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Comments on Professor H. K. Takahashi's "Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism"

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## COMMUNICATIONS

### COMMENTS ON PROFESSOR H. K. TAKAHASHI'S "TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO CAPITALISM"

#### I.

With Professor H. K. Takahashi's stimulating article on "The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism," which makes such an important contribution to deepening and extending our appreciation of the important questions at issue, I find myself in general agreement, and there is very little that I wish or am competent to add to what he has said. In particular, I find his development of the notion of the "two ways" and his use of it to illuminate the contrast between the way of the bourgeois revolution and that of Prussia and Japan specially enlightening. With reference to what he has said in criticism of myself I would like merely to make three comments.

He is, of course, quite justified in saying that my book paid "inadequate attention to French and German writing"; he might have added with even more justice that I had almost entirely ignored the experience of southern Europe, Italy and Spain in particular. I can only explain that this was done advisedly, and that my book was entitled *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* to indicate its selective and partial character. No pretense was made of writing, even in outline, a comprehensive history of Capitalism. The method adopted can, I think, be described as consisting of a treatment of certain crucial phases and aspects in the development of Capitalism, primarily in terms of England as the classic case, with occasional references to continental parallels (as with developments in the guilds or the putting-out system) or contrasts (as with the feudal reaction in Eastern Europe or the creation of a proletariat) to illuminate the particular issues that I was trying to clarify. To have developed these parallels and contrasts as they deserved, and to have made from them anything like a

complete comparative study of the origin and growth of Capitalism under diverse conditions would have required a range of knowledge of the historical literature of Europe to which I could lay no claim. Even a much more encyclopaedic mind than mine would probably have had to wait upon a decade or so of "cooperative advances in these studies" to which Professor Takahashi refers.

Secondly, in asserting that in my book I spoke of the period from the 14th to the 16th century in England as "neither feudal nor yet capitalist" I think that Professor Takahashi has been misled into accepting my posing of a problem as my own conclusion about it. If he will look at the passage on page 19 of my book again, I think he will see that I am here asking a question (there is in fact a question-mark at the end of the sentence)—formulating a difficulty which has presented itself to so many students of this period. On the very next page I state that, despite the disintegration of Feudalism and the appearance of "a mode of production which had won its independence from Feudalism: petty production . . . which was not yet capitalist although containing within itself the embryo of capitalist relations," one still could not speak of the end of Feudalism ("But unless one is to identify the end of Feudalism with the process of commutation . . . one cannot yet speak of the end of the medieval system, still less of the dethronement of the mediaeval ruling class"—p. 20). Admittedly the sparseness of my references to agriculture (which he criticizes) left my conclusion much less supported than it might have been. But here I believe that, despite the illumination shed by Tawney and some others, much field-work remains to be done by specialists in this period—specialists who are guided by the method of Marxism. Again, I am very ready to admit that earlier viewpoints of my own, embodied in earlier drafts, may have left their trace in the final version and have been responsible for the presentation being less clear than it might have been. But it was certainly not my intention to endorse the view that the period between Edward II and Elizabeth was "neither feudal nor yet capitalist"; and the statement that this period was "transitional," of which Professor Takahashi speaks as a "correction" introduced only in my "Reply," was in fact made on page 20 of the book.

I should continue to defend, however, my other and distinct statement 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." It does not imply that these transitional centuries

were "neither feudal nor yet capitalist," but rather the contrary; and I believe that it provides a key to the difficulty which has led so many to adopt something akin to the Sweezy-view of this period. I regarded it as a statement in general and preliminary form of the thesis which I gather that Professor Takahashi fully accepts: namely, that the disintegration of Feudalism (and hence its final and declining stage) came *not* as the result of the assault upon it of an incipient "Capitalism" in the guise of "merchant capital" wedded to "money economy" as has been commonly supposed, but as a result of the revolt of the petty producers against feudal exploitation. This partial independence of the petty producers resulted in an acceleration of their own disintegration (even if this was not the start of the process) by accelerating the process of social differentiation among them; and out of this process (but *only* after its maturing during a transitional period of feudalism-in-decline) the capitalist mode of production was born. Precisely *because* this process of social differentiation within the petty mode of production had to mature before capitalist production was born, an interval was necessary between the start of the decline of serfdom and the rise of Capitalism. In Professor Takahashi's own words: "As rent in kind gives way to money rent, these small-scale peasant farms, the petty mode of production in agriculture, become more and more clearly independent, and at the same time their self-disintegration too goes on more rapidly and freely." The only disagreement between us here seems to be a possible difference of emphasis on the degree of this "self-disintegration" at an earlier period and a later period.

Thirdly, as regards the "two ways" and my references to the putting-out system, Professor Takahashi's interpretation is correct when he speaks of me as including the putting-out system of the English petty domestic-industry type as belonging to Way No. 1. I thought, however, that I had made clear in my chapter on "The Rise of Industrial Capital" that I regarded the putting-out system, not as a homogeneous economic form, but rather as a generic name for a complex phenomenon embracing several different types. One, the pure *Verleger*-type of industry organized by merchants of companies like the Haberdashers, Drapers, Clothworkers, Leathersellers, I treated as merchant-into-manufacturer Way No. 2 (see p. 129-134 of my *Studies*); and immediately went on to contrast with it the movement of which the rise of a class of merchant-manufacturer employers from among the ranks of craftsmen composing the (subordinate) "Yeomanry" of the Livery Companies and the challenge of the new Stuart corporations formed from these elements (of which Unwin wrote) were the expression (p. 134-8). On

whether this organized-from-below form of the putting-out system is a peculiarly English phenomenon, or whether it has continental parallels, I should hesitate to venture a dogmatic opinion. Here I can do no more than suggest that preoccupation with the search for the large-scale capitalist *entrepreneur* may possibly have blinded continental historians to the role played by the small and *parvenu* type of merchant-manufacturer, and that the true picture of the *Verlags-system* may not, even in Germany, be quite such a systematic and tidy one as German economic historians have represented it. Again one must appeal to those "cooperative advances" in the study of such questions in various countries, of which Professor Takahashi speaks.

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## II.

The problems that troubled me most when I first took up Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York, 1947), were, very briefly, these: There existed throughout most of Western Europe in the early Middle Ages a feudal system such as Dobb well describes on pp. 36-37. This mode of production went through a process of development which culminated in crisis and collapse, and it was succeeded by capitalism. Formally, the analogy with the life history of capitalism—development, general crisis, transition to socialism—is very close. Now, I have a pretty good idea about the nature of the prime mover in the capitalist case, why the process of development which it generates leads to crisis, and why socialism is necessarily the successor form of society. But I was not at all clear about any of these factors in the feudal case when I sat down to Dobb's book. I was looking for the answers.

The greatest tribute I can pay to Dobb's book is that when I had finished studying it I felt much clearer in my own mind about all these questions. This was partly because he succeeded in convincing me and partly because he stimulated me to look into other sources and to do some fresh thinking on my own. My original article in *Science and Society* was in the nature of a report on the tentative answers I had reached. (I think, incidentally, that I should have made this plainer. Dobb of course formulated his problems in his own way, and he was interested in much that bears only indirectly if at all on the questions to which I was seeking answers. Some of my "criticisms,"

therefore, were really not criticisms at all; they should have been presented as supplementary suggestions and hypotheses.)

In his "Reply," Dobb indicates various points of disagreement with my answers, and Takahashi, if I understand him rightly, rejects them very nearly *in toto*. But I know little more about what Dobb's answers are (to *my* questions, of course) than I did after finishing the book, and I know next to nothing about what Takahashi's are. I should therefore like to use the opportunity afforded by this rejoinder to restate my questions and answers as concisely as possible and in a form which may perhaps invite alternative formulations from Dobb and Takahashi.<sup>1</sup>

*First Question.* What was the prime mover behind the development of Western European feudalism?<sup>2</sup>

In the case of capitalism, we can answer this question positively and unambiguously. The prime mover is the accumulation of capital which is inherent in the very structure of the capitalist appropriation process. Is there anything analogous in the case of feudalism?

Dobb's theory finds an analogue in the feudal lords' growing need for revenue. In his view, "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 the point where this pressure became literally unendurable." (*Studies*, p. 42.) As a result, "in the end it led to an exhaustion, or actual disappearance, of the labor-force by which the system was nourished." (p. 43.) The question is whether the lords' growing need for revenue—the *fact* of which is not in dispute—can be shown to be inherent in the structure of the feudal mode of production. I gave reasons for doubting that any such relation exists ("Transition," p. 138-140),

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I refer to Dobb's book as *Studies*, to my review-article as "Transition," to Dobb's reply as "Reply," and to Takahashi's article as "Contribution."

<sup>2</sup> I insist on speaking of *Western European* feudalism, because what ultimately happened in Western Europe was manifestly very different from what happened in other parts of the world where the feudal mode of production has prevailed. The extent to which this may be due to variations among different feudal systems, and the extent to which it may be due to "external" factors are, of course, very important questions. Since, however, I do not pretend to be able to answer them, the only sensible thing for me to do is to confine my attention to Western Europe. By doing so, I do not want to imply that I think other feudalisms are subject to different laws of development; I want to evade the question altogether.

and I showed how the lords' growing need for revenue could readily be explained as a by-product of the growth of trade and urban life.

Dobb is rather impatient with my emphasis on this subject. According to him, I seem to feel that the development of feudalism is 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. ("Reply," p. 160.)

*Historically*, of course, Dobb is entirely right. It *was* an interaction of internal and external factors that determined the course of feudal development, and I never intended to deny it. But the same can be said of the historical development of capitalism, a fact which does not keep us from seeking and finding the prime mover within the system. I cannot agree, therefore, that Dobb is justified in describing my formulation of the question with regard to feudalism as "mechanical." It is a *theoretical* question, and I continue to believe that it is crucial to the whole analysis of feudalism.

The second half of the foregoing quotation clearly indicates that Dobb does in fact take a position on this question, despite his reluctance to formulate either the question or the answer in a clear-cut fashion. And the position is precisely the one which I attributed to him on the basis of the book, namely, that feudalism does contain an internal prime mover. Since he adduces no new arguments in support, however, I can only remain unconvinced.

So far as I can see, Takahashi contributes little to the clarification of this issue. His interesting analysis of the *elements* of feudalism ("Contribution," p. 318 f.) does not lead him to any formulation of the "laws and tendencies" of the system, and when he does address himself specifically to this question, the result is not very enlightening, at least to me. In feudal society, he writes,

the means of production are combined with the producer, and productivity develops (collapse of the manorial system and development of small-scale peasant agriculture; formation of money rents; tendency of the rent rate to fall; *crise seigneuriale*) as the productivity of the direct producer himself; and therefore the law of development in feudalism can only lead in the direction of the liberation and independence of the peasants themselves. (*Ibid.*, p. 334.)

Here rising productivity is treated as the crucial factor, but it is certainly not self-evident that rising productivity is an inherent char-

acteristic of feudalism. In fact, there is a good deal of historical and contemporary evidence that suggests precisely the opposite hypothesis. Here again, as in the case of Dobb's growing need of the lords for revenue, I think we have to do with the influence of forces external to the feudal system.

On this whole question of external forces, Takahashi takes me severely to task:

Sweezy does not take the break-up of a given social structure as the result of self-movement of its productive forces; instead he looks for an "external force." If we say that historical development takes place according to external forces, the question remains, however, how these external forces arose, and where they came from. ("Contribution," p. 325.)

The latter point, of course, is a valid one which I never intended to deny. Historical forces which are external with respect to one set of social relations are internal with respect to a more comprehensive set of social relations. And so it was in the case of Western European feudalism. The expansion of trade, with the concomitant growth of towns and markets, was external to the feudal mode of production,<sup>3</sup> but it was internal as far as the whole European-Mediterranean economy was concerned.

A thorough study of Western European feudalism—which Dobb of course never claimed to offer—would have to analyze it in the context of this larger European-Mediterranean economy. How this can be done has been brilliantly demonstrated by Pirenne who argued, first, that the origins of feudalism in Western Europe are to be sought in the isolation (by the Arab expansion of the seventh century) of that relatively backward region from the real economic centers of the ancient world; and second, that the later development of feudalism was decisively shaped by the re-establishment of these broken com-

<sup>3</sup> I am unable to understand Dobb's reasoning when he says that "to some extent" he believes that the growth of towns was an internal feudal process. ("Reply," p. 161.) Surely, the fact cited by Dobb in this connection that feudalism "encouraged towns to cater for its need of long-distance trade" does not prove the point. One would have to show that the feudal ruling class took the initiative in building the towns and successfully integrated them into the feudal system of property and labor relations. Undoubtedly this did happen in the case of some towns, but it seems to me that Pirenne has conclusively shown that the decisive trading centers typically grew up in an entirely different way. But what particularly indicates the non-feudal character of the towns was the general absence of serfdom.



mercial ties.<sup>4</sup> Viewed in this way, the growth of trade from the tenth century on was obviously no mysterious external force, such as Takahashi quite mistakenly accuses me of "looking for." But when attention is narrowly centered on feudalism as such—as Dobb was quite justified in doing—it seems to me not only legitimate but theoretically essential to treat the growth of trade as an external force.

The answer to the first question, then, seems to me to be this: the feudal system contains no internal prime mover and when it undergoes genuine development—as distinct from mere oscillations and crises which do not affect its basic structure—the driving force is to be sought outside the system. (I suspect that this applies pretty generally to feudal systems, and not only to Western Europe, but this is an issue which is beyond the scope of the present discussion.)

*Second Question.* Why did the development of feudalism in Western Europe lead to crisis and ultimate collapse?

Having determined that an external prime mover is behind the developmental process, we must of course conclude that the answer to this question is to be sought in the impact of this external force on the structure of feudalism. As Dobb rightly insists, in other words, the process is one of interaction, and I take it that Takahashi would not disagree. There are therefore no basic differences here. My chief criticism of both Dobb and Takahashi in this connection is that in their anxiety to minimize the importance of trade as a factor in the decline of feudalism they avoid a direct analysis of this interactive process. Both of them, for example, tend to treat the substitution of money rents for labor services or payments in kind as largely a matter of form and to lose sight of the fact that this change can occur on any considerable scale only on the basis of developed commodity production.

My own effort to deal with the interactive process and its outcome was given in my original article. ("Transition," p. 141-147.) It doubtless contains many weaknesses—for example, in the treatment of the so-called "second serfdom," which Dobb criticizes—but I still think it has the merit of being an explicit theoretical analysis. I would like to see others improve upon it.

4 In addition to Henri Pirenne's *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (London, 1936), see also his *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (New York 1939), the posthumously published work which gives the author's fullest treatment of the twin problems of the end of antiquity and the rise of feudalism in Western Europe.

*Third Question.* Why was feudalism succeeded by capitalism?

If one agrees with Dobb, as I do, that the period from the fourteenth century to the end of the sixteenth century was one in which feudalism was in full decay and yet in which there were no more than the first beginnings of capitalism, this is a genuinely puzzling question. One cannot say that feudalism had created productive forces which could be maintained and further developed only under capitalism—as, for example, one definitely can say that capitalism has created productive forces that can only be maintained and further developed under socialism. True, the decline of feudalism was accompanied (I would say “caused”) by the generalization of commodity production, and, as Marx repeatedly emphasized, “commodity production and developed commodity circulation, trade, form the historical preconditions under which it [capital] arises.” (*Capital*, I, p. 163.) But historical preconditions do not in themselves provide a sufficient explanation. After all, the ancient world was characterized by highly developed commodity production without ever giving birth to capitalism; and the clear beginnings of capitalism in Italy and Flanders during the late Middle Ages proved abortive. Why, then, did capitalism finally catch on and really get going in the late sixteenth century, especially in England?

Dobb throws a good deal of light on this question, though I’m sure that he would be the last to claim to have given the definitive answer. Much of his emphasis is placed upon what Marx called “the really revolutionary way” for industrial capitalists to develop, which Dobb interprets to mean the rise of small men from the ranks of petty producers. In my original article, I criticized this interpretation of Marx, but Dobb’s reply and further reflection have led me to conclude that while it is not the only possible interpretation, it is nevertheless a legitimate one which points in a fruitful direction. What is required now, it seems to me, is a great deal more factual research on the origins of the industrial bourgeoisie. This kind of research should do more than anything else to unlock the secret of the definitive rise of capitalism from the late sixteenth century.

I am not at all clear about Takahashi’s position on this question. He criticizes Dobb for going too far in describing the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as transitional. Presumably, his meaning is that feudalism survived essentially intact until the rise of capitalism overthrew it and that there is therefore no disjunction between the processes of feudal decline and capitalist rise such as both Dobb and I assert. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that Takahashi agrees with Dobb as to the revolutionary significance of the rise of small producers from the

ranks; and I assume that he would also agree with me as to the urgency of more factual research on the nature and extent of this phenomenon.

One final point in this connection. Developing Dobb's suggestion that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries seem to have been "neither feudal nor yet capitalist" (*Studies*, p. 19), I proposed that the period be given the name of precapitalist commodity production. Dobb rejects this proposal, preferring to consider the society of that period as one of feudalism "in an advanced stage of dissolution." ("Reply," p. 162.) He says:

The crucial question which Sweezy has apparently failed to ask . . . is this: what was the ruling class of this period? . . . it cannot have been a capitalist class. . . . 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 . . . 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 . . . that it was a struggle against an attempted *counter*-revolution staged by crown and court against an already existent bourgeois state power. . . . 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. ("Reply," p. 162 f.)

I recognize that these are questions that British Marxists have been earnestly debating for some years now, and it is perhaps rash of me to express any opinion on them at all. Let me, therefore, put my comment in the form of a query. Why isn't there another possibility which Dobb does not mention, namely, that in the period in question there was not one ruling class but several, based on different forms of property and engaged in more or less continuous struggle for preferment and ultimately supremacy?

If we adopt this hypothesis, we can then interpret the state of the period in accordance with the well-known passage from Engels:

At certain periods it occurs exceptionally that the struggling classes balance each other so nearly that the public power gains a certain degree of independence by posing as the mediator between them. The absolute monarchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was in such a position, balancing the nobles and the burghers against one another.<sup>5</sup>

In this interpretation, the civil war was *the* bourgeois revolution in the straightforward sense that it enabled the capitalist class to master the state and achieve definitive ascendancy over the other classes.

Wilton, N. H.

PAUL M. SWEEZY

<sup>5</sup> *Origin of the Family* (Chicago, 1902), Kerr. ed., p. 209. Engels clearly was thinking of the continent; for England the dates were earlier.