. Macpherson in their work on the origins of modern political and economic individualism, we find them all based on the same deep and often unexamined model of a change from collective, group, communal, kinship dominated, peasant society, to

individualised, private, economic dominated, industrial society, with the key transition in the sixteenth century. This model affects the views of archaeologists and pre-historians and all those who work on a period before 1600, as well as those who work in contemporary non-industrial societies.

The classic case is England, classic because it is the best documented mediaeval society, and because it was taken as the central example of the transition (since it was the first) by most of the great thinkers whom we have mentioned. Let us therefore examine the evidence concerning England very briefly. We may isolate three central indices, 'mirrors' of the supposed change from one system to another. These are property in land, the degree of the use of money, wage labour and the use of non-family labour. It is not unfair to all those thinkers to whom we have referred, with the exception of Maine, to summarize their position as follows. Private property in land was absent before the fifteenth century. In the peasant/feudal/mediaeval period in England, the property-owning unit was not the individual but the family and, furthermore, the Church and the Lords had rights in land. Land could not be conceived of as in the hands of an individual owner, to be bought and sold as a commodity. Many people, including the village community, had rights in land, the 'bundle of rights' had not been brought together into a single person's hands. Thus there was no land market, parents could not disinherit their children, the family stayed on the same plot for generation after generation, keeping 'the name on the land'.

The widespread use of cash and the presence of an integrated market was again absent before the fifteenth century; England was a 'natural' or subsistence economy. Where rent payments were made they were not in kind. People consumed most of what they produced and produced most of what they consumed. Thus there was little circulation of commodities, little buying and selling. The rise of a money economy would destroy this situation; the only pockets of marketing and cash were the towns. The countryside was a rural, non-monetized civilization similar to the large agrarian civilizations of traditional Asia.

p.20

Almost all labour was family labour; there were very few landless labourers before the late fifteenth century. Those who did work for cash only did so occasionally, in order to supplement their major income from the land. The expropriation of the 'peasants' laid the foundations for the individualistic capitalistic system. Again it occurred in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The small peasant proprietors were ousted and became the work-force for the later factories.

Although this is a highly compressed picture, it contains the core of the general theories. On top of these features were many others; for example, since land was owned by the family, since there was little mobility of labour, since there were few occupations other than agricultural ones, community boundaries were strong. Villages tended to be filled with kin. The group of the family and the kin, the village community, all these dominated the individual. Ritual and religion confirmed and reflected this group-based world. All this was to change in the sixteenth century and onwards. Before we accept this whole model, let us look a little more closely at the evidence.

During the last fourteen years I have been engaged on a very detailed investigation of two parishes in the past. Using computer as well as hand indexing systems, my colleagues, Charles Jardine, Sarah Harrison, Tim King and Jessica Styles and I have been piecing together the economic and social history of the parish of Earls Colne in Essex and Kirkby Lonsdale in Westmorland between 1500 and 1750. The research suggests that the general model which has been used to describe what happened in England during the period 1200-1750 is probably incorrect. In conjunction with a number of detailed monographs which

have only appeared in the last twelve years - as well as other work on sixteenth century social structure and demography by Peter Laslett and Tony Wrigley, it looks as if we will have to revise our picture of the supposed transition from one system to another. Let me end by briefly indicating why this is so.

A re-examination of mediaeval English Common Law suggests that from at least the time of Bracton in the middle of the thirteenth century, English freehold tenure, which covered perhaps a third of the country, was a form of absolute, individual, property. There was no wider group than the individual, except in the case of entailed property (and entails could fairly easily be broken in any case). People could buy and sell land as individuals, and the large land market shows that it was treated as such. Another third of the land, the lord's demesne, was also his own. The last third, where one would expect to find communal as opposed to individual rights, was the customary, later 'copyhold', land. Many mediaevalists, including G. C. Homans in his work in the *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* argue that such land belonged to the family, and not to the individual. A re-examination of mediaeval court transfers and legal texts suggest that this was not so. It appears that a landholder, male or female, though holding of the lord, had strong, fully alienable, right in the land. During his or her life, he or she could sell the land and there was nothing an heir could do about it. In other words, the tenurial revolution which historians believe happened in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries and ushered in modern capitalism, never took place. The destruction of the 'feudal system' in relation to land law is largely a myth, - a fact which contemporaries such as the great Common Lawyer Sir Edward Coke realised.(6)

p.21

In relation to cash and markets, it has been known for some time that the idea of a 'natural economy' in mediaeval England is largely a myth. Kosminsky and later Postan have shown that from at least the twelfth century a large proportion of the rents in kind were commuted to money. An examination of account rolls and manorial rolls shows that cash played a very large part in the economy. At the village level there was widespread buying and selling, borrowing and lending; all property was marketable and had a price well before the Black Death. Again, this was the case two centuries earlier than should have been the case.

Turning to the question of labour, detailed studies are confirming Kosminsky's early findings that servants and wage-labourers were not merely a marginal category in the thirteenth century. Postan's work on estate labourers, the famuli, as well as recent analyses of the later fourteenth century Poll Tax suggest that the hiring of labour for cash was widespread, non family servants were common. It looks as if by the later fourteenth century, in many parts of England, over half the adult male population were servants or labourers. It is arguable that there was as much wage labour for cash in 1300 as there was in 1600.

Recent studies have also indicated that there was very considerable geographical mobility; that the idea of the closed medieval community is largely a myth. Furthermore, it is clear that families moved and died out, so that villages were not filled with kin groups. Any analogies we might be tempted to draw with peasant societies elsewhere need to be viewed with considerable scepticism.

The 'classic' case turns out to be doubtful; many of our deepest and basic premises concerning the transition from group to individual need to be re-examined. Perhaps I may end my warning against the 'idol of the mind' which tends to make us think of a general and universal evolution from one type to another by repeating the words of the great mediaeval historian, F. W. Maitland:

"To suppose that the family law of every nation must needs traverse the same route, this is an unwarrantable hypothesis. To construct some fated scheme of successive stages which shall comprise every arrangement that may yet be discovered among backward peoples, this is a hopeless task." (7)

Some societies do move from group to individual, others, no doubt move from individual to group. England from the thirteenth century onwards, it is argued, moved from individual to individual.

#### NOTES

1. Sir H. S. Maine, *Ancient Law* (13th edn., London, 1890), p. 258.

2. There is a full discussion of the views of Marx, Weber and other authorities cited in the next few paragraphs, with detailed bibliographic references, in Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford, 1978), ch. 2.

3. Marc Bloch, *French Rural History* (London, 1966), trans. J. Sondheimer, p. 150.

p.22

4. A preliminary description of the material and the method is in Alan Macfarlane, Sarah Harrison and Charles Jardine, *Reconstructing Historical Communities* (Cambridge, 1977).

5. The recent work by Laslett, Wrigley and others is summarized Macfarlane, *English Individualism*, ch. 3.

6. The detailed material to support this and the following paragraphs is contained in Macfarlane, *English Individualism*, chs. 4, 5, 6.

7. Sir F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1968), ii, p. 255.