



# From Feudalism to Capitalism

Chris Harman

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The transition from feudalism to capitalism is necessarily of enormous interest to Marxists. It is about how the system we live in rose on the western fringes of Europe and then spread to the rest of the world. It is the most recent example of how one mode of production changes into another and provided Marx and Engels with many of the insights they incorporated into **The German Ideology** and **The Communist Manifesto**. Arguments about the transition are often, for this reason, as much about the correctness of Marx and Engels' method as they are about historical fact.

This has been particularly true in the last ten years. A range of people have used the account of the transition to be found in the articles of the American Marxist Robert Brenner – usually quoted as *the* authority on the question –

to attack any notion that the development of the forces of production explain the development of the relations of production and, therefore, of society in general. Brenner's thesis collected, along with replies from his critics, in T.H. Ashton and C.H.E. Philpin (*eds.*), **The Brenner Debate**, is the essential starting point for many other writers. So it is that Comninel, in his recent book on interpreting the French Revolution, criticises Marx for falling into 'liberal scientific materialism' when he wrote that:

the direct relation between the owners of production to the direct producers ... always naturally corresponds to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labour and therefore its social productivity. [1]

Steve Rigby follows the same path in his **Marxism and History**. He attacks what he calls 'productive force determinism', claiming:

Marxist historians have been able to make little use of productive force determinism. The transition from feudalism to capitalism, a key test of productive force determinism ... [shows] ... the redundancy of theories based on it. [2]

Finally, Colin Barker's criticisms of myself in the pages of this journal for holding 'base' and 'superstructure' to be 'a necessary distinction' rely to a great extent on a view of the transition derived from Brenner. [3] The argument, then, is one that is too important just to be left to those few Marxists who are professional historians.

Two of the most recent books to deal with elements in the transition, although from opposite ends of it, are Jacques Le Goff's **Medieval Civilisation** and Dave McNally's **Political Economy and the Rise of Capitalism**. Le Goff deals with the development of feudalism, from the 6th to the

15th century, from a standpoint which is not Marxist but which is not afraid to borrow insights from Marx. McNally is a Marxist (and a frequent contributor to this journal) whose study of the way in which political economists in England and France saw society changing in the 17th and 18th centuries is very much influenced by Brenner's arguments.

I hope to show by looking critically at these two books and others that have appeared in the last decade – notably Peter Kriedte's **Peasants, Landlords and Capitalists, Europe and the World Economy 1500–1800** and **Industrialisation Before Industrialisation** – that Marx's account of the interrelation between the development of the forces and relations of production *can* be used to explain the transition, indeed, that is the only account that provides such an explanation. [4]

### **The scope of the transition**

Before the argument can begin it is necessary to spell out what the 'transition' was about. There has been a tendency in the recent discussions among Marxists to see it in terms of the change from the organisation of society (or at least of the economy) of the 14th century to that of the late 18th century. [5] But the scale of the 'transition' is best grasped by comparing feudalism in its 'classic' form, that of the 10th century, with capitalism in its classic form, that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Tenth century feudalism was an overwhelmingly rural society. Almost the whole of the population lived off the land, in more or less self contained manorial villages.

Control of each manor lay with the feudal lord – either a warrior or an ecclesiastical body – exercising political and juridical as well as economic power in the locality. The mass of peasants were serfs, unable to leave the manor, where they tilled strips of land for themselves but also provided for the livelihood of the feudal lord, either by forced labour on his estate (‘demesne’) or by payment of rent in kind. Money played very little role in rural life, with the feudal lords using serf labour to produce non-agricultural produce in demesne workshops.

Towns were few, far between and small, with many town dwellers themselves tilling plots for part of their livelihood. Trade was carried out by despised travelling peddlers who provided those few essential goods (for instance, salt) which the local serfs could not produce. Because land was the only source of substantial wealth, control of it was the motive force behind the behaviour of the ruling class – and the cause of repeated armed conflicts within it.

The feudal lord exploited the peasants, often forcing them into abject poverty. Yet he could not exploit in order to amass profits. The aim of production was consumption (including conspicuous consumption), not accumulation. As Marx put it, ‘the limits to the exploitation of the feudal serf were determined by the walls of the stomach of the feudal lord’.

Contrast capitalism at its height. Urban life dominates, so that even owners of agricultural land are based in towns. The great majority of the population work in industry or ‘services’. Money plays an absolutely central role. Everyone depends on selling something in order to get the means of livelihood – even if all most people have to sell is their labour power. Most importantly, there is no limit to the accumulation of wealth. Everything can be turned into money and members of the ruling class can own endless

amounts of money. What drives the system forward is not the consumption of the ruling class, but what Marx called self-expansion of capital, the endless pursuit of accumulation for the sake of accumulation.

The differences between 10th century feudalism and modern capitalism are not, of course, just economic. The economic transformation has been accompanied by enormous change in attitudes, in what are sometimes called 'mentalities' or 'spiritualities'. In classic feudalism everyone was born into a fixed hierarchy of ranks (even if a few people did manage to climb from one to another). The great majority of people never moved more than a few miles (on average about five) from their birthplace, and their knowledge of the world was very much restricted to this locality. They spoke a local dialect, virtually incomprehensible to someone living only 40 or 50 miles away. They had virtually no conception of the world as it was before they were born. There was no notion of the nation. The state was whoever exercised physical power over you at a given point in time – and that could change very rapidly. Everyone assumed things would be done more or less as they had been done by parents and grandparents.

Again things could not be more different under capitalism. Everyone, at least in theory, has equal political and judicial rights with everyone else. Everyone is born into a nation and speaks a language spoken by millions or even hundreds of millions of other people. Everyone assumes life will be very different for them than it was for parents and grandparents.

## **Explanations for the transition**

There are two main sorts of theories of the transition. First there are those which see it as following from the growth of trade, of a powerful class of merchants, and of towns as the centre of both. The best known version of this theory is that developed by the Belgian economic historian, Pirenne. He claimed that feudalism arose as Europe's Mediterranean trade was disrupted by the rise of Islam. This led to European society turning in on itself. As long distance trade virtually ceased, the towns, as the trading centres, declined, and money lost its role. The ruling class became dependent for its consumption upon production in virtually autarkic manors because of the lack of alternatives.

All classes of the population, from the Emperor, who had no other revenues than those derived from his landed property, down to the humblest serf, lived directly or indirectly on the produce of the soil, whether they raised them by their own labour, or confined themselves to collecting and consuming them. Moveable wealth no longer played any part in economic life. All social existence was founded on property or the possession of land ... [6]

But from the 11th century onwards a new growth of trade began around the edges of Europe – from Byzantium and Venice in the south, and from the Baltic coasts in the north. The crusades drove the Muslims from strategic points in the Mediterranean so that it was ‘opened, or rather re-opened, to western navigation. As in the time of Rome, communications were established from one end to the other ... The exploitation of its waters by Islam was at an end.’ [7]

The revival of maritime commerce was accompanied by its rapid penetration inland. Not only was agriculture stimulated by the demand for its produce and transformed by the exchange economy of which it now became part, but a new export industry was born. [8]

What happened in the Mediterranean was matched in the north as Scandinavian trade brought the countries bordering the North Sea into contact with those bordering the Baltic and gave a stimulus to the growth of towns like Ghent, Bruges, Lille and London. Soon, too, rivers like the Rhine and the Rhone were being used to link the commerce of northern Europe and the commerce of the Mediterranean – and in the process giving a forward push to towns and cities in between.

These changes led to the transformation of the humble and despised peddlers of the 9th century into the powerful merchant class of the 13th and 14th centuries, a class protected from the feudal lords by the fortifications of its towns and adopting a new set of attitudes based upon endless profit making.

A range of thinkers have held a similar view to Pirenne, stressing the external impetus of the growth of export trade as leading to an internal transformation of European feudalism. Paul Sweezy, for instance, writes:

Long distance trade could be a creative force, bringing into existence a system of production for exchange alongside the old feudal system of production for use. [9]

Immanuel Wallerstein puts the decisive change a couple of centuries later than Pirenne and Sweezy, stressing the importance of the conquest of American colonies in the transition. ‘Europe’s upper strata’, he argues, responded to a crisis of feudal society in the



15th century by overseas expansion and the creation of colonies and politically dependent zones with which trade could take place on the basis of 'unequal exchange', transferring surplus products from 'the periphery' to 'the core' of the system. [10] The equation of capitalism with profits from trade is also to be found in the work of the non-Marxist economic historian Braudel [11], and in some of the writings of the sociologist Max Weber [12].

What can be called for short the Pirenne-Sweezy-Wallerstein view has one great strength. It focuses on the contrast between production for use, characteristic of pre-capitalist societies, and production simply in order to expand exchange value. As Wallerstein puts it, what characterised capitalism was that:

Capital ... came to be used with the primary object or intent of self expansion. In this system past accumulations were 'capital' only to the extent that they were used to accumulate more of the same ... It was this relentless and curiously self disregarding goal of the holder of capital, the accumulation of still more capital ... which we denominate as capitalist ... [13]

But there are problems with such accounts of the rise of capitalism which other theorists have been quick to focus on.

(i) It doesn't explain the patterns of trade it points to. Pirenne, for instance, simply asserts that the new Islamic states on the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean could not trade with Christian western Europe in the 7th-10th centuries – even though he recognises that they continued to trade

with Christian Byzantium and its dependency, Venice.

[14]

Wallerstein has no explanation as to how it was that Europe was able to seize control of other parts of the world and impose 'unequal exchange' on them, given that he insists Europe was, 'in terms of the forces of production, the cohesion of its historical system and its relative state of human knowledge', more backward than some other parts of the world, even if not as 'primitive' as others. [15]

(ii) The great merchants of the medieval period might have originated from backgrounds quite different to those of the feudal ruling class and have adopted different attitudes at first. But they tended very quickly to forget those differences and to join with that ruling class, using the profits from trade to buy manors. Braudel suggests that families rarely remained in trade for more than three generations before buying their way into the old ruling class. This was what happened to the great German merchant family, the Fuggers, and to the most powerful families in the Italian city states by the 16th century. Even where wealthy merchants remained in trade they soon put the stress on establishing ties with the old ruling class in order to establish monopoly control over their line of business, rather than on revolutionary subversion of that class.

Far from pushing for a new system of production in opposition to feudalism, the wealthiest merchants often

became a conservative forces defending the *status quo*.

(iii) Those involved in the handicraft trades of the towns could be just as conservative. The rights which the towns obtained for themselves in the ‘interstices’ of the feudal order were often used to establish guild organisations of trades which sought, not to transform old methods of production, but to preserve them against competition from newcomers. In this way they aspired to guarantee the guild members an assured livelihood, even if this meant holding back the growth of the towns. [16]

(iv) Merchants might have been involved in making money for sake of making money – the self expansion of capital. But they had not developed a way of doing this systematically over a long period of time. This was only possible if they established a new organisation of production, capable of continually expanding the surplus obtained from the labour force. This could not happen so long as agriculture was cramped by feudal relations of production and industry by guild regulation. The merchants could buy in order to sell, and so expand their wealth – in the notation used by Marx, they could go through the cycle M–C–M. But they did not control an intermediate stage of production and exploitation, that is M–C–[P]–C–M.

This meant the long term possibilities for any individual merchant family were very limited. It could take advantage

of existing discrepancies in prices between different countries or regions (e.g. for spices from the east or grain from Poland), but could not find a mechanism for systematically creating such a discrepancy. Then those gains could easily be wiped out – by competition from rival merchants raising buying and cutting selling prices, by the accidental loss of a ship at sea or by the looting which was an inevitable accompaniment of feudal wars.

This could not change until forms of production came into being based upon wage labour. As Marx put it:

Value, the objectified labour which exists in the form of money, could only grow by exchange with a commodity whose use value itself consisted in the ability to increase exchange value ... But such use value is only possessed by living labour capacity ...

Value, money, can therefore only be transformed into capital through exchange with living labour capacity. [17]

This cannot happen unless workers are both able and willing to sell their labour power – able because it does not belong to slave owners, willing because there is no other way they can turn it into the commodities they need in order to subsist. Again, as Marx puts it:

Money can, in general, be transformed into capitals, or the money owners turned into capitalists, only to the extent that the free worker is available on the commodity market: free in so far as he, on the one hand, has at his disposal his own labour capacity as a commodity, and on the other hand has no other commodity at his disposal, is free, completely rid of, all the objective conditions for the realisation of his labour capacity ... and therefore, as a mere subject, a mere personification of his own labour capacity is a worker in the same sense that the money owner is a capitalist, as subject and repository of objectified labour ... [18]

But this condition is not brought about just by an increase in external, market pressures on a pre-capitalist society. In fact, the growth of markets in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries did not just lead to the rise of capitalist production based on wage labour in places like Britain and the low countries; it also led to the growth of plantation based slave labour in the Caribbean and the American South, and to a renewed growth of feudalism in much of eastern Europe. [19]

### **The arguments of Dobb**

The inadequacies of the Pirenne-Sweezy-Wallerstein view have led to a different range of theories which stress the growth of capitalist production within feudalism between the 15th and 18th centuries. Maurice Dobb's **Studies in the Development of Capitalism**, first published in 1946, argued that the breakdown of feudalism and the development of capitalism had to be understood in terms of factors *internal* to the western European societies, not to external trade.

He dealt at length with the growth of merchant capital and, alongside it and often subordinated to it, of handicraft production in both the towns and the countryside. But he concluded that the merchants were too much part of feudal society to have played a central role in its transformation. The key to this transformation lay within the old mode of production itself. As he later put it: 'What I am asserting is

the growth of trade exercised its influence to the extent that it accentuated the internal conflicts within the old mode of production.' [20] The central conflict within feudalism Dobb saw as being between 'the petty producers' and the feudal exploiting class:

No one is suggesting that the class struggle of peasants against lords gives rise, in any direct and simple way, to capitalism. What this does is to modify the dependence of the petty mode of production upon feudal overlordship and eventually to shake loose the small producer from feudal exploitation. [21]

In England:

By the end of the 15th century the feudal order had disintegrated and grown weaker in a number of ways. The peasant revolt of the previous century, it is true, had been suppressed. But it had left its ghost to haunt the old order in the form of the standing threat of a peasant flight from the manor into the woods or hills or to swell the growing number of day labourers and artisans in the towns. The ranks of the old nobility were thinned and divided; the smaller estates, lacking sufficient labour-services, had taken to leasing or to wage labour... Merchants were buying land, estates were being mortgaged and a kulak class of improving peasant farmers were becoming serious competitors in local markets and as rural employers of labour. [22]

The old feudal ruling class survived these changes in so far as it was left in control of the state and of a substantial portion of society's income. But it was decisively weakened by them, a full two centuries before the capitalist mode of production had established itself:

Between the 14th and the end of the 16th [centuries] ... the petty mode of production was in the process of emancipating itself from feudal exploitation, but was not yet subjected (at

least to any significant degree) to capitalist relations of production which were eventually to destroy it. [23]

The capitalism which finally develops is different to the merchant capitalism of the medieval towns: 'We cannot date the dawn of this system from the first signs of large scale trading and of a merchant class ... We must look for when changes in the mode of production occur, in the sense of a direct subordination of the producer to the capitalist.' [24] This Dobb does not see as happening until the second half of the 16th century.

The two hundred year period which separated Edward III and Elizabeth were certainly transitional in character. A merchant bourgeoisie had grown in wealth and influence ... it stood in a position of co-partner rather than antagonist to the nobility, and in Tudor times partly merged with it. Its appearance exercised little direct effect on the mode of production ... In the urban handicrafts and the rise of the well to do and middling well to do free hold farmers one sees a mode of production which had won its independence from feudalism: petty production of the worker owner, artisan or peasant type ... [25]

There are two main problems with Dobb's argument. First, he insists that the collapse of feudalism must be mainly due to internal factors. But he does not specify what they are, apart from his references to peasant revolts and a crisis among the nobility. He does not connect either of these to the development of productive forces within feudalism.

In **Studies** he depicted these as virtually stagnant, arguing that 'it was the inefficiency of feudalism as a system of production, coupled with the growing needs of the ruling

class for revenue, that was primarily responsible for its decline ...' [26] and that where a growth in output did occur under feudalism, it was a result of an increased labour force taking new lands into cultivation. [27]

In his debate with Sweezy (written in 1950) he recognised that 'the feudal period witnessed considerable changes in technique and the later centuries of feudalism showed marked differences from those of early feudalism'. [28] But he does not draw any connection between such changes and the crisis of feudalism, and can still, in the same piece, simply refer to feudal methods of production as 'relatively primitive'. [29] This led him to a second problem – that of the two century period between the collapse of feudalism and the rise of capitalism in which a mode of production not to be identified with either predominated. Marx recognised that there was such a transition period, but insisted, 'the economic structure of capitalist society grows out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of one sets free the elements of the latter.' [30] Dobb, by contrast, stresses the gap between the collapse of feudalism and the rise of capitalism.

This, of course, did not prove Dobb wrong. Marx was only human and could easily make mistaken judgments. However, Dobb's own position raised all sorts of awkward questions as to the nature of the ruling class in that period – as Sweezy and others pointed out in the debate in the 1950s. Dobb was only able to answer such questions by saying it must have been 'feudal' otherwise the English Revolution of the 1640s cannot have been a bourgeois revolution. He may have been able to get away with that sort of argument in the 1950s, when those in Moscow presided over a Stalinised caricature of Marxism and could pass decrees on what was and what was not be regarded as a bourgeois revolution. But today the most likely response to the argument would be:



‘OK, the English Revolution had nothing to do with the rise of the bourgeoisie.’

However much Dobb twisted and turned in presenting his case, he could not avoid interposing a huge gap between the decline of one mode of production and the rise of another, which makes it seem as if the two were not connected and were both historical accidents.

### **Brenner’s arguments**

The debate of the 1950s resumed in the mid 1970s with the publication of two articles by Robert Brenner. One was an onslaught on the Pirenne- Sweezy- Wallerstein position and appeared in **New Left Review**. [31] The other, in the academic journal **Past and Present**, concentrated its fire on attempts by non-Marxist economic historians such as Postan and Hatcher to explain the crisis of feudalism through the impact of a rising population upon limited food resources – a theory Brenner describes as ‘neo-Malthusian’. [32] Both articles put forward the same argument, although from different angles.

What Brenner does, essentially, is to take up Dobb’s argument, but simplify it in a way which gives it greater polemical power. To this end he takes up and expands just one of the elements Dobb sees at work in this period, the leasing of estates by former feudal lords to farmers who employ wage labour. He ignores the mass of other material which exists in Dobb’s **Studies** – on merchant capital, handicraft production, rural and urban manufacturing, the putting out system, and the class struggle in towns.

Brenner gives added emphasis to Dobb's argument that it is the struggle between agricultural exploiters and agricultural producers which brings about a great crisis of feudal relations of production in the 14th century. But he then goes further than Dobb and insists that it was on the land that capitalism was born in the following period – again as a result of the balance of forces between the two great landed classes of feudalism, the lords and the peasants. Capitalism emerges, for him, neither as merchant capitalism nor as industrial capitalism but as agrarian capitalism.

It was, indeed, in the last analysis an agricultural revolution, based on the emergence of capitalist class relations in the countryside, which made it possible for England to become the first nation to experience industrialisation. [33]

This could only happen because of the outcome of the class struggle under feudalism:

The original breakthrough in Europe to a system of more or less sustaining growth was dependent upon a two sided development of class relations: first the breakdown of systems of lordly surplus extraction by means of extra-economic compulsion, second the undermining of peasant possession or the abating of any trend towards full peasant ownership of the land. [34]

Agrarian capitalism involves the ex-feudal lord, faced with a shortage of cash needed to meet the requirements of military conflict with other feudal lords [35], renting out land to big peasants who in turn employ wage labour. The lord will then have an interest in improving the productivity of the land, so as to raise the rents he can demand (transforming traditional feudal rents into market determined capitalist rent). And the big peasant will seek to

exploit those poor peasants who have been forced to sell their labour power to him, in as efficient manner as possible – to determine his levels of productivity and production in relation to the demands of endless accumulation, not of consumption.

But before this can happen control over the land has to develop in two ways. First, the peasants have to rebel on such a scale as to free themselves from the main burden of feudal services and dues. This prevents the lords from using unpaid labour to till demesne land and so raise their incomes (as happened in eastern Europe). Second, the lords have to retain enough power to prevent peasants getting control of land themselves and tilling it as independent small proprietors (as happened in France, according to Brenner).

Brenner claims that his account roots the transition from feudalism to capitalism in production and in the class struggle, while the account of Sweezy and Wallerstein does not and is ‘neo-Smithian’ rather than Marxist. But there are as many problems with his explanation as with theirs:

*(i)* It rests upon the unsatisfactory notion that the future society is determined by the struggle between the lord and an undifferentiated peasantry in the countryside. For him there has to be an intermediate outcome to this class struggle. If the peasants win everything, as he claims happens in France, then capitalism does not develop. Likewise, if the lords win everything, as in eastern Europe, it does not develop either. What is required is what Brenner says happened in England, for the lords to lose some of

their power, but not all of it. [36] History, it seems, is made by those exploited classes who fight but don't fight to the end.

Now, of course there are situations in which the outcome of historical events is completely different to the intention of those who take part in them. But was this true of all of those engaged in the great social and political struggles of the transition period? Or did not some at least of the leading participants feel that they were fighting for a new form of society, a form which had certain features we could identify as capitalist?

If the poor peasants in Britain were only half victorious, might this not be connected with the influence on them of other social classes who were already setting themselves goals which pointed to a society based upon capitalist forms of exploitation – even if they described these goals in religious terms?

Brenner's formulations imply a complete separation between the ideological objectives of the social forces involved in conflicts and the outcome of these conflicts. But this makes it very difficult to see what connection there is between the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the huge social, political and ideological conflicts of the period. People rarely enter into battle with the goal of only half winning, yet according to Brenner's arguments only those who did so could advance society. So it is that wars, revolutions and civil wars (as opposed to peasant rebellions) have no place in Brenner's account of the period. Nor do the huge changes in human attitudes associated with the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment. It seems simply a great coincidence that the centuries of the transition were also centuries which saw huge revolutionary upheavals. It is hardly surprising that his account has led

one of his disciples, Comninel, to accept the argument of 'revisionist' historians that the English and French Revolutions had nothing to do with the rise of the bourgeoisie.

Brenner claims his account puts class struggle at the centre of the transition in a way that other accounts do not. But his is a very narrow view of class struggle, restricted to the immediate struggle at the point of production between peasants and feudal lords and excluding any reference to the global social changes which one or other class would like, in however confused a way, to bring about. Accounts of the class struggle under capitalism in these terms are usually described as 'economism' and the apolitical methods of struggle based on them as 'syndicalism'. Brenner has transmitted this notion of the class struggle back into the rural class struggle of the late medieval period. His approach has been described by critics and supporters alike as 'political' Marxism [37]; it would be more accurate to say he has given birth to a sort of rustic economism. [38]

(ii) Brenner does not even try to explain why this intermediate outcome to the class struggle should occur after the crisis of feudalism in the 14th century but not earlier. The struggle between the exploited and the exploiting rural classes was, for him, a constant feature of feudalism. So why did not previous demographic crises – for instance that at the time of the collapse of Charlemagne's empire – lead to a transition? Indeed, on his reasoning it is difficult to see why the collapse of the Roman Empire should have led to feudalism and not to 'agrarian capitalism'. For he never even attempts to locate any dynamic in

feudalism which could account for differences between one period and another.

(iii) Separating the direct agricultural producers from control over the means of production does not produce a drive towards the self expansion of capitalism on its own. There is no reason why it should not simply lead to the landowners using hired labour to provide for their own consumption. [39] The only thing which rules out this sort of production for use on the basis of hired labour is the existence of the market and commodity production. Brenner takes this for granted when he writes of the improving landlords and their tenants producing crops for cash, but does not explain where this market came from.

(iv) Brenner's account simply ignores the role of towns. For him the classes based in the towns seem to play a thoroughly reactionary role.

The essence of the urban economy, based on luxury production for a limited market was economic restriction – and in particular control over the labour market. [40]

The urban artisans could be anti-aristocratic, but were just as frightened of labour market competition from a free peasantry as they were of the feudal lords. And:

The urban patriciate would tend to align themselves with the nobility against the peasantry. Both these classes had a common interest in maintaining social order and the defence of property and in protecting their mutually beneficial relationships of commercial exchange. [41]

He claims that examples show that 'the towns rarely aided peasant resistance to serfdom, nor was the success of such resistance apparently dependent on such aid.' [42] He dismisses the old argument that the towns presented a way of escape from serfdom for the rural peasants, on the grounds that the towns never accounted for more than 10 percent of the population.

Yet there is a mass of empirical material which at least partially contradicts his argument. Capitalist economic development in the countryside would have been impossible if urban based classes had not existed to buy the products of agriculture. This buying did not simply occur. It was encouraged by the merchants, however much they might have politically accepted feudalism. F.J. Fisher long ago pointed to the role of London based merchants in encouraging the development of the English countryside.

During the century before 1650 London was large enough to exercise a great influence upon the agriculture of the surrounding counties, causing a rapid spread of market gardening, increasing local specialisation, and encouraging the wholesalers to move back up the chain of production and exchange to engage directly in the production of food, or to sink capital in the improvement of agricultural facilities. [43]

Poulterers made loans to warreners and themselves bred poultry. Fruiterers helped to establish orchards and leased them when established. Butchers themselves became graziers. [44]

It has often been pointed out that individual peasant families living on the verge of subsistence bought very little from the towns or from itinerant traders. But they did buy some essential things (for example, salt, the small amounts of iron used in their ploughs,

leather for horse harnesses, occasionally the cheapest sorts of cloth, the services of blacksmiths). [45] Silvia Thrupp has gone so far as to state, ‘The popular notion that peasants bought only farm tools and salt, relying on their wives to make everything else, is ... no longer tenable’, pointing to evidence from late 11th century documents of local trade in ‘feathers, wool, tables, bedrolls, skins of cats, lambs, wedding outfits, rings, knives and harnesses’. [46] Georges Duby has noted that: ‘A widespread popularisation of aristocratic usage reached even into the peasant world by the 14th century.’ [47] And, of course, the richer peasants who did develop in the direction of capitalist farming were much more dependent on industrial products and market networks run by urban-based merchants than the average.

At a minimum, the towns – and not just the large cities, but the many smaller towns [48] – provided a market for the output of the improving farmers and some of the inputs that made improvement possible. These inputs were not necessarily just physical: also of importance was the spread of knowledge about how improvement was possible. One contributing factor to the economic advance of Bohemia in the century before the Thirty Years War was the circulation of books detailing the most productive agricultural methods: ‘Printers disseminated ... technical books, especially in the sphere of agriculture.’ [49]

Le Goff writes, with reference to the period which Brenner sees as the taking off point of ‘agrarian capitalism’ in England: ‘A network of [small towns] set up a kind of fine weft under the stretched and loosened warp of a population



decimated by the plague and thinly scattered because of deserted villages.’ [50] It was this ‘fine weft’ that enabled production for the market to penetrate into the countryside and the separation of direct producers from the means of production to lead to the self expansion of value.

There were certainly some occasions on which the towns did loosen the hold of the feudal lords over the serfs. Le Goff, for instance, points to out that:

The town could force rural lords to free their serfs, as happened on a large scale in 13th century Italy, at Vercelli in 1243, Bologna in 1256–57, and Florence in 1289. [51]

The famous Peasant Revolt of 14th century England did not just involve peasants, but also urban journeymen, even if the London oligarchy helped crush it.

For some peasants at least, flight to the town was a way of escaping serfdom: hence the well known German saying ‘*Stadtluft macht frei*’ (the town air makes you free). Hence too the clashes which could occur between small English towns and the feudal lords who had first established them. [52]

As for Brenner’s claim that the towns contained too small a proportion of the population to influence what happened on the land, this begs the question of what happened when the towns grew bigger. And this happened in the two countries which did make the breakthrough to capitalism: in 1650 in Holland 8 percent of the total population lived in Amsterdam alone, and in England 7 percent lived in London, while in France only 2.5 percent lived in Paris. [53] One estimate suggests that in the century after 1650 one in seven of England’s population lived in London at some point in their life. [54] It is a strange coincidence that the towns should have this influence precisely where the chains of

feudalism were successfully smashed, while in the countries of eastern Europe, where the towns were much smaller and more dispersed, feudal relations could strengthen their grip over agriculture.

Again, Brenner's picture of all the urban classes cohabiting peacefully with the feudal lords hardly fits with the facts. For the towns were centres of ideological ferment within feudal society.

In the late 12th and 13th centuries the growth of new religious orders based in the town – one founded by a Lyons merchant Peter Waldes, another by the son of an Assisi merchant, Francis – were seen by the church as a dangerous ideological threat. Le Goff tells how the heretical movement of the late 13th century 'joined together heterogeneous coalitions of social groups, in which sections of the nobility, of the new burgess class, and of the artisan class, combined ...' in which 'men' displayed 'an attitude of complete rejection' of 'the world, with its social organisation (feudal society) and its guide, the Church of Rome ...' [55]

Two hundred and fifty years later the Protestant ideas which were to plunge Europe into a century of religious wars and revolutions were disseminated from towns. And in the great revolution of 1789–94 the intervention of the urban *sans culottes* was of major importance in providing a central, national, political focus for the bitter class struggle waged in the countryside. The towns may, on average, have made up only a tenth of the population, but this tenth was decisive as the focal point for agitation and propaganda in opposition to the old feudal attitudes. An account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism which does not, as a minimum, integrate the role of the towns cannot be an adequate account.

(v) Brenner more or less ignores the changes taking place in production techniques, both in town and countryside, in the centuries before the transition. Amongst these were the advances in printing and papermaking, the development of mechanical clocks, advances in textile manufacture, the development of guns and gunpowder, and the advances in shipbuilding and navigation that made sea trade with the East Indies and the conquest of the Americas possible.

Brenner writes:

The feudal socio property system established certain distinctive mechanisms for distributing income... which led to economic stagnation and involution.

It ... imposed upon the members of the major social classes strategies for reproducing themselves which, when applied on an economy wide basis, were incompatible with the requirements of growth. [56]

Yet, as we shall see, the feudal period saw quite considerable economic advance.

(vi) Brenner makes no attempt to integrate the development of agriculture with the development of industry. In fact, in the 16th century, for him a century of rising 'agrarian' capitalism in Britain, the majority of woollen exports were *manufactured* exports. By the end of the 17th century, although not more than 20 or 30 percent of England's population was outside agriculture, 44 percent of national income was non-

agricultural and textiles accounted for 70 percent of exports. As one history of the industry tells, ‘By the beginning of the 17th century the western cloth industry had long been a field in which large capitals had been employed...’ ‘The large capitalists dominated the industry’, even if ‘the small clothiers formed a large element in it’. [57] At least one maker of white cloth claimed to employ nearly 1,000 persons. [58] It is rather bizarre to call a society in which such things occurred *agrarian* capitalism!

Brenner can write, ‘Quite possibly the spectacular rise of the English cloth production for export from the late 15th century was what set off the overall process of English economic development ...’ [59] and of ‘the unique symbiotic relationship between agriculture and industry’ [60] in England. But he makes no attempt to investigate the impact of industry on agriculture.

### **The rival theories: the unity of opposites**

Both sets of theories have something in common. They both try to explain the transition without talking about the development of the forces of production under feudalism. The Pirenne-Wallerstein-Sweezy position as change as being external to feudal system. Brenner claims to disagree with this. But in his analysis the only thing he is concerned to study in the feudal system is ‘the class structure’. The way in which this changes under the impact of the great social

classes is, for him, the factor which explains the transformation of society as a whole. There is little or no room in his account of social change for giving any causative role to the development of the forces of production. [61] What matters to him is class struggle, and he shows little concern with changes in the material setting within which it takes place, except in so far as demographic developments lead to shortages of foodstuffs and increased struggle between classes.

[62]

Sweezy, Wallerstein and Brenner all claim to be Marxists. Yet Marx's own version of historical materialism was based on the claim that to understand the development of any mode of production you have to look at the interrelation between the development of forces of production and the relations of production. Changes in the forces of production lead to small scale, cumulative changes in the relations between people which, eventually, throw into question whole organisation of society. [63]

This is as true of feudalism as of any stage in the history of human society. Feudalism is a very slowly changing form of society. But it is not a static one. Sylvia Thrupp suggests that 'the best medieval rates of general economic growth, if they could be balanced by decades to balance the effects of good and bad harvests, would come to perhaps half of 1 percent'. [64] This is very slow by capitalist standards. But it still implies that massive advances occurred over 500 or 1,000 years. Estimates of population growth point to the scale of the change. The medieval period saw four great demographic crises. Three of these, in the 6th, 13th and 17th centuries, were associated with famines and plagues and led to cuts in the total population of up to 50 percent (the other

one, in the 9th century, seems to have been less acute and only to have brought to an end a period of population growth). [65]

Yet the total population at the end of this one thousand year period was much higher than at beginning. It was three times larger after the plague of 14th century than it was after the plague of the 6th century. Or, to put it another way, the number of people in Europe at the dawn of the Renaissance was more than twice that at the peak of Roman civilisation.

The period from the 10th to the 13th century in particular saw considerable economic growth. This is a key part of the Pirenne argument and is accepted by Brenner. But the Pirenne school locates this growth simply as a response to external market stimuli, and Brenner sees it as based simply on the clearing of new land on which old agricultural techniques are applied – ‘quantitative economic growth’ was possible for peasant based production, but ‘it could not sustain a qualitative breakthrough into economic development’. [66]

Yet historical research in the last two or three decades has shown that there were considerable advances in the forces of production during the feudal period, both in industry and agriculture. As Lynn White has pointed out:

The growth of technology is the least developed and most rapidly shifting part of economic history ... The state of records and the tastes of historians have combined to distort past activities. Today our view is being somewhat rectified by a surge of interest in studying, with what evidence is available, improved methods of production and transportation, the emergence of new types of goods, and changing ways of living and thinking ...’ [67]

## **Expansion rooted in feudal mode of production**

The view that feudalism was a stagnant mode of production is linked to another contention that has become almost a commonplace among many Marxists: that because it was based on extra-economic coercion rather than the 'economic' interaction between buyers and sellers of labour power to be found under capitalism, it had no economic roots.

[68]

But, as Marx and Engels always pointed out (read, for instance, Engels piece **The Role of Violence in History** [69]) the ability of one class to coerce another class itself depends on prior economic developments, on the development of the forces of production. Feudalism arose in the first place because it could maintain and develop production at a time when the preceding mode of production was in terminal crisis.

The slave society of ancient antiquity which dominated the Mediterranean area until the 4th and 5th century AD collapsed through its inability to develop the forces of production after the 2nd century. The wealth of the Roman Empire was created by slavery [70] and the ruling class of the empire sought to increase its wealth through increasing the number of slaves, to be obtained by warfare, rather than by any concern with increasing the productivity of labour.

Rome exploited its empire without creating anything. No technical innovation had occurred since the Hellenistic age. Rome's empire was fed by pillage. Successful wars provided slave manpower and precious metals drawn from the hoarded treasures of the East. [71]

On this basis it was able to build a civilisation centred on a series of great towns, where the ruling class that exploited the countryside resided. But a point was

eventually reached, as early as the second half of the 2nd century, where the source of the surplus for maintaining this urban civilisation began to run out: the supply of slaves began to decrease. Incessant wars could more or less hold the boundaries of the empire for some two or three centuries more, but they could not overcome the economic stagnation – and with it the proliferation of famines, plagues, intra-ruling class civil wars and, on occasions, revolts from below. Finally the empire as a whole collapsed in the face of ‘barbarian’ tribes, initially invited into its boundaries in a desperate attempt to fight off other barbarian tribes. The whole superstructure of urban civilisation came crashing down, as the ‘base’ of slave based production ceased to be adequate to support it.

But even while the old mode of production was falling apart, a new one was emerging to supplant it. It did so in two ways. First, it emerged within the boundaries of the empire itself as a way of preserving production and exploitation. A section of the ruling class discovered that they could protect themselves from the collapse of the economy of the empire as a whole by granting land to former slaves or former soldiers in return for produce in kind and/or labour services.

Meanwhile, a similar structure of exploitation was also arising out of intrinsic developments in the Germanic tribes which settled in the lands in and around the old empire. Formerly free peasants often found that the only way they could get military protection from marauding bands (whether ‘barbarian’ or Roman) was to accept a similar serf-type arrangement with a powerful local lord. It was military



strength, violence, which enabled the new feudal exploiters to protect holdings from armed raiders and to force the exploited class to accept the status of serfdom. But military strength in turn depended on the fact that the new system of exploitation enabled local, more or less self contained, economic units to survive the disintegration of the old mode of production. And not just survive – the new arrangement was soon more productive than the old.

The new serf peasant was necessarily more attentive to his own plot of land than the slave had been to his master's. And the new feudal lord had to pay some heed to the needs of peasant based production. It was the only source by which he could seek to protect his living standards in the midst of the collapse of the old slave economy and protect himself from marauding warrior bands.

Kriedte quite rightly notes that:

The logic of the manorial system based on serf labour demanded that the lord had to preserve the peasant holding at all cost because of its role as a supplier of labour power and draft power. Therefore he had to assist peasants in emergencies which arose from harvest failures and other causes. [72]

It was not only a question of preserving existing levels of production. In the early feudal period the 'walls of the feudal lord's stomach' were by no means full. His diet, though more plentiful, was hardly more varied than that of the serfs: he lived on bread, meat and, in northern climes, ale. He clothed himself in rough and uncomfortable peasant spun garments. He lived in a cold and draughty rough built castle. In such circumstances he had every incentive to encourage the planting of new crops and increases in output which

could be exchanged for specialised luxury goods to be obtained from outside the manor. Duby tells how: 'The [lord's] steward, anxious never to find himself in short supply, naturally tried to increase output, especially of corn.' [73] There was 'no wish to accumulate goods', but always 'to have something in hand to provide for the "family".' [74]

Le Goff notes:

From the moment when the ruling class established itself in the countryside and became a class of great landowners, the landed aristocracy encouraged progress in agricultural production. Not that the aristocracy took a direct interest in managing its estates, although some ecclesiastical lords and high Carolingian functionaries did so, but the dues and services which it extracted from the peasant masses must have stimulated the latter to improve their methods of cultivation to some extent to pay the dues ... [75]

Precisely because all the wealth of the feudal lord came from land, he could develop an interest in building up productivity – in encouraging 'his' serfs to use new techniques of production (often, in fact, old techniques known during antiquity but not used because they did not fit in with slave production). Of course, many feudal lords did not behave in this way. They were prepared to push their serfs below the subsistence level as they squandered their output or devoted it solely to military adventures against other feudal lords. But at the end of the day, the most effective feudal lords, even when it came simply to military adventures, had to be those who maintained an adequate material base from which to operate. And

that meant some concern with maintaining and improving serf productivity.

So after the 'invasions' of the 10th century:

Once the barbarian tribes had settled the new masters were forced to form a real policy of land development. The history of the earliest dukes of Normandy, written by the canon Dubdo of St Quentin in the 11th century, shows how the Normans, during the 1st century after they had installed themselves in Normandy, turned themselves into cultivators under the leadership of the dukes, who put farming tools made of iron, especially ploughs, under their protection. [76]

Far from being concerned *solely* with violence, it was individual feudal lords who organised and financed the colonisation of new lands throughout the feudal period. Again, the feudal lords were the driving force in the spread of the first, and for a long time most important, form of mechanisation, the water mill. The feudal lord wanted it built so as to force the peasants to use it and release more surplus for himself (usually obtained by making peasants hand over dues for the use of contrivances which had, in the last resort, been produced out of their labour); the fact of the well documented resistance of serfs to the water mill – they preferred to keep the dues themselves and use the old hand mill – does not disprove the point at all. Indeed, it shows that even feudal lords' violence could on occasions raise general productivity.

The abbots and monks who collectively exploited the peasants in those manors in ecclesiastical hands were the only literate group in early medieval society. As such they could play a role in spreading knowledge of improved

techniques which neither the illiterate warrior class nor the illiterate peasant class could.

If one is looking at the earliest mills, watermills or windmills, or for progress in farming techniques, one often sees the religious orders in the vanguard. [77]

This section of the feudal ruling class could also do something that no one else could – gain access to the writings on technology of the Greek and Roman worlds and of the Byzantium and Arabic empires which existed alongside feudal Europe.

It is characteristic of medieval Christendom that it put to industrial use technical devices which in classical society had been known but left almost unused or regarded simply as toys. [78]

The important point was that on the ecclesiastical demesnes a *literate* group of exploiters were responsible for supervising the labour of the mass of direct producers. This seems to have given a boost to developments in technology through to the 13th or 14th century. Recent investigations of medieval science and technology have emphasised the extent to which thinkers previously thought of as ‘scholastic’ were, in fact, deeply concerned with providing solutions to practical problems. [79] The feudal lords, lay and ecclesiastical, were a very wasteful ruling class, absorbing much of the hard won produce of a poor society through their own parasitic consumption, and despoiling much more with their endless wars. [80] They did, however, preside over a certain development of production.

The investment in agriculture which did occur must be viewed as resulting largely from the activities of the landlords and others who cultivated and produced on a large scale. Four to 5 percent of revenues went into gross investment and a level of 1 to 2 percent for net investment is probably quite representative. [81]

This is a very low level of investment compared to that found under modern capitalism. But nevertheless, it was still investment, and it is wrong to give the impression, as many commentators have, that no investment at all took place, that 'feudal lords did not have the option of increasing their incomes through capital investments that would raise the productivity of labour ...' [82]

### **The growth of the feudal forces of production**

Our knowledge about the organisation of production in early medieval times is very scant. But that does not justify claims that there was no advance. [83]

The prime event in Europe's history during the early middle ages was the development, between the 6th and the late 8th centuries, of a novel system of agriculture appropriate to the northern lands. As the elements of it emerged, consolidated into a new pattern of cultivation and spread, it proved to be the most productive agrarian method, in relations to manpower, that the world had seen. [84]

The first major innovation was the use of a heavy wheeled plough which could deal with heavy soils instead of the light scratch plough of the ancient

world. The new plough spread from the Slavs in the 6th century to the Po Valley in the 7th century, Germany in the 8th century and Britain in the 9th century. Its spread revolutionised both agricultural techniques and the relations among cultivators in manorial communities: the new plough was most efficiently used if peasants tilled strips of land rather than squarish fields, and, needing eight, rather than two, oxen to pull it, encouraged peasants to pool their resources through a new emphasis on communal co-operation. The spread of the heavy plough was followed by further major innovations – the adoption of a three field system, in which only a third of the land was left fallow at any point in time, a new emphasis on the use of animal dung to reinvigorate the soil, the planting of pulses which raised the protein content of people's diet and the cultivation of oats which enabled some peasants at least to replace the slow ox with the much faster, although more expensive, horse.

The heavy plough, the open fields, the new integration of agriculture and herding, three field rotation, the modern horse harness, nailed horse shoes, and the whipple tree [for pulling horse drawn vehicles – *CH*] had combined to into a total system of agrarian exploitation by the year 1100 to provide a zone of peasant prosperity stretching right across Northern Europe from the Atlantic to the Dnieper. [85]

These changes produced a considerable increase in productivity per head and in the yield of seed corn. Georges Duby estimates grain yields as being only 2 : 1

in the 9th century – so that half the grain harvested had to be saved for planting the following year, however many people were starving. But yields had reached 3 : 1 or 4 : 1 in in the 12th century. [86] ‘There is reason to believe that a general rise in productivity occurred between the 9th and 12th centuries ... of 100 percent’ [87] George Duby’s study of medieval agriculture goes so far as to claim:

A great change in productivity, the only one in history until the great advances of the 18th and 19th centuries, occurred in Western Europe between the Carolingian period and the dawn of the 13th century. [88]

The feudal mode of production was characterised by a slow development of the forces of production, but not by stagnation.

Apologists for feudalism – as for all class societies – claim that the exploiting class by deserved the thanks of the exploited class by developing production in this way. Socialists reject this claim. The innovations and investments of the feudal period were based upon the labour which the feudal lords had stolen from the peasants. But Marx and Engels were quite right to point out that each form of class society does play a certain ‘progressive’ role for a period. While the productivity of labour is low, the mass of the population must live so close to subsistence level as to be unable to sustain through their own volition the investments needed to increase productivity and to provide for the development of culture and civilisation. This will only occur when one small section of society gains control over that surplus over and above what is needed to keep the mass at the subsistence level. Then, although it may well waste much of the surplus, it will enable some as least to be invested.

Under feudalism the waste, particularly on the continual warfare between the feudal lords, was enormous. Nevertheless, the mode of production was dynamic enough for western European society, over a thousand year period, to recover from the economic collapse of late Roman times and to outstrip, in terms of technology and productivity societies like those of China and the Islamic empires that had initially been far in advance of it.

### **Trade, the towns and medieval industry**

Early feudalism was, as we have seen, an almost entirely rural society. But the rise of towns was not something extraneous to this society but a result of its internal development. The growth in the productivity both land and labour in the 10th and 11th centuries provided the lords with a growing surplus of agricultural products. They could use this surplus either for personal consumption or for waging war against other lords. In either case, it was to their advantage to exchange some of it for products from outside their own demesne – for more specialised foodstuffs and non-agricultural products such as weapons, fine clothing or building materials. And so they encouraged the growth of new centres of trade and handicraft production – new towns. While most Roman cities disappeared or declined into simple religious and administrative centres, a whole range of new cities emerged. As Le Goff writes:



Venice, Florence, Genoa, Pisa, even Milan, Paris, Bruges, Ghent and London, let alone Hamburg or Lubeck, were essentially creations of the middle ages ...

The towns were born not only out of the reawakening of trade, but also out of the growth of agriculture in the west, which was beginning to supply urban centres with a better supply of food and manpower.

Of course, the towns attracted new men who had escaped from the land... Yet they were joined by members of the ruling class, who helped notably by lending money which they alone had at the outset ... [89]

The towns, then, were initially an outgrowth of the rural society around them. They were a product of feudalism. Yet at the same time they contained new ways by which a minority in society could gain control of the surplus. Merchants could cream off some of the surplus previously in the hands of the feudal lords through trade, and in the process transform themselves into a new class, with different interests to the old rural ruling class. And the towns also contained new ways of creating wealth, through handicraft production, again quite different to the agricultural production of the countryside. Even while non-agricultural production had been concentrated in the feudal demesnes, there had been some technical advance. The new, growing medieval towns witnessed much more advance:

From about the 6th century, Europe began to show innovations in technology more significant than those found in the more elaborate, neighbouring and kindred cultures of

Byzantium and Islam. By the middle of the 14th century, after the invention of the mechanical clock had increased the number of artisans skilled in making intricate metal machines, Europe surpassed China and seized global leadership in technology. Some inventions were borrowed, notably from China, others were internally generated. The end result of medieval developments was the physical equipment of the early modern capitalist world. [90]

Among the most notable innovations of the feudal centuries were the crank (enabling much wider use of the water mill), the spinning wheel, the lathe, the development of dyes, printing and paper making, the invention of eyeglasses (so enormously extending the active life of the literate minority), new shipbuilding technologies, and the compass.

All of these led to big leaps in productivity. In villages for every five people the water mill freed about one person day's labour a week. [91] In towns the use of the mill for fulling, ie beating cloth to finish it, saved even greater amounts of labour. And as time went on the mill was applied to an increasing number of purposes – to iron working, for example. The use of the compass doubled the number of journeys a ship from Venice or Genoa could make to the Levant in a year.

The increases in productivity associated with the spinning wheel, more advanced looms or new techniques of metal working may seem small compared with the 10,000 percent increases seen in the industrial revolution. But they could bring about a doubling or trebling of productivity, an enormous gain for people whose labour barely enabled them to rise above the subsistence level. This gain is significant enough not to be simply ignored as all sides in the Sweezy-

Wallerstein-Brenner debate tend to be.

## **Town, country and feudalism**

As centres of trade and manufacturing the towns began to develop according to a dynamic different to the rural feudal society which had given birth to them. Whereas 10th century feudalism was bound to the logic of autarchic manors which produced the subsistence of both the exploited and the exploiting class, the towns were bound from the beginning to the logic of the commodity, of goods which had to be exchanged if their owners were to feed themselves. The means of exchange, money, which had been of marginal significance in the feudal society of the early 10th century was of central significance to the towns which had grown up within it by the 12th century. Le Goff summarises the whole process very well:

In order to come into existence the towns needed a favorable rural environment, but gradually as they develop they exercise an ever larger attraction over the surrounding area extending in proportion to their demands. The urban population was a group of consumers who only took part in farming as a sideline and who needed to be fed ... Around the towns more land was cleared and yields rose, the more so since towns not only drew food from their surrounding areas but also took away people. Emigration from the countryside to the town between the 10th and the 14th century was one of the most important events which took place in Christian Europe. What is certain in any case is the towns forged a new society out of the varied human elements which they took in. [92]

The towns were part of feudal society, and the urban classes shared many of the attitudes prevalent in society at large. Urban ruling groups often turned themselves into feudal proprietors in surrounding rural areas. The feudal lords often lived in and influenced the towns. The urban upper classes imitated the lifestyles of the feudal nobles. 'Yet little by little urban society succeeded in substituting its own impulse for the catchwords of the countryside.'

[93]

This was shown by an important shift in the ideological centres of the feudal world. While until the 12th century the dominant ideas were pumped out from monasteries which were themselves based on rural manors, 'in the 13th century the spiritual leaders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, established themselves in the towns and governed souls from their pulpits and their university chairs'. [94]

From now on the towns took over the role of directing, inspiring, and developing ideas. At first this manifested itself in the economy. Even if the town initially had been a trading centre, a commercial nexus, a market, its basic function in economic terms was production. Towns were workshops, more importantly, it was in these workshops that the division of labour originated. In the countryside in the early middle ages all forms of productions were concentrated within the manor, even if some skilled craftsmanship did find a home there too ... However, in the towns such specialisation was carried to its limits. The craftsman had ceased to be primarily, or even additionally, a peasant, and the burges had ceased to be primarily or additionally a landowner. [95]

The medieval towns could not have developed without the prior advance in techniques and productivity in the countryside. But in the towns the possibilities for

further growth of productivity were much higher than in the countryside. Whereas the productivity of agricultural labour took two or three centuries to double, the productivity of urban craftsmen could be increased much more quickly by adopting new techniques – or often old techniques developed, but not used, in Roman times. The basis existed for the owners of urban workshops to expand their wealth at a faster rate than the initially much wealthier rural lords. What was required for them to do so was to find a workforce which itself had no control of the means of production and therefore would work for little more than a subsistence wage. Such a workforce was to be found among recent arrivals from the countryside, from ex-serfs and their families. From the beginning there was, therefore, the potential for turning means of production in the towns into capital and, with it, the potential for the self expansion of capital.

This potential was mostly not realised. There were objective obstacles. Handicraft production was still at the stage where it depended upon the much bigger agricultural sector of the economy to feed its workforce and buy much of its output. A succession of bad harvests could destroy its markets, at least temporarily, and with them the ability of the urban workforce to get the money to pay for food. A military campaign in the locality could have very much the same effect. In either case, an urban economy which had previously been flourishing could suddenly be devastated. Many a new shoot of urban handicraft production wilted in such a harsh environment.

There were other obstacles as well. The ideology of feudal society was not favourable to technical advance, even if it could not block it entirely. And the new urban classes, growing up within feudalism, more often than not adapted to its conservative attitudes. The owners of workshops would often seek to use political influence in the towns to provide a guaranteed income for themselves by imposing guild regulations which restricted competition. The journeymen who laboured in the workshops would fight against the introduction of new techniques which might threaten their jobs. Nevertheless, there were occasions in which new techniques of production were combined with new methods of employing 'free' wage labour on a big enough scale to create the beginnings of industry of a distinctly capitalist sort. This was true by the late 13th century in the two most economically advanced areas of Europe – in Flanders and in northern Italy.

In the early 14th century the belt of land which corresponds with the western part of modern Belgium and the north west corner of France contained a number of towns whose inhabitants lived on a highly developed woolen cloth industry. Bruges, Ghent, Ypres ... Brussels and Malleines, and Douai and Arras ... were some of the most important. There are thought to have been at least 4,000 weavers alone, apart from other allied trades, in the city of Ghent in the mid-14th century. Industry on this scale led to the existence of substantial capitalists ... The cloth towns, nearly all pure industrial centres ... developed on a large scale the characteristic physiognomy of the modern city: commercial wealth contrasting with the relative poverty of the numerous artisans and paid workers for whom the city bell rang out the beginning of the working day.

[96]

A contemporary chronicler claimed that in Florence, in Northern Italy, the city's wool guild had over 200 workshops supporting 30,000 people in the 1330s.

[97] It is quite correct to stress that these were embryos of a new mode of production, and that like many other embryos they were often aborted. But every embryo, whether aborted or not, influences the metabolism of the body in which it finds itself. An important part of the reason that feudalism in the 15th and 16th centuries was very different to feudalism in Charlemagne's time was because of the way in which the embryonic capitalist features of the towns had reacted back upon the overwhelmingly rural societies from which they had sprung.

## **Merchants and capitalism**

Industrial capitalism made fleeting appearances during the medieval period – appearances which were significant because they occurred in the most economically advanced regions and because they gave a foretaste of the future. But much more important in general was merchants' capital. This has made the question of the relationship of merchant capitalism to both feudal and capitalist production a central one in all the debates over the transition. [98]

The growth of towns arose from the growth of trade, which was only possible with the marketisation of some production in the countryside.

But the growth of the towns in turn encouraged further marketisation creating as it did a section of the population which could not physically survive without trading its output

for food. The rise of the towns is thus synonymous with the rise of commodity production.

Commodity production is not itself capitalism. It can grow up on the surface of non-capitalist societies, leaving old methods of production and exploitation intact. This, for instance, was true of trade in the Roman and Chinese empires. And even during the period of the ascendancy of capitalism as a world system, non-capitalist forms of exploitation could survive – in the latifundia of Latin America, in the slave plantations of the southern states of the United States, and in the vast labour camps of Stalin's gulag. So commodity production alone did not bring the feudal mode of production to an end. But that does not mean commodity production – and the class which organises the exchange of commodities, the merchant class – has no impact at all on the underlying forms of production and exploitation. The latifundia, the slave plantations and the labour camps were in fact products of the impact of a global system of commodity production. [99] So too was the transformation of the way in which feudal society was organised between the 10th century and the 14th century.

The rise of the market and the merchants in feudal society did not bring about an automatic transition to capitalism. But it did bring about transformations within feudalism which meant that, when the mode of production entered into deep crisis, capitalist development was one possible option. The merchants of the middle ages were concerned with the self expansion of their wealth (with  $m-m'$ ). The easiest way for them to achieve this was by taking advantages of the imperfect development of the trading system, of the fact that there were substantial price differences from region to region. They could do this within the confines of a system of production run by other classes. But these differences in prices could not be relied on to



provide substantial profits indefinitely. If other merchants entered the ring, then prices in the final market would fall and the self expansion of wealth would come to an end.

It was this which led the merchants to fight for political power in the towns and then to use this political power to rig the feudal market in their own favour – via monopolies, encouragement of wars against rivals, piracy, and so on. It was this too which led successful merchants to try to protect their accumulations of wealth by moving them from the cities and trade into land. They would usually end up trying to guarantee their future well-being by buying themselves into the feudal ruling class. They developed all sorts of interests in compromising with the ruling powers of feudal society. To this extent there was a powerful conservative trend built into merchant capital. In the great revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries most of the great merchants stood for ‘moderate reform’ and a few sided with the out and out defenders of the old order.

Yet at the same time the growing marketisation of the economy provided merchant capital with a way of expanding itself on a surer long term basis than through trade alone, a basis that was in contradiction to the feudal mode of production. For the impact of marketisation was to deprive growing numbers of people both in town and country of direct access to the means of production and to turn them into a potential pool of wage labour. Peasants who could not pay their rents sold their land and sought paid employment, journeymen who could not afford to set up as independent tradesmen were forced onto the urban labour market. Capitalist exploitation, based on ‘free labour’ became possible, but often this did not appear in its full form.

As Marx noted long ago [100], the first fleeting appearances of a way of achieving the self expansion of capital which did not depend on accidents or monopolies

were short-lived. The Flemish cloth industry declined after the late 14th century, the North Italian industries a century later. But that was not the end of merchant capital's attempts in this direction. The decline of urban industry in the face of general economic crisis and the resistance of the urban lower classes to increased exploitation were followed by the rise of rural handicraft production, very much under the direction of urban based merchants.

This was not usually fully capitalist production. The handicraft producers mostly owned their own means of production – the cottage in which they worked and the spinning wheel or loom they worked on. This enabled them to work at their own speed and to restrict their output to what was needed to provide themselves with their own basic needs – that is, to avoid being pulled into the endless treadmill of production for the sake of production, of the pursuit of the self expansion of their capital. But the merchant would control both the supply of raw materials to them and the marketing of their output. In this way he would be able to force them to surrender to him a portion of the value of their product.

As Jurgen Schlumbohm has pointed out [101], it was a short step from this system (known in German as the *Kaufsystem*, i.e. buying system) to the putting-out system (in German *Verlagsystem*) in which the merchant capitalist loans the direct producer raw materials in return for a guaranteed level of output. Once this has taken place, the direct producer is only in part his own master. He depends on others for some of his productive resources – and this enables them to dictate to him his tempo of work, to force him to accept in part at least subordination of the self expansion of capital. From here it is another short step to capitalist production proper, with the capitalist providing both the means and the materials of production.

In practice these three stages were always combined in various ways. In cloth manufacture, for instance, spinning and weaving might take place under the buying system, but certain finishing processes were carried out in workshops directly owned and supervised by the merchant capitalist. So for centuries there were hybrid, bastardised forms of production, in which elements of capitalist exploitation were mixed with elements of non-capitalist commodity production by individual craftsmen. But the tendency was for the element of direct capitalist control to grow over time:

The putting out system did not entail an increased labour productivity. Yet the management of the different stages of production by a single entrepreneur opened up important opportunities for innovations. [102]

Since some of these innovations could only be achieved with the use of more expensive equipment that only the capitalist could buy, the buying system tended over centuries to give way to the putting out system, and the putting out system to capitalist production proper.

The development of industry in the countryside was no more an automatic or a smooth process than the earlier development in the medieval towns had been. Industry could only grow in rural areas to the extent that marketisation was already destroying the bonds which tied the whole rural population to agricultural production and forcing some of them to seek new sources of livelihood. Those urban classes who lost out by rural industrialisation tried to prevent it – for instance, using their political influence to press for state wide controls over production methods. The narrow base of the market for industrial output and the precariousness of the ability of the rural economy to provide food at prices which the new handicraft

workers were able to afford could force expanding areas of rural industry into sudden crisis and even obliteration. The merchant capitalists could lose interest in productive activity and move their capital into speculative venture or land.

Yet by the late middle ages 'centres of dense rural industry developed in England, the southern low countries and southern Germany.' [103] Whereas in the 14th century only 4 percent of English wool was manufactured into cloth before export, with the rest serving as raw material for the Flemish and Italian urban based industries, by the mid-15th century 50 percent was manufactured and by the mid-16th century 86 percent. [104]

Proto-industrialisation, on the one hand was kept in check by rural relations of production, and on the other it acted as a powerful ferment in the gradual disintegration of those relations. While feudal ties maintained their strength to varying degrees, relations of dependence that were essentially of a capitalist nature arose besides them in industrial regions. Often it was only a matter of time before merchant capital would shake off the remaining fetters of feudalism and enforce the formal freedom of labour. [105]

Where rural industries took off, they had an immediate impact on agricultural production. The demand of the handicraft producers for foodstuffs encouraged marketisation of agriculture, while the need of the urban based merchants to retain the services of the proto-industrial workforce led them to help it protect the rural producers against pressures for feudal services by the lords. The rulers of the towns, and the armed forces at their disposal, had a direct interest in undermining ties of feudal dependency in parts of the countryside.

That industrial commodity production in the countryside was integrated less directly and less comprehensively into the feudal system than was agrarian production is most clearly illustrated by the fact that rent in kind and labour services could remain viable in agricultural production for the market, but rarely did either of them form of the base of industrial commodity production.

While in the eastern half of Europe, the production of grain for the market was dominated by the feudal system until the 19th century, it was much less widespread in industrial commodity production. [106]

What is more, the spread of rural industry served to create direct social relations between the urban merchants and a rural middle class:

Wealthy, business minded peasants ... and members of the village 'bourgeoisie' often assumed a strategic function in the proto-industrialisation process ... [as] the middle men between domestic producers and merchants. They constituted the personnel of the putting out system's infrastructure ... [107]

The products of rural industry were not merely used in local trade, but in inter-regional and international trade. By the late 16th century trade in north and west Europe 'comprised mass consumption goods, above all cereals, livestock and copper from eastern Europe, and textiles and metal goods from western parts of the continent.' [108] Merchant capital might have grown up within feudalism and might continually try to liquidate itself back into the feudal mode of production, but such developments also gave at least a section of it a powerful interest in identifying with a new mode of production, organised on quite a

different basis to feudalism. And not only in relation to industry.

Brenner is right to say, following Marx, that there was growth of capitalist relations of production in parts of the countryside in this period. Sometimes this took the form of full blooded capitalist exploitation, the form which came to predominate in England. Sometimes, as in parts of France, a bastardised form prevailed: *metayage*, in which the landowner (often a bourgeois from the town) advanced half the stock and received half the crop which he would then market. In either case, what happened in the countryside was not something distinct from the development of the towns and of merchant capital. The growing specialisation of production in the countryside could only occur if there were growing trading networks, influencing the direction of agriculture as well as industry. A key role in these networks was played by a growing number of small towns, where new groups of traders could operate without any impediment from the guilds of the bigger towns. R.H. Hilton has shown how important these could be in medieval England, clashing with feudal lords even though these had often helped establish them. [109]

Georges Duby tells how changes in the system of husbandry:

were symptomatic of the opening of the country economy to exchanges, and went hand in hand with the gradual penetration of money and credit. They stimulated the growth of a host of small market towns inhabited by dealers in wine, grain, and cattle, and moneylenders. And these changes went deepest in regions close to towns and to lines of communication. [110]

Agriculture was beginning to be transformed even before the demographic crisis of the 14th century –

and long before the twofold outcome of the class struggle which Brenner claims alone could permit any development of the productive forces. After the first quarter of the 13th century, 'among those in charge of agricultural production appeared many men well versed in the rational methods of management and who were as attentive to the operations of the market as they were to the theories of agriculture.' [111] The tendency to production for exchange 'rapidly intensified in the 13th century... The play of commercial operations in the countryside on the eve of the 14th century was astonishingly widespread and vigorous.' [112] This turn to commodity production was accompanied by changes in production methods:

Towards the end of the 13th century some remarkable changes in regions where economic expansion was taking place come to light. They all bear testimony to the desire to work the cultivated lands in a more rational manner and for greater profit. [113]

By the 15th century 'every town had its butchers, who were at the same time entrepreneurs, cattle merchants, meat merchants and leather merchants, all of them prosperous, the new men of the pastoral economy and its absolute masters.' [114] No wonder Le Goff describes the 'small towns' as the 'new active element' giving direction to society as a whole as Europe recovered from the black death in the 15th century. [115]

It is wrong to see merchant capital, as Pirenne, Sweezy and the others tend to do, as the unambiguous agent of a

new mode of production within feudalism. Merchant capital was bound by a thousand ties to the system out of which it grew and therefore continually tended to sink back into that system. But it is also wrong to see it, as Brenner does, as simply a force cementing feudal ties. In fact, it both perpetuated the society it grew out of and tended to undermine that society. It was, as Kriedte puts it, 'Janus-faced', looking to the future as well as the past. This enabled it (or at least sections of it) to play a very important role in dissolving feudal ties. But it also meant that it was an obstacle to the full development of industrial capitalism which had, in the 18th century, to wage a struggle with it for hegemony before full blooded capitalist development could take off. [116]

## **The crisis of feudalism**

Pre-capitalist class societies have known crises just as deep as any known by capitalism. This is clearly the case if you just look at the demographic devastation which occurred with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west, at the height of the medieval period in the 14th century, or across continental Europe in the 17th century. But the cause of the crises was quite different to that under capitalism.

Capitalist crises have occurred every ten years or so as accumulation and production, both in industry and agriculture, outstrip the source of profits to the capitalist class. Feudal crises, by contrast, occurred every few centuries rather than every few years, and arose because society's demand for resources went beyond the capacity of the existing forces of production, especially in the



countryside. Put crudely, the number of mouths to be fed grew more rapidly than the food supply and mass hunger resulted. This crisis has sometimes been called a 'Malthusian' or 'Neo-Malthusian' crisis, after the English clergyman who insisted at the beginning of the 19th century that humanity could never improve its lot because starvation would always result. The title is a poor one, because it was a particular, class directed way of organising production which led to the shortages of food, not any innate feature of human society.

Feudalism, as we have seen, advanced the forces of production, but in a very wasteful and therefore a very slow way. The advance of the forces of production was accompanied by a growth in population: conditions of relative prosperity led people in the countryside to marry earlier and have larger families; the growth of an exchangeable surplus encouraged the growth of the towns and with them a new urban population. Since there were large areas of untilled countryside (forests and swamps) under early feudalism, the growing number of people were easily fed at first as the expanding peasantry cleared and cultivated new land and as the slow spread of improved techniques increased yields on old land. But a point was eventually reached (towards the end of the 13th century and again towards the end of the 16th century) at which the supply of uncleared land began to run out. At this point the only way for the increased rural population to make a living was either to work marginal, relatively unproductive bits of land or to try to increase the output of other land without worrying about exhausting its fertility.

In this way it was possible to keep output rising for a period, but not for very long. As yields on over-farmed land began to fall, it only required a poorer than average harvest to plunge the whole of society into famine. The crisis was not

simply a 'demographic' one. It was intensified by the very feudal relations of production which had enabled production to rise in previous centuries. From being a spur to the development of the productive forces in the early feudal period these were now increasingly a drag on them.

A huge portion of the output of their serfs went into providing a rising level of the conspicuous consumption for the feudal lords. Technical advances meant that armies could be larger and wars more far ranging than before – a further drain on society's resources. The rise of the towns provided a source of borrowing which allowed feudal lords to consume and fight beyond their means, at least up to a point: 'the poorer and middling members of the knightly class ... got into debt faster than they could get out of it.'

[117]

In the towns themselves a growing urban upper class itself consumed conspicuously, with its own retinues of servants, its own private armies, its own dependence on a proliferation of luxury trades, all of which had to be paid for and fed. The growth within the framework of feudalism of the new, exchange oriented, forms of economic activity exacerbated the crisis, although in a contradictory way. It led, as we have seen, to increased concern with the productivity of labour and land. It provided opportunities for wage labour for the poorest section of the peasantry and so put off the moment at which they were driven to starvation. But it also diverted land from producing the staple foodstuff, grain, into providing marketable luxuries for the towns and the upper classes – wool, wine and meat.

The entrepreneurs succeeded in building up units directly linked with trade; they went on improving their tools and perfecting techniques. In order to intensify grain production they applied more complex rotational systems and engaged more labourers to till the soil more thoroughly. Nevertheless, their special interests were the vineyards, the woodland, the

grassland and the management of their flocks, which yielded the larger part of their profits. [118]

This intensified the factors leading to crisis while concealing them from view:

Between 1275 and 1330 ... arable land ceased to grow at the expense of the waste. This did not prevent the rural economy as a whole from wearing at this moment an air of solid prosperity. But nevertheless we notice that the antagonism between the small country people and the increasing band of entrepreneurs becomes sharper ... [119]

While all this was happening, the ideology of the ruling class was less and less capable of coming to terms with the changes which were taking place. It increasingly came to reflect the pampered position which the feudal lords had attained, divorced from the world of production, concerned only with rank, honour and the defence of hereditary position. The creative period of medieval thought gave way to the sterile phase of scholasticism proper. The superstructures which had once overseen the growth of social production became more expensive to maintain – and ensured that, once social production began to falter, the crisis that resulted was on an immense scale.

Economic crisis could rapidly have political effects which made the economic crisis worse. In the countryside the different members of the feudal ruling class sought to protect their incomes by increased pressure on the peasants (which pushed the poorest peasants into ever greater poverty) and by increased military activity as each attempted to seize land from the other. In the cities there

were increasingly bitter conflicts between the mass of the population, hard hit by rising food prices, and the handful of very rich families who held power. Wars and civil wars brought military devastation to an already impoverished society. And in the wake of hunger and war came diseases, above all the bubonic plague, which cut a huge swathe through the population. The crisis pushed society backward. The population halved in the space of a few years. Whole villages were deserted as their inhabitants died or fled. Vast tracts of countryside passed out of cultivation. Urban industry declined as the demand for its products fell.

To this extent the crisis of the 14th century had some features in common with the crisis of the late Roman Empire and the less demographically disastrous crisis of the Carolingian 9th century. But there was a difference. The development of the forces of production meant that towns did survive, even if in a weakened form. The trade networks remained intact. And so did industry, although it often moved to the countryside in search of cheaper labour. Indeed, once recovery from the immediate demographic catastrophe of the mid 14th century took place, industry was helped by its effects: the supply of foodstuffs, especially grain, was now greater than the demand from a diminished population, food prices fell relative to those of manufactured goods, and the poorer peasants could make a better living through rural handicrafts than through tilling the land.

All this meant there that a new alternative could emerge from the crisis of the 14th century to the feudal cycle of expansion and collapse. The alternative lay in carrying to its logical extreme the marketisation of output that had emerged in the previous centuries, so that not only goods but also labour power became a commodity. So it was that the period of recovery from the crisis of the 14th century saw in parts of western Europe the growth of rural industries

controlled by merchant capitalists, on a greater scale than ever before. This period also saw in certain towns the growth of new industries, organised on capitalist lines in a much more sophisticated way than previously – most notably printing, paper making, shipbuilding and coal-mining. It also saw the spread of the organised market system (controlled by merchants, big or small) which encouraged better off peasants to employ wage labour to produce much more than they needed for their own immediate consumption, so encouraging some feudal lords to protect their revenues through leasing lands to such peasants rather than through feudal dues.

Capitalism began to emerge not as merchant capitalism (the Pirenne-Sweezy version) or as agrarian capitalism (the Brenner version) but as a network of productive units in both handicrafts (in town and country) and agricultural production using free labour separated to varying degrees from real control over the means and materials of production, a network bound together by the activity of a section of merchant capital which itself was centred on the towns.

## **The transitional society and the absolutist state**

There has been much debate about the character of western European society – and English society in particular – from the 15th century onwards, with Dobb and Anderson [120], for instance, insisting it remained feudal, and Sweezy arguing it was based on a ‘petty commodity producing mode of production’. [121] But the important point was that it was a society

in transition, with both feudal and capitalist forms of exploitation existing side by side, and in many cases intermingling.

The two forms were both complementary (as when a feudal lord used some of his wealth to take part in commercial ventures using some waged labour, or when a merchant used the profits from the putting out system to set himself up with a manor) and contradictory (as when merchants and feudal lords fought physically for political dominance of great cities). What is more, they operated according to different dynamics. The relatively slow growth of the forces of production under feudal forms of exploitation compared with the faster growth under capitalist forms meant that the balance between the two was continually changing. Whereas the balance of the economy in France, say, was overwhelmingly towards feudalism in the 15th century, by the late 18th century it was much more tilted in a capitalist direction.

This changing balance had strong effects on the politics of the period. One element of feudal society, the monarchy, tried to strengthen itself by balancing between the feudal lords and the different urban classes. The feudal monarchy had been a weak central force, exercising power only insofar as it could persuade the nobles who held real power in each locality to accept its rule. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries both old monarchs (as in France, and England) and new rulers (like the Medicis in the Italian city state of Florence) began to construct absolutisms, in which their power overrode that of the local nobles and urban oligarchies alike. They were able to do so because they used the towns to counterbalance the power of the rural lords – and, if necessary, the middle classes in the towns as a counterbalance to the oligarchies. Symbolic of the change was the construction by the French monarchy alongside the

old feudal lords (the *nobles d'épée*) of a new aristocracy to man its state bureaucracy (the *noblesse de robe*) drawn from bourgeois families.

None of these changes could have occurred had recovery from the crisis of the 14th century not been associated with a rise in the importance of the urban ruling and middle classes compared to the feudal lords, a rise dependent upon a further spread of commodity production and within that of elements of capitalist production.

The industrial and commercial world does not present the same picture of general decay as the seigniorial world ... Cities such as Florence, Venice, Bruges, London or Nuremburg acquired a prominence apparently greater than they had enjoyed earlier, even though they were smaller communities ...

[122]

Perry Anderson quite rightly stresses:

It is significant that the years 1450 to 1500, which saw the emergence of the first prodromes [fore-runner – CH] of unified absolute monarchies in the west, were also those in which the long crisis of the feudal economy was surmounted by recombination of production factors in which for the first time specifically urban technological advances played a leading role. [123]

But the logical inference to be drawn from this observation is that absolutism was not simply a changed 'form of feudal exploitation' and its function was not simply 'the repression of the peasant and plebeian masses'. [124] It was rather a political form which, in Engels' words, could arise in a period when 'the warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires for the moment a certain degree of independence of both'.

[125]

The state administrators had an interest in the continuation of feudalism: after all part of their own income came from direct feudal exploitation of peasants on the monarchy's own lands. But they also had an interest in the further development of trade and of direct capitalist forms of exploitation: these provided them with an expanding urban tax base. Finally, they had an interest in maintaining the balance between the two: then they could use the power of the feudal lords to deal with any town which stepped out of line, and they could use the power of the towns to force the feudal lords to let them have (through taxation) part of the surplus product of the peasantry which otherwise would have been absorbed completely by feudal dues. So it is in this period that the state does not simply adjust to advances in capitalist forms of production which had already taken place, but encourages such advances itself, sometimes from scratch.

It was as Janus-faced as merchant capital. Like the great merchants, those who rose to eminence and wealth out of administering the state were continually caught between two facts: the quickest way to make wealth was to identify with the anti-feudal forces, but the best way to preserve it was to sink it back into land.

So, even when the administrators themselves were bourgeois in origin, as with the *noblesse de robe* in France, they tended over time to revert back to feudal forms of exploitation. Similarly, in England key figures in running the Tudor state came from non-lordly backgrounds, yet 100 years later their descendants were well established as landowners.

Even this was not the end of the matter. For if merchants and state administrators were continually falling back into the methods of the feudal ruling class, this class itself was also beginning, in part, to adapt to methods of capitalist



exploitation. Few feudal lords themselves became either capitalist farmers or capitalist industrialists. But many began to see their future as better assured if they were landlords to capitalist farmers than to feudal peasants, and many began to see the advantages of doing deals with merchant capitalists.

The contradictory role of the state in this period is shown most sharply by looking at how it used its 'bodies of armed men'. For the feudalists their function was to fight for land, the source of feudal wealth. Where this land was did not really matter to the feudal lord. So the typical feudal war was part of a dynastic struggle to secure scattered territories for one or other monarchy – as with the battles between German princes, French kings and the popes for control of Sicily in the 13th century, or the Hundred Years War between French, English and Burgundian rulers in the 14th and early 15th century.

By contrast, merchant capitalists were concerned with securing a hold on their trading networks. As urban and rural industry developed, and with it capitalist agriculture, this meant trying to bind together adjacent geographic regions within a single, stable political framework: in short, seeking to establish some sort of national state. Wars, for them, should be national wars, aimed at consolidating the territory of the nation and opening new markets for trade. The degree to which the rulers of the absolutist state looked backwards to feudalism or forward to capitalist methods of exploitation was shown by the degree to which they fought one kind of war or the other. There were absolutisms (Spain, for example) where dynastic wars predominated. But there were more advanced cases (England in the 16th century, France in the 18th) in which commercial and 'national' considerations came to predominate.

## The class struggle and the transition

The growth of capitalist forms of exploitation at the expense of feudal forms was not some automatic process. The old feudal ruling classes' power was weakened by the crisis of the 14th century. While land had been in increasingly short supply under pressure from a growing population, it had been able to keep a land hungry peasantry subjugated without too much resort to physical coercion. Now suddenly, with the rural population halved, discontented peasants could flee one lord and easily find land elsewhere unless faced with vicious repression.

But this did not mean the feudal ruling classes just sat back and watched their power decline. As Brenner quite rightly emphasises, they attempted to use force to make up for their economic losses. The result was a series of large scale and violent clashes between the exploited and the exploiters, starting with the Jacquerie, a huge and bloody peasant rising in the Paris region in 1358. Then there was the revolt of the *ciompi* (wool carders) in Florence in 1378, the risings of weavers in Ghent and Bruges of 1379–82, the peasants' revolt in England in 1381, and the rising of the *maillotins* (the lower classes, so called because they armed themselves with mallets) of Paris in 1382. [126]

None of these struggles was victorious in the sense of immediately breaking the power of either the lords in the countryside or the oligarchies in the towns. But they did show there were limits beyond which the old feudal ruling classes could not go in their attempt to make up for their losses as a result of the crisis. Within the next half century there was a decline in direct feudal authority over both

peasants and townspeople right across western Europe. [127] The most extreme expression of direct lordly control, the demesnes tilled by serf labour, virtually disappeared in this period. By the beginning of the 16th century Europe had recovered from the crisis. Population was growing right across the continent, and lands which had been abandoned 150 years before were now once more beginning to be cultivated. Grain prices stopped falling and began to rise in what has been called the ‘inflation of the 16th century’.

If the weakening of feudal ties had simply been an automatic response to the crisis of the 14th century, then there should have been a regrowth of feudal ties in the 16th century. This did occur in much of eastern Europe – where there was a return to demesne production using forced labour – and in parts of Italy and the Iberian peninsula. But it did not occur in much of western Europe.

How is the difference to be explained? Not simply in terms of the growth of marketisation, since much of the output of the east European landed estates was sold. Brenner argues that what matters is the different outcome to the class struggle in the two regions. But this begs the question as to *why* the anti-feudal forces were more successful in the west than the east and, in the west itself, more successful in England than in France. [128]

We cannot explain the difference without reference to the simple fact that urban development and rural industrial development were more pronounced in the west than in the east. This did not mean that either the urban oligarchy or the urban middle and lower classes always supported the peasants against the feudal lords. [129] But they did represent centres of power independent of the feudal lords which made it more difficult for the latter to impose their interests on the whole of society or, one expression of this, to always bend the state bureaucracy to their will. In eastern

Europe, where the towns and the urban classes were relatively weak, the state did indeed function simply as the expression of a centralised feudalism, helping the nobility to crush the peasants, reimpose serfdom and extend its demesnes. In western Europe, faced with a different balance of forces in society as a whole, the state did not give such unambiguous backing to the forces of feudalism, thus aiding the peasantry to retain much of their freedom. Caught between the past and the future, the monarchical states facilitated the growth of capitalist forms of exploitation, but also became a drag upon them at key moments in history. Then bitter class struggles alone could determine whether society moved forwards or backwards. And these struggles involved bitter clashes between rival exploiting classes as well as between the exploiters and the exploited classes.

### **The transition and ideology**

These transformations in society necessarily found expression in the realm of ideas. People began to try to come to terms with the changes which were taking place in their lives, with some trying to slow down these changes and others to speed them up. It is hardly surprising that the late 15th and 16th centuries saw the spread of ideas which challenged, at first implicitly and then explicitly, the ideological centre of feudalism, the Catholic Church.

The Reformation was not, of course, a simple adoption of pro-capitalist ideas by people opposed to feudalism. The transition period involved the emergence of a range of classes and social groups – the urban oligarchies, the middle

ranking urban merchants and handicraft proprietors, the urban poor, the new layer of rich, labour-employing peasants, those they employed, the administrators of different states – alongside the old classes of feudalism. Each of these groups could only achieve its goals by making and unmaking alliances with other groups, and each, in the process, fell to some degree under the influence of other groups. There was no clear notion of what was to replace medieval society amongst any of these groups. But there was a sense that things were changing, that the old religious conceptions and institutions no longer fitted.

So, Jan Hus, Luther, Calvin or John Knox could preach doctrines which meant different things to different social groupings. But such ideas also provided at least temporary basis for uniting such groupings in opposition to the old order of things to such an extent that people were prepared to fight and die for what they believed. Those who were most radical in their religious reinterpretation of the world tended to be those who wanted it changed most – whether, as with the radical Hussites or the anabaptists, to an egalitarian classless society, or, as with the more sober minded Calvinists, to a society based upon commodity production and the relentless attempt to accumulate capital.

These new ideas were the product of urban based preachers. But they had an impact on rural as well as urban classes. This is not surprising. The market networks which had grown up, under the control of big and small merchants, to unite producers and consumers in town and country were also networks through which ideas could travel. Verbal intercourse accompanied commercial intercourse – between the merchants of a city, the nobles, wealthier peasants, rural handicraft manufacturers and small town traders of its hinterland. Single languages replaced hotchpotches of local dialects within each regional trading network. The more

trade developed, the more this took written forms. Part of the ideological challenge to the medieval world lay in people putting across their ideas in these new languages, asserting them as national languages as opposed to the Latin of the feudal Church. The networks which carried trade were soon also carrying dissident ideological works of various kinds, from the tracts of Martin Luther or Thomas Münzer to the satirical books of Rabelais.

The town united the countryside (or at least part of the countryside) behind it in presenting an ideological as well as an economic alternative to the feudal world – something which is inexplicable if you see the transition, as Brenner does, as originating purely in the countryside.

### **The transition and the first great revolutions**

The transitional society combined contradictory forces, between which monarchical states tried to balance. But however high the state raised itself for a certain period, it could not stop the forces moving so far in opposite directions as to bring it crashing down eventually. There were elements in old feudal ruling class which looked back to old methods of exploitation whenever society entered into crisis. And this happened on a European scale in the 17th century, in much the same way as it had done three centuries before.

The feudal looking elements had already reorganised themselves with the ideology and institutions of the counter-Reformation (for example, the Jesuits and the inquisition)

in the second half of the 16th century. They had enormous financial backing from the Spanish monarchy, a feudal state which nevertheless controlled most of the gold flowing into Europe from Latin America. In the first half of the 17th century they sought to preserve society as they knew it from the contagion of the new ways and the new ideas by waging a war across half of Europe – the Thirty Years War.

The two epicentres of this struggle were Holland and Bohemia. Neither was by any means a pure capitalist state. Far from it. In both, elements of the old nobility retained considerable influence. They were ruled by Estates – representatives of both the lords and the towns – not by revolutionary assemblies. But in both, a substantial section of the nobility identified with new ways of producing wealth, through trade and through urban and rural manufacturing, and through agriculture in which feudal dues played a very little part. [130] The Estates in neither country were keen for the great struggles in which they found themselves. The Bohemians tried to avoid war, and the Dutch waited 12 years before joining in. But the sheer scale of the feudal reaction gave them no choice. Polisensky has described the conflict as of ‘two civilisations in ideological conflict’. [131] But he has gone on to insist:

It would be a crass oversimplification to contend that the war was collision between the champions of capitalism and the bourgeoisie on the one hand, and the representatives of the ‘old regime’ on the other. These two models were only the poles in whole complex struggle, the centres around which were forged two powerful political camps. [132]

By the time the war ended in 1648 the issues which had led to it were half forgotten. Absolutist Catholic France became the main obstacle, for its own great power reasons, to the all out victory of the reactionary forces. Bohemia had long since been conquered for

feudalism, and the devastation of the war's main battleground, Germany, halved its population and set back its economic development by a century. Only in Holland did the forces standing for a new, thoroughly bourgeois, organisation of society survive intact.

Even before the Thirty Years War was over, a similarly decisive but confused struggle was taking place in England and Scotland. A section of the old ruling class was inspired by the general reactionary ideology emanating from Spain. The king, Charles I, tried to go against the foreign policy interests of those social forces associated with the new ways of making wealth and to rule in an arbitrary manner in opposition to their desires. He was soon confronted by an armed coalition, made up of sections of the aristocracy, much of the rural gentry, many (but not the topmost) merchants and the middling classes of both town and country.

As in Bohemia and Holland, this coalition did not want to push the struggle to the limit. But also as in those cases, the old order did not give them much choice. As the king ratted on compromise after compromise, the leadership of the oppositional camp fell into the hands of those who no longer looked for a slightly reformed version of the old transitional society, but to one which had gone much further on the way towards capitalism.

The crisis of the 17th century meant that all the different elements which made up the transitional society were thrown into conflict with each other – aristocrats, gentry and rural manufacturers in the countryside, big merchants and small merchants and manufacturers in the towns, the monarchy and the classes between which it had previously balanced. In the confused battles which followed no class was initially clear on its own long term interests. But the



very severity of the political crisis forced people to try to see through the fog to some resolution of the crisis. And for those who did not want a reversion to feudalism, there was only one such way – by a policy which would steadfastly develop the new forms of production and exploitation as opposed to the old. The genius of Cromwell in the English Revolution lay in his instinctive grasp of the direction in which society had to go and in his ability to mobilise a coalition of forces which could achieve this.

But the precondition for such a coalition was precisely the networks of people committed to the new ways – the lesser merchants, yeoman farmers employing wage labour, the promoters of urban and rural handicrafts and industries. Interestingly, the strongest support for the revolution came from London, the seaports and those rural areas which produced agricultural and/or manufactured goods for the market. Cromwell could build out of these a coalition which could beat the king and, in presenting a programme to unite them in struggle, push the development of the sort of society they represented further forward.

Wherever such leadership was not able to construct a coalition of forces capable of victory in this way (whether for objective or subjective reasons), the result was that society was pushed backward. This had already happened in late 15th century Italy, where the forward development of the city states came to an end with the French invasion of 1494. It happened, as we have seen, in Bohemia and Germany in the Thirty Year War. And it happened in France in 1648, when a confused revolt, the Fronde, drove the monarchy from Paris but did not coalesce into a force with any programme for developing French society.

## **Capitalism and colonies**

In the period of the first great revolutions capitalism proper, based on the routine exploitation of 'free labour' in industry and on the land, was still overshadowed by merchant capitalism. And merchant capitalism was increasingly identified with the carving out of colonial empires from which enormous riches flowed back into Europe, riches which made it much easier for the rising bourgeoisie to buy over or subvert the old ruling classes. It is this which has led Sweezy, Wallerstein and other authors such as Gunder Frank to see the secret of capitalist development as lying in the 'unequal exchange' established between western Europe and the rest of the world. But that leaves two vital questions unexplained. First, why were western European states able to exercise such a stranglehold over the rest of the world? Second, why did some states experience successful capitalist development based upon such 'unequal' trade, but not others? Spain and Portugal were, after all, in advance of Britain, Holland and France in establishing colonial empires, but suffered impoverishment, not growth, in the 17th and 18th centuries. And Holland was a greater trading centre than England in the mid 17th century, but thereafter fell behind in the advance to full blooded capitalist development.

It is only possible to answer these questions by recognising that the key to international influence lay in developments in the domestic economies, which were then further enhanced by colonial control and 'unequal exchange'. Western Europe's rulers and merchants could

only impose their will elsewhere in the world because already, after the crisis of the 14th century, the means of production were more advanced in Europe than in the parts of the globe they subjugated. The growth of the new empires led to economic advance in Holland and England precisely because more productive capitalist and semi-capitalist forms of exploitation were beginning to emerge there rather than in Spain and Portugal. England overtook Holland because Dutch merchant capitalism was not able to establish networks of rural manufacturing under its control as its English rivals did. [133]

There is an additional factor which also has to be taken into account. From the 17th century onwards a form of production developed which yielded large and regular profits, but which was not based on 'free' labour. The slavery on the plantations of the new world could be a very efficient form of production and yield huge and reliable profits, most of which ended up in the hands of the merchant capitalists who supplied the slaves and sold the plantations' products. [134] These profits could give a big boost to capitalist development. But slavery could never supplant free labour as the motor of that development. Slavery was only an efficient method of exploitation in certain cases: where the labour process itself was such as to be easily subject to detailed supervision without much reliance on the initiative of the labourer – as on sugar and cotton plantations – and where the market for the product was virtually guaranteed to expand, so that the owner would not lose money through having to keep his 'property' alive through periods of idle production. These conditions could apply in the case of certain very important crops, but not to the huge range of different products needed for sustained industrial and agricultural expansion.

It is important to remember that the period was still one in which the demand for the products of industry fluctuated wildly from one time of the year to another and could be badly hit by natural occurrences. In industry, .the typical unit was small, with numbers of workers fluctuating markedly over the year, varying with the state of demand according to the seasons, at the mercy of water power, affected by floods and droughts.’ [135]

‘Free labour’ was much more profitable for the employers under such conditions than slave labour could ever have been. Both British and French merchant capitalism reaped huge profits from hundreds of thousands of slaves. The growth of the new mode of production would have been much slower without them. But slavery itself was only possible in certain sectors of a much wider international division of labour in which the mode of production based upon the exploitation of ‘free labour’ predominated. The whole system rested on wage labour, for it was this which gave it its great advantage over previous modes of production.

### **Between two revolutions**

The struggle between the old and the new did not end with the crisis of the 17th century, any more than with the crisis of the 14th century. In Germany, Italy and Bohemia the forces of production declined as old feudal forms of exploitation reconsolidated their hold. In France absolutism under Louis XIV recovered from the upheavals of the late 1640s to establish a stronger base than ever. The monarchy forced the great feudal

families to accept centralised control by the state, although this meant that taxation increasingly competed with old feudal payments and dues in creaming off the surplus from peasant production. At the same time, it was able to persuade the richest sections of the bourgeoisie to expend much of their wealth on buying their way into existing society – through paying the monarchy itself for the right to noble status and the old aristocracy for feudal landholdings.

Even in Britain the revolutionary dictatorship of the army under Cromwell gave way to a series of compromises with the great landowners and merchants, the restored monarchy of 1660 and, when this began to show absolutist pretensions, the settlement of 1688. The new groups of exploiters who based themselves on forms of capitalist exploitation, pure or bastardised, urban or rural, were still too weak to impose their will on the rest of society without some reliance on forces below them which they came to fear [136], and most were prepared to put their trust in the aristocrats and gentry to keep order. By 1660 their attitude was that without a monarchy there could be no growth of trade. [137]

The defeats and compromises of the mid 17th century did not, however, destroy the trend towards capitalist development. In Britain it proceeded at a steady, if at first slow, pace in town and country for more than 100 years before accelerating massively at the end of the 18th century. The population of London increased 50 percent between 1650 and 1750, so that it became easily the biggest city in Europe. [138] Although 70 to 80 Percent of the population still worked in agriculture, it now ‘generated no more than

56 percent of the national incomes. Next to agriculture, textiles made the largest contribution to the national income.’ [139]

The putting out system still dominated in textiles, but took on increasingly capitalist characteristics as big clothiers advanced at the expense of small ones, so that ‘the bulk of workers had no other resources but their labour.’ [140] Meanwhile ‘more modern modes of production’ were to be found in other industries which grew in this period, such as ‘brewing, glass manufacture, paper manufacture, refining of salt and sugar.’ [141] Symbolic of the changes which were taking place was the growth of coal production as coal replaced wood in ‘soap making, brick manufacture, brewing, refining of salt, alum, and sugar and glass making.’ [142]

In the early decades of the 18th century a seven fold increase occurred in the collier population of the southern area [of Lancashire] and in the maximum size of collieries there ... In the third decade in the neighbouring south western area an ‘industrial revolution’ occurred in mining: massive growth, greatly increased scale of the units of production, technological innovation, increased productivity of labour, capital infusion, and fierce competition ... [143]

Across the whole range of industries innovation in terms of new ways of marketing and the production of new commodities was widespread. [144] The invention and spread of new technologies took place at a slower pace. Nevertheless, Schlumbohm can estimate rises in productivity for particular industrial processes ranging from 30 to 1,000 percent. [145]

In agriculture, the growth of capitalist methods of exploitation continued at an accelerating pace, here symbolised by the enclosure of land: in Leicestershire only 10 percent of land was enclosed in the 16th century; the

crisis of the 17th century increased the pressure on poorer peasants to sell land to the landlords who could then rent it out; and where 'voluntary' methods did not work, compulsion could be used – in 1721–1750 there were 100 parliamentary bills of enclosure, in 1750–1760 156, in 1760–1770 424, in 1770–1780 642. [146] The change in the methods of exploitation was accompanied by innovation in farming techniques: farmers responded to the price changes of the crisis years by growing crops like sainfoin, clover and turnips as well as grain, using new systems of rotation which enabled them to keep larger and better nourished herds. [147] The overall productivity of agriculture rose by between 13 and 25 percent [148], a 'formidable achievement' [149] in a pre-industrial society.

Under French absolutism neither industry nor capitalist agriculture developed nearly as rapidly as in post-revolutionary Britain. As we have seen, the successful merchants very often used their wealth to try to buy their way into the old ruling class. Nevertheless, the shift was not all in one direction. The French bourgeoisie had not been nearly as damaged by the outcome of the wars and civil wars of the 17th century wars as had the German and Italian bourgeoisies. And the intelligentsia, including advisors to the monarchy and individual members of the aristocracy, were sufficiently impressed by the ability of the smaller British state to challenge French military might as to its way of running the economy as superior to their own. McNally shows in detail how the dominant economic school of mid 18th century France, the physiocrats, was concerned with how to push capitalist development forward in overwhelmingly agricultural France [150] – although his reliance on Brenner's ideas leads him to understate the degree to which capitalist development was already occurring in industry and agriculture.

By the end of the 18th century there were a million people involved in the rural textile industry:

Cloth was the country's foremost export, taking pride of place over grain and wine, enabling France to get the precious metals she herself did not produce ... The dispersed yet massive strength of the textile industry played a far more important role than its output (apparently not even 5 percent of the CNP) and the workforce (probably not much more than 5 percent of the population) would suggest. [151]

In addition, shipbuilding, iron and steel, coal mining, all advanced: 'The overall rate of expansion (of industry) must have worked out at 60 percent for the 18th century as a whole.' [152] In a number of regions of the country capitalist and semi-capitalist agriculture began to develop, and with it the adoption of new forms of cultivation. [153]

Despite Brenner, France was not moving in the opposite direction to Britain, but in the same direction, at a slower pace. If France seemed relatively backward economically, this was not because it saw no advance in agriculture and industry, but because its global output targets were only about the same as its British rival which had only a quarter of its population. So it was that France saw the growth of both a big, merchant capitalist bourgeoisie and a host of smaller independent producers exploiting a few wage labourers in a capitalist or semi-capitalist manner. So it was that sections of the nobility began to invest in trade and, occasionally, large scale industrial production, just as merchants were investing in land. So it was, too, that a whole ideology could develop within mid-18th century French absolutism which saw capitalist forms of exploitation as more advanced than feudal ones. Braudel has quite correctly summarised the development:



The whole revolutionary ideology of the enlightenment ... was directed against the privileges of the leisured aristocratic class, defending by contrast, in the name of progress, the active population – including merchants, manufacturers and reforming landowners ... The idleness and uselessness of the high and mighty was compared to the industry and social usefulness of the active class. [154]

The French economy entered into a new period of crisis in the 1770s and 1780s. The collaboration between old and new exploiting classes was suddenly subject to same strains it had experienced throughout Europe in the crisis of the previous century. Once again a section of the old ruling class tried to protect itself by turning society backwards, and once again those associated with the new methods of exploitation were compelled, often despite themselves, to fight. A century and a quarter of continuing economic advance meant that the class alignments in the revolution that followed were less complex than those in the first half of the 17th century. But it still required leadership of genius, this time of the Jacobins, to construct a coalition of forces committed to reorganising society on the basis of the new, capitalist methods, in face of opposition from those bourgeois interests which had become most incorporated into the old society.

## **Conclusion**

I have attempted to provide an overview of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Marx's

writings should never be regarded as holy writ by Marxists. He never had time to work out many of his ideas, he was quite capable of making mistakes in his reasoning and there have been considerable advances in historical knowledge since his time. But it is worth noting when he was right. In **Capital** he points to a four-fold origin of capitalism: in the growth of trade, in the use of free labour in manufacturing, in separation of the peasantry from the land, and in the 'primitive accumulation of capital'.

For Marx there was an interrelation between the four elements. They all arose from the way in which the growth forces of production within feudalism threw up new relations of production, relations which came into collision with the old society when it entered into crisis. These new relations did not displace feudal exploitation immediately, but ensured a longer or shorter transition period, in which periods of peace and even co-operation between old and new exploiting classes were interspersed with bitter conflicts, revolutions and civil wars. This enabled him to see how the bourgeois revolution is centred in the towns but is reinforced by the revolt of rural classes. It also enabled him to incorporate into his account the insights he had made 20 years before, when in **The German Ideology** he connected the rise of capitalism with the development of forces of production and when in **The Communist Manifesto** he traced the history of the bourgeoisie back to the medieval towns.

Marx never fully completed his account. As Schlumbohm has correctly noted, 'Marx never really analysed ... the inner logic of pre-capitalist and transitional relations of production' [155], and so there are many gaps in his

argument that need to be filled. That is no reason to retreat into counterposing one element in his approach to the others, as, in their own ways, both the Sweezy-Wallerstein school and the Brenner school do. Each ends up by revising parts of Marxism: the Sweezy-Wallerstein school by focusing on the ‘peoples’ of the Third World rather than the international working class; the Brenner school by separating off the struggle between the classes from the material circumstances in which it takes place.

Fortunately there is an alternative to both, some elements of which I’ve tried to outline in this article.

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## Notes

1. G. Comninel, **Rethinking the French Revolution** (London 1987), p. 169; the quote from Marx is from volume III of **Capital**, p. 54.
2. S.H. Rigby, **Marxism and History** (Manchester 1987), p. 13.
3. Barker, **International Socialism** (new series) 34, p. 118.
4. For my understanding of Marx’s account, see my article, *Base and superstructure*, in **International Socialism** (new series) 32.
5. This was true both of the debates in the 1950s occasioned by Maurice Dobb’s **Studies in the Development of Capitalism** and of the more recent debate around the ideas of Robert Brenner.
6. Pirenne, **Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe** (NY 1937), section reprinted in A.F. Cantor and M.S. Werthman (*ed.*), **Medieval Society, 400–1450** (New York 1972), p. 132.
7. Pirenne, **op. cit.**, p. 148.
8. Pirenne, **ibid.**, p. 150.
9. R.H. Hilton (*ed.*), **The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism** (London 1982), p. 42.

10. For summaries of his arguments, see Wallerstein, **Historical Capitalism** (London 1983), pp. 330–31 and 40–43.
11. See especially, Braudel, **Capitalism and Civilisation**, Vol. 2, *The Wheels of Commerce* (London 1982).
12. Although Weber is obsessed by the contrast between the ‘rational’ pursuit of profit under modern capitalism and the less systematic pursuit of it in what he sees as previous forms of capitalism.
13. Wallerstein, **op. cit.**, p. 14.
14. See Pirenne, **Mohammed and Charlemagne** (London 1968), pp. 171–185.
15. Wallerstein, **op. cit.**, p. 41.
16. This was a point long ago made by Marx, see for instance **Capital**, Vol. I (Moscow 1961), p. 715: ‘To become a free seller of labour power ... he [the worker] must have escaped from the regime of the guilds.’
17. Marx and Engels, **Collected Works**, Vol. 30, p. 36.
18. Marx and Engels, **Collected Works**, Vol. 30, p. 37.
19. Wallerstein recognises this, but then argues that because slave production in the Americas and feudal production in eastern Europe were for markets, they were forms of capitalism!
20. Dobb, in Hilton, **op. cit.**, p. 60.
21. Dobb, **ibid.**, p. 59.
22. Dobb, **Studies ...**, p. 65.
23. In Hilton, **op. cit.**, pp. 61–62.
24. Dobb, **Studies ...**, p. 17.
25. **Ibid.**, p. 20.
26. **Ibid.**, p. 42.
27. **Ibid.**, p. 47.
28. Dobb in Hilton, **op. cit.**, p. 59.
29. **Ibid.**, p. 58.
30. Marx, **Capital**, Vol. I (Moscow 1961), p. 715.

**31.** Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development: a Critique of neo-Smithian Marxism*, **New Left Review 104**, July–August 1977.

**32.** The debate in the pages of **Past and Present** over this article is reprinted as Ashton & Philpin (*eds.*), **The Brenner Debate** (London 1988).

**33.** *The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism*, in **The Brenner Debate**, *ibid.*, p. 54.

**34.** *Ibid.*, p. 214

**35.** What Brenner, by a misleading comparison with the dynamics of capitalism, refers to as 'political accumulation'.

**36.** **The Brenner Debate**, p. 293

**37.** The term is used by Bois, *Against neo-Malthusian orthodoxy*, *ibid.*, p. 115, and taken up by Wood in **New Left Review 127**, p. 76. For a full analysis of the current which is identified with it, see Callinicos, appendix to *Bourgeois Revolutions and Historical Materialism*, **International Socialism 2 : 43**.

**38.** As Bois, one of the contributors to the **Past and Present** debate, quite rightly noted, Brenner's position 'amounts to a voluntarist vision of history in which class struggle is divorced from all objective contingencies and in the first place from such laws of development as may be peculiar to a specific mode of production' (Ashton and Philpin (*eds.*), p. 115).

**39.** Indian Marxists have long been vexed by the character of the mode of production in India after the mutiny. The British colonial authorities created a class of rural landowners with legislation modelled on conditions in the British countryside, but the landowners did not begin to adopt methods of capitalist farming until much later—until the interwar years in the Punjab and until after independence elsewhere. The form of property ownership did not in itself produce capitalist production relations. The argument is very well put by Utsa Patnaik, in Ashoki Rudra and others, **Studies in the Development of Capitalism in India** (Lahore 1978), from page 53 onwards, who points out that neither the separation of agricultural labourers from the means of production nor the existence of a world market was enough to

give rise to capitalist production relations. That required ‘the creation of an expanding domestic market owing to large investment outlays by the state.’

**40.** *Agrarian Class Structure*, in **The Brenner Debate**, p. 39.

**41. Ibid.**, p. 40.

**42. Ibid.**, p. 40.

**43.** Summary of Fisher’s argument in E.A. Wrigley, *London’s Importance 1650–1750*, in Patten (ed.), **Pre-Industrial England, Geographical Essays**, p. 202.

**44.** F.J. Fisher, *The Development of the London Food Market, 1540–1640*, **Economic History Review V** (1934–35), p. 63, quoted in E.A. Wrigley, **op. cit.**.

**45.** For a discussion on this question, see Roehl, *Patterns and Structure of Demand*, in C.M. Cipolla (ed.), **The Fontana Economic History of Europe, The Middle Ages**, pp. 118–9

**46.** Sylvia Thrupp, *Medieval Industry, 1000–1500*, in Cipolla, **ibid.**, p. 231. Contrast this with Brenner’s claim (*Agrarian Roots*, p. 241) that ‘little of the output of the growing urban centres goes back into production to augment means of production or means of consumption of direct peasant producers’.

**47.** *Medieval Agriculture*, in Cipolla, **ibid.**, p. 192.

**48.** For the role of small towns, with only 500–2,000 inhabitants, see R.H. Hilton, *Lords, Burgesses and Hucksters*, **Past and Present**, November 1982. See also Marx, **Capital**, Vol. III, p. 804.

**49.** J.V. Polisensky, **The Thirty Years War** (London 1974), p. 52.

**50.** Le Goff, *The Town as an Agent of Civilisation*, in Cipolla (ed.), **op. cit.**, p. 94.

**51. Ibid.**, p. 79

**52.** See Hilton, *Lords ...*

**53.** Wrigley, **op. cit.**, p. 192.

**54.** Wrigley, **op. cit.**, pp. 196–197.

**55.** Le Goff, **Medieval Civilisation**, pp. 88–89.

56. *The agrarian roots ...*, **op. cit.**, p. 214.

57. J. de L. Mann, **The Cloth Industry in the West of England, from 1640 to 1880** (Oxford 1971), p. 89.

58. **Ibid.**, pp. 90–91.

59. *The agrarian roots ...*, in **op. cit.**, p. 324.

60. *Agrarian Class Structure*, p. 54.

61. In this he sets a trend which is taken further by Wood in her *The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism*, **New Left Review** 127, May–June 1981, and her *Marxism and the Course of History*, **New Left Review** 147, September–October 1984, and further still by Conninell.

62. Despite his criticisms of what he calls the ‘Malthusians’ he incorporates large chunks of their interpretation into his theory, without seeing how the development of the forces of production alter the impact of rising population over the whole feudal period.

63. This Marx first argued in **The German Ideology** of 1846 – although there he did not use the phrase ‘relations of production’ but rather ‘forms of intercourse’. The argument is repeated in the famous *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1858, in the 1861–3 preparatory manuscript for **Capital** (Vol. 30 of the Marx Engels, **Collected Works**), and in **Capital** itself.

In all of them his usage makes it clear that by ‘relations of production’ he does not just mean class relations – relations of exploitation – but all those new forms of interaction between human beings that are continually being thrown up by changes in methods of production. A failure to grasp this inevitably leads to a failure to see how one mode of production bears within it the seeds of a subsequent mode of production. This is why it is regrettable that in his absolutely justified critique of Conninell in **International Socialism 2 : 43**, A Callinicos accepts the myth that there is a change in Marx’s understanding of historical materialism between **The German Ideology** and **Capital**.

64. Thrupp, *Medieval Industry 1000–1500*, in Cipolla (ed.), **op. cit.**, p. 225.

65. J.C. Russell, *Population in Europe 500–1500*, in Cipolla, **op. cit.**, p. 25.

66. *Agrarian roots ...*, **op. cit.**, p. 265.
67. White Jr., *The Expansion of Technology 500–1500*, in Cipolla, **op. cit.**, p. 143.
68. This is implied by Wood when she argues that ‘the formula concerning the contradictions between forces of production and relations of production’ is a ‘law of capitalist development’ and not of pre-capitalist class structures. *Marxism and Historical Progress*, *New Left Review* 147, p. 102.
69. **Anti-Dühring**, in Marx and Engels, **Collected Works**, Vol. 25, pp. 146–151. See also pp. 609–612 and 613–615.
70. Or at least the surplus which came into the hands of the ruling class, see Ste Croix, **The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World** (London 1981).
71. Le Goff, **op. cit.**, p. 3.
72. Kriedte (*ed.*), **Industrialisation before Industrialisation** (Cambridge 1981), p. 19.
73. Duby, **Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West** (London 1968), p. 36.
74. Duby, **ibid.**, p. 49.
75. Le Goff, **Medieval Civilisation**, p. 57.
76. **Ibid.**, p. 59.
77. **Ibid.**, p. 198.
78. A.C. Crombie, *Medieval Science and Technology*, in Cantor and Werthman, **op. cit.**, p. 240.
79. **Ibid.**, pp. 232–234; see also Duby, *Rural economy ...*, **op. cit.**, pp. 88–89.
80. Although proponents of the Brenner thesis should note that the ecclesiastics did attempt from the 10th century onwards to reduce the devastation to society caused by internal warfare with campaigns for ‘peace’. See Bloch, **Feudal Society**, pp. 408–431.
81. Roehl, *Patterns and structure of demands, 1000–1500*, in Cipolla, **op. cit.**, p. 133.
82. McNally, paraphrasing Brenner, **op. cit.**, p. 3.



83. For a discussion on what is and what is not known, see the early chapters of Duby, **Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West** (London 1968).

84. White, **op. cit.**, p. 146.

85. **Ibid.**, p. 153. See also Le Goff, **Medieval Civilisation**, pp. 54 and 59; and Duby, *Medieval Agriculture*, in Cipolla, **op. cit.**, pp. 176–197.

86. Duby, **op. cit.**, pp. 195–196.

87. Duby, **ibid.**, p. 196.

88. Duby, *Rural Economy ...*, **ibid.**, p. 103.

89. Le Goff, **op. cit.**, pp. 73–74. See also his accounts of the growth of different towns, pp. 72, 76, 77.

90. White, in Cipolla, **op. cit.**, p. 144.

91. Thrupp, **op. cit.**, p. 234.

92. Le Goff, **op. cit.**, p. 74.

93. **Ibid.**, p. 75.

94. **Ibid.**, p. 75.

95. **Ibid.**, p. 75.

96. Holmes, **Europe, Hierarchy and Revolt 1320–1450** (London 1975).

97. Quoted in Holmes, **ibid.**, p. 70. See also Piero Pieri, **Il Rinascimento e la crisi militare italiana** (Einaudi 1952), p. 50.

98. I should say, ‘almost all the debates’, since Brenner virtually ignores it.

99. The example of the latifundia and slave plantations has been well documented: See, for example, E. Williams, **Capitalism and Slavery**. For the causes behind the rise of Stalin’s labour camps, see Cliff, **State Capitalism in Russia** (London 1988).

100. **Capital**, Vol. I (Moscow 1961), p. 715.

101. In Kriedte (*ed.*), **op. cit.**.

102. Schlumbohn, **op. cit.**, p. 111.

103. Kriedte, in Kriedte, (*ed.*), **op. cit.**

104. Kriedte (*ed.*), **op. cit.**, p. 34.
105. Kriedte, in Kriedte (*ed.*), **op. cit.**, p. 33.
106. Schlumbohm, in Kriedte (*ed.*), **op. cit.**, pp. 95-96.
107. Kriedte, in Kriedte (*ed.*), **ibid.**, p. 29.
108. Kriedte, **Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists** (Leamington Spa 1987), p. 41.
109. R.H. Hilton, *Lords, Burgesses and Hucksters, Past and Present*, November 1982.
110. Duby, in Cipolla, **op. cit.**, p. 193.
111. Duby, **Rural Economy ...**, **op. cit.**, p. 165.
112. **Ibid.**, p. 151.
113. **Ibid.**, pp. 96-7.
114. **Ibid.**, p. 193.
115. Le Goff, in Cipolla, **op. cit.**, p. 94.
116. See Kriedte, **Peasants ...**, **op. cit.**, p. 90.
117. Le Goff, **Medieval Civilisation**, **op. cit.**, p. 95.
118. Duby, **Rural Economy ...**, **op. cit.**, p. 165.
119. **Ibid.**, p. 165.
120. Dobb, **Studies ...**, **op. cit.**, and Perry Anderson, **Lineages of the Absolute State** (London 1974), pp. 18-19.
121. Sweezy in R.H. Hilton (*ed.*), **op. cit.**
122. Holmes, **op. cit.**, p. 116.
123. Anderson, **op. cit.**, pp. 21-2.
124. As Anderson puts it earlier, **op. cit.**, pp. 18 and 20.
125. **Origins of the Family**, quoted in Anderson p. 15.
126. For a summary of these revolts see Holmes, **op. cit.**, pp. 25-133.
127. See Holmes, **ibid.**, p. 133.
128. Brenner's own account, in terms of traditions of peasant solidarity, is unconvincing, as Heidi Wunder shows, in Ashton and Philpin (*ed.*), **op. cit.**, pp. 91-100, although she provides no real account of her own.

129. As when the Parisian bourgeoisie, involved in a dispute of its own with the feudal ruling class, vacillated over whether to support the peasant rebellion of 1378 and, in effect, allowed the feudal forces to crush it. See Holmes, **op. cit.**, p. 41.

130. For an excellent account of the economic roots of the Bohemian revolt, see J.V. Polisensky, **The Thirty Years War** (London 1974), pp. 37–39, p. 41, and pp. 47–50.

131. Polisensky, **op. cit.**, p. 17.

132. **Ibid.**, p. 17.

133. Kriedie, **op. cit.**, p. 90.

134. See, for instance, the calculations in R.W. Fogel and S.L. Engerman, **Time on the Cross** (London 1974).

135. D.C. Coleman, **Industry in Tudor and Stuart England** (London 1975), p. 36.

136. For an account of how the lower classes mobilised see Manning, **The English People and the English Revolution** (London 1976). See also virtually any of the writings of Hill, especially **The World Turned Upside Down**.

137. Hill, **Milton and the English Revolution** (London 1977), p. 186.

138. E.A. Wrigley, **op. cit.**, p. 203.

139. Kriedte, **Peasants ...**, **op. cit.**, p. 77.

140. J. de L. Mann, **The Cloth Industry in the West of England** (Oxford 1971), p. 102.

141. Kriedte, **Peasants ...**, **op. cit.**, p. 78.

142. **Ibid.**, p. 78.

143. Langston, *Coal Output in South West Lancashire, 1590–1799*, in Patten, **op. cit.**, p. 242.

144. See, for instance, de L. Mann, **op. cit.**, ch. one.

145. Schlumbohm, in Kriedte (*ed.*), **op. cit.**, p. 111.

146. Kriedte, **Peasants ...**, **op. cit.**, pp. 106–107.

147. **Ibid.**, p. 68.

148. Estimates quoted in Wrigley, **op. cit.**, p. 204.

**149. Ibid..**

**150.** A point which Marx made in those notebooks for **Capital** which are published under the title **Theories of Surplus Value**.

**151.** Goubert, **The Ancien Regime** (London 1973), p. 57.

**152. Ibid.,** p. 57.

**153. Ibid.,** p. 111–113

**154.** Braudel, **Civilisation and Capitalism**, Vol. II, *The Wheels of Commerce* (London 1982), p. 504.

**155.** Schlumbohm, **op. cit.**, p. 74.

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