

Is the Condition of the Modern Farmer and Industrial
Laborer Preferable to that of the Mediaeval Serf
and Craftsman ?

Alumni Prize Essay

by

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I once heard a man endeavouring to convince a friend of the superior generalship of Hannibal as compared to that of Marshal Foch. Such a comparison seemed indeed a difficult task. Here were two men centuries apart, one with his war elephants and catapults, the other with his tanks and artillery. Hannibal was an opportunist, overcoming difficulties as they arose; Foch was a strategist, preparing for difficulties before they arose. Both, however, had in common almost insurmountable obstacles confronting them. You can readily see how difficult it is to make such a comparison. But, although difficult, it is not impossible.

In contrasting conditions of the mediaeval serf and craftsmen with those of our modern farmer and industrial laborer, we are faced with much the same task. Yet, if we go about this in a logical manner we are bound to reach some conclusions concerning the status of these groups centuries apart. And certainly these groups have, as had the generals, great difficulties in common.

First of all we shall contrast the average farmer with the serf. Next we shall deal with the modern industrial laborer as contrasted with the craftsman of the Middle Ages. The merits of their conditions must be judged from economic, social, religious, and political points of view. Thus it will be necessary to understand, at least in part, their labor and its return, their wants, their standard of living, their political position, and, most important to us as Catholics, their religious conditions. Only after these essentials have been carefully considered can we even attempt to judge their respective status.

Bearing these in mind let us inquire into the conditions of the serf. It is true that the serf was bound to the land and had to live in a rude hut. His food was rather rough fare with very little variety. He held about 30 acres of the lord's land which he worked for himself. Besides this he was obliged to work on the lord's land two or three days a week with the rudest of implements. Then at harvest time

he had to perform perhaps three weeks' boon labor reaping the master's harvest. He used the lord's oven and brewery, and rendered military service in time of need. Life was lived according to a definite plan. A serf either remained in the class into which he was born, or joined the Church. The result was a stable social order paralleled by an equally stable religious one. All were Catholics, living in a society which had not yet lost direct contact with its Christian roots.

The lot of this class of men may seem a hard one to us, but we must consider the times in which they lived. Their economic wants were few; they never looked for political rights. Their main needs were protection from invasion, and, since they were entirely dependent upon agriculture, from crop failure. The fact that he was tied to the soil was, in the static society of the Middle Ages, an advantage rather than a disadvantage. His position, although low, was secure. The very size of the lord's establishment insured, except in years of widespread famine, protection from scarcity of food.

We have had a brief glimpse of the life of the serf. Our consideration of the position of the farmer of today can be more easily understood since we are all familiar with him and his problems. Perhaps the first thing we think of by way of comparison is that today's agricultural man can produce about ten times as much as the serf with the same expenditure of labor. Today the binder and the thresher can do the work of hundreds of sickles and flails; the potato planter and digger displace hundreds of hoes. But is this an advantage when the farmer often does not receive enough to pay him for his labor let alone for his investment? Staggering under a burden of debt, is he not shackled more securely to the soil than was his counterpart of the mediaeval period? Think too of the amount of unemployment in the agricultural communities of today. There is so little return for agricultural labor that many of those born on the soil are driven to industrial centres to face difficulties which we shall consider presently.

In contrast to the serf, today's farmer has a myriad of economic wants. His standard of living has risen and with it have come countless desires that never troubled his forebears. Examples of this are the radio, the automobile, more expensive clothes, machinery, and protective organizations with their attendant expenses. Nevertheless, although the plentitude of wants facing the present day tiller

of the soil are to be classed as disadvantages, we must not forget the benefits to which he has access, not, however, as a modern farmer, but as a member of this civilization. These are such advantages as modern medical science with its more scientific diets and sanitation, and consequent longer span of life.

If we bear in mind this meager sketch of the positions of these two groups we may come to a conclusion about their relative merits. First, however, we must forget, if such a thing is possible, that we belong to a certain age. We must not look at the problems as citizens of the twentieth century, biased by all its scientific labour-saving developments. Very few of us would care to exchange our lot, with all its worries, for the drab one of the mediaeval serf. On the other hand it must be remembered that the serf knew nothing of all these advances, and so, had no desire for them. If, in such a way, a really unprejudiced view is taken, we can easily see that, economically and socially, the serf was in a better position than the farmer. His wants were few and, for the most part, satisfied, whereas those of the present-day farmer are many, and, for the most part, never realized. Thus the serf derived the greater mental satisfaction. Although social advantages are hard to measure, we can say that the uniformity of land holdings and the manner of their cultivation insured an integration of social life that is quite foreign to rural districts of today.

In judging the two classes from a religious point of view we are again aided by history. It was already mentioned that the stable mediaeval society made for religious stability also. It was only with the breakdown of this self-sufficient manorial economy, in which the serf played an important part, that the Faith was endangered by religious speculation; which speculation seems to become even more dangerous as civilization advances. This condition eloquently attests the fact that the religious status of the serf was preferable to that of the farmer of today.

When we come to compare political advantages the modern agriculturalist has by far the most political rights. Even so, it is debatable whether or not the acquisition of these rights has contributed any more toward his peace of mind than the lack of them did to the serf. However we shall grant that, politically, the farmer of today is better off. But if we are to remain unbiased by modern developments we cannot deny that from an economic, religious, and social

point of view, the position of the serf is preferable to that of the farmer.

We shall now turn to the position of the mediaeval craftsman. Perhaps it would be best to distinguish first between the purposes of the craft unions of mediaeval times and the labor unions of today. The craft union protected not only the laborer but the consumer. The workman received a just return from the consumer — no more. In those days when local monopolies were easily established, owing to the lack of transportation, this was an important factor. The sole purpose of the modern labor union is to protect the worker from the exploitation of the capitalist. Since our present-day system of capitalism was unknown in the craftsman's time, there was no need for this protection. Goods were sold direct from the producer to the consumer.

The craftsman was protected against contingencies beyond his control by insurance much the same as that of our fraternal organizations of today. Quite unlike our modern association, however, the craft guilds extended this protection to all members of a compulsory organization, in short, to all craftsmen. Moreover, although more had access to these benefits in the Middle Ages, fewer needed them because the Christian basis of mediaeval society made for a greater feeling of responsibility of neighbor to neighbor than exists today.

The craft guild admirably provided an ideal form for the expression of the mediaeval laborer's tendencies in the way of social organization. Here he found men who did what he did, thought as he thought, and were on practically the same economic level. The mediaeval craftsman was franker in acknowledging the fact that occupation plays a large part in determining social habits. Thus the mystery plays gave artistic and imaginative expression to the life of a group established on so common-place a ground as similarity of occupation. In the same way the guild furthered the religious life of the craftsman.

Since the economy of large scale production had not yet been heard of, the guild had a most important purpose. It was an association of small enterprises, each carrying on its own trade. The market was small and local; little capital was needed. The craftsmen's products received the indelible stamp of his personality as can readily be seen from those examples handed down to us. He possessed

that rugged individualism that the modern industrial man has largely lost.

With regard to political advantages the craftsman was not much better off than the serf, but, as with the serf, this presented no problem. He had never had them and did not look for them. His guild activities did, however, pave the way for the future granting of town charters and consequent improvement in his political status.

Now we may consider the modern industrial worker. Economically, he is certainly not in as advantageous a position as was the craftsman. Our unemployment figures show this. He has to run the risk incident to all specialization, the risk that the market for his services may be swept away by some industrial change beyond his control. Socially his position is still further eclipsed by that of the craftsman, for the modern system of production has a narrowing and deadening effect on the laborer. He is subordinated to the impersonal pace of the machine. Initiative and versatility are destroyed, qualities which are badly needed for leadership. The system deprives the laborer of the real joy that comes from the gratification of the creative instinct. The modern laborer's religious life is on a lower plane than that of the craftsman because the very coldness and humdrum of the machine ages seeps into his personality and leaves there a callousness that makes for apathy in religious matters.

If we consider these facts, and, as has already been mentioned, preserve a view unprejudiced by modern development, we cannot deny that from an economic, social, and religious point of view the condition of the mediaeval serf and craftsman was preferable to that of the present-day farmer and industrial laborer.



My End

G. Mallett, '44

If I may toil the land — and sweat,
If I may clasp one hand — and set
My head above the mire and rain,
I shall not live in vain . . .