Fenoaltea on Open Fields: A Comment

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Stefano Fenoaltea's characteristically insightful and elegant article on "Risk, Transaction Costs, and the Organization of Medieval Agriculture" (1976) argues that the peculiar scattering of plots characteristic of open fields cannot be explained by diversification against localized disasters. In a series of articles published since Fenoaltea wrote his piece I have pinned my flag to the mast he is trying to shoot down (McCloskey, 1975a, b, 1976). I would therefore like to indicate here why I believe Fenoaltea's objections to diversification, although ingeniously conceived, are at present not decisive.

Fenoaltea points out that if alternative forms of insurance were available and cheap it would be silly for a medieval peasant to suffer the inconvenience of self-insurance by scattering. This is true and important, and finds a place in my version of the history of open fields at its end (McCloskey, 1975a, pp. 117–118; 1976, last section): On the eve of massive enclosure in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the lower interest rates on loans, the better facilities for storage of grain, and the enrichment of the peasantry all make self-insurance less valuable. Where we disagree is on the significance of loans, charity, and storage in earlier centuries. Did a medieval peasant in difficulty have cheap access to relief? At present the question is an open one, not, so to speak, enclosed by a stout fence of fact. For what they are worth I offer the following bits of evidence on Fenoaltea's conjecture (discussed in my papers mentioned above): Interest rates on consumption loans were high in medieval England, as they are nowadays in poor countries (cf. Tun Wai, 1957-58, p. 102; Pollock and Maitland, 1898, p. 469); the church might be expected to have been an important source of charity, but was not (cf. Coulton 1931, p. 296; Pound, 1971, p. 22); and storage of grain in the wet climate of Northwestern Europe was so poor that general dearths were common (McCloskey, 1976). Fenoaltea might well reply that these alternative methods of insurance would have been cheaper had scattering not existed where it did, but the subjunctive mood of the verb makes such a reply difficult (although not impossible) to test. I believe that my view of medieval peasant life as selfish, hazardous, and short is more in accord than his with the views of the

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medievalists on whom both Fenoaltea and I, rank amateurs in the field, must depend.

Fenoaltea puts forward an alternative explanation of scattering, namely, that peasants might have held soils of varied quality in order to smooth out their schedules of work—planting and harvesting chiefly—over the agricultural year. The conjecture is again ingenious, and shares with the hypothesis of diversification a rich array of observable implications. I look forward to empirical research on the matter, exhibiting, say, the time budget of a typical peasant in the Middle Ages or modern experimental evidence on the loss from badly timed planting or harvesting.

Fenoaltea recognizes that, just as my explanation must contend with evidence (if any) on cheap substitutes for self-insurance, his must contend with evidence (if any) on cheap employment of labor in rush times. M. M. Postan reckoned that in the thirteenth century one-half the tenantry of the 104 English manors he studied were full- or part-time laborers on other men's land (Postan 1966, p. 622). Fenoaltea meets this with another conjecture fruitful in observable implications, namely, that hired labor would inevitably be less energetic in other men's service than in their own. This is, of course, a problem that must always be solved with wage labor, usually by the threat of dismissal. Whether or not dismissal was a potent threat remains to be seen. In the meantime I look forward again to evidence on the cost of supervising wage labor drawn from records of payments to manorial officers, comparisons of medieval productivity on owner-operated and wage-work farms, cases in manorial courts on hired plowing shoddily done, and testimony that the hiring of labor was expensive, laborers few and proud, and relatives unavailable to work a day harvesting an overripe crop. Lacking such evidence one must conclude that however promising they are, Fenoaltea's conjectures remain untested.

There is one testable implication of the two alternative explanations of scattering on which some evidence is now in. The scheduling explanation implies that output would be higher on open fields than on enclosed; the diversification explanation implies that output would be lower. It would appear from the evidence of rents on open and enclosed land from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century (McCloskey, 1975b, pp. 151-60) that output was in fact lower.

Finally, on its own grounds the explanation from diversification has been tested and found robust, while scheduling has not yet been. The two are not mutually exclusive, but if diversification can be shown to be sufficient to explain the amount of scattering that actually occured, the attractiveness of the alternatives, partible inheritance, common plowing, and egalitarianism, as well as Fenoaltea's, would be reduced. In an elaborate essay on the subject (McCloskey, 1976; perhaps overelaborate, but the task is difficult to accomplish briefly and elegantly) I have shown that diversification passes this test. The essay draws on the records of medieval

yields and tenures, early modern innovations in cropping, nineteenth-century experiments, and modern anthropological studies to show that medieval peasants did indeed scatter their plots to diversify against hazard.

Fenoaltea's work is always a pleasure to read and is usually persuasive. In this instance, however, the conjecture, for all its testable charm, has not been tested. It has yet to enter the lists of empirical combat against the Knight Hazard—himself, to be sure, not invincible, but armored and mounted, and well tested in the preliminary rounds.

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Fenoaltea on Open Fields: A Reply*

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I have argued (Fenoaltea, 1976a) that the open fields can be understood as a productivity-maximizing system: Individuals held diversified portfolios of land to save (labor market) transaction costs in optimizing the schedule of cultivation; communal coordination ensured positive externalities, and was essentially costless in the presence of an underlying consensus as to the most desirable use of the land. To my mind, risk aversion dictated not the structure of the open fields but hard work, abstinence, and storage. Donald McCloskey characterizes these views as conjecture, with no evidence in their favor and some against them; and he claims to have established the empirical validity of his own model of the open fields as behavior toward risk. While I admire the erudition and ingenuity displayed in McCloskey (1976), I do not consider it a successful test of his hypothesis; and I believe the evidence supports my model over his. Let me take up his points in order.

McCloskey and I both believe that scattering represented systematic diversification, and that diversification stabilized individual output; we differ on the value (cost) of that stabilization benefit.[1] McCloskey (1976, p. 125) believes that medieval peasants paid about 10% of their income to obtain it; I believe that it was quasi-free, because it amounted to no more than a stabilization of output *shares* that disappears upon aggregation to the village level and could have been readily reproduced without sacrificing productivity (e.g., by interest-free credit rationed in accord with the publicly known incidence of relatively favorable or unfavorable agricultural conditions; Fenoaltea, 1976a, pp. 131 ff., 144n).[2] Do "the views of the

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*This is a reply to "Fenoaltea on Open Fields: A Comment," by Donald McCloskey, that appears in the preceding pages. References to McCloskey are to this comment, unless otherwise identified.

[1] McCloskey's use of "diversification" as the shorthand label for his particular model of scattering is unfortunate, since it applies equally to mine (and indeed to most others); such phrases as "Fenoaltea's objections to diversification" should not be taken literally. Conversely, "the inconvenience of self-insurance by scattering" is not an agreed-upon fact, but precisely the point at issue.

[2] This credit arrangement could have been formal or informal. Even a formal arrangement, with communal administration and enforcement, would have required no more organization than open-field villages actually possessed (e.g., Ault, 1972); and the public knowledge of different plots' response to particular agricultural conditions is precisely the knowledge that