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The Labor Problem at Jamestown, 1607–18

EDMUND S. MORGAN

THE STORY OF JAMESTOWN, the first permanent English settlement in America, has a familiar place in the history of the United States. We all know of the tribulations that kept the colony on the point of expiring: the shortage of supplies, the hostility of the Indians, the quarrels among the leaders, the reckless search for gold, the pathetic search for a passage to the Pacific, and the neglect of the crucial business of growing food to stay alive. Through the scene moves the figure of Captain John Smith, a little larger than life, trading for corn among the Indians and driving the feckless crew to work. His departure in October 1609 results in near disaster. The settlers fritter away their time and energy, squander their provisions, and starve. Sir Thomas Gates, arriving after the settlement's third winter, finds only sixty men out of six hundred still alive and those sixty scarcely able to walk.

In the summer of 1610 Gates and Lord La Warr get things moving again with a new supply of men and provisions, a new absolute form of government, and a new set of laws designed to keep everybody at work. But when Gates and La Warr leave for a time, the settlers fall to their old ways. Sir Thomas Dale, upon his arrival in May 1611, finds them at "their daily and usuall workes, bowling in the streetes."¹ But Dale brings order out of chaos. By enlarging and enforcing the colony's new law code (the famous *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall*) he starts the settlers working again and rescues them from starvation by making them plant corn. By 1618 the colony is getting on its feet and ready to carry on without the stern regimen of a Smith or a Dale. There are still evil days ahead, as the Virginia Company sends over men more rapidly than the infant colony can absorb them. But the settlers, having found in tobacco a valuable crop for export, have at last gone to work with a will, and Virginia's future is assured.

The story probably fits the facts insofar as they can be known. But it does

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¹ Ralph Hamor, *A True Discourse of the Present State of Virginia* (London, 1615; Richmond, 1957), 26.

not quite explain them. The colony's long period of starvation and failure may well be attributed to the idleness of the first settlers, but idleness is more an accusation than an explanation. Why did men spend their time bowling in the streets when their lives depended on work? Were they lunatics, preferring to play games rather than clear and plow and plant the crops that could have kept them alive?

The mystery only deepens if we look more closely at the efforts of Smith, Gates, La Warr, and Dale to set things right. In 1612 John Smith described his work program of 1608: "the company [being] divided into tennes, fiftenees, or as the businesse required, 4 hours each day was spent in worke, the rest in pastimes and merry exercise." Twelve years later Smith rewrote this passage and changed the figure of four hours to six hours.² But even so, what are we to make of a six-hour day in a colony teetering on the verge of extinction?

The program of Gates and La Warr in the summer of 1610 was no more strenuous. William Strachey described it:

it is to be understood that such as labor are not yet so taxed but that easily they perform the same and ever by ten of the clock have done their morning's work: at what time they have their allowances [of food] set out ready for them, and until it be three of the clock again they take their own pleasure, and afterward, with the sunset, their day's labor is finished.³

The Virginia Company offered much the same account of this period. According to a tract issued late in 1610, "the settled times of working (to effect all themselves, or the Adventurers neede desire) [requires] no more pains than from sixe of clocke in the morning untill ten, and from two of the clocke in the afternoone till foure."⁴ The long lunch period described for 1610 was also a feature of the *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall* as enforced by Dale. The total working hours prescribed in the *Lawes* amounted to roughly five to eight hours a day in summer and three to six hours in winter.⁵

It is difficult, then, to escape the conclusion that there was a great deal of unemployment or underemployment at Jamestown, whether it was the idleness of the undisciplined in the absence of strong government or the idleness of the disciplined in the presence of strong government. How are

² John Smith, *Travels and Works*, ed. Edward Arber and A. G. Bradley (Edinburgh, 1910), 1: 149; 2: 466.

³ L. B. Wright, ed., *A Voyage to Virginia in 1609* (Charlottesville, 1964), 69–70.

⁴ *A True Declaration of the Estate of the Colonie in Virginia* (London, 1610), reprinted in Peter Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers* (Washington, 1844), 3, no. 1: 20; Smith, *Travels and Works*, 2: 502. Captain Daniel Tucker maintained a similar program in Bermuda in 1616: "according to the Virginia order, hee set every one [that] was with him at Saint Georges, to his taske, to cleere grounds, fell trees, set corne, square timber, plant vines and other fruits brought out of England. These by their taske—Masters by breake a day repaired to the wharfe, from thence to be employed to the place of their employment, till nine of the clocke, and then in the after-noone from three till Sunneset." *Ibid.*, 653.

⁵ *For the Colony in Virginia Britannia: Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall* (London, 1612), 61–62.

we to account for this fact? By our standards the situation at Jamestown demanded hard and continuous work. Why was the response so feeble?

One answer, given by the leaders of the colony, is that the settlers included too many ne'er-do-wells and too many gentlemen who "never did know what a dayes work was."⁶ Hard work had to wait until harder men were sent. Another answer may be that the Jamestown settlers were debilitated by hunger and disease. The victims of scurvy, malaria, typhoid, and diphtheria may have been left without the will or the energy to work. Still another answer, which has echoed through the pages of our history books, attributed the difficulty to the fact that the settlement was conducted on a communal basis: everybody worked for the Virginia Company and everybody was fed (while supplies lasted) by the company, regardless of how much he worked or failed to work. Once land was distributed to individuals and men were allowed to work for themselves, they gained the familiar incentives of private enterprise and bent their shoulders to the wheel.⁷ These explanations are surely all valid—they are all supported by the testimony of contemporaries—and they go far toward explaining the lazy pioneers of Jamestown. But they do not reach to a dimension of the problem that contemporaries would have overlooked because they would have taken it for granted. They do not tell us what ideas and attitudes about work, carried from England, would have led the first English settlers to expect so little of themselves in a situation that demanded so much. The Jamestown settlers did not leave us the kind of private papers that would enable us to examine directly their ideas and attitudes, as we can those of the Puritans who settled New England a few years later. But in the absence of direct evidence we may discover among the ideas current in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England some clues to the probable state of mind of the first Virginians, clues to the way they felt about work, whether in the Old World or the New, clues to habits of thinking that may have conditioned their perceptions of what confronted them at Jamestown, clues even to the tangled web of motives that made later Virginians masters of slaves.

ENGLISHMEN'S IDEAS about the New World at the opening of the seventeenth century were based on a century of European exploration and settlement. The Spanish, whose exploits surpassed all others, had not attempted to keep their success a secret, and by the middle of the sixteenth century Englishmen interested in America had begun translating Spanish histories

⁶ Smith, *Travels and Works*, 2: 487.

⁷ A much more sophisticated version of this explanation is suggested by Professor Sigmund Diamond in his discussion of the development of social relationships in Virginia, "From Organization to Society: Virginia in the Seventeenth Century," *American Journal of Sociology*, 63 (1958): 457-75; see also his "Values as an Obstacle to Economic Growth: The American Colonies," *Journal of Economic History*, 27 (1967): 561-75.

and memoirs in an effort to rouse their countrymen to emulation.⁸ The land that emerged from these writings was, except in the Arctic regions, an Eden, teeming with gentle and generous people who, before the Spanish conquest, had lived without labor, or with very little, from the fruits of a bountiful nature.⁹ There were admittedly some unfriendly exceptions who made a habit of eating their more attractive neighbors; but they were a minority, confined to a few localities, and in spite of their ferocity were scarcely a match for Europeans armed with guns.¹⁰ Englishmen who visited the New World confirmed the reports of natural abundance. Arthur Barlowe, for example, reconnoitering the North Carolina coast for Walter Raleigh, observed that "the earth bringeth foorth all things in abundance, as in the first creation, without toile or labour," while the people were "most gentle, loving, and faithfull, void of all guile, and treason, and such as lived after the manner of the golden age. . . ."¹¹

English and European readers may have discounted the more extravagant reports of American abundance, for the same authors who praised the land often gave contradictory accounts of the hardships they had suffered in it. But anyone who doubted that riches were waiting to be plucked from Virginia's trees had reason to expect that a good deal might be plucked from the people of the land. Spanish experience had shown that Europeans could thrive in the New World without undue effort by exploiting the natives. With a mere handful of men the Spanish had conquered an enormous population of Indians in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Peru and had put them to work. In the chronicles of Peter Martyr Englishmen learned how it was done. Apart from the fact that the Indians were naturally gentle, their division into a multitude of kingdoms, frequently at odds with one another, made it easy to play off one against another. By aiding one group against its enemies the Spaniards had made themselves masters of both.¹²

The story of English plans to imitate and improve on the Spanish strategy is a long one.¹³ It begins at least as early as Francis Drake's foray in Panama in 1572-73, when he allied with a band of runaway slaves to rob a Spanish mule train carrying treasure from Peru across the isthmus to Nombre de

⁸ See especially the translation of Peter Martyr, in Richard Eden, *The Decades of the new worlde or west India* (London, 1555); a useful bibliographical history is John Parker, *Books to Build an Empire* (Amsterdam, 1966).

⁹ Gustav H. Blanke, *Amerika im Englischen Schrifttum Des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* Beitrage Zur Englischen Philologie, 46 (Bochum-Langendreer, 1962), 98-104.

¹⁰ Since Peter Martyr, the principal Spanish chronicler, identified most Indians who resisted the Spaniards as cannibals, this became the familiar sixteenth-century epithet for unfriendly Indians. It is doubtful that many tribes actually practiced cannibalism, though some certainly did.

¹¹ D. B. Quinn, ed., *The Roanoke Voyages 1584-1590*, Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, 2d ser., 104, 105 (London, 1955), 1: 108.

¹² Eden, *Decades*, *passim*. For English awareness of the Spanish example, see Smith, *Travels and Works*, 2: 578-81, 600-03, 955-56, and Susan M. Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, 1906-35), 3: 558, 560-62.

¹³ I have dealt with this subject in a work still in progress.

Dios on the Caribbean.¹⁴ The idea of joining with dissident natives or slaves either against their Spanish masters or against their wicked cannibalistic neighbors became an important ingredient in English plans for colonizing the New World. Martin Frobisher's experiences with the Eskimos in Baffin Land and Ralph Lane's with the Indians at Roanoke¹⁵ should perhaps have disabused the English of their expectations; but they found it difficult to believe that any group of natives, and especially the noble savages of North America, would fail to welcome what they called with honest pride (and some myopia) the "gentle government" of the English.¹⁶ If the savages first encountered by a colonizing expedition proved unfriendly, the thing to do was to make contact with their milder neighbors and rescue them from the tyranny of the unfriendly tribe, who must be their enemies and were probably cannibals to boot.¹⁷

The settlers at Jamestown tried to follow the strategy, locating their settlement as the plan called for, near the mouth of a navigable river, so that they would have access to the interior tribes if the coastal ones were hostile. But as luck would have it, they picked an area with a more powerful, more extensive, and more effective Indian government than existed anywhere else on the Atlantic Coast. King Powhatan had his enemies, the Monacans of the interior, but he felt no great need of English assistance against them, and he rightly suspected that the English constituted a larger threat to his hegemony than the Monacans did. He submitted with ill grace and no evident comprehension to the coronation ceremony that the Virginia Company arranged for him, and he kept his distance from Jamestown. Those of his warriors who visited the settlement showed no disposition to work for the English. The Monacans, on the other hand, lived too far inland (beyond the falls) to serve as substitute allies, and the English were thus deprived of their anticipated native labor.¹⁸

They did not, however, give up their expectations of getting it eventually. In 1615 Ralph Hamor still thought the Indians would come around "as they are easily taught and may by lenitie and faire usage . . . be brought,

¹⁴ Irene A. Wright, ed., *Documents concerning English Voyages to the Spanish Main 1569-1580*, Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, 2d ser., 71 (London, 1932), gives the original sources, both English and Spanish.

¹⁵ Richard Collinson, ed., *The Three Voyages of Martin Frobisher*, Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, 1st ser., 38 (London, 1867), 131, 141-42, 145-50, 269, 271, 280-89; Quinn, *Roanoke Voyages*, 1: 275-88.

¹⁶ The phrase "gentle government" is the younger Hakluyt's, in a proposal to make use of Drake's Negro allies from Panama for a colony at the Straits of Magellan. E. G. R. Taylor, ed., *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the two Richard Hakluyts*, Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, 2d ser., 76, 77 (London, 1935), 1: 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 121, 2: 241-42, 246-49, 257-65, 275, 318, 342.

¹⁸ The secondary literature on the Indians of Virginia is voluminous, but see especially Nancy O. Lurie, "Indian Cultural Adjustment to European Civilization," in J. M. Smith, ed., *Seventeenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1959), 33-60. The most helpful original sources, on which most of our information is necessarily based, are Smith, *Travels and Works*, and William Strachey, *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* (composed 1612), ed. L. B. Wright and V. Freund, Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, 2d ser., 103 (London, 1953), 53-116.

being naturally though ingenious, yet idly given, to be no lesse industrious, nay to exceede our English."¹⁹ Even after the massacre of 1622 Virginians continued to dream of an Indian labor supply, though there was no longer to be any gentleness in obtaining it. Captain John Martin thought it better to exploit than exterminate the Indians, if only because they could be made to work in the heat of the day, when Englishmen would not. And William Claiborne in 1626 invented a device (whether mechanical or political is not clear) that he claimed would make it possible to keep Indians safely in the settlements and put them to work. The governor and council gave him what looks like the first American patent or copyright, namely a three-year monopoly, to "have holde and enjoy all the benefitt use and profit of this his project or invention," and they also assigned him a recently captured Indian, "for his better experience and tryall of his invention."²⁰

English expectations of the New World and its inhabitants died hard. America was supposed to be a land of abundance, peopled by natives who would not only share that abundance with the English but increase it under English direction. Englishmen simply did not envisage a need to work for the mere purpose of staying alive. The problem of survival as they saw it was at best political and at worst military.

ALTHOUGH ENGLISHMEN long remained under the illusion that the Indians would eventually become useful English subjects, it became apparent fairly early that Indian labor was not going to sustain the founders of Jamestown. The company in England was convinced by 1609 that the settlers would have to grow at least part of their own food.²¹ Yet the settlers themselves had to be driven to that life-saving task. To understand their ineffectiveness in coping with a situation that their pioneering descendants would take in stride, it may be helpful next to inquire into some of the attitudes toward work that these first English pioneers took for granted. How much work and what kind of work did Englishmen at the opening of the seventeenth century consider normal?

The laboring population of England, by law at least, was required to work much harder than the regimen at Jamestown might lead us to expect. The famous Statute of Artificers of 1563 (re-enacting similar provisions from the Statute of Laborers of 1495) required all laborers to work from five in the morning to seven or eight at night from mid-March to mid-September, and during the remaining months of the year from day-break to night. Time out for eating, drinking, and rest was not to exceed

¹⁹ *True Discourse*, 2. See also Strachey, *Historie of Travell*, 91-94; Alexander Whitaker, *Good Newes from Virginia* (London, 1613), 40.

²⁰ Susan M. Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, 1906-35), 3: 705-06; H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia* (Richmond, 1924), 111.

²¹ *Records of the Virginia Company*, 3: 17, 27.



Hard at work in old England. Woodcut from *Robert, the Devil*. Printed by W. de Worde [1502?] (STC 21070, 21071). Photograph: Edward Hodnett, *English Woodcuts, 1480-1535* (London, 1935).

two and a half hours a day.²² But these were injunctions not descriptions. The Statute of Laborers of 1495 is preceded by the complaint that laborers "waste much part of the day . . . in late coming unto their work, early departing therefrom, long sitting at their breakfast, at their dinner and noon-meat, and long time of sleeping after noon."²³ Whether this statute or that of 1563 (still in effect when Jamestown was founded) corrected the situation is doubtful.²⁴ The records of local courts show varying efforts to enforce other provisions of the statute of 1563, but they are almost wholly silent about this provision,²⁵ in spite of the often-expressed despair of masters over their lazy and negligent laborers.²⁶

²² R. H. Tawney and Eileen Power, eds., *Tudor Economic Documents* (London, 1924), 1: 342. For some seventeenth-century prescriptions of long working hours, see Gervase Markham, *A Way to get Wealth* (13th ed.; London, 1676), 115-17; Henry Best, *Rural Economy in Yorkshire in 1641*, Surtees Society, *Publications*, 33 (Durham, 1857), 44. See also L. F. Salzman, *Building in England down to 1540* (Oxford, 1952), 61-65.

²³ 11 Henry 7, cap. 22, sec. 4; Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones, *The Medieval Mason* (Manchester, 1933), 117.

²⁴ Tawney and Power, *Tudor Economic Documents*, 1: 352-63.

²⁵ A minor exception is in J. H. E. Bennett and J. C. Dewhurst, eds., *Quarter Sessions Records . . . for the County Palatine of Chester, 1559-1760*, Publications of the Record Society for the Publication of Original Documents relating to Lancashire and Cheshire, 94 (Chester, 1940), 95-96, where a master alleged that his apprentice, John Dodd, "hath negligently behaved him selfe in his service in idlinge and sleepinge in severall places where he hath been comanded to work." But sleeping (from eight in the morning till two in the afternoon and beyond) was only one of Dodd's offenses. On the enforcement of other provisions in the statute, see Margaret G. Davies, *The Enforcement of English Apprenticeship . . . 1563-1642* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956); R. K. Kelsall, *Wage Regulation under the Statute of Artificers* (London, 1938); and R. H. Tawney, "The Assessment of Wages in England by Justices of the Peace," *Vierteljahrshrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 11 (1913): 307-37, 533-64.

²⁶ E. S. Furniss, *The Position of the Laborer in a System of Nationalism* (Boston, 1920), 117-

It may be said that complaints of the laziness and irresponsibility of workmen can be met with in any century. Were such complaints in fact justified in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England? There is some reason to believe that they were, that life during those years was characterized by a large amount of idleness or underemployment.²⁷ The outstanding economic fact of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century in England was a rapid and more or less steady rise in prices, followed at some distance by a much smaller rise in wages, both in industry and in agriculture. The price of provisions used by a laborer's family rose faster than wages during the whole period from 1500 to 1640.²⁸ The government made an effort to narrow the gap by requiring the justices in each county to readjust maximum wages at regular intervals. But the wages established by the justices reflected their own nostalgic notions of what a day's work ought to be worth in money, rather than a realistic estimate of what a man could buy with his wages. In those counties, at least, where records survive, the level of wages set by the justices crept upward very slowly before 1630.²⁹

Wages were so inadequate that productivity was probably impaired by malnutrition. From a quarter to a half of the population lived below the level recognized at the time to constitute poverty. Few of the poor could count on regular meals at home, and in years when the wheat crop failed, they were close to starvation.³⁰ It is not surprising that men living under these conditions showed no great energy for work and that much of the population was, by modern standards, idle much of the time. The health manuals of the day recognized that people normally slept after eating, and the laws even prescribed a siesta for laborers in the summer time.³¹ If they slept longer and more often than the laws allowed or the physicians recommended, if they loafed on the job and took unauthorized holidays, if they worked slowly and ineffectively when they did work, it may have

34; E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, no. 38 (1967): 56-97.

²⁷ D. C. Coleman, "Labour in the English Economy of the Sixteenth Century," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 8 (1956), reprinted in E. M. Carus Wilson, ed., *Essays in Economic History* (London, 1954-62), 2: 291-308.

²⁸ E. H. Phelps Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins, "Seven Centuries of Building Wages," *Economica*, 2d ser., 22 (1955): 95-206; "Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables, compared with Builders' Wage-Rates," *ibid.*, 2d ser., 23 (1956): 296-314; "Wage Rates and Prices: Evidence for Population Pressure in the Sixteenth Century," *ibid.*, 2d ser., 24 (1957): 289-306; H. P. R. Finberg, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 4, 1500-1640, ed. Joan Thirsk (Cambridge, 1967), 435-57, 531, 583-695.

²⁹ Tawney, "Assessment of Wages," 555-64; Kelsall, *Wage Regulation*, 67-86. Tawney and Kelsall both argue that the enforcement of maximum wages according to the statute of 1563 demonstrates a shortage of labor; but except in a few isolated instances (there may well have been local temporary shortages) the evidence comes from the period after the middle of the seventeenth century.

³⁰ Coleman, "Labour in the English Economy," 295; Peter Laslett adduces figures to show that actual starvation was probably rare among English peasants (*The World We Have Lost* [London, 1965], 107-27), but there can be little doubt that they were frequently close to it and chronically undernourished. See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen* (New York, 1968), 91-98.

³¹ Thomas Elyot, *The Castel of Helthe* (London, 1541), fols. 45-46; Thomas Cogan, *The*

been due at least in part to undernourishment and to the variety of chronic diseases that undernourishment brings in its train.³²

Thus low wages may have begot low productivity that in turn justified low wages.³³ The reaction of employers was to blame the trouble on deficiencies, not of diet or wages, but of character. A prosperous yeoman like Robert Loder, who kept close track of his expenses and profits, was always bemoaning the indolence of his servants. Men who had large amounts of land that they could either rent out or work with hired labor generally preferred to rent because labor was so inefficient and irresponsible.³⁴

Even the division of labor, which economists have customarily regarded as a means of increased productivity, could be a source of idleness. Plowing, for example, seems to have been a special skill—a plowman was paid at a higher rate than ordinary farm workers. But the ordinary laborer's work might have to be synchronized with the plowman's, and a whole crew of men might be kept idle by a plowman's failure to get his job done at the appropriate time. It is difficult to say whether this type of idleness, resulting from failure to synchronize the performance of related tasks, was rising or declining; but cheap, inefficient, irresponsible labor would be unlikely to generate pressures for the careful planning of time.

The government, while seeking to discourage idleness through laws requiring long hours of work, also passed laws that inadvertently discouraged industry. A policy that might be characterized as the conservation of employment frustrated those who wanted to do more work than others. English economic policy seems to have rested on the assumption that the total amount of work for which society could pay was strictly limited and must be rationed so that everyone could have a little,³⁵ and those with family responsibilities could have a little more. It was against the law for a man to practice more than one trade or one craft.³⁶ And although large numbers of farmers took up some handicraft on the side, this was to be discouraged, because "for one man to be both an husbandman and an Artificer is a gatheringe of divers mens livinges into one mans hand."³⁷ So as not to take

Haven of Health (London, 1589), 231-39; *The Englishmans Doctor, or The School of Salerne* (orig. pub. London, 1608) (New York, 1920), 77.

³² E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism."

³³ On the prevalence of such a vicious circle in pre-industrial countries, see W. F. Moore, *Industrialization and Labor* (Ithaca, 1951), 106-13, 308. But see also E. J. Berg, "Backward-Sloping Labor Supply Functions in Dual Economies—The Africa Case," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 75 (1961): 468-92. For a comparison of Tudor and Stuart England with modern underdeveloped countries, see F. J. Fisher, "The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: The Dark Ages in English Economic History," *Economica*, 2d ser., 24 (1957): 2-18.

³⁴ G. E. Fussell, ed., *Robert Loder's Farm Accounts 1610-1620*, Camden Society, 3d ser., 53 (London, 1936); Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (New York, 1965), 295-97; Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, 198.

³⁵ Compare Bert F. Hoselitz, *Sociological Aspects of Economic Growth* (Glencoe, 1960), 33-34.

³⁶ 37 Edward 3, c.6. *A Collection in English of the Statutes now in Force* (London, 1594), fols. 22-23; Calendar of Essex Quarter Session Rolls (microfilm in the University of Wisconsin Library), 4: 228; 17: 124.

³⁷ Tawney and Power, *Tudor Economic Documents*, 1: 353.

work away from his elders, a man could not independently practice most trades until he had become a master through seven years of apprenticeship. Even then, until he was thirty years old or married, he was supposed to serve some other master of the trade. A typical example is the case of John Pike-man of Barking, Essex, a tailor who was presented by the grand jury because he "being a singleman and not above 25 years of age, does take in work of tailoring and works by himself to the hindrance of other poor occupiers, contrary to the law."³⁸

These measures doubtless helped to maintain social stability in the face of a rapid population increase, from under three million in 1500 to a probable four and a half million in 1640 (an increase reflected in the gap between wages and prices).³⁹ But in its efforts to spread employment so that every able-bodied person would have a means of support, the government in effect discouraged energetic labor and nurtured the workingman's low expectations of himself. By requiring masters to engage apprentices for seven-year terms and servants (in agriculture and in most trades) for the whole year rather than the day, it prevented employers from hiring labor only when there was work to be done and prevented the diligent and effective worker from replacing the ineffective. The intention to spread work is apparent in the observation of the Essex justices that labor by the day caused "the great depauperization of other labourers."⁴⁰ But labor by the year meant that work could be strung out to occupy an unnecessary amount of time, because whether or not a master had enough work to occupy his servants they had to stay and he had to keep them. The records show many instances of masters attempting to turn away a servant or apprentice before the stipulated term was up, only to have him sent back by the courts with orders that the master "entertain" him for the full period.⁴¹ We even have the extraordinary spectacle of the runaway master, the man who illegally fled from his servants and thus evaded his responsibility to employ and support them.⁴²

In pursuit of its policy of full employment in the face of an expanding population, the government often had to create jobs in cases where society offered none. Sometimes men were obliged to take on a poor boy as a servant whether they needed him or not. The parish might lighten the burden by

³⁸ April 1594. Calendar of Essex Quarter Sessions Rolls, 16: 165. See also the indictment (1589) of four bachelors for taking up the trade of poulterer, which "hindreth other powre men." *Ibid.*, 15: 54. While the statute seems to allow single men and women under thirty to set up in trade unless their services are demanded by a master, the courts, in Essex County at least (where the earliest and most extensive records are preserved), required such persons to find themselves a master. Moreover, the court was already issuing such orders before the statute of 1563. See *ibid.*, 1: 85, 116.

³⁹ See note 28.

⁴⁰ Calendar of Essex Quarter Sessions Rolls, 4: 128.

⁴¹ For examples: William LeHardy, ed., *Hertfordshire County Records*, 5 (Hertford, 1928): 191-92, 451; E. H. Bates, ed., *Quarter Sessions Records for the County of Somerset*, 1, Somerset Record Society, 23 (London, 1907), 11-12, 21; B. C. Redwood, ed., *Quarter Sessions Order Book 1642-1649*, Sussex Record Society, 54 (1954), 34, 44, 46, 128, 145-46, 188, 190.

⁴² For examples: *Hertfordshire County Records*, 5: 376; *Quarter Sessions Records for Somerset*, 1: 97, 193, 258, 325.

paying a fee, but it might also fine a man who refused to take a boy assigned to him.⁴³ To provide for men and women who could not be foisted off on unwilling employers, the government established houses of correction in every county, where the inmates toiled at turning wool, flax, and hemp into thread or yarn, receiving nothing but their food and lodging for their efforts. By all these means the government probably did succeed in spreading employment. But in the long run its policy, insofar as it was effective, tended to depress wages and to diminish the amount of work expected from any one man.

Above and beyond the idleness and underemployment that we may blame on the lethargy and irresponsibility of underpaid labor, on the failure to synchronize the performance of related tasks, and on the policy of spreading work as thinly as possible, the very nature of the jobs to be done prevented the systematic use of time that characterizes modern industrialized economies. Men could seldom work steadily, because they could work only at the tasks that could be done at the moment; and in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England the tasks to be done often depended on forces beyond human control: on the weather and the seasons, on the winds, on the tides, on the maturing of crops. In the countryside work from dawn to dusk with scarcely an intermission might be normal at harvest time, but there were bound to be times when there was very little to do. When it rained or snowed, most farming operations had to be stopped altogether (and so did some of the stages of cloth manufacture). As late as 1705 John Law, imagining a typical economy established on a newly discovered island, assumed that the persons engaged in agriculture would necessarily be idle, for one reason or another, half the time.⁴⁴

To be sure, side by side with idleness and inefficiency, England exhibited the first signs of a rationalized economy. Professor J. U. Nef has described the many large-scale industrial enterprises that were inaugurated in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁴⁵ And if the development of systematic agricultural production was advancing less rapidly than historians once supposed, the very existence of men like Robert Loder, the very complaints of the idleness and irresponsibility of laborers, the very laws prescribing hours of work all testify to the beginnings of a rationalized economy. But these were beginnings only and not widely felt. The laborer who seemed idle or irresponsible to a Robert Loder probably did not seem so to himself or to his peers. His England was not a machine for producing wool or corn. His England included activities and pleasures

⁴³ Bates, *Quarter Sessions . . . Somerset*, 114, 300; Redwood, *Order Book* (Sussex), 96, 146, 194; W. L. Sachse, ed., *Minutes of the Norwich Court of Mayoralty*, Norfolk Record Society, 15 (Norwich, 1942), 78, 216.

⁴⁴ Coleman, "Labour in the English Economy"; E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism"; Keith Thomas, "Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society," *Past and Present*, no. 29 (1964): 50-66.

⁴⁵ J. U. Nef, *The Conquest of the Material World* (Chicago, 1964), 121-328.

and relationships that systematic-minded employers would resent and that modern economists would classify as uneconomic. At the opening of the seventeenth century, England was giving him fewer economic benefits than she had given his grandfathers so that he was often ready to pull up stakes and look for a better life in another county or another country.⁴⁶ But a life devoted to more and harder work than he had known at home might not have been his idea of a better life.

PERHAPS WE MAY NOW view Jamestown with somewhat less surprise at the idle and hungry people occupying the place: idleness and hunger were the rule in much of England much of the time; they were facts of life to be taken for granted. And if we next ask what the settlers thought they had come to America to do, what they thought they were up to in Virginia, we can find several English enterprises comparable to their own that may have served as models and that would not have led them to think of hard, continuous disciplined work as a necessary ingredient in their undertaking.

If they thought of themselves as settling a wilderness, they could look for guidance to what was going on in the northern and western parts of England and in the high parts of the south and east.⁴⁷ Here were the regions, mostly wooded, where wastelands still abounded, the goal of many in the large migrant population of England. Those who had settled down were scattered widely over the countryside in isolated hovels and hamlets and lived by pasture farming, that is, they cultivated only small plots of ground and ran a few sheep or cattle on the common land. Since the gardens required little attention and the cattle hardly any, they had most of their time to themselves. Some spent their spare hours on handicrafts. In fact, they supplied the labor for most of England's minor industries, which tended to locate in pasture-farming regions, where agriculture made fewer demands on the inhabitants, than in regions devoted to market crops. But the pasture farmers seem to have offered their labor sporadically and reluctantly.⁴⁸ They had the reputation of being both idle and independent. They might travel to the richer arable farming regions to pick up a few shillings in field work at harvest time, but their own harvests were small. They did not even grow the wheat or rye for their own bread and made shift to live in hard times from the nuts and berries and herbs that they gathered in the woods.

⁴⁶ On the geographical mobility of the English population, see E. E. Rich, "The Population of Elizabethan England," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 2 (1949-56): 249-65; and Peter Laslett and John Harrison, "Clayworth and Cogenhoe," in H. E. Bell and R. L. Ollard, eds., *Historical Essays 1600-1750 Presented to David Ogg* (New York, 1963), 157-84.

⁴⁷ This paragraph and the one that follows are based on the excellent chapters by Joan Thirsk and by Alan Everitt, in Thirsk, *Agrarian History*.

⁴⁸ Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, 417-29; Joan Thirsk, "Industries in the Countryside," in F. J. Fisher, ed., *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1961), 70-88. See also E. L. Jones, "Agricultural Origins of Industry," *Past and Present*, no. 40 (1968): 58-71. Lawrence Stone, "An Elizabethan Coalmine," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 3 (1950): 97-106, especially 101-02; Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, xxxv, 111.

Jamestown was mostly wooded, like the pasture-farming areas of England and Wales; and since Englishmen used the greater part of their own country for pasture farming, that was the obvious way to use the wasteland of the New World. If this was the Virginians' idea of what they were about, we should expect them to be idle much of the time and to get grain for bread by trading rather than planting (in this case not wheat or rye but maize from the Indians); we should even expect them to get a good deal of their food, as they did, by scouring the woods for nuts and berries.

As the colony developed, a pasture-farming population would have been quite in keeping with the company's expectation of profit from a variety of products. The Spaniards' phenomenal success with raising cattle in the West Indies was well known. And the proposed employment of the settlers of Virginia in a variety of industrial pursuits (iron works, silk works, glass works, shipbuilding) was entirely fitting for a pasture-farming community. The small gardens assigned for cultivation by Governor Dale in 1614 will also make sense: three acres would have been far too small a plot of land to occupy a farmer in the arable regions of England, where a single man could handle thirty acres without assistance.⁴⁹ But it would be not at all inappropriate as the garden of a pasture farmer. In Virginia three acres would produce more than enough corn to sustain a man for a year and still leave him with time to make a profit for the company or himself at some other job—if he could be persuaded to work.

Apart from the movement of migrant workers into wastelands, the most obvious English analogy to the Jamestown settlement was that of a military expedition. The settlers may have had in mind not only the expeditions that subdued the Irish⁵⁰ but also those dispatched to the European continent in England's wars. The Virginia Company itself seems at first to have envisaged the enterprise as partly military, and the *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall* were mostly martial. But the conception carried unfortunate implications for the company's expectations of profit. Military expeditions were staffed from top to bottom with men unlikely to work. The nucleus of sixteenth-century English armies was the nobility and the gangs of genteel ruffians they kept in their service, in wartime to accompany them into the field (or to go in their stead), in peacetime to follow them about

⁴⁹ Hamor, *True Discourse*, 16-17; Peter Bowden, in Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, 652. It is impossible to determine whether the settlers had had direct experience in pasture farming, but the likelihood that they were following familiar pasture-farming procedures and may have been expected to do so by the company is indicated by the kind of cattle they brought with them: swine, goats, neat cattle, and relatively few horses. When they proposed to set plows going, they were to be drawn by oxen as was the custom in pasture-farming areas. In arable farming areas it was more common to use horses. The company's concern to establish substantial herds is evident in the *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall* in the provisions forbidding slaughter without government permission.

⁵⁰ See Howard M. Jones, *O Strange New World* (New York, 1964), 167-79; David B. Quinn, "Ireland and Sixteenth Century European Expansion," in *Historical Studies*, ed. T. D. Williams, Papers Read at the Second Conference of Irish Historians (London, 1958); *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (Ithaca, 1966), 106-22. Professor Quinn and Professor Jones have both demonstrated how the subjugation of Ireland served as a model for the colonization of America. Ireland must have been in the minds of many of the settlers at Jamestown.

as living insignia of their rank.⁵¹ Work was not for the nobility nor for those who wore their livery. According to the keenest student of the aristocracy in this period, "the rich and well-born were idle almost by definition." Moreover they kept "a huge labor force . . . absorbed in slothful and parasitic personal service." Aside from the gentlemen retainers of the nobility and their slothful servants the military expeditions that England sent abroad were filled out by misfits and thieves whom the local constables wished to be rid of. It was, in fact, government policy to keep the able-bodied and upright at home and to send the lame, the halt, the blind, and the criminal abroad.⁵²

The combination of gentlemen and ne'er-do-wells of which the leaders at Jamestown complained may well have been the result of the company's using a military model for guidance. The Virginia Company was loaded with noblemen (32 present or future earls, 4 countesses, 3 viscounts, and 19 barons).⁵³ Is it possible that the large number of Jamestown settlers listed as gentlemen and captains came from among the retainers of these lordly stockholders and that the rest of the settlers included some of the gentlemen's personal servants as well as a group of hapless vagabonds or migratory farm laborers who had been either impressed or lured into the enterprise by tales of the New World's abundance? We are told, at least, that persons designated in the colony's roster as "laborers" were "for most part footmen, and such as they that were Adventurers brought to attend them, or such as they could perswade to goe with them, that never did know what a dayes work was."⁵⁴

If these men thought they were engaged in a military expedition, military precedent pointed to idleness, hunger, and death, not to the effective organization of labor. Soldiers on campaign were not expected to grow their own food. On the other hand they *were* expected to go hungry often and to die like flies even if they never saw an enemy. The casualty rates on European expeditions resembled those at Jamestown and probably from the same causes: disease and undernourishment.⁵⁵

But the highest conception of the enterprise, often expressed by the leaders, was that of a new commonwealth on the model of England itself.

⁵¹ W. H. Dunham, *Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers 1461-1483*, Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Transactions*, 39 (New Haven, 1955); Gladys S. Thompson, *Lords Lieutenants in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1923); Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, 199-270.

⁵² Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, 331; Lindsay Boynton, *The Elizabethan Militia 1558-1638* (Toronto, 1967); Thompson, *Lords Lieutenants*, 115.

⁵³ Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, 372. About fifty per cent of the other members were gentry. See Theodore K. Rabb, *Enterprise and Empire: Merchant and Gentry Investment in the Expansion of England 1575-1630* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

⁵⁴ Smith, *Travels and Works*, 2: 486-87.

⁵⁵ The expedition of the Earl of Essex in 1591 to assist Henry IV of France met with only a few skirmishes, but only 800 men out of 3,400 returned. Thompson, *Lords Lieutenants*, 111. Even the naval forces mustered to meet the Armada in 1588 suffered appalling losses from disease. In ten of the largest ships, in spite of heavy replacements, only 2,195 out of the original complement of 3,325 men were on the payroll by September. The total loss was probably equal to the entire original number. Lawrence Stone, "The Armada Campaign of 1588," *History*, 29 (1944): 120-43, especially 137-41.

Yet this, too, while it touched the heart, was not likely to turn men toward hard, effective, and continuous work.⁵⁶ The England that Englishmen were saddled with as a model for new commonwealths abroad was a highly complex society in which the governing consideration in accomplishing a particular piece of work was not how to do it efficiently but who had the right or the duty to do it, by custom, law, or privilege. We know that the labor shortage in the New World quickly diminished considerations of custom, privilege, and specialization in the organization of labor. But the English model the settlers carried with them made them think initially of a society like the one at home, in which each of them would perform his own special task and not encroach on the rights of other men to do other tasks. We may grasp some of the assumptions about labor that went into the most intelligent planning of a new commonwealth by considering Richard Hakluyt's recommendation that settlers include both carpenters and joiners, tallow chandlers and wax chandlers, bowyers and fletchers, men to rough-hew pike staffs and other men to finish them.⁵⁷

If Jamestown was not actually troubled by this great an excess of specialization, it was not the Virginia Company's fault. The company wanted to establish at once an economy more complex than England's, an economy that would include not only all the trades that catered to ordinary domestic needs of Englishmen but also industries that were unknown or uncommon in England: a list of artisans the company wanted for the colony in 1611 included such specialists as hemp planters and hemp dressers, gun makers and gunstock makers, spinners of pack thread and upholsterers of feathers.⁵⁸ Whatever idleness arose from the specialization of labor in English society was multiplied in the New World by the presence of unneeded skills and the absence or shortage of essential skills. Jamestown had an oversupply of glassmakers and not enough carpenters or blacksmiths, an oversupply of gentlemen and not enough plowmen. These were Englishmen temporarily baffled by missing links in the economic structure of their primitive community. The later jack-of-all-trades American frontiersman was as yet unthought of. As late as 1618 Governor Argall complained that they lacked the men "to set their Ploughs on worke." Although they had the oxen to pull them, "they wanted men to bring them to labour, and Irons for the Ploughs, and harnesse for the Cattell." And the next year John Rolfe noted that they still needed "Carpenters to build and make Carts and Ploughs, and skilfull men that know how to use them, and traine up our cattell to draw them; which though we indeavour to effect, yet our want of experience brings but little to perfection but planting Tobacco."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ For typical statements implying that Virginia is a new commonwealth on the English model, see the *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall*, 47-48; Robert Johnson, *The New Life of Virginia*, in *Force, Tracts*, 1, no. 7: 17-18.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Writings of the two Richard Hakluyts*, 2: 323, 327-38.

⁵⁸ Alexander Brown, *The Genesis of the United States* (Boston, 1890), 1: 469-70.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Travels and Works*, 2: 538, 541.

TOBACCO, AS WE KNOW, was what they kept on planting. The first shipload of it, sent to England in 1617, brought such high prices that the Virginians stopped bowling in the streets and planted tobacco in them. They did it without benefit of plows, and somehow at the same time they managed to grow corn, probably also without plows. Seventeenth-century Englishmen, it turned out, could adapt themselves to hard and varied work if there was sufficient incentive.

But we may well ask whether the habits and attitudes we have been examining had suddenly expired altogether. Did tobacco really solve the labor problem in Virginia? Did the economy that developed after 1618 represent a totally new set of social and economic attitudes? Did greater opportunities for profit completely erase the old attitudes and furnish the incentives to labor that were needed to make Virginia a success? The study of labor in modern underdeveloped countries should make us pause before we say yes. The mere opportunity to earn high wages has not always proved adequate to recruit labor in underdeveloped countries. Something more in the way of expanded needs or political authority or national consciousness or ethical imperatives has been required.⁶⁰ Surely Virginia, in some sense, became a success. But how did it succeed? What kind of success did it have? Without attempting to answer, I should like very diffidently to offer a suggestion, a way of looking ahead at what happened in the years after the settlement of Jamestown.

The founders of Virginia, having discovered in tobacco a substitute for the sugar of the West Indies and the silver of Peru, still felt the lack of a native labor force with which to exploit the new crop. At first they turned to their own overpopulated country for labor, but English indentured servants brought with them the same haphazard habits of work as their masters. Also like their masters, they were apt to be unruly if pressed. And when their terms of servitude expired—if they themselves had not expired in the “seasoning” that carried away most immigrants to Virginia—they could be persuaded to continue working for their betters only at exorbitant rates. Instead they struck out for themselves and joined the ranks of those demanding rather than supplying labor. But there was a way out. The Spanish and Portuguese had already demonstrated what could be done in the New World when a local labor force became inadequate: they brought in the natives of Africa.

For most of the seventeenth century Virginians were unable to compete for the limited supply of slaves hauled across the ocean to man the sugar plantations of the Americas. Sugar was a more profitable way to use slaves than tobacco. Moreover, the heavy mortality of newcomers to Virginia

⁶⁰ Moore, *Industrialization and Labor*, 14-47; Melville J. Herskovits, “The Problem of Adapting Societies to New Tasks,” in Bert F. Hoselitz, *The Progress of Underdeveloped Areas* (Chicago, 1952), especially 91-92. See also William O. Jones, “Labor and Leisure in Traditional African Societies,” Social Science Research Council, *Items*, 23 (1968): 1-6.

made an investment in Africans bound for a lifetime more risky than the same amount invested in a larger number of Englishmen, bound for a term that was likely to prove longer than a Virginia lifetime.

But Virginians continued to be Englishmen: the more enterprising continued to yearn for a cheaper, more docile, more stable supply of labor, while their servants loafed on the job, ran away, and claimed the traditional long lunch hour. As the century wore on, punctuated in Virginia by depression, discontent, and rebellion, Virginia's position in the market for men gradually improved: the price of sugar fell, making it less competitive with tobacco; the heavy mortality in the colony declined, making the initial outlay of capital on slaves less risky; and American and European traders expanded their infamous activities in Africa. The world supply of slaves, which had fallen off in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, rose sharply in the third quarter and continued to rise.⁶¹

With these developments the Virginians at last were able to acquire substitute natives for their colony and begin, in their own English way, to Hispanize Virginia. By the middle of the eighteenth century Africans constituted the great majority of the colony's entire labor force.⁶² This is not to say that plantation slavery in Virginia or elsewhere can be understood simply as a result of inherited attitudes toward work confronting the economic opportunities of the New World. The forces that determined the character of plantation slavery were complex. But perhaps an institution so archaic and at the same time so modern as the plantation cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the attitudes that helped to starve the first settlers of the colony where the southern plantation began.

⁶¹ On the last point, see Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969), 119. I hope to deal elsewhere with the other developments that brought slavery to Virginia.

⁶² In 1755 the total number of white tithables in the colony was 43,329, of black tithables 59,999. Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population before the Federal Census of 1790* (New York, 1932), 150-51. Tithables were white men and black men and women over sixteen. Black women were tithable because they were made to work like men.