

Revised: 13 August 2013

ECONOMICS 301Y1:

**The Economic History of Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe  
(European Economic History, 1250 - 1750)**

**THE MASTER LIST OF “A” AND “B” LIST ESSAY TOPICS:  
for 2013 - 2014**

The following is the “Master List” of all the “A” and “B” List essay topics for this course, for the entire year with some notes explaining their importance (and relevance to both economics and history). Unlike the lecture topics, which are organized in a thematic fashion, these essay/reading topics are presented in roughly chronological order, to give you another overview of the course, progressing from ‘beginning’ to the ‘end.’ By reading through these topics you will gain a good idea of the important questions to be raised in this course, and of the major debates currently concerning economic historians (and economists) in this field. (Note, however, that some of these topics -- nos. 19, 21, 23, and 24 -- are also given in Eco 303Y1, covering the zone where the two courses necessarily overlap, i.e. around 1700-1750. Obviously an essay based on any one these topics may not be submitted to *both* courses.)

Please note carefully that these are very general debate topics and should not to be taken as ideal essay topics, because they are much too broad. You are advised instead to select a much narrower aspect of the ‘debate’ topic -- i.e. a sub-topic -- so chosen from this list, after consulting the bibliographies available for each topic. For each term I will select five of these topics (i.e. 10 in total for the year), and give the class a one-page bibliography, with some major questions; but you are free to select any of the other topics on this list, so long as they are relevant to the course material for that term. Much more complete bibliographies will be posted on my Home Page: <http://economics.utoronto.ca/munro5/>

You are in effect requested to write an essay in the form of a journal article, not a full length book! It is thus up to you to frame the exact essay topic; but if that task does not appeal to you, you may instead select one of the alternative and pre-defined topics on the supplementary list of essay topics (for which, however, no bibliographies will be provided).

**A. PRIMARY TOPICS:**

**1. The Great Famine, the Black Death and the Late-Medieval Demographic Crises**

Why did late-medieval Europe lose so much of its population -- perhaps a loss of 40 per cent or more? When and how did the European population decline begin: before, during, or after the Black Death of 1347-48? Did prior economic expansion, during the 13th century, inevitably produce a ‘Malthusian’ crisis that inevitably led to economic and then demographic crises and decline, in particular manifesting itself in the ‘Great Famine’ of 1315-22? Or did the Black Death occur independently of any such economic crises? What caused the Black Death? How did it spread so far and so rapidly? What were its immediate and long term consequences: economic, social, and cultural? Were these demographic crises unique to Europe or were they found elsewhere during this era?

**2. The Problem of Serfdom in European Economic Development, I: The Decline of Serfdom in Western Europe, ca. 1300 - ca. 1500**

What was 'serfdom' in late-medieval western Europe, and how was this economic and social institution related to 'feudalism' and 'manorialism'? Was it a form of slavery; and was it a serious impediment to European economic development? How did the institution of serfdom vary by time and place (region) in late medieval western Europe? How and why did this institution begin to decline, decay, and finally wither away in western Europe during the late-medieval and early-modern eras? To what extent was the decline of serfdom in western Europe related to the demographic and economic crises of the late Middle Ages -- to the so-called 'Great Depression' in particular? What were the economic and social consequences of the decline of serfdom in western Europe?

How important was personal freedom, labour mobility, and unfettered labour markets for European economic development and industrialization? In more concrete terms: how important were **property rights** over both labour and land? Initially, from an earlier medieval era, that question really pertained to the property rights of a land-holding feudal **aristocracy**, military and ecclesiastical, possessing or controlling both land and the servile labour tied to that land. When did the peasantry working these feudal lands gain their own individual property rights, to possess or control their own lands, and freely to dispose of their own labour? When did labour become a 'free commodity,' free to leave the land, and subject only to the laws of supply and demand in factor markets? That question of individual liberty involved the liberation of individual landholding and labour not only from the constraints imposed by superior feudal lords, but also from the even more powerful **communal** constraints of manorial village society, especially under 'open field' farming systems: i.e. a struggle between individual and collective rights.

### 3. **The Problem of Serfdom in European Economic Development, II: The Spread of Serfdom in Eastern Europe, ca. 1400 - ca. 1700**

Why did serfdom either begin to spread or to become intensified in many parts of eastern Europe -- from Prussia to Russia -- during the late-medieval and early-modern eras, and evidently during the very same time that serfdom was declining in the West? Is it possible that the economics of demographic decline, following the Black Death, could lead to the intensification of serfdom in the East while undermining serfdom in the West? Or did the spreading stain of serfdom in the East really occur long after the demographic decline, and instead during the demographic expansion of the 16th century? Or both? Is there in fact any common pattern and any common explanation for the spread of serfdom into eastern Europe during the late-medieval and early-modern eras? What are the other economic, social, and political explanations for its spread? What were the consequences of the spread of serfdom into eastern Europe: economic, social, and political? Why did serfdom remain such a strong barrier to economic development in eastern Europe, even as late as the 19th century?

This topic and the previous one constitute an examination of the different ways by which serfdom, as a bondage imposed on some of the peasantry in feudal-manorial societies, restricted agricultural output, labour mobility, market expansion, and economic development, in different regions of Europe, at different periods, from the late-Middle Ages to the late 19th century. It offers a panorama of European socio-economic history, contrasting Western and Eastern Europe over these five centuries, in posing the following questions:

- (1) What roles did demographic (population) and commercial (market) forces play in the decline of serfdom in the West and its subsequent spread in the East (discussed in the next topic)? Why did apparently similar demographic and market forces have different consequences for serfdom in different parts of Europe?
- (2) How have various historians used similar market and/or demographic models to explain contrary changes involving serfdom?
- (3) How must these economic models be supplemented by institutional models involving relationships of social, political, and military power amongst social classes, particularly

within the structure of feudal society and feudal landownership?

Many of these questions were recently posed by the American Marxist economic historian Robert Brenner, in 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe,' *Past & Present*, no. 70 (Feb. 1976), a seminal article that has sparked a separate debate amongst orthodox and neo-Marxists, and between neo-Marxists and traditional historians (the Brenner Debate).

**4. Feudal Governments, Warfare, Taxation, and Economic Crisis in Late-Medieval Europe, c. 1250 - 1500.**

Why did Western Europe, after having enjoyed a long era of relative peace, from ca. 1215 to ca. 1290, then suffer such prolonged, widespread, and devastating warfare over the next two centuries? What impact did such warfare -- and more especially government fiscal, monetary, and commercial policies related to warfare -- have upon the regional economies of Europe and the Mediterranean basin? Examine this question in relation to the four sectors of the economy: agriculture, industry, international commerce, banking and finance. In particular, did such warfare shift the patterns of long-distance commerce from largely continental overland routes to maritime routes? Which European regions gained the most from late-medieval warfare, and which ones lost the most? Which sectors of society gained and which ones lost? Was such warfare the primary or secondary cause of the so-called 'Great Depression' of the late Middle Ages? [See the following topic]

**5. The 'Great Depression' of the Late Middle Ages: Economic Slump or Economic Growth?**

Did late-medieval Europe experience a prolonged economic slump or a series of economic crises -- a crisis that would justify the term 'Great Depression'? If there was an economic slump, how was it related to the demographic crises of late-medieval Europe, as a cause or consequence? Did such an economic slump or contraction precede, coincide with, or follow the demographic contractions? Did demographic contraction necessarily mean economic contraction; and did an economic contraction mean a 'depression'? Were there other possible causes, primary or secondary, that may have contributed to an economic slump or contraction in late-medieval Europe: in particular warfare and related political events? Was there a monetary aspect to the so-called 'Great Depression'? If not, why did so much of late-medieval Europe experience deflation (as well as periodic inflation)? If there was an economic contraction, slump, or 'depression,' what were the consequences: economic, social, and cultural? Did a smaller Europe become richer or poorer? Did living standards rise or fall -- and if so, for what economic/social groupings and classes: i.e. who gained and who lost from the macro-economic changes? What regions of Europe collectively gained the most and which ones lost the most from these structural changes?

**6. Monetary Problems and 'Economic Conjuncture' in Late-Medieval Europe, ca. 1290 - ca. 1520: the nature of price changes; and the interrelationships among demographic, agrarian, and monetary changes in the European economy.**

Why did western Europe experience cycles of inflation and deflation from late 13th to early 16th centuries -- to the eve of the later and better known 'Price Revolution' (topic 13)? What were the causes of these price movements: 'real' or monetary forces? Why must any such analysis carefully distinguish between changes in relative prices and changes in the price level? What role did demographic and agrarian changes play in these price changes? What role did changes in the money supply and its composition play in these cycles of inflation and deflation? What was coinage debasement and what role did it play, along with state finances and warfare, in the periodic cycles of inflation? Did late-medieval Europe experience one or more 'bullion famines' and were they a major cause of the cycles of deflation? If so, why should Europe have suffered periodic scarcities of precious metals, after having enjoyed a seeming 'surplus' of metals, or of coined money? What

role did credit play in European money supplies and in these cycles of inflation and deflation? What were the economic and social consequences of these price movements: of cycles of inflation and deflation? Particularly in terms of wages, rents, and interest payments? Did monetary forces play a significant role, primary or secondary, in the so-called 'Great Depression' of the late Middle Ages?

## 7. **The Church, the Usury Question, and Late-Medieval Banking**

Why did the Church, as part of feudal society, concern itself with the economy in medieval society; and what were its economic attitudes and doctrines, concerning labour, business enterprise, prices, profits, and interest? How did these doctrines evolve by the late Middle Ages? In particular what was the usury doctrine (concerning interest on loan contracts) and how widely was it respected by secular society in later-medieval Europe? What impact did it have upon late-medieval commerce, finance, and banking -- upon capital investments and capital formation in particular? How did it govern the conduct of late-medieval commerce and banking; and how did late-medieval European banking and financial institutions seek to accommodate, evade or circumvent the usury doctrine?

In particular, how did the Bill of Exchange evolve as a mechanism for investing capital without violating the usury ban? Why was the Italian bill of exchange the most important financial innovation in late-medieval and early-modern Europe? Why did the Italians dominate bills-of-exchange banking, and late-medieval banking and finance in general? In what other respects did the medieval usury doctrine influence the development and evolution of other financial instruments -- especially in public finance (e.g., the *rente* or annuity contract).

Finally, how did the Church, the usury doctrine, and related secular legislation (by feudal, national, and civic governments) affect or influence the role of the Jews in medieval and early-modern European society? What role did the Jews play in medieval banking (lending) and finance? To what extent did the evolution of the usury doctrine and related legislation, in canon and civil law, foment or promote anti-Semitism in European society?

## 8. **The Dynamics of Change in Late-Medieval Industry, ca. 1250 - ca. 1460: Textile Manufacturing in Western Europe (Italy, the Low Countries, France, and England)**

Why were the wool-based textile industries (woollens, worsteds, and mixed fabrics) the most important manufacturing industries in late-medieval Europe, particularly in supplying the leading manufactured commodities for long-distance trade? What impact did textile manufacturing have -- in terms of backward and forward linkages -- upon the agricultural, commercial, and financial sectors of the economy? What factors determined whether textile manufacturing would have a rural or urban location? Why did urban industries become organized by merchant and craft guilds; and why were they almost exclusively male? What role did females play in textile manufacturing -- and did they account for the majority of workers producing these textiles? What role did town governments play in the textile industries and trades? Did textile manufacturers, in many regions of western Europe, increasingly desert the traditional towns to locate in the countryside during the later Middle Ages? What was the 'putting-out' or 'domestic system' of textile production, and was it predominantly urban or rural?

Why were the Low Countries, especially Flanders and Brabant, the predominant centre of textile manufacturing during the 12th to early 14th centuries: and why did they lose their pre-eminence to Italy and England? How and why did England become the leading manufacturer and exporter of woollen textiles by the late 15th century, at the expense of both the Low Countries and Italy? What structural industrial changes did the Low Countries and Italy undergo in response to the English challenge, especially in switching to both cheaper worsted textiles (the Low Countries) and more expensive silks (Italy)?

What other forms of textile manufacturing and trades developed in late-medieval Europe?

**9. Urban Governments, Guilds, and Gender-Related Occupations in Late-Medieval European Towns, 1200 - 1500: Merchant-guilds, industrial-craft guilds, and the contrasting roles of men and women in West European towns during the later Middle Ages.**

What roles, positive and/or negative, did urban governments play in the West European economy during the later Middle Ages; and to what extent, and why, did they become 'protectionist' during this era? What role did merchant and craft guilds play in urban commerce and industry during the later Middle Ages? Were such guilds more extensive and more powerful at the end of the Middle Ages than they had been during the 12th and 13th centuries? What industries and trades were the most likely to become subject to guild organization and guild controls? To what extent did guild power depend upon support from urban governments, and indeed upon guild participation in urban governments. What specific economic policies did guilds and governments pursue in promoting these industries and trades? Why were guilds almost exclusively male in composition and leadership? What role did females play in the industries subjected to guild organization; and in other crafts and urban occupations? What factors determined who could enter a guild, and who could become a guild master? Did late-medieval west European guilds have the power to set wages or fees and prices, especially in those industries depending upon regional and foreign markets? What economic factors did determine the prices of inputs (labour especially) and outputs? Were guilds a positive or negative force in urban economic development during the later Middle Ages? Why did craft guilds decline in late-medieval or early-modern Europe; and to what extent did state or national governments supersede urban governments and their guilds in determining economic policies? Did the economic status of women improve or deteriorate in West European towns from the later medieval to early-modern eras?

**10. International Trade and The European Economic Recovery, ca. 1450 - 1550: South Germany, Italy, and the Low Countries**

How and did the late-medieval secular economic and demographic decline -- the so-called 'Great Depression' -- finally come to an end in Western Europe; where and how did economic recovery begin? What role did the Central European Mining Boom, South Germany, and the revival of overland continental trade routes between Italy and the Low Countries play in this revival? What role did Venice, its Levantine trade, in particular the spice and cotton trades, play in this revival; and what forged and expanded the economic links between Venice and South German, with its fustian, metalwares, and mining industries? Why did South Germany come to govern the overland trade with the Low Countries, and Antwerp in particular? What factors explain the rise of Antwerp to become the commercial and financial centre of -- the economic hub -- of early modern Europe? What role did South Germany, Antwerp, and Italy (Venice) play in the inauguration of the new age of Overseas Expansion, especially in terms of commercial relations with Portugal and Spain? What role did South Germany, the Central European copper and silver mining boom, and South German merchant financiers play in the processes of overseas expansion, in particular the new commerce with western Africa and South Asia, and then the 'East Indies'? What role did the Low Countries, and in particular Antwerp and Holland play in these economic events? Did demographic recovery precede or follow the economic recovery and expansion of international trade? What factors improved transportation in long-distance trade and lowered transaction costs?

**11. The Inauguration of the Age of Overseas Expansion: Maritime Explorations and the Establishment of the Portuguese and Spanish Overseas Empires, c. 1450 - 1600**

Why did western Europe begin a process of overseas explorations, conquest, colonizations, and economic expansion from about the mid 15th century -- at the very time that the European economy and its population began to experience a 'recovery' or renewed expansion following the late-medieval demographic slumps and 'contraction'? How were these events related in terms of cause and effect -- if it is possible to untangle causes and effects? Why did such peripheral and

economically 'backward' countries as Portugal and Spain, occupying the Iberian peninsula play and the inaugural and leading roles in this new age of maritime exploration, overseas expansion and colonization? What role did innovations in shipbuilding and navigation play in this new age of overseas expansion: were the advances the causes or consequences of the new discoveries? What were the economic strengths and weaknesses of Portugal and Spain in the 15th century? What role did religion, the 'crusade' against the Muslim world (the Reconquista), and military strife play inaugurating this age of overseas expansion? What roles did gold and spices play as lures for overseas expansion? In particular what were both the monetary and commercial consequences of the discoveries of new sources of gold and then of silver from these conquests? What were the initial and long-term economic consequences of the establishment of Portuguese trade with and commercial colonies in Africa, the Americas (Brazil), and Asia? How did Spain and Portugal divide their overseas discoveries and conquests between them? What were the strengths and ultimate weakness of the Portuguese and Spanish overseas empires, and why was Portugal the weaker of the two. Did such economic events constitute the beginnings of European 'imperialism' that led to their economic domination of the world in the modern era?

**12. The Rise and Expansion of The Dutch Commercial Empire: ca. 1360 - ca. 1550**

Why did the northern Netherlands, the former feudal counties of Holland and Zeeland within the larger regional unit known as the 'Low Countries,' expand so successfully during the end of the so-called 'Great Depression' era, not only to displace the German Hanseatic League in dominating the commerce of northern Europe, but ultimately to dominate the commerce, banking, and finance of the early-modern European economy? Why did Amsterdam, in displacing Antwerp and Bruges, become the leading economic centre -- the commercial and financial capital of early modern Europe -- until it, too, was finally displaced by London, during the British Industrial Revolution? Why were the Dutch so successful in dominating the herring fisheries, the Baltic trades, and then the major carrying trades and finance of early modern Europe? Why were they so much more successful than the Portuguese in establishing and maintaining an economic empire in Asia (if not so successful in the Americas), during the 16<sup>th</sup> century?

**13. The Population Problem and the Economic Development of Early-Modern Europe (1500 - 1640): Was there a 'Malthusian Trap'?**

Did population growth in early-modern Europe inhibit or promote economic growth and industrialization? Did the supposedly inevitable 'law of diminishing returns' condemn the European economy to cycles of over-expansion and crisis, both demographic (population) and economic crises, until the technological breakthroughs of the modern Industrial Revolution?

This important, 'vital' topic considers the possible relationships between demographic (population) and economic change in pre-Industrial Revolution Europe: the effect of both population growth and decline upon wages, land rents, agricultural and other commodity prices, upon investments and trade; the effects conversely of economic growth and decline upon marriage patterns, birth rates, death rates, and migration.

Why did Europe, following upon the late-medieval catastrophes of the Black Death, successive plagues, famines, and wars, experience an unprecedented population growth during the 16th and early 17th centuries? Did that population grow so rapidly and to such an extent, by the early 17th century, that it outstripped the economic capacity of Europe to sustain such numbers: did Europe then experience a 'Malthusian crisis' ultimately bringing both population growth and economic growth to a halt? Why did the populations of many parts of Europe stagnate or decline during the 17th and early 18th centuries? What were the demographic foundations for the subsequent Industrial Revolution?

#### 14. **The Era of the European ‘Price Revolution’, ca. 1540-1640: Inflation and Economic Growth**

Did inflation promote or inhibit economic growth and industrialization in early modern Europe? Did European industrial capitalism first arise during this ‘Price Revolution’ era as the result of what is called ‘profit inflation’? Did long-term inflation redistribute national incomes: who gained and who lost from such inflation? Did (real) wages always lag behind inflation? What about rent, interest, and profits -- or what may be better defined as ‘economic rent’?

This topic involves an examination of the causes and consequences of long-term inflation in early-modern Europe: in particular, a debate between the Real School and the Monetary Schools. The Real School contends that population pressures and other physical factors were the chief causes of rising prices from ca. 1540 to 1640, while the opposing Monetary School argues that inflation was essentially the product of monetary expansion, in various forms, particularly if not initially from the influx of Spanish American silver in this era, coinage debasements, credit expansion, etc.

The topic may also consider the once-famous and now largely neglected Hamilton thesis: that ‘profit inflation’ brought about the true birth and financed the growth of ‘industrial capitalism’ in this early-modern era. Hence we must ask what were the costs and benefits of inflation: for entrepreneurs, artisans and labourers, peasants, landholders, and merchants? Is economic growth always accompanied by inflation?

#### 15. **The ‘Rise of Capitalism’ and The Protestant Reformations: the Weber-Tawney Theses on the ‘Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,’ 16th - 18th Centuries**

In early modern Europe, what influence did religion have in shaping the cultural ethos of modern European ‘capitalism,’ especially in terms of the profit motive and the work ethic? **Profit maximization** by economically rational individuals and business firms lies at the heart of modern micro-economic theory. Is this economic principle valid for all times and places; or did it arise only in early-modern Europe? Furthermore, why is a ‘backward bending’ supply curve not the normal supply curve for modern industrial labour, while much more typical of medieval labour? What explains a work ethic that leads both entrepreneurs and labour to continue pursuing a business, craft, or occupation and to seek incomes beyond those necessary to satisfy their basic needs and wants?

This topic analyses the debate that began with the sociological theses of Max Weber and Richard Tawney on the development of the modern ethos or ‘spirit of capitalism’ and the so-called ‘Protestant work ethic,’ associated with the spread of Calvinist religious sects. But more generally it provides an examination of the religious, social, and cultural barriers to modern European economic development that were a product of medieval feudal and ecclesiastical society. It also involves a comparison of the various attitudes of the Roman Catholic and the Reformed (Protestant) churches towards economic questions, in the early-modern era: concerning profit, interest, prices, labour, enterprise, and the market economy. Did European economic attitudes really change from late-medieval to early modern times; and did those attitudes really matter? Did there develop, in early-modern western Europe, a new social predisposition to save and to invest productively, and to maximize all forms of incomes, a socially widespread and acceptable predisposition fundamentally different from that to be found in the traditional feudal or medieval society?

This topic also has very considerable relevance for the more modern Industrial Revolution of the later 18th and early 19th centuries: because in England during that era, more than 50 per cent of the known or documented industrial entrepreneurs, scientists, and other innovators of that ‘Industrial Revolution’ belonged to Calvinist religious sects known as ‘Dissenters’ -- dissenting against the established Church of England, when such Dissenters comprised only about 5 per cent of the English population.

#### 16. **The Social Costs of Agricultural Modernization: The Tudor-Stuart Enclosure Movements in**

## England, from ca. 1480 to ca. 1700

Was a radical transformation of the agrarian sector, involving especially the destruction of **feudal** modes of production, the first essential step towards modern industrialization? Furthermore, what were the social costs, direct and indirect, of that agrarian transformation: who gained and who lost? In particular, to what extent were the ebbs and flows of early-modern enclosures determined by questions of **economic rent**? Under these enclosures, who succeeded in capturing a greater share of increasing **economic rents**: the landlord, leasehold tenants, freehold tenants, customary tenants, and other peasants?

This topic is directly linked to the previous topics on European Serfdom in dealing with one of the most important, truly fundamental questions in economics: the evolution of **property rights**, within the context of freely organized market economies; and hence the importance of the subject of economic rents. To enclose land means to destroy all prior communal rights over the use of that land, and place the unified control over that land in the hands of a single person, whether landlord or a tenant leaseholder. In a struggle between landlords and peasants, the chief initial victims of the Tudor-Stuart enclosures were: ‘cottagers,’ the smallest tenant landholders, serving also as agricultural labourers, many of free origin; and the ‘customary tenants,’ most of whom held lands formerly considered servile tenures, most of whose ancestors were considered to be serfs.

In fact, much land had been peacefully enclosed in medieval England, chiefly in pastoral areas, long before the Tudor era; nevertheless, many historians view the Tudor era (1485 - 1603) as the first period of concentrated, socially and economic significant Enclosures: the disruption of ‘common field’ farming to place lands under unified, single management. To Marxist historians and to many non-Marxist economic historians as well, these Enclosures were an essential process in the transition from a feudal agrarian economy to a more modern commercially-oriented or ‘capitalist’ agricultural economy. Clearly the Tudor Enclosures were both significant and disruptive in that they were concentrated in a few Midland counties that were thickly populated and whose lands were almost equally suitable for grain farming and sheep-raising, or other livestock farming (usually in some combination of arable-livestock farming). Many grain lands, employing much labour, were converted into sheep pastures, employing relatively little labour.

Since the lectures will examine the various theories to explain the ‘causation’ of the Tudor-Stuart Enclosures, you may be better advised (in doing an essay) to focus on the economic and social consequences. Who gained and who lost by these Enclosures: cottagers, copyhold peasants, freeholder tenants, landlords, and agricultural labourers? Did Enclosures result in agricultural growth and expansion and also in increased employment; or did these Enclosures result in labour displacement and ‘depopulation;’ did they create ‘deserted villages?’

Note that there is a very clear division of opinion amongst historians about the contemporary motives for and consequences of enclosure. The more conservative historians view such enclosures as a necessary response to changed economic conditions and a necessary mechanism for increasing the productivity of both land and labour, thus increasing total product and aggregate social welfare. The Marxist or neo-Marxist historians instead view Enclosure as a mechanism by which the landlord ‘class’ (perhaps a changed, less feudally-oriented class) sought to alter property rights in order to appropriate the economic rent on land, to exploit the peasantry more thoroughly (removing the communal protection of manorial institutions), without having any direct or immediate concern about increasing agricultural productivity. Nevertheless many modern neo-Marxist historians would also agree -- would agree with Marx himself -- that, in the long run, Enclosure was a necessary step in European economic development and in the transition to a modern, capitalist economy.

### 17. The ‘Rise of the Gentry’ Debate: On the Origins of Modern ‘Agrarian Capitalism’

Was agricultural modernization in England, indeed a ‘radical transformation of the agrarian sector,’ fundamentally dependent upon the emergence of a ‘new’ non-feudal class of landlords -- a



social grouping of landowners known as the **gentry**? Was the ‘rise of the gentry’ a fundamental condition of that necessary transition from ‘feudalism’ to ‘modern capitalism,’ in a Marxian historical framework? Was it necessary and important even within a non-Marxist model of historical economic development?

The question posed in this ‘Rise of the Gentry’ topic is more important than some of the rather negative debate literature on this topic would indicate. If one agrees that modernization of the agrarian sector, including enclosures, was fundamental in the economic and social changes leading to modern industrialization, and if one also argues that those agrarian changes depended upon the elimination of any remaining vestiges of feudalism, manorialism, and serfdom, then who was responsible for those changes? Who would have a social predisposition to organize their estates and agricultural production in terms of both factor and product markets, a social predisposition to invest productively and to maximize profits from the land? Surely not the traditional class of feudal-manorial landlords, with a entirely different concept of property rights, generally much less market-oriented? The English economic historian Richard Tawney (a Fabian socialist) argued that those responsible (and responsible for most enclosures) belonged to a new, non-feudal socio-economic class known as the **gentry**; and he further argued that a fundamental change in the structure in English landownership -- a shift of property from the old feudal aristocrats, the Crown, and the Church -- came about partly because of the inflationary consequences of the Price Revolution.

His thesis provoked a very strong reaction from more traditionally-minded historians, especially from the eminent conservative Prof. Hugh Trevor Roper (now Lord Dacre), who argued that Tawney's ‘gentry’ were not a new class, not a class at all, and were really indistinguishable from the traditional aristocracy. The debate, a particularly vigorous, very ideological, and often very nasty one in economic history, is particularly instructive for the ways in which different historians use sociological concepts and manipulate both documentary and statistical evidence, to support their own preconceived views (known in economics as ‘prior assumptions,’ or just ‘priors’).

#### **18. On the Industrial ‘Origins’ of the Industrial Revolution: The Nef Thesis on Industrial Change in Tudor-Stuart England, ca. 1540 - 1640**

Did modern industrialization, in more purely technical terms, depend upon an early-modern ‘energy crisis,’ which led to fundamental changes in Europe's fuel technology: from a wood-based to a coal-based technology? And did this radical change first occur in sixteenth-century England, poorly endowed in wood but richly endowed in coal? In what other respects did coal provide the essential physical ingredients of modern industrialization? How important are resource endowments for industrialization?

This topic provides an examination of the industrial changes in Tudor-Stuart England, principally during the ‘Price Revolution’ era (1540-1640, but also extending to in some instances to 1715), to be compared with those industrial changes of the later (and crucial) British Industrial Revolution of ca. 1750-1830. Did Tudor-Stuart England, with its rapid population growth, experience an ‘energy crisis’ that promoted significant technological changes in industry, in turn promoting the growth of larger-scale forms of ‘capitalist industry’? Specifically, why did these technological innovations and English markets necessarily lead to much larger scale industrial capitalism? What indeed is really meant by the term ‘industrial capitalism,’ and how does its structure differ so essentially from previous forms of industry?

What other changes also led Prof. Nef to formulate his thesis of a precursor Industrial Revolution? Is the term justifiable in this context? Did changes in the industrial sector radically alter the overall economic and social structure in Tudor-Stuart England; or were such radical changes really the result of the later Industrial Revolution, from the 1760s? What connections do the industrial changes of this era 1540 - 1640 have with the later Industrial Revolution?

**19. Social and Agrarian Changes in Early-Modern France: the Decline of Feudalism, Rural ‘Embourgeoisement’ and the Seigneurial Reaction, 1480 to 1789**

An analysis of a major thesis by one of this century’s leading economic historians, and certainly one of the most prominent French historians: the late Marc Bloch. He argued that combined economic, social and political forces of the late-medieval ‘Great Depression’ and then the 16th century ‘Price Revolution’ eras (though never using those terms) led to the virtual disappearance of traditional feudal, manorial, and servile institutions in early-modern France, giving the peasantry virtually full property rights over their lands. During the 17th and 18th centuries, however, the great landed seigneurs, the descendants of former feudal aristocrats, but now a social class or social grouping that had received a significant infusion from the bourgeoisie-- by urban merchants, financiers, office holders who had bought formerly feudal seignories -- managed to achieve an important revival or ‘reaction’ that allowed many of them to reconstitute large and powerful landed estates that effectively governed the rural economy and society of post-Revolutionary 19th century France. The thesis can be best summed up by Marc Bloch himself, from his monumental and seminal work: *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics*, trans. from the 1931 French edition by Janet Sondheimer (Berkeley, 1966), p. 149:

If we can imagine, which is of course absurd, the [French] Revolution breaking out around the year 1480, we should find that land relieved of seigneurial charges was reallocated almost without exception to a host of small occupiers. But the three centuries between 1480 and 1789 saw the rehabilitation of the large estate. It was not, as in England and Eastern Germany, all embracing.... But the victory was a sizeable one, though its completeness varied noticeably with the region. The Revolution was to leave the large estate relatively unimpaired. The picture presented by the rural France of our own day [1931] -- which is not, as is sometimes said, a land of petty proprietors but rather a land where large and small properties coexist in proportions which vary considerably from province to province -- is to be explained by its evolution between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.

To the extent that Marc Bloch remains correct about the monumental economic and social changes of the 17th and 18th century, i.e. before the French Revolution, those changes have to be understood in the context of the debate about the 17th-Century General Crisis, in the following topics.

**20. The ‘General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century,’ 1620-1740: The Hobsbawm Thesis on the Transition from ‘Feudalism to Modern Capitalism’**

Are Marxists or Marxist-oriented historians correct in arguing that modern European industrialization fundamentally depended upon radical or ‘revolutionary’ changes in the structure of both society and economy: a radical transformation from a ‘feudal’ to a modern ‘capitalist’ society?

This is another of the several topics that deal with Marxist theory and Marxist writings in European economic history (which thus give you a point of view different from those of the lecturer). And this particular debate, over some very fundamental principles of Marxism, was sparked by the writings of Professors Eric Hobsbawm (Marxist) and Hugh Trevor Roper (conservative) on the supposed economic and ‘general crises’ of the 17th and early 18th centuries. Hobsbawm contended that these economic crises, resulting from the ‘internal contradictions’ of 16th-century European expansion, led to the essential transition from a ‘feudal’ economy to a modern ‘capitalist’ economy. His opponent, Trevor-Roper, had already achieved fame in attacking Tawney’s ‘Rise of the Gentry’ thesis, which was similarly on the theme of the transition from ‘feudalism’ to ‘capitalism;’ and echoes of that attack can be found in this debate.

What makes this debate so fascinating is that some of the very harshest (nastiest) critics of Hobsbawm's thesis came from fellow Marxists, particularly from the now former Soviet bloc.

Some questions to be posed: was there in fact a fundamental, European-wide general economic crisis in the 17th century; or were there a series of unrelated economic crises or disturbances in various but not all parts of Europe over this century? Were the causes of such crises internal (endogenous) or external (exogenous) to the structure of the early-modern European economy? What regions benefited and which regions suffered from the economic changes of the era 1620-1740? How and why do some historians argue that the foundations of the modern Industrial Revolution can be found in the economic changes of this century, especially in Great Britain. For Great Britain in particular, what was 'New Colonialism': what is its relationship, if any, to early-modern Mercantilism; and what was its importance to European industrialization?

## 21. Depopulation, Deflation, and Economic 'Crises' in 17th Century Europe

This topic is obviously a variant of the preceding one; but it may prove to be more appealing to those who find such concepts as a 'General Crisis' -- whether Marxian (Hobsbawm) or conservative (Trevor Roper) -- too grandiose and overblown to be worthy of serious consideration. If you are one of those (and there are indeed many), you must nevertheless respond to the following questions: why was there so much depopulation and deflation, or at least demographic stagnation with low prices -- lower than in the 16th century -- in so many parts of western Europe? Were they causes or consequences of various regional economic crises, or unrelated to any economic malaise in western Europe? Did depopulation or other 'real factors' produce this deflation (or indirectly, vice-versa); or were there independent monetary causes of widespread and prolonged deflation? What similarities may be found between the major economic forces at work in the 17th and early 18th centuries, on the one hand, and those during a similar era of deflation and depopulation, from the late 14th to late 15th centuries, on the other? What were the precise economic and social consequences of demographic stagnation and falling prices in the various regions of western Europe, but especially in England?

The significance of this topic can also be found in an issue of the London based journal, *The Economist* (July 1992). In discussing economic problems of the early 1990s, in particular 'disinflation,' *The Economist* points out that falling prices affect the value of assets, as well as goods and services, and that:

'asset deflation' has profound consequences.... When people feel billions poorer, they spend less. They are also less inclined to borrow, and their mood is matched by a new prudence among lenders. Banks like to secure their loans against the collateral of assets. If their collateral is falling in value, they lend less. This congruence of caution is now familiar in many countries ... [People and businesses] are in no mood to borrow at the moment; the imperative is to repay their debts. Credit liquidation, [as] some textbooks call it...

Consider this basic principle, distinguishing carefully between nominal and real prices: inflation normally cheapens the cost of prior borrowing, alleviating debt burdens; deflation increases that real cost and thus the real burden of debt. Furthermore, it is an almost universal phenomenon of both the late-medieval and early-modern European economies that many or most time-wages are 'sticky,' in particular 'downward sticky'. In other words, during periods of generally falling prices (i.e. deflation), time-wages (as opposed to piece-work wages) either do not budge or do not fall in proportion to general prices. That produces rising real incomes for such time-wage earners; but it also raises costs for industrial entrepreneurs. Are such problems -- and the views of *The Economist* -- relevant to the early-modern European economy, to the economy of Europe on the eve of the modern Industrial Revolution?

**22. The 'Proto-Industrialization' Debate: The Mendels Thesis on Rural Handicraft Industries in Early Modern Europe and the Transition to Modern Urban Industrialization**

This topic is also directly related to the more general one on the 'General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century' -- for reasons noted below -- and it poses another fundamental question in European economic history: *what were the agrarian origins of modern industrialization?* Did modern, urban factory-industrialization paradoxically grow out of rural, peasant handicraft manufactures, in what were known as 'domestic' or 'cottage industries,' operating on a 'putting-out' system of production, chiefly in textiles? Remember that the cotton industry, originally rural, constituted the heart of the modern British Industrial Revolution (according to many historians).

This debate, perhaps the most recent and still prominent debate to entertain and vex economic historians, was spawned by the article of the late Franklin Mendels, 'Proto-Industrialization: The First Phase of the Industrialization Process,' *Journal of Economic History*, 32 (1972), in which he contended that the 'rapid growth of traditionally organized but market-oriented, principally rural industry' in early-modern Europe, which he calls 'proto-industrialization' (phase one), 'induced the passage to modern industry' and '... paved the way for factory industrialization' (i.e. the Industrial Revolution as phase two). His seminal article inspired a very considerable volume of periodical and monograph literature, especially by neo-Marxist historians, whose culminating achievement is arguably *Industrialization before Industrialization* (German edn. 1977; English trans. 1981), by P. Kriedte, H. Medick, and J. Schlumbohm, who see proto-Industrialization as an integral part of the 'transition from feudalism to capitalism.' A very important component in Mendels' and other Proto-Industrialization models is the impact of population growth upon agrarian society and on the mix of agricultural and industrial production, which was never a concern of Marx or of his early followers.

Indeed, even if Mendels' views differ in several respects from the neo-Marxists, and are not specifically Marxist, Mendels is clearly indebted to that renowned British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, whose article 'The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century,' *Past and Present*, Nos. 5-6 (1954) also sought to provide a new explanation for the Marxist thesis of the 'transition from feudalism to capitalism.' (See Topic no. 15, above.) Hobsbawm also viewed the spread of rural 'putting-out' industries in early-modern Europe as a 'protean stage of industrial development,' arguing that they were 'a most effective dissolver of the traditional [feudal] agrarian structure, and provided a means of rapidly increasing industrial production before the adoption of the factory system.' In reading Mendels, however, you will not immediately perceive this debt, since Mendels is reluctant to acknowledge some fundamental sources for his supposedly 'original' thesis.

Finally, so important had the Mendels debate become, at least to one group of economic historians, that in 1982 the 8th International Economic History Congress devoted one of its two major sessions to 'Proto-Industrialization,' with Mendels himself as the keynote speaker. One of the commentators and chief critics at that session was Prof. Donald Coleman (Cambridge), who subsequently summed up his views in the article 'Proto-Industrialization: A Concept Too Many,' *Economic History Review*, 36 (Aug. 1983). Both the Mendels and Coleman articles will be the required readings for this topic.

**23. The Economic Declines of Italy and Spain in the 17th Century: Aspects of the European 'General Crisis Era'?**

The fundamental question posed in this topic-- which is also a subset of the debate about the 17th Century 'General Crisis' -- is what were major forces at work that completed the final shift of Europe's economic centre of gravity from the Mediterranean world, where it had been from ancient (Classical) times, to North West Europe, in particular to the Netherlands (Holland) and England, a shift that ultimately manifested itself, one may argue, in the British Industrial Revolution. In particular, why did Italy -- or the major Italian city states, such as Venice, Florence, Milan, and Genoa -- after having dominated European commerce and finance for well over a thousand years,

and after having successfully coped with the rise of the Portuguese and Spanish, finally lose their primacy to the Dutch and the English during the course of the 17th century? Did these city states and Italy more generally suffer not only a relative economic decline but an absolute decline? Did they 'de-industrialize' and 'retrogress' into a lower-level agricultural economy? Did they become, individually and collectively, poorer? What were the regional and urban differences?

As for Spain: a different set of questions, perhaps. But why did Spain, after having achieved the largest and most powerful empire the West had ever known, a truly overseas empire from East Asia to Western Europe, far vaster than the Roman Empire, suffer severe economic and political difficulties from the early 17th century (or even earlier)? Why in particular did Spain fail to hold on to the most valuable part of its far flung empire: the northern Netherlands? What were the economic consequences of the Spanish decline for the Mediterranean and northern European worlds?

In more general terms, were the economic declines of Italy and Spain part of the 'General Crisis' of the 17th century; or were they independent economic, social, political, and cultural phenomena?

#### 24. **Mercantilism: Money, Economic Nationalism, and the State in Early-Modern Europe**

How important was the **state** -- i.e. national governments and their economic policies and activities -- in providing the foundations for modern industrialization: especially those monetary, fiscal, commercial, and industrial policies that are considered to be both 'bullionist' and 'protectionist,' and especially those pursued in Great Britain? Beyond these material considerations, how important was **economic nationalism** as a socially competitive driving force in European economic development, from the 16th to 18th centuries? [The important point to stress here is a competitive spirit amongst communities and nations, rather than individuals, though not excluding individual competition.]

This topic provides an examination of the special roles of the state, of national governments, in the economies of early-modern Europe, from the 16th to the late 18th centuries: the political economy of 'power and plenty'. Included in this will be a discussion of the various monetary, financial, military, industrial, and other 'protectionist' policies pursued in this era to enhance national power and national prosperity (wealth). Were these goals of national 'power and plenty' contradictory or complementary?

What does the term 'Mercantilism' mean: are we entitled to apply it to any specific school of economic thought, to any coherent economic philosophy? Or more generally, what is meant by the label 'mercantilist,' in terms of both general economic attitudes and administrative measures and government legislation? What were the medieval monetary roots of 'mercantilist' measures: in what is called 'bullionism;' and what roots may be found in medieval urban and guild protectionism?

Finally, those engaged in this debate should also discuss whether such mercantilist policies promoted or hindered economic development in general and industrialization in particular, in Western Europe (principally England, France and the Netherlands). For a better perspective, one should also compare such early-modern 'mercantilist' policies with those of present-day national governments.

#### 25. **The Economic Decline of the Netherlands in the Eighteenth Century: Absolute or Relative?**

Was dominance in both commerce and finance, two closely intermingled economic sectors in early-modern Europe, a necessary requisite for modern industrialization? If so, then why did the Netherlands, so successfully dominating European commerce and finance from the sixteenth century, not become the homeland of the modern Industrial Revolution?

This topic provides a most interesting case-study of the potential relationships, both positive and negative, between commerce and industrialization: a case study of the commercial leader of early-modern Europe, the Netherlands, which exercised commercial and financial hegemony for almost two centuries, but then failed to industrialize -- i.e. failed to achieve the industrial transformations and economic growth that Great Britain did from the later 18th century, possibly because of its commercial structure, which provided readier transition to finance than to industry. Thus this topic also examines how and why the Dutch ultimately lost their commercial and financial supremacy in early-modern Europe to Great Britain; and indirectly it asks the question why the Industrial Revolution began in Great Britain, and not elsewhere.

In relation to the questions posed in Topic No. 24, on 'Mercantilism,' this topic also offers a series of debates: (1) on whether the decline of the Dutch economy was due primarily to the Netherlands' failure to pursue the Mercantilist policies of their neighbours; (2) whether the causes of decline were primarily internal or external, and/or endogenous or exogenous to their economic structure; (3) whether the Dutch decline facilitated the coming of the British Industrial Revolution; (4) whether the Dutch economic decline, if there indeed was one, was absolute or merely relative. Implicit in all these questions is whether or not such a small community as the Netherlands had the manpower and the resources to sustain a world-wide empire, especially in an age of increasingly expensive warfare.

## **B. SECONDARY TOPICS:**

Bibliographies, with sets of questions, and (usually) sets of tables and graphs, are also available for the following topics:

1. Medieval European Demography and the Family: (1) The Origins and Evolution of the European Marriage Pattern.
2. Medieval European Demography and the Economy: (2) Did Late-Medieval Population Growth Produce a Malthusian Crisis?
3. Medieval Agriculture, 1250 - 1460: Manorial and non-manorial agrarian regimes in southern and northern Europe; the Open-Field Systems of northern Europe, and crop-rotation systems.
4. Agrarian Changes during the Late Middle Ages, 1260 - 1460: Italy, France, Spain, England.
5. The Role of Money in the Medieval Economy: Money, Coinages, and Moneys-of-Accounts.
6. Banking, Credit, and Foreign Trade in the Late-Medieval Economy, 1250 - 1460.
7. Guilds, Women, and Urban Governments in the Late-Medieval European Economy, 1200 - 1500.
8. The 'Crisis of the Early Fourteenth Century': Did western Europe experience a combined demographic and economic crisis in the early fourteenth century?
9. The Late-Medieval 'Standard of Living' Debate: Rising Real Wages and Growing Poverty?
10. Banking, Finance, and Public Credit in Late-Medieval and Early Modern Europe, to 1600.
11. Early-Modern Agriculture (I): Agricultural Innovations in the Low Countries, 1320 - 1500.
12. Early-Modern Agriculture (II): The Diffusion of Agricultural Innovations in England during the 16th century.
13. Prices, Population, Prosperity, and Poverty in Tudor and early Stuart England.

14. Changing Patterns of Mediterranean Commerce: Italy, the Levant, and the Hispanic World, 1350 - 1600.
15. The Hanseatic League and the Rise of the Dutch Commercial Empire, 1350 - 1600.
16. England, the Hanse, and the Netherlands: International Commercial Rivalry, 1350 - 1600.
17. Draperies Old and New: the Transformations of the Textile Industries in the Low Countries, England, and France, 1450 - 1600.

**C. COMMENTS AND NOTES on these topics:**

**1. Why these topics will give you a better understanding of the course:**

Students specializing in History, Political Science, Geography, Sociology, or Anthropology rarely, if ever, ask me why they should study economic history: for them, the reasons are self-evident. Regrettably, though understandably, that is not so for many students in Economics and Commerce & Finance. Reading over the explanatory notes on the topics listed above should provide them, and indeed all students, with a better answer to that question. These topics should provide some insight into how economic theory and economic history or historical economic development are related, and how economic history constitutes an integral part of modern economics; and the introductory notes for each of these topics will illustrate some of the important economic themes to be discussed.

**2. A Selection of Some Economic Themes to be Emphasized:**

Theories and dynamics of economic growth and change; the relationships between 'diminishing returns' and technological change; endogenous and exogenous factors in structural changes to the European economy; the economics of demographic (population) changes; the importance of **property rights** in economics; the concept of **economic rent** and its historical applications; the economic impact of changes in income and wealth distributions; the economics of monetary-financial institutions and of monetary changes; the macro-economics of changes in price levels, and the micro-economics of changes in relative prices, and their historical interactions; relative-price changes as inducements to technological changes; the determination of monetary and fiscal policies.

**3. Alternative Viewpoints (and Marxism):**

Many of these essay topics will also serve to provide viewpoints, both in economics and history, different from those of the lecturer: in particular Marxist views that I do not personally share. Nevertheless, Karl Marx and his disciples or followers have played a very major role in the literature of European economic history; and, whether or not one agrees with their ideological framework or conclusions, one is forced to respect much of this literature for asking very important questions, questions so often neglected or poorly treated by us traditional economic historians.

The topics with some Marxist or neo-Marxist content are those in Section A on: The Decline of Serfdom in the West (no.2); The Spread of Serfdom into Eastern Europe (no. 3); Feudal Governments, Warfare, Taxation, and Economic Crisis in Late-Medieval Europe, c. 1250 - 1500(no. 4); the Tudor-Stuart Enclosure Movements (no. 16); The Rise of the Gentry Debate (no. 17); The 'General Crisis' of the Seventeenth Century (no. 20); and the Proto-Industrialization Debate (no. 22).