

12-15-2022

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Citation Details

Burlingame, Stella "Towards an Evolutionary History of Gleaning, Working Paper No. 69", Portland State University Economics Working Papers. 69. (15 December 2022) i + 15 pages.

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TOWARDS AN EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY OF GLEANING

Working Paper No. 69

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A Contribution to the *Working Papers* of the
Department of Economics, Portland State University

Submitted for: EC445 and EC456, “American Economic History, Colonial Era to 1900,” and “Comparative Economic Systems”. 15 December 2022; i + 15 pages

Prepared for Prof. John Hall

Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that the act of gleaning can be understood through an evolutionary approach. Because gleaning has been practiced in some form in almost every agricultural system, this inquiry shall consider several different regions and time periods, taking into account the distinct economic and social structures. The segments of history to be explored here range from antiquity, as documented in Scripture, through early modernity, and into the post-modern era.

***Journal of Economic Literature* Classification Codes:** B15, B52, I38

Keywords: Gleaning, Evolutionary, History, Institutions, Poverty

Traditionally, gleaning has been a peasants' practice of gathering leftover crops in the wake of a farmer's harvest. The earliest written reference to gleaning can be found in the Hebrew Bible, where it is said that Israelite farmers should always leave the fallen or passed over produce of the main harvest for the poor to collect (Leviticus. 19:9). This originally biblical law has existed, and at times been legally enforced throughout much of Europe as a means of redistribution in the feudal system and beyond, up until modernity wherein the "right to glean" has been either altered or abolished. With the passing of time and the evolution of economic liberalism, the definition of gleaning has morphed to encompass a wide range of food and resource recovery practices. The most prominent forms of gleaning today appear to be charitable food recovery (practiced by non-profits) and field theft.

Gleaning as Found in Scripture

Turning our gaze to Judeo-Christian doctrine, established by the Israelites in 500 B.C., gleaning can be understood as a charitable act in a time when charity was seen as the duty of anyone of means. The Book of Leviticus commands:

"{19:9} And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. {19:10} And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather [every] grape of

thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I [am] the LORD your God.”

This excerpt establishes a tradition of passive charity aimed at providing some resources for those in need without imposing upon the farmers the extra work of gleaning and distribution. Here, it is not the poor who are addressed directly with the message that they have the right to go forth and glean, but rather the landowners with the message that they ought to allow it. It is relevant to note that “the poor” referred to here are a group external to the farmers, i.e. the landowners to whom the message is directed. This is made clear by the use of possessive language, for example: “your land,” “thy field,” “thy harvest,” etc. And so a power hierarchy can be delineated, wherein the holy, charitable, and enfranchised persons have the agency as individuals directed by the Lord, to share a portion of their prosperity with the disenfranchised, the landless, the powerless, or in other words, the poor. These poor have not a right to land, tools, or means of generating their own subsistence but rather a right to expect some amount of charity from the higher class on account of their impoverished condition.

The route of escape from this state of wretchedness is exemplified in the Book of Ruth, in which a widowed Moabite emigré is blessed by the grace of Boaz, a landowner who allows her to glean from his barley field. Ruth, the immigrant gleaner, and Boaz are soon married and their child, Obed, is to become

the grandfather of Christ. In this tale of redemption, Ruth's poverty is overcome through the generosity and kindness of an individual landowner. The societal structure which permits some to have land, while others get by as best they can whilst hoping for an act of goodwill, is not questioned and a great emphasis is placed on a charitable relationship between rich and poor rather than on the possibility of a more egalitarian society. If one considers another particularly famous piece of scripture; "The poor will always have with you," this apparently inexorable dichotomy within the human experience, with some being rich and others poor, is confirmed.

This is not to argue that the Bible was formulated or upheld as a conspiracy between the better-offs of society—not at all. This inquiry into the biblical foundations of socio-economic relations simply pursues an adequate understanding of how social inequality in biblical times was addressed by its contemporary doctrine. In his 1988 journal article, "Biblical Laws and the Economic Growth of Ancient Israel," Todd Buchholz examines the impact of religion on ancient economies at length. He observes that the idea of justice and the need for a legal system were unambiguously discussed in the Old Testament numerous times, the most obvious being within the Noahide Commandments which, since they were disclosed to Noah before the existence of Judaism, were understood as applying to all peoples (not strictly to Jews). The first of these commandments is, "to establish

courts of justice,” which sets the stage for the following books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus; texts consisting of specific and distinct laws that such courts might uphold. The right to glean lives within these books in the midst of a great variety of other laws pertaining to the treatment of one’s neighbor, lover, land, or enterprise. Many of these God-sent instructions can be found in contemporary secular legal code as well as in the informal institutions that govern even the most atheist of social relations. Buchholz (1988, 401) concludes that, “Theology invades the legal system, compelling the legal system to intervene throughout society.”

Working from this well-founded assumption, gleaning as described in scripture can be taken seriously as evidence for understanding its legal origins. In the aforementioned passages, gleaning is referred to as an existing practice. So it is not that the practice was invented by scripture, but rather that these writings bear testament to its function in early society.

Gleaning During Early Modernity

Observing these laws in action is made possible by author Peter King, who delves deeply into the statistics marking gleaning’s relative importance in the local economies of eighteenth to nineteenth century England in his 1991 article:

”Customary rights and women’s earnings; the importance of gleaning to the rural labouring poor, 1750-1850.” King (1991) demonstrates that gleaning was a

significant source of income for rural families at the time, and that it contributed to the families' incomes proportionally to their overall earnings. In his findings, poorer counties and less well-to-do families depended the most on gleaning to subsidize their livelihoods. At this time the presence of gleaners was taken for granted as something landowners would need to contend with. The law allowed gleaners to enter the property after the harvest, and this right created a gray area on what was otherwise private land. According to the archival research of King (1991, 466), farmers would sometimes stall the harvest of their grain past its prime, or rush to carry it inside—at times, too soon—in efforts to limit the time that the sheaves lay cut in the carts, vulnerable to the gleaners' gathering fingers as they picked through the stubble. The loss to farmers due to thefts of cut, sheaved grain amidst the harmless collecting of passed-over grain were calculated to be as much as fifteen percent of their crop.

King (1991) also notes that bad weather years for farmers could be a boost to the incomes of gleaners; excessive wind or snow could beat down and tangle up a crop of wheat, rendering it difficult for the reapers who, as a result, would leave much more behind. Additionally, these bad harvests would increase the demand for and price of the damaged crops—a boon for the gleaners, for it meant they could glean more goods at a higher value per unit.

Considering these advantages for the poor at the expense of the landowners, it is fair to inquire as to why gleaning was allowed; did the landowners not have a greater influence when it came to lawfare? A few different explanations crop up, the first of which King (1991, 470-473) lays out in his study of the legal developments of gleaning. He first cites his adventures into medieval manorial records, from which he concluded that there was no ‘right to glean’ as such established until at least the 1500s. Gleaning was allowed on a case-by-case basis, at the discretion of feudal landlords. The right to the practice corresponds with the popularization and widened accessibility of the first English-language bible in 1540, which suits this paper’s previous assertions about lawfare and gleaning in relation to scripture. One eighteenth-century surveyor for the Board of Agriculture cited by King (1991, 470) states that, it is “no sin” for a farmer to turn a gleaner out of his land if they are not what he would refer to as “real poor.” In this detail, readers can identify the religious scaffolding of the law, as well as an attempt to narrow its definition. This attempt was indeed a tendency—one that many landowners and magistrates took up. In many instances the case was made that only those who had been given personal permission, or those with no other options for work, i.e., the severely disabled, the elderly, or children, ought to be granted the legal right to glean.

However, the reality was that many working families depended on gleaning to supplement their incomes and to supply bread for their households. The pushback against proposed restrictions was enormous, with attempts at exclusion spurring widespread protest by farm laborers and others who depended on that supplement. The importance of gleaning for a large strata of the poor, and their eagerness to maintain that access helps to explain why the legal rights of the practice were protected. However, there is a second outstanding explanation which offers a more political look at the institution of gleaning.

In her article, “Gleaning: Old Name New Practice,” Jovana Dikovik (2016) argues that the role of gleaning in early European society extended beyond charity and was in fact part of a reciprocal relationship between the landowner and the landless. According to her research, farmers’ allowance of gleaning also served practical and political functions. Practically, gleaning was a service to the farmers in that it cleared their fields after the harvest, helping to prepare them for the next planting season. This was labor the farmers neither had to pay for, nor conduct themselves and so the practice was beneficial to both the gleaners and the landowners. Politically, the allowance of gleaning helped to keep landowners in the good graces of the peasantry so they might better achieve political influence in the community, allowing them to protect their interests and maintain a system that supported their overall advantage. Dikovik (2016) asserts that the existential needs

of the poor are met in the short term when the farmer allows them to glean, but in the long run this allowance also prevents social unrest and potential assaults to this farmer's property. In this way, the farmers' allowing the poor to haul off the residuum helps insure them against parting permanently with a larger share as might happen if people starved to the point that reform or revolt were inspired.

The tendency of the landed and affluent to maintain and increase their wealth over time is outlined in Kenneth Sokoloff and Stanley Engerman's 2000 journal article, "Institutions, Factor Endowments, and Paths of Development in the New World" wherein the authors explore the synergy between factor endowments, labor availability, and political power as they establish hard-to-break patterns of wealth distribution. Sokoloff and Engerman (2000, 223) identify institutions established by the powerful as tools for maintaining a status-quo that favors them. This pattern has been identified in societies that saw a great power imbalance at their founding, due in part to factor-endowments such as ample natural resources and a vast labor pool, and have remained quite stratified even as political and material circumstances have changed at a global level. This relationship can be understood in the micro-context, too, and applied to small-time agricultural laws like the right to glean. One can see how this right is preserved twofold: both to pacify the masses, and to ensure the maintenance of an elite upper class.

The need for pacification of the poor indicates that they are not entirely powerless; their excitement, as King (1991, 471) demonstrated, can mean trouble for the landed elite who need their labor and their political support. King (1991, 473) identifies the introduction of more efficient harvest technology, particularly the mechanical reaper and the horse rakes, and self-sheaving reaper-binders as the shift that finally did see the demise of gleaning in the traditional sense. With these technologies, much less was left behind by the harvest. One 1901 newspaper read, ‘gleaning has commenced but in the machine-cut fields little is left to gather.’ One can imagine the existential dread of these families on the margins as they took in the sight.

It was a little over mid-way through the nineteenth century that these innovations came into common use, and by the 1890s, into the early 1900s, the practice had become marginal. The wave of new technology brought forth by the industrial revolution was not a rogue one; that is to say, it was directed by capital. It took money to invest in the production and purchase of the new reaping technologies, and this was a weapon the gleaning poor could not hold their own against, especially as these machines displaced many of them from their jobs in agricultural labor, effectively diminishing their power to protest. The adoption of technologies that replace human labor and capture for the landowners a greater share of the harvest is an example of an elite-serving institution; once the

technologies are integrated into the agricultural process, the wealthy are systematically advantaged in the agricultural industry in a way that cannot be undone, and the public's relationship with the land that they can no longer glean is fundamentally changed. In this case, the institution exacerbated the inequality of the time.

Gleaning in the Post-Modern Era

Drawing again from Dikovic (2016) as well as from Anna Gorman's 2019 dissertation, "Kinder and Less Just: a Critical Analysis of Modern Gleaning Organizations and Their Place in Food Recovery Discourse," it can be deduced that gleaning in the modern sense is still centered on re-allocating leftover food to the poor, but the practice itself is fundamentally different. There are two prominent forms of gleaning that take place today: food recovery by charitable organizations, and field theft.

In the case of the United States, where private property has been under firm protection since the country's founding, the right to glean has never been overturned—it simply has never existed. Instead, landowners can opt to allow charitable gleaning organizations access to the remainder of their harvest under the protection and compensation of their crop insurance. According to Harvard Law School's 2022 Gleaning Guide for Farmers, surplus crops, or those not

aesthetically worthy of the market, can be collected by verified gleaning organizations and still be claimed by the farmer under crop insurance. There are also gleaning organizations that collect leftover food from grocery stores and restaurants, delivering them to homes and food banks to see that they avoid the landfill, and that people are fed in the process. One major shift from traditional gleaning is that these charitable gleaning projects focus on fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as prepared goods like pastries and bread. A gleaner in the original sense is mainly associated with collecting raw grains like wheat and barley to make flour or feed livestock. In addition, the labor involved is often minimal; typically a few people from the organization simply schedule a time to pull up in their van and load it with crates of fruit, as opposed to the back-breaking work of old, when women would take to the fields with their children in tow, bent over rows of stubble for hours at a time.

This new, charitable gleaning is also unique in that it is typically those of means who glean on behalf of the poor, rather than the poor gleaning for themselves. Gorman (2019) touches on this quality in her study of gleaning organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. According to her research, organizations such as Alameda Backyard Growers and Farm to Pantry, just to name a couple, identify themselves as communities of charitable people who seek to help the needy—a group external to the organization. By identifying this

relationship and division between those who can afford to give and those who receive, Gorman (2019) approaches an argument not unlike that of Dikovic (2016): allowing leftover food to go to the poor helps them eat in the short-term, but functions doubly as a sort of pressure-release valve for the problem of poverty, of a deeply-rooted inequality that precedes this charitable relationship.

Turning to Dikovic (2016), and her study of the evolution of gleaning in Serbia, private property expansion and the welfare state appear to be the primary factors shaping the social connotations of the change. Dikovic (2016), in her interviews with rural Serbians and resident Roma finds that the Serbian equivalent of gleaning is used today as a euphemism for field theft, and these thefts are most often carried out by the marginalized Roma population. In this particular case, Dikovic (2016) reports that Roma will often “glean” corn before the harvest, considering that not much is left behind by modern tools, and use the pickings to supplement their incomes by selling at pop-up markets. The thefts occur frequently enough that the farmers affected hire people to watch their fields as it nears harvest time.

Although theft is clearly different from gleaning, the roots are the same. Dikovic (2016) attributes the shift from the socially reciprocal, somewhat communal practice of gleaning, to the antagonistic social relations characterized by field theft to the state’s taking on the role of social welfare during the socialist

period in Yugoslavia, followed by harsh civil war and the stripping of these social benefits as austerity measures increased. Gleaning was a subsistence method that depended on some degree of public access to private land, and a localized social safety net. The switch to socialist governance meant that the state stepped in to provide higher pensions, and other forms of assistance for those who could not work. Food was also distributed by the state, and access to regular rations of grain rendered gleaning a marginal activity during that time. Dikovic (2016) also identifies the civil war that broke out in Yugoslavia toward the end of its life as a nation as deeply damaging to its social fabric. People living in modern-day Serbia are navigating a landscape wherein pre-socialist subsistence safety nets have been replaced, that replacement has been gutted, and ethno-nationalism has been stoked. Combine this with increased class-stratification due to neo-liberal economic reforms that promote the expansion of private property, in ever-larger shares, and the result is the ethnic- and class-antagonism based practice of stealing, in place of gleaning. In the United States, England, and other highly developed Western countries, theft is also common but the overall wealth and abundance of food is great enough that stealing someone's crop would hardly be worth the effort compared to stealing cars, electronics and other more valuable common-place items. This relative abundance, paired with extreme income inequality fosters the charitable approach to gleaning in modernity. This being said, many of the same

forces—namely neoliberalism and modern technology—were at play in shaping the modern reality of gleaning as both charity and theft.

This inquiry has sought to observe the evolution of gleaning from its origin to the modern day. The ancient practice has seen the transformation of society on a global scale, and has itself undergone such change that it is hardly recognizable, save its long-lived name. Waves of change ushered forth by technology, the rise of neoliberalism, and the near-abandonment of subsistence living in favor of capitalist economies accompanied by welfare states, have drastically altered the ways in which the poor seek their bread. Gleaning, in every era's sense of the verb, is a valuable lens through which to examine the social, economic, and technological facets of the human world. It is traceable as both a product of the past and an anchor for the future, remaining a token of poverty, and a moderate plea for redistribution. Thus far, it has always been with us, as have the poor.

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