

European Workers between order and revolt. Labourers in feudal society (eleventh to the thirteenth century)*

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ABSTRACT

The well-known "Three Orders scheme", which was from the twelfth century and served as a model for the feudal societies of northern Europe has been thus far commented on from the point of view of the rulers, ecclesiastical and seigniorial. The paper aims to reappraise it from the point of view of the third order: the workers. Far from bringing evidence of an irresistible process of domination, the author emphasizes evidence of a conflictual situation, where the peaceful organization of the orders was constructed through symbolic and actual compensations. This process of settlement of a major social struggle made possible a first stage of the "industrious revolution" and a long trend of economic growth in Europe.

KEYWORDS

Three Orders scheme, Northern Europe, Twelfth century and beyond, Workers, Conflict, "Industrious revolution"

In the infinite debate about the origins of the modern European economy, the issue of medieval growth from the eleventh to the thirteenth century has an uncertain place. Though establishing the population figure at the beginning of the fourteenth century is crucial for any interpretation of the late medieval crisis and subsequent early modern development, recent scholarship has not

* I wish to thank Christian De Vito, Jan De Vries and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments on my first draft. A part of this paper was previously published as "Between Paradise and Revolt : *Laboratores* in the Society of the Three Orders". In: CROUCH, David and THOMPSON, Kathleen (eds.), *Normandy and its Neighbours, 900–1250. Essays for David Bates*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011, pp. 201-214. A full treatment of its topic can be found in ARNOUX, Mathieu. *Le temps des laboureurs. Croissance, travail et ordre social en Europe (XI^e-XIV^e siècles)*. Paris: ed. Albin Michel, 2012.

brought new information to light in this field. The most accurate presentation of the *status quaestionis*, by Bruce Campbell, makes clear that, even when real (i.e. non estimate) figures of the population can be produced, for example from the Domesday Book (1086), the tax returns of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, or the crops figures in the manorial accounts, the final figure depends as much on the interpretative frame chosen by the scholar than on the evidence gathered from the records.¹

In this regard, the common knowledge of what happened in Europe during the eleventh to the thirteenth century remains set within the landscape designed a half-century ago, in the classic books of Georges Duby, first in *L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes* (1962), then in *Guerriers et paysans* (1973).² In these two synthetic books, Duby developed two different, or conflicting, explanations of medieval economic growth. In the first book, which shared many hypotheses with Michael Postan, the starting point was technological innovation in agriculture, leading to improvement in work productivity then to population increase and massive land clearance. The chronology of this process was complex and different for any region. There was an early and obscure stage of demographic growth in Carolingian times before the cycle of technological and agrarian change. In his second book, Duby focused on the early medieval part of the process, from the seventh to the twelfth century. Technological change was no longer seen as the origin of the growth. Population increase and development were linked, in some enigmatic way, to the evolution of the social structure and the emergence of feudalism. In the beginning of the eleventh century, the first debates about the social orders and the new organization of power and authority were evidence of such social and economic processes.

From this moment on, economic growth in the high Middle Ages has been put aside by most historians of medieval societies, usually because of the lack of serial sources and statistical figures. During the 1990s, the so-called debate among French and European medievalists about the *mutation féodale*, which focused exclusively on the sociological structure of the feudal élite did not bring any progress to the field, and the problem remains: medieval economic growth is an unsolved problem. More recently, the brilliant presentation of

¹ CAMPBELL, B.M.S. *English Seigniorial Agriculture (1250-1450)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.386-410.

² DUBY, Georges. *L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes dans l'Occident médiéval*. Paris, 1962 (English Translation: *Rural Economy and Country Life in Medieval Europe*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968); DUBY, Georges. *Guerriers et paysans, VII^e-XII^e siècle. Premier essor de l'économie européenne*. Paris: Aubier, 1974 (English translation: *The Early Growth of the European Economy, Warriors and Peasants*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974. For an important review of this book see R. H. Hilton. "Warriors and Peasants". *New left Review*, 83 (1974), pp. 83-94.

the various interpretations of the English economic evolution in John Hatcher and Mark Bailey's *Modelling the Middle Ages* put the question on an economic footing: if there was no decisive technological change during the period, where does the dramatic demographic growth of the eleventh to the thirteenth century come from?³

The hypothesis of a medieval "industrious revolution" could help to solve the dilemma. This notion has become a widespread concept in the global history of work, since Jan De Vries borrowed it from historians of Japanese industrialization. Since economic growth in the Netherlands and England began before the innovations linked to steam technology that changed industrial conditions, there must have been another change in production factors. The industrious revolution was a two-pronged process, which combined a huge increase of labour supply and social and institutional change, which made it possible for a large part of the population to buy commodities and improve their living standards.⁴ The chronology of the process matters: for De Vries, the industrious revolution is "early modern" and "pre-industrial" and happens during the long eighteenth century. But the origin of the process, especially the social change in the work ethic, which is crucial in the explanation of the increase in labour supply, is more difficult to investigate, particularly because of the lack of serial figures for the sixteenth century and before.

Hence the proposition, that an early stage of the industrial revolution took place during medieval times. Actually, if we lack reliable statistic or series of probate inventories for this period, we could argue from other kinds of data with a very different kind of chronology. For the fourteenth century, an important article by Chris Dyer brought compelling evidence of work ethics widespread among English labourers.⁵ Furthermore, it has been suggested that most European vocabulary related to work, wages and production, appeared in the records as early as the twelfth century.⁶ In the same period, a large part of the words used in the same semantic field during later antiquity and the high Middle Ages disappeared or changed their meaning. Such evolution raises the issue of important changes and innovation in the

³ HATCHER, J. and BAILEY, M. *Modelling the Middle Ages. The history and theory of England's Economic Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁴ DE VRIES, J. "The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution". *Journal of Economic History*, v.54, 1994, pp. 249-270; *The Industrious Revolution. Consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

⁵ DYER, C. "Work ethics in the fourteenth century". In: Bothwell, J, Goldberg, P.J.P. and Ormrod, W.M. (eds.), *The problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*. Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2000, pp.21-41.

⁶ GODELIER, Maurice. "Aide-Memoire for a Survey of Work and its Representations". *Current Anthropology*, 1980, v. 21, pp. 831-835.

organization of production and work in the time when feudalism and lordship grew in European society. From this point of view, there is not much help to expect from recent literature in medieval history: for the three last decades, the rulers, kings, lords, ecclesiastics and urban elites, authority, distinction and power have been the main topics. The question of work and the social group of labourers were mostly neglected. The social model of the Three Orders provides a good starting point for a new inquiry on work.

Frequently quoted and commented on when the question arises, Georges Duby's great book *Les trois ordres*, published in 1976, remains nevertheless a solitary landmark. Among historians of medieval societies, it raised debate on two points: the actual existence of a "Feudal Revolution" at the beginning of the eleventh century, and the intellectual origins and birth of an ideological formula: *laboratores, oratores, bellatores*.⁷ The problem of the institutional enforcement of this social classification of orders is usually bypassed. Mostly grounded in evidence from the Anglo-Norman world, which was its birthplace, the following pages reconsider the model of the Three Orders and its relevance for a renewed history of work.

Genesis of a historiographical problem

Although it had been obvious for a great part of European society from the Middle Ages on to the end of the "Ancien Regime" that each man should belong to one of the three "états", - the nobility, clergy and the third, or common, group - the problem of the origin, birth and enforcement of such an idea remained outside the interest of historians until the 1960s. Jacques Le Goff was the first to investigate this theme in his great 1964 book, *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, from an anthropological point of view.⁸ He addressed the idea expressed by Georges Dumézil that Indo-European religious, juridical and political thought was characterized by a tri-functional organization, where the first function was related to religious and magic sovereignty, the second to warfare, and the third to fertility and economic activities. The relationship between this scheme and the tripartition of medieval and early modern European society had been explored by Dumézil

⁷ DUBY, Georges. *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976; English Translation: *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago, Il.: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

⁸ Le Goff, Jacques. *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*. Paris: Arthaud, 1964, pp. 319-28. English Translation : *Medieval Civilization 400-1500*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, pp. 255-64; "Note sur société tripartite, idéologie monarchique et renouvellement économique dans la chrétienté du IX^e au XII^e siècle". In: *Pour un autre Moyen Âge: temps, travail et culture en Occident: 18 essais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1977, pp. 80-90.

himself, and by his disciple Jean Batany.⁹ They both favoured the hypothesis of some continuity of the Indo-European structure, especially into Anglo-Saxon society, where, at the end of the ninth century, the idea of the Three Orders was expressed for the first time by King Alfred the Great. Le Goff focused on an historical construction of the religious and social representation of the orders and pointed out that, since the earliest evidence of the idea was to be found in the tenth century, the theory of Indo-European continuity had to account for the disappearance of the model at the beginning of the Middle Ages or its rebirth during the tenth century.

Georges Duby decided to devote his seminar to this problem in 1970, after he was elected to the Collège de France. The book he published in 1978, which remains one of his major works, presented the results of a collective investigation. It presented all the pieces of the dossier for the tenth to the twelfth century and outlined the chronology of the historical institution of the idea of the Three Orders in society. Two crucial moments were identified: the first expression of the theme around the year 1000, and its enforcement as the official expression of the monarchic ideology of the Plantagenet and Capetian kings in the second half of the twelfth century.

The book is a crucial piece in the reconstruction by Duby of the dynamic of feudalism as the result of a social and ideological mutation of post-Carolingian society. The birth of a new model of social organization, which broke with the stratification of the early Middle Ages, was a major element of the evolution. Eventually, studies in marriage and family patterns of the feudal group in the eleventh and twelfth centuries made it possible to have a global view of feudal society.¹⁰ The weakening of the public authority at the end of the tenth century and the correlated outburst of violence from the knights (*milites*) formed the background to a general debate on social organization and evolution, where the Three Orders scheme had to compete with other propositions of social and religious organization: the heretic ideas, the Peace of God and the social proposal of the Cluniac monks. Then the idea and the social debate it referred to disappeared for almost a century, perhaps because of a preoccupation with the political and religious struggle of ecclesiastical reform, until its second birth in the middle of the twelfth century.

⁹ Batany, Jean. "Des "trois fonctions" aux trois "états"?" *Annales ESC*, 18 (1963), pp. 933-38.

¹⁰ DUBY, Georges. *Le chevalier, la femme et le prêtre: le mariage dans la France féodale*. Paris: Hachette, 1981. English Translation: *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest: the Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, transl. by Barbara Bray. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

Duby's book was well received, but there were few further publications on the topic.¹¹ One major contribution was the influential article published in 1994 by a specialist on Anglo-Saxon society, Timothy Powell.¹² Like Le Goff and Duby before him, Powell rejected the hypothesis of the continuity of an Indo-European tri-functional pattern, and presented the theory of the three orders as an historical construction, an intellectual reaction in a period of crisis. In the English case, it did not raise the problem of the misdeeds of chivalry, but an older European question, the military competencies of the ecclesiastic institutions. The presentation of the Three Orders, *laboratores* (labourers), *bellatores* (knights), *oratores* (clerics), as the providential framework, where there is a place for everyone, was a preliminary to an examination of the specific case of the bishops. As the chiefs of the *spiritualis militia*, they had to fight with the specific weapons of their order: "the coat of Justice, the shield of Faith, the helmet of Salvation, the sword of Spirit". But, were there any circumstances in which they could lay down the staff and use the sword in the battlefield? The rules of the *ordines* strictly prohibited such a transgression, which, in the bishops' case, implied a move from God's army down to the secular troop. In late tenth-century England, such a proposal had not only theoretical but also practical implications in the struggles between the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes. For Archbishop Wulfstan of York and Abbot Aelfric of Eynsham, who wrote the most important texts on this topic, the bishops' role was to preach, convert and baptize the pagans after the battle; they were not permitted to fight them on the battlefield. Timothy Powell's interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon evidence made the clerics, i.e. the *ordo oratorum*, the target of Aelfric and Wulfstan's theory, whereas Georges Duby had earlier detected that the knights, i.e. the *ordo bellatorum*, was the crucial point of the scheme. There is no contradiction between them on this point, and the ideas of Archbishop Wulfstan, who, in his *Institutes of Policy*, presented the *ordines* as follows:

Every rightful throne that stands fully upright rests on three pillars: one is *oratores*, and another is *laboratores* and the third is *bellatores*. *Oratores* is clergy, who must serve God day and night, interceding zealously for all the

¹¹ OEXLE, Otto G. "Die funktionale Dreiteilung der "Gesellschaft" bei Adalbero von Laon.: Deutungsschemata der sozialen Wirklichkeit im früheren Mittelalter". *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, v.12 (1978), pp. 1-24; Le Goff, Jacques. "Les trois fonctions indo-européennes, l'historien et l'Europe féodale". *Annales ESC*, 34 (1979), pp. 1187-1215; IOGNA-PRAT, Dominique. "Le 'baptême' du schéma des trois ordres fonctionnels: l'apport de l'école d'Auxerre dans la seconde moitié du IX^e siècle". *Annales ESC*, 31 (1986), pp. 101-26.

¹² POWELL, Timothy E. "The 'Three Orders' of society in Anglo-Saxon England". *ASE*, 23 (1994), pp. 103-132. Also see WORMALD, Patrick. *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, pp. 457-62 and, about Wulfstan's political theory, "Archbishop Wulfstan: eleventh-century state-builder". In: TOWNEND, Matthew ed. *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: the Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2004, pp. 18-19, 20.

people. *Laboratores* are working men (weorcmen) who must provide that by which all the people live. *Bellatores* are warriors, who must defend the land valiantly with weapons. On these three pillars, every throne shall stand upright in a Christian nation. And if any of them weakens, the throne will soon totter; and if any of them should break, then the throne will fall and that will damage the people.¹³

As Timothy Powell points out in the conclusion of his paper, “the Three Orders had both to be seen as a model for stability and unity and yet broadly enough defined to enable those like Aelfric to make their particular points”. So far we have considered how the model of the Three Orders was applied to the *oratores* and *bellatores*, let us now try to discover what kind of message was given to the *laboratores*, who were by far the large majority of the population. After all, the *ordo* in which they gathered with no other consideration of social *status*, should be seen as the very novelty of the system.

Ordo laboratorum: Emancipation and discipline for the labourers?

Before any interpretation of the few bald words devoted to the *laboratores*, we have to be clear on the exact nature of the evidence. The description of the orders cannot be read as prescriptive: it is not a juridical statement nor a moral exhortation. This may explain why the simple word *laborator* can be applied to a group of men who used to be called, in England or on the Continent, by many different names, referring to their degree of freedom, the *status* of their tenure or the nature of their economic functions. The aim of the Three Orders model was to restore the genuine condition of people, as the holy Providence had fixed it, as a way for human salvation. Indeed, these descriptions of Christian society had to be understood as a proposition of reform with related actions.

When theologians expressed the idea that agrarian work could be by itself fulfilment of Providential design, they surely implied that it had to be done freely. In archbishop Wulfstan’s case, it is possible to link the theory of the orders, i. e. the idea that the labourers were one single group in the eye of God, with his decisive action against slavery, which was still widespread in tenth-century England. A part of his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (1014) was devoted to a sharp condemnation of the slave trade, which sold many

¹³ JOST, Karl ed. *Die “Institutes of Polity, Civil and Ecclesiastical”*: ein Werk Erzbischof Wulfstans von York. Bern: Francke Verlag, 1959, pp. 55-7, quoted by Powell, “Three Orders of Society”, *op.cit.*, p. 116.

Christian Englishmen, women and children to Viking, Welsh, Irish or other traders:

Widows are widely forced to marry in unjust ways and too many are impoverished and fully humiliated; and poor men are sorely betrayed and cruelly defrauded, and sold widely out of this land into the power of foreigners, though innocent; and infants are enslaved by means of cruel injustices, on account of petty theft everywhere in this nation. And the rights of freemen are taken away and the rights of slaves are restricted and charitable obligations are curtailed. Free men may not keep their independence, nor go where they wish, nor deal with their property just as they desire; nor may slaves have that property which, on their own time, they have obtained by means of difficult labor, or that which good men, in Gods favor, have granted them, and given to them in charity for the love of God.¹⁴

In Abbot Aelfric's didactic works, there are frequent hints to the slaves (*theow* or *thraell*) who lived and worked on the domestic estates. The lists of dependent countrymen of the *Domesday Book* (1086) provide significant evidence of the diffusion of slavery in Anglo-Saxon society in the time of King Edward. By the end of the eleventh century, however, this population had vanished, as had the old Anglo-Saxon words referring to it.¹⁵ Even if it is particularly obvious for England, we have to see this process as a European one, whose importance cannot be underestimated. In the beginning of the eleventh century, slavery and the slave trade were still present as a danger, though they had become very rare on the continent.¹⁶ Around 1100, they had disappeared forever, leaving behind them states of dependency or non-freedom, which were absolutely different from the old slavery.

Even in those areas of Europe where slavery had long disappeared, the hypothesis of a single group of labourers alongside the group of knights, had strong social and juridical implications, because it made ineffective the old

¹⁴ WHITELOCK, Dorothy ed. *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*. London: Methuen, 1939; Wormald, *Making of the English Law, op.cit.*, p. 344. For a reference to slave trading in late eleventh-century Bristol, see William of Malmesbury, "Vita Wulfstani", ii, c. 20 in William of Malmesbury, *Saints' Lives*, WINTERBOTTOM, Michael and THOMSON, Rodney M. eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002, pp. 100-02. At the very same moment on the eastern border of Christendom, Bishop Adalbert of Prague took similar action among Czech people in favour of ecclesiastical reform and against the slave trade: PERTZ, Georg Heinrich ed. *Vita Adalberti episcopi Pragensis auctore Johanne Canapario* (BHL 37), *MGH Scriptores* (in fol.) IV, p. 581.

¹⁵ PELTERET, David A. E. *Slavery in Early Medieval England, from the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century* Studies in Anglo-Saxon History, 7. Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995, pp. 232-40.

¹⁶ ARNOUX, Mathieu. *Le temps des laboureurs, op.cit.*, pp. 66-97.

social stratification, especially between free and un-free men. In Carolingian times, freedom meant military service; in the new organization, no peasant had to serve in the army, nor to bear weapons, working in the field being his only duty. In other words, the order of labourers was also the orders of disarmed laymen, to which a tripartite society granted full protection, as the Peace of God was supposed to do in other parts of Europe. The actual history of European peasantry shows that the process of disarmament of the countrymen did not take place at the beginning of the eleventh but rather in the twelfth century. My hypothesis is that the enforcement of the society of Three Orders as an implicit way of ordering of the French and English kingdoms achieved the process of disarmament, not by general enslavement of the peasants, but through negotiation between the orders, granting to the workers symbolic gratifications and real economic guarantees. The evidence for this evolution is sparse, but it does exist.

Labour and original sin: Augustine versus Augustine

Medieval expositions of the social model of the Three Orders are often misread because of a misunderstanding caused by an incorrect appreciation of the “Augustinian” nature of the theory. In the commonly understood Augustinian view of original sin, the labourers expiate, by painful and weary work, the sin of our father Adam, as the Almighty had explained to him, after he had to leave the Paradise.¹⁷ Such an interpretation is consonant with our modern representation of Augustine and with the point of view of clerics and lords on the peasant group. Nevertheless, it makes it difficult to understand how the new organization was taught to the third group, who represented the largest part of Christendom. There was nothing specific to explain why peasants were to bear all the burden of the sins of humankind. Such a ubiquitous cliché has been until now a major obstacle for a correct understanding of the model of the Three Orders. It is grounded in Augustine’s later and pessimistic thought, which is one of the many possible representations of the African father. Actually, there are in the works of Augustine other texts, well known to medieval theologians, which fit far better with the sources on the Three Orders. The most important is the chapter of his tract *The Literal meaning of Genesis*, about *Genesis*, 2. 15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”.¹⁸

¹⁷ For a recent example, consult FOSSIER, Robert. *Le travail au moyen age*. Paris: Hachette-Littératures, 2000, p. 19: “En revanche, il [le travail] est moralement abject. C’est une punition, celle que le créateur infligea au premier couple après la faute.”

¹⁸ ZYCHA, Joseph. ed. *Sancti Aureli Augustini de Genesi ad litteram duodecim libri*, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum, 28. Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1894, VIII, 8-9, Bd. 8, pp.

Remembered only by historians of medieval philosophy, this text was, until the end of the Middle Ages, one of Augustine's best known, since it took a place in the margins of the of the Glossed Bible, thus becoming the main authority for every comment on this part of the holy book, and a basis for the preachers. Questioning the fact that Adam cultivated Paradise before he committed the sin and was expelled, Augustine wondered whether it was possible that the work was not intended as punishment for the sinner: "is it not simply incredible that he should condemn him to hard labour before sin?" The answer was positive, beyond any doubt. Work in the field of the fertile paradise was only pleasure, joy and participation in the magnificent work of the Creator: "there was no stress of wearisome, but pure exhilaration of spirit". Very important for our topic was the idea that something of this exultation survived the Fall and the expulsion from Paradise, and could prefigure, in those who loved their agricultural labour or work among nature, Man's predestination to become again Creation's gardener: "had we never seen how some people till the field with such pleasure that it is a severe punishment for them to be called away from that to anything else".

This theory of the nature of labour sounds very different from the "usual" Augustine, philosopher of the expiation of the sin through the pain of work. If used in preaching to the peasants, it could have very important implications for the religious interpretation of the Three Orders. Indeed, if the *ordo laboratorum*, instead of being responsible for the expiation of original sin, was to be considered as the true witness to the experience of Paradise, and labourers compared to men from the time before the Fall, it was not difficult to argue that the other orders, chivalry and clergy, had been instituted after the Fall (and Augustine in the same treatise provided abundant material for this idea). For example, he explained that war and the domination of the lord over his serf were unthinkable in Paradise, as too was the domination of the husband over his wife.¹⁹ The two orders of priests and of knights were at first consequences of sin, then reaction to and perhaps remedy for it.

It is not difficult to collect texts in French, German, English or Italian literature, where the *laboureur* was described as a perfectly good and just man, an unquestionable example of the true right life in the face of the Almighty. Piers Ploughman, and another ploughman, brother of the good priest, in the *Canterbury tales*, or in Germany the wise father of the young Helmbrecht, and the Ackerman from Bohemia are all figures of the same model of innate faith and charity, which was so deeply rooted in medieval

242-45. English Translation: HILL, E. *On Genesis (Works of St Augustine, 1/13)*. New York: New City Press, 2002, pp. 356-357.

¹⁹ *De Genesi ad litteram*, b. 11, XXXVII, 50, pp. 371-72.

peasant ideology.²⁰ When Renart the Fox decides to convert and become a good Christian, in the last and satirical version of his deeds, in the French kingdom of the early fourteenth century, he decided to become a ploughman:

Another job he wants to get
 That is to be a ploughman (laboureur de terre).
 That is one have highly to appraise
 To love so much and not despise.
 To ploughing Adam applied
 When he went out of Paradise:
 Everyday, he kept on ploughing
 And his life so earned.
 God to plough sent him
 So granted him his life.²¹

Obviously, Renard failed in this attempt at redemption: work and the honest life gained nothing but pain and poverty. This is a common topic in the social literature of the fourteenth century, which describes either with satirical, pathetic, or rebellious words the injuries inflicted on the pacific and defenceless group of labourers. Its most famous slogan was the theme of the leader of the 1381 revolt, John Ball: “Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span,/Wo was thane a gentilman?”²² This was indeed a very concise and efficient comment on Augustine’s treatise on *Genesis*.

Conflict and rebellion

Even if the peasant group was disarmed (*inermes*), and its ideology seemingly peaceful and stranger to every conflict, the social form of the *ordo laboratorum* must not be seen as generally accepted in all European societies. The Roman church never agreed with a social model, which presented the clergy as one among other orders of the society, with no priority nor special dignity. Perhaps Gregorian hostility to it was the main cause of the vanishing

²⁰ CHAUCER, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury tales*, First fragment, v. 529-532; Wernher der Gartenaere, *Helmbrecht*, vv 242-258 ; cf. BELL, Clair Hayden. *Peasant Life in Old German Epics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931, pp. 43-44; VON TEPL, Johannes. *Der Ackermann*. KIENING, Christian. ed. and transl. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2000.

²¹ RAYNAUD, Gaston and LEMAÎTRE, Henri. eds. *Le roman de Renart le contrefait*, 2 vols. Paris: Champion, 1914, 2, p. 47, vv. 26981-27029.

²² DEAN, James M. ed. *Medieval English Political Writings*. Middle English texts. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996, p. 140.

of the theory of the order during the period of the Investiture struggle, in the second half of the eleventh century. Even at the end of the twelfth century, the conflict was not extinguished. In his most famous tract, *On the Misery of the Human Condition*, Cardinal Lothar of Segni (1161-1216), who was not yet Pope Innocent III (1198), described incessant work among mortals as a mere vanity, an insane attempt to escape the vision of the miserable human condition. So was economic growth, of which he gave the most impressive description:

Mortals rush and run about through fences and paths, climb mountains, cross hills, ascend cliffs, fly over the Alps, step over pits, go into caves; they explore the inner parts of the earth, the depths of the sea, the uncertainties of the water, the shadows of the forest, the inward way of solitude; they expose themselves to winds, to rains, to thunders and lightnings, to floods and storms, to disasters and dangers. They hammer and melt metals, cut and polish stones, cut down and chop wood, spin and weave fabrics, cut and stitch cloths, build houses, plant gardens, cultivate fields, grow vines, fire ovens, erect mills, fish, hunt, and catch birds. They meditate and cogitate, consult and arrange, complain and dispute, rob and steal, cheat and trade, contend and fight, and do countless things of such sort in order to accumulate riches, to multiply profits, to purse wealth, to acquire honours, to raise their ranks, to extend their powers. And this also is labor and vexation of mind.²³

The conflict was not only with the Clerics. The fear of revolt, particularly from the peasants, stands behind much evidence about the theory of the Three Orders. One particularly striking text is the narrative by John of Worcester of the threefold nightmare of King Henry I of England, who was threatened by a crowd of peasants “standing by him with agricultural implements”, then by “a large band of knights, wearing armour, bearing helmets on their heads, each of them holding lances, a sword, spears and arrows”, and finally by “archbishops, bishops, abbots, deans and priors, holding their pastoral staff”.²⁴

The most famous and complete description of the Three Orders, in the Norman chronicle of Benoit of Sainte-Maure, is also linked to a narrative of revolt. King Henry II Plantagenet commissioned the poem by Benoit, a poet from his native Anjou, after he had dismissed the Norman canon, Wace,

²³ Lothar of Segni [Pope Innocent III], *De miseria condicionis humane*. LEWIS, Robert E. ed. The Chaucer Library Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1978, pp. 111-12.

²⁴ *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*. vol.3. MCGURK, P. Ed. Oxford Medieval Texts. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 198-203.

author of the unfinished *Roman de Rou*. It is therefore particularly significant that the Three Orders model is introduced when the narrative describes a discussion held (about 940) between Duke William Longsword and Abbot Martin of Jumièges. This modification upset a long historical tradition, which went back to the time of Dudo of Saint-Quentin (around 1000).

The original matter of the dispute was about the person of the Duke. William, Christian-born, son of the converted Rollo, had invited the Cluniac monks of St-Cyprien in Poitiers to restore the ancient community of Jumièges and asked Abbot Martin whether he could resign his ducal dignity and enter the monastic community as a monk. His crucial question was about the opportunities granted to the laity and the clergy to obtain salvation. The Three Orders of the Christian religion were the key to the problem: “Why are there three orders of Christian in the church? Will there not be one mercy and one reward, for those who perform separate offices in the Christian religion?”.

Martin’s answer is a classic of the post-Carolingian theology of the orders:

Every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. (...) The totality of the Christian religion consists of three distinct orders. It is practised by the generous labour of laymen, canons and monks, and follows the trinity of persons and the one God in substance, according to the articles of belief. Their service, successfully accomplished, leads by regular steps to heaven.²⁵

There are therefore three orders, one for laymen and the other two for clerics: secular (canons) and regular (monks). As the chief of the lay order, the duke had to stay in his own place and accomplish his own duty, that is, to organize his succession and strengthen his legitimacy.

The dialogue remained unchanged in its meaning in the Latin version of the chronicle written by William of Jumièges in the middle of eleventh century, then in the French version, the *Roman de Rou*, which Wace undertook in 1160 and left unfinished.²⁶ Around 1170, when Wace was dismissed by the king for unknown reasons, Benoit de Sainte-Maure began the redaction of a new French versified chronicle, where the topic of the discussion between William and Martin changed completely.²⁷ Duke William’s project of monastic life and his question about the reward promised to each order and a part of Martin’s answer, were a mere copy of Wace’s text. This was not the case for the presentation of the orders. The Three Orders of society, “Chevaliers,

²⁵ Dudo of St Quentin, *History of the Normans*. transl. by CHRISTIANSEN, Eric. Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998, pp. 77-78.

²⁶ MATHEY-MAILLE, Laurence. *Écritures du passé: histoires des ducs de Normandie*, Essais sur le moyen âge, 35. Paris: Champion, 2007, p. 33.

²⁷ Benoit, I, vv. 13229-13548, pp. 383-92.

clercs et villains” were presented twice, first by William, then by Martin, in a clear view of political philosophy, exactly as archbishop Wulfstan had described them in his “Institutes of Policy” more than a century and a half before.

The other famous part of the *Chronicle*, which amplified Wace’s narrative of the same event, was devoted to the great revolt of the Norman peasants in the end of the tenth century.²⁸ The short, and rather enigmatic, description of the revolt written by William of Jumièges around 1050, was interpreted by Wace and Benoit as a great confrontation between the labourers and their lords. Wace’s version of the peasant’s slogans was strangely empathic:

Son of a whore! said some, why do we put up with all the harm which is being done to us? Let us free ourselves from their control. We are men as they are; we have the same limbs as they do, we are their equal physically and are able to endure as much as they can. The only thing we lack is courage. Let us unite on oath, defend our goods and ourselves and stick together. If they wish to wage war on us, against one knight, we have thirty or forty peasants, skilful and valiant. Thirty men in the flower of their youth will be cowardly and shameful if they cannot defend themselves against one man.²⁹

They received no answer from the knights other than violence and slaughter. In Benoit’s version, the rebellion was presented as a transgression of the order of society, especially in regard to the peasants’ attempt to eat fish and game, to keep for themselves the fruit of their labour and to resist the looting of their lords.³⁰ The answer to the peasants, a horrible outburst of violence, conformed probably better to the ideas of the king and courtiers than the presentation by Duke William and Abbot Martin of the dignity and duties of the labourers, but it also fitted in the scheme of the orders. One point remains enigmatic however: there is no record of any rebellion from Norman or English peasants until the fourteenth century. Instead of a celebration of the glorious victory of the *milites*, Benoit’s text should be read as an exorcism of their fear of a peasant revolt. His description of the orders could be as well read as a kind of proposition for a peaceful Christian society, the last chance before a general civilian war.

²⁸ ARNOUX, Mathieu. “Classe agricole, pouvoir seigneurial et autorité ducal: l’évolution de la Normandie féodale d’après le témoignage des chroniqueurs”. *Le Moyen Âge*, 98 (1992), pp. 35-60.

²⁹ Wace, vv. 864-882, pp. 124-27.

³⁰ Benoit, II, vv 28854-29052, pp. 197-203.

Conclusion

Thirty years after the publication of Georges Duby's great book, the history of the "Three Orders" has retained a great part of its fascination and much remains to be studied. Although it is generally analysed from the genealogical point of view of a history of political theory, the threefold representation of Christendom must also be examined from a functionalist viewpoint, as an institutional attempt to negotiate a peaceful society in a tense period. It addressed the violence of the knights and the laicizing temptations of the clerics, as Duby and others have shown, but also the rebellious character of the peasants. Literary and religious sources witness either the intellectual construction of the Three Orders or the social tension in which the negotiation took place. In this frame, textual evidence gives ground for an interpretation of the *ordo laboratorum* as the ideological facade of a medieval industrious revolution, which took place in Western and North-western Europe during the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

We know that the industrious revolution is not only a matter of a virtuous representation of society, family and work: ideology does work with actual retribution of good practices. Surely, the suppression of slavery and the slave trade in northern Europe was not enough to buy the peasants' consent to their disarmament. During the eleventh and thirteenth century, retribution for labourers could not consist, as in seventeenth century Netherlands, in a share of luxury goods, and the rise of the standard of living did not consist in a greater supply of commodities. According to all the sources, to enjoy sumptuous cloths and exquisite foods was the exclusive lot of the clerics and lords, and of urban elites for the late medieval period. Subsistence, which was essentially wheat, rye, oats and barley, had to be the main issue for medieval labourers, who faced and feared hunger and famine as everyday realities. In the same regions where narrative sources witness the rise of the *ordo laboratorum* as a way of peasant life, other records give evidence of huge institutions, closely integrated in the agrarian economy, which aimed to grant peasants and poor people an easier access to food.³¹ As Chaucer wrote, giving his own parish the tithes of his crop should be a part of peasant identity and pride.³² Tithes, according to canonical regulations, had three functions: food for the local clergy, building and maintenance of the parish church and alms for the poor people. In almost every village, the parochial barn, where a large part of the crops was preserved, was a massive evidence of this economy of redistribution. Considered as social institutions, from the same point of view,

³¹ ARNOUX, Mathieu. *Le temps des laboureurs. op.cit.*, pp. 221-336.

³² *Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue, 539-540: « Hise tithes payed he ful fair and wel/bothe of his propre swynk and his catel » and 486-489 for the link between tithes and elms.

seigniorial mills, which, at least in the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, were strictly regulated by customary rules, were elements of an institutional economy of the labourers. According Henri Pirenne, even local markets, should be considered from the same point of view as welfare institutions:

“[The legal system of towns in western Europe] sought to secure their inhabitants a supply as cheap as possible. Its ideal aim, and its achievement, was fighting high prices and setting for every commodity the “just price”, which in other words was the lowest price. How? By the plainest, which is also the most radical way: eliminate all categories of middlemen and set an immediate link between the producer and the consumer. Extremely complicated by-laws created an extremely simple situation: the meeting of the producers and the consumers. Every attempt to create monopolies or to speculate was relentlessly and ingeniously repressed: the purpose was to stop the rise of prices by prohibiting the commodities to be exchanged several times before reaching the buyers.”³³

One could arguably object to the ecclesiastic and seigniorial nature of tithes, mills and markets, and record the extremely hierarchical and unequal organization of medieval society. There is no doubt that maintaining the privileges of the two other orders against the peasant claims was a function of the social model of the three orders. But there is no doubt too that social peace, subsistence insurance, institutional organisation of markets and improvement in the standard of living had an effect on the growth in the population and the economy. One can credit generous and compassionate rulers, ecclesiastic and landlords, with granting their peasants this welfare organisation. My hypothesis is that the labourers themselves conquered it and largely maintained it, as they created the conditions for the great medieval growth, until the crisis of the fourteenth century.

³³ PIRENNE, Henri “Le consommateur au Moyen Âge [1922]”, in *Histoire économique de l'Occident médiéval*, Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1951, pp. 532-534.

