DEBATE

The rise of capitalism in England: Reviewing the Brenner thesis

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The article contests Robert Brenner's thesis that capitalism in England originated mainly through, first, the success of the landlords in their struggle against the peasants in early modern England, and, then, by the landlords' sense of moderation in charging rents from capitalist tenants, creating thereby prosperity for all classes.

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In 1976 Robert Brenner contributed an article 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe' to the journal *Past and Present*. The journal opened its pages to articles contributed by various scholars in response to Brenner's paper, to all of which Brenner replied in a long essay, 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism' (1982). All these contributions, together with an introduction from R.H. Hilton, were published in a volume titled *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, edited by T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985 (Indian reprint, New Delhi, 2005). Since Brenner had ostensibly written in defence of the Marxian approach, in opposition to Malthusian models of historical change, he drew replies from two eminent historians, M.M. Postan (with John Hatcher) and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, whom he had himself picked out for criticism. Patricia Croot and David Parker took issue with him over his comparisons of England and France, and J.P. Cooper over his interpretation of English agricultural development. Marxist historians' contributions to the debate remained rather limited: Guy Bois supported Brenner against the neo-Malthusians and H. Wunder and A. Klima provided regional studies of their own. Rather surprisingly, R.H. Hilton, neither in his Introduction to the final publication of the papers, nor in his own article within that volume, took any position with regard to Brenner's main thesis. Hilton's remark that Brenner 'strongly emphasizes class struggle' (*Brenner Debate*, p. 8) is also rather misleading, since, as Hilton himself concedes in the same paragraph, Brenner regards a successful struggle by the oppressed as a source of 'historical regression'!

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Hilton, makes a further statement in his Introduction,[1] which puts Brenner on a high pedestal within Marxist historiography: He holds his thesis to be a continuation of the discussion opened by Paul Sweezy's critique of Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, London, 1948, in *Science and Society*, 1950, which led to a debate among Marxist historians within that journal, the various contributions being later collected in a volume titled *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, London, 1954. It is important, however, to realise why these two debates are, in fact, on a different plane altogether.

The earlier debate essentially arose over different perceptions of how the origins and evolution of capitalism as described by Karl Marx in *Capital*, Vol. I, Part VIII, were to be worked out in detail. In that part of *Capital,* I*,* Marx had rejected the notion that capitalism could have developed merely out of savings of the more 'frugal' elements in society. It could, he argued, only become dominant through a multi-faceted process of 'primitive accumulation', or wealth gained by 'expropriation' of peasants and artisans inside the country and of the colonial peoples abroad, as happened in the case of England, the first industrialised country.[2] Marx had, however, not clearly indicated when the feudal mode ended and the capitalist mode began, and he had also spoken as if there could have been the phase of a 'petty mode of production' in between.[3] The problem thus remained to be resolved whether, or how far, an economy, with extensive commodity production, as that of Western Europe, from the fifteenth century onward, could still be called 'feudal'. It was around these questions that the debate centred. None of the basic formulations of Karl Marx's perception of the rise of capitalism, especially his understanding of Primary Accumulation, as being the essential engine behind it, was brought into question.

With Brenner, it is entirely different. Although he refers (p. 11*n*.) to Karl Marx's definitions of class structure and 'labour process', which, he says, he accepts, he entirely ignores the process of expropriation implied in the notion of primary accumulation of capital (i.e., the entire process of Enclosures in England, as we shall see, as well as that of colonial expropriation). Indeed, further, where Marx saw 'the first beginnings of capitalist production', as early as the fourteenth or fifteenth century, sporadically, 'in certain towns of the Mediterranean',[4] Brenner locates its earliest appearance in England's 'agricultural capitalism' in the same centuries, and denies that capitalism could have evolved anywhere else. It is precisely for this reason that there are no references in his two papers to the *Transformation* symposium of the early 1950s, nor even to Marx's own statements on the

[1] *Brenner Debate*, p. 1. Henceforth all page nos put within brackets in the main text refer to pages of *Brenner Debate*.

[2] See Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, transl. S. Moore and E. Aveling, ed. F. Engels, London, 1889 (photographic reprint, ed. Dona Torr, London, 1938), pp. 736–57, 774–83.

[3] *Capital*, I, pp. 786–88.

[4] Ibid., p. 739.

development of capitalism. It is, therefore, hardly possible to see how the Brenner Debate can shed light on the issues that the earlier *Transition* controversy was concerned with.

Brenner's own line of argument is briefly as follows. When feudalism in Western Europe reached a stage of crisis in the fourteenth century, it was not the dip in population but the peasants' struggle that brought about the end of serfdom. However, this did not resolve the problem of the peasants' control over the land they cultivated. In this respect England was unique. The lords won the struggle here, and by 1500, unlike France and other countries, they were able to reduce the bulk of peasants to mere temporary lease-holders. Thereafter the lords nurtured such tenants as improved the land, so that ultimately England attained a capitalistic form of agriculture, with a three-tiered class structure, comprising the landlords, capitalist tenants and agricultural labourers. It was the success of this system in increasing agricultural production to a degree unimaginable in all other countries carrying on with simple peasant agriculture that enabled England to feed a fast growing industrial population. Thereby, concludes Brenner, it made possible the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, which needed large masses of labour for its factories and a prosperous countryside for its 'home market'.

It is strange that, of all those who responded to Brenner's thesis, it was only J.P. Cooper, who commented (p. 177) that Brenner sounds like 'a Tory defender … of the fruitfulness of the partnership between capitalist farmers and beneficent landlords'. It will be seen from our summary of Brenner's views that his is, indeed, a full-scale Tory statement of English economic history with only a thin Marxist veneer over it. Since J.M. Blaut's critique of Brenner mainly concentrates on his Eurocentric approach,[5] it has seemed desirable to examine in detail the major arguments and statements of fact which form the building blocks of Brenner's theory. As far as possible, I have given below direct quotations from him, and then commented on them.

First, 'From the late fifteenth century … [in England]', 'we find the landlords consolidating holdings and leasing them out to large capitalist tenants who would in turn farm them on the basis of wage labour and agricultural improvement' (Brenner, p. 46).

This statement raises the question as to what is meant by a '*capitalist*' farmer, and whether 'large capitalist tenants' had come into being before 1500 in any number in England. One must remember that peasants who employ wage-labourers and produce for the market have existed in most agricultural societies. The famous text *Kāmasūtra* composed in India in the early centuries of the Christian era, speaks of 'field-labour' (*kshetrakarma*) performed for wages by women on the land of the village headmen (*grāmadhipati*).[6] A description of an Indian village in early

[5] J.M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians*, New York, 2000, pp. 45–72.

[6] For translation of the full passage in *Kāmasūtra*, 5.5.5 and 6, see Irfan Habib, *Post-Mauryan India*, New Delhi, 2012, p. 129.

nineteenth century refers to village headmen, 'who engage wage-labourers as servants and set them to tasks of agriculture', while paying 'them fixed wages in cash or grain'.[7] This kind of a seemingly proto-capitalist relationship follows naturally from the differentiation which Marx held to be inevitable in a peasant economy, based on individual cultivation of fields.[8] Unless there was a further additional element, say, an accretion of money-capital in his hands, as Marx suggested happened with the bigger farmer in England owing to profits gained from the Price Revolution of the sixteenth century,[9] there could not be any class of proto-capitalist farmers. The farmers who might have employed labourers before the Price Revolution that began only about 1530 in England could no more be regarded as agricultural capitalists than the headmen in *Kāmasūtra* or Indian rich peasants of the early nineteenth century. Even so, the capitalist tenant-farmers of whom Marx spoke formed only a small class as late as 1688. In the year of the Glorious Revolution, 'England was in the main a country of commons [i.e., common pastures] and common [i.e., open] fields'. At that time, the 'yeoman', or the independent peasant, was thought to be above the ordinary tenant, who was still usually a peasant holding a terminable lease.[10] In other words, as late as the closing years of the seventeenth century, England was still a country of peasant farms, with proto-capitalist agriculture forming only a minor sector within it.[11] In fact, Brenner himself concedes the prevalence of peasant agriculture in England when he speaks of the peasant revolts of the sixteenth century, which, as he records with some satisfaction, 'did not succeed' (p. 50). In the light of this, his persistent attempt to pre-date the emergence of capitalist agriculture in England to late medieval times is all the more untenable.

Second, what the agrarian situation after 1700 was like is described by Brenner thus: 'In my view, it was the emergence of the "classic" landlord/ capitalist-tenant/ wage-labourer structure which made possible the transformation of agricultural

[7] Passage quoted in Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 2nd ed., New Delhi, 1999, p. 137.

[8] Marx, Second draft of letter to Vera Zasulich, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* (English ed.), Vol. XXIV, Moscow, p. 363.

[9] *Capital,* I, pp. 766–68.

[10] J.F. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1660–1832,* London, 1911/1917, p. 26. Incidentally, Brenner here shows a lapse in accuracy, which normally should not occur. He says (p. 62) that in England about 1700 'the owner-occupants held no more than 25–30% of the land', and refers us to his *n.*80 on p. 48. But here the only relevant source given is F.M.L. Thompson, who estimated that freeholders held 'about one-third of the land at the end of the seventeenth century.' We are not told on what basis Brenner reduced the freeholders' land from being a third to (possibly) just a quarter of the entire land.

[11] Paul Mantoux, *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed., New York, 1961, p. 137. G.E. Mingay, *Enclosure and the small Farmer in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, London, 1968, esp. pp. 31–32, opposes the 'old view' that the decline of small farms in England mainly took place between 1760 and 1850, with the 'modern understanding' that the decline occurred between 1660 and 1750. Even this revisionist view concedes in effect that England must still have been a country of small farms in 1688.

production in England' (p. 49). This transformation was apparently made possible by the landlords' great generosity and consideration. The capitalist tenants 'were assured that they could take a reasonable share of the increased revenue resulting from their capital investments and not have them confiscated by the landlords' rent increases' (p. 49). Thereby there came about a purely British absence of class antagonism: England 'saw the displacement of the traditionally antagonistic relationship in which landlord squeezing undermined tenant initiative, by an emergent landlord/tenant symbiosis which brought mutual cooperation in investment and improvement' (p. 51). Indeed, a veritable abolition of class struggle by mutual consideration!

All this is an astonishing travesty of fact. While speaking of the rise of the landed gentry in the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, R.H. Tawney spoke of the two features of that class: 'charg[ing] the rent … *a farm will stand*' and engaging in trade.[12] The eighteenth century of which Brenner is here speaking was a century, in fact, of dramatic enhancements of rent by the landlords.[13] A study of the Coke estate in Norfolk found that between 1718 and 1748 rent income from the same lands rose 1.2 times in a period when 'prices were falling', so that the real rent-burden increased much more. And 'rents continued to rise steadily after 1748'.[14] But the real rise took place through 'Enclosures' when all old tenancies were put an end to and new large tenancies were offered at the highest rents the landlords could get. The latter half of the eighteenth century was the main period when most of the land in England was enclosed: and Arthur Young noted that rents increased 3 to 4 times in Lincolnshere after enclosure. According to the Board of Agriculture, 1804, the average rent per 100 acres increased in a period of 14 years, 1790–1803, from £ 88, 6s. to £ 121, 2s.,7d. or by 37.2 per cent.[15] According to estimates by Deane and Cole, the increase in income from rents and services outpaced that of agricultural output over the eighteenth century: between 1700 and 1800 the former increased by 57 per cent, the latter by 43 per cent.[16]

It was the landlords' drive for rent that brought about the Enclosure Movement of the eighteenth century, which, in turn made England the sole country in the world where the landlords have been able to destroy an entire peasantry. It is characteristic of Brenner, the professed believer in class struggle, that he sees the enclosures as merely a measure 'to make farms more efficient' (p. 316).[17] He refuses to see that

[12] R.H. Tawney, 'Rise of the Gentry', in Carus-Welson, ed., *Essays in Economic History*, Vol. I, London, 1954, p. 187.

[13] Cf. G.E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1963, pp. 52–57.

[14] R.A.C. Parker, 'Coke of Norfolk and the Agrarian Revolution', in E.M. Carus-Wilson, ed., *Essays in Economic History*, Vol. II, London, 1962, p. 329.

[15] See T.S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England: the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1955, p. 46.

[16] Phyllis Deane and W.A. Cole, *British Economic Growth, 1688–1959*, Cambridge, 1962, p. 78.

[17] Mingay, who speaks, like Brenner, of accommodating landlords who abated rents, when prices fell (*English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 171–72), concedes, unlike him, that 'from the landlords' point of view, enclosure was an investment in land which enabled them to raise rents' (Ibid., p. 182).

both in Tudor enclosures of the sixteenth century, where cornfields were converted into pastures, and in those of the eighteenth, where large farms were carved out, the object was to get more rent out of the leases of the enclosed lands through eliminating the numerous small tenancies, since from such tenancies higher rents could not be received, owing to the irreducible subsistence costs of individual peasants. Their successors, the larger farmers, on the other hand, could pay higher rents to the landlords, by reducing wage-costs, a reduction made possible by the continuously increasing ranks of the rural proletariat thrown out from the land by the enclosures themselves.[18] Brenner forbears even mentioning the wholesale expropriation of the English peasantry, which the eighteenth century saw, and which Marx held to be a major source of primitive accumulation of capital in England.[19] How the landlords used Parliament to bring about Enclosures to inflict destruction upon the small tenantry, wherever 'private' Enclosures could not achieve that object, is a story classically told in the Hammonds' *Village Labourer*.[20] Marc Bloch sums it all up when he speaks of 'the profit' derived by the English landed 'gentry' from the Enclosure Movement, which was 'also directly or indirectly the means of bringing ruin on countless tenant farmers'.[21] Such was the compassion and lack of antagonism that the English landlords showed towards their tenantry!

Third, Brenner justifies the triumph of full-fledged capitalist agriculture on the altar of 'development', which, one would suppose, means increase of production per capita. He cannot deny that peasants could also increase production, but he denies that by so doing, they could achieve 'development'. He says:

> Thus small-scale farming could be especially effective with certain industrial crops (for example, flax) as well as viticulture, dairying and horticulture. But this sort of agriculture generally brought about increased yields through the intensification of labour rather than through the greater efficiency of a given unit of labour input. It did not, therefore, produce "development" (p. 50).

Here Brenner has obviously confounded increase of production *per capita*, with increase of production *per unit of labour*. Development takes place if the former occurs, through full employment for instance, even if there is no increase in production per unit of labour. Even Hilton (p. 8) seems to be doubtful about Brenner's assumption here, given the performance of the peasantry in 'the

[18] In an article titled 'The Roots of Modern Capitalism: A Marxist Accounting History of the Origins and Consequences of Capitalist Landlords in England', *The Accounting Historians Journal*, Vol. 31(3), June 2004, pp. 1–56, Rob Bryer, with frequent quotations from Marx, still omits to consider even the possibility that the increased rents of the landlords after enclosures originated at least in large part, from the depressed wages of labourers employed by the rent-paying capitalist farmers.

[19] *Capital*, I, pp. 740–57.

[20] J.F. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, op. cit., pp. 50–165.

[21] Marc Bloch, *French Rural History*, English transl., London, 1966, p. 135. In this portion of his book, pp. 125–35, Bloch makes an insightful comparison between French and English rural developments from late medieval times onwards.

Third world' (especially China and India) in recent times.[22] But what is doubtful is whether capitalist farming in England even in the eighteenth century really produced high growth per unit of labour, to qualify for Brenner's designation of 'development'.

First of all, let us remember that in capitalist agriculture in England, the object was not larger production, but larger profit, out of which the ever-increasing rent had to be paid. Arthur Young in his *Farmers' Letters* (1767) had argued that a farm could make better profits by breeding than by tillage.[23] This would, of course, have meant lower agricultural production. Marx showed how in Ireland which was completely in the grip of English land-owners, the 'surplus produce increased (after 1846) although the total produce, of which it formed a fraction, decreased'.[24]

In actual fact, according to Deane and Cole, the increase in agricultural production in England during the eighteenth century was achieved mainly by an increase of sown acreage by 25 per cent, while the increase in yield per acre over the century amounted only to a 'modest' 10 per cent.[25] Even in this modest increase in productivity, the increased efficiency per unit of labour played little role, for, according to the same writers, 'the enclosure movement of the latter part of the [eighteenth] century was directed more towards increasing yields per acre and extending the area under cultivation *than at economising the use of human labour*'.[26] Clearly, therefore, not increase in productivity per unit of labour, but a depression in wages per unit of labour was the real source of capitalist farmers' profits and the landlords' rent in eighteenth-century England.

Fourth, Brenner regards the growth of English agriculture in the eighteenth century as a unique achievement of British capitalism. He compares English agricultural performance with that of France (pp. 54–62), and concludes to his satisfaction that peasant economy could not increase production in the way capitalist farming did (see also p. 319*n.*).

But France except in the north had a different system of agriculture. Why not compare English agricultural performance with that of Ireland, the country next door in the same latitudes, with the same climate, a peasant country, that was England's own first colony, and mercilessly exploited by English landlords?[27]

[22] See also Le Roy Ladurie's remarks in *Brenner Debate*, p. 105.

[23] Mantoux, op. cit., p. 173.

[24] *Capital*, I, p. 725.

[25] Deane and Cole, op. cit., p. 68.

[26] Ibid., p. 75. Italics ours.

[27] This description of Ireland accords with what was widely accepted for a fact 'on both sides of the Irish Sea ever since the mid-nineteenth century' (Michael J. Winstanley, *Ireland and the Land Question*, *1800–1922*, London, 1984, p. 3); but a host of 'revisionist' texts, including Winstanley's tract just quoted, seek to undermine it by introducing complexities and modifications of various kinds. The main facts still stand out. The vast majority of the Irish (70 to 75 per cent) were Catholics, yet in 1776, according to Arthur Young, no more than 5 per cent of land in Ireland was owned by Catholics

Between 1701 and 1801 the population of England and Wales increased by 56.8 per cent (from 5.826 million to 9.136 million). Even if the per capita food intake had remained the same, English agriculture needed to increase production by over 58 per cent to feed the country's population. It did not do so, the increase it attained being estimated at just 43 per cent: imports from Ireland therefore became essential (largely received in rent payments by English land-owners and so free of cost!). The population of Ireland itself increased in the same period by 104.9 per cent, from 2.540 million to 5.216 million. It not only increased its agricultural production by over 100 per cent to feed its own population, but increased it still further to meet England's food deficit.[28] For this to happen, Ireland's peasant agriculture must have greatly outperformed English capitalist agriculture![29]

Brenner by ignoring Ireland also seriously misreads English agricultural history. By 1700, he says, 'England had become one of Europe's largest grain exporters' (p. 318), implying, to an innocent reader, that such self-sufficiency then continued into the eighteenth century, when the real capitalist transformation of English agriculture took place. But the reverse was the case. Even in the first half of the eighteenth century, England had only 'a *small* but growing surplus of grain export', and this was 'in later years converted into a deficit, so that in 1800 its net grain imports amounted to over 2 million quarters.'[30] If 'subsistence crisis' had been, for a long time, 'a thing of the past' in England, as Brenner (p. 318) exultantly notes, this was only because the vulnerability to it was transferred to Ireland. It was estimated in 1797 that Ireland had to remit to England £ 1.5 million annually in rents that were due to absentee English land-owners.[31] The Irish peasant had to eat potatoes so that England could consume Irish wheat, meat and cheese. When blight forced a repeated failure of potato crops in Ireland in 1845–49, 1 million Irishmen simply died of starvation.[32] It was not a 'subsistence crisis', it was wholesale subsistence-destruction.

(J.G. Simms, *A New History of Ireland*, Vol. IV (*Eighteenth Century Ireland, 1691–1800*), ed. T.W. Moody and W.E. Vaughan, Oxford, 1986, p. 13). That is, no less than 95 per cent of the land was owned by English landlords and immigrants, the so-called Anglo-Irish Protestants. The tenants, subject, from 1816 onwards, to summary ejectment by law, were true peasants with little trace in Ireland of the three-tier class structure so admired by Brenner.

[28] For the population of England and Wales and of Ireland, see Deane and Cole, op. cit., p. 6, and for Irish exports of corn and dairy products to England, see Ibid., p. 74.

[29] It is significant, as Marx noted (*Capital*, I, p. 700 & *n.*), that the Irish labourer (employed by the peasant) was better nourished than the English labourer (employed by the capitalist farmer), receiving four times more milk and double the amount of bread! Marx quotes Arthur Young to the same effect.

[30] Deane and Cole, op. cit., p. 65 and Table 17.

[31] Mingay, op. cit., p. 44.

[32] See Marx on Ireland in *Capital*, I, pp. 719–35 and especially *n.* 5 on p. 734, where he mentions how, after the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846, Ireland was transformed from a source of wheat for England to that of dairy products, thereby initiating a steady process of depopulation in that country. This point is unaffected by the insistence of some historians that decline in 'arable farming' in Ireland had begun in the 1830's, which only got 'accelerated' after 1846 (M. Winstanley, *Ireland and the Land Question*, p. 8).

Fifth, forgetting entirely this tribute in foodstuffs that England received from Ireland, but noting England's growth of population and shift of labour to industry in the eighteenth century, Brenner tells us: 'Even so, grain prices ceased to rise. This allowed real wages to increase, *a new golden age for the working people*' (p. 327: italics ours).

What Brenner says here is contradicted by the studies of the movement of real wages in England that we have access to. One such study, that of wages in building trades over the period 1250–1950, shows real wages taking a deep dip around 1600, then recovering slowly to reach the 1550 levels only by 1750. Thereafter, the *real wages declined* with a deep dip around 1800.[33] We have also estimates by Deane and Cole, who, besides noting that in the eighteenth century local wage divergences tended to be reduced, tell us that overall 'between the late [seventeen-] sixties and 1795, the average wage rose by about 25 per cent, but in the same period the cost of living increased, *on a conservative estimate*, by something like 30 per cent'.[34] Real wages, therefore, distinctly fell. There were food riots in 1795 in England, at the height of Brenner's 'golden age'; and there is no escape from accepting the Hammonds' judgement of the situation: 'The governing fact of the situation was that the labourer's wages no longer sufficed to provide even a bare and comfortless existence'.[35]

Sixth, Brenner concludes his second essay, 'Agrarian Roots, &c.,' with the following summing up of how he sees the path to the triumph of capitalism in England: 'With agriculture providing growing discretionary incomes and increasing purchasing power not only to the middle but to the lower classes, the home market continued to grow. Industry fed on agriculture and stimulated in turn further agricultural improvement—an upward spiral that extended into the industrial revolution' (p. 327).

This is a fairy-tale view of the process leading to the English industrial revolution and the turning of England into the first industrial-capitalist economy of the world. First of all, it ignores the essential role of machinery, and its product, the factory, the crucial unit of capitalist production, to which Marx devoted so much attention. Machinery intruded into agriculture only well after 1800, with which alone the capitalist transformation of agriculture was completed.[36] The path to the invention and use of machinery was totally independent of agriculture, and involved not only a preceding stage of technological developments in England but also Europe and other parts of the world, notably China. Equally important is Brenner's

[33] E.H. Phelps Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables, & c.', in E.M. Carus-Welson, ed., *Essays in Economic History*, Vol. II, London, 1965, p. 186 (graph).

[34] Deane and Cole, op. cit., p. 21. Italics ours.

[35] J.F. Hammond and Barbara Hammon, op. cit., p. 123. For food riots, see Ibid., pp. 120–22.

[36] 'Modern Industry alone, and finally, supplies, in machinery the lasting basis of capitalistic agriculture, & c.' (*Capital*, I, p. 773). This happens, of course, because of the immense labour-replacement that machinery brings about: 'Along with the tool, the skill of the workman handling it passes over to the machine' (Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 419).

complete neglect of the creation of a labour reserve for industry brought about by the enclosures.[37] Moreover, it was not only the increased purchasing power of the capitalist farmers that provided modern industry with its 'home market', but also the destruction of domestic industry once the peasant economy was shattered: the 'lower classes' became purchasers of products of industry not because they had larger incomes, as Brenner alleges, but because their own home crafts were destroyed.[38] We have already seen that Brenner has completely ignored rents from Ireland received in the form of foodstuffs, as a factor in feeding the rising population of industrial England; but he has also completely ignored the income England secured in the eighteenth century out of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the products of slave-plantations of the West Indies and the tribute from India.[39] Utsa Patnaik has aptly called this flow of wealth 'Free Lunch' that was provided to England by its colonies at the crucial time when it was in the throes of the Industrial Revolution.[40] In 1799, William Pitt made what may be regarded as an official estimate of foreign income that Britain then earned, putting it at £ 17 million, a figure amounting to 7.33 per cent of Britain's national income as estimated by Deane and Cole for 1801.[41] Brenner forgets all these special advantages in favour of England, when he compares England with sundry European countries and asks why the latter did not achieve full-scale capitalism as England succeeded in doing in the latter half of the eighteenth century. He should surely have also asked what income countries other than England were then receiving from their colonial enterprises, to add to their capital.

Having dealt with his conclusion, it is, perhaps, time for us to set out, at the cost of some repetition, our major differences with Brenner. We frankly regard his debate with the 'neo-Malthusian orthodoxy' as something of a red herring, because, as Blaut points out, in a long note,[42] Brenner himself admits to the demographic factor being partly an independent variable in pre-modern societies. There is little room for difference with him in recognising that by 1400 serfdom, in its rigid feudal form, was fast disappearing. Nor is there any controversy over the fact that by 1500 in England, but not in France, the lords had converted themselves into landlords with most peasants reduced to the status of their lease-holders

[37] Marx's observations on this (*Capital*, I, p. 757) are further developed by Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, London, 1946, pp. 221–42.

[38] *Capital*, I, pp. 272–74. For the earlier extensiveness of domestic and rural crafts, see G.E. Mingay, op. cit., pp. 238–39.

[39] Not only Brenner, but also many British Marxist historians, including Dobb in his magisterial *Studies*, have paid surprisingly little attention to Marx's statements on this source of Primitive Accumulation (*Capital*, I, pp. 774–79).

[40] Utsa Patnaik, 'The Free Lunch: Transfers from the Tropical Colonies and their Role in Capital Formation in Britain during the Industrial Revolution', in K.S. Jomo, ed., *Globalization under Hegemony: The Changing World Economy*, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 30–70.

[41] Deane and Cole, op. cit., pp. 34–160.

[42] Blaut, op. cit., p. 52 & *n.* 11 on pp. 68–69.

or tenants. This fact had already been noted by Marc Bloch, who held that the villeins' deprivation of rights to the land in England was a legally recognised fact by 1500.[43]

What is, however, not to be conceded is that this deprivation was accompanied by an almost *simultaneous* implanting of the characteristic three-tiered class structure of the modern English agrarian system, with the peasant disappearing and his place taken up by the capitalist tenant and the landless labourer. What Brenner wishes us to overlook is the fact that peasant agriculture lasted in England till as late as the latter half of the eighteenth century, when it was overthrown by the great movement of enclosures undertaken by the landlords with the full aid and support of Parliament. In other words, he chooses to shut his eyes to the entire violent process of destruction of the English peasantry, which is, perhaps, the single most consequential 'revolution' in English agrarian history.[44] This feat of omission he has been able to perform by putting the dominance of capitalist agriculture in the pre-enclosure era and, then, treating the enclosures as a mere consequence of technological improvement with which the landlords and capitalist tenants (assumed to be already established) are credited. By this device, the eighteenth century which contained in its latter half some of the most terrifying periods of privation for the English poor, can become, to him, 'a new golden age for working people'. I may be mistaken, but few Tory historians have gone so far as this in glorifying that dark corner of British social history.

One is also struck by the insular approach that Brenner adopts and the way it is left uncensored by his critics. No one raised the question of Brenner's failure to compare Ireland with England, when like England Irish peasants had equally lost (in their case, through bouts of alien conquest) in the struggle with English land-owners—the very same class whose sense of moderation in extraction of rent Brenner praises. He should surely have also compared, as we have seen, the performance of Irish peasant agriculture with that of English capitalist farming to test the claims for the latter's superiority.

Blaut has pointed out that Brenner pays scant attention to the growth of commerce as a necessary accompaniment of capitalism whether in agriculture or industry.[45] Such inattention to commerce implies neglect of Marx's suggestion that in the pre-industrial times, it is the 'commercial supremacy that gives industrial predominance'. 'Hence', adds Marx, 'the preponderant role that the colonial system plays at the time'.[46] But, as we have seen, Brenner excludes

[43] Bloch, op. cit., pp. 127–28.

[44] One fails to find in Brenner any citation either from the Hammonds' *Village Labourer* or Mantoux's *Industrial Revolution*, where the entire process is classically described, let alone Karl Marx's critical passages in *Capital*, I, pp. 769–74. And yet Brenner is considered a rather strict or rigorous Marxist (e.g., Hilton's observations in *Brenner Debate*, pp. 1–5).

[45] Blaut, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

[46] *Capital*, I, pp. 77–79.

the colonial system altogether from his sights, so that the only stream that can be shown to lead to industrial capitalism is kept deliberately confined to British agriculture. He forgets, as we have seen, that through the colonial system, British capitalism laid agriculture abroad under tribute as well—slave plantations in the West Indies and peasant agriculture in India. These too should surely have been counted among the 'agrarian roots' of English capitalism!