God, Duty and Community in English Economic Life, 1660-1720

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For the majority of ordinary people in early modern England, the moral and the economic were closely aligned. Alongside material changes and a growing market ideology, traditional ideas about religion, duty, and community continued to influence economic relationships and practices well into the 18th century. This is the subject of Brodie Waddell’s new book, which sets out to explore the economic culture of later Stuart England. Focusing on concepts such as divine will, social duty, and communal ties, Waddell shows how these all have an underlying logic in common, combining to form a world view based on notions of reciprocity, hierarchy, mutuality, and order. His central contention is that these cultural ideas and moral codes did not decline in importance over the 17th century, as some historical narratives have suggested, but rather continued to shape and define the social and economic lives of ordinary people in later Stuart England.

This in itself is not a new argument, and Waddell acknowledges that there are important existing studies of economic culture in early modern England. However, he suggests that previous scholarship has neglected several essential areas, and his book sets out to remedy these gaps. First, he claims that previous historians have not fully (or explicitly) challenged teleological narratives about the shift from a moral to a market economy; and, within this, that they have not challenged some of the dichotomies that these narratives imply. He argues that we need a more nuanced understanding of the richness of early modern economic culture, and to recognise that this was based on diversity of ideas and practices, where multiple ideas and concepts could exist at the same time. Second, Waddell claims that historians have either neglected the later Stuart period, or have subsumed it within broader studies of the early modern period as a whole. He wants to reclaim the importance of later Stuart economic culture, and to explore the defining features of the era. This links to his first aim, of challenging those existing narratives that view the later Stuart period as a point of transition from a moral to a market economy; his book aims to show that, on the contrary, religious, patriarchal, and communal ideas did not decline in this period, but rather continued to have a significant impact on everyday economic beliefs and behaviours.

Waddell’s third key aim is to focus on the economic lives and agency of the ‘humble majority’ – he suggests that in previous studies these folk have either been ignored altogether, or reduced to a rioting crowd. He sets out to rehabilitate the behaviour and beliefs of ordinary people, and to show how they understood and engaged with their position within a wider economic culture. Each section of the book therefore includes a
discussion of practices that were available to ordinary working folk, who were able to use their position in a wider cultural framework in order to seek aid or redress. Overall, therefore, Waddell’s book aims to illustrate the diversity, plurality, and importance of economic culture for the lives and relations of ordinary people in the later Stuart period. To do this, Waddell draws on a wide range of sources. The majority of these may be described as ‘cheap print’ – sermons, ballads, pamphlets, broadsides – but he also includes examples from archival sources such as court records, guild and company records, and parish registers. The aim in using these different sources is to try to recover a sense of economic and social praxis, rather than just looking at theoretical or prescriptive texts. Each section of the book therefore begins with a survey of ideas and concepts as set out in cheap print and literature, before moving on to a discussion of how these ideas and concepts influenced economic action in practice.

The book is divided into three sections, broadly corresponding to the themes of ‘God’, ‘duty’, and ‘community’. The first section, ‘God’s will’, explores the concepts of divine stewardship, mammonism, heaven and hell, and providence, and finishes with a discussion of prayers and curses. Waddell’s main argument here is that religious ideas did not decline in importance over the later Stuart period, and nor were they merely a super-structural addition to material life; instead, he suggests that religion continued to have a significant impact on economic discourse and behaviour. Given the subject matter, most of the sources in this section are sermons, with some other printed media included as evidence of how religious ideas were articulated and represented as part of a wider cultural discourse.

The section on religion is primarily on prescriptive rather than descriptive texts. As Waddell acknowledges, although it is clear that religious ideas were widely circulated in the later Stuart era, it is hard to get at exactly how these ideas actually influenced economic behaviour in practice, especially for the ordinary folk who are at the centre of his study. The final subsection makes the argument that poor people derived some form of economic agency through their perceived ability to say prayers for their benefactors, or utter curses against their oppressors: Waddell suggests that this power could be used as a kind of bargaining tool, a method of ensuring that the richer sort upheld their role as godly stewards and guardians of the poor. But although this makes sense as an idea, there is not much evidence for how effective it was (or how widely it was employed) in practice; as a whole, this first section feels rather weighted towards ideas and theory, with little analysis of actual economic behaviour.

The second section, ‘Oeconomical duties: patriarchy, paternalism, and petitioning’, explores the importance of the household – or oikos – in early modern economic life. Waddell argues that the household was an important model in theory and in practice: it was a primary economic unit in the 17th century, and functioned as a site of learning and production, and it also served as a metaphor for wider social relationships, political hierarchies, and religious beliefs. As such, the household stood at the centre of economic life, as ‘a microcosm thought to exemplify the essence of the macrocosmic order’ (p. 86). Once again, Waddell’s aim is to challenge existing narratives that ‘traditional’ familial and patriarchal values declined over the early modern period, to be replaced by the market and the emergence of modern capitalism. He argues that mutuality, interdependence, duty, and social hierarchy continued to influence economic thinking and practice in the later Stuart period – and, further, that some economic concepts that have been labelled as ‘modern’, such as the valorisation of work, in fact emerged from an earlier, distinctly ‘oeconomical’, model of society.

However, this household model represented an ideal and, as Waddell admits, ‘the well-ordered world described by moralists did not ... exist in practice’ (p. 126). The final part of this section therefore looks at how people acted to achieve redress when this system of reciprocity and mutual obligation failed. Since the familial model assumed that injustices could only be redressed by the ‘head’ of the relevant social unit, aggrieved inferiors used petitions to ask superiors to intervene on their behalf. This appeal to a higher power has obvious parallels with the previous section, in which Waddell described the ‘prayers and curses’ of the poor as a form of economic agency; once again, the agency of the inferior sort is seen to derive from their position within a wider cultural schema and their ability to seek aid or justice from more powerful figures.
The third section deals with ‘Communal bonds: solidarity, alterity, and collective action’. Waddell’s central contention here is that belonging to a community – whether national, local, political, occupational, or religious – was a vital part of ‘making shift’ in later Stuart England (p. 149). He argues against a linear model of the decline of community during this period (often characterised as a shift from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft), and instead sets out to show that communal forms and identities continued to shape the economic lives and relationships of ordinary people after 1660. The section looks at different forms of communal associations, ranging from kinship ties and neighbourliness to national, religious, and occupational identities, and highlights the key concepts and features that defined them. Throughout the discussion, there is a particular focus on strategies of inclusion and exclusion, as Waddell argues that communal bonds were defined by alterity: dichotomies were set up between citizens and foreigners, locals and strangers, and notions of internal mutuality were set against hostility to outsiders. The final section, on collective action, shows how belonging to a community enabled ordinary people to protest, campaign, and achieve redress through group mobilisation, echoing Waddell’s previous arguments that people derived economic agency through their place within a broader cultural and social framework.

Having argued against narratives that posit a linear decline of Gemeinschaft over the later Stuart period, Waddell suggests that the problem remains of how to account for change over time. Although some forms of communal organization continued in importance over this period, still others declined, with new forms of association appearing alongside (and sometimes in place of) older institutions and practices. Given this, Waddell argues that since many forms of communal association experienced a revival in the late 17th century before eventually declining into the 18th, their trajectory may best be described as following a bell curve, rather than a linear decline. It is not clear how different this really is from Keith Wrightson’s assertion, paraphrased by Waddell, that the early modern period saw ‘a shift in the balance between differing types of social identities’, with an erosion of broad and inclusive forms of mutuality, and a tightening of narrower bonds of class or religious identity (p. 223). Waddell’s discussion of the rise of new occupational associations would certainly fit this model, although ultimately he rejects it because it fails to account for the nuances of the later Stuart period. More convincingly, Waddell’s discussion does successfully show that although some forms of association may have changed in the early years of the 18th century, with older companies declining in importance and new ones appearing, the ideals of communal fellowship underlying their existence endured; thus the basic cultural concepts of communal belonging remained strong in theory, even if their manifestations changed in practice.

Waddell concludes the book with a reiteration of his argument against teleological narratives and dichotomies, and suggests an alternative approach based on a recognition of the plurality and diversity of early modern economic discourses and practices. This is an important point, and is amply backed up by the evidence presented throughout the book. However, it is unclear exactly how new Waddell’s argument or approach is. Early modernists have challenged linear models of economic and social development for some time now, and the work of Craig Muldrew, Keith Wrightson, and Phil Withington, among others, has shown the importance – and resilience – of moral and cultural factors in early modern economic life. Waddell acknowledges these studies in his introduction, and claims that his main contribution to the field is to highlight ‘the specific circumstances’ and ‘unique attributes’ of the later Stuart period. However, despite this promise, little room is given in the text to identifying the distinctive political, social, economic, or legal milieu of post-1660 England, with the result that the majority of the concepts and practices that Waddell describes could arguably be applied to the early modern period more broadly. It would have been interesting (and instructive) to read more about how these concepts – many of them inherited from previous centuries – took on a new shape or significance in the immediate context of the later 17th and early 18th centuries.

The book would therefore have benefited from a closer analysis of some of the new forms of economic activity that arose during the later Stuart period. In the third section, for instance, Waddell cites numerous examples of strikes, protests, and communal actions that took place across England between 1660 and 1720; however, these are not placed in relation to their political or social context, and are instead treated only as manifestations of a more general sense of collective identity and agency. Because of this, much of their force
and wider significance is lost. Although Waddell notes that the naval yard strikes of 1665 to 1671 were probably linked to the ‘Dutch Wars’, for example, this connection is not examined any further, and no references or suggestions for related reading are given in the footnotes (p. 207). The same could be said of the appearance of wool workers’ clubs, calico protests, resistance to hearth tax, the destruction of tobacco crops, and fen-dwellers’ resistance to ‘foreign encroachment’ on their lands; although these examples all support Waddell’s central thesis that there was continuity and even a strengthening of communal ties and associations in the later Stuart period, the reader is left wondering what wider discourses these agitators and protestors were engaging with when they made their demands. Admittedly, Waddell does not claim to be making a detailed case study of any particular topic; but the presence of these and other examples, passed over fairly cursorily in the text, would merit a deeper analysis than is given here. And without an analysis of how the later Stuart period was unique, it is difficult to see how Waddell adds anything new to an already substantial historiographical field.

This said, however, Waddell’s book will provide a stimulating and thoughtful introduction to early modern economic culture for a reader unfamiliar with the existing scholarship. He succeeds in his aim of demonstrating that the later Stuart era had a rich and important moral economy: and he convincingly shows that religious, patriarchal, and communal concepts did not decline or disappear in this period, but rather continued to shape and influence the economic lives and relationships of ordinary people into the 18th century. Rather than attempting to replace one grand narrative with another, Waddell judiciously concludes that later Stuart England contained a plurality of different economic cultures: some concepts and practices continued largely unaltered from earlier decades, some gained in significance and popularity, others lost importance or died out, and some new forms appeared. He shows that the later Stuart period did not witness an inevitable shift from a moral to a market economy; and he also makes an important case for focusing on the economic lives of ordinary people rather than just on those of an elite minority. By eloquently challenging older assumptions, and arguing for a more nuanced approach, Waddell’s book stands as a useful introduction to the vibrancy of economic life in early modern England.

The author thanks the reviewer for her detailed assessment and thoughtful critiques of the book, and does not wish to comment further.

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