Scene on Radio: Capitalism
Episode 2: BC: Before Capitalism
Transcript

Lilly Clark, interviewer: When I say – when you hear the word capitalism, what comes to mind?

Mark, Columbus, Maryland: Selling and buying, you know, exchanging of goods for services, goods for money, that kind of thing.

Julie, Tucson: Capitalism, ooh. I guess people spending too much money on things that we don't need.

Alvin, Tucson: It's all about, you know, I'm going to make as much money as I can – ideally stay within the law, but people oftentimes go outside the law if it means having the most money. And it's money, money, money, money, money. They never have enough money.

Women Speaker: It’s not to me a terrible word. What comes to mind is production, and people buying what they need.

Mark, Maryland: It's a good system, with the exception of people who game the system.

Elaine, Tucson: Oh, it's not to me a terrible word. What comes to mind is production and people buying what they need.

Lilly Clark: And when I say the word capitalism, what comes to mind for you?

Mark, Tucson: [Pause] Political piracy.

Alana, Tucson: Torture.

Muhammad, Tucson: So, I don't necessarily think capitalism is the worst thing. Socialism is far more worse.

Carlos, Raleigh: It makes me think of men wearing suits.

Susan, Tucson: Rich people. (Laughs.) Yeah, Not me. (Laughs)

Music: Lili: Facts? Equanimity/Osis? ParentsChoice/Osis?

Karen Dempsey, Cosmeston Village, Wales: So, here we have the latrine, which is like basically a bench with two holes put in it. Arse shaped, shall we say? (Laughs)

John Biewen: Ellen, this last bit I recorded in Wales. I was walking around this restored medieval village with a pair of scholars, learning about the lives of folks there in the Middle Ages.

Ellen McGirt: That is very cool! And they're actually showing you a medieval family's outhouse.

John Biewen: Yes. It's a handsome two-holer, in a little covered shed behind the house. Though these experts said that in fact, latrines like this were not common in rural villages in that region in medieval times. So, the people who run the site probably added it for the tourists.

John Biewen: So you think it's unlikely they had this? Where would they have done their business, then?

Karen Dempsey: I would say a collection in a bucket, a night soil bucket, and then emptied into a particular area.

Ben Jervis: Yeah, it's material that can be added to the manure heap, isn't it, ultimately?

John Biewen: Right, right.

Ellen McGirt: And that's some very deep reporting, John.

John Biewen: (Laughs) I know, right?

Ellen McGirt: Listen you've spent a lot of time over the last year diving into history for this series.

John Biewen: Yes. In particular, I've spent a *lot* of time trying to understand how and when capitalism took hold in the world, how that all went down.

Ellen McGirt: Well, in search of that unified theory of capitalism, I'm guessing the answers aren't simple.

John Biewen: Not at all.

Ellen McGirt: For one thing, we need to be able to say, what *is* capitalism? What exactly are we talking about? Because it's not just markets. People all over the world have traded stuff for thousands of years. Some folks started using money to buy and sell things as early as 25-hundred years ago, long before capitalism came along.

John Biewen: Yes. So, what makes capitalism *capitalism*? And you know, just based on the word itself, I think it has something to do with capital?

Ellen McGirt: I think you're exactly right. And what people do with it, I would say. Using money to make more money. Not a thing I was ever very good at. But at least, that's one core piece of the definition.

John Biewen: We'll have more to say about this, in this episode and others. Our working understanding of capitalism will reveal itself as we hear how people built capitalist practices. Obviously, this economic system didn't have a single launch date.

Ellen McGirt: Right, so it didn't happen all at once, and it appeared in different parts of the world at different times, sometimes centuries apart.

John Biewen: But most economic historians would say early capitalism took shape over a couple of centuries – first in western Europe and most powerfully in England. And that it really kind of revved into motion about five hundred years ago.

Ellen McGirt: And that's an important point. It was a time of profound change in Europe, with the gradual breakdown of what came before: the medieval world, and feudalism.

John Biewen: So that's where our story really gets going, here in Episode Two. In the time BC: before capitalism.

Theme music:

John Biewen: From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 7: *Capitalism*. In which we explore: How did capitalism as we know it come to be? What were the forces that led people to build this system and to shape it as they did over time?

Ellen McGirt: And, in this moment when a lot of people feel our economic system isn't working well for a whole lot of people, or other living things, we'll consider what to do about that.

John Biewen: I'm John Biewen, producer and host of the show.

Ellen McGirt: And I'm Ellen McGirt, a business journalist and John's co-host for Season 7.

Theme music

John Biewen: In the Middle Ages, societies could be found all over the world that were roughly similar in overall wealth, technology, what we might call "advancement." Aside from the outfits and hairstyles, things didn't look all that different from one place to the next.

Ellen McGirt: Think about it, there were dozens of complex societies on the Indian subcontinent. And you had those West African empires: Mali, Songhai, and Ghana. And the Mongol dynasty dominated most of Eurasia for most of the 13th century.

Movie Sound, "Mongol": Horse nickers, man singing

John Biewen: This sound is from the movie, "Mongol," about Ghengis Khan.

“Mongo:” Man yells, battle starts – swords, grunts…

John Biewen: The Mongols built the largest Empire ever, by land mass, up to that time. Only the British Empire would surpass it.

Ellen McGirt: And here in the Western Hemisphere, more recent scholarship has found that before Columbus showed up, the population of the Americas was bigger than that of Europe. Indigenous Americans farmed and in many places lived in highly structured villages.

John Biewen: But we’re gonna start in the British Isles – a completely unremarkable corner of the world in the Middle Ages. Because it was there, and elsewhere in western Europe, that people would start doing capitalism on a big scale. Capitalism’s rise, and Europe’s move into so-called modernity, came after the breakdown of feudalism.

Ellen McGirt: Let’s pause on feudalism for a second. It stands for different things, depending on who’s using the word. But for our purposes, here’s what I picture when I hear feudalism: that the vast majority of people are peasants, and they’re living and working on the land. A large percentage are serfs, meaning they're not free, and that they’re essentially the property of the manor where they live and work.

John Biewen: Overseeing those peasants, exploiting them and also protecting them from bandits and marauding armies, you've got your lords. Sometimes it's the head of a monastery. In turn, the lord pays taxes and provides military support to the nobles above him, and ultimately the monarch, the king or queen, who owns all the land.

Ellen McGirt: Now, the details of these arrangements vary in different times and places, even from one manor to the next. You've also got smaller groups of people playing other, relatively privileged roles: The clergy, the craftspeople in the guilds, burghers or merchants in towns and cities.

John Biewen: And this is a key feature that's always mentioned in school: there's virtually no social or economic mobility. Just about everybody will live and die in the social station they were born into. And if there's one more thing most of us have heard about life under feudalism, it goes something like this:

> **Diane Morgan, "Cunk on Earth":** At the time, most people's lives were as grim and joyless as my uncle Martin. Their only hobbies were doing back-breaking work, dying of the plague, or being tortured. As far as they were concerned, this was all there was to life.

John Biewen: That's Diane Morgan, in her satirical history show, "Cunk on Earth."

Ellen McGirt: She's very funny, but it's hard to tell if she's spoofing medieval people and their plight, or those of us alive today and the way we talk about people in the Middle Ages.

John Biewen: Maybe both. Our popular histories and movies set in medieval times tend to focus on royalty or maybe some grisly wars – I'm thinking of "Braveheart." If peasants even come into the picture, they're usually presented – well, like Cunk on Earth just did.

Music

Ellen McGirt: That's fair, and most of us usually just don't show much interest in the regular lives of regular medieval people. But you did John, and you traveled to the UK to take some walks into Britain's medieval and feudal past. Tell us what you learned and then we'll talk more on the other side.

Music

Sound: Car door opens, dinging, chattering voices, car door opens…

John Biewen: Let's face it: there is something kind of forced about getting out of a car, taking a short walk down a trail, and trying to imagine you've stepped back in time seven, eight, nine hundred years.

> **Karen Dempsey, walking:** And then we'll get up here and we'll cross over another piece of water and we'll be into the medieval village.

John Biewen: But the Cosmeston Medieval Village, on the southern coast of Wales, is not cheesy or theme-parkish. A village was here, going back to the eleven hundreds – a village of fifty to a hundred people. Its first lord was a Frenchman who grabbed this piece of land as the Norman conquest spread from England to Wales. Researchers started excavating the site in the 1980s. Later, the local community, the Vale of Glamorgan, built this replica village. It's a cluster of thatched cottages and barns, made of stone – though, I was told, they were probably wooden in the Middle Ages. There's a pig yard, and a brewhouse and oven that the villagers would have shared, with the lord probably charging a fee for their use.

> **Karen Dempsey:** And they have reinstated some of the gardens, and they have, it's kind of like a living museum in a sense? …

John Biewen: Two scholars graciously agreed to show me around:

Karen Dempsey: I'm Dr. Karen Dempsey. I'm a later medieval archaeologist. I kind of specialize in gender archaeology, but I guess I cover things like medieval castles, settlement households….

Ben Jervis: Hi, I'm Ben Jervis. I'm a reader in medieval archaeology at Cardiff University. So, I'm an archaeologist who's really interested in the everyday lives of medieval people.

[T7/42.45 sfx a few steps, T7/*9.25 sfx walking]

John Biewen: Ben Jervis says the villagers probably raised wheat and barley on the surrounding fields, and they would have had animals – chickens, pigs, sheep for spinning wool, cows….

Ben Jervis: Certainly dairying was important here based on the ceramic evidence. We've got pottery that was used for processing dairy products.

John Biewen: OK, so this one is marked as a peasant's cottage. [Reading:] "Typical peasant farmer's house."

Karen Dempsey: You're coming up a couple of steps here and bending your head to go through the door, which is a timber….

Ben Jervis: Um, I think the first thing you notice in here is it's quite dark. Takes a bit of time for your eyes to adjust.

John Biewen: The cottage is one room, with no windows, the size of a large living room in an American house today. In a typical peasant household, several generations would have lived together here. I ask Karen and Ben to help me imagine the start of a day in a cottage like this one.

Karen Dempsey: You know, and the privacy wasn't the same in the medieval period as you have today, so you're two and three people to a bed, maybe even topped and tailed. So you know there's quite a lot of a waking up process. Someone is stoking the hearth, probably up first boiling water or making porridge or whatever breakfast items that they had for that day. Waking the kids, but also the more senior members of the household being up and out and open the door, let's say in the summer anyway, to let in light so you probably don't have to light a candle or you're not reliant on the hearth. The outer household is waking up. There's definitely birds, the cock crowing. Maybe even the church bells are going. If you live near a religious institute, they've probably been up

doing bells throughout the night, so there's a huge soundscape going on around you before probably you've even opened your eyes. / Putting away the beds, rolling up the linen. Bringing in sticks or peat for the fire, boiling, sweep out the floor, and everything gets tidied away and people start their jobs.

Ben Jervis: Whoever needs to go out to the fields will presumably do so…

Karen Dempsey: Emptying the night bucket, maybe…

Ben Jervis: Yeah. Gathering their tools together. We've seen tools kind of strewn and sort of stowed around the house, haven't we? Generally, if the fields are a way away and there's a lot of work to do, they'll effectively take a picnic with them so they don't have to come back to the house in the middle of the day.

Karen Dempsey: Going to church, saying prayers, a big part of – possibly even reciting prayers as you work. Going to visit neighbors, bringing people stuff, getting your bread from the bread ovens….

Ben Jervis: And of course that weekly routine of maybe going to the local market on market day….

John Biewen: Much of this labor is in service to the lord and his family in the manor house. The manor house here at Cosmeston hasn't been reconstructed, but it stood at one end of the village, a distance away from the peasant cottages. This village did not have its own church – the other vital institution for any community in medieval Europe.

Karen Dempsey: So the medieval people would have probably traveled to nearby – there's other nearby manors which would have had a parish church on them solely as one. But it is unusual for a settlement not to have a relatively adjacent medieval parish church because you know, going to church and the practices of religion was just imbued in everyday life.

Music:

John Biewen: In most ways, life here was self-contained. No money changed hands for most day-to-day dealings. People raised the food they ate and traded with neighbors – a few of my eggs for some beans and carrots from your garden. A peasant family might work three days a week on the lord's fields, the rest of the workdays on strips of land designated for the subsistence of their household. The agreement between the lord and the peasant involves the whole family, so everyone, besides the youngest children, is a worker – yet nobody punches a clock.

Karen Dempsey: There is loads of leisure time.

Ben Jervis: There's certainly an ebb and flow to the calendar, the agricultural calendar. So you have, harvest time obviously is a massively busy time and the time when you're sowing your crop is a massively busy time. But then there are lulls in between and you see that in the way in which certain regions specialize in particular types of craft activities, for example.

John Biewen: The lines between work, childcare, and play are blurred. Researchers find evidence of board games, including at the Cosmeston village.

Ben Jervis: So yeah, there is time, and you can imagine sitting around the hearth singing, telling stories, those kind of things, which don't leave any trace, historical or archaeological, beyond kind of folklore and word of mouth, do they, really?

Karen Dempsey: Storytelling of big events, of heroic characters that are kind of in a sense can be seen as foundation myths for different societies. You know, King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, or in Ireland you have Cu Chulainn and the Band of Warriors, or you have the trials and tribulations of the people

who went on crusade to the Near East. / You know, there is a strong narrative tradition, and that's why the hearth is such an important part of the life of the household, both during the day and for cooking and for the evening, for this heat, light, and kind of the creation of social bonds or the passing down of family memory.

Music

John Biewen: There's no denying that for serfs and poorer peasants, life was hard. The typical feudal arrangement was grossly exploitative. The lord skimmed the wealth that peasant workers produced, often leaving them just enough to survive. The average lifespan in medieval Europe was in the thirties, mainly because at least a quarter of all children died. At the same time, for most peasant families, the village on the manor was home – a place they and their children could expect to stay.

Ben Jervis: I think when you think of the idea of hereditary plots and things, that becomes really important as well, doesn't it? Because you're living in the house that was your father's house, potentially your father's father's house, whatever. And you know, there are instances of unbaptized, presumably unbaptized children being found under house floors. So they were being – they couldn't be buried in the churchyard because they weren't yet baptized, so they're being

buried in the home. Having that very strong relationship with place, and household, family, community, all together.

John Biewen: Most peasants had something else in their favor that would be taken away in the post-feudal world, under capitalism. They had access to land: the plots assigned to their family, and common lands where they could fend for themselves. They could gather timber and firewood, or graze a few cows or sheep. They could hunt and fish.

Ben Jervis: We quite often find weights for fishing, and fishing hooks, on excavations, particularly around the coast but also places where there are rivers…

Karen Dempsey: There probably is, the river is probably close enough.

Music

John Biewen: Archeologists found few signs of development at the site of Cosmeston Village after the middle of the 14th century. So, it's possible that the Black Death decimated the community when it swept through in the late 1340s.

T7/22.40 John Biewen: Is there anything about – uhh (laughs) – about medieval life that you envy? Based on what you understand of it, that you would like to have back? Anything at all?

Karen Dempsey: God, no. (laughs) That's the honest answer.

John Biewen: As a woman, in particular, Dempsey finds this a no-brainer.

Karen Dempsey: Let's say, even, I was an elite lady and I had my ladies in waiting and, but I was bound to behave in a particular way to restrict my movement, to have as many children as I could possibly bear – and I mean that in all senses of the word, bear. You know, health care, obviously. Yes, of course there was health care and there was ways of being, but it was nothing like we receive today in a, yes, over-medicalized environment, sure. But no, literacy levels were low. Um, I don't see it. I mean, yes, like, okay, if we have more bees and plant life and things like that, there's definitely, biodiversity is better. But yeah, I wouldn't envy the medieval people at all.

John Biewen: A few minutes later, though, we're wrapping up our stroll around the village, and Karen says something that seems to contradict what she just said – or

maybe it doesn't. She's making a broader, more philosophical point. Change happens. And change means trade-offs.

> **Karen Dempsey:** I loathe the narrative of progress, like progressing towards what? (Laughs.) I really do. And just thinking of, / would I like to live in the medieval world? No. Do we have a different world now? Yes. Are some parts of it better? Yes. Are some parts of it worse? *Yes.* So, I don't think progress in terms of making things better really exists in that way.
>
> **Music - fades out**
>
> [BREAK]

John Biewen: In the Middle Ages, across the world and in Europe, *most* people lived and worked on the land. But not everyone did.

Eleanor Janega: And this is, I think, a really interesting thing because people don't tend to think about cities in the medieval period. Which I think is a shame because I love medieval cities. And medieval cities kind of represented the same thing that cities

do now, which is opportunity, right? You know, the kind of bright lights, big city thing certainly existed at the time.

John Biewen: I'm in central London now, with Eleanor Janega.

> **Eleanor Janega:** I'm a medieval historian and an early modern historian, I suppose, and I work at the London School of Economics.

John Biewen: Yes, Eleanor, who's kind of a rockstar among medievalists, is American – she's from Tacoma, Washington. She's been in London for more than 15 years.

> **Eleanor Janega:** And London's really quite big for medieval cities as well. You know, Paris is the biggest city in medieval Europe but London is oftentimes the second biggest. So, you know, you'll have around ten thousand, twenty-thousand people sometimes, and that's a lot in the medieval period for Europe.

John Biewen: Did you hear that? In the year 1100, London's population was about 15-thousand – to us, a thousand years later, a small town. Historians estimate the city had grown to 80-thousand two centuries later, but then the Black Death, in 1348, cut that number in half.

Sound: Smithfield street ambience

John Biewen: London, of course, is a *very* old city, going back to Roman times, but physical evidence of its deeper history isn't easy to find. That's why Eleanor brought me here to talk about medieval London – a place that's now a bustling neighborhood near the middle of the city but back then was a field outside the city walls.

Eleanor Janega: So we're on the Smithfield right now, um, and the Smithfield was any number of things. It is a place of execution. It's a big place for things like tournaments and jousting. It was a meat market – we still have a big Victorian meat market here now. But, you know, it's where you kind of drive your animals into town and then slaughter them the next day and butcher them. But it's also one of the only places you can come to see some medieval buildings in London that didn't burn down or get bombed.

John Biewen: That is, these buildings had to survive the Great Fire of 1666, and the Blitz of 1940-41. We walk under an arched gatehouse, built more recently, in the late 16th century.

Eleanor Janega: We're in the churchyard. There's big London plane trees all around us. Big old wisteria, which we've just missed blooming, unfortunately, to

one side. And it's just a really special place, especially because just behind one of these plane trees, over to our left, if we're facing the door, is the oldest house in London, which dates to the 15th century.

John Biewen: The church we're heading into is older than that.

Eleanor Janega: Yeah, let's go in.

Sound: click of latch, going in

John Biewen: The Church of St. Bartholomew the Great, with its flint exterior and decorative arches, just had its 900th birthday. It was founded in 1123. Inside, Eleanor whispers, out of respect.

Eleanor Janega, half-whispering: It's very interesting when you come in because the outside can look quite early modern because of the steeple, because of things like that. But when you come in, you really see how medieval the bones are. You know, if you just look at these rounded arches, the way that they're using columns and everything, this is definitely high medieval. And that's really special.

Sound: going back outside

John Biewen: Given the global empire that England would become, Eleanor says, it's important to grasp that that happened later:

> **Eleanor Janega:** No one cared about England in the medieval period, you know…

John Biewen: To illustrate the point: In 1382, the young King Richard the Second got himself married to Anne of Bohemia, the daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor, as part of a religious alliance. This meant the new queen would have to relocate from Prague to this island kingdom in the North Atlantic.

> **Eleanor Janega:** And before she was married off, it was a scandal in Prague. People were like, where? Where's *London*? You can't send a Czech girl to London. Like, they don't even – what do they *speak* up there? And you know she spoke five languages and was raised in Prague, which was a very important place, right?

John Biewen: But within England, London did stand as a beacon of prosperity, because it was the leading trading center for one valuable commodity: wool.

Eleanor Janega: Because, you know, if you live in a world without central heating or you've got to be outside all the time, you know, the miracle fiber that stays warm when it's wet is worth a lot of money. And England's not particularly great at producing crops or anything like that but it's fantastic for grazing sheep. So absolutely tons of wool is produced, and then that gets brought into London, or indeed Norwich, places like that. And then sometimes it's made into cloth and sometimes it's just sold on wholesale, especially to countries in the lowlands. What I always kind of say is it's the equivalent of a petrostate but for wool.

John Biewen: So, there was some money sloshing around in London. Janega says the city grew because peasants, especially young people, trickled in from the countryside. Some ran away from the manor to find work as a stable boy or a scullery maid – some wound up in the sex trade. Luckier migrants came to the city with an apprenticeship that might even land them a coveted spot in a guild – as a baker, carpenter, or candle maker.

Eleanor Janega: So, even if you're a peasant, if your parents get enough money and you get permission from your Lord, you can be sent away to learn a craft. Usually it's for a period of about seven years and you kind of work for free and you live in somebody's household and you learn the trade.

John Biewen: From time to time, peasants also showed up in London, and other cities where nobles lived, carrying axes and pitchforks.

> **Eleanor Janega:** So, they've got a monument to the Peasants' Revolt over here, which I think is really great….

John Biewen: See, Smithfield, where Eleanor and I are standing, is also the place where the epic Peasants' Revolt of 1381, led by Wat Tyler, effectively came to an end.

> **Eleanor:** I love the Wat Tyler's rebellion peasants. They're my very favorite people.

Music

John Biewen: Before we say more about that attempted revolution, some context. There's a common idea about peasants in the Middle Ages, that they meekly accepted their place in the scheme of things, or were just too ignorant to imagine a different world. In a classic "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" scene, where the traveling king encounters peasants working in a muddy field, the flouting of that stereotype is part of

the joke.

> **Graham Chapman, Monty Python and the Holy Grail:** Well, I am King!

> **Eric Idle, as peasant:** Oh, king, eh, very nice. And how'd you get that, eh? By exploiting the workers. By hanging on to outdated imperialist dogma which perpetuates the economic and social differences in our society…

John Biewen: In fact, though, a medieval peasant speaking out against class division – to the king himself, no less – is not far-fetched.

> **Eleanor Janega:** No, they knew it sucked. (Laughs.) You know, peasants could really understand that they were disadvantaged and that they were treated abysmally. And, you know, they periodically tried to do something about it – you know, kind of, especially the 14th century is a big one for that.

John Biewen: In the 13th and 14th centuries, peasants revolted in northern France, on the coast of Flanders in present-day Belgium, and in Florence, Italy. Historians say feudalism was already beginning to crumble by the early 1300s, as peasants demanded a bigger piece of the pie and some voted with their feet, running off to cities to find work. Then came the Bubonic Plague of the late 1340s. It killed a third of the

European population, maybe more. This created a huge labor shortage, giving peasants – the ones who survived – more leverage. They demanded lower rents and higher wages, and got them, for a while. The ruling class tried to push back, passing laws to limit the wages and mobility of the peasantry, stoking anger in the countryside.

> **Film, "Medieval England: The Peasants' Revolt": Christopher Logue as John Ball:** We must build a great society where men are born free, live free, work for whom they will, where they will. Free of humiliation, free of poverty, free of forced labor, free of the rich.
>
> **Film Narrator:** The time: 1381. The place: England. The man: John Ball, preacher, whom some called mad. (Brass music) …

John Biewen: This is from an educational film, produced in 1969, about the English Peasants' Revolt. The uprising was a defining episode in late medieval history. On top of the general discontent among the peasantry, the immediate spark was a series of poll taxes, or head taxes, that the Crown levied to pay for England's unending war with France. The poorest people had to pay as much as the richest.

> **Film: Peasant man:** It's more than we can afford! It's as much as we earn in a month!

John Biewen: When the government realized that a lot of peasants were dodging the tax, it sent commissioners out to the countryside to collect. Those officials, underestimating the peasants' fury, abused and humiliated villagers…

Film audio: Tax man: Come here, girl!

Murmuring voices…

John Biewen: …including young women.

Film: Tax Man: Not only do I want to…

Father: Let her go, stop that!

Tax Man: Who speaks?

Father: Her father!

Tax Man: Oh! A serf commands me to let her go. You will pay twice, I think. You will pay the poll tax and you will pay for your insolence.

Father: No!

John Biewen: In a village in Essex, a crowd of peasants attacked and killed some of the king's men.

Film, Father: Yes! (Groan as he stabs the tax man. Shouts and blaring music)

John Biewen: And the revolt was on.

Fim sound: Cacophony

John Biewen: Word spread, and soon up to sixty thousand peasants marched toward London. On the way, they killed local tax collectors and burned records at manors and abbeys. Wat Tyler, who was probably a roof tiler – thus his name – became their leader. But the radical preacher, John Ball, was the inspirational voice of the rebellion. He'd been roaming the countryside speaking against the poll taxes and the oppressive structures of feudalism, against inequality itself.

Film, "Medieval England: The Peasants' Revolt": John Ball: My friends, unless we bring God's law into our land, we will be ruled by devils. … We build the castles, but who looks out of the windows? We pick the grapes, but who drinks the wine? This is our land, and we must take it.

Eleanor Janega: As they marched on London, John Ball gave these big rousing speeches and the peasants, who were largely kind of coming from Kent, the countryside down in the southeast, came, stormed London, let everyone out of prison – which I think is excellent because prison is mostly for debtors in the

medieval period – um, killed the nobles they could get a hold on, burnt down the Savoy Palace, and a lot of the times destroyed the, kind of, wealth therein. Some people stole it, but a lot of people just destroyed it because the point was that they wanted an actual, equitable society. They thought that lands should be held in common, that they shouldn't be being charged to farm. You know, they're the ones who are kind of producing everything around here. Why is it that they're paying rich people for that privilege?

John Biewen: The rebels beheaded two of the King’s top officials: the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Treasurer. Like almost everything in medieval Europe, the peasants’ protest found its justification in Christianity.

Eleanor Janega: And you know, there's no such thing as a conception of rights in the medieval period. No one thinks that you have a right to anything. But there is a conception of the equality of spirit and of the soul. And what the rebels are really saying is that if we are all equals, you know, on a religious level, if our souls are all equal, then why doesn't society reflect this?

Film John Ball: God made the fields and trees but he didn’t say, I make this field for lord monk and I make that tree for his lady wife. As far as God was concerned, everything was held for everybody.

John Biewen: On June 15th, 1381, Wat Tyler and a group of rebels met with King Richard at Smithfield, to discuss terms for ending the revolt. The king at first agreed to Tyler's demands: to end serfdom, give all the church's vast lands to the people, and grant an amnesty to the rebels – all promises he would later break: But before the meeting could wrap up, insults were thrown:

> **Film, King's man:** You're a lout, Tyler! An ignorant lout!
>
> **Anthony Hopkins as Wat Tyler:** You say that again and I'll have your head!
>
> **King's man:** You're a pig-faced lout, Tyler. And a cheat and a liar!
>
> **Wat Tyler:** Come here!!

John Biewen: Things turned violent, and one of the king's men stabbed Wat Tyler. [**Sound:** Ruckus, wild music] Tyler was then decapitated. In the following days, government soldiers slaughtered hundreds of rebels and hanged more than a thousand others. John Ball was drawn and quartered, his head stuck on a pike on London Bridge. The plaque at Smithfield includes these words:

> **Eleanor Janega, reading:** "Things cannot go on well in England, nor ever will, until everything shall be in common, when there shall be neither vassal nor Lord and all distinctions leveled." Which is a quote from the preacher John Ball.

Music

John Biewen: The Peasants' Revolt was crushed, but it succeeded, too. The government issued no more poll taxes and stopped trying to push down wages. Over the next century or two, feudalism died. Making way for a new struggle: what would replace it?

Music

Ellen McGirt: So, first of all, John, wow, what a story. And who knew class consciousness was even a thing so long ago? Which leads me to a question. Why is it that most people — and I do mean Americans — don't know all of this?

John Biewen: Well, you know, let's not get into how much history Americans know in general, and how interested we are in it or not. But in previous seasons on this show, we've talked about Bacon's Rebellion, in the 1670s in Virginia, and *Shays's* Rebellion, which happened in Massachusetts in the 1780s. Most Americans don't know much if anything about those uprisings, either.

Ellen McGirt: OK, so maybe it's about something else. Maybe the people who've shaped our national narratives weren't too excited about stories of lower-class people rising up against the wealthy classes.

John Biewen: In Britain, too: Eleanor Janega pointed out that the historical marker about the Peasants' Revolt wasn't put up at Smithfield until 2015. She told me it was only in the last few decades that the establishment in the UK admitted that Wat Tyler and John Ball and the rebels had a point. Anyway, this is a series about capitalism, so I think in this episode we want to reflect on this pre-capitalist society in medieval Europe, and what makes it *not* capitalist. But before we get to that, let's highlight an obvious point about feudalism: The exploitation of the many by the few.

Ellen McGirt: Right, and it is blatant. I have an image of something like a toothpaste tube, except it's filled with money and food and all the stuff people need. The elites and the system they've created are squeezing it from the bottom. The wealth of the society is produced at the bottom, by the peasantry, but most of it is pushed out the top, where the ruling classes gather it up and keep it for themselves.

John Biewen: Yes. Leaving the vast majority of the people just barely enough to survive – and to reproduce more peasant laborers. It'll be interesting to think about how much this basic dynamic changes, or doesn't so much, under capitalism.

Ellen McGirt: But, hearing these scholars describing medieval life, there are important differences, too. One is the relationship between working people and their "employers," to use the modern term. Under feudalism, peasants lived where they worked, and they essentially belonged to their employer and their place of employment. There was no separation, no real independence. None of this sense that we have today, as workers earning wages or a salary, of being free agents, exercising our options in the labor "marketplace" – if we're lucky enough to have options.

John Biewen: And I can't imagine wanting to give up that autonomy to become a serf. But it does cut both ways. For a lot of people, serfdom was the alternative to complete destitution and homelessness. There *were* homeless people in the Middle Ages, usually disabled folks or wounded soldiers who couldn't do much work, and they survived, if they did, by becoming beggars or bandits. But the number of vagrants, to use another term of the time, would actually increase – by a lot – in the world that replaced feudalism. More about that in our next episode.

Ellen McGirt: John, earlier, you made such an interesting point about access to shared lands – the commons. Peasant laborers usually didn't get a fixed wage or salary. What was fixed was how much they had to hand over to the lord, and the rest was theirs to keep.

John Biewen: And what they got to keep could be extremely meager, especially if the harvest was bad. But peasants could also scrape together more food and other resources for themselves on those shared, common lands, by hunting or fishing, or grazing their own animals for meat or milk or wool.

Ellen McGirt: I have to say, I'm with Karen Dempsey on this, you know, the professor you spoke with at the medieval village. I don't envy medieval peasants at all. But then again, I might if I were a child in 19th century London working twelve-hour days in a cotton mill.

John Biewen: Uh, yeah. So, OK, what about the folks at the top of the hierarchy in the Middle Ages: the nobility, the people hoovering up most of the wealth. Think about the difference in *their* economic behavior, in this "before capitalism" time, as opposed to the ownership class *in* capitalism. That difference seems fundamental to understanding what we mean by capitalism.

Ellen McGirt: You said earlier, half-jokingly, that a defining feature of capitalism is – hello – capital. And sure enough, under feudalism, capital is pretty much absent from the picture – if by capital you mean money that's used to make more money. That's

how today's economists typically use the word. The people running the show, the monarchs and lords, they did pile up wealth, but they just added it to the pile!

John Biewen: Or bought stuff with it. Or they gave some of it away. Out of generosity or to earn a ticket to heaven. Peasants had to tithe, too, turning over a tenth of what they produced to the local parish. But rich people, because they *had* the money, provided the big donations for those essential institutions, right? Churches and cathedrals; monasteries, which were also hospitals in many cases; shelters for people with leprosy.

Ellen McGirt: But whether they were spending it, sitting on it, or giving it away, rich folks did not use the wealth they acquired to create a lot more wealth. To put it another way, they didn't put their capital to work.

John Biewen: They didn't start corporations and build factories. There were no corporations to invest in. The first stock market wouldn't open for a few more centuries.

Ellen McGirt: I guess you could say rich people in medieval times were just the biggest consumers. They bought fancy furniture and drapes and silver for their castles and manor houses, which did keep the craftspeople in the guilds employed.

John Biewen: I think of something like Windsor Castle, the royal residence outside of London. It's said to be the oldest and largest occupied castle in the world. Have you ever been, Ellen?

Ellen McGirt: I have not.

John Biewen: I have not seen it, either, and I have to say it's not too high on my bucket list. William the Conqueror, the guy who led the Norman takeover of England in 1066? He built the first version of Windsor Castle, out of timber. Over the centuries it became this grand, walled complex, with sprawling manicured lawns and those endless stone buildings with a thousand rooms – like, actually, a thousand rooms.

Ellen McGirt: Oh, my goodness. Every one of them, I guess, filled with hand-crafted, antique, luxury stuff.

John Biewen: What is a place like that except, essentially, a storehouse for the riches of the British monarchy, and, especially back in the day, I guess, a fortress to protect those riches?

Ellen McGirt: As we said earlier, things were not so different in other empires at the time, in places like India, China, West Africa, where you had the rich ruling class, then everybody else – the peasants and enslaved people.

John Biewen: There were other societies that didn't have rulers hoarding the wealth, and shared things more-or-less equally. Indigenous cultures in parts of the Americas, Africa, and Asia – societies that were not feudalistic but certainly not capitalist, either.

Music

John Biewen: So, add it all up, and before capitalism, as we're gonna define it in this series, you just didn't have a lot of people amassing piles of wealth in the way that capitalists would.

Ellen McGirt: That's why you can look at those graphs showing global economic growth over the last, say, two thousand years – and the line is almost completely flat for ninety-percent of the time, just lying there at the bottom of the graph, before it shoots up in just the last couple of centuries.

John Biewen: Yes. According to one widely-used estimate of historic GDP, you could take all of the goods and services bought and sold by human beings, worldwide, in the

year 1000. That amount of economic activity was roughly equaled last year in just the nation of Greece, or the state of Kansas.

Ellen McGirt: Of course, the global population was a small fraction of what it is now, but still. Per capita GDP is estimated to have increased 13-fold – we're talking one thousand, three hundred percent – over the last millennium. With almost all of that increase coming since the Industrial Revolution.

John Biewen: For better, and for worse. As we said in Season 5, our climate season, GDP is just what it is: it's a tally of the production and sales of goods and services. It's not a measure of a society's health or well-being.

Ellen McGirt: In a world organized around capitalism, humans make and sell and buy a staggering amount of stuff. And it's undeniable that millions, even billions of us, have material wealth and comfort beyond the imagining of a medieval peasant. But billions of other people do not. And even in the country with the biggest GDP of all, the U.S., close to half of us live with economic insecurity.

John Biewen: The bigger picture is more troubling, because other measures have climbed sharply right along with global GDP: To name just two: the number of non-

human species driven to extinction each year, and the concentration of greenhouse gasses in earth's atmosphere.

Music

Ellen McGirt: Next time: The big shift. Capital takes control.

John Biewen: This episode was made by me, with Ellen McGirt and our story editor this season, Loretta Williams. Person-on-the-street interviews by Lilly Clark and Gabriela Glueck. Music by Lili Haydn, Michelle Osis, Alex Symcox, and Goodnight, Lucas. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Our website is sceneonradio.org. This season is produced in partnership with Imperative 21. The show is distributed by our friends at PRX. Scene on Radio comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.