

HEALTH

What Did Medieval Peasants Know?

The internet has become strangely nostalgic for life in the Middle Ages.

By Amanda Mull



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In the foreword to her book *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, the historian Barbara W. Tuchman offered a warning to people with simplistic ideas about


what life was like in the medieval world, and what that might say about humanity as a whole: You think you know, but you have no idea.

The period, which spans roughly 500 to 1500, presents some problems for people trying to craft uncomplicated stories. “No age is tidy or made of whole cloth, and none is a more checkered fabric than the Middle Ages,” Tuchman wrote. Historians, she noted, have disagreed mightily on basic facts of the era: how many people there were in various parts of Europe, what they ate, how much money they had, and whether war deaths meant society was overpopulated with women, or childbirth deaths meant it was overpopulated with men. What’s even more complicated is determining the nature of life—how well different kinds of people lived, the quality of familial bonds, what people did to occupy their time and amuse themselves, how they thought about their lives. Draw broad, confident conclusions at your own peril.

Tuchman’s warning was prescient, if not especially well heeded. Her book was published in 1978 and won the National Book Award for History, but in the nearly half century since, the Middle Ages have been a common hobbyhorse for people of all political persuasions who suspect modernity might be leading us down the primrose path, especially as the internet has become a more central and inescapable element of daily life. Our ancestors of the distant past can be invoked in conversations about nearly anything: They supposedly worked less, relaxed more, slept better, had better sex, and enjoyed better diets, among other things. Their purported habits are used as proof of recent folly, but also of future possibility. Things could be better; after all, they have been before.

A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century

BARBARA W. TUCHMAN,
RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS

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The problem is that these assertions about our glorious history usually don't quite check out—they tend to be based on misunderstandings, disputed or outdated scholarship, or outright fabrications long ago passed off as historical record. But that doesn't stop people from regularly revisiting the idea, counterintuitive though it may be, that some parts of life were meaningfully better for people who didn't have antibiotics or refrigeration or little iPhone games to play to stave off boredom. What, exactly, is so irresistible about a return to the Middle Ages?

To untangle exactly what is going on here, let's use a recent example of the phenomenon. A few weeks ago, an oft-cited historical trope made the rounds once again, primarily on Twitter. The upshot: Medieval peasants worked less, had more free time, and were guaranteed more holidays with their family than you. [The tweet](#), from the writer Azie Dungey, was hugely popular—it racked up 127,000 likes—and she followed it up with an explanation of her intent: “We give a lot more labor to increase someone else's wealth than in times past. We generally work much longer hours. We have far fewer holidays and times of community festivity,” she wrote. “The idea that this is normal is completely wrong and frankly outrageous.” Dungey went on to cite her source: *The Overworked American*, a 1991 book by the sociologist Juliet Schor.

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Schor's book, a best seller and classic of its genre, may very well be the origin story for how so many people otherwise uninvolved in medieval history came to know and share this particular factoid. In it, she cites a then-recent estimate by Gregory Clark, a medievalist and economic historian at UC Davis, who pegged the average number of workdays per year in medieval England at about 150. Modern Americans work more—about 250 days a year, if you work five days a week and get federal holidays off. This kind of historical citation makes for a very compelling device: The circumstances of modern labor can feel inflexible and alienating, and that's because, for many workers, they are. If even medieval peasants—most of whom performed forced labor as feudal serfs—worked fewer hours and got more vacation days than you do, then maybe you shouldn't settle for whatever your boss thinks you deserve. Schor, an enormously well-regarded scholar, used this idea in much the same way that progressives on social media now tend to—not to assert that medieval life overall was paradise for the lower classes, but to highlight a modern absurdity through juxtaposition with an era that people tend to think of as unambiguously miserable.

The thing about history, though, is that much of our understanding of the past isn't settled fact. Clark no longer believes that his estimate of 150 days, made early in his career, is accurate. "There's a reasonable controversy going on in medieval economic history," Clark told me. He now thinks that English peasants in the late Middle Ages may have worked closer to 300 days a year. He reached that conclusion by inspecting

the chemical composition of fossilized human remains, as well as through evidence of the kinds of goods that urban peasants in particular had access to. These factors suggest that they may have lived more materially luxurious lives—eaten much more meat and other animal products, specifically—than usually estimated, suggesting that they had higher incomes than would be possible at the era's common daily pay rates if they didn't work most days of the year.. Across the world and throughout human history, poor populations rarely consume much meat and dairy.

That's not to say that the vision of history on which Schor's, and in turn Dungey's, point relies is conclusively false. Clark and his colleagues have revised their estimates upward, but the school of thought his previous numbers belonged to still has many academic supporters, who generally base their estimates of how much peasants worked on records of per-day pay rates and annual incomes. "This other view is that they were quite poor, but they were poor kind of voluntarily, because they didn't like work and didn't want to do a lot of work," he told me. Perhaps these groups of long-dead people were poor and lazy and happier for it. Or the discrepancies may have another explanation. It's possible, for example, that peasants were commonly paid part of their wages in something besides hard currency, which may explain where all that meat in their diets came from. Right now, no one really knows. You can dedicate your life to figuring out a problem, uncover troves of new information, and still not end up with any easy answers.

None of this makes for an especially good tweet, but it's a stumbling block that you hit again and again when trying to tease out pop-historical beliefs about medieval life. The era resists surety: During that time in Europe—and these references are almost always made to Europe—the majority of people, including virtually all peasants, were illiterate. Detailed records plotted the lives of royalty, nobility, and important religious figures, but there are relatively few primary sources that describe the day-to-day existences of regular working stiffs. If you can't read or write, you can't even keep a diary that someone might find 1,000 years later. This, Clark said, means that historians have to do far more subjective interpretation of medieval life than is required for post-Enlightenment eras of history. The necessity of interpretation is convenient for anyone trawling for a good historical anecdote to prove a point—you

can shop around and probably find *something* that suits whatever opinion you've already formed.

The medieval period's enormous messiness aids in this grab-bag dynamic, according to Eleanor Janega, a medieval historian at the London School of Economics. Because there was no one dominating empire that overwhelmed everything around it, as had been the case during previous periods of Greek and Roman domination, European life varied mightily from region to region and across the age's 1,000-year span. That level of heterogeneity makes the period hard to teach and hard to learn; it's a void in most people's understanding of humanity, waiting to be filled. "It allows people to make their own medieval mythology and cling to that," Janega told me. "They're just kind of navigating on vibes."

People also tend to bring plenty of modern biases to the table, even when they're not seeking expedience. This is particularly important when trying to discuss medieval work, Janega said. The clear delineations that people assume between work and personal life just aren't particularly tidy for peasants doing agrarian labor. "They're thinking of these people as having, like, a 9-to-5 job, like you're a contracted employee with a salary and you get vacation days," she told me. "The thing about having a day off is like, well, the cows ain't gonna milk themselves." So while people are correct that European peasants celebrated many more communal holidays than modern Americans, in many cases, that just meant they weren't expected to do a particular set of tasks for their lord. Minding the animals, crops, and themselves never really stopped. Their vacations weren't exactly a long weekend in Miami—after all, they didn't really *have* weekends.

There were, of course, some other obvious downsides to medieval life. A huge chunk of the population died before the age of 5, and for people who made it out of childhood, the odds of seeing your 60th birthday weren't great. There wasn't any running water or electricity, and there was a very real possibility that mercenaries might one day show up and kill you because your feudal lord was beefing with some other lord.

Although the desire to rebalance work and life is generally categorized by modern Americans as a progressive goal, similar historical devices are frequently used to reactionary (and, at times, similarly viral) ends. If a grand yearning for a glorious and mostly imaginary past feels a tad familiar, it might be because right-wingers tend to deploy cherry-picked factoids about the Middle Ages—and, to be fair, basically every other era of history—as an argument to Make Western Civilization Great Again. Some people think the distant past seems ideal not because they're sick of their commute, but because they're sick of pluralistic society and want to be more enthusiastically venerated as white Christians.

This kind of historical hang-up doesn't fit neatly onto any one part of the American political spectrum—or into any one part of history. Modern people might have seized on the Middle Ages in particular in the past few years, but Janega pointed out that the mindset of wanting to return to better days is in fact quite medieval itself. In Europe, people's lives were ordered by the Church, and Christianity is a linear religion. “The way they thought about the world is that we're in a constant process of getting further and further away from the Garden of Eden, when everything was ‘natural’ and fine and good,” she said. American life is less religious, but it's no less obsessed with how things change over time, and especially between generations. And lots of modern people have perfectly rational reasons to question the nature of progress—whether the internet does more harm than good, whether corporations have accumulated too much power, whether climate change can be halted before it immiserates us all.

“There's this amazing impulse to think maybe we're all on the wrong track,” Clark said. He and Janega are both sympathetic to those prone to rooting around in the historical record in search of better ways to imagine the future—you probably won't find many historians who think that the past has nothing to offer in our pursuit to understand ourselves. The trope endures primarily because it's useful. People have a hard time believing that something is possible if they can't see proof of concept. Medieval history, with its 1,000-year span and huge variety, is full of concepts.

If you're looking for a vision of history where people were generally peaceful and contented, though, you might want to check in with societies outside of the Middle

Ages. Perhaps look for a group of people not perpetually engaged in siege warfare. “Medieval peasants are a weird one to go to, because, you know, they were rebelling constantly,” Janega noted. “Why are they storming London and burning down the Savoy Palace, if this is a group of happy-go-lucky, simple folk who really love the way things are?”

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