frontiers | Frontiers in Human Dynamics

TYPE Hypothesis and Theory
PUBLISHED 22 August 2025
DOI 10.3389/fhumd.2025.1627513

Food, markets, and governance: a new lens on the emergence of collective institutions

Richard E. Blanton[1]* and Gary M. Feinman[2]

[1]Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, United States, [2]MacArthur Curator of Anthropology, Negaunee Integrative Research Center, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, IL, United States

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Francesca Fulminante,
University of Bristol, United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY
Simon Kenneth Stoddart,
University of Cambridge, United Kingdom
Barbara Mills,
University of Arizona, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Richard E. Blanton
blantonr@purdue.edu

RECEIVED 12 May 2025
ACCEPTED 24 July 2025
PUBLISHED 22 August 2025

CITATION
Blanton RE and Feinman GM (2025) Food, markets, and governance: a new lens on the emergence of collective institutions.
Front. Hum. Dyn. 7:1627513.
doi: 10.3389/fhumd.2025.1627513

We employ access to food as an analytical lens to compare and explore the interplay between economic practices and political change in three premodern complex societies: Early Imperial China (primarily the Han Dynasty), the Athenian democracy, and Medieval to Early Modern England. Explicitly framed by the theory of political collective action and economists' notions of capital and competitive markets, we illustrate how food economies had a key role in shaping the political evolution of collective governing institutions. Although the three cases had divergent historical trajectories, we focus on a persistent and dynamic social process, outcomes of an active discordance between two expressions of economic action, the "capitalist impulse" and the "egalitarian impulse." In the former, a wealthy elite, enabled by autocratic rulers, strived to realize unearned profits by free riding on the labor of subaltern populations. The egalitarian impulse reflected responses of effected persons to counter such actions through their own agency and by encouraging institution-building that spurred phases of egalitarian political change. Through this comparative processual analysis, we elaborate a key dynamic that spurred past episodes of political transformation while also providing a useful new vantage on current rhetorical arguments concerning the interrelationship between state formation/political institutions and commercial economies.

KEYWORDS

premodern states, premodern markets, collective action theory, food economies, capitalist impulse, egalitarian impulse

Introduction

We empirically investigate aspects of negotiations and renegotiations of social life as they relate to food production and exchange in three well-known premodern complex societies, Early Imperial China (primarily the Han Dynasty, 202 BCE to 220 CE), the Athenian democracy (fourth and fifth centuries BCE), and Medieval to Early Modern England (1000 to 1800 CE). We compare these cases from a conceptual frame that not only offers new analytical depth on the specific cases but leads us to question entrenched views regarding the presumed uniqueness of the European historical experience (e.g., Huntington, 1996) and long-term dynamics between states and markets.

From our perspective, all three focal periods were times of increased divisions of labor, active networks of marketplace exchange, and widespread domestic dependence on the commercial production and exchange of food. Rural producers were neither self-sufficient nor isolated. The sale and purchase of grains such as rice or wheat were key elements of diets, yet, brought challenges, especially for commoner households. In the cases we investigate, the grains represented a large proportion of the daily food costs of ordinary households and had no acceptable substitutes. As a result, demand for these staples was highly inelastic so that shortages in the marketplaces could bring price hikes harmful to consumers. At the same time, oversupply would bring prices below the production costs of ordinary producers. In this paper we investigate the consequences of such actions when they enabled elite and wealthy social actors to constrain household production and to distort market pricing for their own selfish benefit at the expense of commoners.

Although supply and demand for grain will fluctuate in part owing to climatic variation, we illustrate how the commercial exchange of grains created opportunities for self-seeking social actors who possessed sufficient resources to negatively influence economic opportunities of ordinary producers, on the one hand, and to distort the forces of supply and demand in markets, on the other. We term such actions as the "capitalist impulse." However, this impulse is only one dimension of a persistent and dynamic social process in which effected producers and consumers oppose the capitalist impulse, what we term the egalitarian impulse. The investigation of the dynamic interaction between these discordant impulses, we suggest, provides a window onto processes of egalitarian social change that contributes to theory-building while laying out an empirical frame suited to the evaluation of current rhetorical arguments about the interrelation of state formation and commercial economies. One such argument, drawn from the writings of the economist Milton Friedman (summarized in Leeson and Palm, 2017, p. 26), who was one of the principal architects of contemporary neoliberal thought, is that "By removing the organization of economic activity from the control of political authority, the market eliminates this source of coercive power. It enables economic strength to be a check on political power rather than a reinforcement of it." At first glance, his claim appears deficient to us, particularly the assumption that states generally exercise "coercive power," a particularly odd notion coming from an author who lived in a democracy. As we point to below, the impact of governing authorities on commercial transactions is complex and variable across time and social setting and does not accord well with simplistic rhetorical claims such as those of Friedman and other neoliberals.

Theoretical approaches to historical comparison

Our approach to understanding the dynamic interaction between capitalist and egalitarian impulses draws insights from three sources: the Theory of Collective Action (Olsen, 1995), Piketty's (2014) analysis of capital, and what economists refer to as competitive markets, or in our terminology, "open" marketplace economies (Blanton and Fargher, 2016, pp. 69–98).

Collective action theory

This approach recognizes that humans are "contingent cooperators" who will agree to support group cooperative efforts if they perceive others' willingness to cooperate in a way that realizes group benefits. The theory also recognizes that contingent cooperators, when faced with individually rational but socially selfish actions that challenge cooperation, will respond in ways that can be a spur to social change, particularly when it involves coordinated efforts such as popular protests or other strategies that signal dissatisfaction. While elite social actors militate against such strategic actions as restrictions of their economic "freedom," yet, in the cases studied the egalitarian impulse did (although in one of the cases, very slowly) provoke change particularly in forms of governance based on the construction of new institutions—workable rules—that could be monitored and enforced (e.g., Levi, 1988; Ostrom, 1986, 1990).

We emphasize that both selfishness and attempts to counter its negative social consequences are not entirely scale dependent. They have been noted in societies of varying degrees of scale and social complexity, for example, in small-scale societies cooperation is not spontaneous. Even when food sharing is mandated, ethnographic observations point to how individuals or households may decide that their best option is to hoard or free-ride on others even though such actions could diminish the potential for group benefit (for foraging societies, e.g., Lee, 1969, pp. 75–76, Siskind, 1973, pp. 85–88; Weissner, 1982, p. 79). However, at larger scales, such as in the societies we evaluate, entirely new kinds of cooperation problems come into play that we discuss below.

Capital

One scale-dependent feature we address has to do with how, in more socially complex settings, persons or groups may have the opportunity to allocate for commercial sale some of the wealth they produce as private capital. To fold this aspect of producer choice into our discussion, we drew from Piketty's (2014) analysis of capital, which, at first glance, seems unsuited to our purposes. His macroeconomic analysis concerns variation in capital accumulation and its consequences for wealth disparities in the U.S. and Europe from the late nineteenth century to the present. During this time, industrial production, capital markets, and finance institutions were highly developed such that the wealth produced from these sources significantly augmented the wealth produced by labor. In our adaptation of his scheme, however, we focus on capital, in its private form, as the proportion of wealth gained from labor that the producer decides to sell in a market. In highly egalitarian social settings, producers will have some proportion of the total wealth they produce available to expend in a competitive market where they can expect to receive an acceptable return on their capital. In less egalitarian settings, by contrast, the potential to sell private capital is constrained by a wealthy or powerful elite who claim much or all of it. Also, in less egalitarian settings, an elite will control sufficient quantities of capital that they are able to distort market pricing. Such profit-maximizing strategies limit the ability of ordinary producers to gain acceptable returns on their capital or may even preclude affordable access to desired goods and services.

Competitive ("open") markets

In market systems where there is competition, wages received, returns on capital, and prices paid are all determined primarily by the forces of supply and demand (e.g., Blanton and Fargher, 2016, pp. 69–98; Blanton and Feinman, 2024); that price-making dynamic, however, is not spontaneous. Instead, open markets are social environments in which cooperation problems are addressed through the construction of institutions that provide for egalitarian access and that foster fair pricing (Blanton, 2013). Openness is possible when there are no restrictions on market participation, information about commodity pricing is widely available, and market participants have multiple options for buying, selling, or finding employment. In these contexts, there will be downward pressure on profits that minimizes wealth inequality in society while providing affordable and equitable access to goods and services to a wide diversity of producers and consumers.

The capitalist impulse

This impulse represents the actions of those asocial actors who are able to control some or all of the capital produced by others and use it as a store of wealth to support an elaborate standard of living or to distort competitive markets. One of the goals of distortion we identify is to drive out market competitors, but capitalists may also choose to withhold their store of wealth from a local market, for example by shipping it to more profitable locations, even when resulting price spikes harm local consumers. Either way, their goal is to amass what economists refer to as "unearned profits" or "rents" (e.g., Stiglitz, 2016, p. 154). These are sources of income that are realized, not as a reward for creating new forms of wealth or for creating wealth more efficiently, rather by distorting markets or by constraining the choices of those who produce capital.[1] This process is expressed in the cases we compare when capital produced by labor is controlled by an elite, for example, in the forms of serfdom, slavery, or debt bondage (when a person in debt becomes subservient to the debtor). Tenancy, also, makes it possible for landowners to constrain the allocation of at least some capital produced by tenant-producers. Although those who wield the capitalist impulse will see it as rational business as usual, from the vantage of collective action theory it is an example of harmful and antisocial free riding on the efforts of others.

The egalitarian impulse

The selfish actions that underpin the capitalist impulse prompt state-builders and producer-citizens alike to devise counter strategies, based on the assumption that economic inequality is not "natural" and can be mitigated through social action and institution-building. This is not simply the adoption of other-regarding norms, instead it represents active strategic actions such as those expressed in our compared cases including popular protests initiated against both the capitalists and the incompetent and uncaring governments who failed to protect common persons from the capitalist impulse. The egalitarian impulse is evident in two distinct modes of institution-building by governments: (1) measures taken to preserve the freedom of those who are producers so that they maintain control over their produced capital, and (2) institutions that assure producers will have opportunities to realize what they perceive as acceptable returns when they exchange their capital in competitive and open markets.

We apply the ideas of collective action theory, capital, competitive markets, and the capitalist and egalitarian impulses in a comparative analysis of the food economies in three premodern societies: Early Imperial China where the egalitarian impulse was most clearly demonstrated, the Athenian democracy, where both impulses were at work in different contexts, and Medieval to Early Modern England, where a wealthy elite realized unearned profits by free riding on commoner producers and distorting market pricing, and, with the aid of an uncaring and persistently ineffective and highly extractive government, for centuries was able to inhibit or ignore expressions of the egalitarian impulse. We chose these three societies because they are well-described, and because the various solutions to the capitalist impulse played important roles in influencing the evolution of governing and economic systems that had echoes beyond their separate historical paths.

Confucian governing ethics: the dynamic interplay of egalitarian and capitalist impulses across Chinese dynasties

Hsia Sung (985–1051 CE), a high official during the Northern Song Dynasty, reported that "…since the unification of the empire, control over the merchants has not yet been well established. They enjoy a luxurious way of life, living on dainty foods… owning handsome houses… In the morning they think about how to make a fortune, and in the evening devise means of fleecing the poor…" (Shiba, 1975, p. 43).

The quote from Hsia Sung indicates that during the Song Dynasty the state was expected to benefit the common people by minimizing the negative outcomes of the capitalist impulse. The notion that the state should play a role in determining the outcome of the conflict between powerful families and the common people derived much earlier from mid-first millennium arguments of philosophers, most notably Confucius (549–479 BCE) and other anti-elitists such as Mencius (371–289 BCE). They argued that a state will be seen as meritorious when its policies enhance the social and economic vitality of the commoners (e.g., Pines, 2012, pp. 139–143), not through the exercise of power, but, rather by a process of creatively devising and enacting policies that will enhance mutuality between the state and citizens (Ames, 1988). This egalitarian framing for state-building became an inspiration for what was recognized as a valid practice of protest that allowed citizens to demonstrate against a government that is not meritorious (Hui, 2005, pp. 173–177). Popular protest did come into play in the overthrow of the highly unpopular and short-lived Qin Dynasty that preceded the Han (Pines, 2012, pp. 142–143). This is an important point because Han rulers understood the potential negative consequences of uncaring and overly extractive governance. In particular, Confucius had earlier emphasized the importance of the small but independent land-owning agrarian households that make up the bulk of society's population (Creel, 1970, pp. 99–100; Elvin, 1973, p. 24). Han theorists (particularly during the earlier, Western Han Dynasty, 206 BCE to 9 CE) acted on this prior sensibility but also

1 This is similar to Marx's notion (Marx, 1977, pp. 325) of capitalism as a type of economy in which workers' surplus value is appropriated by private owners of the means of industrial production. Our phrase capitalist impulse pertains to various ways of distorting private capital through constrained labor or market-distorting practices, both found in diverse social formations, not just industrial capitalism.

saw that other commoners should be regarded as contributing to society, including artisans and commoner merchants (Loewe, 2006, pp. 157–158). The commoner population, particularly farming families, was seen as key to successful societal functioning in three senses: they were viewed as the principal source of morality in society; their predominantly family-scale production was understood as the main source of society's wealth; and, as taxpayers, they were key to the state's fiscal health (e.g., Deng, 2015, p. 314; Poznanski, 2017, pp. 363–364; Wong, 2019, p. 131).

We know relatively little about the formation of market economies in the pre-Han periods (Feinman et al., 2019), but Loewe (2005, p. 55) notes a growing tendency toward commercial land sales after 500 BCE and a corresponding growth of large estates. Han Dynasty policies reflected the presence of such estates when their policies opposed engrossing (when large landowners earn excess profits by deploying large consignments of wealth to distort market pricing). Policies also aimed to protect small farms from incorporation by wealthy landowning families, as we discuss below (Loewe, 2006, pp. 157–158; Pines, 2012, pp. 62–63, 111–112, 115, 144). By Han times there is ample evidence of a well-managed commercial economy that served as a vital resource for the commoner population. Ch'ang-an, the first Han capital, for example, featured multiple busy marketplaces where a wide range of goods, local and foreign, were bought and sold, including agrarian and artisanal products provided by commoner households, all overseen and taxed by staffs of government officials (Loewe, 2005, pp. 131, 154–155, 170; Loewe, 2006, pp. 52–53, 159). In addition to well-managed marketplaces, the following policies were central to realizing Han Dynasty market regulatory and related egalitarian goals, as outlined in the sections below.

Grain and food security

Even before the Han Dynasty, as early as the sixth century BCE through the Warring States period (BCE 403–221), philosophers had acknowledged the important role that the state should play to ensure the food security of the people (Wong, 1991, pp. 2–3). By the Han Dynasty, which embraced Confucian principles of governance, effective policies were enacted to regulate markets and foster competition (Wong, 2019, p. 134). These policies displayed a concern that artificially high prices harm consumers, but also that unfair competition undercuts independent small-farm producers who may lack a sufficient surplus fund to weather a period of low prices. Unfair competition was possible because wealthy landowners often did not pay their fair share of taxes, lowering their production costs, and because of their extensive use of constrained labor (Bray, 1984, pp. 557–558; Loewe, 2006, p. 158). Unfair competition in this context also benefitted the large landowners when low prices caused independent farms to fail, forcing their owners into a state of tenancy or servitude (e.g., Loewe, 2005, pp. 165–166; Wong, 2019, p. 132). The construction and management of public ("ever-normal" or "ever-level") granaries was understood as key to realizing state goals to protect smallholders and stabilize pricing. Granaries were critical to the state's fiscal health (needed for administrative and military costs) at the same time they were seen as bulwarks against grain shortages and price fluctuations resulting from natural causes and from the actions of wealthy landowners and merchants who had the capacity to withhold significant grain supplies with the goal to drive up prices. The state pursued policies of price stabilization to avoid popular distress including the purchasing of grain in markets at higher than market prices or selling stored grain in the markets at low prices when supplies were short (Loewe, 2006, pp. 157–158; Wong, 1991, pp. 3–4).

Government policies to promote the success of the independent agrarian households

New agricultural technologies were promoted by the Han government, both to maintain the vitality of the commoner farms and to increase agricultural production in the face of population growth. Changes included new methods to prepare fields and new tools, including iron plows and a device to spread seed (Bray, 1984, pp. 588–589; Loewe, 2005, pp. 153, 167–170, 173–174, 190–191; Loewe, 2006, p. 153). Notably, to prevent a potential mercantilist monopoly on iron production, in 117 BCE the state created agencies to control its production and make the technology widely available at low cost (as they did with salt production) (Loewe, 2005, pp. 157, 190–191). These actions by the state prompted complaints from mercantilists that state monopolies would be inefficient and argued that production and sales of commodities are best left to a market without government interference; their arguments were ignored (Loewe, 2006, pp. 95–96, 188).

Minimal taxation

The mentioned policies, however, presented a dilemma that was a constant feature of Han-period state-building as it was in some subsequent periods. The dilemma was that, in spite of the administrative costs entailed in protecting the commoners, excessive taxation must be avoided, in part because the short-lived and highly autocratic Qin Dynasty, which preceded the Han, had been rejected by the people in part for that reason. Also, Han authorities recognized that steep demands on producer families would be counter to the state's goal to encourage their productivity and prosperity (Deng, 2015, pp. 313–314; Loewe, 2005, p. 165).

Sumptuary and other laws

An emerging sense that monopolists pose a danger to the markets motivated other kinds of Han-era controls over wealthy families. Some new rules mandated the punishment of government officials who participated as merchants in the commercial economy. In addition, sumptuary laws limited the mercantilists' overt displays of wealth (Loewe, 2006, pp. 158, 168–170).

Additional policy-making dating to the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279 CE)

Although Han policies were only variably adhered to during the later years of their rule (Bray, 1984, pp. 595–596), Han policy making informed aspects of Chinese state-building for nearly two thousand years (Wong, 1991) and eventually had influence beyond Chinese history, including among European state-builders in the Early Modern period (Creel, 1970, pp. 15–27). The Southern Song Dynasty illustrates continuity but also extensions of Han Dynasty policies, including an addition to the "ever-normal" granaries in the form of locally managed rural granaries (Wong, 1991, p. 7). Following Han precedent, additional policies aimed to improve the productivity of the independent agrarian households and to protect their livelihoods from the capitalist impulse, known at that time as "the absorbing and grabbing families" (Ma, 1971, p. 127). These agronomic policies were so successful they brought what Bray (1983-84, pp. 15–17; Bray 1984, p. 597; cf. Ho 1956) refers to as a "Green Revolution" in the Southern China rice-based economy, one that informed farming technologies and practices in subsequent periods (Bray, 1984, p. 603). The state's goals emphasized the dispersal of funds to aid in land reclamation projects by ordinary farm families and the creation of rural extension officers charged with instructing farmers in new techniques such as the cultivation of quick-ripening rice that allowed for double-cropping or alternation between summer rice and winter wheat production. The state also lowered tax rates to farmers who accepted new techniques, and even, for a brief period, provided low interest loans to stimulate investment in agricultural improvements (Bray, 1984, pp. 598–600).

Classical Athens, fifth and fourth centuries BCE: egalitarian impulse in the core region, capitalist impulse in the periphery

For decades, Finley (1973) and Garnsey (1988), who both adhered to the theoretical frame of Karl Polanyi, saw a Classical Athenian society whose social bonds of reciprocity and mutual obligation operated outside the scope of commerce. With few exceptions (e.g., Brown, 1947; Redfield, 1986), this disposition meant that the commercial economy received little academic attention. Recent research, however, points to how population growth, urbanism, division of labor, and an increased standard of living across social sectors were associated with more dependence on a highly organized and competitive market economy (e.g., Harris, 2001, 2019; Ober, 2010).

In addition, across much of the Mediterranean region, including in Athens/Attica, after about 600 BCE a new suite of political economic practices acknowledged the value of the individual irrespective of status (Liverani, 2016, pp. 204–209). These new praxes challenged the bonds that historically had entangled many households in constrained labor practices, such as debt bondage, which, in Athens, was prohibited in the revolutionary reforms of Solon (Cartledge, 2016, p. 53; cf. Veyne 1990, p. 75). In the middle of the fifth century, Cleisthenes, in a struggle for power with tyrants, extended the notion of *isonomia* ('the equal sharing of honors and offices in public life') to all the people (e.g., van der Vliet, 1987, p. 85). This mobilized a popular support that brought into play an economy in which, even though slavery did persist, free Athenian households were reimagined as citizens who could own land (Bitros and Karayiannis, 2008, p. 218) and who were tied to state and market rather than to aristocratic or wealthy families (Westgate, 2007). Garnsey (1988, pp. 74–75) suggested that Solon's reforms, pivotal elements of the new democracy, were motivated in part by his concern that aristocratic control of food distribution was harmful to ordinary citizens.

We focus on the grain trade as a key aspect of the expanded commercial economy of post-500 BCE Athens/Attica in which most citizens purchased their wheat and barley supplies. This new economy, as summarized by Moreno (2007, pp. 3–33), expanded in the context of rapid population growth during the fifth and fourth centuries that greatly exceeded the capacity of local production of major grains, compounded by the fact that, although Attica's climate is highly suited for barley production, wheat was the preferred grain for bread-making. This rendered the polity's population heavily dependent on external supplies, much of which came from colonized regions such as Euboea, which became a major supplier of grain during the fifth century.

The new colonialist system was legitimated, beginning in the fifth century, by a growing sense of Athenocentrism (Hall, 1997, 2002, pp. 177–201). This new imaginary saw non-Athenians as primitive "barbarians" who could be legitimately exploited as tenants (on what was previously their own land) or even enslaved (in part because—gasp!—barbarians allowed women to attend markets and to own property) (Hall, 2002, p. 195). In Euboea, and in other colonized regions, local residents continued production, but what had been their land was distributed to Athenian citizens (as *cleruchies*) who became their landlords. This land, and its previously free labor force, was given by the Athenian state to citizens free of charge, but with the obligation to sell grain surpluses they controlled only in the Athenian marketplaces and to pay tax on earnings derived from the properties (e.g., Zuchtriegel, 2018, p. 18). Wealthy Athenians, through their consolidation of the *cleruchies*, could become significant grain suppliers to the city (Moreno, 2007, pp. 81, 89–93, 102–104, 140–143), which correspondingly provided them with the opportunity to distort competitive market pricing.

While some degree of profiting from the grain trade was acceptable to Athenians, given that there were risks such as loss of shipments at sea (Bitros and Karayiannis, 2008, p. 213), excess profits accrued by the wealthy were not acceptable when they imposed financial hardships on commoner households and when their practices exacerbated wealth inequality that could threaten the social fabric of what was understood to be a highly egalitarian society. Although elitists, including Aristotle, had despised the market because of its egalitarian threat to the traditional hierarchical social order, the new reality presented by the capitalist impulse spurred a different kind of anti-market sentiment, this time among the citizens, expressed in a growing sense that commerce is inherently a domain of *kapeleia* or sharp dealing (Moreno, 2007, p. 233). Athenians addressed the growing social malfeasance and growing wealth inequality through institution-building that was central to the operation of their democracy.

Regulation of grain marketing

An extensive set of rules was established to maintain order in the Athenian agora (marketplace) with the welfare of common persons always in mind. These rules were enforced by officials charged with keeping order and regulating imports and exports of grain and preventing hoarding or attempting to sell large quantities with the goal to influence price and supply (summarized in Moreno, 2007, pp. 334–336). Legislation also addressed the specifics of controlling grain imported from conquered regions. A key concern was that the "buying together" of grain imports would serve to limit competition and cause injury to the people of Athens/Attica. The solution was to limit import allotments to fifty baskets of grain at a time by grain merchants (Moreno, 2007, p. 213).

Corn wardens at Piraeus

Grain imports were restricted to only one port, at Piraeus, where a staff of elected officials, variously referred to as "market controllers," "grain guardians," or "corn wardens" monitored the grain trade and forced traders to sell grain only in the Athenian market (e.g., Bitros and Karayiannis, 2008, pp. 222–223; Gulick, 1973, p. 302).

Communication about grain market issues in the *ekklesia*

Cheating and profiteering in the grain market emerged as an important legislative concern, for example, the issue appeared regularly on the agenda of the principal governing assembly (*ekklesia*), that is, ten times per year (Moreno, 2007, p. 3). And as Harris (2001, pp. 75–76) notes, the meetings were a venue where public honors could be given to those who sold grain at below market rates in times of shortage.

Lawsuits

The polity's new judicial system reflected the idea of *isonomia* in the rule that jurors would be recruited from a broad citizen public (Hansen, 1999, p. 301). Legal suits then became one venue where wealth inequality and market rigging could be addressed in a participatory manner that reflected the interests of commoner citizens. This is evident in the text of one well-described lawsuit (Lysias 22: 'Against the Grain Dealers') arguing that "…the defendants can monopolize all grain in times of crisis… [and]…extort money from the hungry and helpless populace…," and there were many other such legal cases (Moreno, 2007, pp. 214–220, 279–299).

Civic gifting

The institution of costly civic gifting (*liturgies*) for citizens whose wealth was above 3 or 4 *talents* was a key building block of the new democracy. This might involve, for example, the funding of a *trireme* for a year or defraying the costs of a public ritual or feast, among others (Veyne, 1990, pp. 71–77).

England, 1000 to 1800 CE

Extreme persistence of the capitalist impulse

A local English official's explanation for a food riot in 1525: multitudes of "small substance" were ruled more by "their own self willfulness than after good reason or discretion and some well fall in to fumes, and so fallen well not be ruled by other persons, nether can or well rule or order themselves" (from Sharp, 2016, pp. 196–197).

A notice affixed to the market cross in Carlisle, 1783: "Peter Clemeseson and Moses Luthart this is to give you Warning that you must quit your unlawful Dealing or Die and be Damed your buying the Corn to starve the Poor Inhabitants of the City…you Damed Roagues" (from Thompson, 1971, p. 99).

The extreme and persistent elitist bias against common persons [illustrated, for example, when Edward II blamed an England-wide crop failure on the common people's sinfulness (Sharp, 2016, pp. 3, 4)] fostered a centuries-long period of popular protests (numbering in the hundreds, although the total number has yet to be determined) and acidic commentaries such as the one above declaring a hatred of the government, of corn (wheat) dealers, and of the land-owning elite (e.g., Waugh, 1991, p. 167). These were consistent actions and expressions across the eight contentious and conflictive centuries of English history we discuss (e.g., Davis, 2012, p. 46). This cultural and social setting reflected that ordinary English families had to struggle against a lack of control over their produced capital, over the manipulation of grain supplies in local markets, and their lack of legal rights regarding property. And, owing to a "remarkably deficient" government, for centuries they received no beneficial responses to these threats (Hindle, 2000; Sharp, 2016).

Grain shortages sometimes were due to naturally caused climatic events but more often to elite opportunism. Lay and ecclesiastical manorial lords, merchants, and the state itself manipulated capital, markets, and even commoner rights to land ownership (e.g., Dunn, 2004, p. 159) in ways that artificially depressed the living standards of poorer persons—even at times challenging their food security—without ever considering such actions to be selfish or wrongfully hurtful to fellow citizens (e.g., Dunn, 2004, p. 176) whom the elite considered to be biologically inferior (Scanlan, 2020, p. 497). Eventually, however, the "fluidity of money and commerce" inherent in a growing commoner-driven commercial economy brought effective challenges to the traditional elitist actions and ideologies (Davis, 2012, p. 46; cf. Rollison, 2010). Change to a more effective government, however, was slow; it wasn't until the early nineteenth century that the Crown, to some extent, and local governing agencies became stabilizing factors impacting grain supplies and prices, including standardized weights and measures, that did finally bring a decline, although not the end, of food-related riots (Bohstedt, 1983, p. 211; Randall, 2007, pp. 303–331). Yet, a persistent lack of concern for persons not deemed fully human was still evident in the massive Atlantic Seaboard slave economy, but also in the case of nineteenth-century Ireland. There, large-scale primarily English-owned commercial farms produced an abundance of food, most of which, however, was shipped to growing markets in industrializing cities such as Liverpool, leaving local populations with inadequate and unaffordable food supplies. Food stress, exacerbated by the cessation of food aid to Ireland by the government of the United Kingdom (because, they claimed, it posed too much of a fiscal burden), contributed, between 1846 and 1847, to an estimated one million Irish deaths due to famine and more than one million forced to emigrate (Smyth, 2012, p. 49).

Forms of constrained labor: slavery to serfdom to tenancy

At the cusp of the Late Medieval period in England around 1000 CE, a principal mode of production was one built on the constrained labor of slaves owned by the lords of landed estates (manors) (Dyer, 2002, pp. 36–37) (although slavery had a much deeper history here). This exploitative system was growing after 1000 with the establishment of a "squirearchy" (Dunn, 2004, p. 176) consisting of new lay manors and an expanded number of ecclesiastical lords and their properties, a "church aristocracy" (Dyer, 2002, p. 76). The squirearchy benefitted economically from the exploitation of servile labor that was justified as an expression of the "divine" origin of a highly stratified society consisting of the nobility, clergy, and workers—a society that will remain harmonious only when the differential privileges of the three orders are respected (Davis, 2012, p. 46; Hilton, 2003, p. 222).

After the twelfth century, the slave economy declined, to be replaced with the subordination of serfs (referred to as villeins after 1086) (Dunn, 2004, p. 17). In the new system, labor control remained key to the manorial economies, but control over workers was increasingly justified through practices not that different from slavery. Lords provided "protection" for serfs or villeins in exchange for labor done without pay (as summarized from Bloch, 1961, pp. 272–273). Although free households, who represented more than a third of the rural population, benefitted from the protection of the royal courts, those subordinated did not—they fell under the supervision of the manorial courts that were often self-serving and not monitored by any official judicial system; serfs had no title to property other than domestic items and some household animals, and no rights of inheritance; they could not leave the manor without permission from the overlord; they had no control over family matters such as marriages; and they were obligated to carry out agricultural tasks and other tasks such as haulage at the discretion of the manor's owner without pay. However, even the concept of a "free" person was always under threat, challenged by the manorial elite's ideal to maintain a homogeneously servile commoner population (Hilton, 2003, pp. 220–221). Free households could challenge such claims in the King's courts but doing so required representation by a lawyer, which was prohibitively expensive, while self-representation was unlikely as court proceedings were conducted in French (Hilton, 2003, p. 221).

The growth of a commoner-driven market economy

By the twelfth through fourteenth centuries the system of servile labor began to shift with many manors finding tenant labor a more productive workforce and more profitable (Dyer, 2002, pp. 137–147, 295). This process was accelerated following the fourteenth century Black Death, when lords of manors, short of labor, increased their leasing of land to free tenants based on market-determined prices and certified by mutually agreed contracts signed in the form of indentures. Once the indentures were signed, the lords were expected to honor specified rents for the use of land and wages that were to be paid for labor (Dyer, 2005, p. 199). As expected, however, the manorial lords and the governing elite showed their discomfort with any effort to improve the lives of commoners when, in 1349, the Parliamentary Commons passed the much-hated Ordinance of Labourers mandating that the cost of labor will not increase owing to the pandemic and that workers will not be allowed to travel to work sites to gain more income (e.g., Dunn, 2004, pp. 31–32).

The new contractual system did leave tenants with some degree of control over the disposition of their own capital even though manorial lords still had the ability to minimize the potential for workers to benefit economically, for example, by forcing rent payments when grain prices were low or issuing fines from the manorial courts, actions that could force farmers into debt and back into servitude (Dyer, 2005, pp. 33–34, 87–88). Nonetheless, with the freedom to control more of the capital they produced, households generated increased demand for domestic commodities in a growing commoner-driven marketplace economy (Dunn, 2004, p. 24; Dyer, 2002, pp. 163–178; Dyer, 2005, p. 25–29). The number of marketplaces across England grew at this time (see Biddick, 1985; Davis, 2012, p. 276; Everitt, 1967; Thirsk, 2003). This transition gradually brought an increase in the sale and purchase of goods produced and consumed by commoner households that gradually transcended the old prestige-good system of the manors that had featured demands for labor and materials for the construction and furnishing of elaborate residences, costly weaponry, elaborately landscaped gardens and parks, and lavish feasting and other entertainments (Dyer, 2005, p. 89); the elite expressed their anger with this transition when Parliament passed a sumptuary law in 1363 making it illegal for common persons to wear expensive clothing (Dyer, 2002, p. 283).

Challenges to the commoner-driven economic sector

England's growing role, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as a supplier of wool cloth to the Afro-Eurasian world-system (Abu-Lughod, 1989) was a significant spur to the new commoner economy (Taylor, 1989, p. 299), which underlaid an increasing commoner standard of living, including, for example, more regular consumption of the preferred white bread (Dyer, 2005, p. 134). New secondary industries flourished (e.g., agricultural tools, pottery, house construction) as did various forms of economic specialization related to cloth production (e.g., Dyer, 2005, pp. 135–138). Bohstedt (2000, p. 57; Bohstedt 2010, pp. 263–266), however, noted that these favorable outcomes for commoners also came at a price because the growth of specialization and dependence on the markets implied a growth in numbers of people who purchased their food supplies. Correspondingly, commercial change created possibilities for elite actors to gain unearned profits beyond their traditional exploitation of constrained labor to include strategic actions to distort the supply and pricing of critical foodstuffs. These actions ushered in a long period marked by popular protests against food shortages and against the lack of governmental action to make markets work for the benefit of the commoners (e.g., Bohstedt, 1983).

Even worse, the state was among those elite actors who contributed to the growing level of commoner dissatisfaction and expression of civil disobedience. During the Edwards's reigns, beginning in the 1290s, military expansionism shaped the government's food policies in ways that brought unwelcome outcomes for commoners. Importantly, owing to elite bias and the state's fiscal ineptness, the Crown was eager to "pass on the costs of wars to their poorer subjects" (e.g., Sharp, 2016, pp. 113–119, 181). War funding occurred in part through the system of purveyance in which the king's victualers were allowed to purchase commodities for the fleet and for diplomatic purposes—including grain—at below market rates, a practice widely regarded as being "little better than theft" (Dunn, 2004, p. 39; cf. Sharp, 2000, pp. 41–45). Further, the Crown's tax system was highly regressive when it emphasized moveable goods while exempting landed income, and when it took the form of a new poll tax that negatively impacted the poorest commoners. Food riots across

England as early as 1347 were provoked in part by the state's market-distorting policies that exacerbated domestic food shortages (Sharp, 2000, p. 34), and opposition was further expressed in the England-wide rebellion of 1381. In this case also, the Crown and other elite showed their utter disrespect for commoners. By June of that year the rioters had succeeded to the degree that Richard II agreed to sign emancipation charters endorsed with the Great Seal of England, but, by the end of the year the Crown and Parliament had rescinded all of them.

The causes of market disruption were well understood

Sharp (2016) emphasizes that well into the sixteenth century it was understood that opportunism was an important cause of market disruption (e.g., as described in Gras and Brien, 1915). Additionally, by that time Western European price theorists had arrived at a consensus that a "just price" is the price determined by market forces of supply and demand, made possible through direct sales to consumers that eliminates the influence of "middlemen, hawkers and brokers" (de Roover, 1958, pp. 428–429). The Crown and Parliaments regularly issued proclamations to curtail that kind of influence, for example, beginning in 1587 the Tudor Council issued Books of Orders that mandated several rules: that grain exports should be discouraged and imports encouraged; that grain marketing cannot be done in secret; that engrossing (buying up large quantities outside the marketplaces) and forestalling (holding rather than selling food supplies) are illegal; and that there should be rules for the standardization of weights and measures (Bohstedt, 2000, p. 57; Davis, 2012, pp. 176–177, passim; Randall and Charlesworth, 2000, pp. 1–2). However, Sharp (2016) and other historians (e.g., Hay, 2000; Hindle, 2000) document how, in this case as in many others, the central authorities, influenced by elite interests, exposed again and again their marked inability and unwillingness to govern effectively on behalf of commoners. The Crown and Parliaments consistently failed to uphold rules they had mandated, instead allocating the responsibility for enforcement to local officials or local commissions that lacked adequate governing capacity and funding and who were often corrupt (e.g., Healey, 2019, p. 100).

Slowly at first, beginning in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, the reality that opportunists pose a danger to the markets motivated new governmental policies to enhance the public sector (Hindle, 2000), including standardization in judicial procedures. Also, at this time there was increased state involvement in welfare provision, bureaucratized beginning in 1563 (Hindle, 2000, pp. 6–8, passim). In addition, the corrupt, regressive, and much-hated royal tax prerogatives (Braddick, 1996, pp. 70–79) were replaced after 1710 with a professional tax administration that focused more attention on excise (market commodity) taxes rather than land taxes (Brewer, 1989, pp. 91–102; Fig. 4.2). This was a significant transition because historically the manorial lords had claimed that their extensive control of properties rendered them the "natural rulers of society," a claim that was undermined when the commoner-driven economy and excise taxes on domestically produced goods emerged as principal sources of the state's revenues (Brewer, 1989, pp. 100–102, 155–156, 199). The new fiscal economy contributed to a new sense of the importance of and rights of the common person and a reduced adherence to the claim of exclusive elite privilege (Taylor, 1989, pp. 339–342).

Discussion and implications: citizens and the state against the capitalist impulse

Recent decades have seen a sea change in thinking about state and economy as researchers have uncovered an unexpected degree of variation that, irrespective of social scale or complexity, past or present, included state-building underpinned by political collective action (Blanton and Fargher, 2008, 2013; Blanton and Fargher., 2016; Blanton and Feinman, 2024; Blanton et al., 2022a, 2022b; Carballo et al., 2014; Feinman, 2017). Most importantly, this research has led us to recognize that to build and sustain egalitarian institutional systems at scale presents numerous challenges. Humans, as conditional cooperators, are more likely to cooperate and limit their personal agency only when they perceive others similarly willing to cooperate. Conditional cooperators will also look for evidence that the institutional structure of a cooperative system is capable of providing trustworthy monitoring and enforcement of rules as well as equitable access to beneficial group or joint resources including competitive markets. Although this recent theoretical turn alters the lenses through which we see the social evolution of urban societies, much work remains to be done to discover the conditions likely to spur or deter the growth of more collective institutions.

In this essay we have explored the possibility that struggles over the control of private capital and opportunistic involvements in markets might be among the conditions that undergirded the construction and resilience of collective government institutions, including policies to enhance the freedom of producers to allocate the capital they generated in regulated competitive markets [as also applies to contemporary polities (Drèze and Sen, 2002, pp. 6, 7)]. We were inspired to move in this direction thanks to the efforts of researchers who recognized food as a persistent concern in premodern societies, in some cases owing to naturally caused production shortages but also when market manipulation brought economic crises (e.g., Sewell, 2012, pp. 305–308). "Food Supply and Public Order in Modern Europe" (Tilly, 1975) was one key source that stimulated our thinking, as were "Nourish the People: The State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650–1850" (Will and Bin Wong, 1991) and Alfonso Moreno's "Feeding the Democracy" (Moreno, 2007). Further, we benefitted from the turn among historians and anthropologists to fully acknowledge the reality of elite-driven feudalism, the Atlantic Seaboard slave economy (e.g., Drescher, 2017; Horvath and White, 2024; Mintz, 2011), and the impacts of poor governance in the massive loss of life in nineteenth century Ireland (Crowley et al., 2012).

Although we encountered considerable variation across the three cases, it is clear that food insecurity was a causal factor during the phases of social transformation that we investigated. Of our examples, the Han Dynasty best exemplified how state policies had codified and implemented features of the egalitarian impulse to directly address food insecurity. This dynasty's policies, influenced by the writings of Confucius, Mencius, and other philosophers, envisioned governance as meritorious when it extended benefits and protections to the independent land-owning agrarian households who make up the bulk of society's population and whose labor provided the greater part of the state's fiscal economy. Further, this degree of governing accountability (especially during the Western Han), even though it implies the right of citizens to oppose a non-meritorious government, brought a lengthy period for which there is little recorded evidence of popular protests. By contrast, during the dynasty's last years (Eastern Han), the state devolved into corruption that eventuated in a major anti-government revolt, the Rebellion of the Yellow Turbans, that forced the abdication of the last Han emperor (Loewe, 2016, p. 316, Loewe, 2006, p. xviii).

The institutional history of the Classical Athenian democracy also illustrates how the egalitarian impulse was in part a response to food insecurity; recall that Garnsey (1988) saw Solon's reforms in the light of concerns that aristocratic control of food distribution was harming ordinary citizens. And many of the democracy's new policies gave citizens a voice to counter elite malfeasance and to involve the state in the regulation of the grain supply and pricing. In this emergent democratic polity and economy, Athenian households, freed from the constraints of clientage and debt bondage, were reimagined as citizens tied to state and market rather than to aristocratic or wealthy families. Yet, this well-developed egalitarian impulse was only selectively applied. Slavery persisted in the polity's core region of Attica/Athens while regions in the peripheral grain-supply areas, which were newly defined as populated by "barbarians," were conquered. In the process local populations lost control of their produced capital, which became the property of Athenian citizens.

Discussion and implications: the egalitarian impulse and the rational commoner

Our comparison, we suggest, can be added to the growing list of efforts to challenge theories that imagined a singular causal process to explain the rise of premodern social complexity. These entrenched approaches ascribed agency solely or principally to the powerful and envisioned an agentless subaltern sector of society that was easily dominated by an autocratic governing elite, the latter depicted variously as "coercive and self-seeking entrepreneurs" by the sociologist Tilly (1985, p. 165) or described as an elite who possessed a "comparative advantage in violence" that made it possible to forcefully extract wealth from passive subalterns (North, 1981, p. 21). By contrast, comparative research, including the examples discussed here, points to a different reality, namely, that a state extracting revenues forcefully and without any corresponding public goods, equitable taxation, or other services, most likely faces opposition and social disorder from a citizenry that cannot be assumed to be passive.

Oddly, these scholars depicted a passive and irrational subaltern, despite a Western political tradition that included England, in which the notion of popular sovereignty had a long history traceable to Classical Athens. Nevertheless, these egalitarian notions were largely abandoned by historical scholars during the nineteenth century (Kelly, 2016). Instead, historians (and other nineteenth century Romanticists) placed English history in a favorable light, reimagining the reality of a brutal and exploitative past by inventing new interpretations that were largely untethered from reality (Biddick, 1998). In one of these imagined scenarios, the base of Medieval (and we would say Early Modern) English society had consisted of insular villages whose social cohesion was found in the values of a peasant moral economy of sharing (Biddick, 1998, p. 65, passim). Karl Marx and his disciples, for example, depicted, and still depict, premodern peasant communities as insular and self-sustaining communes where, because "economizing choices were absent," their populations were rendered agentless and easily mystified by elite-sponsored ideology; they were also regarded as risk averse, subsistence oriented, and little interested in markets (e.g., Pearson, 2000, p. 945).[2] This thinking has relevance to the issues we address when followers of Marx saw a peasant food riot as a mere flash in the pan, or saw them as "more or less spontaneous acts" that have no truly significant social outcomes" (Rudé, 1995, p. 4). Some theorists even assumed popular protests were reactions to market intrusion into the moral economy of the villages (e.g., Thompson, 1971). The information we summarized from recent investigations, not influenced by Marx or other notions of a romanticized English past, depicts a very different scenario: that popular protests emanated from marketplaces, not villages, a reality that has been noted in other historical circumstances (e.g., Yang, 1998). Further, the evidence points to how commoners were not "mystified" by religious or other forms of anti-commoner ideology and instead fought against them, as evidenced in the England-wide riots of 1381 when rioters identified the ecclesiastical magnates as among the most demanding of the manorial lords and subjected them to much popular violence (Dunn, 2004, p. 24; Sharp, 2016, pp. 121–122), including the beheading of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Biddick, 1998, p. 45) and other high-ranking church officials (Dunn, 2004, p. 126).

Surprisingly, during the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists promoted theories of emerging premodern social complexity ("neoevolutionism" and Polanyian "substantivism") that shared features with Marx's invention of a past moral economy of the peasant. The prominent anthropologist Fox (1971, p. 9), for example, wrote that "Preindustrial agrarian states must continually deal politically with the inherent insularities, self-sufficiencies, and regionalisms of their undeveloped technological and productive orders." Wolf (1999, pp. 290–291), similarly, claimed that in premodernity it was only the governing elite who had the capacity to imagine and implement methods of societal domination and then to reproduce their power through ideological systems that mystified an inherently irrational subaltern (see also Fried, 1967, p. 226). Further, Marxist-inspired substantivists (Polanyi, 1944) argued that the governing elite alone had the capacity to subsume the economy into a centralized redistributive system that would inhibit the growth of what substantivists argued was an amoral commercial economy (e.g., Service, 1975, p. 302; cf. the critiques of this view in Blanton and Fargher, 2010 and Blanton and Feinman, 2024). Our summary demonstrates clearly that these

2 Marxian theory sees the peasant villages as a non-commercialized "stage" of social evolution preceding the capitalist "stage." This dichotomy fails to reflect the stark contrast between marketplace economies where there is a concern for fairness and competition and the monopoly-producing capitalist impulse. As a result, when Marxists encounter household-based and non-capitalized agrarian production that is linked to markets, this anomalous situation (in their view) is regarded as a "backward" economy "doomed to extinction," or consists only of "petty commodity production" or an "informal economy." However, while such systems may seem "informal" to Marxists, the reality is that they were in the past and still are key to the economic success of large numbers of households (e.g., Blanton and Feinman, 2024; Harriss-White, 2023).

long-held views are mistaken. In the cases studied, the egalitarian impulse served to restrict the actions of capitalists without embedding the economy entirely within the state.

Despite his adoption of the moral economy argument, we point to E. P. Thompson's (1971) famous essay on the English Crowd as a key work that guided us, and other researchers, toward new ways of thinking about market economies and about popular protests in England. Although Thompson's ideas have undergone considerable reevaluation, for example by pushing the elite manipulation of grain prices and the resulting popular protests back from the eighteenth to as early as the fourteenth century, still, Thompson was the first Western historian to make the important point that students of history had been mistaken when they carried forward the received wisdom of England's highly stratified and elitist past that had depicted the common person as motivated more by emotion and tradition than rationality. As Thompson expressed it, because scholars had depicted commoner-inspired social disturbances, including food riots, as nothing more than spasmodic and compulsive actions, it was sufficient for them to "mention a bad harvest or downturn in trade, and all requirements of historical explanation are satisfied" (Thompson, 1971, p. 76).

The information we have summarized here, and from sources such as "Collective Action in the Formation of Premodern States" (Blanton and Fargher, 2008) and "Power from Below" (Thurston and Fernandéz-Götz, 2021), critique the notions of an agentless and passive commoner dominated by a powerful autocratic elite. Our position also stands as a test of the hypothesis that, when state-building involves effective shared resource or common-pool management, taxpayers are more likely to see themselves as integral to society rather than as victims of elite appropriation. They, thus, become more likely to rationally comply with fiscal and other obligations and be less prone to popular protests against authoritarian or inept rule. John Bohstedt's careful research (e.g., Bohstedt, 2000, pp. 62–79) provides an example when he demonstrates that English rioters were acting purposefully, "calculating costs and benefits," when they militated against the state and against food shortages and high food prices engineered by the Crown, by grain merchants, and by the squirearchy. And commoner actions had consequences. Davis (2012, p. 46) documents how the gradual intrusion of the rural market economy into the towns brought a "fluidity of money and commerce" that weakened the cultural foundations of a stratified society built on notions of "order, stability, privilege, and conformity." This process dovetails with what the historian Rollison (2010) identifies as a "long revolution" (1066–1649) marked by the gradual emergence of an activist commoner and a more secular "commonwealth ideology," featuring a new appreciation of the commoners' moral capacity and agency (Gorski, 2003, p. 167). This historical sequence over a long period of time did eventually bring challenges to what had been the foundational principle of an elitist society: that privileges should, by custom, accrue naturally to nobles and the manorial and ecclesiastical lords who owned land (Taylor, 1989, pp. 297–298, 342). It was only during the late seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries that some members of the elite saw the reality of an exploitative English past. This kind of argument is represented in the philosophical core of the writing of John Locke in his Two Treatises of Government, published in 1689, where he argued for the right of citizens to rebel against an unjust government and their right to own property, including property produced by their own labor (e.g., Dunn, 1984, pp. 28–38). Locke also argued that a key role of government is to guarantee the rights of citizens to adequate subsistence and to prosper in the face of oppressive landowners (Ashcraft, 1995, pp. 46, 52).[3] Lord Kenyon, chief justice of the King's Bench, wrote in 1795 that: "The law should recognize the rights of the poor as well as the wealthy" and he recognized the "immorality and the illegality of the marketing offenses" that were causing harm to the poor (although his suggestions were rejected shortly thereafter) (Hay, 2000, pp. 108, 110–111). And Adam Smith recognized that economic problems such as poverty were not the fault of ordinary people, rather were due to elite misconduct, for example when he argued that the "interest of the dealers…in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the public…[and through their actions they]…levy, for their own benefit, an absurd tax upon the rest of their follow citizens" (Smith, 1776, Vol. 1, p. 352; cf. Boucoyannis, 2013; Evensky, 2005, p. 135).

Final thoughts

The Romantic creation of a contented peasantry residing in isolated and self-sufficient rural communes is only one expression of misrepresentation and re-remembering of a past found in an English historical literature that has only recently been subjected to scrutiny (e.g., Scanlan, 2020; see also Horvath and White, 2024). Re-remembering is evident in other domains, also with the purpose to "explain" why Europeans, especially English speakers, were singularly responsible for ushering in political and economic modernity world-wide, based on an oppositional illogic contrasting Europe with supposed "Oriental" societies (Hui, 2005). This argument is exemplified by English colonialists who argued that the regions they dominated benefitted from their introduction of notions of private property. We point to the fact that it was an eighteenth century French orientalist who first noted that it was only rhetoric when the English justified their intervention in India by claiming their efforts will "modernize" the country by introducing the notion of private property into what had been an oriental despotism (Wink, 1986, p. 377). However, it appears that English intrusion in India had little to do with private property and more to do with removing vast wealth from the region (e.g., Bhambra, 2021), what Habib (2002, p. 280) refers to as the "economic strangulation of the Indian economy by Britain."

Some recent economists seem to regard historical re-remembering as fact. The economist Acemoglu et al. (2005, p. 550), for example, argue that non-absolutist states such as England gained great wealth, not through the slave trade (a claim that is not widely accepted [e.g., Inikori, 2020]), but by establishing "political institutions providing secure property rights…" Similarly, North et al. (2009, pp. 77–91) provide a detailed analysis of the history of transferable property rights—but only of the manorial lords—in England after 1066, an account that is one of the most elitist and morally objectionable descriptions of the

3 Locke knew that his radically egalitarian Two Treatises essays would be viewed negatively, even potentially as seditious, so initially he chose to publish them anonymously (Dunn, 1984, p. 10).

capitalist impulse that we have ever read. To begin, their assumption that land is the primary asset in agrarian societies fails to recognize that for centuries of English history it was the ability of the nobility and other manorial lords to control the produced capital of servile persons, and to interfere in markets, that were the true sources of their extreme wealth. North and coauthors also claim that "English land law provided an institutional and legal basis for a relatively equal distribution of freehold land in American colonies, while Spanish and Portuguese land law led to the creation of large estates and unequal distribution of land…" (ibid., p. 77). Evidently, they forgot about the plantation economy and its slave production that dominated the southern North American colonies and later, states, where a vast population of enslaved workers created great wealth for a small number of plantation owners in what Drescher (2017, p. 373) described as "…an unconscionable crime against humanity."

We should also mention that, although we draw insights from Piketty's focus on capital, we suggest he illustrates a similarly biased argument when, because slavery had been abolished, he focused his analysis on "non-human" produced wealth, including land, finance, and industrial capital (p. 46). We should point out, however, that Piketty's 1870s starting point for his analysis was only decades after the destruction of the vastly profitable slave economy of the Atlantic Seaboard that, in spite of abolition and the war, continued to shape the ways that wealth and capital have been distributed, including in the United States (e.g., Richardson, 2020). Following abolition and the civil war, the failure of post-war reconstruction after the 1870s brought a resurgence of anti-commoner actions, especially as the inability of ex-slaves to exercise full control over their produced capital and their lack of fair access to competitive markets and political agency, including open access to elections, public goods, educational opportunities, employment options, and residential choices.

Our conclusions demonstrate how, over the last century, social scientists and historians have collected mountains of data regarding long-term changes in political and commercial institutions. Yet while the empirical record has grown, the conceptual landscape has shifted little—long-standing presumptions remain intact. Here, we have compared three well-documented historical cases with a fresh analytical lens and find many of these key assumptions no longer hold. A fresh perspective on the role of citizens and commoners in the emergence of collective institutions, both political and economic, is required.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

RB: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. GF: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the critical role played by research institutions, especially the Field Museum, Chicago, and Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, as well as granting agencies during our careers. Blanton benefitted from the collections of the Knight Library of the University of Oregon. We thank the paper editor and reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions. Many teachers, colleagues, and students helped us develop our ideas and research programs, implement investigations, and refine our thinking. Among these sources, Cindy L. Bedell, Lane F. Fargher, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Linda M. Nicholas were particularly supportive and instrumental in the formulation and presentation of this material for which we are grateful.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

References

Abu-Lughod, J. L. (1989). Before European hegemony: the world system. New York: Oxford University Press.

Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., and Robinson, J. (2005). The rise of Europe: Atlantic trade, institutional change and economic growth. *Am. Econ. Rev.* 95, 546–579. doi: 10.1257/0002828054201305

Ames, R. T. (1988). "Rites as rights: the Confucian alternative" in Human rights and the world's religions. ed. L. S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 199–216.

Ashcraft, R. (1995). "Lockean ideas, poverty, and the development of liberal political theory" in Early modern conceptions of property. eds. J. Brewer and S. Staves (London: Routledge), 43–61.

Bhambra, G. K. (2021). Narrating inequality, eliding empire. *Br. J. Sociol.* 72, 69–78. doi: 10.1111/1468-4446.12804

Biddick, K. (1985). Medieval English peasants and market involvement. *J. Econ. Hist.* 45, 823–831. doi: 10.1017/S0022050700035117

Biddick, K. (1998). The shock of medievalism. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bitros, G. C., and Karayiannis, A. D. (2008). Values and institutions. as determinants of entrepreneurship in ancient Athens. *J. Institut. Econom.* 4, 205–230. doi: 10.1017/S17441374080000969

Blanton, R. E. (2013). "Cooperation and the moral economy of the marketplace" in Merchants, markets, and exchange in the pre-Columbian world. eds. K. G. Hirth and J. Pillsbury (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Research Library and Collection), 23–48.

Blanton, R. E., and Fargher, L. (2008). Collective action in the formation of pre-modern states. New York: Springer.

Blanton, R. E., and Fargher, L. F. (2010). "Evaluating causal factors in market development in premodern states: a comparative study, with critical comments on the history of ideas about markets" in Archaeological approaches to market exchange in ancient societies. eds. C. P. Garraty and B. L. Stark (Boulder, Colorado: The University Press of Colorado), 207–226.

Blanton, R. E., and Fargher, L. F. (2013). "Reconsidering Darwinian anthropology: with suggestions for a revised agenda for cooperation research" in Cooperation and collective action: archaeological perspectives. ed. D. Carballo (Boulder: University Press of Colorado), 93–128.

Blanton, R. E., Fargher, L. F., Feinman, G. M., and Kowalewski, S. A. (2022a). The fiscal economy of good government: past and present. *Curr. Anthropol.* 62, 94–96. doi: 10.1086/713286

Blanton, R. E., and Fargher, L. F. (2016). How humans cooperate: confronting the challenges of collective action. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

Blanton, R. E., and Feinman, G. M. (2024). New views on price-making markets and the capitalist impulse: beyond Polanyi. *Front. Hum. Dynam.* 6:1339903. doi: 10.3389/fhumd.2024.1339903

Blanton, R. E., Feinman, G. M., Kowalewski, S. A., and Nicholas, L. M. (2022b). Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán state. 2nd Edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bloch, M. (1961). Feudal society. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Bohstedt, J. (1983). Riots and community politics in England Wales: 1790–1810. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bohstedt, J. (2000). "The pragmatic economy, the politics of provisions and the "invention" of the food riot tradition in 1740" in Moral economy and popular protests: crowds, conflict, and authority. eds. A. Randall and A. Charlesworth (New York: Palgrave), 55–92.

Bohstedt, J. (2010). The politics of provisions: food riots, moral economy, and market transition in England, c. 1550–1850. London: Routledge.

Boucoyannis, D. (2013). The equalizing hand: why Adam Smith thought the market should produce wealth without steep inequality. *Perspect. Polit.* 11, 1051–1079. doi: 10.1017/S115375927/13008X

Braddick, M. J. (1996). The nerves of state: taxation and financing of the English state, 1558–1714. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bray, F. (1983-84). Patterns of evolution in rice-growing societies. *J. Peasant Stud.* 11, 3–33.

Bray, F. (1984). "Agriculture" in Science and civilization in China, volume 6, biology and biological technology, part II. ed. J. Needham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 552–616.

Brewer, J. (1989). The sinews of power: war, money, and the English state, 1688–1783. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Brown, N. O. (1947). Hermes the thief: the evolution of a myth. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Carballo, D. M., Roscoe, P., and Feinman, G. M. (2014). Cooperation and collective action in the cultural evolution of complex societies. *J. Archaeol. Method Theory* 21, 98–133. doi: 10.1007/s10816-012-9147-2

Cartledge, P. (2016). Democracy: a life. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Creel, H. G. (1970). The origins of statecraft in China. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Crowley, J., Smyth, W. J., and Murphy, M. (2012). Atlas of the great Irish famine. New York: New York University Press.

Davis, J. (2012). Medieval market morality: life, law, and ethics in the English marketplace, 1200–1500. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

de Roover, R. (1958). The concept of just price: theory and economic policy. *J. Econ. Hist.* 18, 418–434.

Deng, K. G. (2015). "Imperial China under the song and late Qing" in Fiscal regimes and the political economy of premodern states. eds. A. Monson and W. Scheidel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 308–332.

Drescher, S. (2017). "European antislavery: from empires of slavery to global prohibition" in The Cambridge world history of slavery, volume 4, AD 1804-AD 2016. eds. D. Eltis, S. Engerman, S. Drescher and D. Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 373–398.

Drèze, J., and Sen, A. (2002). Hunger and public action. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Dunn, J. (1984). Locke. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dunn, A. (2004). The peasants' revolt: England's failed revolution of 1381. Stroud, Gloucester: Tempus Publishing.

Dyer, C. (2002). Making a living in the middle ages: the people of Britain 850–1520. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dyer, C. (2005). An age of transition? Economy and society in the Later Middle Ages. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elvin, M. (1973). The pattern of the Chinese past. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Evensky, J. (2005). Adam Smith's moral philosophy: A historical and contemporary perspective on markets, law, ethics, and culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Everitt, A. (1967). "The marketing of agricultural produce" in The agrarian history of England and Wales. ed. J. Thirsk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 466–592.

Feinman, G. M. (2017). "Reframing ancient economies" in Eurasia at the dawn of history: urbanization and social change. eds. M. Fernández-Götz and D. Krausse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 139–152.

Feinman, G., Fang, H., and Nicholas, L. (2019). "Political unification, economic synchronization, and demographic growth: long-term settlement pattern shifts in eastern Shandong" in Weights and marketplaces from the Bronze Age to the Early Modern period. eds. L. Rahmstorf and E. Stratford (Kiel/Hamburg: Wachholtz Verlag and Murmann Publishers), 355–376.

Finley, M. I. (1973). The ancient economy. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fox, R. G. (1971). Kin, clan, Raja, and rule: state-hinterland relations in preindustrial India. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fried, M. H. (1967). The evolution of political society: an essay in political anthropology. New York: Random House.

Garnsey, P. (1988). Famine and food supply in the Graeco-Roman worlds: responses to risk and crisis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gorski, P. S. (2003). The disciplinary revolution: Calvinism and the rise of the state in Early Modern Europe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gras, N., and Brien, S. (1915). The evolution of the English corn market: from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. New York: Russell and Russell.

Gulick, C. B. (1973). The life of the ancient Greek, with special reference to Athens. New York: Cooper Square Publishers.

Habib, I. (2002). "The economy" in The magnificent Mughals. ed. Z. Ziad (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 269–280.

Hall, J. M. (1997). Ethnic identity in Greek antiquity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hall, J. M. (2002). Hellenicity: between ethnicity and culture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hansen, M. H. (1999). The Athenian democracy in the age of Demosthenes: structure, principles, and ideology. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Harris, E. M. (2001). "Workshop, marketplace, and household: the nature of technical specialization in Classical Athens and its influence on economy and society" in Money, labor, and land: approaches to economics of ancient Greece. eds. P. Cartledge, E. E. Cohen and L. Foxhall (London: Routledge), 67–99.

Harris, E. M. (2019). "Markets in the ancient Greek world: an overview" in Weights and marketplaces from the Bronze Age to the Early Modern period. eds. L. Rahmstorf and E. Stratford (Kiel: Wachholtz Verlag and Murmann Publishers), 255–274.

Harriss-White, B. (2023). Petty commodity production. *J. Peasant Stud.* 50, 295–314. doi: 10.1080/03066150.2022.2/3854

Hay, D. (2000). "Moral economy, political economy and the law" in Moral economy and popular protests: crowds, conflict, and authority. eds. A. Randall and A. Charlesworth (New York: Palgrave), 93–122.

Healey, J. (2019). "Coping with risk in the seventeenth century: the first age of the English old poor law" in Public goods provision in the Early Modern economy: comparison and perspectives. eds. M. Tanimoto and R. Bin Wong (Berkely: The University of California Press), 110–117.

Hilton, R. (2003). Class conflict and the crisis of feudalism: essays in Medieval social history. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Hindle, S. (2000). The state and social change in Early Modern England, c. 1550–1640. New York: Palgrave.

Ho, P.-T. (1956). Early ripening rice in Chinese history. *Econ. History Rev.* 2, 200–218.

Horvath, C., and White, R. S. (Eds.) (2024). Breaking the dead silence: engaging with the legacies of empire and slave ownership in Bath and Bristol's memoryscapes. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Hui, V. T.-B. (2005). War and state formation in ancient China and Early Modern Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Huntington, S. (1996). The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Inikori, J. E. (2020). Atlantic slavery and the rise of the capitalist global economy. *Curr. Anthropol.* 61, S159–S171. doi: 10.1086/709818

Kelly, D. (2016). “Popular sovereignty as state theory in the nineteenth century” in Popular sovereignty in historical perspective. eds. R. Bourke and Q. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 270–296.

Lee, R. (1969). "!Kung bushman subsistence: an input-output analysis" in Environment and cultural behavior, ed. A. Vayda. Garden City, NY: Natural History Press.

Leeson, R., and Palm, C. G. (Eds.) (2017). Milton Friedman on freedom: selections from the collected works of Milton Friedman. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

Levi, M. (1988). Of rule and revenue. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Liverani, M. (2016). “Conservative versus innovative culture areas in the near east ca. 800-400 BC” in Eurasia at the dawn of history: urbanization and social change. eds. M. Fernández-Götz and D. Krausse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 198–210.

Loewe, M. (2005). Everyday life in early Imperial China. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Loewe, M. (2006). The government of the Qin and Han empires, 221 BCE-220 CE. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Loewe, M. (2016). Problems of Han administration: ancestral rites, weights and measures, and the means of protest. Boston, MA: Brill.

Ma, L. J. C. (1971). Commercial development and urban change in Sung China (960–1279). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Department of Geography.

Marx, K. (1977). Capital. New York: Vintage Books.

Mintz, S. W. (2011). Plantations and the rise of the world food economy. *Fernand Braudel Center Study Econ. Histor. Syst. Civil.* 34, 3–14.

Moreno, A. (2007). Feeding the democracy: the Athenian grain supply in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

North, D. C. (1981). Structure and change in economic history. New York: W. W. Norton.

North, D. C., Wallis, J. J., and Weingast, B. R. (2009). Violence and social orders: a conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ober, J. (2010). Wealthy Helas. *Trans. Am. Philol. Assoc.* 140, 241–286.

Olsen, M. (1965). The logic of collective action: public groups and the theory of goods. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ostrom, E. (1986). An agenda for the study of institutions. *Public Choice* 48, 2–25.

Ostrom, E. (1990). Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pearson, H. (2000). *Homo economicus* goes native, 1859-1945: the rise and fall of primitive economics. *Hist. Polit. Econ.* 32, 933–989. doi: 10.1215/00182702-32-4-933

Piketty, T. (2014). Capital in the twenty-first century. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University.

Pines, Y. (2012). The everlasting empire: the political culture of ancient China and its imperial legacy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Polanyi, K. (1944). The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Poznanski, K. (2017). Confucian economics: how is Chinese thinking different? *Chinese Econ. J.* 10, 367–384.

Randall, A. (2007). Riotous assemblies: popular protest in Hanoverian England. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Randall, A., and Charlesworth, A. (Eds.) (2000). Moral economy and popular protests: crowds, conflict and authority. New York: Palgrave.

Redfield, J. M. (1986). “The development of the market in archaic Greece” in The market in history. eds. B. L. Anderson and A. J. H. Latham (London: Croom Helm), 29–58.

Richardson, H. C. (2020). How the south won the Cvil War: oligarchy, democracy, and the continuing fight for the soul of America. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rollison, D. (2010). A commonwealth of the people: popular politics and England's long social revolution, 1066–1649. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rudé, G. (1995). Ideology and popular protest. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Scanlan, P. X. (2020). Slaves and peasants in the age of emancipation. *J. Br. Stud.* 59, 495–520. doi: 10.1017/jbr.2020.39

Service, E. R. (1975). Origins of the state and civilization: the process of cultural evolution. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

Sewell, W. H. (2012). Economic crises and the shape of modern history. *Publ. Cult.* 24, 303–327. doi: 10.1215/08992363-1535516

Sharp, B. (2000). “The food riots of 1347 and the Medieval moral economy” in Moral economy and popular protests: crowds, conflict, and authority. eds. A. Randall and A. Charlesworth (New York: Palgrave), 33–54.

Sharp, B. (2016). Famine and scarcity in late Medieval and Early Modern England: The regulation of grain marketing, 1256–1631. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shiba, Y. (1975). “Urbanization and development of markets in the lower Yangtze Valley” in Crisis and prosperity in Sung China. ed. J. W. Haeger (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press), 3–48.

Siskind, J. (1973). To hunt in the morning. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, A. (1776). An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. Edinburgh: Privately printed for Andrew Stirling and others.

Smyth, W. J. (2012). “The longue duréeImperial Britain and colonial Ireland” in Atlas of the great Irish famine. eds. J. Crowley, W. J. Smyth and M. Murphy (New York: New York University Press), 46–63.

Stiglitz, J. (2016). “Inequality and economic growth” in Rethinking capitalism: economics and policy for sustainable and inclusive growth. eds. M. Jacobs and M. Mazzucato (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons), 148–169.

Taylor, C. (1989). Sources of the self: the making of modern identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thirsk, J. (2003). The rural economy of England: collected essays. London: Hambledon Press.

Thompson, E. P. (1971). The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. *Past Present* 50, 76–136.

Thurston, T. L., and Fernandéz-Götz, M. (Eds.) (2021). Power from below in premodern societies: the dynamics of political complexity in the archaeological record. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tilly, C. (1975). “Food supply and public order in modern Europe” in The formation of national states in Western Europe. ed. C. Tilly (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 380–455.

Tilly, C. (1985). “War making and state making as organized crime” in Bringing the state back. eds. P. B. Evans, D. Rueschmeyer and T. Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 169–191.

van der Vliet, E. (1987). “Tyranny and democracy: the evolution of politics in ancient Greece” in Early state dynamics. eds. J. M. H. Claessen and P. van de Velde (Leiden: E. J. Brill), 70–90.

Veyne, P. (1990). Bread and circuses: historical sociology and political pluralism, trans Brian Pearce. London: Penguin.

Waugh, S. L. (1991). England in the reign of Edward III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weissner, P. (1982). “Risk, reciprocity, and social influence on !Kung san economics” in Politics and history in band societies. eds. E. Leacock and R. Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 61–84.

Westgate, R. (2007). The Greek house and the ideology of citizenship. *World Archaeol.* 39, 229–245. doi: 10.1080/00438240701257671

Will, P.-É., and Bin Wong, R. (Eds.) (1991). Nourish the people: the state civilian granary system in China, 1650–1850. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies.

Wink, A. (1986). Land and sovereignty in India: agrarian society and politics in the eighteenth-century Maratha Svarajya. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wolf, E. (1999). Envisioning power: ideologies of dominance and crisis. Berkeley: The University of California Press.

Wong, R. B. (1991). “Chinese traditions of grain storage” in Nourish the people: the state civilian granary system in China, 1650–1850. eds. P.-É. Will and R. Bin Wong (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies), 1–16.

Wong, R. B. (2019). “Coping with poverty and famine: material welfare, public goods, and Chinese approaches to governance” in Public goods provision in the Early Modern economy: comparative perspectives from Japan, China, and Europe. eds. M. Tanimoto and R. Bin Wong (Berkeley: University of California Press), 130–144.

Yang, A. (1998). Bazaar India: Markets, society, and the colonial state in Bihar. Berkely: The University of California Press.

Zuchtriegel, G. (2018). Colonization and subalternity in Classical Greece: experience of the nonelite population. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.