

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HATCHER

**Name: HILTON RODNEY_RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN
HATCHER CAMBRIDGE _ORIGINAL PPM 5 SOURCE
MATERIALS_BOX5 _cust ref_MID19726125**

S1

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We are meeting today with Rodney Hilton, an eminent and very productive historian of the Middle Ages, whose special interest has been in the peasantry and the lower orders. Well, Rodney was born in Middleton, near Manchester in 1916. And I wonder, Rodney, whether you can identify in your early years certain pointers in the direction that your subsequent career was to take?

S2

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I think quite positively so. My parents were active members of the Independent Labour Party and had been so even before the Labour Party itself was founded on both sides. My grandparents had been involved in the Lancashire textile industry and strangely enough, both my maternal grandparents and my paternal grandparent had been in the early years of their adult life Handloom weavers, all of which, as it were, came into the the folklore of the family, all sorts of things in the folklore of the family, which were interesting, such as my maternal grandfather carried a banner in the 1884 general election saying Down with the House of Lords. So there was a general sort of radical background as well as the late 1930 and 20th century commitment to the ALP, which of course was a socialist party. So when you grow up in that sort of atmosphere, it's not only the sort of ideological, if you'd like to put it that way, commitment, but also all of my family as well as looking forward, very definitely looked backwards to their to their immediate ancestors and to the activities of their immediate ancestors.

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And then you you really decided to be a historian or you suddenly became interested in history from an early age.

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Yes, I was I was certainly interested in history and fascinated visiting my maternal grandparent, my maternal grandfather, who died at the age of 96. I used to go I used to go and take him his lunch wrapped up in a bowl in a red cotton handkerchief. And I couldn't help noticing when I went to the cottage where he was living that a plaque over the door said Samuel Bamford was arrested here after the Peterloo massacre in 1819. So you see, there are all sorts of historical backgrounds that were completely unavoidable when I went to school. I, first of all, went to the North Manchester branch of the Manchester Grammar School, and then I went to the Manchester Grammar School to the history sixth, where there was the, the, the chief history master in the history. Sixth was RFI Bunn, who although not having any particular sort of commitments as far as the interpretation of history was concerned, was an extremely stimulating and encouraging person. And incidentally, he had also taught the man that was later to be my supervisor at Oxford, R.W. Southern. So I actually met Southern, first of all, in the company of RFI. But yes, and it was it was at the schools. I was very interested in history, I imagine myself. In fact, I actually started writing a history of Middleton with an emphasis on it's sort of the labor history of Middleton. I used to go to extramural classes at Manchester University conducted by G. Toppling the historian of of Southern Lancashire. And consequently by the time I came to sit for scholarships and whatnot to go to the university, I was very committed as a historian and particularly, of course interested in the history of the Lancashire working class. I changed that as, as you know.

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Yes. At Oxford then did your interest in the Middle Ages begin and what particularly directly do you think?

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I think they're the reason why. At Oxford, at Balliol College, I got interested in the Middle Ages was because the first tutor I had was a very, very stimulating person. V H. Galbraith, a very fine historian, not particularly interested in the sort of history that I was interested in, but sufficiently broad in his general interest to make the Middle Ages seem quite exciting. And then after he left Balliol to take up a chair, I think in I think it was Edinburgh, I'm not quite sure. His successor as my tutor was R.W. Southern, whom I had already met and who again, although in no way particularly sympathetic to or committed to the sort of history I was interested in, nevertheless gave me a sort of broad perspective of the Middle Ages, which encouraged me to to begin to think of myself as a medievalist. Well, now, one of the problems, of course, was how was I interested in the history of the Lancashire working class getting all sucked up into medieval history? And I thought, well, why not? If I'm going to talk about or write about the history of the of the working class in industrial society, one really ought to start off by looking at their ancestors. So I decided that the thing to do was to look at the medieval peasantry. There was a bit of a problem about looking at the medieval peasantry that was that. The last of my special subjects, which interested me very much, was on the medieval English burgh. But one of the documents that I found most interesting when looking at the medieval English borough was the the documents illustrating the history of Leicester, the Leicester Borough records, which had been edited by Mary Batson. So I thought, well, yes, right, Leicester, that's a very interesting place and there's plenty of documents, but perhaps I better look at the rural background. So I discovered in the Bodleian Library that there was a colony of Leicester Abbey, which I plunged into, and at that point I became completely absorbed in the peasantry and the relationships between peasantry and landlords.

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And this is the subject, of course, of your your dphil the subject Leicestershire estates. Less stress, less.

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S2

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Less stress traits in the 14th and 15th centuries. Yes.

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And was your supervisor then a source of inspiration to you?

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Well, my supervisor my supervisor was R.V. Leonard of Wadham College, who was a very amiable, amiable and knowledgeable character. But in actual fact, I only went to see him 2 or 3 times. He had he encouraged me. He made the odd corrections to my mistakes of facts and things like that. But it would not be right to say that he was in any way inspirational.

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So your intellectual milieu as a particularly as a postgraduate then didn't lie amongst medievalist doing similar things to yourself. Is this when you were became a member of the Communist Party? Well, I became.

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A member of the Communist Party in 1936, and much of my activity in those days, right up to when I went into the Army, was political and very much connected with, of course, the antifascist movement. Because if you're if you're becoming politically conscious in the 1930s. You become conscious of of Mussolini's Italy, Franco's Spain and Hitler's Germany.

S1

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And the British fascist movements at the time as well.

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Yes, I did go to 1 or 2 meetings of Oswald Mosley, but we regarded them as a bit piffling, not not particularly important.

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And from there, then you presumably worked on your PhD, but within a very short space of time you were off on. Yes. War service.

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That's right. I started the PhD in 19 1938 and I was in the Army in 1940, having just managed to finish the the PhD or as they call it in Oxford. The difference.

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Yes, the Research Council will be proud of that two year achievement. So you were what? You'd completed it and you were examined before you went off to.

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Middle East. Yeah. No, I was examined by yes, I was examined by Eileen Power and J.J. Edwards. And it was only a, you know, a month or two after that that I was put into the Army and did a period of training in England and then went off to the Middle East and eventually to Italy.

S1

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Was there anything in your war service which, with hindsight you see as helping you understand the sort of history that you were interested in?

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Yes, I think there was. First of all, of course, although I'd been on holiday in France occasionally when I was a student, the very the very fact of being in the Middle East and in Italy brought one into contact with a completely different social structures and so on. Because even though one was in the army one, particularly if you felt like doing so, you could find out about what was going on. And in particular, I found, you know, the the peasant life of southern Italy, even though I was mostly going through it in an armored car. Extremely interesting because I used to get sent out on patrol and that sort of thing. And I also found the Lebanon where I was for a time very interesting, particularly because there were many aspects of the life of the peasantry in Lebanon which sort of made a contact for me with what I had been doing as far as the peasantry in medieval England was concerned. But perhaps some of the most interesting experiences that I had were when I went on leave towards the end of my Army career, if you can call it a career to Cairo, where I was in touch with quite a lot of left wing chirinos I especially call them, but they weren't necessarily Egyptians. A lot of them were people from the Lebanon and from Syria, and of course they were all French speakers. So in a way, my connections with France were very much bolstered up by the fact that most of my periods of leave were spent in Cairo talking to French speaking people. One of my greatest friends was a man called Raoul Curiel, who at that time was the manager of the French radio at Beirut and who later became the head of the department medallion in the Bibliotheque Nationale in in Paris. He was a sort of. An ancient historian cum archaeologist, if one could find a description for him. But there again, a man of very definitely French cultural attributes with whom I always spoke in French, as with other people.

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And this led on to the context which you've enjoyed ever since with with the French scholars.

S2

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Yes, I have. Since then, I've had contacts with French scholars.

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And when you came back to England and obviously fresh from the war, exciting times, you had no doubts that you were going to be an academic historian. Oh, yes. Yes. And what about the state of the subject then? Economic and social history of the Middle Ages? What, in your view, needed doing?

S2

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Well, I. I went straight from the army to the medieval history department at Birmingham, and my principal preoccupations were. I'm trying to think back six years, what I knew about the Middle Ages and doing teaching and that sort of thing. I think that perhaps it would be correct to say that insofar as there were formative influences after definitely secondary to my reading of the the basic works of Marx, of Engels and Lenin, which influenced me a lot. The the people that I found myself most sympathetic with were Munir Posten, with whom I had quite often disagreements, as you know. But nevertheless, his conceptualization of the social and economic history of the Middle Ages I found very admirable. And the other person was that other Cambridge man, Maurice Dobb, whose studies in the development of capitalism were published in 1946. And as you know, I've got quite a lot of medieval background to the development of development, the transition, if you like, from feudalism to capitalism.

S1

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But his emphasis was very much on commercialisation, urban developments rather than the peasantry. So did you think this was an area that was being neglected? I'm trying to to pin down why particularly you started at the bottom the grass roots of society and saw the peasantry as.

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S2

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Well, I as I told you before, I'd been interested in the grass roots and decided that I better start with the peasantry. I think that Maurice Dobb actually did attempt to deal with problems of the peasantry. All they are quite right. The main emphasis was on urbanization and commercialization. Of course it was. It was Boston who was very influential as far as I was concerned in developing theories about the peasantry. Though of course Boston did not, as a non Marxist, agree with my conception of medieval rural society as being, so to speak, structured by the relationship between landlords and peasants. I'm not saying that he ignored that, but he didn't regard the the antagonism or the conflict between landlords and peasants as necessarily as determining determining in the shape of medieval history that I did know.

S1

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Because from an early stage you were concerned with with peasant resistance and the article that presumably you, you left in the press when you went off to war. Yes. The one that was.

S2

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Published in the English Historical Review, which is.

S1

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Your first publication, but first.

S2

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Publication, which was this poem, This poem in Latin by a bad tempered Augustinian canon, slating the peasants that had the audacity to rebel against their landlord. Yes.

S1

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And that's been a major theme of your work. Yes, it has. From then on, because soon after you collaborated with Hymie Fagin, that's the Yes Peasants Revolt.

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S2

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That's it. Well, you see, after the after the end of the war, with all all of us Marxist historians had been in the Army. And when we got back, we were fortunate enough to get back into academic jobs. And that was when the Communist Party historians group was set up, which, as I think I've mentioned to you before, was a very, very free and so to speak, liberal. And so committed to Marxism by no means dogmatic organization.

S1

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So very different to well, certainly Russia, but also certain of the European. Oh, absolutely.

S2

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I think that, for instance, I think that the French Communist Party did tend to keep quite a tight grip ideologically on its intellectuals and in particular on its historians, which was certainly not the case with the British Marxist historians who were, as it were, given a free hand. And I think we were our work was was appreciated by the party, which made no attempt, as I say, to intervene in any way. Well, it was the discussions of that particular organization were extremely stimulating, particularly in the atmosphere before the Cold War and. Even after the Cold War. And I think I was directed, in a sense, still further towards studying peasant rebellion when we we decided to try and get Hymie Fagin, who'd written this book on the 1381 Rising for the Galax Left Book Club. Before the war, we found that we got lots of criticisms to make, which were natural, given that Hymie wasn't a professional historian, and we got together with him and he agreed that it would be a good idea to rewrite it. So I collaborated with Hymie in the, what was it, 1950 edition, The English Rising of 1381. I did an introduction and Hymie did the narrative.

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Well, that introduction in itself in terms of the sources you were using, was was radical really because you were looking or you spent quite a bit of time writing about sermons, about poetry. And this at the time was quite unusual for for historians. Yes. Particularly medieval historians to use these documents as testaments to to the state of affairs in the nation as a whole. Well.

S2

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And to mentality, of course. Yes. And when I was at Birmingham, it was particularly stimulating to me that there were a lot of people in the English department who were specialists in Langland, Chaucer and all that, with whom we historians had very good relationships. In fact, we had a joint seminar and eventually a joint ma course in medieval history and literature.

S1

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So Birmingham was a obviously a good center. Yes, for a medievalist, yes, it was excellent. And also with the was the East European specialism of Birmingham there in those early days or did that come later?

S2

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I was saying no, it was already beginning. It was already beginning. I don't think that the Center for Russian and East European Studies had been founded yet, but there were 1 or 2 specialists in not merely in the Russian language, but in Russian and in particular, Soviet history and society.

S1

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And is this about the time when you undertook the the task of editing Minsky's? Yes, that's right.

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S2

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Yes. Well, I cos Minsky's studies in the agrarian history of 13th century England, based upon the 100 rolls of 1279 to 80, I think it appeared in 1956. I had a long correspondence with Minsky. He did come over to England, actually. I remember very vividly a dinner that we had in Cambridge in which Munir Posten, myself and Dom David Knowles were present and we all got on like a house on fire, which which is a tribute to David Knowles called Liberal Attitude.

S3

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Yes.

S2

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And I've only once been to the Soviet Union, but there again, I think it was in 1953, I met Minsky again, had discussions with him and whatnot. But I think that was very worthwhile because, as you will very well know, that book is still very much a useful text.

S1

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Yes. Yes. And contacts with Russian historians became more difficult during the Cold War.

S2

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Yes, they did. They did. Very, very difficult indeed. I think Minsky was basically the only one of the Soviet historians that I had much to do with. I occasionally exchanged letters with some of them, but nothing further than that. But in any case, of course, the intervention of the Soviet Union in Hungary in 1956 was rather traumatic for a lot of English communists, many of whom, including myself, left the Communist Party in 56 without necessarily becoming hostile in any way to Marxism as. An approach to history.

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S1

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How important was the stimulus that you were getting in, say, the decade after the war from the Communist Party study groups? The friends and colleagues who set up past and present? Do you think that your work benefited in a substantial way from being in this intellectual milieu? I think it.

S2

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Was absolutely crucial. Absolutely crucial. I'm not trying to suggest in any way that I was alienated from my colleagues in the University of Birmingham. I always had very good relationships with them. And in spite of the atmosphere of the Cold War, none of this actually spilled over into Birmingham itself. And my head of department, HRC, Karen, was always a great support, even though he got absolutely no sort of intellectual connections with Marxist historical interpretations. But in spite of these good relationships with colleagues in the university, there's no doubt about it that the historians group of the Communist Party was absolutely essential. Mind you, I should say that there was in the University of Birmingham, a group of Communist Party Marxists, including the Professor of Classics, George Thompson, and the professor of German Right, Pascal and various other people. So there was a sort of there was a very sort of good bridge between the university itself and the Communist Communist Party historians group.

S1

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You obviously found Birmingham a very congenial place to work, but rather unusually perhaps, you spent your whole career there. Did you ever think of leaving?

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Yes, I did.

S1

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Going back to Oxford or. Well, as a matter of fact.

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S2

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I was a friend when I was an undergraduate with the the son of Sir Morris Polk. And when my friend unhappily was killed in a motor accident, I had encouragement from some Morris perk to try and get back to Oxford. And I thought, well, why not? And I made various applications. And from what I heard, you know, in roundabout ways from the college senior common rooms, the fact that I was a dirty red was absolutely crucial in stopping me from getting anywhere. Yes. So there was obviously no escape during the period of the Cold War or perhaps even later from Birmingham. And in a way, looking back on it, I'm pleased that I did get turned down because I'm very glad to have spent all that time in the University of Birmingham.

S1

00:28:22:20

William, you managed to achieve a remarkable feat in terms of the numbers of postgraduates reading about medieval peasants in Birmingham. Yes, we did have some.

S2

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We have had some very good, good people. And I think that the Birmingham Medieval Postgraduate School, so to speak, whether it's been about peasants or other things, has been very successful.

S1

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And of course, the the centre, the geographical center of your own work is very much the West Midlands as well. Well, obviously you were deriving enormous benefit from studying local sources.

Clip: HILTON RODNEY RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HAT

S2

00:28:58:19

Yes. Well it's interesting that they should raise that because in actual fact, that book *A Medieval Society*, which is about the West Midlands, developed quite definitely from a special subject I was running his, so to speak, a development of the special subject. And the what I did later called *Bondman made free* was also a development of a special subject. So my my writing about teaching linked together very closely. Yes.

S1

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Yes. The Medieval society is a very interesting and unusual study in the sense that it it almost freezes a community at a point in time and then moves outwards from that through the societies, which really isn't the way the English have tended to write history, is it? Well, that.

S2

00:29:49:21

Sort of regional history or regional studies is much more French and English, isn't it? Yes. Yes.

S1

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And about the main core of your work, I think it's it's fair to say that you've emphasized conflicts in historical societies, the antagonism between landlords and and peasants and the need to view society in, in class terms, even peasant societies where a number of historians. I, Macfarlane most recently would object to the use of pleasant and obviously would object to the use of class. Is this essential in the interpretation not only of the Middle Ages, but later periods of history? Do you see your work on the medieval peasantry and the understanding which you've given to the medieval peasantry helping subsequent interpretations of history of England in 16th, 17th, 18th centuries?

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S2 00:30:56:18

Well, I hope so. I certainly I certainly would specifically defend to the last breath an interpretation of medieval society, feudal society, if you like, in terms of the appropriation of the surplus of peasant production in various form of rents, taxes, jurisdictional dues and that sort of thing. The appropriation of that by a landowning ruling class. As you may know, there is a sort of internal battle within Marxism. On the one hand, sort of economic determinism. That's to say you interpret history according to the development of of technology, the forces of production and so on. And then on the other hand, illustrated particularly by Pierre Docks in France, the attempt to interpret history purely in terms of class conflict. I dissociate myself myself from both of those extremes. And as I attempted to say very briefly in that introduction to my recent book, *Class Conflict in the Crisis of Feudalism*, I have in fact spent a good deal of my research on looking at the the the the social and economic structures and developments of the big estate, whether it's ecclesiastical or lay so as to lay the foundations for an understanding, first of all, of the the actual structures of peasant society based upon the the peasant household relationships with the landlords, which, as I have indicated, I regard as conflictual, but I do not regard either the sort of economic determinist aspect of Marxism or shall I say, Marxism in quotation marks, because I don't really think that either Marx or Engels really accepted that sort of economic determinism. And indeed, Engels denied it very strongly towards the end of his life. But on the other hand, although I would emphasize, particularly in the Middle Ages, where there is this stark contrast between the small peasant holding and the largest state and the preservation of the riches of the owners of the large estate by appropriation from the small peasant. I regard that inevitably as forcing one to look at the conflictual element in the relationships between the different classes.

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S1

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How would you assess the contribution of Robert Brenner?
Because certain of the things that you've said suggests that you might be very close to his attempt to to place the the class struggle back in the centre of things. But are there also points where you would disagree with his own?

S2

00:34:16:24

Yes, I think I think that I'm very sympathetic with the general thrust of his his original essay. But I would think that he perhaps over emphasises the class struggle element. I don't think that he should abandon that emphasis, but I think there is an element of overemphasis when he is, for instance, contrasting English and French developments.

S1

00:34:48:07

Do you think there is any significant contribution coming from, say, the Toronto school where almost consciously they concentrate not so much on relations between laws and tenants, but the really the benefits that all the community derive from the feudal and manorial set up. Is there anything in that that we've learnt?

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HAT

S2

00:35:13:11

I don't think that I don't think that I would agree in any way with any of those aspects of the Toronto school that you've mentioned. I think that the Toronto school is essentially reproducing as a theory of society. The three state theory of society which we owe to medieval ecclesiastics. So I think the Toronto school people are, in a sense, medieval ecclesiastics promoting the harmony of the three orders. Nevertheless, I think that contribution has been worthwhile in methodological sense. I think that the the detailed analysis of controls, the detailed utility utilization of those court roles in order to examine relationships between families and individuals, even when it's a question of enumerating people pledging each other in the courts. I think that they've certainly made a contribution to the methodology of the analysis of medieval court roles. And I certainly wouldn't just dismiss out of hand what that contribution has been.

S1

00:36:35:05

Although they were the pioneers in the field, really, of the systematic study. Yes, they were. Are you happy with the way in which I mean, it has been a very popular area. Are you happy with the way in which you developments have gone in that field, or do you think that perhaps too much of medieval social and economic historians research time has been devoted to cultural studies?

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S2

00:36:57:04

Uh, I don't think too much time has been devoted to them. I think that too little time has been devoted to broadening the perspective. I think that I think that there's been too much use of medieval monaural controls for demographic history. I think that demographic history is important. I think that the contribution of the demographers to historical understanding is important. But I really do think that to conflate social history into demographic history, which is what Laslett has specifically done, is a great mistake because I think there's a lot more to be found in medieval controls other than this demographic stuff. Again, I say it's been very important and the contributions have been extremely useful, particularly those originating in Cambridge from campus. But I think that one's got to go beyond the utilization of controls, mainly for demographic purposes. And there's been, I think, too much concentration on the, you know, the the essentials of democracy, birth, fertility, death, and also perhaps too much concentration on the history of the family. I think the history of family is very important. But I think that in the medieval manor, it's not the relationships which it's not the relationships between peasant families, which all totally dominate our interpretation. Those things have got to be brought in. But we've also got to see the relationships between peasant society and the The Lords monks. ET cetera. Who dominated them.

S1

00:39:00:08

Of course, the opening up after obviously inspired people to do so of of the history of the peasantry opens up a wide range of interpretations as well. As you were answering that last point, it occurred to me the the way in which Alan Macfarlane is able to look back into the Middle Ages using very similar records to the records that you use yourself, but not only to deny that there were any peasants, but to portray a society where the villagers are essentially capitalists. I mean, yes, Well, what what does that say about that?

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S3

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Well, I've always.

S2

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Said quite a bit about what I think about Macfarlane's book. I think I think to reduce the medieval peasantry to individual families is very mistaken, because I think that I think that the the solidarities of the medieval community were very strong.

Furthermore, it's absolutely extraordinary that the subject of serfdom is completely lacking in this particular type of interpretation of the peasantry. Serfdom, after all, in England was very, very strong right up until the middle of the 14th century. So to ignore that particular aspect of the relationship between peasants and their lords is, well, yes, you get a whole.

S1

00:40:32:14

Volume was written as your, as you say, without the Lord being mentioned as if there are no Lords. I think I, we I was going to say you were going to switch or switch the if we could cut and switch back. I've got locked in.

S2

00:40:50:22

Yes. Okay.

S1

00:40:51:18

To what do you think and have a breather. Yes, fine. And drink this coffee before it's too cold. How long have we gone on losing the time? Was it 330? How long have we been going?

S4

00:41:08:09

One minutes.

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HAT

S1 **00:41:10:19**

So if we shift to. Yeah, so we've got more than enough for the actual tape, haven't we? Are there things that we. I feel I can shift you on. What I could have done was actually shift you on to your more recent work on small towns. Yes. And the relevance of that.

S2 **00:41:39:03**

Yeah, fine. And.

S1 **00:41:42:21**

And where how do we sum up then?

S2 **00:41:48:12**

Well, perhaps.

S1 **00:41:49:12**

If you've got any ideas of what you would like to see people doing now, what's on the agenda for research in the in the Middle Ages now?

S2 **00:42:01:21**

The Gosh, to think about that a bit. Yeah.

S1 **00:42:08:14**

Well, I've got a quote from Bondman made free about conflict is part of existence and nothing is gained without struggle. Do you want us to say a few sentences about that? That if I say that I read that and saw that as actually exemplifying a theme in your in your history and and then you could come in and talk a little bit about about that and that would make an appropriate.

Clip: HILTON RODNEY RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HAT

S2

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I think that the way in which I would explain that would be to emphasize that one mustn't imagine the conflict between classes in medieval peasant society as being simply composed of outraged peasants waving, waving scythes and trying to chop off the heads of the Lords. I think that in medieval peasant society, as in peasant society throughout history, one of the most extremely effective ways in which peasants stood up for themselves was by passive resistance. And I think that to imagine that any successes that peasants had, for instance, in medieval England or medieval Europe, were due to moments of crisis when there was actual rebellion would be a great mistake. I think that. Peasant. Peasant resistance or peasant demands had a good deal more rationality than. Their contemporaries, such as the chap that wrote the poem for Leicester Abbey. Or some modern historians would be prepared to accept. I think that there's a very considerable element of rationality in peasant demands for freedom of status because that protects them from excessive rent demands from any attempt to restrict their access to the market. Not only do I think that there is rationality there, but I think that in all sorts of in all sorts of semi hidden ways, they were able to make their feelings known to their landowners and I think the landowners did in fact learn lessons. They certainly learned lessons after 1381.

S1

00:44:59:09

But lessons in the the defensive custom, which of course landlord landlords when reminded, would would wish to defend. Oh, yes.

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HAT

S2

00:45:08:12

Well, it all depends on how you interpret customs, isn't it? I have noticed and others have noticed at the beginning of the 15th century. Uh, remarks in the Lords records, whether they are court records or accounts. They say this particular rent is no longer demanded and will not be demanded until things turn up for the better. And what they're specifically saying is, you know, we we could demand this, right? But we know that the son says won't pay up, so we might as well drop it for the time being. And I think that that sort of that sort of combination of active resistance and passive resistance is additional to the sort of conjectural reasons for the decline in the overall total of rent during the latter part of the Middle Ages. Now, I'm not I'm not going to deny that the change in the land labor ratio wasn't very important in that. But I still think that this active and passive resistance and this perception on the part of the landlords that they can't go too far was very important in changing a lot of economic structures. And they may indeed have had even further reaching effects insofar as insofar as landlord incomes go down. So the demands on the international luxury market tend to go down. So I think these things have got to be taken into consideration when looking at the widest perspective of medieval society. As far as as far as taking that into the modern period is concerned, I wouldn't regard myself as an expert, but nevertheless, I think that to to continue a sort of to continue a class analysis of the relationships between the ruling elements of society and those for whom they eventually derive their their income continues to be relevant.

S1

00:47:36:01

In the last few years. I'm not quite sure when it began, but suddenly we observed that Rodney Hilton was publishing articles and studies of small towns rather than peasants. Are you in fact pursuing similar themes within the small town? It seems on the surface to be an unheroic topic. I mean the peasantry, the great mass of the peasantry. A great tide of history. Yes. Small towns, small scale feelings. Yeah.

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HAT

S2

00:48:12:16

Definitely unheroic. You're quite right.

S1

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Why does it appeal to you? Why have.

S2

00:48:16:12

You. The reason why. The reason why I spent time on small towns is because I became very much aware. Perhaps I ought to have become aware earlier that the the element of simple commodity production within feudal society tended to be underestimated and that insofar as trade, the development of mercantile wealth and that sort of thing was concerned, it tended to be thought of in terms of the big towns and international trade. And it seemed to me that in view of the fact that international trade depended so much on the money income, which eventually comes from the peasantry, that it was, would be a useful thing to see the way in which those peasant money rents were generated. And it occurred to me that the way in which one could look at the generation of of money rent, which had to be paid over to the landowners more and more as compared with rent in kind of labour. Rent was to look at the places where the peasants sold their surplus product and that was really the original that was the original sort of conceptual push to looking at small towns. It was not only that, almost accidentally, I got interested in the small town equivalent of the Mineral Court roles, and the first one that I looked at in any detail was the little borough of Thornbury, just north of Bristol, which has a very, very interesting. Set of. Controls fairly continuous though with some gaps which throw a lot of light on the the social history and the economic history of the small town as as a very distinct element in rural society. It's not a village. The majority of the people living in it, even though it's quite small, are engaged in non-agricultural pursuits. So I found that very interesting.

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_ RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HATTON

S1

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But do you find the same elements of tension and conflict there? Is it are these part of feudal society or are they outside of feudal society, as some historians have claimed?

S2

00:51:02:00

I would say that we're outside of feudal society. I think that in a way, the small town, which almost invariably is a central foundation, is almost like a fief, except that it's it's a commercial enterprise. I wouldn't say that by any means. There is a lack of conflict there where you've got good records, as in the small borough of Halesowen. There are plenty of indications of conflict between the Abbot of Halesowen and the members of the small town community, but it's nothing like so well organised as peasant resistance. It is much more of a fragmented society and consequently you don't get you don't get the sort of the rational development of demands which would suit the whole lot of them. As a matter of fact, it's your your raising. This question has reminded me of some work that I've been doing very recently in comparing urban revolt and rural revolt. It's not so much small towns as medium sized and big towns. What what triggered the the interest off, in a sense, was the fact that about a couple of years ago I undertook a research project which I'm still doing, that's to say, a comparative study of English and French towns in feudal society. Much of this has got to do with the extent to which the towns should be regarded as compatible rather, and rather than antagonistic to feudal society. And I did three seminars in Barcelona last year dealing with this subject. But one of the things I thought I ought to do in looking at towns and feudal society was to see to what extent the class antagonisms are manifested. In fact, it's an answer to precisely to the question you've recently posed. Well, one of the things that surprised me when reading in particular, a lot of syntheses by French historians on urban history was the consistency with which they said that rebellions in towns were completely irrational. Were the expressions of hatred of the by the poor, for the rich had got no programs and had got no sort of. No, no, no. Well, more rationality. And this was a this was a theme I thought would be

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_ RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HAT

quite interesting to deal with. And I did deal with actually at a conference which was run by the French equivalent of the historical association in Paris last year, which was called Revolt a Society. And I sort of punched up all the time, knew about urban revolt. And one of the things that struck me as being very interesting was that the very French historians that were saying that urban revolt was irrational and just a sort of gut reaction of the poor against the rich. They also said that practically all of the most important rebellions were rebellions against the levy of tax. So I looked at tax in some detail, not simply the rebellions themselves, but the way in which tax was imposed. And one of the things that struck me very strongly was something that had occurred to Philip Wolff, the historian of southern French towns quite a long time ago, that these irrational townspeople had got a damn sight more perceptive view of the difference between progressive and regressive taxation than people do have today. And for instance, in in the towns of Languedoc in the 14th century, the the ruling elites of the towns were saying, right, the tax we want is, first of all, a poll tax and secondly, a tax on consumables, which of course is okay for the rich, the middling elements, artisans and so on, and their supporters lower down the social scale, said, no, we don't want that sort of tax. We want a tax which is proportional to people's wealth. And this theme crops up over and over again in these tax rebellions.

S1

00:56:06:02

Very rational.

S3

00:56:06:18

Arguments. Absolutely.

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_ RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HATTON

S2

00:56:09:02

Absolutely rational. And it occurred to me that in a way, for the for the artisans and those lower down the social scale, there is a sort of analogy between tax and rent. That's to say it's a sort of it's a sort of rip off from the household unit of production, which doesn't have, so to speak, an economic function. You can say that in modern times you pay a rent for land or for a house because that is a commodity which you are offering a payment for in order to occupy that property or commodity. Well, it's not the same in medieval times when you've got peasant communities and it's not the same really, as far as artisans are concerned in the medieval towns because the artisans are in fact paying quite a substantial element of their income in unfair taxation, but not only in unfair taxation. The more I looked at the episodes, the more clear it was that it wasn't merely unfair in the sense of aggressive taxation, but there was a tremendous amount of fiddling by the mercantile elites so that the tax was actually being taken corruptly. For instance, as Geocells wrote a very interesting article some years ago about York in 1306, apparently the mayor, a 1 or 2 members of the mercantile elite. Set up a bogus fraternity, and they swore oaths to each other that they wouldn't pursue each other in the courts, that they would that they would see to it that they were the dominating members of the committees which assessed the tax. That they wouldn't tax each other and that in order to compensate for the loss of tax, they would tax the artisans so much a week on their wages. And that sort of thing is it's all over the place. Yeah.

S1

00:58:22:12

Well, I wonder, with your current enthusiasm for studying the town whether you won't end up doing the study that you thought you might well wish to do when you were sitting in the seminar in Oxford. Yes. And looking at the records of the borough of Leicester. Yes. I wonder if that was.

S3

00:58:40:09

Well, it could be.

Clip: HILTON RODNEY_RODNEY HILTON WITH JOHN HAT

S1

00:58:41:01

On the agenda.

S3

00:58:41:15

Could be, yes, could be.

S2

00:58:43:12

Could be a reversion to pastimes.

S1

00:58:46:03

Well, thank you very much, Rodney Hylton. I'm sure you've given us much there to chew upon and to digest. Thank you.