Clip: LASLETT PETER_PETER LASLETT WITH KEITH WRIG

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S1 **00:00:14:15**

Peter Laslett has a rare, perhaps a unique position amongst historians of England writing since the Second World War in the sheer breadth of his influence. His best known work, The World We Have Lost, has been read not only throughout the English speaking world, but also translated into eight other languages and has sold more than a quarter of a million copies. Is one of the most influential historical thinkers and writers working on British history since the Second World War. Peter, you've had a very varied career both within and outside academic life, and your intellectual concerns have embraced history, political philosophy, sociology and other spheres. What drew you to history in the first place?

S2 **00:00:56:23**

Well, it's a difficult question to answer. Ever since I had any consciousness of being in intellectual life. I've been interested in the past and felt that I must contribute. I had things to say and particularly books to write, which it was imperative I should get on with. I did find myself because of the circumstances at the time. Firstly, for a long time in the Navy and various parts of world, within the world of the world, in the Navy and in the late 1940s and early 50s in the BBC. But this desire to express what I wanted to people to know about and to do my own thing in relation in relation to historical development, was always there when I got the opportunity. I took it up.

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S1 **00:01:58:08**

Within your historical career. Well, it could be said to have had more than one career within history, two careers perhaps, or perhaps more. It's perhaps summed up in the fact that your title prior to your retirement was reader in the history of of politics and social structure. Why did this kind of shift of interest come within your work?

S2 **00:02:20:08**

Again, I find it difficult to answer in a transparent way. Of course, I would simply assert that these are not separate intellectual interests, that the same interest, the type of intellectual attitude which I suppose I could be said to represent, would deny any separateness between political philosophy and its history and the history of social structure.

S1 **00:02:49:11**

Looking at it from that perspective. How was it that the kinds of interests that you began to discuss in clothe and cook now and subsequently in the world we have lost? How did they develop out of the preoccupations of your earlier career?

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S2 **00:03:03:10**

Well, I had it's a bit of an illusion here. Clay was and Cook now, though published in 63, initially was not. In fact the first writing I'd done on the subject for the record. It might be well to confess that there's a piece of mine called The World of Lost, published in a paperback collection on Alienation. I think I've forgotten the actual title, which asserts, among other things, that traditional English society was dominated by large scale multigenerational households. And this is perhaps, I think it was six years before I began consistent work on the world we've lost. That may exaggerate the time, and I lectured here on the subject. So it didn't begin all that late. Although like all the war generation, I began my intellectual career as a university teacher late. And it's also true that as a very young and unconfident research student, I'd wanted to work on these subjects. But in me discouraged to do so by senior advisers who'd warned me that there isn't such a thing as the history of domestic relationships or kinship. That wasn't a thing that historians could study. And therefore I did take up what also interested me history, political theory, starting with a very prominent figure who in the history of patriarchal ism, which is to do with the family. So it wasn't a late influence. Whatever could be said to have changed my view. And it wasn't one which I think I could identify.

S1 **00:04:53:03**

Did the more positive move in the direction of the history of the family develop very largely out of the work on the Rector's Book of Clay with which you did publish in clay Within?

Clip: LASLETT PETER_PETER LASLETT WITH KEITH WRIG

S2 **00:05:04:00**

No, it had a particular effect on me, which was that I had said in that piece I've name, which has been perhaps to my advantage, forgotten the original. Peace on the world you've lost, which like we've lost itself, was delivered initially as a talk on the BBC and having this on trade, BBC production circles and being a member of the BBC. Even though teaching in Cambridge, I could broadcast more or less what I liked. But what had I said in that piece was given a very rude shock. When I looked at this play with Rector's book, which you referred to, which made it perfectly clear that in this particular community it was simply untrue that the family was this way, and that immediately followed that an enormous proportion of the of what was talked and it was taught very much it was much taught to what was believed in about the former state of the family in Western Europe and in Britain was simply wrong. What most surprised me in the director's book wasn't so much the size and structure of the household because I had seen hints of that in other sources. What most surprised me was the comparison between two lists of inhabitants divided by 12 years and this very remarkable fact that they were so different that 60% of the people present in 1676 were absent in 1688. That struck me very forcibly, and I was deeply impressed with the extraordinary fact that Asian marriage was so deceptively reported in literature.

S1 **00:06:53:13**

The methods you've adopted, your attitude towards literary and artistic sources in general, and the range of preoccupations which I've already mentioned as being reflected to some degree in clay within all of these things of course came to the front very much with the world. We have lost. It has been described as being the first public hint of a coming paradigm shift in the study of history. By this stage, were you quite deliberately putting forward an agenda and a method, the tools and the job, so to speak?

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S2 **00:07:32:07**

Oh, the answer to that must be yes. I'd been back at the university after my different preoccupations earlier for long enough to be quite convinced that the the neglect of this type of inquiry, that the concentration on politics, intellectual matters, was a completely unacceptable way of looking at the past, that there were very many ways in which those rigid preoccupations could and should be attacked and dissolved. And so in that book, I was determined that I should do so.

S1 **00:08:09:12**

One very striking feature of the book, of course, is is its sociological perspective. That a variety of sociological concepts, which certainly weren't familiar to most readers of history at that time, were being gently introduced. Presumably you have a view on the proper relationship of history and the social sciences and the way in which the the the the subject should develop.

S2 **00:08:33:18**

I hold a rather straightforward and perhaps simple minded view of this that the that all social investigation is historical sociology, that every nominated social science and economics through to social psychology, certainly including anthropology and of course political history and the various denominations of history, which presumably now family history is one are all members of that particular activity that you won't analyse society except over time you'll need various techniques, various traditions of study, various specialisms of of all kinds for particular part of it. But it's all the same activity. But in narrower terms. There is no intellectual or theoretical distinction on that view between what's called sociology and what's called history.

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S1 **00:09:25:01**

Um, but could it be fairly said that the vision of the world we've lost is rather static? It does deal in long term comparisons and contrasts, which are very effective in engaging in discussion with sociology, say, pointing contrasts, but it doesn't trace change very much. How interested are you in the in the business, the traditional historical business of tracing change?

S2 **00:09:47:23**

I have written about the nature of social change and I've written a piece which perhaps isn't yet very well known on the pieces of change called social structural time. And I've reflected a great deal on it. What I have not done is to trace a particular type of change from generation to generation face to face. And I feel. That I should have. I feel that that's been a gap in what I have done in this direction, this.

S1 **00:10:20:04**

This notion of social structural time. It's fine phrase and and and an attractive concept. Would you like to explain a little more about what exactly you mean by social structural time?

S2 **00:10:33:08**

Well, it's simple. It's like falling off a log. The fastest time, the fastest pace of change in all change is the political action of individuals and of course, the political structures which they create and which they control. That's fast. And it's very close to another sort of change that one can witness. That's a change of fashion, literary aesthetic and the world in which the media inhabits. But social structural change, where institutions such as the what are only called the basic forms of of social life, particularly the family. And note the importance of the whole enterprise, of the unity of the family are regarded in that essay as likely to change the slowest pace and the error, the very straightforward error which that particular study tries to pinpoint is to suppose that all change goes forward at the political pace.

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S1 **00:11:46:12**

I suppose a lot of the less favourable response that the world we have, the world we have lost, received was was because of some of the arguments in the book relating to certain alleged changes of the period you were dealing with. You rejected the notion of there having been any kind of social revolution in the early modern period. You also rejected the notion that class could be seen as an agency of historical change in the 17th century and put forward your views about a one class society. One of the arguments of the book, which has been very much discussed, do you still stand by your views regarding the English Revolution and the lack of more than one identifiable class in 17th and early 18th century English society?

S2 **00:12:42:16**

I think that the straightforward answer is yes. I think I have to make it in a in a sense, qualified in many ways. One is that I made this challenge because I thought the orthodoxy was, as I've already hinted, distortive, dogmatically presented. And another view, even for its own good, so to speak, would be good for all of us. What I'd expected was that there be a response if I were successful, which would lead to many other suggested theoretical models. And what has surprised me about the book is that that particular challenge put in those highly coloured terms a one class society, that there was no such thing as an English revolution, stands almost on its own as a set of theoretical construct, as against the tradition I was attacking. I also think that if you've made a challenge of what turned out to be such a serious matter, you should stand by it. Even if the points of application, the illustrations used and the dogmatic presentation are no longer as important to you, or perhaps will be rejected by you because you must be you must stand by a challenge because it's having important intellectual results. So I would say I'd make that series of qualifications. But of course my final reservation is goes what would ordinarily be called to a much deeper level, the notion of class as a unifying mode of human action. The notion of conflict is being in some sense physical surfaces, rubbing against surfaces or banging up against each other. The structure of

society in physical terms is all unacceptable to me. So the whole mode of thinking is, to my mind, unacceptable as a way of getting at what we're trying to get at society, its modes, the relation of individual action to what change takes place and what attitudes are produced are all obscured from the responsible investigator by the use of a dogmatic, particularly physically concerned. See of process. Do remember I emphasized in this conversation that I'm a media man, at least an important part of my life. As we give a darn good title. Like the world we have lost, or like a one class society fastens attention. And when writing a book of that kind, remember to interest people in a new sort of historical analysis the unify, the non-professionals and the quotes professionals, the student and the teacher. That type of writing is important, even if it may point in extreme directions, which unfortunately might damage the case. And if that's a confession of a conspiracy against a readership, then I freely make it.

S1 **00:15:59:09**
Well, for a media man who's conscious of of that kind of imperative. You've been fairly demanding on your audience, particularly in your advocacy of statistical and quantitative methods. Has the use of quantitative methods the development of a quantitative historical sociology lived up to your expectations?

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S2 **00:16:21:20**

That's another challenging question. I'm not absolutely clear on. My expectations were at the beginning high. I think that one can one can assume high. I feel no sense of disappointment about it because if my expectations were high, if I were realistic, I knew it would be an extremely tedious business. But of course, from my point of view, some of the categories you are using are not accepted by me. I don't think statistical or numerical history is a sort of history at all. I mean, statistics are numerical and as simply a technique, they are the briefest, the most stable and very frequently the subtlest and most useful way of formulating intellectual problems and the analysis of social structure or of events over time in social structural matters, to wit, demography, births, marriages and deaths simply require that technique. It doesn't make the the whole inquiry different because you use it. It may be true that the people who can do it well and no damn good at describing a world we have lost, describing it, incidentally in two senses of the word grow a world we regret losing and a world where well rid of that that anomaly is throughout that whole book, playing on the two sets of the meaning of it. But if they want to investigate it and they want to invest it away, which will really convince critical contemporaries and successors they cannot avoid counting and they cannot avoid those arts which go with counting to which statistics and in particular case, demography. If they get caught up with demography, they could do nothing else or statistics. And if they exercise a superiority of mathematicians over others, and we all know about that tendency amongst our contemporaries in university, they are just bad historical sociologists. It's not because the nature of the task is wrong, it's because of the limitation, their limitations as practice in the art.

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S1 **00:18:29:10**

Several of several of these issues have have entered into the work over the last 20 years of the Cambridge Group for the history of population and social structure, which is, I suppose, associated with a whole range of dimensions of the history of pre-industrial England, attempting very much to to put into action the the kind of approach you've just advocated so eloquently. Um, the group was a rather new kind of phenomenon in English historical research. How did it come into being in the first instance?

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S2 **00:19:14:08**

Because I couldn't see how the collection of data on that scale, which I've already hinted. Let's make it clear to those who haven't any occasion to familiarize himself with what we finally produce, with what was done, what we finally produced. The reconstruction of the population history of England was based on a thousand parishes. We didn't know we could collect that number. A thousand may be a bit exaggerated. We only used 400, but no one man could. Even with computers, is likely to be able to wield that amount of information alone. It needs an institutional framework because it needs machines. But we felt they were positive virtues to the group enterprise to provide it. It didn't stifle the the autonomy as a writer and a researcher because people are associated in the group. So what we tried to do was to keep collective enterprises to a minimum legally. And Schofield, which is the final and most important book of that phase of the group's work, which we published, is an exception. Most of the work done by members of the group was done by themselves individually, and they took responsibility for it. But I'd like to comment on two features of the questions, as you put them. To me, it was never concerned simply with England and it was never concerned with pre-industrial England. It may have been I think you hinted that that my original interests were anchored in the 17th and 18th century, and that's what I had to teach and that's what I'd originally written in. But that was purely incidental. We are concerned that the Cambridge group, with the whole historical story and specifically now concerned with the contemporary world always in relation to the past. And it was certainly never confined to England. The isolationist trend of all historical activity in all countries, its nationalist concentration is one other enormously important barrier to the free search after what you've got to get. About the way societies are structured. So from the very beginning it was English history was always seen in comparative terms.

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S1 **00:21:28:24**

Some would argue that that that international broadening may be there, but there's also been a great narrowness of focus on the quantifiable, on the the demographic and the household structural, perhaps at the expense of other issues which which you've discussed elsewhere in the world. We have lost, for example.

S2 **00:21:54:13**

Well, I feel the force of that criticism. I've already said you can't do everything. After all, it's 30 years since we began this movement. There's not a very long time The number of people mixed up with the writing of it was small. And I repeat, you can't do everything. But I'm not brushing aside the burden of what you have to say. On the other hand, what I shouldn't fail to underline again is if you're going to do a job like that properly, you've got to do it well. The population history of England, in my view, is an extraordinary book because it uses very high technique. The technicians watching this or listening to it might sniff a bit of that, but the historical world to which you and I belong, Keith It is very high technique consistently used with an object set of problems, with great imagination and collaborative skill, relying on the existence of a coordinated body of a body of researchers in Cambridge with a large number of helpers outside was a remarkable achievement, which had to be highly specialised. It had to reject other alternatives. We might have been pursued because to do it properly, it was the.

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S1 **00:23:13:22**

First imperative within the broad project your own particular interest in in the household has a clear place since the nuclear family household is a critical element in the the English demographic regime which we now have reconstructed. Have you never felt tempted to go on beyond that work on household structure and the characteristics of the Western family to address the issues which a number of other historians of the family have most addressed themselves to? The issues that Michael Anderson calls the sentiments approach to the family. The whole question of the consensual nature of marriage, parent child relationships, conjugal relationships within marriage and so forth, you've rather held aloof from the great controversies in that area. Why is that? Why didn't you ever get involved in all of that?

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S2 **00:24:17:17**

Well, a school questioner, you needled me again. I don't know. I think I would I would moderate modulate that reply in the following way. I'd have said that although we've talked as if we intended to find the history of the family, the Cambridge group, and in a sense we did. But it was the household we originally engaged in and it was the family group in relation to demography, which narrowly defined unified Wrigley in myself and again. Schofield. So it's the history of the family. It was in a sense, an offshoot of these activities. It wasn't the declared objective. We've never been called as a group of the history of study, of the history of the family. That I think is my first modulation. My second is that I have very considerable reservation about the appropriate method for the sentiments approach, and we have referred earlier to my great suspicion of the literal use of evidence appearing in literary and particularly imaginative literature and the ineffectiveness you've talked of the use of sociological techniques, the lack of good techniques to capture that type of subject. I don't know whether you ever heard of content analysis, but it is what sociologists use for this purpose unwieldy, difficult and unlikely to get at the truth. And if you take non technical ways of doing this, I'm admitting technicality is an important matter. You take non technical ways of doing it. Anybody's opinion is as good as mine.

S1 **00:26:07:04**

After household and family in past time you did go on to take up the issue of illegitimacy and the comparative history of trends in illegitimate births. Why was that? What was? The particular interest of of that question to you. Well.

S2 **00:26:25:05**

Family is a normative structure. A great deal of what we call societies and organized affair is based on normative regularities in the society. A very conspicuous example of the breach of those regularities is children conceived and born outside marriage. Its relationship with means of subsistence and population control in all senses, is obvious.

S1 **00:26:54:22**
Can I take up the notion of the illegitimacy prone society? This one slightly pushed to one side. Do you think it might be time to reconsider again that hypothesis that a good deal of illegitimacy was associated with a particular group within the population or represented in certain local populations, and that their activities had a sort of booster effect, that there were groups with a somewhat deviant outlook within local society and so forth.

S2 **00:27:23:05**
I agree that there's been a lag there and I cannot myself cease to wonder at the at the transfixing importance of locality. Why should a particular place, a particular region have a pattern of illegitimacy which stays not constant but is traceable over enormous social vicissitudes, particularly as stewards of industrialization? That seems to me to betray a feature of the fixation of human behavior on localities, which is very difficult to explain. And if it's true of illegitimacy, must be true elsewhere.

S1 **00:28:04:08**
You didn't attempt to fully explain that. You raised a number of possibilities. You clearly weren't in a position to explain it at the time, but it does raise fascinating possibilities of the existence of regional subcultures. Do you think, or is it simply a reflection of regional, economic and social structures?

S2 **00:28:23:17**
Well, it could be both, of course, and its a perpetual tendency to play down plain economic determinism, which could explain it, on the other hand, rather a lot against it. If we take particularly the the industrialisation of Britain, industrialization did not send up illegitimacy in Lancashire, where industrialism first began in the Western world, I suppose, and where it is most intense for the first 50 or 60 years as industrialization, illiteracy didn't go up, it went down. And that does seem to me to be a very challenging thing, which could be used outside the the field of illegitimacy.

S1 **00:29:08:03**
By the time that book was published, you were already off on another track inasmuch as you you'd begun to develop your present preoccupation with the history of aging. Now, what specifically led in that direction?

S2 **00:29:21:17**
Well, the answer to that question, thank goodness Keith, is a very simple one. It was and I've said this in a book in press, to be called something like a fresh or New Map of life, looking at myself as an early mid and now late 20th century English citizen. The whole tenor of the work we've done on the age structure of England and of course we know the age structure of England, which no other country does to 400 years back, made it transparently clear that the critical issue in demographic, in in structure terms and therefore in general social structural terms in our time was to be the ageing of the population. That the reduction of fertility and of course now much more important though for many years not important the the reduction of mortality to the length of expectation of life was going to transform the age composition of all these societies. Therefore, for the first time, beginning in the 50s and 60s of this century, ordinary every human being had a chance of living to the potential lifespan everyone was conferred on at birth and that would double length of life would make all the ordinary incidences of life cycle obsolete as a description of the whole life cycle since the third Age, as I've called it, coming after the ability to conceive in in women, the upbringing, socialization of children stage adding an enormous amount there and putting every other lower life cycle stage into a quite different relationship with the whole was going to be a social structural change of magnitude. The others that we'd examined were much less.

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S1 **00:31:20:14**

You in? I'm very glad to hear of this new book and another another winning title. It seems that the the earlier works that you've published on this question of aging have already raised a number of very interesting ideas about the implications of these shifts in in the nature of the life cycle and so forth. One particular concept that's attracted a lot of people is the the so-called nuclear hardship hypothesis. Could you perhaps say a little more about this? Because it isn't always in the different uses. It's been put to quite, quite clear what's implied by this this term.

S2 **00:32:04:18**

The nuclear family typical of the West. It's clearly it is solid and most emotionally satisfying to all parties, emotionally satisfying and also divisive when people are at the lifecycle stage, which I think you are at with young children and more young children likely to come. And that goes on, of course, until the socialization of children is ended and they leave in the nuclear family household that's getting on in the traditional life cycle, getting on towards the time when your your expectation of life has gone down. You don't go on living for very long after that. Of course, the earliest societies were fatality period went on longer. When you die, there were very frequently people still at home, children still at home at your deathbed. So the nuclear family did all that the family could do for you. Family in different forms, of course, at different stages of the cycle until in many cases towards the end, if you go on living for very much longer, as you know, the nuclear family doesn't provide you the nuclear family sets up a hardship which another familial system would not because in another familial system your children would stay behind in the household, go on having children and grandchildren. So you'd have a family circle for very much longer than a nuclear family can can provide it.

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S1 **00:33:40:15**

Can we perhaps now turn to 1 or 2 broader reflections about the state of the subject? Is it perhaps the case that. Social, structural and demographic. History and historical sociology more broadly has imitated some of the follies of the old history that we've got compartmentalization by period, by country, by specialty all over again, that the interaction with other related disciplines is in some ways less than it was 10 or 20 years ago when this program of research was setting out.

S2 **00:34:22:12**

I don't think I expected much different and at least within the closed world of academia, and perhaps I'm too insistent on the close character of the academic world, but I don't think I'm quite as gloomy as your remarks would imply. I'd been here long enough to experience the difference. I think it's an older man's reflections on his juniors is often guff, but nevertheless, I think you're being a little restrictive on your own generation. I think that there is. What else could there possibly be but an attempt to compartmentalize any new subject that I, in spite of all those exceptions, I just said that the world has changed in very interesting ways and that certainly the Cambridge group and the type of activity we were discussing is very important in it, but very, very much other many other influences important to it. And I just said the general intellectual thaw of the 19 mid 1980s is a noticeable affair. And in your position, if I were starting again this time, you are your career's historical sociologist, I think I'd expect enormous payoff in the next ten years and hope it will happen. Thank you.