

The Elgar Companion to Marxist Economics

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21. Feudalism

George C. Comninel

The idea of feudalism is enormously contested among historians and theorists of all stripes. With some notable exceptions, non-Marxist British historians have generally conceived 'feudalism' as a formal hierarchy of lords and fiefs – a 'technical' conception identified with F.L. Ganshof (Comninel, 2000a). Recently, whether feudalism in those terms ever even existed has been challenged (Reynolds, 1996). Marxists – and other socially oriented medievalists like Georges Duby (1968) – have instead followed Marc Bloch in focusing on 'feudal society', comprising peasants as well as lords (Comninel, 2000a). While often posed as alternatives, these views are compatible (to whatever extent a formal feudal hierarchy actually existed). Marxists concerned with feudalism as a system of class relations cannot, in any case, dismiss relations among lords as irrelevant.

Marxists, however, generally differ from non-Marxists in conceiving feudalism as one of a sequence of 'modes of production' or forms of class society. Usually grounded in a brief account of such modes by Marx, Marxist approaches must confront three basic sets of questions: (1) how, when and why was there a transition from ancient society – usually understood in terms of a 'slave mode of production' – to feudal society; (2) how should the class relations of feudalism be conceived; and (3) how, when and why was there a subsequent transition from feudalism to capitalism.

A further issue has been how, if at all, historical developments elsewhere relate to European feudalism. Focusing on any domination of peasants by landowners, some accounts have multiplied feudal and 'semi-feudal' societies across the globe. The debates over feudalism, therefore, remain too numerous and complex to detail in any short survey. Certain lines of enquiry, however, have been influential.

One crucial contribution was the 'Transition Debate' launched by Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb (1978). In retrospect, this mostly exposed the weakness of Marxist accounts of feudalism and the transition to capitalism down through the 1960s. Presuppositions about modes of production and historical processes bedevilled the debate, revealing how little agreement there was over Marx's ideas and methods, and how to apply them. The core disagreement was over Sweezy's contention that feudalism was fundamentally defined by the absence of market relations, lordly 'income' taking the form of compulsory labour by serfs, challenging Dobb's broader conception of feudalism as the appropriation of peasant surpluses through rent, whether in labour, kind or money. Ultimately, neither conception is adequate.

Despite its limitations, the debate importantly focused attention on the discussion of feudal rent in *Capital III*, chapter 47. Marx argued that, because peasants in the first instance produce to meet immediate household needs, 'surplus-labour for the nominal

owner of the land can only be extorted from them by other than economic pressure, whatever the form assumed may be'. Indeed:

all forms in which the direct labourer remains the 'possessor' of the means of production and labour conditions necessary for the production of his own means of subsistence, the property relationship must simultaneously appear as a direct relation of lordship and servitude, so that the direct producer is not free; a lack of freedom which may be reduced from serfdom with enforced labour to a mere tributary relationship.

In this context Marx uttered a striking statement of historical materialist method:

The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers . . . which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state.

Applying equally to capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, this statement dramatically underlines a crucial distinction between them. In the capitalist mode of production, surplus is appropriated through seemingly purely economic relations, formally distinct from relations of political power; in pre-capitalist modes of production no comparable separation of the political from the economic can exist. Instead, pre-capitalist surplus appropriation depends on 'extra-economic coercive force' (whether manifest or implicit). This recognition of the fundamentally extra-economic character of pre-capitalist class relations marked a significant theoretical advance.

When the Transition Debate began, Marx's *Grundrisse* was almost unknown. A small part concerning pre-capitalist economic formations was subsequently published in which Eric Hobsbawm confronted problems with mode of production analyses (1965); the whole appeared in 1973. This previously obscure work had considerable impact upon those attending to the Transition Debate. Perry Anderson, particularly, drew together elements from these sources in a highly original and influential account of the arc of Western European history from antiquity to capitalism (1974a, 1974b).

Anderson's work transformed the way feudalism was conceived by Marxists and non-Marxists alike by identifying 'parcellized sovereignty' as its specific form of pre-capitalist extra-economic coercion. He also rejected outright the idea that the feudal mode of production existed outside Europe, making the novel (often overlooked) argument that non-European societies must be investigated without preconceptions, looking for historically specific class relations and modes of production, rather than attempting to fit them into a European model. It is ironic, therefore, that his own analysis of European history is undercut precisely by its limitation to the usual few modes of production.

Anderson begins with an ancient world characterized by a slave mode of production. He argues this was self-limiting in its dependence on an external supply of slaves, causing a transition to feudalism during the later Roman Empire. Feudalism then characterized the entire Middle Ages, remaining dominant well into the modern era. The capitalist mode of production, however, developed in medieval urban interstices where Roman

legacies persisted, igniting economic take-off and eventually producing ‘bourgeois revolutions’ that established contemporary societies. This account has been challenged on several key points, from the existence of a slave mode of production to the idea of bourgeois revolution (Comninel, 1987; Wood, 1988). When taken as a whole, however, it also reveals how difficult it is to make sense of Western European history with just these three modes of production.

On the one hand, it is hard to comprehend the complex histories of ancient societies – from the early Athenian polis and early Roman republic, through the rise of Hellenistic monarchies and growth of Roman imperial power, the heyday of the *Pax Romana*, and ultimately the later Empire’s huge *latifundia* and stifling bureaucratism – based on the single idea of a slave mode of production. On the other hand, Anderson takes feudal society to have developed from the third through to the ninth centuries; then undergoing profound crisis and population collapse from the mid-fourteenth through fifteenth centuries; only to survive in revised and transitional form as the ‘Absolutist State’ through the eighteenth century. Little of the ancient world seems to fit the slave mode of production attributed to it, and of 1500 years of the feudal mode of production, 1100 are spent in transition or crisis!

Setting aside the overall account, it is striking that, although Anderson does more than simply acknowledge extra-economic coercion in conceiving feudalism, identifying its specific form to be ‘parcellized sovereignty’, he offers little more of substance in building on this. Instead, the largely unexamined possession of coercive power by holders of estates seems to develop into parcellized sovereignty merely through a long-term decline of central state power. The essential elements of transition from slave to feudal modes of production, then, are a replacement of household and barracks slaves by dependent peasant tenants (of various statuses), accompanied by an accelerating recession of public authority in Rome and its successor kingdoms. It is in these terms that the transition is conceived to unfold between the third and ninth centuries.

While this analysis asserts continuity at the level of the estate (indeed, it becomes hard to distinguish between Roman *latifundium* and medieval manor), it poorly accords with the substantial political and legal continuity at the level of the state that is now generally recognized in the early Middle Ages. In large part, this is because there is no place in Anderson’s account for the survival of large numbers of free persons not living as dependent tenants on lordly estates, for which the evidence is incontrovertible into the tenth century. Among historians who continue to think in terms of ‘feudal society’, there is, indeed, widespread recognition that it came into existence very rapidly between the later decades of the tenth century and the early eleventh century – centring on the year 1000 – through a ‘transformation’, or even ‘revolution’, based precisely on a parcellization of sovereign royal power, in the first instance among regional magnates, from whom it increasingly devolved, eventually reaching the level of individual *seigneuries* (Comninel, 2000a).

THE FEUDAL TRANSFORMATION AND FEUDAL MODE OF PRODUCTION

This sudden transformation of much of Western Europe, through the fragmentation of previously royal power in the empire established by Charlemagne, had enormous

consequences, marking a rupture far more profound than the 'fall' of Rome. To begin with, regional magnates erected fortifications and, as castellans, arrogated the fundamental royal powers of the *ban*: taxation, command and the provision of 'justice' in courts. Public courts that had continued to serve free men into the mid-tenth century thus became appurtenances of the estates of lords, whose primary relationship with peasants now took the form of territorial jurisdiction. As a result, villages of free peasants, previously independent of lords and manors, were suddenly subject to the arbitrary authority of a lord – through judgements in his courts, obligations to build and maintain fortifications and roads and, especially, unrestrained taxation. Almost immediately, the sovereign powers of jurisdiction became by far the most lucrative element of lordly property. Lordship was itself transformed, from an informal status of men with many dependents on their estates – the 'magnates' – into a formal Order in society. In this new social conception, the lordly second Order was vested with secular rule, although the Order of the Church had formal precedence.

Within the labouring third Order, any distinction between free and unfree disappeared entirely, outside the cities. Virtually all rural producers became subject to immediate lordly rule, and were made to pay dearly for it. Most taxes, dues and fines took the form of money payments, and a rapid re-monetarization followed. Indeed, minting became a lucrative right of sovereignty enjoyed by lords possessing sufficient jurisdiction.

During the heyday of feudal society, the population of Western Europe roughly tripled, mostly between 1100 and 1250. Forests were cleared, wetlands drained, and wastes generally reduced and transformed through varieties of production. Trade revived, generating dramatic urban growth in northern Italy, where cities acquired republican self-government in conjunction with a take-off both in manufacture of luxury goods (for example, 1 Florentine woollens) and imports from the East, satisfying growing demand from newly rich feudal lords in northwest Europe. Towns also grew in the feudal heartland, and great gothic cathedrals were built. Western European lords increasingly organized the conquest and colonization of Eastern Europe. Culture was transformed by chivalry, and a new pre-eminence of the Church at the apex of society. And, of course, the Crusades were launched. In short, feudal society quickly and fundamentally transformed Europe, in ways that most Marxist historians and theorists have completely overlooked because of preconceived ideas about the nature, number and timing of pre-capitalist modes of production, and the transitions between them.

Still, Marx's assertion that the specific form of surplus appropriation is the key to both the political and economic organization of society is readily revealed to be sound for parcellized sovereignty in the feudal mode of production. Not only was parcellized sovereignty the immediate means for extra-economic appropriation of surplus, and foundation for the relations between lords and peasant producers, but it figured centrally in the organization of feudal production. Pre-capitalist agrarian production has in most times and places depended on self-reproducing peasant households (agrarian production by barracks slaves was common only in parts of Rome's West, between the second century BCE and the third century CE, and never dominant even then). Outside of areas of irrigation and water-course management, formal intrusion into largely autarkic household production was limited, and even then individual households remained largely self-managing beyond the particulars of water supply.

The feudal mode of production, however, was dramatically different, its open-field

systems of collective crop and livestock management directly dependent upon the court of the lord. Rotation of crops was known prior to the feudal transformation, and sometimes practised on the lord's fields in manors. Only after the establishment of parcellized sovereignty, however, were lordly manors integrated with the fields of peasant villages and all fields subdivided into narrow strips, each possessed by separate individuals (including the lord), widely scattered but equally divided among two, three or – rarely – four fields of systematic crop rotation (Verhulst, 2002). The court of the lord was essential in regulating this system – as is evident in the continued role of the 'court leet' in the village of Laxton, Nottinghamshire, the only place where open-field farming is still practised. The more productive the soil, and the greater its maximum potential population, the more important was the court's role in coordination and regulation. In subdivided fields, livestock must be kept away from crops, and crops grown in sequence for collective harvests, and use of stubble for herds pastured in common. With open-field agriculture, virtually every aspect of production is directly subject to legal regulation – more intrusive, even, than practices of irrigation.

Such collectively regulated, labour-intensive production tends to maximize the population supported by pre-capitalist peasant production, varying in form, details and degree of intensity with geography and quality of the land. This generalized non-capitalist intensification of production – not grounded in innovation, but in upholding custom as law through effective local jurisdiction – was responsible for the demographic upsurge of feudal Europe. For lords, demographic growth translated into more residents subject to fines, dues and per capita taxes, with increases over time not only in the extent of land in production, but in output per hectare. For peasants, it increased resources both in households and in the village as a whole, expanded total production and potentially also the standard of living (if greater lordly impositions could be resisted).

The implications of such patterns have been extensively analysed by demographically inclined historians (Aston and Philpin, 1985). What they have failed to recognize, however, is that such patterns are not general to pre-capitalist societies, even within Western Europe, but follow directly from the transformation of early medieval manors and independent villages into feudal *seigneuries*, ruled through parcellized sovereignty in wholly novel ways, and with unprecedented consequences. While it is true that the crisis of feudal society in the mid-fourteenth century was caused by over-population of the land relative to its productive capacity, this was no 'natural' phenomenon, but the consequence of a specific system of class relationships operating over time.

The historical details of feudal societies are sufficiently well-established for this brief overview to provide an adequate means of entry and analysis. Once the specific social form that emerged from the parcellization of sovereignty around the year 1000 is clearly distinguished from the sort of manorial society that preceded it, much of the errors and confusion in prior accounts can be sorted out. What remains especially to be noted, however, is that this feudal transformation grew out of, and was centred upon, the monarchy constructed and repeatedly extended by the Franks. The heartland of feudalism was the most completely developed areas of Frankish rule, primarily northern France and western Germany, from which it spread. The subsequent imposition of feudalism in Eastern Europe, southern Italy and the Crusader states is notable, but by far the most significant extension of the feudal mode of production was through the Norman Conquest of England.

ENGLISH 'FEUDALISM' AND THE TRANSITION TO CAPITALISM

Prior to the Norman Conquest, Anglo-Saxon England had developed a strong central state, in striking contrast to contemporary Continental developments. As Duby observed, feudal society in England was, therefore, unique:

Inside the 'manor', authority over men and over land, domestic lordship and land lordship, coincided. On the other hand the autonomous *seigneurie banale*, the independent territorial lordship, did not, properly speaking, exist at all. William the Conqueror held all the castles. (1968, p. 194)

Through the Conquest, William made good a real claim to the throne, not only acquiring, but strengthening its central power. His retention of a system of effective royal courts had the most profound historical consequences.

William carved out some 10000 manors in England, conveying most to his followers. Through this largely new social framework, virtually the whole of feudal social relations of production, and virtually the whole range of feudal exactions, were introduced into England. Open-field agriculture, with its subdivided fields and manorial courts, was imposed, along with its usual geographic variations. The manorial courts exercised nearly complete jurisdiction over roughly three-quarters of the peasantry, whom royal jurists determined to be unfree based on the burden of their obligations. The courts also possessed jurisdiction over production in the open-fields, regulating free and unfree alike.

In France, all peasants equally were subject to arbitrary lordly jurisdiction, except as villages eventually purchased charters of freedom to fix their obligations. In England, however, although most peasants were unfree, and conceived as chattels of the manor, roughly one-quarter were taken to be free (having less onerous obligations) and, thus, entitled to justice in the King's courts. In these, a Common Law of property rights developed – limited, however, to the free peasants and lords having 'freehold' tenures. Initially, royal justices counterbalanced the local power of lords, issuing writs holding them to account for abuse of free peasant property (Comninel, 2000a). These royal writs were so effective in preserving property rights, however, that lords themselves soon turned to them to protect infants and other vulnerable heirs, for which feudal law was wholly unreliable.

The specific form of extra-economic surplus appropriation in England, therefore, differed crucially in relation to the state, compared to France, and with this difference a double legal system developed during the feudal era. English manors partook in the general historical patterns of the feudal mode of production, through the open-field production regulated in their manorial courts. Royal courts, however, evolved to provide elaborate instruments protecting freehold – but not customary – property rights. The Common Law established truly effective abstract property rights, which underlay the day-to-day regulation of customary tenurial succession and open-field production in the manorial courts.

As Robert Brenner first demonstrated (Aston and Philpin, 1985), the final crisis of feudal society brought radically different results in England and France. Through unique historical processes that enclosed the open-fields and eliminated customary law, Common Law property rights emerged as the foundation for agrarian capitalism in

England, eventually leading to fully capitalist society through the Industrial Revolution (Comninel, 2000a). In France, by contrast, specifically feudal forms of politically constituted property increasingly were transformed into state offices within the 'Absolutist State' – no longer truly feudal, but still entirely non-capitalist (Comninel, 1987). Only after the Napoleonic Wars did industrial capitalist social relations of production begin to transform the various non-capitalist Continental societies that had developed through historically specific paths following the crisis of feudalism.

Marxian economics, or the Marxian school of economics, is a heterodox school of economic thought. Its foundations can be traced back to the critique of classical political economy in the research by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxian economics comprises several different theories and includes multiple schools of thought, which are sometimes opposed to each other, and in many cases Marxian analysis is used to complement or supplement other economic approaches.