

Before capitalism: inequality in the early sixteenth century

Once conceived as an unremitting and gloomy recession, if not depression, the later middle ages have subsequently been construed as an 'age of ambition' and even more recently as 'an age of transition'.¹ We are no longer preoccupied by Postan's collapse of the economy. The downturn, it is now suggested, presented some peasants greater opportunities and the exercise of greater agency.² That interpretation, although less ideological than Brenner's notion of the formation of 'agrarian capitalism', is supportive of one of the main conclusions of Robert Brenner that the conflict of interest of peasants and lords was accommodated by a compromise, by which some gentry and some peasants were able to engage in a more robust husbandry and agrarian regime.³ The dislocation of customary tenures, the transition to copyhold tenures, and then leases, was convenient for agrarian enterprise. Nor are the later middle ages now considered culturally a 'great divide', as recent research has proposed more continuous development through the later middle ages, for example in the matters of social disorder and misbehaviour and the confirmation of ideas of commonwealth.⁴ Here, however, it is the economy which is foregrounded. In view of those transitions in the later middle ages, what can we deduce about the extent of inequality in the early sixteenth century? Had the conditions of the later middle ages compressed the rungs on the socio-economic ladder? What were the economic conditions of society in the early sixteenth century before the impact shortly thereafter of demographic expansion and the

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- 1 M. M. Postan; Hatcher; Hatcher and Bailey; Bailey marginal economy; F. R. H. DuBoulay; C. C. Dyer.
 - 2 C. Dyer, *An Age of Transition?: Economy and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005); J. Whittle. *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk 1440-1580* (Oxford, 2000).
 - 3 T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds, *The Brenner Debate. Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985); Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism*.
 - 4 M. K. McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehaviour in England, 1370-1600* (Cambridge, 1998); McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England 1350-1600* (Cambridge, 2012); D. Rollison, *A Commonwealth of the People. Popular Politics and England's Long Social Revolution, 1066-1649* (Oxford, 2010). For the question of cultural continuity – in writing about rural society and labour – K. C. Little, *Transforming Work. Early Modern Pastoral and Late Medieval Poetry* (Notre Dame, IN, 2013), pp. 1-14.

concomitant inflation which endured through the sixteenth century?

I

[The context of the 1520s]

The 1520s have recently been defined as the final decade of relative stability at the end of the middle ages. 'Between around 1530 and 1533, poverty intensified and the forms of relief changed significantly.⁵ 'Between 1530 and the late 1550s, objective problems with poverty became more severe and were distributed more widely throughout the country.⁶ The deterioration involved both structural poverty and conjunctural poverty, chronic and acute conditions.⁷ Urban poverty had, indeed, been recognized before 1530, a precursor of the dissemination of the issue more widely.⁸ Intimations of rural poverty had occurred in earlier decades of the sixteenth century, but without a cohesive response.⁹ Accordingly, some of the complaints entered into the new printed literature of the time.¹⁰

They [the commons/commonalty] are in suche grette penury

That thay cane nether sell ner bye

Such ys there extreme powertey

Experyens dothe it veryfye.¹¹

5 M. K. McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England 1350-1600* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 1, 41, n. 5.

6 McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, p. 19.

7 McIntosh, *Poor relief*, pp. 18-19, n. 47.

8 McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, p. 40.

9 McIntosh, *Poor relief*, p. 44 and n. 14.

10 Tawney on contemporary comment.

11 John Skelton, *Vox Populi Vox Dei, A Complaint of The Comons against Taxes* (originally printed in 1547; repr. London,

In a sort of precursor of the complaint literature which became more extensive in the later sixteenth century, the anonymous *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*, printed in the 1540s, deplored the social and economic division and bifurcation which was reducing the commons to poverty.¹² The 'grett mens transgressyon', perpetrated by 'upstart gentrymen', resulted in the immiseration of the commonalty.¹³ Although not composed by Skelton, the *Vox Populi* echoed some of Skelton's distinctive tropes as well as the Skeltonic form. It has been suggested that *Colin Clout* and *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte* by Skelton assumed the persona of the 'exploited and oppressed ... honest labouring folk' to attack Wolsey, continuing a 'long tradition of estates satire based on the oppositional figure of the noble English ploughman'.¹⁴ In constructing the proponent, Colin Clout, Skelton explicitly adapted the Latin 'colonus' (farmer) and the Middle English 'clout' (rags). Skelton and the *Vox Populi* therefore both projected the plight of impoverished rural society in the first half of the sixteenth century, Skelton more directly concurrent with the taxations of the 1520s. Whilst Skelton's critique was entirely *ad hominem*, directed at Wolsey as personally responsible for the country's ills, not least through the taxations from 1513 to 1525, his rhetorical animadversions identified the incipiently parlous conditions of some of England's population, a perception confirmed by his contemporary, Thomas More. The difference between

1821), p. 2.

- 12 It is generally now accepted, however, that *Vox Populi* was a later composition by one of those authors who adopted the 'Skeltonic form' in the 1540s: J. Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 160, 162 (*colonus*, clout), 165, and, generally, 160-70 for the appropriation of 'The Skeltonic as Protest'; for a Marxist interpretation of this complaint literature, R. Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation. Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of capitalism* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), p. 134 (social ills were attributed by Skelton entirely to the delegated autocracy of Wolsey), and, for More's Utopia, ch. 4 (pp. 136-75); for Skelton's motivation, G. Walker, *John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 53-123 (chapter 3: the need for patronage); for clerical complaint literature half a century later, B. Waddell, 'Economic immorality and social reformation in English popular preaching, 1585-1625', *Cultural and Social History* 5 (2008), pp. 165-82, but Skelton's clerical status was less important than his courtly position.
- 13 Skelton, *Vox Populi Vox Dei*, pp. 8, 12. For the notion of the commonwealth, subsuming the commonalty, D. Rollison, *A Commonwealth of the People. Popular Politics and England's Long Social Revolution, 1066-1649* (Cambridge, 2010).
- 14 A. Hadfield, 'The Nation in the Renaissance', in E. Sauer and J. M. Wright, eds, *Reading the Nation in English Literature. A Critical Reader* (London, 2010), p. 136.

Skelton and the others was, however, that Skelton's work, although conscious of the issues, was confined to manuscript circulation.¹⁵ The other contributors made their condemnations more widely available through the new print medium. All, however, adopted a ventriloquism in which they professed to hear the 'common voice' and merely reported that discontent.¹⁶

As Alexander Barclay intimated, the rich and poor are always with us. In 1509 was printed by Pynson, Barclay's translation and adaptation of Brandt's *The Ship of Fools*. The discussion 'Of ryches unprofytable' refers not only to charity to the poor, but implicates the excessive consumption of the affluent.

The ryche ar rewarded with gyftis of dyuerse sorte
 With Capons and Conyes delycious of sent
 But the pore caytyf abydeth without confort
 Though he moste nede haue : none doth hym present
 The fat pygge is baast, the lene cony is brent
 He that nought hathe, shall so always byde pore
 But he that ouer muche hath, yet shall haue more¹⁷

Although proffering a perhaps well-worn trope, the *Ship of Fools* fits into a new context of heightened significance of debate about affluence and poverty, stimulated by the advent of the printing press.

Some decades ago, our attention was directed by the great historian of the Tudors, S. T. Bindoff, to the debate between Raphael Hythloday with the lawyer and the Cardinal, in More's *Utopia*. Bindoff

15 Walker, *John Skelton and the Politics*, pp. 119-23 for 'the circulation of the satires'.

16 Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority*, pp. 160-70.

17 *The Ship of Fools Translated by Alexander Barclay* (London, 1874), p. 100.

recited the passage about the metaphorically carnivorous sheep and the counterproductive social effects of enclosure for sheepfarming.¹⁸ In the same rhetorical utterances, Raphael also castigated the tendency to sumptuous apparel of the noble estate which some in the lower estate attempted to emulate. As a consequence, the desires of consumption eclipsed the imperative or necessity of production (husbandry and tillage). Another aspect which *Vox Populi* identified was the impact on the 'market'.¹⁹

Whiche maketh the markett now soe dere

That there bye fewe that makes good chere.²⁰

What *Vox Populi* was deploring here was the interruption of normalcy in the exchange of commodities, the expectation of a regulated and social market.²¹

In modern economic interpretation, More had identified the economic diminishing marginal utility of consumption – economic by contrast with the satisfaction rating of the marginal utility of consumption.²² Several implications can be derived from the inequality which More observed: first, it induced the affluent to spend on Jack Fisher's 'conspicuous consumption' which sucked in imported goods; second, and in a consequential way, the expenditure of the rich had a smaller 'multiplier' effect

18 S. T. Bindoff, *Tudor England*. See Appendix 1. For the argument that the conversion to sheepfarming was a response to a structural change in the economy – a consequence of depopulation rather than its cause – C. . Dyer, 'Deserted medieval villages in the West Midlands', *Economic History Review* 2nd ser. xxxv (1982), pp. 19-34; this explanation is probably apposite to in the East Midlands on the wolds and uplands which had been settled late, remained sparsely populated, and by the early sixteenth century was probably epitomized by decayed markets and small gentry estates: H. S. A. Fox, 'The people of the wolds in English settlement history', in M. Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer, eds, *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England: Studies Dedicated to Maurice Beresford and John Hurst* (Oxford, 1989), pp. .

19 For the early origin and persistence of the market, D. Graeber, *Debt. The First 5,000 Years* ((New York, 2011, 2012), passim, but esp. pp. 114-15, 130, 238-9.

20 Skelton, *Vox Populi Vox Dei*, p. 22.

21 R. H. Britnell, 'Price-setting in English borough markets, 1349-1500' and 'Urban economic regulation and economic morality in medieval England' in *idem*, *Markets, Trade and Economic Development in England and Europe, 1050-1550* (Farnham, 2009).

22 For MUC as an index of happiness, satisfaction or welfare, Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence. Self-control and Well-being in the United States and Britain Since 1950* (Oxford, 2006; repr. 2011), p. 59.

in this country.²³ When those on the lower social scale have funds, they are compelled to spend locally on basics: necessary spending. Large-scale discretionary spending is restricted for them. The impact on the local economy is radical with a multiplier effect. The discretionary spend of the more affluent has a lesser impact on the local economy and consequently on employment.²⁴ The entire critique of More can be distilled in these terms.²⁵ *Vox Populi* implicated a further variable, the dislocation of the market. His sensibilities can be associated with two modern economic propositions: asymmetry of information of information in the market place (Stiglitz et al.) and problems of distribution and 'capability deprivation' (Sen) by the 1540s. Since it is here impossible to explore all these variances, the intention here is to concentrate on the distribution of income, a principal component identified by *Vox Populi* and More.²⁶ In other words, this exegesis is mainly economic, without full reference to the 'social imaginary' of the time.²⁷

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- 23 F. J. Fisher, "The development of London as a centre for conspicuous consumption in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4th series 30 (1948), repr. In E. M. Carus-Wilson, ed., *Essays in Economic History* volume 2 (London, 1962), pp. 197-207; for the multiplier in general, R. Lipsey and A. Chrystal, *Economics* (11th edn, Oxford, 2007), pp. 376-9.
- 24 The 'drag' effect of inequality on economic growth was articulated by Keynes; for a more accessible account, Stewart Lansley, *The Cost of Inequality. Why Economic Equality is Essential for Recovery* (London, 2012), esp. pp. 164-79.
- 25 Sir Thomas More, *Utopia* translated by Ralph Robinson with an introduction by Mishtooni Bose (Ware, 1997), pp. 31-6. For the origins, inter-textuality and nuances of *Utopia*, J. C. Davis, 'Thomas More's *Utopia*: sources, legacy and interpretation', in Gregory Claes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 28-50, and, at pp. 40-1, More's critique of 'emulative competition'.
- 26 The most comprehensive and substantive analysis remains, of course, Julian Cornwall's *Wealth and Society in Early Sixteenth Century England* (London, 1988), still under-estimated and under-cited. My mitigation for re-examining the issues is first a difference of technique and second the posing of different questions. A. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford, 1999) is a re-statement of his earlier pronouncements: pp. 163 (exchange conditions), 163-4 (price equilibrium of foodstuffs), 164 ('entitlement failure' in famines), 164 ff ('economic entitlements'), 167 ('entitlement losses'), 167 (competing demand – urban provision). For the issue of the extent of (geographical) integration of the market, J. Walter and R. Schofield, 'Famine, disease and crisis mortality in early modern society', in *idem*, eds, *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 9-10 and succinctly K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities. Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, 2000), pp. 108-12; Walter and Schofield were influenced by Sen's notion of 'entitlement' and its derogation: pp. 14-15. The published papers of Stiglitz and his colleagues (resulting in the award of the Nobel Prize in 2001) are too numerous to cite, but perhaps commenced with: 'Monopoly, non-linear pricing, and imperfect information: the insurance market', *Review of Economic Studies* 44 (1977), pp. 407-430, and Stiglitz and A. Weiss, 'Credit rationing in markets with imperfect information', *American Economic Review* 71 (1981), pp. 393-410.
- 27 D. Dworkin, *Class Struggles* (Harlow, 2007), p. 35; A. Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2002).

The distribution of income thus assumes some importance for the efficiency of the economy as well as its inherent moral conundra about social justice, both elements contained with More's critique.²⁸ A distinction is made here between the functional distribution of income and the size distribution of income. The situation was, however, complex: although the extent of land, labour and capital was to some degree aligned according to the three estates, all estates had some interest in all three resources.²⁹

More conceived of his critique in the first decade of the sixteenth century, appearing first in printed format in 1516 – incidentally just before the harvest dislocations of 1519-21. Profound transformations were about to occur, with the expansion of population and price inflation. It is perhaps then an apposite conjuncture to consider the state of inequality. We can undertake such an analysis from the lay subsidy returns of 1524-5.³⁰

II

[The taxation of 1524-5]

It is generally assumed that the taxation of 1524 and 1525, collected in two installments, was reasonably comprehensive, with few lacunae, omissions and little evasion. Whilst that presumption of completeness has some rationale, it is necessary to examine some potential issues. The 5,000 to 6,000 inmates of hospitals and almshouses were excluded.³¹ These supported 'poor' are thus absent from the

28 For an explanation of 'Engel's Law' on the pattern of consumption, G. Clark, *A Farewell to Alms. A Brief Economic History of the World* (Princeton, 2007), pp. 52-5. Martin Ravallion, 'Inequality is bad for the poor', in Stephen P. Jenkins and John Micklewright, eds, *Inequality and Poverty Re-examined* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 37-42 ('Inequality and growth revisited'). For a wide consideration of notions of famine, S. Millman and R. W. Kates, 'Toward understanding hunger', in L. F. Newman, et al., eds, *Hunger in History. Food Shortage, Poverty, and Deprivation* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 3-24.

29 Lipsey and Chrystal, *Economics*, p. 208.

30 For the constancy of the poor and poor relief by diverse methods, McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England*; C. Dyer, 'Poverty and its relief in late medieval England', *Past & Present* 216 (2012), pp. 41-78.

31 McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, p. 59.

analysis below. The minimum criterion for inclusion in the taxation was £1 in wages, but it is likely that a proportion of people existed on irregular sources of income, tantamount to voluntary provision for welfare, thus, in economists' considerations, 'externalities'.³² It has been suggested that, at least in remoter countryside, with dispersed settlement of multiple hamlets in large parishes, with access to upland transhumance, concealment of livestock was possible.³³ Finally, with experience, the second collection in 1525 might involved more evasion – at the margins – which affects the analysis below to a slight extent, for, where the 1524 return is missing, recourse has been made to that of 1525.

Hoskins concluded that the era of the tax exaction coincided with good harvests, 1522-6.³⁴ That perception is perhaps somewhat optimistic, for the lingering repercussions of the poor run of 1519-21 might have been a persistent challenge. In the assessment for the Aylesbury Hundreds in 1525, about 40 percent of the taxpayers assessed on income of more than £3 requested allowances for decay of corn (and cattle in some cases).³⁵ Sen has suggested that 'famine' is not primarily caused by harvest failure, but through the dislocation of distribution. Harvest failure depresses the food supply at the margin, around 5 percent, but 'famine' is a consequence of the diversion from normal distribution. In the context of the 1520s, there is some uncertainty whether heavier mortality occurred through harvest failure of epidemic sickness in 1519-1521 and 1527-8.³⁶ We know, for example, that grain prices returned by the leet juries in Lincoln almost doubled in the summer of 1520.³⁷ Hoskins in 1964

32 McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, pp. 30-1.

33 Fox

34 Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations', pp. 31, 33-4.

35 A. C. Chibnall and A. V. Woodman, eds, *Subsidy Roll for the County of Buckingham Anno 1524* (Buckinghamshire Record Society 8, 1950 for 1944), pp. 1-10. The return for this hundred is for the second year, 1525. Of the 286 taxpayers assessed on income of more than £3, 114 were allowed a reduction for this reason. The threshold of £3 and above is assumed to exclude those who depended on wages for their income (20s or 40s). The reductions were allowed in Aylesbury, Aston Clinton, Donington, Hadingham, Great Kimble, Great Missenden, Monksborough, Princes Risborough, Stoke Mandeville, Walton, Wendover and Weston Turville.

36 Walter and Schofield, 'Famine, disease and crisis mortality', p. 81. For the dearth of these years, W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations and English economic history, 1480-1619', *Agricultural History Review* 12 (1964), pp. 28-46; despite the later revisions of the data, the general conclusions of Hoskins about the 1520s remain.

37 J. W. F. Hill, *Tudor and Stuart Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 222.

referred to the dislocation of the market of grain in the early sixteenth century, the diversion of grain from its normal destinations.³⁸ The effect of the harvest failures might, however, have been mitigated by the improvement in the standard of living of some during the more benevolent later middle ages.³⁹

The subsequent Amicable grant proposed in 1525 produced complaints of poverty. This clamour might have constituted a strategy to resist the demand without refusing to contribute. A dearth of coin might also have incited the reaction. The successive exactions between 1513 (when Wolsey reintroduced taxation levied on the individual) and 1525 had probably exhausted both patience and resources.⁴⁰ Outright revolt ensued in the textile centres of Suffolk, which might reflect on the analysis below of the lay subsidy for that county.⁴¹

Since no other returns for the taxation provide such evidence about reductions for depreciation, there is a conundrum about the reliability of the taxation. If such allowances were made elsewhere, but not recorded, then the taxation of 1524-5 may represent an under-assessment at a point of severe dislocation of the economy. We cannot compensate for that potential distortion. Indeed, some of the allowances might have consisted of tax evasion by the wealthiest farmers on the pretext of agricultural dislocation. When, however, we consider below the comparative Gini coefficient, we can assume that the wealthiest have constantly been able to avoid the full disclosure of their income, especially in the recent decades.

The lay subsidy of 1524-5 assessed the income of individuals.⁴² The distribution of wealth and

38 Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations', pp. 34-5.

39 McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, pp. 18-19.

40 G. W. Bernard, *War, Taxation and Rebellion in Early Tudor England. Henry VIII, Wolsey and the Amicable Grant of 1525* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 114-17, 124.

41 Bernard, *War, Taxation and Rebellion*, pp. 136-49 (chapter 6: 'The Amicable Grant and disturbances in the textile towns of Suffolk').

42 There has, of course, been considerable debate about the comprehensiveness of the taxation returns by Bridbury, Hadwin, Rigby, Goose et al. Citations in due course. My position is that they must be employed *faute de mieux*. B. M. S. Campbell, 'The population of early Tudor England: a re-evaluation of the 1522 muster returns and 1524 and 1525 lay subsidies', *Journal of Historical Geography* 7 (1981), pp. 145-154.

income was more complicated, nonetheless, for the taxation does not comprehend the household economy.⁴³ A further stage of this research will therefore involve wealth in probate inventories, although that wealth does not correspond with annual income and pertains to a specific stage in the life-course, at death, which might, however, have occurred at various ages.

III

[Measuring inequality]

Currently, we apply two criteria of relative poverty and inequality: the Gini coefficient (with the Lorenz curve) and the poverty line, assumed until recently to obtain at the 60th percentile of the median wage. More contention has surrounded the latter indicator; indeed, it is being revised in the UK right now.⁴⁴ The poverty line has its place because the price mechanism of commodities is influenced by this divergence. Here, however, consideration is confined to the Gini coefficient.⁴⁵ The dilemma, as rehearsed above, for historians is the criticism that we have incomplete data, even in historical tax assessments. The rejoinder, as also noticed above, is that we will nonetheless probably always have defective data, especially in recent decades with the potential for concealing earned and unearned income where assets are not fixed.

Without entering into the precise computation of the coefficient, we can succinctly observe that it measures the extent of equality/inequality from 0 (absolute equality) to 1 (absolute inequality). To place it into a comprehensible context, the Gini coefficient increase in the US from 0.38 in 1968 to 0.43

43 Greg Clark emphasized this difference at a session of the Economic History Society in Cambridge.

44 For reflection on whether this unidimensional measure should be replaced by a multidimensional approach, Stephen P. Jenkins and John Micklewright, 'New directions in the analysis of inequality and poverty', in *Inequality and Poverty Re-examined*, pp. 22-4, and Part II of this book ('Multiple dimensions').

45 'The most popular measure of income inequality is the Gini coefficient ...' Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*, p. 271. For a succinct explanation, Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (London, 2012), pp. 28-9.

in 1992, as inequality advanced in the 'Great U-Turn'.⁴⁶ A corresponding increase in the coefficient occurred in the UK, with a proportionate advance in inequality, measuring 0.34.⁴⁷

Table 1 relates to the Gini coefficient and Lorenz curve for sample counties in England in 1524-5.⁴⁸ For clarification, the data comprise the tax assessment for one year, usually 1524, but where that annual return does not survive, for the second year, 1525. That difference presents another complication: the potential for losses between the first and second years and for higher avoidance/evasion in the second year. The data do not take into account regional and intra-regional differences in standards of living and income. For example, the Breckland is noticeably different in levels of wealth at all levels from the rest of Suffolk.⁴⁹ In the context of the measurement of inequality (below), the Gini coefficient in the Breckland in 1524, although high by modern standards, was towards the low end in 1524 by comparison with other localities (0.570048 for the 169 identifiable taxpayers). Some regions were probably characterized by poor gentry families at their upper echelon.⁵⁰ [More to be added on regional diversity] The data contain inherent discrepancies and present only a crude overview. We cannot also compensate for payments in kind which might have influenced gross income.⁵¹

Table 2 separates off some urban places, cities and boroughs. The data for these places are not

46 Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality*, p. 29: 0.48 in 2012 in the US.

47 Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*, p. 271.

48 The sources: J. Cornwall, *Tudor Rutland: The County Community under Henry VIII* (Rutland Record Series 1, 1980); *Suffolk in 1524, Being the Return for a Subsidy Granted in 1523* (Suffolk Green Books 10, Woodbridge, 1910); T. L. Stoate, *Devon Lay Subsidy Rolls 1524-7* (Bristol, 1979); T. L. Stoate, *Dorset Tudor subsidies granted in 1523, 1543, 1593* (Bristol, 1982); M. A. Faraday, *Worcestershire Taxes in the 1520s: the Military Survey and Forced Loans of 1522-3 and the lay subsidy of 1524-7* (Worcestershire Historical Society 19, 2003); M. A. Faraday, *The Lay Subsidy for Shropshire 1524-7* (Shropshire Record Series 3, 1999); J. C. Cornwall, *The Lay Subsidy Rolls for the County of Sussex, 1524-25* (Sussex Record Society 56, 1956); M. H. Hulton, *Coventry and its people in the 1520s* (Dugdale Society 38, 1999). To be added Gloucestershire; Herefordshire; Nottinghamshire; part of Lancashire.

49 For the specialized economy of the Breckland and its inter-relationship with other *pays* in Suffolk, M. Bailey, *A Marginal Economy?: East Anglian Breckland in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989); idem, *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History, 1200-1500* (Woodbridge, 2010).

50 F. Heal and C. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales 1500-1700* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 12-13.

51 D. Woodward, *Men at Work. Labourers and Building Craftsmen in the Towns of Northern England, 1450-1750* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 12.

included in the analysis in Figure 1. The decision to treat an urban place differently was predicated on the number of taxpayers: a critical mass of taxpayers to make a meaningful analysis. Felicitously, however, the places also represent quite faithfully an urban hierarchy: from small ports (Bridport), small market town (Milton Abbas), small county capital (Lewes, Dorchester), larger county borough (Shrewsbury, Chichester) and (former) great City and county of the City (Coventry, whether its demise has been greatly exaggerated or not).⁵²

Returning to Table 1, which principally represents rural parishes and small towns, the Gini coefficient is high, denoting considerable inequality. It is, however, fairly consistent, within a predominantly narrow and defined range: around 0.61 and 0.62 for Dorset, Suffolk and Rutland. In Devon, with a considerably larger taxable population, the Gini coefficient for rural parishes was somewhat lower at 0.58. There appears, nonetheless, a noticeable difference in the West Midlands, where the coefficient is flatter and lower: 0.54 in Shropshire and 0.57 in Worcestershire. Although that level still indicates a high relative inequality, the differentiation in the West Midlands is less severe: it seems that inequality was abated in these two counties.

When we turn our attention to the urban places, the extent of differentiation is more remarkable. At the apex, the apparent level of inequality in the largest urban place, Coventry, was almost inconceivable: 0.82 – radical differences in income, the still high affluence of some citizens raising the Gini coefficient to an inordinate level. Quite extraordinarily, the county town of Dorchester exhibits the same extreme – 0.85. A high level of the coefficient marked Plymouth in Devon, a new port town, at 0.74. Another developing port town in Devon, Dartmouth, had a Gini coefficient of 0.68. Bridport, a commercial urban place on the Dorset coast, is distinct with a Gini coefficient of 0.67. By comparison with its county, the City of Worcester had a comparatively high coefficient of 0.69.

⁵² C. V. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979).

Perhaps surprisingly, a lower coefficient marked Exeter, a port and regional capital, at 0.66.⁵³ The City of Chichester and the county town of Lewes have lower levels of inequality, but still as high as 0.64, comparable with the levels of the highest county coefficients. Shrewsbury, perhaps commensurate with the lower levels of inequality in its county, has a lower Gini coefficient at 0.60. The small town of Milton Abbas accords with the generality of rural inequality at 0.59. All urban places in Devon, of whatever character and rank in the urban hierarchy, had coefficients above 0.6 (Table 3).

In a sense, those data remain somewhat meaningless outwith a wider context. A secular trend has been proposed by Simon Kuznets, the eponymous 'Kuznets curve', a parabola which involves rising inequality during developmental phases of an economy, after which stability of equality is attained once a critical stage of development is achieved – an inverse U-shaped curve. Broadly, rural economies have an inherent degree of equality, whilst urbanizing and industrializing economies pass through initial stages of increasing inequality. That disparity is smoothed in the later stages of industrial and urban development by 'externalities' such as interventions in welfare, education, and redistribution. As a result of the last three to four decades, the recent end of the parabola has been discredited, of course, by a resurgence of inequality in post-industrial economies. Until recently, the more distant end of the parabola has received little attention from social and economic historians, but there have been some incisive recent comments in a pioneering article by Van Zanden and by Alfani.⁵⁴ Van Zanden adopted a rather scatter-gun approach, collating available data from widely dispersed locations in continental Europe, although including a brief nod to Norwich in 1525.⁵⁵ His analysis largely consisted of comparative urban rental data rather than incomes. Alfani's locus was more

53 M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995); W. T. McCaffrey, *Exeter, 1540-1640 : the Growth of an English Country Town* (Cambridge, MA, 1958).

54 J. L. Van Zanden, 'Tracing the beginning of Kuznets curve: western Europe during the early modern period', *Economic History Review* 2nd ser. 48 (1995), pp. 643-64; Guido Alfani, 'Wealth inequalities and population dynamics in early modern northern Italy', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40 (2010), pp. 513-49.

55 Van Zanden, 'Tracing the beginning', p. 645.

focused and his conclusions derived from taxation data.

Another question remains whether the fiscal phenomena observed here were new in the early sixteenth century or already embedded in the socio-economic 'structure' – 'structure' in the sense of features over the *longue durée* of the *Annales* school. The difficulty here is that most of the earlier taxation data are not comparable. We have to return to the lay subsidies of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries before we have fiscal levies on individuals. The inherent problem is that a much wider proportion of the population was omitted in these assessments.⁵⁶ For the sake of comparison, the Rutland data for the subsidy of 1296-7 have been subjected to the same calculation. We discover a considerable difference in the Gini coefficient, but this variance is almost certainly a consequence of the more exclusive capture of the earlier taxation, omitting a large underbelly of exempted people.

Where we can make an instructive comparison is for some boroughs in which internal subsidies were levied intermittently in the late middle ages. Nottingham is an apposite example, for there exists an internal subsidy of 1473 and the lay subsidy of 1524-5. In 1473, 153 townspeople were assessed, with a Gini coefficient of 0.638988; in 1524, the 295 taxpayers were differentiated by a Gini coefficient of 0.777102.⁵⁷ There is both a discrepancy in the number of taxpayers and in the level of the coefficient, but we can remark that the coefficient was already very high in the late fifteenth century and that it was probably an underestimate because of the exclusion of some of the poorest in the borough in 1473.

One obvious observation is that there is a difference in the data sources interrogated here which might lead to different conclusions, which is, indeed, one of the debating points of Alfani with Van Zanden. The conclusion which we can confirm in England is the difference in inequality between the

⁵⁶ See the Appendix below.

⁵⁷ W. Stephenson, ed., *Records of the Borough of Nottingham* (), pp.

countryside and the big civic centres.⁵⁸ What we cannot state categorically, of course, is whether that difference was new: whether it was a consequence of late-medieval developments or inherited in the economic structure previously. What appears different about England – and is significantly divergent from Kuznets theory – is the rather high level of inequality in the countryside exhibited in the taxation returns. Indeed, what we notice is the similarity of the Gini coefficient in rural England with the high coefficient now in the under-developed world in parts of South America and Africa.⁵⁹

58 It would be not be appropriate to reflect here on the difference between the country and the city in the cultural context of Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (new edition, London, 2011); Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry and Joseph P. Ward, *The Country and the City Revisited. England the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850* (Cambridge, 1999); it might, however, be apposite to comment that this divergence in equality/inequality may have implications for Carl Estabrook, *Urbane and Rustic England. Cultural Ties and Social Spheres in the Provinces, 1660-1780* (Manchester, 1998), as for the wider debate about the qualitative and quantitative difference between urban and rural with regard to Philip Abrams in Abrams and E. A. Wrigley, eds, *Towns in Societies. Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1978) and the subsequent discussion of this issue.

59 <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gini_Coefficient_World_Human_Development_Report_2007-2008.png>

Table 1 Gini Coefficients (rural), 1524-5

County	Contributors	Gini coefficient
Dorset	7294	0.608311
Rutland	1701	0.603511
Shropshire	2348	0.535138
Suffolk	15439	0.623740
Sussex	10928	0.637414
Buckinghamshire	7414	0.600378
Worcestershire	3885	0.573525
Gloucestershire	4951	0.539887
<i>Pays</i>	Contributors	Gini coefficient
(Suffolk) Breckland	569	0.570048
Forest of Dean	999	0.527722

Table 2 Gini Coefficients (urban), 1524-5

Urban place	Urban status	Contributors	Gini coefficient
Dorchester	County borough	135	0.844707
Coventry	Regional capital	657	0.814986
Nottingham	County borough	295	0.777102
Bristol	Major port	1089	0.756066
Plymouth	New port	307	0.744071
Gloucester	County borough	393	0.735554
Bury St Edmunds	Monastic/county borough	647	0.712916
Worcester	City	564	0.691074
Dartmouth	New port	156	0.680185
Bridport	Small port	120	0.665381
Tavistock	Monastic borough	132	0.662380
Exeter	Regional capital/port	225	0.660797
Cirencester (1525)	Monastic borough	119	0.659747

Ashburton	Stannary town	77	0.648920
Plympton	Monastic borough	278	0.646094
Chichester	City	300	0.639644
Lewes	County borough	217	0.635242
Tewkesbury (1525)	Borough	158	0.631959
Aylesbury	Market town (larger)	201	0.621568
Barnstaple	Port	231	0.618114
Shrewsbury	County borough	359	0.603007
Crediton	Former see, market town with rural parish/manor	433	0.597352
Milton Abbas	Market town (smaller)	124	0.591879

Table 3 Gini coefficients for Devon, 1524-5

Location	N of taxpayers in sample	Gini coefficient	Category
Ashburton	77	0.648920	Stannary town
Barnstaple	231	0.618114	Port
Crediton	433	0.597352	Former see, urban with rural manor
Dartmouth	156	0.680185	Port ('new')
Exeter	225	0.660797	'Regional capital', port
Plymouth	307	0.744071	Port ('new')
Plympton	278	0.646094	'Monastic borough'
Tavistock	132	0.66238	'Monastic borough'
Totnes	217	0.778424	Borough
Devon 'rural'	23,675	0.578549	Rural parishes

Appendix 1: More's *Utopia*

'Forsooth my lord' (quoth I), 'your sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame and so small eaters, now, as I hear say, be become so great devourers and so wild that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves. They consume, destroy, and devour whole fields, houses, and cities. For look in what parts of the realm doth grow the finest, and therefore dearest wool, there noblemen and gentlemen, yea, and certain abbots, holy men, no doubt, not contenting themselves with the yearly revenues and profits that were wont to grow to their forefathers and predecessors of their lands, nor being content that they live in rest and pleasure nothing profiting, yea much annoying the weal public, leave no ground for tillage, they enclose all into pastures; they throw down houses; they pluck down towns, and leave nothing standing, but only the church to be made a sheephouse. And as though you lost no small quantity of ground by forests, chases, lands, and parks, those good holy men turn all dwelling-places and all glebeland into desolation and wilderness.

Therefore that one covetous and unsatiable cormorant and very plague of his native country may compass about and enclose many thousand acres of ground together with one pale or hedge, the husbandmen be thrust out of their own, or essle either by covin and fraud, or by violent oppression they be put beside it, or by wrongs and injuries they be so wearied that they be compelled to sell all: by one

means, therefore, or by other, either by hook or crook they must needs depart away, poor, silly, wretched souls, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherless children, widows, woeful mothers with their young babes, and their whole household, small in substance and much in number, as husbandry requireth many hands. Away they trudge, I say, out of their known and accustomed houses, finding no place to rest in. All their household stuff, which is very little worth, though it might well abide the sale; yet being suddenly thrust out, they be constrained to sell it for a thing of naught. And when they have wandered abroad till that be spent, what can they then else do but steal, and then justly pardy be hanged, or else go about a-begging. And yet then also they be cast in prison as vagabonds, because they go about and work not, whom no man will set a-work, though they never so willingly proffer themselves thereto. For one shepherd or herdman is enough to eat up that ground with cattle, to the occupying whereof about husbandry many hands were requisite. And this is also the cause why victuals be now in many places dearer.

Yea, besides this, the price of wool is so risen, that poor folks, which were wont to work it, and make cloth thereof, be now able to buy none at all. And by this means very many be forced to forsake work, and to give themselves to idleness. For after that so much ground was enclosed for pasture, an infinite multitude of sheep died of the rot, such vengeance God took of their inordinate and unsociable covetousness, sending among the sheep that pestiferous murrain, which much more justly should have fallen on the sheepmasters' own heads.

And though the number of sheep increase ever so fast, yet the price falleth not one mite, because there be so few sellers. For they be almost all come into a few rich men's hands, whom no need forceth to sell before they list, and they list not before they may sell as dear as they list. Now the same cause bringeth in like dearth of the other kinds of cattle, yea, and that so much the more, because that after farms plucked down, and husbandry decayed, there is no man that passeth for the breeding of young

store. For these rich men bring not up the young ones of great cattle as they do lambs. But first they buy them abroad very cheap, and afterwards when they are fatted in their pastures, they sell them again exceeding dear. And therefore (as I suppose) the whole incommodity hereof is not yet felt. For yet they make dearth only in those places where they sell. But when they shall fetch them away from thence where they be bred faster than they can be brought up, then shall there be felt great dearth, store beginning there to fail where the ware is bought.

Thus the unreasonable covetousness of the few hath turned that thing to the utter undoing of your island, in the which thing the chief felicity of your realm did consist. For this great dearth of victuals causeth men to keep as little houses, and as small hospitality as they possibly may, and to put away their servants: whether, I pray you, but a -begging, or else (which the gentle bloods and stout stomachs will sooner set their minds unto) a-stealing.

Now to amend the matter, to this wretched beggary and miserable poverty is joined great wantonness, importune superfluity, and excessive riot. For not only gentlemen's servants, but also handicraftsmen, yea, and almost the ploughmen of the country, with all other sorts of people, use much strange and newfangledness in their apparel, and too much prodigal riot and sumptuous fare at their table ...

Cast out these pernicious abominations, make a law that they which plucked down farms and towns of husbandry shall re-edify them, or else yield and uprender the possession thereof to such as will go to the cost of building them anew. Suffer not these rich men to buy all up, to engross, and forestall, and with their monopoly to keep the market alone as pleases them. Let not so many be brought up in idleness, let husbandry and tillage be restored ...

Appendix 2: the non-feasibility of Gini coefficients from earlier taxation

Ideally, it would be desirable to compare the Gini coefficient from taxation records in the early sixteenth century with the level produced by earlier taxation records. The subsidies of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries were levelled on individuals, so that theoretically a comparison could be suggested. There are, however, substantial problems which inhere in the earlier subsidy returns. Although until 1332 the taxation was assessed on individuals (altered to a collective quota on the vill in 1334), the assessed assets excluded materials necessary for subsistence. The taxation was levied only on personal estate – chattels – and excluded those whose personalty was considered to be below 10s., the minimum for inclusion. Various estimates have thus suggested that a substantial proportion of the wider population was omitted, so that in some places the taxation only captured 40 percent or less of the local adult population.⁶⁰ This earlier taxation is thus much less comprehensive than the assessments of 1524-5. Since the lowest echelons are omitted, the expectation would be that

60 C. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: the Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester 680-1540* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 109; B. Harvey, 'The population trend in England between 1300 and 1348', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser. xvi (1966), p. 28; A. T. Gaydon, ed., *The Taxation of 1297* (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society 39, 1959 for 1958), p. xxxiii; A. Jones, 'Caddington, Kensworth, and Dunstable in 1297', *Economic History Review* 2nd ser. xxxii (1979), p. 324; J. F. Willard, *Parliamentary Taxes on Personal Property 1290-1334: A Study in Medieval English Financial Administration* (Cambridge, MA, 1934), pp. 81-5; J. R. Maddicott, 'The English peasantry and the demands of the Crown 1294-1341', repr. in T. H. Aston, ed., *Landlords, Peasants and Politics in England* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 302.

the Gini coefficient extracted from these earlier data would be artificially low – and so it turns out.

Simply for proof of concept, the taxation data for Rutland in 1296-7 have been analyzed in two tranches: the essentially rural locations; and the two market towns of Oakham and Uppingham, although it should be borne in mind that Oakham had a considerable rural component too.⁶¹ For rural Rutland, the Gini coefficient for the 1, 690 taxpayers consists of 0.413338; for the two urban places (138 contributors) 0.392605. It seems pretty decisive that we cannot project the Gini coefficient back because of the deficiencies of the earlier taxation.

61 The National Archives, London, E179/165/1.