

TUDOR SOCIETY

Matthew J. Clark, University of Cambridge

Summary: This account of society in the sixteenth century – population, wages and prices, urban and rural life, the four ‘estates’, social policy – also illustrates the extent to which the State Papers provide evidence for the social historian.

English society in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries experienced intense social change.¹ The national population was increasing rapidly: from around three million in 1541, it had risen to over five million at the time of Elizabeth’s death in 1603, and would continue rising to reach a high of almost six and a half million in the 1650s.² Although people at the time had no way of measuring demographic change, they certainly noticed and commented on its effects. Above all, they felt it in their pockets. The most telling effect of the rise in population was inflation as supply, particularly of basic foodstuffs, failed to keep up with demand. It has been calculated that the price of staple foods rose sixfold between 1500 and the early 1600s, with almost half of that growth occurring in the years after 1570.³

At the same time, the rise in population lessened the demand for labour and contributed to a fall in the value of wages. This posed a problem for the wage-dependent labourer, who in different parts of the kingdom might account for anywhere between one quarter and two-thirds of the population. Measured against rising prices, wages in 1600 were worth only half of what they had been in 1500, and little more than a third of their 1450-75 level.⁴ The impoverishment of the labouring poor was one of the most significant social trends in the sixteenth century, out of which was born an ‘economy of makeshifts’ as people sought to make ends meet in whatever ways they could find.⁵

For others, however, inflation presented opportunities for gain. In the countryside, the great landlords (England’s aristocracy and gentry) were able to take advantage of land hunger to charge their tenants higher rents. Also gaining from the rise in prices were the yeoman farmers. They were able to produce enough to feed themselves and their families, with a surplus left over to take to market. As many farmers employed labourers, the falling value of wages was to their advantage, serving to increase profits.⁶ The prosperity of the sixteenth century yeomanry is evident in what has been dubbed ‘the great rebuilding’ of rural England, as newly rich farmers enlarged, improved and beautified their houses.⁷

Rural and Urban Society

Although some three-quarters of England’s population lived and worked in rural communities, urban society ought not to be overlooked. Towns were important as religious and political centres, and also as sites for markets where agricultural produce was bought and sold. Towns ranged in size. The major urban centres – Norwich, York, Bristol, Exeter and Newcastle – each had populations of between eight and twelve thousand in 1520, rising to between nine

and fifteen thousand in 1603. At the other end of the scale were some five to six hundred smaller settlements with populations of no more than a few hundred which were differentiated from villages only through possession of a market. As in the countryside, rising prices benefited certain groups. The increasing wealth of mercantile elites was a subject for contemporary comment.⁸

Even the largest urban centres were dwarfed by London, whose population in 1550 already stood at 120,000, rising dramatically to around 200,000 in 1600. The astonishing fact is that at all times during this period the death rate in London exceeded the birth rate, so that the growth in population must have been fuelled entirely by migration. It has been calculated that as many as twelve thousand migrants travelled to London every year. The vast majority of these were drawn from the ranks of the rural poor, forced out of their communities by worsening conditions and the shortage of resources. They tended to congregate in the northern suburbs of the city, in overcrowded tenements where mortality rates as a result of endemic disease were exceptionally high.⁹

The Social Hierarchy

Tudor society, then, was inherently and increasingly unequal. Men found different ways of describing their society. Accounts penned by members of the elite tended to describe a God-given hierarchy based on the notion of ‘the great chain of being’. They viewed their society as divided into three or four ‘estates’ or ‘degrees’ of people: the aristocracy and gentry; the citizens or ‘freemen’ in the towns; the yeomanry in the countryside; and ‘the fourth sort’ who had ‘no voice nor authoritie in our common wealth ... onelie to be ruled, not to rule other.’¹⁰

A more common way of describing society was through what Keith Wrightson has termed the ‘language of sorts’. This language tended to divide society into two basic groupings of rich and poor, perhaps reflecting the marked social polarisation of late sixteenth-century society. In the surviving source material we see it used most commonly by people of higher social status who defined themselves as ‘the better sort’ in contrast to the ‘meaner’ or ‘baser’ sorts. Wrightson has described the language of sorts as ‘pregnant with social conflict’.¹¹

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, a third group, ‘the middling sorts’, also began to be mentioned. The term seems to have been used most commonly as a form of self-description by men of yeoman or mercantile background, and by the newly rich in particular, as a means of expressing a separate identity and claim to respectability.¹² It is altogether harder to assess the terms of social description used by society’s poor. This is mainly due to the nature of the source material. When the voices of the poor were recorded at all it was generally in the formal setting of the courtroom, a forum in which people might be expected to have moulded their behaviour and language to conform to official expectations. Recent research has begun to suggest, however, that when freed from official restraint, the poor expressed a strong sense of social injustice and hostility towards the rich.¹³

Sources for Social History

These various themes and problems are illuminated only haphazardly in the State Papers. While the social historian’s main sources are printed tracts, diaries, private papers and correspondence of the gentry, or the records of the criminal

and equity courts, the State Papers are valuable as a source for investigating the attitudes of England's governors to social change. Social mobility was seen to pose a threat to social order. Governors expressed anxiety about the growing wealth of the self-styled 'middling sorts', which they believed undermined society's hierarchical ordering. They were also anxious that the newly rich – men of 'secrete wealth' – were not being properly assessed for the purposes of taxation and other levies.

For the most part such attitudes are stated only implicitly, and a knowledge of the context of social discourse is necessary to uncode the references. Lady Mary Sidney's letter to Burghley requesting that her husband *not* be made a lord because they were unable to afford the requisite lifestyle, for instance, makes sense when read against the background of an elite social ideology which stressed hierarchy and the visible display of status as vital for the peaceful ordering of society.¹⁴ Similarly, anxieties about the increasing wealth of the middling sorts ought to be investigated within the wider context of debates about the nature of true gentility, and in particular set against the voices of men like John Ferne who desired to keep the 'shining ranks' of the nobility and gentry safe from the contamination of new money.¹⁵

All in all, the official view of society seems to have been rather a bleak one. The 'meaner sort' were viewed with suspicion as unruly, dangerous and seditious. The Council's pessimistic outlook was reinforced by the almost endless reports they received reporting cases of seditious speech, disturbance and riot. One historian has described the Council as 'the centre of a vortex ... recipient of incoming reports which by their number and repetition (and sometimes the conscious intention of correspondents who sought government action) distorted and exaggerated the reality of disorder.'¹⁶ By the end of the century the government was prone to over-reaction, demanding the excessively severe punishment of rioters and others who disturbed the public peace.

Reports of riot reflect the prejudices of England's ruling elites who viewed the poor as inherently violent and disordered. However, such reports can also reveal a great deal about the nature and timing of popular disturbance, provided always that the author's agenda is taken into account. Reports of food riots in the 1580s, for instance, allow us to explore the relationship between riot and dearth, as well as illuminating the generally orderly behaviour of the crowd and its attitude to authority. Similarly, an exploration of the State Papers for the reign of Edward VI can reveal important details relating to popular disturbance during the 1549 uprisings. For instance, the material allows us to measure the incidence of small-scale skirmishes away from the focal points of disorder in East Anglia and the West Country as well as to investigate the government's response to those disturbances.

Official attitudes to social change were reflected in policy, above all in the development of poor law legislation. Through statute, royal proclamation and conciliar orders, the Tudor regimes sought to tackle perceived social crisis and to control the activities of the poor. In general, Tudor policy towards poor relief was based on a distinction between the deserving poor (those unable to work through sickness, disability or age), who were to be provided with relief; and the undeserving (those considered able but too idle to work), who were to be punished. Wandering beggars, 'Egyptians', 'rogues and vagabonds' were generally ordered to be whipped and sent home: they were put in their place

both socially and geographically.

Social Policy

State Papers are a useful source for studying the evolution of social policy. However, it must be noted that the evidence they provide is not systematic. Parliamentary statutes and royal proclamations are in many ways more valuable.¹⁷ These were, however, only the final products of the deliberative process. Drafts of legislation contained in the State Papers make it possible to uncover some of the processes by which policy was formed, as well as revealing some of the proposed experiments that never made it on to the statute books. Edward VI's government, for example, considered proposals to redistribute the profits of the law courts in poor relief.

The greatest threat to social order was posed by dearth. Harvest failures exacerbated rising prices, pushing the poor to the very edge of subsistence. In the sixteenth century, grain shortages were usually blamed on the covetous actions of greedy individuals who were accused of hoarding grain in order artificially to raise prices. Thus, the Council ordered barns to be searched, and sought to regulate the markets to ensure grain was sold at a 'just' price. When the government was slow to respond, it is evident that ordinary people in the localities were ready to demand action. Men expected traditional remedies to be supplied; the regulation of the grain trade was seen as the routine response to dearth.¹⁸

Studies of the evolution of social policy stand at the interface between social and political history. Examinations of governmental responses to social crisis allow us to measure the growing pretensions of the Tudor State. Historians have noted what they call 'an increase in governance' over the course of the sixteenth century, as ever more aspects of people's lives came to be regulated. The growth of government was not driven solely from above, however. Local governors, concerned with the preservation of order in their communities, sought to understand the causes of disorder and proposed possible solutions. Correspondence between central and local governors, much of it preserved in the State Papers, suggests that the Council listened to a range of views, and that policy resulted from processes of consultation and negotiation.¹⁹

Citation:

Matthew J. Clark, 'Tudor Society', *State Papers Online, 1509-1714*, Thomson Learning EMEA Ltd, Reading, 2007

Notes:

(Endnotes)

- 1 The clearest overview of social change in this period is provided by J. A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550-1760* (2nd ed., London, 1997). Like so many social histories of the period, Sharpe's work sadly overlooks the first half of the sixteenth century. One valuable exception is Joyce Youings, *Sixteenth Century England* (London, 1984). Despite its focus on the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Keith Wrightson's *English Society, 1580-1680* (London, 1982) remains essential reading.
- 2 E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1981). The findings of this monumental study are usefully summarised in R. A. Houston, *The Population History of Britain and Ireland, 1500-1750* (Basingstoke, 1992).
- 3 R. B. Outhwaite, *Inflation in Tudor and Early Stuart England* (London, 1969).
- 4 E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of Building Wages', in *Essays in Economic History*, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson, (London, 1962), vol. 2.
- 5 The limited options available to the poor are discussed in S. Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c.1550-1750* (Oxford, 2004).
- 6 K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, 2000).
- 7 W. G. Hoskins, 'The Great Rebuilding', *History Today*, 5:2 (1955), pp. 104-11.
- 8 P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition, 1500-1700* (Oxford, 1976).
- 9 R. Finlay, *Population and Metropolis: The Demography of London, 1580-1650* (Cambridge, 1981).
- 10 Versions of this type of account available in printed sources include William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. G. Edelen (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968); and Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. M. Dewar (Cambridge, 1982).
- 11 Wrightson has advanced these arguments in a number of essays and articles. Among the most accessible are: 'Estates, Degrees and Sorts in Tudor and Stuart England', *History Today*, 37:1 (1987), 17-22; and 'Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England' in *Language, History and Class*, ed. Penelope J. Corfield (Oxford, 1991).
- 12 J. Barry and C. Brooks, eds., *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke, 1994).
- 13 A. Wood, "'Poore Men Woll Speke One Daye": Plebeian Languages of Deference and Defiance in England, c.1520-1640', in *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850*, ed. T. Harris (Basingstoke, 2001).
- 14 An illuminating discussion of the relationship between status and display is provided by N. Cooper, 'Rank, Manners and Display: The Gentlemanly House, 1500-1750', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), pp. 291-310.
- 15 J. Ferne, *The Blazon of Gentry* (London, 1586). The contours of this debate are explored in F. Heal and C. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (London, 1994).
- 16 J. Walter, 'A "Rising of the People"? The Oxfordshire Rising of 1596', *Past and Present*, 107 (1985), pp. 90-143 (138).
- 17 These formed the basis for Paul Slack's classic study, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988).
- 18 P. Slack, 'Dearth and Social Policy in Early Modern England', *Social History of Medicine*, 5 (1992), pp. 1-17.
- 19 See the chapters relating to social policy in S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c1550-1640* (Basingstoke, 2000); and M. J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c.1550-1700* (Cambridge, 2000).