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## **THE GREAT CULTURAL DIVIDE A Review Essay**

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There is a revolutionary difference between subsistence and commercial labor norms. This difference is best measured by per capita food production between peasants and farmers. Peasants are subsistence cultivators who do not measure their welfare by money incomes because they do not acquire sufficient money to constitute an income; although, almost all contemporary subsistence cultures are monetized. Their welfare depends on control of land use that allows them to minimize agricultural labor. They sell little or no food and frequently experience seasonal hunger in poor crop years. The rationale of their labor expenditures is to grow ENOUGH food to last until the next harvest. After this labor has been performed, they do other things (most commonly indolence). Farmers are commercial food producers who earn money incomes from the sale of harvests grown by much larger labor inputs. Their welfare depends on money incomes earned by the sale of most or all of their harvests.

The great cultural divide is between subsistence and commercial labor norms. This divide is best expressed by the amount of food produced by peasants and farmers. The social goal of peasants is to produce enough food to feed themselves until the next harvest. They do not consciously grow an assured food surplus, but if it occurs it is due to a good crop year. Peasants act on the assumption that all years will be normal crop years. They know that all crop years are not normal but they willingly accept the risk of seasonal hunger in poor crop years and the larger risk of famine conditions in consecutive poor crop year. They accept this risk in order to minimize agricultural labor. This is the subsistence compromise. ENOUGH is the principal social value that governs food production in peasant societies.

In the English historical experience, commercially motivated cultivators are called yeomen and farmers. Unlike peasants they perform the necessary labor to produce assured food surpluses in all crop years. The food surplus they produce is grown for market sale and this sale generates money incomes.

Understanding the distinction between subsistence and commercial labor norms begins with the observation that agricultural land in all peasant societies is cultivated in some variety of communal tenure. Communal tenure gives peasant communities control of land use and control of land use allows peasants to minimize agricultural labor to subsistence amounts. Communal tenure and subsistence labor norms are the two institutions that differentiate peasants from yeomen and farmers. Understanding the distinction between peasants (subsistence food producers) and yeomen/farmers (commercial food producers) is vital to the social/political analysis that follows.

The purpose of this essay is to describe how food surpluses are produced to feed city residents. Civilization began with the founding of cities. Cities are civilization. Sustaining civilization requires assured food surpluses; therefore, this essay begins with how central governments in subsistence cultures induce some peasants to grow food surpluses to feed city residents and it ends with the policies that governing elites of central governments in contemporary peasant nations must use to commercialize food production.

Before the invention of money, much of the food that fed cities residents (governing elites and armies) was obtained by tributary levies (commodity taxes) on peasant villages. Additional food was obtained by barter for a variety of items produced by city artisans. In addition to tributary levies of food there were tributary levies of laborers from villages to build walls around cities, palaces for kings, and pyramids in Egypt and Mexico. The laborers who built these edifices were temporary migrants. Customary law defined the number of laborers that villages annually sent to build the walls, palaces, and pyramids, and the amount of food and commodities that accompanied them. This labor was performed without the use of money because money did not exist; therefore, money incomes did not exist.

What were the institutions that induced peasants to grow small food surpluses in normal crop years to sustain civilizations? The six most important were: 1) tributary taxation by central governments (usually kingships); 2) full-time warriors to defend boundaries and enforce tributary taxation;

3) a state religion and accompanying myths of origin that acted as cultural glue; 4) monetization; 5) organized public markets; 6) literacy. As city states increased their populations, literacy became necessary for governance. The two most important uses of literacy were to record tax receipts and facilitate commerce. The first literacy was the cuneiform script invented in Akkad/Sumer 4,600 years ago. Many other scripts were invented at later dates, including alphabet scripts about 3,500 years ago, and the quipu knots of the Incas 1,400 years ago.

Three thousand years ago the city states on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea had abundant wealth but it was highly immobile and awkward to use for local and maritime commerce. Coin money was invented in the city state of Lydia (now in Turkey) about 2,560 years ago when the first coins were minted from locally mined gold and silver. Gold and silver coins were used to facilitate maritime trade and pay taxes, and bronze and copper coins of smaller denominations were used by city residents to purchase food and consumer items. Coin money was rapidly adopted by maritime merchants and city storekeepers because of its flexibility for making all forms of exchange. After coins of standard weight and purity were minted, barter exchange was transformed into recognizably modern commerce.

Merchants no longer had to weigh blobs of silver and gold, or ingots of copper and bronze, or accept an assortment of commodities, to conduct trade. Transactions were instant. Monetization of commerce allowed merchants to accumulate wealth in the form of coin money. Coin money was highly mobile and carried with it the ability to create commercial credit by loaning (renting) sums of money for interest. Within a few centuries coin money was adopted by all trading communities on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and other merchants carried its advantages to city civilizations in India and China.

Coin money became the most visible way to measure and compare the subsistence motivation of peasants and the commercial motivation of merchants and city residents. Merchants and city residents had to be full-time laborers to earn money because their welfare depended on it. City artisans had to perform continuous labor to produce items (metal tools, weapons and some textiles) to earn the money needed to purchase food grown by peasants. Alternatively, they performed specialist services for money (scribes, carpenters). The labor of city artisans and service specialists became items of commerce. If city residents did not perform continuous labor to make items for sale or sell specialist services, they did not eat. The necessity for earning money incomes forced city residents to be commercially motivated because they had no choice.

The amount of marketed food available in all crop years determines the size of city populations. It also determines the amounts and varieties of items and services that city residents can produce. Feeding city populations requires institutions that induce some/most peasants to produce small amounts of food beyond their immediate subsistence needs. The invention of money (monetization) helped induce some peasants to voluntarily produce some food for market sale in excess of tributary levies.

Subsistence cultivation was the social norm in ancient civilizations and in Western Europe prior to the sixteenth century. It is also the social norm in contemporary peasant cultures; therefore, a description of the social values and labor norms that govern subsistence cultivation is essential for an analysis of the political policies that can induce some peasants to transform themselves into commercial cultivators (yeomen and farmers) who produce the assured food surpluses needed to feed city residents in contemporary commercial cultures.

After 1500 the governments of some European nations began to encourage feudal landholders to commercialize agriculture. The key policy was replacing communal land tenure with some variety of commercial land tenure. After 1600 in Western Europe, pervasive monetization helped accelerate tenure changes. Pervasive monetization induced increasing numbers of peasants to voluntarily perform small additional amounts of labor to produce small amounts of non-food commodities like barrel staves, wool, or flax for market sale. These were exchange commodities that had limited use or no use in their households.

In contemporary peasant societies some of these exchange commodities are sheets of rubber, hand sawed boards, copra, coffee beans, tea leaves, tobacco, and cotton. The money peasants acquire from the sale of exchange commodities is called a target sum. Target sums are used to purchase limited amounts of manufactured items with superior utility or superior durability compared to similar items made by village artisans. In contemporary peasant societies, target sums are used to purchase textiles, aluminum or cast iron cooking pots, edged steel tools, plastic buckets, and plastic sandals. After target sums have been acquired peasants cease laboring.

Target sums are a convenient way for peasants to measure favorable terms of trade for exchange commodities they can produce. Peasants compute the terms of trade by comparing the labor required to produce an exchange commodity with the labor required to make similar items by household labor or by village artisans. If less labor is required to produce an exchange commodity than to make a similar item by household or artisan labor, peasants will produce exchange commodities to acquire the money needed to purchase desirable manufactured items. Favorable terms of trade for non-food commodities reduces adult labor. If a household's exchange commodity is food grain it will be eaten in poor crop years and no money will be acquired and no manufactured items purchased. These households will experience a temporary decline in welfare but survive.

Money is ancillary to peasant welfare and, therefore, is not an income. The concept of a money income is foreign to them. This analysis should make it clear that money incomes are not the universal way to measure household welfare.

When storekeepers introduce monetized trade into peasant villages, it is often in the hands of strangers who are often of a different race or religion and speak a different language. In Eastern Europe they were often Jewish and in contemporary Southeast Asia they are usually Chinese or Indian, and in sub-Saharan Africa they are often Arabs, Lebanese, or Indian. They have no claim to arable land use within the village's boundary. Their welfare depends on the profits of trade. They are also outside the constraints of customary law that equalizes possession of material goods and food distribution in poor crop years. Peasants often consider them as greedy and oppressive because they insist on repayment of subsistence debts when they are least able to pay. In practice, the debts of peasant households are seldom fully repaid. This is the origin of debt peonage and why storekeepers are major targets in peasant rebellions. Their death cancels debts.

The monetization introduced by village storekeepers is personal credit. Purchases of exchange commodities and sales of manufactured items are made with money of account. Cash money is infrequently used. Village stores have small inventories of a limited variety of manufactured items. When a peasant household needs an item they visit a storekeeper who gives it to them on the understanding that the price of the item (including a high rate of interest) will be repaid at a future date with a commodity that has an agreed money value. The storekeeper records the amount of the transaction in a book along with the date when repayment is due. When the commodity arrives the debt is cancelled and the storekeeper forwards the commodity to a wholesale merchant who supplies the storekeeper with manufactured items equal to the value of the commodities he receives. In this train of transactions, storekeeper and merchant are the only persons who are required to be literate. Put in a universal context, functional literacy is the basic commercial skill.

Yeomen and farmers are commercially motivated cultivators. They do not experience seasonal hunger. They sell a high percentage of the crops they grow and measure their welfare by money incomes. Both yeomen and farmers perform more agricultural labor than peasants in order to produce assured food surpluses for market sale. The marketable surplus grown by yeomen is usually small and their incomes are usually small; nonetheless, they produce assured food surpluses for market sale in all crop years. Farmers maximize labor inputs into cultivation by performing large amounts of physical labor, or by hiring paid laborers, or by investing in machinery. Most or all of their harvests are sold in order to maximize the acquisition of money. The money acquired by yeomen and farmers constitute real incomes because it is the basis for their welfare, just as money incomes are the basis for the welfare of village storekeepers and city residents.

What are the cultivation practices of peasants and how do they relate to population density? There are four cultivation practices used by peasants world-wide. They are: 1) shifting cultivation (with many local names); 2) fallow rotation (with many local names); 3) continuous cultivation; 4) intensive cultivation (including irrigation). The adoption of Green Revolution technologies is the final means of intensifying cultivation. Each one of these cultivation practices requires increased inputs of physical labor, whether in the field or in factories that make agricultural implements.

Peasant societies with low population densities are reluctant to adopt Green Revolution technologies because money is required to purchase them, and this requires producing more commodities for market sale. In addition, much more field labor is required to make Green Revolution technologies productive to their potential. Even with local availability of Green Revolution technologies, most village households continue to perform subsistence labor norms. This continues until an increased population requires more labor from more people living on the same area of land in order to produce subsistence diets. Only then will some households adopt some Green Revolution technologies.

From the perspective of peasants, communal tenure has three virtues. The **first** is providing equalized subsistence opportunities for village households. This is done by village councils dividing and redividing village lands into equal sized cultivation units at periodic intervals and redistributing them in order to accommodate the subsistence needs of new households. This is the most important function of village councils. In densely populated societies equalization is usually carried to extremes with each household having several furrows or terraces on the most fertile land, several on land of average fertility, and another group of furrows or terraces on the least fertile land. Scattered cultivation units ensure that all village households have equalized opportunities to practice subsistence labor norms with minimal risks of deficient harvests in normal crop years.

The usual means of equalizing land allocation is equalized inheritance among sons, but due to variable survival rates some households have larger numbers of cultivation units (furrows or terraces). In order to preserve equalization of subsistence opportunities, cultivation units are redistributed at variable intervals—often every five years. In order to facilitate redistribution, cultivation takes place in open fields. The ultra-division of arable land among village households is called morselation. In densely populated peasant societies subdivisions have occurred to the point where seasonal hunger occurs in normal crop years, and in consecutive poor crop years there are famine conditions.

When morselation reaches its limit, the number of cultivation units are fixed and only replacement households are accommodated on village lands. Nonetheless, village households without a claim to land use have a claim for subsistence. Their claim is satisfied by making subsistence sharing labor available to them; however, this labor does not carry an absolute claim to subsistence amounts of food. Life for these households is precarious. Persons (or households) that have no claim to arable land swarm into cities and become itinerant wage laborers. Hunger forces them to perform continuous paid labor. Manual labor is the only labor they can perform because illiteracy deprives them of learning commercial skills; and if no paid labor is available they are destitute.

The **second** virtue of communal tenure is the ability of peasants to minimize agricultural labor. In practice this means performing only enough labor to grow enough food to last until the next harvest, plus a little more labor to produce an exchange commodity to acquire a target sum of money.

High birthrates are a principal way adults minimize their agricultural labor. All peasant societies desire high birthrates (4 to 6 children per household) because large amounts of agricultural labor can be transferred to them at young ages. Children are a subsistence asset. This strategy of labor transfer is available to all households, and customary law strongly endorses it. Childlessness is a major cause for divorce in peasant societies. High peasant birthrates are not due to pre-eminence of spiritual values, fatalism, traditional peasant behavior, kinship obligations, or survival strategy. They are due to the real advantages conferred on adults by being able to transfer large amounts of agricultural labor to children. This is especially true for picking cotton, tea leaves, coffee beans, or cocoa pods. As long as customary law endorses child labor (rather than literacy), adults can enjoy long periods when they perform minimal agricultural labor.

Economists, demographers, sociologists, political scientists, and historian have failed to recognize with sufficient clarity that high birthrates in peasant societies is rational behavior because of the high social value that adults place on indolence (often called leisure). Economists who frame policies to alleviate endemic hunger in peasant societies seldom see the full extent of child labor or the amount of adult indolence because they seldom make prolonged visits to peasant villages. During momentary visits they usually observe some agricultural labor. More often than not, it is done by women and children. This is most visible in male dominant societies where customary law endorses transferring disproportionately large amounts of agricultural labor to women who are the weakest village residents.

Economists never ask: where are the males to do this labor? Without prolonged visits they are seldom aware of persons who perform minimum amounts of agricultural labor or perform no agricultural labor. If their visits were prolonged they would observe that the minimum amounts of agricultural labor performed by adults guarantees seasonal hunger in poor crop years.

The lack of long-term observation of labor practices in peasant villages is obvious in the writing of economists who specialize in economic development. They have no count of how many hours of labor are performed on a measured area of land during a normal crop year; nor do they know who does the labor or how many people must be fed from a harvest on a measured area of land. This raw data is essential for measuring the subsistence welfare of peasant households. No assessment of food production and consumption by peasant households can be made without it.

Compared to subsistence cultures, labor in commercial cultures, has a high social value because continuous paid employment by adults is essential for earning money incomes that are necessary for paying teachers of literacy and purchasing all of the food, clothing, shelter, and medical services required for children to survive to adulthood and be employable in the commercial sector. Children in commercial cultures are an economic burden because they are expensive to raise to maturity; therefore, births are limited in all commercial cultures regardless of religion, race, or climate.

The **third** virtue of communal tenure is fair sharing of harvests. In poor crop years there are usually some households with larger harvests than their neighbors. These harvests are shared among household with deficient harvests because customary law forbids selling their food grain in poor crop years. Fair sharing ensures survival of all cultivating households and is the moral glue that holds subsistence cultures together. Fair sharing of land and harvests makes the subsistence compromise a successful institution except when there are consecutive poor crop years and famine conditions that induce panic migrations.

If central governments undertake a concerted policy of economic development, commercializing food production must be the first priority because an assured food surplus is the fundamental capital contribution for feeding persons employed in the urban/commercial sector. Most development economists fail to see with clarity that peasants reject producing assured food surpluses as long as land is in communal tenure. They also fail to see with sufficient clarity that assured food surpluses will not be produced as long as village councils can equalize subsistence opportunities among village households by equalizing the size of cultivation units and enforcing food sharing in poor crop years. There is no way that the equalized distribution of village land or the ethic of fair sharing of food can be called economic.

Economic policies alone will not induce peasants to replace the communal institutions that protect subsistence social values. This is a political process that requires the abrogation of communal land tenure. In other words, when a central government attempts to commercialize food production political policies must take precedence over economic policies, as in the term **political economy**.

Abrogation of communal tenure requires replacing it with some variety of commercial tenure. In the nations of Western Europe freehold tenure was the usual tenure used to commercialize food production; however, two other commercial tenures were available. They were leasehold and a twentieth century variation--collective. In 1400 most feudal landholders in Western Europe held their land in some variety of service tenure to kings. They did not actively manage the cultivation practices of the peasants who cultivated their land. They were absentee landholders who allowed village councils to manage cultivation practices and labor services on demesne land.

In medieval England a feudal landholder's share of peasant labor was not sacks of grain but labor service to cultivate demesne land. Crops grown on demesne land were the property of feudal landholders and he received all of the money when harvests were sold. Alternatively, peasant households could substitute money for labor services. The money could be acquired by producing a commodity that had a market value (livestock, barley for brewing, cheese, wool, flax). Collection of sacks of grain that were the landholder's share of peasant harvests was usually done by bailiffs with the help of village storekeepers who sold the grain and forwarded the money to bailiffs who sent it to feudal landholders. Landholders then paid a money tax to a central government (kings) when required. In poor crop years feudal landholders used coercion to collect their sacks of grain. When this occurred peasants experienced various degrees of privation.

After 1500 some feudal landholders began to actively manage cultivation in order to increase their incomes by growing assured food surpluses for market sale. Increasing harvests required increasing labor inputs, and this required abrogating communal tenure and replacing it with a commercial tenure that vested ownership in one person. Institutionalization of commercial tenure had to follow a legal pathway. Feudal landholders had to have their land surveyed to establish boundaries. Then legal titles had to be obtained by using a court that could validate the accuracy of surveys. After legal titles were obtained they had to be registered in a government office (courthouse). Almost always, institutionalizing commercial land tenure required variable amounts of coercion because peasants resisted losing control of land use because this translated into losing the ability to perform subsistence labor norms.

Three changes followed the institutionalization of commercial tenures: 1) increased labor inputs into cultivation; 2) ease of changing land use; 3) money taxation of arable land. Legal ownership of arable land with measured boundaries converted it into a commercial asset that had a market value because it could be sold, leased, or used as collateral for mortgage loans. Money obtained from mortgage loans could be used to purchase additional land or make improvements that made land more productive.

Some of the improvements were fencing, drainage, irrigation, terracing, barns, access roads, and purchasing machinery to aid cultivation and harvesting. Legal titles transformed feudal landholders into landowners. As legal owners they had the authority to end morselation by consolidating scattered cultivation units into larger fields and enclosing them with hedge fences (enclosure movement in England). Larger fields could be more efficiently cultivated by supervised paid laborers or by machines after they were invented. Profitability could also be increased by changing land use in order to produce commodities (wool, flax, cheese, hops, grapes) with a higher market value than food grains. This made arable land into a profit-making asset. Changes in land use to produce more profitable commodities abolished the fundamental ethic of peasant societies: that village land should be used to grow subsistence food crops to feed all village households at a subsistence level of nutrition and, at the same time, share the risks of hunger when there were deficient harvests.

The second revolutionary change resulting from instituting commercial tenure was applying commercial labor norms to cultivation. This was done by leasing land to farmers. Farmers of agricultural land were like tax farmers who collected inland taxes levied by kings (salt tax, transit taxes). Farmers of agricultural land paid an annual sum of money (rent) to landowners for a lease that gave them the right to keep all the money from the sale of harvests in excess of rents. In England the usual lease was 21 years.

Farmers actively supervised paid laborers. They obtained a full day of labor from them by laboring in the field beside them for 10 hours per day 6 days a week. The increased hours of agricultural labor by fewer men performing commercial labor norms for six days a week produced larger harvests for market sale, and this increased the incomes of landowners. Excess households were evicted.

Peasants frequently rebelled (jacqueries) to prevent their scattered cultivation units from being consolidated into large fenced fields and being forced to become paid agricultural laborers on land they formerly cultivated with subsistence labor norms. Armed force had to be available to suppress these rebellions if tenure change was to succeed. After losing control of land use peasants had five choices: 1) become artisan manufacturers in their villages (weavers, fletchers, makers of barrel staves); 2) emigrate to cities and seek wage labor employment; 3) attend district labor fairs where farmers would hire them for one year as agricultural laborers; 4) migrate to where vacant land was available; 5) become vagabonds.

If the central governments of contemporary peasant nations want to commercialize food production they must follow a similar path. Governments must be prepared to use large amounts of physical coercion to enforce tenure change. This coercion can be administered by the police of central governments or by the army if implementation ignites a rebellion. As a general rule, however, governments of contemporary peasant nations do not attempt to institute commercial tenure on land used for subsistence cultivation. It is too politically dangerous because these nations have unreliable coercive power at their disposal; therefore, assured food surpluses are not produced. Nonetheless, city residents must be fed. Imported food feeds them. Money to purchase imported food comes from tax revenues on showpiece projects (oil production, mines), or from export taxes on agricultural commodities (sheet rubber, coffee), or by gifts from nations with commercial agriculture. The tax revenues used to purchase food is unavailable to expand the commercial infrastructure.

Effective taxation is the third revolutionary change that follows the institutionalization of commercial tenure on arable land. Land in communal tenure is not easily taxed because the scattered cultivation units of households are continuously redistributed by village councils. Continual redistribution means that no household has a permanent claim to any unit of arable land. Taxes on arable land in communal tenure were customary amounts of the harvest or customary amounts of labor to cultivate demesne land. Both grain taxes and labor obligations were often contested in poor crop years. The only way central governments (kingships) could collect additional revenue from peasant villages was a poll tax on males over 16 years of age. Peasants strongly resented this tax because it was always paid in cash money.

Economists usually ignore the political coercion required to institute commercial tenure on agricultural land. By ignoring political coercion they can assume that peasant households are eager to maximize their money incomes whenever there are opportunities. This assumption confuses monetization with income. Based on this confusion, they believe that the tools of economic analysis can be used to measure the welfare of peasant households. They use money incomes because they know of no other way to measure peasant welfare.

Economists, however, know that peasants do not earn real money incomes nor do they perform commercial labor norms. Nonetheless, economic analysis requires that peasants have money incomes and perform commercial labor norms. They solve this problem by inventing money incomes. They are invented by assigning a money value to subsistence harvests. This is magic.

Some of the magical terms they use are full income, village income, subsistence income, implicit wage income, non-wage income, income concept, and income produced forces. Commercial labor norms are invented by assigning a money value to the labor required to grow subsistence crops. This is also magic. Economists invent money incomes and commercial labor norms for peasants because they are the only two measurements they understand.

After subsistence sized harvests and subsistence labor norms are given magical money values, economists use mathematical analysis to compare the subsistence labor of peasant households with the paid labor incomes earned by city workers. In other words, commercial labor norms are compared to subsistence labor norms by using the mathematical tools that economists use to measure incomes in commercial cultures. This is comparing elephants to mice. It is spurious analysis.

Reality is different. The labor expended by peasants to grow subsistence crops has no money value and the subsistence sized harvests they grow has no money value. If peasants sold their harvests they would starve. Magical incomes have another purpose. The low money incomes that economists invent for peasants make them poor. Almost without exception, economists use the word poor (or absolute poverty) to describe the welfare of peasants because the policies they recommend are designed to alleviate poverty. The word subsistence is not part of their vocabulary. It is almost never used in their scholarship because they observe peasant societies through the lens of their own commercial social values and assume that commercial social values are universal and households that acquire minimal amounts of money per year are poor.

Poor does not apply to peasants. Poor has a specific meaning that applies only to commercial cultures. Poor describes households with low money incomes. Household welfare in commercial cultures depends on money incomes earned by continuous paid labor, and if they lack paid labor employment they are unemployed. Nor does the term disguised unemployment describe the subsistence welfare of peasants. Peasants are not victims of unemployment or underemployment. Their welfare depends on control of land use which allows them to minimize agricultural labor and minimize participation in the commercial sector. They are not poor, they are subsistent.

It is essential that all persons who investigate global food production understand the revolutionary difference between subsistence cultivators (peasants) and commercial cultivators (farmers) because this is **the great cultural divide** between cultures of abundance and cultures of privation.

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