

[Capitalism from the bottom up](#) [1]

Written by [Dr Eamonn Butler](#) [2] | Wednesday 8 June 2011



It's hard enough to keep up with the literature in economics, but almost impossible for me to keep up with the literature in my other, hobby, interest of archaeology. So I stumbled across Christopher Dyer's book [An Age of Transition?](#) [3] (OUP) only a couple of years since it came out in paperback.

What it looks for is the origin of capitalism, if you like. Somehow, between the Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution, Britain had already become a recognisably modern economy. People were freed from life on the land and were building up capital ? ships, factories, plantations. Cities were growing, artisans were multiplying and flourishing ? so much so that the old mediaeval guilds petitioned their monarchs for regulations to restrict these 'cowboy' new market entrants. Nothing new, is there?

Most historians, perhaps few of whom understand economics, tend to imagine that the growth of capitalism in Britain came from enlightened 'improver' landowners, turning their land from feudal estates into commercial farms. But Dyer disagrees. Sure, the old social structure of duties and responsibilities faded. Family ties were replacing feudal ones. Markets were springing up. Land was being enclosed and made private. But the big landowners, says Dyer, were far too few ? and far too preoccupied with getting well-paid jobs and monopolies from government ? to drive these changes. It was people well below them on the social scale who drove them, making the enclosures, converting poor land to pasture, and from there building up larger farmsteads that were far more efficient in production.

So it was the peasants who drove progress, not the toffs. Nothing much new there, either.

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