

Appendix

The Postan Thesis and the Ricardian Corn-Model

The Postan thesis is often regarded as a Malthusian or neo-Malthusian model. However, as Postan made clear, his thesis owes more to Ricardo than to Malthus. In his reply to Brenner, Postan wrote that:

*Anyone anxious to fit these hypotheses with a doctrinal cap would be advised to look for it elsewhere, and in the first place to Ricardo. It will be remembered that the essence of the Ricardian theory of rent is the continuous trend of diminishing returns in agriculture which manifested itself in the declining productivity of older lands, the extension of cultivation to new lands of lower quality, and the consequent fall in output per head ... the Ricardian system provides a better matrix than Malthusianism for the historical views Professor Brenner criticizes*¹

Postan argued that “Ricardo’s irreversible trend of diminishing returns” would go “a long way to explain why the late medieval recovery was so slow” and that “if the historians holding these views have refrained from overtly involving the name of Ricardo, they have done so mainly because no theoretical matrix, not even Ricardo’s, will fit closely enough the infinite complexity of historical facts”.² It is therefore appropriate to take this opportunity to re-examine the contribution made by Ricardo’s Corn-Rent model to the Postan thesis.

Ricardo assumed a two-sector economic model in which agriculture and manufacturing are the main economic activities.³ The only output from the agricultural sector is grain and the only inputs are land and labour, as it is assumed that non-wage capital inputs are small enough to be disregarded. Society is divided into landowners, farmers and labourers. Landowners rent out their land to the farmers, who possess the capital needed to hire labourers to work the land. The surplus product of the land after the payment of wages is divided into profit and rent. Profits are retained by

¹ Postan and Hatcher, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development”, p. 29. Postan’s initial knowledge of Ricardo’s Corn-Rent model may have come from his economic studies at Odessa, as both Ricardian and Malthusian ideas had considerable intellectual influence in late Tsarist Russia. Another source of information on Ricardo would have been Alfred Marshall and the economists of his school, whose works Postan would have encountered in the 1920s and 1930s as a student in England. At Cambridge during the late 1940s, Postan could hardly have been ignorant of Piero Sraffa’s interest in and work on Ricardo, which led to Sraffa’s eleven volume edition of Ricardo’s *Works and Correspondence* published between 1951 and 1973.

² Postan and Hatcher, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development”, p. 30.

³ Not a one-sector model in which agriculture is the only form of economic activity, as some more recent attempts to formulate Ricardian theory in mathematical terms would suggest.

the farmer to provide the wages fund for future operations, and rent is appropriated by the landowner.⁴

Ricardo argued that there is a natural wage rate. This rate represents the minimum wage consistent with the labourer's bare subsistence and the future reproduction of the labour force. The market wage for labour may be above or below this natural wage rate in the short-term depending upon the laws of supply and demand. When the market price is above the natural wage rate, the number of labourers will increase. If the market rate falls for any reason below the natural rate, labourers will not reproduce themselves and the population will fall. The result is that the market prices for labour tends to conform to its natural price over the long-term.⁵

In addition, Ricardo assumed that the most fertile and the most favourably situated land was the first to be colonised during the initial settlement of a country. No rent is paid for this land, as its abundance is such that it is without a market value. However, although land is free, the cost of labour is high. Because there is more land than the available number of labourers can cultivate, the cost of labour is well above the natural rate and for that reason the population increases rapidly. Demographic growth leads to the outward movement of the margin of cultivation and the tillage of inferior land. Rent is then charged for use of the best quality land and, as progressively poorer and poorer land is brought under cultivation, the rent on more fertile tracts of land increases. In Ricardo's own words:

When, in the progress of society, land of the second degree of fertility is taken into cultivation, rent immediately commences on that of the first quality, and the amount of rent will depend on the difference in the quality of these two portions of land. When land of the third quality is taken into cultivation, rent immediately commences on the second, and is regulated as before by the difference in their productive powers. At the same time, the rent of the first quality will rise, for that must always be above the rent of the second by the difference between the produce which they yield with a given quantity of capital and labour.⁶

Landowners therefore receive an ever-increasing share of the surplus product of labour as the process of internal colonisation continues.⁷

⁴ Ricardo's Corn-Rent model is largely set out in the second chapter of his *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. The assumptions upon which his model was based, however, were largely implied rather than stated. The result is that the academic literature on Ricardian economics is immense and the task of determining what Ricardo said and what he actually meant is likely to continue for sometime. However, the best place to start is still Ricardo's own writings. D. Ricardo, *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, London, 1911, pp. 33-45.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 52-3.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 72.

As the margin of cultivation moves outwards the cost of grain production rises because additional labour is required to produce the same amount of grain. The result is an increase in the market price for grain. This increase in turn leads to a rise in the price of manufactured articles, as higher grain prices lead to a rise in nominal wages. However, as grain production is more labour-intensive than manufacturing, the price of grain will rise faster and further than that of most manufactured necessities.⁸

Despite the rise in wages in nominal terms due to the tillage of poorer and poorer soils, Ricardo assumed that wages would fall in real terms over the long-term. This is because the demand for labour increases at a slower rate than the growth in population, as a result of the diminishing productivity of agricultural labour. The result is that the market price for labour will gradually fall, although not to a sufficient degree to offset the increase in the amount of labour required to cultivate the marginal lands being brought into cultivation. The share of wages in the surplus product of agriculture therefore rises at the expense of the capitalist's profit, while labourers experience a progressive fall in their standard of living.⁹

Ricardo's basic assumption was therefore that the extension of the arable would eventually bring about a fall in the rate of profit. As the process of colonisation continues, farmers are caught between the scissors of rising wage costs and increasing rents. This decline in the rate of profit proceeds as long as the profits of cultivation remain greater than the cost of wages. Ricardo believed that:

The natural tendency of profits then is to fall; for, in the progress of society and wealth, the additional quantity of food required is obtained by the sacrifice of more and more labour ... The rise in the price of necessaries and in the wage of labour is, however, limited, for as soon as wages should be equal ... to ... the whole receipts of the farmer, there must be an end to accumulation, for no capital can then yield any profit whatever, and no additional labour can be demanded, and consequently population will have reached its highest point. Long indeed before this period, the very low rate of profits will have arrested all accumulation, and almost the whole produce of the country, after paying the labourers, will be the property of the owners of land and receivers of tithes and taxes.¹⁰

In this manner, Ricardo predicted that the final result of the extension of the margins of cultivation would be a stationary state in which all economic growth comes to an end.

Although the points of similarity between the Postan thesis and the Ricardian Corn-Model are obvious, the differences appear, at least at first glance, to outweigh the correspondences.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 39, 52, 57-62.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 56, 75.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 71.

Ricardo's model did not assume that the outwards movement of the margin of cultivation must result in the exhaustion of marginal lands.¹¹ In addition, there is no indication in Ricardo's writings that the fall in the rate of profit will inevitably lead to the eventual retreat of cultivation from the land at the extensive margin and a consequent fall in population. Instead, Ricardo argued that that the final results of the process of economic development would be a state of equilibrium. It is important to note also that Ricardo's model specifically excluded consideration of many questions, such as the effect of the outwards movement of the margin on livestock numbers, which are essential to the Postan thesis.

The degree of structural correspondence between the medieval English economy and Ricardo's model is not high. Most estate owners in the pre-Black Death period combined the functions of both "landowners" and "farmers" in the Ricardian model. Being direct managers, the majority of thirteenth and early fourteenth century lords appropriated the entire surplus product of their demesnes. There can be no question of a declining rate of profit in the true Ricardian sense in England before the Black Death.

Another discrepancy is the fact that demesne sector formed only part of the English agrarian economy before the Black Death. Peasant husbandry may have provided the greater part of the total output in the agricultural sector. In contrast, the Ricardian concept of a declining rate of profit assumes that all farms are run along capitalist lines. Peasant households which could draw upon family labour and enjoyed a high measure of self-sufficiency would not necessarily face the same problems as capitalist farmers. It is therefore unsurprising that Postan was reluctant to make more explicit reference to the Ricardian Corn-Model in his writings on the pre-1348 period.

Despite the differences between the Ricardian Corn-Model and the Postan thesis, Postan's debt to Ricardo is undeniable. The Postan thesis rests on the Ricardian concept of the margin. The assumption that population growth causes land of poorer and poorer quality to be taken under cultivation is the starting-point from which develops Postan's reconstruction of demographic trends before the Black Death. Also, Postan's explanations for the upward movement of prices (in particular the rise in grain prices and the apparent fall in real wages during this thirteenth century) are pure Ricardo. Like Ricardo, Postan explained rising prices and an apparent fall in real wages before c.1325 in terms of the diminishing marginal product of agriculture. Postan's explanation for the falling prices and rising real wages in the decades before the Black Death was equally Ricardian, representing as it did the logical extension of the implications of Ricardo's theories.

¹¹ Ricardo explicitly excluded from his model consideration of the implications of changes in the fertility of the soil, as can be seen from his comments on Malthus' theory of rent cf. Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, pp. 272-6.

In addition, both Ricardo's Corn-Model and the Postan thesis frequently predict analogous results from the same basic causes. They differ, however, in their identification of the mechanisms responsible for these results. To take one example: both the Corn-Model and the Postan thesis agree that the extension of cultivation to more marginal lands led to a fall in the productivity of agriculture. Ricardo explained this trend in terms of a drop in the average fertility of the soil under cultivation. The Postan thesis places greater emphasis on the progressive exhaustion of the soil due to over-tillage. Another case in point is the long-term movement of rents. Ricardo predicted that rents would increase over time, just as the Postan thesis assumes a continuous rise in rents before c.1320. However, Ricardo attributed this trend to increasing difference in quality between the land at the margin and the best agricultural land, whereas Postan prefers an explanation in terms of peasant land hunger.

Like Ricardo's Corn-Model, the Postan thesis predicts a fall in output per worker as the drift towards the margin continues. But, unlike Ricardo, Postan saw this trends as a consequence of a decline in the fertility of the soil under cultivation due to physical exhaustion (Ricardo explained the same result in terms of a fall in the average fertility of the agricultural land). In addition, the Ricardian model assumes that the fertility of any piece of agricultural land is fixed, as Ricardo defined rent as "that portion of the earth which is paid to the landlord for the use of the original and indestructible powers of the soil".¹² Thus, in assuming a continual decline in the fertility of the soil, Postan proposed a decidedly contra-Ricardian model.

Postan's interpretation of the process of demographic and economic contraction after c.1320 provides another parallel between the Corn-Rent model and the Postan thesis. Postan assumed that the external manifestations of this downwards trend included rural depopulation, the abandonment of marginal land, a reduction in rents and a general fall in prices. These assumptions should be compared with Ricardo's observation that:

with every portion of additional capital which it becomes necessary to employ on the land with a less productive return rent would rise. It follows from the same principles that any great reduction in the capital of a country which should materially diminish the funds destined for the maintenance of labour would naturally have this effect. Population regulates itself by the funds which are to employ it, and therefore always increases and diminishes with the increase or diminution of capital. Every reduction of capital is therefore necessarily followed by a less effective demand for corn, by a fall of price, and by diminished cultivation. In the reverse order to that in which the accumulation of capital raises rent will the diminution of it lower rent. Land of a less productive quality will be in succession relinquished, the exchangeable value of produce will fall, and

¹² *ibid.*, p. 33.

*land of a superior quality will be the land last cultivated, and that which will then pay no rent.*¹³

Ricardo was describing the effects of a shortage of capital, and not the consequences of the exhaustion of the lands on the margin of cultivation. Nonetheless, the similarities between Postan's account of the trends he perceived at work in the English countryside after c.1320 and the sequence of events described by Ricardo are striking.

There is little doubt the Postan thesis owes a good deal to Ricardo's Corn-Model, perhaps more than is generally realised. Many of the most important elements of the Postan thesis are derived from Ricardo's Model. This is despite the fact that, in its pure form, the Corn-Model is inapplicable to medieval England. Further aspects of the Postan thesis are derived, albeit indirectly, from some of the predictions of Ricardo's Model. The Postan thesis may therefore be described as Ricardian in a broad sense, as its author asserted

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 41.

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