

Destruction or Persistence? New Perspectives on the Relationship between Feudalism and Capitalism

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Abstract

This essay is a short but impacting observation of the economy of the Middle Ages in light of recent economic historians' discoveries: not only are some conventional beliefs such as the absence of a financial and trading economy of the period discredited, but a more nuanced view of feudalism also emerges from such revelations. The new, groundbreaking work of Michael McCormick is pitted against Henri Pirenne's classic theory; in addition, seminal works by Marc Bloch, S.R. Epstein, and lesser known work by Aron Gurevich provide a more authentic view of Middle-Age economy. Finally, contrary to Marxist historiography, this essay postulates that to some extent feudalism fomented the development of capitalism.

Keywords: Feudalism, Capitalism, Pirenne, McCormick, Economy of the Middle Ages.

Introduction

The conceit that feudalism oppressed capitalistic enterprise, and that only its weakening allowed the emergence of capitalism is one we should outright abandon in its simple form. The debates on the origins of capitalism are a welter of contrasting views; the approaches are so varied (economic, social, political, anthropological, ethnographic, etc.), the opinions so disparate, and the scope so vast, that a consensus will probably never be reached. Marxist historiography, which looms large over the theory for the rise of capitalism, in most cases, has envisioned capitalist development at the expense of feudalism; yet, the veracity of this thesis has been persuasively contradicted on account of its too rigid ideology; but even liberal economic historians like Pirenne may be faulted for having simplified a number of aspects of feudalism. This paper will explore a few of these simplifications—in some cases outright misconceptions—against recent, groundbreaking discoveries, which have provided us with a more accurate understanding of the economy of the Middle Ages as well as a more nuanced view of feudalism.

Pirenne and the Myth of a Trade-less Middle Ages

Pirenne's extensive work on the economy of the Middle Ages and its transformation has been fecund indeed: his theories about the rise of towns, burghers and the merchant class, their

pursuit for profit, and the general shift in the conception of *richesse*—from land-based wealth to financial wealth strictly measurable with money—stand against criticism and are still valuable today. But his ideas on the feudal economy must be substantially revised. According to Pirenne, trade and commerce stimulated economic growth, and, eventually, capitalism; but Pirenne grossly underestimated the presence of trade in the early feudal age (800-1100)—a time, which he repeatedly insisted as being devoid of commercial activity: ‘Of a regular and normal commercial activity, of steady trading carried on by a class of professional merchants, in short, of all that constitutes the very essence of an economy of exchange worthy of the name, no traces can be found after the closing off of the Mediterranean by the Islamic invasion’ (Pirenne, 1925, p.35)

In his classic *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, Pirenne continued his dismal portrait of economic regression in the Mediterranean: ‘The Mediterranean, having become a Musulman lake, was no longer the thoroughfare of commerce [...] it had always been.’ (Pirenne, 1937, p.284) Elsewhere, too, Pirenne made the same point more emphatically: ‘The economic organization which imposed itself upon Western Europe in the course of the Carolingian epoch [...] was purely agricultural. Not only did it know nothing of commerce, but one may say that [...] it excluded the very possibility of any professional activity. (Pirenne, 1938, p.201) Such sharp statements have been disproved.

McCormick’s Innovative Views

In 2002 Michael McCormick’s monumental *Origins of the European Economy* was published and fundamentally altered our view of the economy of the early Middle Ages; based on a gigantic amount of data, research, and investigation, McCormick’s book presents a very different picture indeed.

In recent years, deeper scrutiny [...] has revealed a more complex picture, with greater implications for transportation, markets, and commerce than once appeared. Case studies of the transport of goods within four of the best documented of these domanical systems [Paris and the Seine; Moselle, western Germany; Lombardy; Po valley] bring out these implications well. [...] In all four cases, close scrutiny has uncovered highly organized systems of communication between land and water. (McCormick, 2002, p.8)

McCormick enumerates the large quantities of goods, ranging from cereal staple food to “high value products such as wine and iron tools” which were transported across Europe and beyond. In addition, McCormick furnishes a number of tables¹, which clearly show an *increase* in core movements of 140% during the ninth century and of 360% compared to the early eighth century, thus transforming our view of the Carolingian age. In the massive appendices McCormick provides evidence that sanctions an antithetical statement to Pirenne’s thesis on the cessation of maritime commerce during the Carolingian era: ‘whether through intermediaries or direct communications, Carolingian Europe had entered into relations with the much larger economy of the Caliphate.’ (McCormick, 2002, p.569)

As to Pirenne’s views of money and currency, they, too, are in need of revision: in addition to the striking amount of transalpine coin movements, McCormick and his army of researchers have uncovered more Carolingian coins than Pirenne supposed were in existence, and, though Pirenne acknowledged that the feudal economy was not exclusively based on barter exchange, he nevertheless minimized the commercial resilience of the ninth century by stating that, ‘[...] the Carolingian monarchy was now an agricultural state engaging in no commercial activity.’ (Pirenne, 1936, p.107) But McCormick’s findings contradict Pirenne unequivocally: ‘Overall, from the eighth century to the tenth, the general trend among great estates to monetize the dues of rural households has become unmistakable [...] payments were increasingly defined in terms of money, not goods.’ (McCormick, 2002, p.9)

¹ See pp.435-7 & p.722

Feudalism as an Agent of Capitalism?

The presence of money at such an early stage is also a direct blow to Marxist historian Maurice Dobb, whose thesis was that the growth of a money economy was a primary factor in the decline of feudalism—‘the market exercised a disintegrating influence on the structure of feudalism.’ (Dobb, 1947, p.70) Paul Sweezy already criticized this assertion by maintaining that money economy alone was not responsible for the decline of feudalism, because a certain amount of trade is required even by the most primitive economies. Sweezy, however, like Pirenne, thought that commerce fomented capitalistic development. Thus, both historians’ argument for the underlying causes for the emergence of capitalism is sound, but, in the light of McCormick’s work, the argument runs into anachronisms. In other words, trade and commerce were indeed a factor in the development of capitalism (though not the sole factor); and more importantly they were not the sole cause of feudalism’s demise—the traditional, long prevailing view. In this regard, S.R. Epstein made a very important observation when stating that, ‘the principal threat to feudalism therefore did not come from trade; up to a point feudalism thrived on trade.’ (Epstein, 2000, p.50) Yet we should not infer that at a certain point feudalism was not a hindrance to capitalist development: high trade costs, due to the ‘jurisdictional parcellization’ of seigniorial power eventually inhibited economic expansion, for ‘strong feudal and urban jurisdiction was incompatible with long-run economic growth.’ (Epstein, 2000, p.51) So it seems that feudalism had an altogether ambivalent role in the development of capitalism: on the one hand, feudalism with its ‘great estates stimulated trade’ (McCormick, 2002, p.9) and capital accumulation (as Max Weber had already suggested in *Economy and Society*), which are both essential prerequisites for capitalistic enterprise. On the other, the prime movers’ mercantilist pursuits were eventually constrained by the feudal system’s seigniorial jurisdiction, inefficient manorial organizations, and exasperating tolls.

A more authentic picture of the feudal economy reveals that it did not interdict the flourishing of commerce and trade. We ought to turn to a broader view of feudalism—away from the speculation of Marxist historians, who concentrate on the purely economic relationship of servitude between lord and serfs—and look to non-Marxist historians whose outlook on feudalism was based on socio-political conditions rather than on historical materialism. And surely, older historians’ notions that the decline of feudalism was due to its absence of trade, such as the Stephenson’s statement that, ‘The decay of feudalism can therefore be understood as one phase of the economic revolution experienced by Western Europe between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. In the earlier period commerce had been reduced to little more than the local exchange of surplus produce [...]’ (Stephenson, 1942, p.98) now seem irremediably dated.

A More Nuanced View of Feudalism

Aron Gurevich, in his profound work, *Problems in the Origins of Feudalism in Western Europe*, which sadly remains untranslated in English (and for which he was fired from the Moscow Institute of Philosophy for its challenges to Marxist theories), states that the Middle Ages were essentially a polystructural society and that serfdom was not a uniform blanket subjugating all un-free men, as Marxist historians portrayed:

What is important is the fact that at the end of the early middle Ages this diversity of the social structures did not vanish. Next to the independent farmers and feudal proprietors, almost everywhere we can detect a stratum of small, free landowners—of petty proprietors, which constituted a considerable portion of the population. [...] Nowhere, not even in France, did the fief supplant the allodial tenement. [...] Serfdom during the feudal epoch was never a completely uniform class in its economic identity, its socio-juridical status, or its role in the social and political life; serfs were splintered in countless categories, each distinguished by its forms of dependence and the various types of exploitation it suffered.² (Gurevich, 1982, p.14).

² Translated by me from the Italian edition. Original edition: Aron Gurevich, *Problemy genezisa feodalizma v zapadnoj Evrope*. (Moskva: Izdat Vysshaja Shkola, 1970).

Gurevich cites the thirteenth-century French jurist Beaumanoir who tells us definitively that ‘there are many types of serfdom.’ (Gurevich, 1983, p.175) The doleful vision of an inescapably hierarchical feudalism, shackling peasants uniformly and inexorably, is obviously a gross simplification. In fact, in his seminal work *Feudal Society*, Marc Bloch justly remarks that such society actually ‘was an unequal society, rather than a hierarchical one.’ (Bloch, 1964, p.433) This richer picture evinces economic possibilities that have escaped those Marxist historians who tried to trace a too clear-cut transition from feudalism to capitalism. The economic implications of the society described by Gurevich are elucidated by Bloch: ‘The tenant slave on the other hand, had his own dwelling; he subsisted from the produce of his own labour; nothing prevented him from selling for his own benefit the surplus of his harvest, if there chanced to be any.’ (Bloch, 1964, p.256) R.H. Britnell, too, in his study on the commercialization of England, maintained that ‘the tenant of free land was able to sell his property as he pleased’ (Britnell, 1993, p.143) and that thus he entered the markets, since the need as well the availability of cash were a reality. These statements fly in the face of Dobb’s theory that ‘surplus labor [tended] to be performed directly as a personal obligation or to take the form of the delivery of a certain quota of his produce by the cultivator as a tribute in natural form to the overlord.’ (Dobb, 1947, p.13)

And so, we come back to Pirenne, since one of the main problems both his critics and supporters have had to grapple is his nebulous concept of the ‘itinerant peasant’, who, emerging suddenly from the brumes of history, populated cities, improved his own status, increased the division of labor, and acted as a major agent of economic change: the peasant wanderer, in Pirenne’s view, became the burgher who eventually became the modern capitalist. In the light of the previous observations of Gurevich and Bloch it may be possible to understand who these peasants were, or at the very least give them plausibility, since the heterogeneous society both historians described accounts for peasants who were not relentlessly stuck to the clod. In fact, Gurevich makes a subtle distinction between an “un-free freedom” and a “free non-freedom”, which can give further credence to Pirenne’s wandering peasant: ‘A clear manifestation of the medieval conscience is that the law is a tie between people (a tie in that it binds people together, and a tie also in that it is a restraint); the law, thus, is not for everyone; the un-free are not bound by its prescriptions, which are, instead, obligatory for free men—even more so for the lords.’ (Gurevich, 1982, p.187)

Conclusion

In this brief survey, we have seen that the fancy that trade and money destroyed feudalism is quite untenable in its simplest form: McCormick’s groundbreaking discoveries and the more nuanced descriptions of feudalism offered by Bloch and Gurevich have shown quite conclusively that to a certain point feudalism fomented capitalism, or, at the very least, was its precursor. The true disintegrating force of feudalism was political centralization. We thus ought to look at feudalism’s passing from a broader perspective—a deep, structural, societal mutation, which of course was *also* due to economic changes. But what concerns us here is the degree to which the economic aspects during the ‘transition’ from a feudal to a capitalist economy are in conflict. Surely, at a certain point of economic expansion, feudal strictures wore the emerging capitalist economy, because eventually capitalism operated on a scale that necessitated a system that was not fragmented. This paper though, has attempted to show that feudalism’s demise was not due to supposedly new financial conditions, many of which were already in place at the very earliest stages of feudalism. If anything, feudalism might have contributed to the rise of capitalism, since we have seen that in effect trade and commerce had always existed, but capitalism emerged in different parts of Europe, during the feudal age.

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