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The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism

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## COMMUNICATIONS

### THE TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO CAPITALISM

We live in the period of transition from capitalism to socialism; and this fact lends particular interest to studies of earlier transitions from one social system to another. This is one reason, among many others, why Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*<sup>1</sup> is such a timely and important book. Something like a third of the whole volume is devoted to the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. In this article I shall confine my attention exclusively to this aspect of Dobb's work.

#### (1) *Dobb's Definition of Feudalism*

Dobb defines feudalism as being "virtually identical with what we usually mean by serfdom: an obligation laid on the producer by force and independently of his own volition to fulfill certain economic demands of an overlord, whether these demands take the form of services to be performed or of dues to be paid in money or in kind" (p. 35). In keeping with this definition, Dobb uses the two terms, "feudalism" and "serfdom," as practically interchangeable throughout the book.

It seems to me that this definition is defective in not identifying a *system* of production. *Some* serfdom can exist in systems which are clearly not feudal; and even as the dominant relation of production, serfdom has at different times and in different regions been associated with different forms of economic organization. Thus Engels, in one of his last letters to Marx, wrote that "it is certain that serfdom and bondage are not a peculiarly (*spezifisch*) medieval-feudal form, we find them everywhere or nearly everywhere where conquerors have the land cultivated for them by the old inhabitants."<sup>2</sup> It follows, I think, that the concept of feudalism, as Dobb defines it, is too general to be immediately applicable to the study of a particular region during a particular period. Or to put it otherwise, what Dobb is really defining is not *one* social system but a

1 (New York: International Publishers, 1946).

2 Marx-Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 411 f.

family of social systems, all of which are based on serfdom. In studying specific historical problems, it is important to know not only that we are dealing with feudalism but also which member of the family is involved.

Dobb's primary interest, of course, lies in western European feudalism, since it was in this region that capitalism was born and grew to maturity. Hence it seems to me he ought to indicate very clearly what he regards as the main features of western European feudalism and to follow this with a theoretical analysis of the laws and tendencies of a system with these principal features. I shall try to show later that his failure to follow this course leads him to a number of doubtful generalizations. Moreover, I think the same reason accounts for Dobb's frequent practice of invoking factual support from a wide variety of regions and periods for arguments which are applied to western Europe and can really only be tested in terms of western European experience.

This is not to say, of course, that Dobb is not thoroughly familiar with western European feudalism. At one point (p. 36 f.) he gives a concise outline of its most important characteristics: (1) "a low level of technique, in which the instruments of production are simple and generally inexpensive, and the act of production is largely individual in character; the division of labour . . . being at a very primitive level of development"; (2) "production for the immediate need of the household or village-community and not for a wider market"; (3) "demesne-farming: farming of the lord's estate, often on a considerable scale, by compulsory labour-services"; (4) "political decentralization"; (5) "conditional holding of land by lords on some kind of service-tenure"; (6) "possession by a lord of judicial or quasi-judicial functions in relation to the dependent population." Dobb refers to a system having these characteristics as the "classic" form of feudalism, but it would be less likely to mislead if it were called the western European form. The fact that "the feudal mode of production was not confined to this classic form" is apparently Dobb's reason for not analyzing its structure and tendencies more closely. In my judgment, however, such an analysis is essential if we are to avoid confusion in our attempts to discover the causes of the downfall of feudalism in western Europe.

### (2) *The Theory of Western European Feudalism*

Drawing on Dobb's description, we can define western European feudalism as an economic system in which serfdom is the predominant relation of production, and in which production is organized in and around the manorial estate of the lord. It is important to notice that this

definition does not imply “natural economy” or the absence of money transactions or money calculation. What it does imply is that markets are for the most part local and that long-distance trade, while not necessarily absent, plays no determining role in the purposes or methods of production. The crucial feature of feudalism in this sense is that it is a system of *production for use*. The needs of the community are known, and production is planned and organized with a view to satisfying these needs. This has extremely important consequences. As Marx stated in *Capital*, “it is clear . . . that in any given economic formation of society, where not the exchange value but the use value of the product predominates, surplus labor will be limited by a given set of wants which may be greater or less, and that *here no boundless thirst for surplus labor arises from the nature of production itself.*”<sup>3</sup> There is, in other words, none of the pressure which exists under capitalism for continual improvements in methods of production. Techniques and forms of organization settle down in established grooves. Where this is the case, as historical materialism teaches, there is a very strong tendency for the whole life of society to be oriented toward custom and tradition.

We must not conclude, however, that such a system is necessarily stable or static. One element of instability is the competition among the lords for land and vassals which together form the foundation of power and prestige. This competition is the analogue of competition for profits under capitalism, but its effects are quite different. It generates a more or less continuous state of warfare; but the resultant insecurity of life and possession, far from revolutionizing methods of production as capitalist competition does, merely accentuates the mutual dependence of lord and vassal and thus reinforces the basic structure of feudal relations. Feudal warfare upsets, impoverishes, and exhausts society, but it has no tendency to transform it.

A second element of instability is to be found in the growth of population. The structure of the manor is such as to set limits to the number of producers it can employ and the number of consumers it can support, while the inherent conservatism of the system inhibits overall expansion. This does not mean, of course, that no growth is possible, only that it tends to lag behind population increase. Younger sons of serfs are pushed out of the regular framework of feudal society and go to make up the kind of vagrant population—living on alms or brigandage and supplying the raw material for mercenary armies—which was so characteristic of the

3 *Capital*, I, p. 260. Italics added. (All references to *Capital* are to the Kerr edition.)

Middle Ages. Such a surplus population, however, while contributing to instability and insecurity, exercises no creative or revolutionizing influence on feudal society.<sup>4</sup>

We may conclude, then, that western European feudalism, in spite of chronic instability and insecurity, was a system with a very strong bias in favor of maintaining given methods and relations of production. I think we are justified in saying of it what Marx said of India before the period of British rule: "All the civil wars, invasions, revolutions, conquests, famines . . . did not go deeper than its surface."<sup>5</sup>

I believe that if Dobb had taken full account of this inherently conservative and change-resisting character of western European feudalism, he would have been obliged to alter the theory which he puts forward to account for its disintegration and decline in the later Middle Ages.

### (3) *Dobb's Theory of the Decline of Feudalism*

Dobb summarizes the commonly accepted explanation of the decline of feudalism as follows:

We are often presented with the picture of a more or less stable economy that was disintegrated by the impact of commerce acting as an external force and developing outside the system that it finally overwhelms. We are given an interpretation of the transition from the old order to the new that finds the dominant causal sequences within the sphere of exchange between manorial economy and the outside world. "Natural economy" and "exchange economy" are two economic orders that cannot mix, and the presence of the latter, we are told, is sufficient to cause the former to go into dissolution (p. 38).

Dobb does not deny the "outstanding importance" of this process: "That it was connected with the changes that were so marked at the end of the Middle Ages is evident enough" (p. 38). But he finds this explanation inadequate because it does not probe deeply enough into the effect of trade on feudalism. If we examine the problem more closely, he argues, we shall find that "there seems, in fact, to be as much evidence that the growth of a money economy *per se* led to an intensification of serfdom as there is evidence that it was the cause of the feudal decline" (p. 40). In support of this contention, he cites a considerable body of

<sup>4</sup> It might be thought that the vigorous colonization and reclamation movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries disproves this argument. I think, however, that this is not the case. The colonization movement seems to have been a reflex of the growth of trade and commodity production, not a manifestation of the internal expansive power of feudal society. See Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (New York, 1937), ch. 3, sec. ii.

<sup>5</sup> Emile Burns, ed., *A Handbook of Marxism* (London, 1935), p. 182.

historical data, the "outstanding case" being "the recrudescence of Feudalism in Eastern Europe at the end of the fifteenth century—that 'second serfdom' of which Friedrich Engels wrote: a revival of the old system which was associated with the growth of production for the market" (p. 39). On the basis of such data, Dobb reasons that if the only factor at work in western Europe had been the rise of trade, the result might as well have been an intensification as a distintegration of feudalism. And from this it follows that there must have been other factors at work to bring about the actually observed result.

What were these factors? Dobb believes that they can be found inside the feudal economy itself. He concedes that "the evidence is neither very plentiful nor conclusive," but he feels that "such evidence as we possess strongly indicates 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; since this need for additional revenue promoted an increase in the pressure on the producer to a point where this pressure became literally unendurable" (p. 42). The consequence of this growing pressure was that "in the end it led to an exhaustion, or actual disappearance, of the labour-force by which the system was nourished" (p. 43).

In other words, according to Dobb's theory, the essential cause of the breakdown of feudalism was over-exploitation of the labor force: serfs deserted the lords' estates *en masse*, and those who remained were too few and too overworked to enable the system to maintain itself on the old basis. It was these developments, rather than the rise of trade, which forced the feudal ruling class to adopt those expedients—commutation of labor services, leasing demesne lands to tenant farmers, etc.—which finally led to the transformation of productive relations in the countryside.

#### (4) *A Critique of Dobb's Theory*

In order to make his theory stand up, Dobb must show that the feudal ruling class's growing need for revenue and the flight of serfs from the land can both be explained in terms of forces operating inside the feudal system. Let us see how he attempts to do this.

First, with regard to the lords' need for revenue. Here Dobb cites a number of factors which he regards as inherent in the feudal system. Serfs were held in contempt and were looked upon primarily as a source of income (p. 43 f.). The size of the parasitic class tended to expand as a result of natural growth of noble families, sub-infeudation, and the multi-

plication of retainers—all of whom “had to be supported from the surplus labour of the serf population.” War and brigandage “swelled the expenses of feudal households” and “spread waste and devastation over the land.” Finally, “as the age of chivalry advanced, the extravagances of noble households advanced also, with their lavish feasts and costly displays, vying in emulation in their cult of *magnificentia*” (p. 45).

Two of these factors—disregard for the interests of the serfs, and war and brigandage—existed throughout the whole period, and if they became more intense with the passage of time, this requires to be explained: it cannot simply be taken for granted as a natural feature of feudalism. Dobb makes no attempt to explain such a trend, however; and even the special drain which he attributes to the crusades during the decisive period of feudal development is of doubtful significance. After all, the crusaders fought in the East, and they naturally lived for the most part off the land; the crusades were to a certain extent looting expeditions which brought material rewards to their sponsors and participants; and they were in large part substitutes for, rather than additions to, the “normal” feudal warfare of the time. On the whole, it seems to me that these two factors provide little support for Dobb’s theory.

It is somewhat different, however, with the other two factors, namely, the growth in the size of the parasitic class and the growing extravagance of noble households. Here we have *prima facie* evidence of a need for increased revenue. But whether we also have the necessary support for Dobb’s theory is more doubtful. The growth in the size of the parasitic class was matched by a growth of the serf population. Moreover, throughout the Middle Ages there was plenty of cultivable land to be brought into use. Hence, despite its extremely conservative nature, the feudal system did expand, slowly but steadily. When we take account of the fact that warfare took its main toll from the upper orders (since they alone were permitted to bear arms), we may well doubt whether there was a significant *relative* growth in the size of the parasitic class. In the absence of any clear factual evidence one way or the other, we would certainly not be justified in attributing decisive weight to this factor.

On the other hand, there is no reason to doubt the reality of the growing extravagance of the feudal ruling class: here the evidence is plentiful and it all points in the same direction. But was this growing extravagance a trend which can be explained by the nature of the feudal system, or does it reflect something that was happening outside the feudal system? It seems to me that on general grounds we should expect the latter to be the case. Even under such a dynamic system as capitalism, spontaneous

changes in consumers' tastes are of negligible importance,<sup>6</sup> and we should expect this to be true *a fortiori* in a tradition-bound society like feudalism. Moreover, once we look outside the feudal system we find ample reason for the growing extravagance of the feudal ruling class: the rapid expansion of trade from the eleventh century onward brought an ever-increasing quantity and variety of goods within its reach. Dobb recognizes the existence of this relation between trade and the needs of the feudal ruling class, but it seems to me that he passes over it altogether too lightly. If he had given it the weight it deserves, he could hardly have maintained that the growing extravagance of the ruling class was due to causes internal to the feudal system.

Let us now turn to the problem of the flight of the serfs from the land. There is little doubt that this was an important cause of the crisis of the feudal economy that characterized the fourteenth century. Dobb assumes that it was due to the oppression of the lords (which in turn had its origin in their growing need for revenue) and can thus be explained as a process internal to the feudal system. But has he made out a convincing case for this assumption?<sup>7</sup>

I think not. The serfs could not simply desert the manors, no matter how exacting their masters might become, unless they had somewhere to go. It is true, as I have argued above, that feudal society tends to generate a surplus vagrant population; but this vagrant population, constituting the dregs of society, is made up of those of whom there is no room on the manors, and it is hardly realistic to suppose that any considerable number of serfs would deliberately abandon their holdings to descend to the bottom of the social ladder.

This whole problem, however, takes on an entirely new aspect—to which Dobb pays surprisingly little attention—when we recall that the flight of the serfs took place simultaneously with the growth of the towns, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There is no doubt that

6 Thus, for example, Schumpeter feels justified in assuming that under capitalism "consumers' initiative in changing their tastes . . . is negligible and that all change in consumers' tastes is incident to, and brought about by, producers' action," *Business Cycles*, (New York, 1939), I, p. 73. Needless to say, this assumption is in full accord with the Marxian theory of the primacy of production over consumption.

7 It should be stressed that it *is* an assumption, not an established fact. Rodney Hilton, a student of medieval economic history to whom Dobb acknowledges indebtedness in the Preface, states in a review that "there is not anything like adequate statistical proof that an appreciable number of peasants left their holdings for the reason stated [i.e., intolerable conditions of oppression]," *Modern Quarterly*, II (Summer, 1947), p. 268.



the rapidly developing towns—offering, as they did, liberty, employment, and improved social status—acted as a powerful magnet to the oppressed rural population. And the burghers themselves, in need of additional labor power and of more soldiers to enhance their military strength, made every effort to facilitate the escape of the serfs from the jurisdiction of their masters. “There is frequently,” Marx commented in a letter to Engels, “something quite pathetic about the way the burghers in the twelfth century invite the peasants to escape to the cities.”<sup>8</sup> Against this background, the movement away from the land, which would otherwise be incomprehensible, is seen to be the natural consequence of the rise of the towns. No doubt the oppression of which Dobb writes was an important factor in predisposing the serfs to flight, but acting by itself it could hardly have produced an emigration of large proportions.<sup>9</sup>

Dobb’s theory of the internal causation of the breakdown of feudalism could still be rescued if it could be shown that the rise of the towns was a process internal to the feudal system. But as I read Dobb, he would not maintain this. He takes an eclectic position on the question of the *origin* of the medieval towns but recognizes that their *growth* was generally in proportion to their importance as trading centers. Since trade can in no sense be regarded as a form of feudal economy, it follows that Dobb could hardly argue that the rise of urban life was a consequence of internal feudal causes.

To sum up this critique of Dobb’s theory of the decline of feudalism: having neglected to analyse the laws and tendencies of western European feudalism, he mistakes for immanent trends certain historical developments which in fact can only be explained as arising from causes external to the system.

(5) *More on the Theory of the Decline of Feudalism*

While I find Dobb’s theory of the decline of feudalism unsatisfactory on several counts, I think he has nevertheless made an important contri-

<sup>8</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> As I shall argue below, it was the relative absence of urban life in eastern Europe which left the peasantry there at the mercy of the lords and brought about the recrudescence of serfdom in that region in the fifteenth century. Dobb, it will be recalled, cited this “second serfdom” in eastern Europe against the view that trade necessarily tends to bring about the disintegration of feudal economy. We can now see that the problem is in reality much more complex. Near the centers of trade, the effect on feudal economy is strongly disintegrating; further away the effect tends to be just the opposite. This is an important question to which we shall return later.

bution to the solution of the problem. Most of his specific criticism of traditional theories are well taken; and it seems clear that no theory which fails to take into account the factors which Dobb stresses—especially the growing extravagance of the ruling class and the flight of the serfs from the land—can be regarded as correct. Hence the following notes and suggestions owe much to Dobb even where they depart from his views.

It seems to me that Dobb has not succeeded in shaking that part of the commonly accepted theory which holds that the root cause of the decline of feudalism was the growth of trade. But he has shown that the impact of trade on the feudal system is more complicated than has usually been thought: the idea that trade equals “money economy” and that money economy is a natural dissolvent of feudal relations is much too simple. Let us attempt to explore the relation of trade to the feudal economy more closely.<sup>10</sup>

It seems to me that the important conflict in this connection is not between “money economy” and “natural economy” but between production for the market and production for use. We ought to try to uncover the process by which trade engendered a *system* of production for the market, and then to trace the impact of this system on the pre-existent feudal system of production for use.

Any but the most primitive economy requires a certain amount of trade. Thus the local village markets and the itinerant peddlers of the European Dark Ages were props rather than threats to the feudal order: they supplied essential needs without bulking large enough to affect the structure of economic relations. When trade first began to expand in the tenth century (or perhaps even before), it was in the sphere of long-distance, as distinguished from purely local, exchange of relatively expensive goods which could stand the very high transport costs of the time. As long as this expansion of trade remained within the forms of what may be called the peddling system, its effects necessarily remained slight.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the problem of the growth of trade in the Middle Ages is in principle separate from the problem of the decline of feudalism. Granted the fact that trade increased, *whatever the reason may have been*, feudalism was bound to be influenced in certain ways. There is no space here for a discussion of the reasons for the growth of trade; I will only say that I find Pirenne's theory—which stresses the re-opening of Mediterranean shipping to and from the western ports in the eleventh century, and the development by the Scandinavians of commercial routes from the North Sea and the Baltic via Russia to the Black Sea from the tenth century—to be quite convincing. But clearly one does not have to accept Pirenne's theory in order to agree that the growth of trade was the decisive factor in bringing about the decline of western European feudalism.

But when it outgrew the peddling stage and began to result in the establishment of localized trading and transshipment centers, a qualitatively new factor was introduced. For these centers, though based on long-distance exchange, inevitably became generators of commodity production in their own right. They had to be provisioned from the surrounding countryside; and their handicrafts, embodying a higher form of specialization and division of labor than anything known to the manorial economy, not only supplied the town population itself with needed products but also provided commodities which the rural population could purchase with the proceeds of sales in the town market. As this process unfolded, the transactions of the long-distance traders, which formed the seed from which the trading centers grew, lost their unique importance and probably in the majority of cases came to occupy a secondary place in the town economies.

We see thus how 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.<sup>11</sup> Once juxtaposed, these two systems naturally began to act upon each other. Let us examine some of the currents of influence running from the exchange economy to the use economy.

In the first place, and perhaps most importantly, the inefficiency of the manorial organization of production—which probably no one recognized, or at least paid any attention to, as long as it had no rival—was now clearly revealed by contrast with a more rational system of specialization and division of labor. Manufactured goods could be bought more cheaply than they could be made, and this pressure to buy generated a pressure to sell. Taken together, these pressures operated powerfully to bring the feudal estates within the orbit of the exchange economy. “Of what use now,” Pirenne asks, “were the domestic workshops which on each important manor used to maintain a few score serfs to manufacture textiles or farming tools, not half as well as they were now made by the artisans of the neighboring town? They were allowed to disappear almost everywhere in the course of the twelfth century.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In this connection, it is important to recognize that the contrast between the two forms of economy is by no means identical with the contrast between town and country. Rural as well as urban production for the market is included in exchange economy. Hence the relative importance of the two forms of economy can never be measured by a simple index like the proportion of urban to rural population.

<sup>12</sup> Pirenne, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

Second, the very existence of exchange value as a massive economic fact tends to transform the attitude of producers. It now becomes possible to seek riches, not in the absurd form of a heap of perishable goods but in the very convenient and mobile form of money or claims to money. The possession of wealth soon becomes an end in itself in an exchange economy, and this psychological transformation affects not only those who are immediately involved but also (though doubtless to a lesser degree) those who come into contact with the exchange economy. Hence not only merchants and traders but also members of the old feudal society acquire what we should call today a businesslike attitude toward economic affairs. Since businessmen *always* have a need for more revenue, we have here a part of the explanation of the ruling class's growing need for revenue, on which, as we have seen, Dobb places so much emphasis in accounting for the decline of feudalism.

Third, and also important in the same connection, is the development of the tastes of the feudal ruling class. As Pirenne describes the process, in every direction where commerce spread, it created the desire for the new articles of consumption, which it brought with it. As always happens, the aristocracy wished to surround themselves with the luxury, or at least the comfort befitting their social rank. We see at once, for instance, by comparing the life of a knight in the eleventh century with that of one in the twelfth, how the expenses necessitated by food, dress, household furniture and, above all, arms, rose between these two periods.<sup>13</sup>

Here we have what is probably the key to the feudal ruling class's need for increased revenue in the later Middle Ages.

Finally, the rise of the towns, which were the centers and breeders of exchange economy, opened up to the servile population of the countryside the prospect of a freer and better life. This was undoubtedly the main cause of that flight from the land which Dobb rightly considers to have been one of the decisive factors in the decline of feudalism.

No doubt the rise of exchange economy had other effects on the old order, but I think that the four which have been mentioned were sufficiently pervasive and powerful to ensure the breaking up of the pre-existing *system* of production. The superior efficiency of more highly specialized production, the greater gains to be made by producing for the market rather than for immediate use, the greater attractiveness of town life to the worker: these factors made it only a matter of time before the new system, once strong enough to stand on its own feet, would win out.

But the triumph of exchange economy does not necessarily imply

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

the end of either serfdom or demesne-farming. Exchange economy is compatible with slavery, serfdom, independent self-employed labor, or wage-labor. History is rich in examples of production for the market by all these kinds of labor. Dobb is therefore unquestionably right in rejecting the theory that the rise of trade automatically brings with it the liquidation of serfdom; and if serfdom is identified with feudalism, this is of course true, *ex definitione*, of feudalism too. The fact that the advance of exchange economy actually went hand in hand with the decline of serfdom is something which has to be explained; it cannot simply be taken for granted.

In analyzing this problem we can, I think, safely pass over the uneven character of the decline of serfdom in western Europe. Dobb points out that for a time in some regions of western Europe the progress of trade was accompanied by an intensification rather than a relaxation of the bonds of serfdom. This is no doubt true and important, and he succeeds in clearing up a number of apparent paradoxes. But these temporary and partial reversals of trend should not be allowed to obscure the overall picture which is one of the steady replacement of demesne-farming using serf labor by tenant farming using either independent peasant labor or (to a much smaller extent) hired labor. The real problem is to account for this underlying trend.

It seems to me that of the complex of causes at work, two stand out as decisively important. In the first place, the rise of the towns, which was fairly general throughout western Europe, did a great deal more than merely offer a haven of refuge to those serfs who fled the manors; it also altered the position of those who remained behind. Probably only a relatively small proportion of the total number of serfs actually packed up and moved to the towns, but enough did to make the pressure of the higher standards enjoyed in the towns effectively felt in the countryside. Just as wages must rise in a low-wage area when workers have the possibility of moving to a high-wage area, so concessions had to be made to serfs when they had the possibility of moving to the towns. Such concessions were necessarily in the direction of more freedom and the transformation of feudal dues into money rents.

In the second place, while the manor could be, and in many cases was, turned to production for the market, it was fundamentally inefficient and unsuited to that purpose. Techniques were primitive and division of labor undeveloped. From an administrative point of view, the manor was unwieldy: in particular there was no clear-cut separation of production from consumption so that the costing of products was almost im-

possible. Moreover, everything on the manor was regulated by custom and tradition. This applied not only to the methods of cultivation but also to the quantity of work performed and its division between necessary and surplus labor: the serf had duties, but he also had rights. This whole mass of customary rules and regulations constituted so many obstacles to the rational exploitation of human and material resources for pecuniary gain.<sup>14</sup> Sooner or later, new types of productive relations and new forms of organization had to be found to meet the requirements of a changed economic order.

Is this reasoning refuted by the "second serfdom" of the sixteenth century and after in eastern Europe, on which Dobb places so much stress? How did it happen that in this case the growth of opportunities to trade led to a dramatic and enduring intensification of the bonds of serfdom?

The answer to these questions will be found, I think, in the geography of the second serfdom, in the fact that the phenomenon becomes increasingly marked and severe as we move eastward away from the center of the new exchange economy.<sup>15</sup> At the center, where town life is most highly developed, the agricultural laborer has an alternative to remaining on the soil; and this gives him, as it were, a strong bargaining posi-

<sup>14</sup> Dobb often seems to overlook this aspect of feudalism and to assume that only the villein stood to gain from the abolition of serfdom. He tends to forget that "the enfranchisement of the peasants was in reality the enfranchisement of the landowner, who, having henceforth to deal with free men who were not attached to his land, could dispose of the latter by means of simple revocable contracts, whose brief duration enabled him to modify them in accordance with the increasing rent of the land," Pirenne, *A History of Europe from the Invasions to the XVI Century* (New York, 1939), p. 533.

<sup>15</sup> Pirenne gives the following graphic description: "To the west of the Elbe the change had no particular consequences beyond a recrudescence of *corvées*, prestations, and arbitrary measures of every kind. But beyond the river, in Brandenburg, Prussia, Silesia, Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary, the most merciless advantage was taken of it. The descendants of the free colonists of the thirteenth century were systematically deprived of their land and reduced to the position of personal serfs (*Leibeigene*). The wholesale exploitation of estates absorbed their holdings and reduced them to a servile condition which so closely approximated to that of slavery that it was permissible to sell the person of the serf independently of the soil. From the middle of the sixteenth century the whole of the region to the east of the Elbe and the Sudeten Mountains became covered with *Rittergüter* exploited by *Junkers*, who may be compared, as regards the degree of humanity displayed in their treatment of their white slaves, with the planters of the West Indies," *ibid.*, p. 534.

tion. When the ruling class turns to production for the market with a view to pecuniary gain, it finds it necessary to resort to new, more flexible, and relatively progressive forms of exploitation. On the periphery of the exchange economy, on the other hand, the relative position of the landlord and the agricultural laborer is very different. The worker cannot run away because he has no place to go: for all practical purposes he is at the mercy of the lord, who, moreover, has never been subjected to the civilizing proximity of urban life. When the expansion of trade instills a lust for gain into a ruling class in this position, the result is not the development of new forms of exploitation but the intensification of old forms. Marx, in the following passage (even though he was not specifically concerned with the second serfdom in eastern Europe), went to the root of the matter:

As soon as people, whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave-labor, *corvée* labor, etc., are drawn into the whirlpool of an international market dominated by the capitalistic mode of production, the sale of their products for export becoming their principal interest, the civilized horrors of over-work are grafted on the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom, etc."<sup>16</sup>

Dobb's theory holds that the decline of western European feudalism was due to the overexploitation by the ruling class of society's labor power. If the reasoning of this section is correct, it seems to me that it would be more accurate to say that the decline of western European feudalism was due to the inability of the ruling class to maintain control over, and hence to overexploit, society's labor power.

(6) *What Came After Feudalism in Western Europe?*

According to Dobb's chronology—which would probably not be seriously disputed by anyone—western European feudalism entered a period of acute crisis in the fourteenth century and thereafter disintegrated, more or less rapidly in different regions. On the other hand, we cannot speak of the beginning of the capitalist period until the second half of the sixteenth century at the earliest. This raises the following question: "how are we to speak of the economic system in the intervening period between then [i.e. the disintegration of feudalism] and the later sixteenth century: a period which, according to our dating, seems to have been neither feudal nor yet capitalist so far as its mode of production was concerned?" (p. 19). This is an important question, and we should be grateful to Dobb for raising it in this clear-cut form.

Dobb's answer to his own question is hesitant and indecisive (p. 19-

<sup>16</sup> *Capital*, I, p. 260.

21). True, the feudal mode of production “had reached an advanced stage of disintegration”; “a merchant bourgeoisie had grown to wealth and influence”; “in the urban handicrafts and in the rise of well-to-do and middling-well-to-do freehold farmers one sees a mode of production which had won its independence from Feudalism”; “the majority of small tenants . . . paid a money rent”; and “the estates were for the most part farmed by hired labour.” But Dobb qualifies almost every one of these statements and sums up by saying that “social relations in the countryside between producers and their lords and masters retained much of their medieval character, and much of the integument at least of the feudal order remained.” In other words, Dobb’s answer, I take it, is that the period was feudal after all.

This answer, however, is not very satisfactory. If the period is to be regarded as feudal, even from the point of view of Dobb’s comprehensive definition, then at the very least it ought to have been characterized by the continued predominance of serfdom in the countryside. And yet there is good authority for the view that this was precisely the period during which serfdom declined to relatively small proportions all over western Europe.

In England [Marx wrote] serfdom had practically disappeared in the last part of the fourteenth century. The immense majority of the population consisted then, and to a still larger extent in the fifteenth century, of free peasant proprietors, whatever the feudal title under which their right of property was hidden.<sup>17</sup>

It seems that Marx had reservations about how widespread this development was on the continent, but before the end of his life he must have given them up. At the end of 1882, three months before Marx’s death, Engels wrote a paper dealing with the *Mark*, the old German land system. He sent the manuscript to Marx, commenting that “the point about the almost total disappearance (*Zurücktreten*) of serfdom—legally or actually—in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is the most important to me, because formerly you expressed a divergent opinion on this.”<sup>18</sup> Two days later Marx wrote back: “Returning the manuscript: *very good*.”<sup>19</sup> And to this Engels replied: “I am glad that on the history of serfdom we ‘proceed in agreement,’ as they say in business.”<sup>20</sup>

These passages show that it was the considered judgment of Marx

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 788.

<sup>18</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, p. 408.

<sup>19</sup> *Briefwechsel*, Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute ed., IV, p. 694. This letter is not included in the *Selected Correspondence*.

<sup>20</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, p. 411.



and Engels that by the fifteenth century the substance had largely gone out of feudal forms and that serfdom had ceased to be the dominant relation of production throughout western Europe. There is nothing in the evidence cited by Dobb to convince me that we would be justified in reversing this judgment.

Dobb might answer that he does not disagree, that he concedes the substantial disappearance of serfdom, and that his characterization of this period as essentially feudal is based on the fact that the peasant was still restricted in his movements and in many ways dependent upon the landlord. What he says (p. 63-66) could, I think, be construed in this sense; and Christopher Hill, who is in a good position to know Dobb's meaning, lends support to this interpretation. According to Hill:

Mr. Dobb's definition of feudalism enables him to make clear what rural England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was like. He rejects the view which identifies feudalism with labour services and attributes fundamental significance to the abolition of serfdom in England. Mr. Dobb shows that peasants paying a money rent (the overwhelming majority of the sixteenth-century English countryside) may be dependent in numerous other ways on the landlord under whom they live. . . . Capitalist relations in agriculture were spreading in sixteenth-century England, but over most of the country the dominant relation of exploitation was still feudal. . . . The important thing is not the *legal form* of the relationship between lord and peasant, but the economic content of this relationship.<sup>21</sup>

It seems to me that to stretch the concept of feudalism in this way is to deprive it of the quality of definiteness which is essential to scientific usefulness. If the fact that tenants are exploited by, and "in numerous ways" dependent on, landlords is the hallmark of feudalism, we should have to conclude, for example, that certain regions of the United States are today feudal. Such a description may be justified for journalistic purposes; but if we were to go on from there and conclude that the economic system under which these regions of the United States live today is in fundamental respects identical with the economic system of the European Middle Ages, we should be well on the way to serious confusion. I think the same applies, though obviously in less extreme degree, if we assume a fundamental identity between the economic system of England in the sixteenth century and the economic system of England in the thirteenth century. And yet to call them both by the same name, or even to refrain from giving them different names, is inevitably to invite such an assumption.

How, then, shall we characterize the period between the end of

<sup>21</sup> *The Modern Quarterly*, II (Summer, 1947), p. 269.

feudalism and the beginning of capitalism? I think Dobb is on the right track when he says that the "two hundred-odd years which separated Edward III from Elizabeth were certainly transitional in character" and that it is "true, and of outstanding importance for any proper understanding of this transition, that the disintegration of the feudal mode of production had already reached an advanced stage *before* the capitalist mode of production developed, and that this disintegration did not proceed in any close association with the growth of the new mode of production within the womb of the old" (p. 20). This seems to me to be entirely correct, and I believe that if Dobb had followed it up he would have arrived at a satisfactory solution of the problem.

We usually think of a transition from one social system to another as a process in which the two systems directly confront each other and fight it out for supremacy. Such a process, of course, does not exclude the possibility of transitional forms; but these transitional forms are thought of as mixtures of elements from the two systems which are vying for mastery. It is obvious, for example, that the transition from capitalism to socialism is proceeding along some such lines as these; and this fact no doubt makes it all the easier for us to assume that earlier transitions must have been similar.

So far as the transition from feudalism to capitalism is concerned, however, this is a serious error. As the foregoing statement by Dobb emphasizes, feudalism in western Europe was already moribund, if not actually dead, before capitalism was born. It follows that the intervening period was not a simple mixture of feudalism and capitalism: the predominant elements were *neither* feudal *nor* capitalist.

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of terminology. I shall simply call the system which prevailed in western Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries "pre-capitalist commodity production" to indicate that it was the growth of commodity production which first undermined feudalism and then *somewhat later*, after this work of destruction had been substantially completed, prepared the ground for the growth of capitalism.<sup>22</sup> The transition from feudalism to capitalism

<sup>22</sup> It is not necessary to specify that the period is non- or post-feudal, since commodity production and feudalism are mutually exclusive concepts. On the other hand, capitalism is itself a form of commodity production, and for this reason the qualification "pre-capitalist" must be explicitly made.

It could be argued that the best name for the system would be "simple commodity production," since this is a well-established concept in Marxian theory. It seems to me, however, that to use the term in this way might lead to unneces-

is thus not a single uninterrupted process—similar to the transition from capitalism to socialism—but is made up of two quite distinct phases which present radically different problems and require to be analyzed separately.

It might be thought that this characterization of the transition from feudalism to capitalism is in conflict with the traditional Marxian view. But I think this is not so: all it does is to make explicit certain points which are implicit in this view.

Although [Marx wrote] we come across the first beginnings of capitalist production as early as the fourteenth or fifteenth century, sporadically, in certain towns of the Mediterranean, the capitalistic era dates from the sixteenth century. Wherever it appears, the abolition of serfdom has long been effected, and the highest development of the middle ages, the existence of sovereign towns, has long been on the wane.

And again:

The circulation of commodities is the starting point of capital. Commodity production and developed commodity circulation, *trade*, form the *historical preconditions* under which it arises. World trade and the world market open up in the sixteenth century the modern life history of capital.<sup>23</sup>

Such statements, I think, unmistakably imply a view of the transition from feudalism to capitalism such as I have suggested.<sup>24</sup>

We should be careful not to push this line of reasoning about the

sary confusion. Simple commodity production is usually defined as a system of independent producers owning their own means of production and satisfying their wants by means of mutual exchange. Such a theoretical construction is useful for a number of reasons: for example, it enables us to present the problem of exchange value in its simplest form; and it also is helpful in clarifying the nature of classes and their relations to the means of production. In pre-capitalist commodity production, however, the most important of the means of production—the land—was largely owned by a class of non-producers, and this fact is enough to differentiate the system sharply from the usual concept of simple commodity production.

<sup>23</sup> *Capital*, I, p. 787 and 163. I have translated this passage anew. The Moore and Aveling translation is inaccurate and omits the emphasis which appears in the original.

<sup>24</sup> I have, of course, selected these particular quotations from Marx for their conciseness and clarity. But obviously isolated quotations can neither prove nor disprove the point. The reader who wishes to make up his own mind about Marx's view of the transition from feudalism to capitalism will have to study carefully at least the following parts of *Capital*: I, Part viii; and III, ch. 20 and 47.

In some respects, the recently-published manuscripts which Marx wrote during the winter of 1857-58 in preparation for the *Critique of Political Economy* are even more valuable in throwing light on his ideas about the nature of the transition

transition from feudalism to capitalism too far. In particular, it seems to me that it would be going too far to classify pre-capitalist commodity production as a social system *sui generis*, on a par with feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. There was no really dominant relation of production to put its stamp on the system as a whole. There were still strong vestiges of serfdom and vigorous beginnings of wage-labor, but the forms of labor relation which were most common in the statistical sense were pretty clearly unstable and incapable of providing the basis of a viable social order. This holds especially of the relation between landlords and working tenants paying a money rent ("the overwhelming majority of the sixteenth-century English countryside," according to Christopher Hill). Marx analyzed this relation with great care in a chapter called "The Genesis of Capitalist Ground Rent," and insisted that it could be properly understood only as a transitional form:

The transformation of rent in kind into money rent, taking place first sporadically, then on a more or less national scale, requires a considerable development of commerce, of city industries, of the production of commodities in general, and with them of the circulation of money. . . . Money rent, as a converted form of rent in kind and as an antagonist of rent in kind is the last form and at the same time the form of the dissolution of the type of ground rent which we have considered so far, namely ground rent as the normal form of surplus value and of the unpaid surplus labor which flows to the owner of the means of production. . . . In its further development money rent must lead . . . either to the transformation of land into independent peasants' property, or into the form corresponding to the capitalist mode of production, that is to rent paid by the capitalist tenant.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, this is not the only type of unstable relation in the pre-capitalist commodity-producing economy. Dobb has shown in a very illuminating section of his chapter on the growth of the proletariat "how unstable an economy of small producers can be in face of the disintegrating effects of production for the market, especially a distant market, unless it enjoys some special advantage which lends it strength or special measures are taken to give protection to its poorer and weaker members" (p. 254).

from feudalism to capitalism: see *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Rohentwurf)*, Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute (Moscow, 1939), especially the section entitled "Formen die der kapitalistischen Produktion vorhergehen" which begins on 1, p. 375. An adequate examination of this source, however, would require a long article by itself; and I can only say here that my own interpretation of Marx, which was fully formed before the *Grundrisse* became available to me, was confirmed by this new material.

<sup>25</sup> *Capital*, III, ch. 47, p. 926 f. Changes have been made in the Untermann translation.

We are, I think, justified in concluding that while pre-capitalist commodity production was neither feudal nor capitalist, it was just as little a viable system in its own right. It was strong enough to undermine and disintegrate feudalism, but it was too weak to develop an independent structure of its own: all it could accomplish in a positive sense was to prepare the ground for the victorious advance of capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

(7) *A Few Remarks on the Rise of Capitalism*

In general, I agree fully with Dobb's analysis of the rise of capitalism. It seems to me that his treatment of this problem is exceptionally clear and illuminating: I would be inclined to rate it the high point of the whole volume. But there are two theses, clearly regarded by Dobb himself as important, which seem to me to require critical examination. The first concerns the origin of the industrial capitalist in the full sense of the term; the second concerns the process of original accumulation.<sup>26</sup>

Dobb cites Marx's chapter on "Merchant Capital" (III, ch. 20) in support of the view that industrial capital develops in two main ways. The following is the key passage from Dobb:

According to the first—"the really revolutionary way"—a section of the producers themselves accumulated capital and took to trade, and in course of time began to organize production on a capitalist basis free from the handicraft restrictions of the guilds. According to the second, a section of the existing merchant class began to "take possession directly of production"; thereby "serving historically as a mode of transition," but becoming eventually "an obstacle to a real capitalist mode of production and decline (ing) with the development of the latter."<sup>27</sup>

Dobb puts much stress on the first of these methods. On p. 128 he writes:

While the growing interest shown by sections of merchant capital in controlling production—in developing what may be termed a deliberately contrived system of "exploitation through trade"—prepared the way for this final outcome [i.e., the subjection of production to genuine capitalist control], and may in a few cases have reached it, this final stage generally seems, as Marx pointed out, to have been associated with the rise from the ranks of the producers themselves of a capitalist element, half-manufacturer,

<sup>26</sup> Dobb follows the Moore and Aveling translation in speaking of "primitive" accumulation." This is likely to be misleading, however, since the point is not that the process is primitive in the usual sense of the term (though it may be and usually is), but that it is not preceded by previous acts of accumulation. Hence "original" or "primary" is a better rendering of *ursprünglich* in this context.

<sup>27</sup> Dobb, p. 123. The internal quotes are from *Capital*, III, p. 393 f.

half-merchant, which began to subordinate and to organize those very ranks from which it had so recently risen (p. 128).

Again:

The opening of the seventeenth century witnessed the beginnings of an important shift in the centre of gravity: the rising predominance of a class of merchant-employers from the ranks of the craftsmen themselves among the yeomanry of the large companies—the process that Marx described as the “really revolutionary way” (p. 134).

And later, after a lengthy analysis of the failure of capitalist production, despite early and promising beginnings, to develop in certain areas of the continent, Dobb says:

When seen in the light of a comparative study of capitalist development, Marx's contention that at this stage the rise of a class of industrial capitalists from the ranks of the producers themselves is a condition of any revolutionary transformation of production begins to acquire a central importance (p. 161).

It is noteworthy, however, that Dobb admits that “the details of this process are far from clear, and there is little evidence that bears directly upon it” (p. 134). In fact, so little evidence, even of an indirect character, seems to be available that one reviewer felt constrained to remark that “it would have been desirable to find more evidence for the view, derived from Marx, that the really revolutionary transformation of production and the breaking of the control of merchant capital over production, was accomplished by men coming from the ranks of former craftsmen.”<sup>28</sup>

I think, however, that the real trouble here is not so much a lack of evidence (for my part, I doubt if evidence of the required kind exists) as a misreading of Marx. Let us reproduce the entire passage in which Marx speaks of the “really revolutionary way”:

The transition from the feudal mode of production takes two roads. The producer becomes a merchant and capitalist, in contradistinction from agricultural natural economy and the guild-encircled handicrafts of medieval town industry. This is the really revolutionary way. Or the merchant takes possession in a direct way of production. While this way serves historically as a mode of transition—instance the English clothier of the seventeenth century, who brings the weavers, although they remain independently at work, under his control by selling wool to them and buying cloth from them—nevertheless it cannot by itself do much for the overthrow of the old mode of production, but rather preserves it and uses it as its premise.<sup>29</sup>

As can be readily seen, Marx does not say anything about capitalists rising from the ranks of the handicraft producers. It is, of course, quite

<sup>28</sup> Perez Zagorin in *SCIENCE & SOCIETY*, XII (Spring, 1948), p. 280 f.

<sup>29</sup> *Capital*, III, p. 393.

true that the expression used by Marx—"the producer becomes a merchant and capitalist"—might have that implication; but it might equally well mean that the producer, whatever his background, *starts out* as both a merchant and an employer of wage-labor. It seems to me that the whole context goes to show that the latter is the more reasonable interpretation. What Marx was contrasting, I believe, was the launching of full-fledged capitalist enterprises with the slow development of the putting-out system. There is no indication that he was concerned about producers' rising from the ranks. Moreover, when he does deal explicitly with this problem in the first volume of *Capital*, what he says is quite impossible to reconcile with Dobb's interpretation of the above-quoted passage.

The genesis of the industrial capitalist [Marx wrote] did not proceed in such a gradual way as that of the farmer. Doubtless many small guild-masters, and yet more independent small artisans, or even wage-laborers, transformed themselves into small capitalists, and (by gradually extending exploitation of wage-labor and corresponding accumulation) into full-blown capitalists. . . . The snail's-pace of this method corresponded in no wise with the commercial requirements of the new world-market that the great discoveries of the end of the fifteenth century created.<sup>30</sup>

These are the opening remarks of a chapter entitled "Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist"; most of the rest of the chapter is devoted to describing the methods of trade and plunder by which large amounts of capital were brought together much more rapidly than this "snail's-pace." And while Marx says very little about the actual methods by which these accumulations found their way into industry, it is hardly credible that he would have assigned an important role in the process to the producer risen from the ranks.

If we interpret Marx to mean that the "really revolutionary way" was for those with disposable capital to launch full-fledged capitalist enterprises without going through the intermediate stages of the putting-out system, we shall, I think, have little difficulty in finding a wealth of evidence to support his contention. Nef has shown conclusively (of course without any reference at all to Marx) that what he calls the first industrial revolution in England (about 1540 to 1640) was very largely characterized by precisely this kind of investment in such "new" industries as mining, metallurgy, brewing, sugar refining, soap, alum, glass, and salt-making.<sup>31</sup> And the proof that it was a "really revolutionary

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, p. 822.

<sup>31</sup> J. U. Nef, *Industry and Government in France and England, 1540-1640* (Philadelphia, 1940), especially ch. 1 and 3.

way" was provided by the results of England's first industrial revolution: economic supremacy over all rival nations and the first bourgeois political revolution.

I turn now to the second of Dobb's theses on the rise of capitalism which seems to me to require critical examination. Here I can be briefer.

Dobb sees the process of original accumulation as involving two quite distinct phases (p. 177 ff.). First, the rising bourgeoisie acquires at bargain prices (or in the most favorable case for nothing: e.g., the church lands under Henry VIII) certain assets and claims to wealth. In this phase, wealth is not only transferred to the bourgeoisie; it is also concentrated in fewer hands. Second, and later, comes the realization phase. Dobb writes that

of no less importance than the first phase of the process of accumulation was the second and completing phase, by which the objects of the original accumulation were realized or sold (at least in part) in order to make possible an actual investment in industrial production—a sale of the original objects of accumulation in order with the proceeds to acquire (or to bring into existence) cotton machinery, factory buildings, iron foundries, raw materials and labour-power (p. 183).

So far as I can see, Dobb offers no evidence at all of the existence of this realization phase. Nor is this surprising because it seems to me equally clear that there are no reasons to suppose that such a phase must have existed or actually did exist. As Dobb himself makes perfectly plain, the assets acquired and concentrated in fewer hands during the acquisition phase were of various kinds, including land, debt-claims, and precious metals: in other words, frozen and liquid assets alike. He recognizes, too, that this was the period during which the bourgeoisie developed banking and credit machinery for turning its frozen assets (especially the public debt) into liquid assets. Under the circumstances, it is impossible to see why the bourgeoisie should be under any compulsion to sell in order to realize capital for industrial investment. Further, it is impossible to see what *class* could buy assets from the bourgeoisie in order to supply it with liquid funds. Naturally, this does not mean that individual members of the bourgeoisie could not or did not sell assets to other members of the same class or to members of other classes in order to acquire funds for industrial investment, but there was surely no other class to which the bourgeoisie *as a whole* could sell assets in this period of capitalist development.

Actually Dobb, aside from asserting the necessity and importance of the realization phase, makes very little of it. When it comes down to analyzing the necessary pre-conditions for industrial investment, he shows



that the required complement to acquisition on the part of the bourgeoisie was not realization by the bourgeoisie, but the break-up of the old system of production and especially dispossession of enough landworkers to form a class willing to work for wages. This is certainly correct, and I can only regret that Dobb's reiterated statements about the importance of the realization phase may serve to divert the attention of some readers from his excellent treatment of the essential problems of the period of original accumulation.

PAUL M. SWEEZY

#### REPLY BY MAURICE DOBB

Paul Sweezy's article on the transition from feudalism to capitalism raises in a clear and stimulating manner a number of important issues, discussion of which can only be beneficial to an understanding both of historical development and of Marxism as a method of studying that development. May I state at the outset that I personally welcome his contribution to such a discussion as a distinguished challenge to further thought and study? With a good deal of what he says I feel no disagreement. In some places where he dissents from what I have said, the difference between us is one of emphasis and of formulation. But in one or two places a more fundamental difference over method and analysis seems to emerge; and here I feel that his interpretation is misleading.

(1) First, I am not quite clear whether Sweezy rejects my definition of feudalism or merely considers it to be incomplete. This definition, as he says, rests on a virtual identification of feudalism with serfdom—if by the latter is meant, not merely the performance of obligatory *services*, but exploitation of the producer by virtue of direct politico-legal compulsion.<sup>1</sup> If he means that feudalism thus defined covers something wider than the medieval form of European economy and embraces a wide variety of types which (in any fuller study of feudalism) deserve careful analysis, I readily agree. But in referring to a “*system of production*” he seems to

<sup>1</sup> Sweezy suggests that such a widening of the term is unsatisfactory since elements of direct politico-legal compulsion over labor may be found at widely separated periods of history, including modern times. Where such elements predominate, they would on this definition constitute the form of economy in question feudal; but if they are merely incidental and subordinate, their presence no more suffices to do so than does the incidental existence of hired wage-labor suffice to constitute a particular society capitalist. In most of the “incongruous” cases which Sweezy has in mind, compulsory labor is purely incidental, not typical.

be saying something other than this, and to be contrasting a *system* of production with a mode of production in Marx's use of this term. What precisely a system of production is intended to cover I am not clear. But what follows indicates that the term is intended to include the relations between the producer and his market. There are even hints that these relations of exchange (by contrast with relations of production) are the focus of attention in Sweezy's interpretation of the historical process. (He regards "the crucial feature of feudalism," for example, as being "that it is a system of *production for use*.")

If this is so, then I think we have a fundamental issue between us. The definition which I was using in my *Studies* was advisedly in terms of the relations of production characteristic of feudalism: namely, the relations between the direct producer and his overlord. The coercive relationship, consisting in the direct extraction of the surplus labor of producers by the ruling class, was conditioned, of course, by a certain level of development of the productive forces. Methods of production were relatively primitive, and (so far as the producers' own subsistence, at least, was concerned) were of the type of which Marx spoke as the "petty mode of production," in which the producer is in possession of his means of production as an individual producing unit. This I regard as the crucial characteristic; and when different economic forms have this characteristic in common, this common element which they share is of greater significance than other respects in which they may differ (e.g., in the relation of production to the market). Admittedly this production-relationship is itself capable of considerable variety, according to the form which the compulsory extraction of the surplus product takes: e.g., direct labor services or the appropriation of tribute either in kind or in money.<sup>2</sup> But the distinction between these does not correspond to

<sup>2</sup> See Marx's analysis of "Labor Rent, Rent in Kind and Money Rent," *Capital*, III.

I would particularly draw attention to the passage in the course of Marx's treatment of this subject in which he says: "The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labor is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relation of rulers and ruled, as it grows immediately out of production itself and reacts upon it as a determining element. . . . It is always the direct relation of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden foundation of the entire social construction. . . . The form of this relation between rulers and ruled naturally corresponds always with a definite stage in the development of the methods of labor and of its productive social power. This does not prevent the same economic basis from showing infinite variations and gradations in its appearance, even though its principal conditions are everywhere the same," *Capital*, III, p. 919.

that between "western European feudalism," which Sweezy thinks that I should have distinguished and concentrated upon, and feudalism in eastern Europe (although in Asiatic feudalism the tributary relationship would seem to have predominated and to have given this its distinctive impress). While there were important differences undoubtedly between conditions in western and eastern Europe, there were also striking similarities as regards "the form in which unpaid surplus labor was pumped out of the direct producers"; and it is my belief that the desire to represent "western European feudalism" as a distinctive *genus* and to endow it alone with the title of "feudal" is a product of bourgeois historians and of their tendency to concentrate upon juridical characteristics and *differentia*.

(2) Regarding the "conservative and change-resisting character of "western European feudalism," which needed some external force to dislodge it, and which I am accused of neglecting, I remain rather sceptical. True, of course, that, by contrast with capitalist economy, feudal society was extremely stable and inert. But this is not to say that feudalism had no tendency within it to change. To say so would be, surely, to make it an exception to the general Marxist law of development that economic society is moved by its own internal contradictions. Actually, the feudal period witnessed considerable changes in technique;<sup>3</sup> and the later centuries of feudalism showed marked differences from those of early feudalism. Moreover, it would seem to be not to western Europe but to the East that we have to look for the most stable forms: in particular, to Asiatic forms of tributary serfdom. And it is to be noted that it was of the form where surplus labor is appropriated via dues in kind—and of this form specifically—that Marx spoke as "quite suitable for becoming the basis of stationary conditions of society, such as we see in Asia."<sup>4</sup>

Sweezy qualifies his statement by saying that the feudal system is not necessarily static. All he claims is that such movement as occurs "has no tendency to transform it." But despite this qualification, the implication remains that under feudalism class struggle can play no revolutionary role. It occurs to me that there may be a confusion at the root of this denial of revolutionary and transforming tendencies. No one is suggesting that class struggle of peasants against lords gives rise, in any simple and direct way, to capitalism. What this does is to modify the dependence

<sup>3</sup> Molly Gibbs, *Feudal Order* (London, 1949), p. 5-7, 92 f.

<sup>4</sup> *Capital*, III, p. 924.

of the petty mode of production upon feudal overlordship and eventually to shake loose the small producer from feudal exploitation. It is then from the petty mode of production (in the degree to which it secures independence of action, and social differentiation in turn develops within it) that capitalism is born. This is a fundamental point to which we shall return.

(3) In the course of supporting his own thesis that an internally stable feudalism could only be disintegrated by the impact of an external force<sup>5</sup>—trade and markets—Sweezy represents my own view as being that the decline of feudalism was *solely* the work of internal forces and that the growth of trade had nothing to do with the process. He seems to see it as a question of *either* internal conflict *or* external forces. This strikes me as much too simplified, even mechanical, a presentation. I see it as an *interaction* of the two; although with primary emphasis, it is true, upon the internal contradictions; since these would, I believe, operate in any case (if on a quite different time-scale), and since they determine the particular form and direction of the effects which external influences exert. I am by no means denying that the growth of market towns and of trade played an important role in accelerating the disintegration of the old mode of production. What I am asserting is that trade exercised its influence to the extent that it accentuated the internal conflicts within the old mode of production. For example, the growth of trade (as I pointed out in my *Studies* in several places, e.g., p. 60-62 and 253 f.) accelerated the process of social differentiation within the petty mode of production, creating a *kulak* class, on the one hand, and a semi-proletariat, on the other. Again, as Sweezy emphasizes, towns acted as magnets to fugitive serfs. I am not much concerned to argue whether this flight of serfs was due more to the attraction of these urban magnets (and alternatively in some parts of Europe to the lure of free land) or to the repulsive force of feudal exploitation. Evidently it was a matter of both, in varying degrees at different times and places. But the specific effect which such flight had was due to the specific character of the relationship between serf and feudal exploiter.<sup>6</sup>

5 His reference to "historical developments which in fact can only be explained as arising from causes external to the system" leaves us in no doubt that this is his view.

6 Incidentally, I agree entirely with the important consideration which Sweezy stresses that it was not so much the magnitude of the flight to the towns which was significant, but that the threat of it (accompanied perhaps by no more than a small movement) might suffice to force the lords into making concessions, seriously weakening to feudalism.

Hence I do not agree that I am called upon to "show that the feudal ruling class's growing need for revenue and the flight of serfs from the land can both be explained in terms of forces operating inside the feudal system," or "that the rise of towns was a process internal to the feudal system" (although to some extent I believe that the latter is true, and that, precisely because feudalism was far from being a purely "natural economy," it encouraged towns to cater for its need of long-distance trade). At the same time, I think that Sweezy is wrong in asserting that there is necessarily a correlation between feudal disintegration and "nearness to centers of trade." In my *Studies* I cited several pieces of evidence to rebut the simplified view which has been popularized by the vulgar theorists of "money economy." Of these I will repeat here only two. It was precisely in the backward north and west of England that serfdom in the form of direct labor services disappeared earliest, and in the more advanced south-east, with its town markets and trade routes, that labor services were most stubborn in their survival. Similarly, in many parts of eastern Europe intensification of serfdom in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was associated with the growth of trade, and the correlation was, not between nearness to markets and feudal disintegration (as Sweezy claims), but between nearness to markets and strengthening of serfdom (cf. my *Studies*, p. 38-42). These facts are mentioned by Sweezy. Yet this does not prevent him from maintaining that it was only "on the periphery of the exchange economy" that feudal relations were proof against dissolution.

The fact that the "system of production" on which Sweezy focuses attention is more concerned with the sphere of exchange than with relations of production is indicated by a rather surprising omission in his treatment. He nowhere pays more than incidental attention to what has always seemed to be a crucial consideration: namely, that the transition from coercive extraction of surplus labor by estate-owners to the use of free hired labor must have depended upon the existence of cheap labor for hire (i.e., of proletarian or semi-proletarian elements). This I believe to have been a more fundamental factor than proximity of markets in determining whether the old social relations survived or were dissolved. Of course, there was interaction between this factor and the growth of trade: in particular (as I have already mentioned) the effect of the latter upon the process of social differentiation within the petty mode of production. But this factor must, surely, have played a decisive role in determining the precise effect which trade had in different places and at different periods? Possibly Sweezy plays down this factor because he

thinks it too obvious to stress; or possibly because he is thinking of the leasing of farms for a money rent as the immediate successor of serfdom. This latter consideration brings us to his question: "What came after feudalism in Europe?"

(4) I entirely agree with Sweezy in regarding economic society in western Europe between the fourteenth century and the end of the sixteenth as being complex and transitional, in the sense that the old was in process of rapid disintegration and new economic forms were simultaneously appearing. I also agree with him in thinking that during this period the petty mode of production was in process of emancipating itself from feudal exploitation, but was not yet subjected (at least in any significant degree) to capitalist relations of production, which were eventually to destroy it. Moreover, I regard the recognition of this fact as vital to any true understanding of the passage from feudalism to capitalism. But Sweezy goes further than this. He speaks of it as transitional in a sense which excludes the possibility of its still being feudal (even if a feudal economy at an advanced stage of dissolution). There seems to me to be point in doing this only if one wishes to speak of it as a distinct mode of production *sui generis*, which is neither feudal nor capitalist. This is to my mind an impossible procedure; and Sweezy agrees in not wishing to go so far as this. In the final picture, therefore, these two centuries are apparently left suspended uncomfortably in the firmament between heaven and earth. In the process of historical development they have to be classified as homeless hybrids. While this sort of answer might be adequate enough in a purely evolutionary view of historical development through successive systems or stages, I suggest that it will not do for a revolutionary view of historical development—a view of history as a succession of class systems, with social revolution (in the sense of a transfer of power from one class to another) as the crucial mechanism of historical transformation.

The crucial question which Sweezy has apparently failed to ask (or if he has, he would seem to have burked the answer to it) is this: what was the ruling class of this period? Since (as Sweezy himself recognizes) there was not yet developed capitalist production, it cannot have been a capitalist class. If one answers that it was something intermediate between feudal and capitalist, in the shape of a bourgeoisie which had not yet invested its capital in the development of a bourgeois mode of production, then one is in the Pokrovsky-bog of "merchant capitalism." If a merchant bourgeoisie formed the ruling class, then the state must have been some kind of bourgeois state. And if the state was a bourgeois state

already, not only in the sixteenth century but even at the beginning of the fifteenth, what constituted the essential issue of the seventeenth century civil war? It cannot (according to this view) have been *the* bourgeois revolution. We are left with some such supposition as the one advanced in a preliminary discussion of the matter some years ago: that it was a struggle against an attempted *counter*-revolution staged by crown and court against an *already existent* bourgeois state power.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, we are faced with the alternative of either denying that there was any crucial historical moment describable as the bourgeois revolution, or of seeking for this bourgeois revolution in some earlier century at or before the dawn of the Tudor age.

This is a matter which has occupied a good deal of discussion among Marxist historians in England in the last few years. The larger question of the nature of the absolute states of this epoch was also the subject of discussion among Soviet historians just before the war. If we reject the alternatives just mentioned, we are left with the view (which I believe to be the right one) that the ruling class was still feudal and that the state was still the political instrument of its rule. And if this is so, then this ruling class must have depended for its income on surviving *feudal* methods of exploiting the petty mode of production. True, since trade had come to occupy a leading place in the economy, this ruling class had itself an interest in trade (as also had many a medieval monastery in the heyday of feudalism), and took certain sections of the merchant bourgeoisie (specially the export merchants) into economic partnership and into political alliance with itself (whence arose many of the figures of the "new Tudor aristocracy"). Hence, this late, dissolving form of feudal exploitation of the period of centralized state power had many differences from the feudal exploitation of earlier centuries; and admittedly in many places the feudal "integument" was wearing very threadbare. True also, feudal exploitation of the petty mode of production only rarely took the classical form of direct labor services, and had assumed predominantly the form of money rent. But while political constraint and the pressures of manorial custom still ruled economic relationships (as continued to be the case over very large areas of the English countryside), and a free market in land was absent (as well as free labor mobility), the form of this exploitation cannot be said to have

7 P. F., in the course of a discussion on Christopher Hill's article, "The English Revolution 1640," in the *Labour Monthly* (1941).

shed its feudal form—even if this was a degenerate and rapidly disintegrating form.

In this connection I would draw attention to the fact that in the passage about money rent which Sweezy quotes from Marx (*Capital*, III, ch. 47), the money rent of which Marx is here speaking is not yet capitalist ground rent, with the farmer as an independent tenant paying a contractual rent, but is still (by manifest implication) a form of *feudal* rent, even if a dissolving form (“money rent, as a converted form of rent in kind and as an antagonist of rent in kind is *the last form* and *at the same time the form of dissolution* of the type of ground rent which we have considered so far. . .”). Earlier in the same section Marx says: “the basis of this rent remains the same as that of the rent in kind, from which it starts. The direct producer still is the possessor of the land . . . and he has to perform for his landlord . . . forced surplus labor . . . and this forced surplus labor is now paid in money obtained by the sale of the surplus product” (p. 926).

(5) On the two final points of Sweezy’s criticism I will try to be brief. Of the outstanding role played at the dawn of capitalism by capitalists who had been spawned by the petty mode of production I suggest that there is abundant evidence,<sup>8</sup> whatever the proper interpretation may be of that crucial passage from Marx’s discussion of the matter (and I still think it bears the interpretation customarily placed upon it). Some of this evidence I quoted in my *Studies* (ch. 4). This is doubtless a matter deserving of more research than it had had hitherto. But the importance of the rising small and middle bourgeoisie of this period has already been shown by Tawney, for one. There is accumulating evidence that the significance of *kulak* enterprise in the village can hardly be overestimated. There are signs of him at a quite early date, hiring the labor of the poorer “cotter” and in the sixteenth century pioneering new and improved methods of enclosed farming on a fairly extensive scale. Historians of this period have recently pointed out that a distinctive feature of English development in the Tudor age was the ease with which these *kulak* yeoman farmers rose to become minor gentry, purchasing manors and joining the ranks of the local squirearchy. It may well be (as Kosminsky has suggested) that they played a leading role even in the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381. Undoubtedly they prospered greatly (as employers of labor) from the falling real wage of the Tudor Inflation; and smaller

8 The passage of mine which Sweezy quotes, referring to “little evidence that bears directly upon it,” relates to “*the details* of the process” and not to the existence of this type of capitalist or to the role which he played.



gentry and rising *kulaks* were organizers of the country cloth industry on an extensive scale. Evidently they were a most important driving force in the bourgeois revolution of the seventeenth century, providing in particular the sinews of Cromwell's New Model Army. Moreover, the fact that they were is, I believe, a key to understanding the class alignments of the bourgeois revolution: in particular the reason why merchant capital, far from always playing a progressive role, was often to be found allied with feudal reaction.

Similarly, in the urban craft guilds there were many entrepreneurs of a similar type, who took to trade and employed poorer craftsmen on the putting-out system. I have suggested (and if I remember rightly the suggestion originally came from Unwin) that these developments were responsible for the movements to be observed among the guilds at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth: in particular for the rise of the new Stuart corporations. So far as one can see, it was they (certainly it was the country clothiers) who were firm supporters of the English revolution, and not the rich patentees, such as those of whom Nef has talked, many of whom were royalist, since they still depended on privilege and derived their privilege from court influence. I cannot see how the importance of this line of development in generating the first, pre-industrial revolution, stage of capitalism can possibly be denied.<sup>9</sup> Even at the time of the industrial revolution many of the new entrepreneurs were small men who had started as "merchant-manufacturers" of the putting-out system. True, in some industries (e.g., iron, copper and brass), where larger capitals were needed, it was already different. But it was conditions of technique which determined whether the small capitalist, risen from the ranks, could or could not become a pioneer of the new mode of production; and until the technical changes associated with the industrial revolution (*some*

<sup>9</sup> Sweezy quotes Marx's reference to such developments as proceeding "at a snail's pace," compared with the full possibilities of expansion. But so was the development of capitalism "at a snail's pace" (relatively to later developments) in the period of "the infancy of capitalist production" of which Marx is here speaking. It was, surely, because of this that the transformation could only be completed after the new bourgeoisie had won political power, and (as Marx says later in the same chapter) had begun to "employ the power of the State . . . to hasten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition." Then, but only then, could the snail's pace of earlier development be accelerated and the ground laid for the rapid growths of the industrial revolution.

of which, it is true, were already occurring two centuries before 1800) the small capitalist could still play a leading role.

(6) With regard to the so-called "realization phase" in the accumulation process, I must acknowledge that Sweezy has laid his finger on a weak place in the analysis, about which I myself had doubts, and on which I was aware that the evidence was inadequate. Whether such a phase exists or not does not affect my main contention; since this was that *dispossession* of others is the essence of the accumulating process, and not merely the acquisition of particular categories of wealth by capitalists. This is not to deny, however, that the bourgeois-enrichment aspects of the matter had a place; in which case I believe that the distinguishing of the "two phases" retains some importance. I suggest that it is a topic to which Marxist research might usefully be directed; and I continue to think that "the second phase" is a hypothesis which corresponds to something actual.

We can agree that it was not a case of the bourgeoisie realizing assets, previously accumulated, to some *new class*. Indeed, there is no need for them to do so *as a class*, since, once a proletariat has been created, the only "cost" to the bourgeoisie as a whole in the extension of capitalist production is the subsistence which they have to advance to workers (in the form of wages)—a fact of which the classical economists were well aware. Ownership of land and country houses, etc., did not of itself assist them in providing this subsistence. Even if they could have sold their properties to third parties, this would not necessarily—leaving foreign trade apart—have augmented the subsistence fund for capitalist society as a whole. But what is the case for the class as a whole may not be the case for one section of it, which (as Sweezy implies) may be handicapped by lack of sufficient liquid funds to serve as working capital; and there may well be substantial meaning in speaking of one stratum of the bourgeoisie (imbued with a desire to buy labor power: i.e., to invest in production) selling real estate or bonds to other strata of the bourgeoisie which still has a taste for acquiring wealth in these forms. It is, of course, possible that all the investments needed to finance the industrial revolution came from the *current income* of the new captains of industry of the period: the Darbys, Dales, Wilkinsons, Wedgwoods and Radcliffes. In this case nothing remains to be said. Previous bourgeois enrichment in the forms we have mentioned can be ignored as a factor in the financing of industrial growth. This, however, seems *prima facie* unlikely. I am not aware that much work has been done on the sources from which such constructional projects as the early canals and railways

in England were financed. We know that many of the new entrepreneurs were handicapped for lack of capital, and that much of the capital for the expanding cotton industry in the early nineteenth century came from textile merchants. That the credit system was not yet adequately developed to meet the needs of developing industry is shown by the mushroom growth of the unstable "country banks" in the early nineteenth century precisely to fill this gap. It seems an hypothesis worthy of investigation that in the eighteenth century there was a good deal of selling of bonds and real estate to such persons as retired East Indian "nabobs" by men who, then or subsequently, used the proceeds to invest in the expanding industry and commerce of the time; and that it was by some such route—by a process having two stages—that the wealth acquired from colonial loot fertilized the industrial revolution.

Even if there was no significant amount of transfer of assets, I think that my "second phase" may not altogether lack justification. It may have significance (if, admittedly, a somewhat different one) as denoting a period in which there had been a shift for the bourgeoisie as a whole from an earlier preference for holding real estate or valuable objects or bonds to a preference for investing in means of production and labor-power. Even if no considerable volume of selling of the former actually took place, the shift may nevertheless have had a large influence on the prices of such assets and on economic and social activities.

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