

CHAPTER ONE

Social Order and Tensions in Tudor England

To judge from the writings they left behind, the men and women of early modern England were obsessed with order – or frightened silly that it might break down. So what did they mean by order? How did sixteenth-century English people think families, villages, towns, the London metropolis, and the State should be ordered? How did these social groups function within themselves and with each other? The documents reproduced in the first section of this chapter portray contemporary social ideals of order, hierarchy, and stability. Those in the second section portray a messier world of disorder, tension, and change. What were English society and economy actually like ca. 1500? Perhaps only an outsider can say: the chapter concludes with two views of foreigners on the character of English society from about a century apart.

Of course all contemporaries who articulated an idealized order *thought* they were commenting on their reality. Sometimes, Tudor subjects even drew idealized portraits of disorder to show how the ideal is unattainable for sinful man in an inherently corrupt world. In recent years, historians have suggested that perhaps social hierarchy should not be conceived simply in terms of dominance from above or resistance from below, but in terms of shared obligations. Service and deference owed by the members of one rank to another were dominant values in late medieval England, and remained so well into the early modern period.

Below, we present the documents by theme. How might your vision of early Tudor society differ if you read them in chronological order? As you read the documents in this chapter, you might ask:

- Which images or models of society used by sixteenth-century contemporaries are most effective or convincing, and which least?
- How did the authors of these early modern sources think about continuity or tradition, and how did they think about change?
- What did they most like about their society? What did they dislike? What would they think of ours?

Great Chain of Being

1.1 Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum* (written 1565, pub. 1583)¹

Early modern people embraced the socially conservative doctrine that every individual should know and keep his or her place in the divinely ordained social hierarchy. This ideal divided the English people by rank, age, and gender (see Bucholz and Key, introduction). It could be expressed metaphorically, as the Great Chain of Being (see the visual representation in Plate 1), or as a Body-Politic (see the verbal representation, document 1.2), but perhaps the most famous description of Tudor social structure is that by Sir Thomas Smith (1513–77), the first regius professor of civil law at Cambridge and – at the time of composition of *De Republica Anglorum* – a diplomat in France.

Note how Smith defines different social levels. Are his definitions and distinctions precise? Is it entirely clear who is and is not a knight, an esquire, or a gentleman? Are his distinctions closer to caste divisions (based on birth) or class divisions (based on income)? Assuming each chapter is of more or less equal length, does he spend time on these groups proportional to their numbers? Why might an agricultural laborer or cottager subscribe to such a hierarchical view?

Chapter 16. *The Divisions of the Parts and Persons of the Common Wealth*

We in England divide our men commonly into four sorts, gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen artificers, and laborers. Of gentlemen the first and chief are the king, the prince, dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons, and this is called ... the nobility, ... next to these be knights, esquires, and simple gentlemen.

Chapter 17. *Of the First Part of Gentlemen of England Called Nobilitas Major*

Dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons, either be created of [by] the prince or come to that honor by being the eldest sons, or highest in succession to their parents. For the eldest of duke's sons during his father's life is called an earl ..., [etc.]

Chapter 18. *Of the Second Sort of Gentlemen Which May Be Called Nobilitas Minor, and First of Knights*

No man is a knight by succession Knights therefore be not born but made [by the king]. ... Knights in England most commonly [are made] according to

¹ T. Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. M. Dewar (London, 1982), 64–7, 70–2, 74, 76–7.



Plate 1 “The Great Chain of Being.” (Source: Diego Valadés, *Rhetorica Christiana*, 1579, © British Library.) Note the hierarchical levels of nature and society reaching to God at the top, while fallen angels plummet toward Hell on the right. What moral(s) might one draw from this image? How might this image or model have difficulty incorporating all social hierarchies within it? What other images or models, possibly drawn from nature, might also represent such a chain of being?

the yearly revenue of their lands being able to maintain that estate ... [but] not all [are] made knights in England that may spend a knight's lands but they only whom the prince will honor. ...

Chapter 19. Of Esquires

Escuier or esquire ... be all those which bear arms (as we call them) ... which to bear is a testimony of the nobility or race from which they do come. These be taken for no distinct order of the commonwealth, but do go with the residue of the gentlemen. ...

Chapter 20. Of Gentlemen

Gentlemen be those whom their blood and race doth make noble and known ..., for that their ancestor hath been notable in riches or for his virtues, or (in fewer words) [they represent] old riches or prowess remaining in one stock. Which if the successors do keep and follow, they be *vere nobiles*. ... If they do not, the fame and riches of their ancestors serve to cover them so long as it can, as a thing once gilted though it be copper within, till the gilt be worn away. ... The prince and commonwealth have the same power that their predecessors had, and as the husbandman hath to plant a new tree when the old faileth, to honor virtue where he doth find it, to make gentlemen, esquires, knights, barons, earls, marquises, and dukes, where he seeth virtue able to bear that honor or merits, to deserve it, and so it hath always been used among us. But ordinarily the king doth only make knights and create the barons and higher degrees: for as for gentlemen, they be made good cheap in England. For whosoever studieth the laws of the realm, who studieth in the universities, who professeth liberal sciences, and to be short who can live idly and without manual labor, and will bear the port, charge, and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be called master, for that is the title which men give to esquires and other gentlemen, and shall be taken for a gentleman. ... (And if need be) a king [officer] of Heralds shall also give him for money, [a coat of] arms newly made and invented, which the title shall bear that the said Herald hath perused and seen old registers where his ancestors in times past had born the same. ...

Chapter 22. Of Citizens and Burgesses

Next to a gentleman, be appointed citizens and burgesses, such as not only be free and received as officers within the cities, but also be of some substance to bear the charges. ... Generally in the shire they be of no account, save only in ... Parliament. ...

Chapter 23. Of Yeomen

Those whom we call yeomen next unto the nobility, the knights, and squires, have the greatest charges and doings in the commonwealth. ... I call him a



yeoman whom our laws call *Legalem hominem* ..., which is a freeman born English, who may spend of his own free land in yearly revenue to the sum of 40s. sterling [£2] by the year. ... This sort of people confess themselves to be no gentleman ..., and yet they have a certain preeminence and more estimation than laborers and artificers, and commonly live wealthily, keep good houses, do their business, and travail [work] to get riches: they be (for the most part) farmers to gentlemen, and with grazing, frequenting of markets, and keeping servants, not idle servants as the gentlemen doth, but such as get their own living and part of their masters: by these means do come to such wealth, that they are able and daily do buy the lands of unthrifty gentlemen, and after setting their sons to the schools, to the universities, to the law of the realm, or otherwise leaving them sufficient lands whereon they may labor, do make their said sons by these means gentlemen. ...

Chapter 24. Of the Fourth Sort of Men Which Do Not Rule

The fourth sort or class amongst us is ... day laborers, poor husbandmen, yea merchants or retailers which have no free land, copyholders, all artificers, as tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, brickmakers, bricklayers, masons, etc. These have no voice nor authorities in our commonwealth, and no account is made of these but only to be ruled, not to rule other, and yet they be not altogether neglected. For in cities and corporate towns for default of yeomen, they are fain to make their inquests of such manner of people. And in villages they be commonly made churchwardens, aleconners [local brewing inspectors], and many times constables

1.2 Richard Morison, *A Remedy for Sediton* (1536)²

Sixteenth-century authors worried that England was disordered, but disagreed as to the remedies. But all began with a fairly organic model of how society functioned. Sir Richard Morison (ca. 1510–56) was a humanist (he may have introduced the work of Niccolò Machiavelli [1469–1527] to England), who had lived in the household of the Catholic reformer Reginald Pole (1500–58) at Padua, but returned to England to write for Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell (ca. 1485–1540). He is often associated with that group of writers who sought to apply the new reformist ideas to social and economic problems, the Commonwealthmen. He published *A Remedy for Sediton* in the wake of the Pilgrimage of Grace of that year (see chapter 3), a dangerous rebellion against Henry's religious and governmental reforms. He sought, in part, to maintain the social *status quo* by restraining the commoners' lusts and appetites and by discouraging social mobility.

² R. Morison, *A Remedy for Sediton* (n.p., 1536), sig. Aii–Aiiiv, Biiv.



How does he justify the current social order? What imagery (metaphors) does Morison use to explain English society? Which are most effective? Which least? What is he most afraid of? How does his view match that of Smith (document 1.1)?

When every man will rule, who shall obey? How can there be any commonwealth, where he that is wealthiest, is most like to come to woe? Who can there be rich, where he that is richest is in most danger of poverty? No, no, take wealth by the hand, and say farewell wealth, where lust is liked, and law refused, where up is set down, and down set up. An order, an order must be had, and a way found that they rule that best can, they be ruled, that most it becometh so to be. ... For as there must be some men of policy and prudence, to discern what is metest [best] to be done in the government of states even so there must be others of strength and readiness, to do what the wiser shall think expedient, both for the maintenance of them that govern, and for the eschewing of the infinite jeopardies, that a multitude not governed falleth into: these must not go, arm in arm, but the one before, the other behind. ...

A commonwealth is like a body, and so like, that it can be resembled to nothing so convenient, as unto that. Now, were it not by your faith, a mad herring [joke], if the foot should say, I will wear a cap with an ouch [ornament], as the head doth? If the knees should say, we will carry the eyes, another while; if the shoulders should claim each of them an ear; if the heels would now go before, and the toes behind? This were undoubted a mad herring: every man would say, the feet, the knees, the shoulders, the heels make unlawful requests, and very mad petitions. But if it were so indeed, if the foot had a cap, the knees eyes, the shoulders ears, what a monstrous body should this be? God send them such a one, that shall at any time go about to make as evil a commonwealth, as this is a body. It is not mete, every man to do, that he thinketh best.

1.3 *An Act Against Wearing Costly Apparel* (1 Hen. VIII, c.14, 1510)³

One indication of the contemporary obsession with order is the many sumptuary laws passed by parliament to prevent people from inferior social ranks wearing “sumptuous” or extravagant clothing reserved for their betters. Such laws from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reveal both the ideal of

³ SR, 3: 8–9.

the Great Chain of Being and fears that this ideal was being honored only in the breach. Such laws attempted to regulate dress quite rigidly and, although they might be used to encourage English manufacture, they mainly sought to preserve an ordered society of ranks, or at least a society in which people could be “placed” securely.

Can this 1510 Act be used to work out the status hierarchy in Tudor England? Is this an economic hierarchy? According to the preamble of the statute, why was this law passed? Is this the whole story? What might be the difficulties in enforcing such legislation? Further Acts – 6 Hen. VIII, c. 1; 7 Hen. VIII, c. 6; 24 Hen. VIII, c. 13; 1–2 Philip and Mary, c. 2 – followed. What does their proliferation suggest about their efficacy?

Forasmuch as the great and costly array and apparel used within this realm contrary to good statutes thereof made hath been the occasion of great impoverishing of diverse of the king's subjects and provoked many of them to rob and to do extortion and other unlawful deeds to maintain thereby their costly array: in eschewing whereof, be it ordained by the authority of this present Parliament that no person, of what estate, condition, or degree that he be, use in his apparel any cloth of gold of purple color or silk of purple color but only the king, the queen, the king's mother, the king's children, the king's brothers and sisters upon pain to forfeit the said apparel wherewith soever it be mixed, and for using the same to forfeit 20 pound. And that no man under the estate of a duke use in any apparel of his body or upon his horses any cloth of gold of tissue upon pain to forfeit the same apparel wherewith soever it be mixed and for using the same to forfeit 20 mark [£13 6s. 8d.]. ... And that no man under the degree of a baron use in his apparel of his body or of his horses any cloth of gold or cloth of silver or tinsel, satin, nor no other silk or cloth mixed or embroidered with gold or silver upon pain of forfeiture of the same apparel, albeit that it be mixed with any other silk or cloth, and for using of the same to forfeit 10 mark. And that no man under the degree of a lord or a knight of the Garter wear any woollen cloth made out of this realm of England, Ireland, Wales, Calais, or the Marches of the same, or Berwick, upon pain to forfeit the said cloth and for using of the same to forfeit 10 pound. And that no man under the degree of a knight of the Garter wear in his gown or coat or any other his apparel any velvet of the color of crimson or blue upon pain to forfeit the same gown or coat or other apparel and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings [£2]. ... And that no man under the degree of a knight, except esquires for the king's body, his cupbearers, carvers, and sewers having the ordinary fee for the same, and all other esquires for the body having possession of lands and tenements or other hereditaments in their hands or other to their use to the yearly value of 300 mark [£200] and lords' sons and heirs, justices of the one Bench or of the other, the master of the Rolls, and

barons of the king's Exchequer, and all other of the king's Council and mayors of the city of London for the time being, use or wear any velvet in their gowns or riding coats or furs of marten in their apparel upon pain to forfeit the same fur and apparel wherewith soever it be mixed and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings. Nor no person other than the above named wear velvet in their doublets nor satin nor damask in their gowns nor coats, except he be a lord's son or a gentleman having in his possession or other to his use lands or tenements or annuities at the least for term of life to the yearly value of an hundred pound above all reprises, upon pain to forfeit the same apparel wherewith soever it be mixed and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings. Nor no person use or wear satin or damask in their doublets nor silk or camlet [silk and angora] in their gowns or coats not having lands or tenements in his possession or other to his use office or fee for term of life or lives to the yearly value of 20 pound, except he be a yeoman of the Crown or of the king's guard or grooms of the king's Chamber or the queen's having therefor the king's fee or the queen's upon pain to forfeit the same apparel wherewith so ever it be mixed and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings. And that no man under the degree of a gentleman except graduates of the universities and except yeomen, grooms, and pages of the king's Chamber and of our sovereign lady the queen's, and except such men as have ... an hundred pound in goods, use or wear any furs, whereof there is no like kind growing in this land of England, Ireland, Wales, or in any land under the king's obeisance, upon pain to forfeit the same furs and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings. The value of their goods to be tried by their own oaths. And that no man under the degree of a knight except spiritual men and sergeants at the law or graduates of universities use any more cloth in any long gown than four broad yards, and in a riding gown or coat above three yards upon pain of forfeiture of the same. And that no serving man under the degree of a gentleman use or wear any gown or coat or such like apparel of more cloth than two broad yards and an half in a short gown and three broad yards in a long gown, and that in the said gown or coat they wear no manner [of] fur upon pain of forfeiture of the said apparel. ... And that no serving man waiting upon his master under the degree of a gentleman use or wear any guarded hose or any cloth above the price of 20d. the yard in his hose except it be of his master's wearing hose upon pain of forfeiture of 3s. 4d. And that no man under the degree of a knight wear any guarded or pinched shirt or pinched partlet [neckerchief or collar] of linen cloth upon pain of forfeiture of the same shirt or partlet and for using of the same to forfeit 10 shillings. And that no servant of husbandry nor shepherd nor common laborer nor servant unto any artificer out of city or borough nor husbandman having no goods of his own above the value of 10 pound use or wear any cloth whereof the broad yard passeth in price two shillings nor that any of the said servants of husbandry, shepherds, nor laborers wear any hose above the price of 10d. the yard upon pain of imprisonment in the stocks by three days.

Social Order, Social Change, and the State

1.4 Act Against Pulling Down of Towns (4 Hen. VII, c. 19, 1489)⁴

From the late Middle Ages on, many landowners found it profitable to abandon arable demesne farming, throw their peasant villagers off the land, and turn it to sheep-farming. This process, known as enclosure, was controversial and opposed by the Church and many in government. According to the preamble of the Act Against Pulling Down Towns why do the Church and the State fear depopulation? What happened when a town was pulled down? Does the statute mention other possible reasons for the State fearing depopulation? Why might a landlord want to destroy a town? *Qui bono* (who benefits)? (You might want to consider this question after reflecting on documents 1.5 and 1.6.)

The king our sovereign lord, having a singular pleasure above all things to avoid such enormities and mischiefs as be hurtful and prejudicial to the common wealth of this his land and his subjects, remembering that among all other things great inconveniences daily do increase by desolation and pulling down and wilful waste of houses and towns within this his realm, and laying to pasture lands which customarily have been tilled, whereby idleness ground and beginning of all mischiefs daily do increase, for where in some towns two hundred persons were occupied and lived by their lawful labors, now are there occupied two or three herdsmen and the residue fall in idleness, the husbandry which is one of the greatest commodities of this realm is greatly decayed, churches destroyed, the service of God withdrawn, the bodies there buried not prayed for, the patron and curates wronged, the defense of this land against our enemies outward feebled and impaired; to the great displeasure of God, to the subversion of the policy and good rule of this land, and remedy be not hastily therefore purveyed: Wherefore the king our sovereign lord by the assent and advice of the Lords spiritual and temporal and Commons in this present Parliament assembled and by authority of the same, ordains, enacts, and establishes that no person, what estate, degree, or condition that he be, that hath any house or houses, that any time within three years past has been or that now is or hereafter shall be let to farm with twenty acres of land at least or more lying in tillage or husbandry, that the owner or owners of every such house or houses and land be bound to keep, sustain, and maintain houses and buildings upon the said ground and land, convenient and necessary for maintaining and upholding of the said tillage and husbandry.

⁴ SR, 2: 542.

1.5 Thomas More, *Utopia*, Book I (1516)⁵

Laws and statutes like those above proliferated in response not only to perceived social ills but also to “waves” of prosecutions for very real assault and theft. Some humanists, in particular, found the legal punishments for those crimes harshly disproportionate. Thomas More (1478–1535) was a member of parliament, a lawyer and a humanist scholar who rose to be lord chancellor of England before dying a martyr’s death in 1535 for not overtly embracing Henry VIII’s break with Rome. His masterpiece, *Utopia*, was published in Latin in 1516, and translated into English and other languages soon thereafter. In *Utopia*, More himself is one of the characters. He meets a fictional traveler, Raphael Hythloday (remember that More wrote in the age of Columbus and Magellan), who describes an imaginary, perfect state (the word “utopia,” coined by More, means “no place” in Greek) exactly opposite from the flawed kingdom of England geographically and temperamentally. The more that Hythloday (More) learns about Utopia, the worse England’s social and economic problems appear. Below, Hythloday’s humanist analysis of why people stole, the danger of “men-eating sheep,” and the irrational punishments for theft provide a justly famous indictment of Tudor England.

According to the discussion, what major problems does Tudor England face? How is the incidence of crime in England explained? How is enclosure explained? If Morison (document 1.2) had sat in on the discussion, how might he respond? How does the narrator – at this point the fictional Raphael – propose to solve these problems? Would his solution work? What, do you suppose, does the author think of the Great Chain of Being?

It happened one day when I [Raphael] was dining with him [Cardinal John Morton], there was present a layman, learned in the laws of your country [England], who for some reason took occasion to praise the rigid execution of justice then being practiced on thieves. They were being executed everywhere, he [the layman] said, with as many as twenty at a time being hanged on a single gallows. And then he declared he was amazed that so many thieves sprang up everywhere when so few of them escaped hanging. I ventured to speak freely before the Cardinal, and said, “There is no need to wonder: this way of punishing thieves goes beyond the call of justice, and is not in any case for the public good. The penalty is too harsh in itself, yet it isn’t an effective

⁵ T. More, *Utopia*, ed. G. M. Logan and R. M. Adams, rev. ed. (Cambridge, 2002), 15–20; reproduced by permission of W. W. Norton & Co., for original translation, T. More, *Utopia*, ed. R. M. Adams, 2nd ed. (New York, 1992), 9–10, 12–14.



deterrent. Simple theft is not so great a crime that it ought to cost a man his head, yet no punishment however severe can restrain those from robbery who have no other way to make a living. In this matter not only you in England but a good part of the world seem to imitate bad schoolmasters, who would rather whip their pupils than teach them. Severe and terrible punishments are enacted for theft, when it would be much better to enable every man to earn his own living, instead of being driven to the awful necessity of stealing and then dying for it. . . .”

[Also, I said,] “There are a great many noblemen who live idly like drones off the labor of others, their tenants whom they bleed white by constantly raising their rents. (This is the only instance of their tightfistedness, because they are prodigal in everything else, ready to spend their way to the poorhouse.) What’s more, they drag around with them a great train of idle servants, who have never learned any trade by which they could make a living. As soon as their master dies, or they themselves fall ill, they are promptly turned out of doors, for lords would rather support idlers than invalids, and the heir is often unable to maintain as big a household as his father had, at least at first. . . .”

“Yet this is not the only force driving men to thievery. There is another that, as I see it, applies more specially to you Englishmen.”

“What is that?,” said the Cardinal.

“Your sheep,” I said, “that commonly are so meek and eat so little; now, as I hear, they have become so greedy and fierce that they devour human beings themselves. They devastate and depopulate fields, houses and towns. For in whatever parts of the land sheep yield the finest and thus the most expensive wool, there the nobility and gentry, yes, and even a good many abbots – holy men – are not content with the old rents that the land yielded to their predecessors. Living in idleness and luxury without doing society any good no longer satisfies them; they have to do positive harm. For they leave no land free for the plough: they enclose every acre for pasture; they destroy houses and abolish towns, keeping the churches – but only for sheep-barns. And as if enough of your land were not already wasted on game-preserves and forests for hunting wild animals, these worthy men turn all human habitations and cultivated fields back to wilderness. Thus, so that one greedy, insatiable glutton, a frightful plague to his native country, may enclose thousands of acres within a single fence, the tenants are ejected; and some are stripped of their belongings by trickery or brute force, or, wearied by constant harassment, are driven to sell them. One way or another, these wretched people – men, women, husbands, wives, orphans, widows, parents with little children and entire families (poor but numerous, since farming requires many hands) – are forced to move out. They leave the only homes familiar to them, and can find no place to go. Since they must leave at once without waiting for a proper buyer, they sell for a pittance all their household goods, which would not bring much in any case. When that little money is gone (and it’s soon spent in wandering from place to place), what finally



remains for them but to steal, and so be hanged – justly, no doubt – or to wander and beg? And yet if they go tramping, they are jailed as idle vagrants. They would be glad to work, but they can find no one who will hire them. There is no need for farm labor, in which they have been trained, when there is no land left to be planted. One herdsman or shepherd can look after a flock of beasts large enough to stock an area that used to require many hands to make it grow crops.

“This enclosing has led to sharply rising food prices in many districts. Also, the price of raw wool has risen so much that poor people among you who used to make cloth can no longer afford it, and so great numbers are forced from work to idleness. One reason is that after so much new pasture-land was enclosed, rot killed a countless number of the sheep – as though God were punishing greed by sending on the beasts a murrain that rightly should have fallen on the owners! But even if the number of sheep should increase greatly, the price will not fall a penny, because the wool trade, though it can’t be called a monopoly because it isn’t in the hands of a single person, is concentrated in so few hands (an oligopoly, you might say), and these so rich, that the owners are never pressed to sell until they have a mind to, and that is only when they can get their price. ...

“So your island, which seemed specially fortunate in this matter, will be ruined by the crass avarice of a few. For the high cost of living causes everyone to dismiss as many retainers as he can from his household; and what, I ask, can these men do but rob or beg? And a man of courage is more easily persuaded to steal than to beg.

“To make this miserable poverty and scarcity worse, they exist side by side with wanton luxury. The servants of noblemen, tradespeople, even some farmers – people of every social rank – are given to ostentatious dress and gourmandizing. Look at the cook-shops, the brothels, the bawdy houses, and those other places just as bad, the wine-bars and ale-houses. Look at all the crooked games of chance like dice, cards, backgammon, tennis, bowling and quoits, in which money slips away so fast. Don’t all these pastimes lead their devotees straight to robbery? Banish these blights, make those who have ruined farmhouses and villages restore them or hand them over to someone who will restore and rebuild. Restrict the right of the rich to buy up anything and everything, and then to exercise a kind of monopoly. Let fewer people be brought up in idleness. Let agriculture be restored, and the wool-manufacture revived as an honest trade, so there will be useful work for the idle throng, whether those whom poverty has already made thieves or those who are only vagabonds or idle servants now, but are bound to become thieves in the future.

“Certainly, unless you cure these evils it is futile to boast of your justice in punishing theft. Your policy may look superficially like justice, but in reality it is neither just nor expedient. If you allow young folk to be abominably brought up and their characters corrupted, little by little, from childhood; and if then you punish them as grown-ups for committing the crimes to which their training



has consistently inclined them, what else is this, I ask, but first making them thieves and then punishing them for it.”

1.6 *Complaint of the Norwich shoemakers against their journeymen (September 21, 1490)*⁶

While early modern England was overwhelmingly agrarian, towns played a role disproportionate to their puny size. As you read this “Complaint,” ask yourself what sorts of problems city-dwellers worried about? Was there more order (or disorder) in towns or in the countryside? Norwich was the second-largest city in England at the time (in the 1520s, London had 50–70,000 inhabitants; Norwich about 10,000). (You might compare Norwich’s problems with the situation in London, by examining document 1.8.) How does the Great Chain of Being help to explain the views expressed in the Complaint (consider a guild hierarchy of master, journeyman, apprentice)?

To our right honorable masters, the mayor, and his brethren alderman and to our good masters and weelwillers [well-wishers] of the Common Council of the city: Showeth to your great discretions the poor artificers and craftsmen of shoemakers of the said city, that where diverse journeymen and servants of the said craft greatly disposed to riot and idleness, whereby may succeed great poverty, so that diverse days weekly when them lust to leave their bodily labor till a great part of the week be almost so expended and wasted, against the advantage and profit werely [not only] of themselves and of their masters also. And also contrary to the law [of] God and good guiding temporal [temperance], they labor quickly toward the Sunday and festival days on the Saturdays and vigils [evenings before festival days] from four of the clock at afternoon to the deepness and darkness of the night following. And not only that sinful disposition but much worse so offending in the mornings of such fests, and omitting the hearing of their divine service. Wherefore prayeth the said artificers heartily, that the rather for good cause and also that virtuous and true labor might help to the sustentation of the said craft, that by your general assent may be ordained and enacted for a laudable custom, that none such servant or journeyman from henceforth presume to occupy nor work after the said hour in vigils and Saturdays aforesaid, upon pain by your discretions to be set for punishment alsweel of [as much against] the said artificers for their favoring and supporting, as for the said journeymen so working and offending.

⁶ *Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. W. Hudson and J. C. Tingey (London, 1910), 2: 104.



1.7 Thomas Starkey, *Dialogue between Pole and Lupset* (ca. 1529–32)⁷

Starkey (ca. 1498–1538), another humanist writer associated with Cromwell, also often identified as a Commonwealthman, wrote a fanciful dialog between two real contemporaries Thomas Lupset (ca. 1495–1530) and Reginald Pole in order to ponder how one might improve the lot of all in the commonwealth. Which social groups do the speakers blame for England's ills? Is this diagnosis different from Morison's or More's (document 1.2 or 1.5)? Compare and contrast these sources by asking their respective views on the ideal society. Starkey thought government could initiate change that would help the poor. How might the Great Chain of Being be used to press for social change as well as the *status quo*?

Pole: There is also, in this politic body, another disease and sickness more grievous ..., and that is this, shortly to say: A great part of these people which we have here in our country, is either idle or ill-occupied, and a small number of them exerciseth himself in doing their office and duty pertaining to the maintenance of the common weal, by the reason whereof this body is replenished and over-fulfilled with many ill-humors, which I call idle and unprofitable persons, of whom you shall find a great number, if you will a little consider all estates, orders, and degrees here in our country. First, look what an idle rout our noblemen keep and nourish in their houses, which do nothing else but carry dishes to the table and eat them when they have down [done]; and after, giving themselves to hunting, hawking, dicing, carding, and all other idle pastimes and vain [vanities], as though they were born to nothing else at all. Look to our bishops and prelates of the realm, whether they follow not the same trade in nourishing such an idle sort, spending their possessions and goods, which were to them given to be distributed among them which were oppressed with poverty and necessity. Look, furthermore to priests, monks, friars, and canons with all their adherents and idle train, and you shall find also among them no small number idle and unprofitable, which be nothing but burdens to the earth; insomuch that if you, after this manner, examine the multitude in every order and degree, you shall find, as I think, the third part of our people living in idleness, as persons to the common weal utterly unprofitable; and to all good civility, much like unto the drone bees in a hive, which do nothing else but consume and devour all such thing as the busy and good bee, with diligence and labor, gathereth together.

Lupset: Master Pole, me seemeth you examine this matter somewhat too shortly, as though you would have all men to labor, to go to the plough, and

⁷ T. Starkey, *A Dialogue between Pole and Lupset*, ed. T. F. Mayer (London, Camden Society, 4th ser., 37, 1989), 52–4, from TNA SP1/90; reproduced by permission of Royal Historical Society.

exercise some craft, which is not necessary, for our mother the ground is so plenteous and bountiful, by the goodness of God and of nature given to her, that with little labor and tillage she will sufficiently nourish mankind none otherwise than she doth all beasts, fishes, and fowls which are bred and brought up upon her, to whom we see she ministereth food with little labor or none, but of her own fertile benignity. Wherefore if a few of our people busy themselves and labor therein, it is sufficient; the rest may live in triumph, at liberty and ease free from all bodily labor and pain.

Pole: This is spoken, Master Lupset, even as though you judged man to be born for to live in idleness and pleasure, all thing referring and applying thereto. But, Sir, it is nothing so; but, contrary, he is born to labor and travail (after the opinion of the wise and ancient antiquity) none otherwise than a bird to fly, and not to live (as Homer saith some do) as an unprofitable weight and burden of the Earth. For man is born to be as a governor, ruler, and diligent tiller and inhabitant of this earth, as some, by labor of body, to procure things necessary for the maintenance of man's life; some by wisdom and policy to keep the rest of the multitude in good order and civility. So that none be born to this idleness and vanity, to the which the most part of our people is much given and bent, but all to exercise themselves in some fashion of life convenient to the dignity and nature of man. Wherefore, though it be so that it is nothing necessary all to be laborers and tillers of the ground, but some to be priests and ministers of God's Word, some to be gentlemen to the governance of the rest, and some [to be] servants to the same. Yet this is certain, that over-great number of them, without due proportion to the other parts of the body, is superfluous in any commonalty. It is not to be doubted but that here in our country of those sorts be over-many, and specially of them which we call servingmen, which live in service to gentlemen, lords, and others of the nobility. If you look throughout the world, as I think, you shall not find in any one country proportionable to ours like number of that sort.

Lupset: Marry, sir, that is truth. Wherein, me seemeth, you praise our country very much, for in them standeth the royalty of the realm. If the yeomanry of England were not, in time of war we should be in shrewd case; for in them standeth the chief defense of England.

Pole: O, Master Lupset, you take the matter amiss. In them standeth the beggary of England. By them is nourished the common theft therein, as hereafter at large I shall declare. Howbeit, if they were exercised in feats of arms, to the defense of the realm in time of war, they might yet be much better suffered. But you see how little they be exercised therein, insomuch that in time of war it is necessary for our ploughmen and laborers of the country to take weapon in hand, or else we were not like long to enjoy England, so little trust is to be put in their feats and deeds.

Wherefore doubt you no more but of them, like as of other that I have spoken of before (as of priests, friars, monks, and other called religious), we have over-many, which altogether make our politic body unwieldy and heavy, and, as it were, to be grieved with gross humors, insomuch that this disease therein may well be compared to a dropsy in man's body.

Foreigners View English Society

1.8 Andrea Trevisan's Report on England (ca. 1500)⁸

Historians particularly value commentary by foreigners. Why? On what subjects might the following report by a Venetian nobleman (most probably Andrea Trevisan, 1458–1534) to his Senate be most valuable? On what subjects might it be weakest or most unreliable? Can you reconcile the following foreign views of England with what Smith or More or Starkey wrote? How are English family relations most different from those on the continent according to this visitor from Venice? Is there an English national identity ca.1500? Of what might it consist?

The English are, for the most part, both men and women of all ages, handsome and well-proportioned; though not quite so much so, in my opinion, as it had been asserted to me, before your Magnificence went to that kingdom [perhaps 1496]; and I have understood from persons acquainted with these countries, that the Scotch are much handsomer; and that the English are great lovers of themselves, and of everything belonging to them; they think that there are no other men than themselves, and no other world but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner, they say that “he looks like an Englishman,” and that “it is a great pity that he should not be an Englishman”; and when they partake of any delicacy with a foreigner, they ask him, “whether such a thing is made in *their* country?”... [T]hey think that no greater honor can be conferred, or received, than to invite others to eat with them, or to be invited themselves; and they would sooner give five or six ducats [Venetian ducats varied from 3s. 6d. to 4s.; thus, about £2] to provide an entertainment for a person, than a groat [4d.] to assist him in any distress....

The want [lack] of affection in the English is strongly manifested towards their children; for after having kept them at home till they arrive at the age of 7 or 9 years at the utmost, they put them out, both males and females, to hard service in the houses of other people, binding them generally for another 7 or 9 years. And these are called apprentices, and during that time they perform all the most menial offices; and few are born who are exempted from this fate, for every one, however rich he may be, sends away his children into the houses of others, whilst he, in return receives those of strangers into his own. And on inquiring their reason for this severity, they answered that they did it in order that their children might learn better manners. But I, for my part, believe that they do it because they like to enjoy all their comforts themselves, and that they are better served by strangers than they would be by their own children. Besides

⁸ *A Relation, or Rather a True Account, of the Island of England ... about the Year 1500*, trans. C. A. Sneyd (London, Camden Society, 1847), 20–2, 24–9, 41–3.

which the English being great epicures, and very avaricious by nature, indulge in the most delicate fare themselves and give their household the coarsest bread, and beer, and cold meat baked on Sunday for the week, which, however, they allow them in great abundance. That if they had their own children at home, they would be obliged to give them the same food they make use of for themselves. That if the English sent their children away from home to learn virtue and good manners, and took them back again when their apprenticeship was over, they might, perhaps, be excused; but they never return, for the girls are settled by their patrons, and the boys make the best marriages they can, and, assisted by their patrons, not by their fathers, they also open a house and strive diligently by this means to make some fortune for themselves; whence it proceeds that, having no hope of their paternal inheritance, they all become so greedy of gain that they feel no shame in asking, almost “for the love of God,” for the smallest sums of money; and to this it may be attributed, that there is no injury that can be committed against the lower orders of the English, that may not be atoned for by money.

Nevertheless, the apprentices for the most part make good fortunes, some by one means and some by another; but above all, those who happen to be in the good graces of the mistress of the house in which they are domiciliated at the time of the death of the master; because, by the ancient custom of the country, every inheritance is divided into three parts; for the Church and funeral expenses, for the wife, and for the children. But the lady takes care to secure a good portion for herself in secret, first, and then the residue being divided into three parts as aforesaid, she, being in possession of what she has robbed, of her own third, and that of her children besides (and if she have no children, the two thirds belong to her by right), usually bestows herself in marriage upon the one of those apprentices living in the house who is most pleasing to her, and who was probably not *displeasing* to her in the lifetime of her husband; and in his power she places all her own fortune, as well as that of her children, who are sent away as apprentices into other houses. ... No Englishman can complain of this corrupt practice, it being universal throughout the kingdom; nor does any one, arrived at years of discretion, find fault with his mother for marrying again during his childhood, because, from very ancient custom, this license has become so sanctioned, that it is not considered any discredit to a woman to marry again every time that she is left a widow, however unsuitable the match may be as to age, rank, and fortune.

I saw, one day, that I was with your Magnificence at court, a very handsome young man of about 18 years of age [Richard de la Pole, d. 1525], the brother of the duke of Suffolk, who, as I understood, had been left very poor, the whole of the paternal inheritance amongst the nobility descending to the eldest son; this youth, I say, was boarded out to a widow of fifty, with a fortune as I was informed, of 50,000 crowns [Venetian crowns, or, about £10,000]. And this old woman knew how to play her cards so well, that he was content to become her husband, and patiently to waste the flower of his beauty with her, hoping soon to enjoy her great wealth with some handsome young lady: because when there

are no children, the husband succeeds to the whole of the wife's property, and the wife in like manner to her husband's, as I said before; the part, however, belonging to the Church always remaining untouched. Nor must your Magnificence imagine that these successions may be of small value, for the riches of England are greater than those of any other country in Europe, as I have been told by the oldest and most experienced merchants, and also as I myself can vouch. ... This is owing, in the first place, to the great fertility of the soil, which is such, that, with the exception of wine, they import nothing from abroad for their subsistence. Next, the sale of their valuable tin brings in a large sum of money to the kingdom; but still more do they derive from their extraordinary abundance of wool, which bears such a high price and reputation throughout Europe. And in order to keep the gold and silver in the country, when once it has entered, they have made a law, which has been in operation for a long time now, that no money, nor gold, nor silver plate should be carried out of England under a very heavy penalty. And everyone who makes a tour in the island will soon become aware of this great wealth ..., for there is no small innkeeper, however poor and humble he may be, who does not serve his table with silver dishes and drinking cups; and no one, who has not in his house silver plate at least £100. ..., is considered by the English to be a person of any consequence....

[A]t present, all the beauty of this island is confined to London; which, although sixty miles distant from the sea, possesses all the advantages to be desired in a maritime town; being situated on the river Thames, which is very much affected by the tide, for many miles ... above it; and London is so much benefitted by this ebb and flow of the river, that vessels of 100 tons burden can come up to the city, and ships of any size to within five miles of it; yet the water in this river is fresh for twenty miles below London. Although this city has no buildings in the Italian style, but of timber or brick like the French, the Londoners live comfortably, and, it appears to me, that there are not fewer inhabitants than at Florence or Rome. It abounds with every article of luxury, as well as with the necessaries of life but the most remarkable thing in London, is the wonderful quantity of wrought silver. I do not allude to that in private houses, though the landlord of the house in which the Milanese ambassador lived, had plate to the amount of 100 crowns [£25], but to the shops of London. In one single street, named the Strand, leading to St. Paul's, there are fifty-two goldsmith's shops, so rich and full of silver vessels, great and small, that in all the shops in Milan, Rome, Venice, and Florence put together, I do not think there would be found so many of the magnificence that are to be seen in London. And these vessels are all either salt cellars, or drinking cups, or basins to hold water for the hands; for they eat off that fine tin, which is little inferior to silver [pewter]. These great riches of London are not occasioned by its inhabitants being noblemen or gentlemen; being all, on the contrary, persons of low degree, and artificers who have congregated there from all parts of the island, and from Flanders, and from every other place. No one can be mayor or alderman of London, who has not been an apprentice in his youth; that is, who



has not passed the seven or nine years in that hard service described before. Still, the citizens of London are thought quite as highly of there, as the Venetian gentlemen are at Venice, as I think your Magnificence may have perceived.

1.9 “*Journey Through England and Scotland Made by Lupold von Wedel*” (1584–5)⁹

The German knight von Wedel (1544–1615) had already traveled through Egypt and the Holy Land as well as Spain and Portugal by the time he visited the British Isles. We will return to his report when we consider Elizabethan London (see chapter 4). Here, note von Wedel’s opinion of English society overall. Is there an English national identity according to his report? Has it changed since the beginning of the century?

Rare objects are not to be seen in England, but it is a very fertile country, producing all sorts of corn but no wine. There are plenty of sheep, cows, and various kinds of meat. The peasants and citizens are on the average rich people, not to speak of the gentlemen and noblemen. They are fond of pomp and splendor, both high and low. The value of the estates of the nobility cannot be reduced, for the eldest son inherits all; the others enter into some office or pursue highway robbery, as they also do in Scotland. The best tin of all Europe is found in the mines. The gentlemen and nobles keep more servants here than I saw in all my life elsewhere, a simple nobleman keeping perhaps twenty servants, but not so many horses as we do in Germany. When a gentleman goes out on horseback his servants follow on foot. The climate is temperate, similar to that in France, not too hot in summer, and the cold in winter is to be endured. Persons of noble birth enter into marriage with those of lower standing and vice versa, according to wealth and property. I have seen peasants presenting themselves statelier in manner, and keeping a more sumptuous table than some noblemen do in Germany. That is a poor peasant who has no silver-gilt salt-cellars, silver cups, and spoons.

HISTORIANS’ DEBATES

Was early modern England a society of order and deference? Should we re-insert class and conflict into our explanation?

P. Burke, “The Language of Orders in Early Modern Europe,” in *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, ed. M. L. Bush

⁹ “Journey Through England and Scotland Made by Lupold von Wedel in the Years 1584 and 1585,” trans. G. von Bülow, *TRHS* n.s. 9 (1895): 268.



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