

Farm Servant vs Agricultural Labourer, 1870–1914: A Reply to Richard Anthony

By ALUN HOWKINS

I AM DELIGHTED with Richard Anthony's careful and clear corrective to my over simplistic remarks about Scotland. Nevertheless, I would wish still to hold to my general points. Firstly, my 'straw man' was and is a device, but 'he' remains an essentially real figure in much writing at least about, or derived from a model based on, southern and eastern England. My central concern here was with predictive model building. The notion of 'proletarian' in a social history sense is usually ultimately derived, whether those who use it like it or not, from Marx. As such it brings with it a load of intellectual baggage about political and social behaviour. As a result many of those who use the concept have sought, hitherto in vain, for 'proletarian' behaviour, especially a recognizable socio-political consciousness. This is to misunderstand the concept, at least in a Marxist sense. To Marx the key elements of a 'proletariat' were not only the extraction of surplus value or the lack of anything to sell but labour power (landlessness in our case), but also the socialization and division of labour. Simply being 'poor' or 'a worker' is not the same as being a 'proletarian' in this sense. It is in Marx's sense that I would use the word. It is clear from the most cursory examination that farm work was socialized and divided, if at all, only on large cereal farms in the east of England and Scotland, and then, sticking my neck out, only for a brief historical period say between the 1850s and the 1920s. As I said it is perhaps striking that these areas, the Lothians and East Anglia, produced the most tenacious 'proletarian' organizations.

Secondly, and in a more general sense still, my interests at one level are clearly at variance with those of Anthony. As my intellectual origins are at least in part in sociology these thoughts led to my concern about how we can build a model of a predictive, or at least explanatory, kind (a project I take to be a central part of social history) which deals with the socio-political behaviour of the rural workforce. Put crudely, at a time (c 1880–1920) when the majority of the British working class were organizing their own institutions and were increasingly militant, why did a significant group (the rural poor) remain outside this process? While not wishing to deny local and specific factors, this led in turn to my schematic sense of three kinds of 'worker', just as earlier it led to my notion of 'structural conflict'. This is not to deny conflict but rather to seek perhaps different forms of conflict which might find expression outside 'organized' labour disputes. I cannot see that anything Anthony says conflicts with this unless it be a general distrust of explanatory and predictive models.

The main thrust of Anthony's criticism lies in my treatment of farm service. While farm service clearly has many regional and local manifestations it remains obviously different from a social situation where hiring by the week is the norm and where the worker lives in a community separate from the workplace. For example, as Anthony says of Scotland 'bargaining' for hiring and yearly wages while based on a farm is very different (as it was in, for example, Northumberland where similar practices to those described by Anthony

were often the norm) from weekly off-farm hiring. Further, the social separation of the servant from his peers (even on large family hiring farms) and the fact of living on the farm, even if not in the house, were seen by contemporaries in England at least as creating 'bonds' between master and man which were not there elsewhere. Wages in kind obviously vary in value and in social and cultural nature, but Wilson Fox's 1900 and 1905 figures for East Anglia are very different from Newby's 1970s figures, showing a variation from less than 3 per cent to about 8 per cent, the latter only for men in charge of horses. Wilson Fox also notes that most farms paid nothing in kind although piecework payments were common.¹ This is supported by my own

oral material for Norfolk. All I would suggest is that farm service creates different kinds of social relationships from those of 'farm labour' which produce different kinds of conflict or perhaps, as Pretty suggests for parts of Wales,² virtually eradicate conflict.

Finally, Anthony argues for seeing farm work in a community context: here I agree absolutely. The work/wage relationship is clearly not the only one which effects behaviour. Nevertheless, I am enough of a 'social scientist' to want to see this relationship investigated, and 'modelled' – something conspicuously missing from my essay.

¹ A Wilson-Fox, *Wages, Earnings and Conditions of Employment of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom*, 1905.

² D A Pretty, *The Rural Revolt that Failed*, Cardiff, 1989.