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English society before and after the coming of industry

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Laslett, P. (1965) *The World we have Lost*, London, Methuen and Company Limited, pp. 1–2, 5–8, 10.

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[[p. 1]] In the year 1619 the bakers of London applied to the authorities for an increase in the price of bread. They sent in support of their claim a complete description of a bakery and an account of its weekly costs. There were thirteen or fourteen people in such an establishment: the baker and his wife, four paid employees who were called journeymen, two apprentices, two maidservants and the three or four children of the master baker himself. Six pounds ten shillings a week was reckoned to be the outgoings of this establishment of which only eleven shillings and eightpence went for wages. [...] Far and away the greatest cost was for food: two pounds nine shillings. [...] Clothing was charged up too, not only for the man, wife and children, but for the apprentices as well. [...]

A London bakery was undoubtedly what we should call a commercial or even an industrial undertaking, turning out loaves by the thousand. Yet the business was carried on in the house of the baker himself. There was probably a shop as part of the house, shop as in workshop and not as meaning a retail establishment. Loaves were not ordinarily sold over the counter: they had to be carried to the open-air market and displayed on stalls. There was a garner behind the house, for which the baker paid two shillings a week in rent, and where he kept his wheat, his sea-coal for the fire and his store of salt. The house itself was one of those high, half-timbered over-hanging structures on the narrow London street. [...]

[[p. 2]] The only word used at that time to describe such a group of people was 'family'. The man at the head of the group, the entrepreneur, the employer, or the manager, was then known as the master or head of the family. He was father to some of its members and in place of father to the rest. There was no sharp distinction between his domestic and his economic functions. His wife was both his partner and his subordinate, a partner because she ran the family, took charge of the food and managed the women-servants, a subordinate because she was woman and wife, mother and in place of mother to the rest.

The paid servants of both sexes had their specified and familiar position in the family, as much part of it as the children but not quite in the same position. At that time the family was not one society only but three societies fused together; the society of man and wife, of parents and children and of master and servant. But when they were young, and servants were, for the most part, young, unmarried people, they were very close to children in their status and their function. [...]

[[p. 5]] [...] There are reasons why a baker's household might have been a little out of the ordinary, for baking was a highly traditional occupation in a society increasingly subject to economic change. [...] a family of thirteen people, which was also a unit of production of thirteen, less the children quite incapable of work, was quite large for English society at that time. Only the families of the really important, the nobility and the gentry, the aldermen and the successful merchants were ordinarily as large as this. In fact, we can take the bakery to represent the upper limit in size and scale [[p. 6]] of the group in which ordinary people lived and worked. Among the great mass of society which cultivated the land, [...] the family group was smaller than a London craftsman's entourage. [...]

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[[p. 7]] Everything physical was on the human scale [...] No object in England was larger than London Bridge or St Paul's Cathedral, no structure in the Western World to stand comparison with the Colosseum in Rome. Everything temporal was tied to the human life-span too. The death of the master baker, head of [[p. 8]] the family, ordinarily meant the end of the bakery. [...]

[...] There was an organization in the social structure of Europe before the coming of industry which enormously exceeded the family in size and endurance. This was the Christian Church. It is true to say that the ordinary person, especially the female, never went to a gathering larger than could assemble in an ordinary house except when going to [[p. 9]] church.[...]

[...] At a time when the ability to read with understanding and to write much more than a personal letter was confined for the most part to the ruling minority, in a society which was otherwise oral in its communications, the preaching parson was the great link between the illiterate mass and the political, technical and educated world. Sitting in the 10,000 parish churches of England every Sunday morning, in groups of 20, 50, 100 or 200, the illiterate mass of the people were not only taking part in the single group activity which they ordinarily shared with others outside their own families. They were informing themselves [...] of what went on in England, Europe, and the world as a whole. The priesthood was indispensable to the religious activity of the old world, at a time when religion was still of primary interest and importance. But the priesthood was also indispensable because of its functions in social communication. [...]

When we insist on the tiny scale of life in the pre-industrial world, especially on the small size of the group in which nearly everybody spent all their lives, there are, of course, certain occasions and institutions which we must not overlook. There were the military practices, an annual muster of the able-bodied men from every county, which took place after harvest in Tudor times. [...]

[[p. 10]] [...] Other organizations and purposes which brought groups of people together were the Assizes in the County Towns; [...] the meetings of [...] the town councils in the towns, of the companies or craftsmen there [...]; the assemblies which sometimes took place of clergy or of nonconformist ministers. Most regular of all, and probably largest in scale and most familiar to ordinary men and women were the weekly market days and the annual fairs in each locality. [...]

The fact that it is possible to name most of the large-scale institutions and occasions in a sentence or two makes the contrast with our own world more telling than ever. We have only to think of the hundreds of children sitting every day, all over the country, in their classrooms, the hundreds and thousands together in the factories, the offices, the shops, to recognize the difference. [...]