

Engendering Feudalism: Modes of Production Revisited

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How do we understand economic activity outside capitalist wage relationships? Capitalocentric analyses assign it to the local or cultural. This replicates previous approaches that assigned such activity to the "feudal." Drawing on collaboration with Serap Kayatekin, this paper urges renewed attention to feudal subjectivity, as a way to work through this problematic and to build a communal politics.

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Marxist Feminism and the Locus of Difference

How do we "think" difference in relation to economy? Marxist feminism demonstrates two ways: early writings stressed women's class background, thereby emphasizing differences between women. Writings of the 1970s on unpaid labor and housework understood women as a class, thus emphasizing women's difference from men. More recent feminist literature on the international division of labor has examined the interaction between these two. Marxist feminists have also begun to integrate insights about the role of discourse and culture in the social constitution of gender.¹ Despite their richness and variety, these literatures have largely explored economic difference in terms of a pre-given structure of *capitalism*, illustrating the hold of what J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) term *capitalocentrism*. The next section makes the case for a Marxist feminism that takes on board the critique of capitalocentrism, on the grounds of both realism and transformative politics.

Capitalocentrism as Political Limit

The social relations of work found at a diversity of sites do not fit into the capitalist form. Take the informal sector, which ranges over an astonishing variety of social

1. See, for example, Salzinger 2003; Mohanty 1997; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; and Ramamurthy 2004.

relations, from wage labor and putting out to own-account work. We encounter debt-bondage in own-account work and the equivalent of sharecropping in some manufacturing and service-sector activities. These forms should have disappeared with the advance of capitalism; they grow. They should enact capitalist modernity in subject formation; they do not.

Many of the flashpoints around gender and labor occur where women’s work deviates from the classic wage compact of the capitalist form. Unpaid labor in the household has always been a point of tension for Marxist feminists, as it falls outside the wage form. For paid labor, we find attention to housewifization in home-based production (Mies 1999, Mohanty 1997), the anomalous work statuses of transmigrant nannies and maids (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004), and the problematic of the rise of bonded and slave labor under capitalist globalization. These literatures find that the social relations of work, and the subjectivities they draw on and reproduce, cannot be understood in terms of a classic capitalist wage compact. Typically, these deviations are read as symptoms of culture or local tradition, standing in opposition to, or mobilized amorally by, globalizing capitalism. The invocation of the cultural or local marks a point where capitalocentric analyses seek to address the other-than-capitalist in the social relations organizing work.

The typical political response to this type of difference is to seek its elimination through boycotts and legal bans, and to fix up social relations so they match the universal capitalist template. There are global campaigns to end “modern-day slavery,” and efforts to standardize workdays, wages, overtime, and occupational health and safety. If this cannot be accomplished through negotiation with employers, often because clear employers are absent, campaigners turn to a redistributive politics of social safety nets.

This kind of effort addresses exploitation by erasing difference and promoting capitalist modernity: *It seeks to make the work done by women and other marginal groups more closely resemble the theoretical description of the classic male wage compact of capitalism.* This problem is not unique to paid labor. We seek to “count” unpaid female labor and ask for wages for housework, in the process imagining unpaid and affective labor in and through the value categories of capitalist abstract labor. When we find it hard to code own-account work as labor, we imagine women as mini-capitalists: Microcredit looks to rework the social relations of own-account for-market work to make it more nearly resemble the financial relations of capitalist production.

Analytically and ethically, capitalocentric approaches understand any politics that finds value in the different-from-capitalist as romantic, if not reactionary, nostalgia. It cannot engage political imaginaries that emerge from noncapitalist *exploitative* social relations (Charusheela 2000). This paper argues for an approach that can formulate economic difference *differently*. It explores the political imaginaries that open up outside a capitalocentric frame, and argues that they are essential for a Marxist feminist politics of communal social relations. To get there, we take a detour through transition debates.

The Indian “Modes of Production” Debates

The question of how to think difference-from-capital was at the center of a variety of transition and development debates. One such debate about transition was the Indian modes-of-production debate: From the late 1960s to the 1980s, Marxist scholars debated whether there was a transition to capitalism in Indian agriculture (see Patnaik 1990; Thorner 1982; Chakrabarti and Cullenberg 2003, chaps. 2–5).

The debate opened with a dispute about the extent and nature of agrarian transition between Ashok Rudra and Utsa Patnaik. Rudra argued that Indian agrarian relations were semi-feudal; Patnaik that capitalist agrarian relations were emerging. The debate turned not only on empirical questions, but also appropriate modes of analysis. Thorner (1982, 1961) found that participants: “deal with the same body of subject matter, and they share a common theoretical commitment to Marxism. But they are very far from agreement as to how Marxist methodology should be applied to the Indian case. It is taken for granted that Marxist historical models exist; there is no consensus as to the nature of these models.”

At stake in the debate was the *definition* of capitalism. To answer the question, “do we see the emergence of a capitalist mode of production in agrarian India?” scholars had to answer a prior question: What is capitalism? Which features define capitalism, and at what point do enough of these features accrue to identify its emergence?

While most observers now take the debate to be settled in favor of Patnaik’s position that capitalism has arrived in Indian agriculture, the analytical and political issues are hardly settled. As Thorner observes (1982, 2063):

Yet master-servant types of behaviour, extra-economic constraints, rack-renting and usury have by no means disappeared. A particular feature of the Indian scene is the vast mass of un- or under-employed, who, if they cannot emigrate and find jobs outside of agriculture, exercise upward pressure on the rental price of land, and downward pressure on wage rates. The school of thought which tried to take account of these aspects by labeling Indian agriculture semi-feudal has withdrawn from the debate after about the middle of the 1970s, but there is still talk of the persistence of feudal and semi-feudal relations of production. Similarly, the original proponents of a colonial mode have themselves dropped the term, while the term “dual mode” has, to my knowledge, attracted no followers. But the concepts of the preservation/destruction of earlier modes of production by capitalism, and of the articulation of different modes within a single social formation continue to figure in the discussion.

The modes-of-production debates were, in the end, about how to account for economic difference. They were simultaneously political debates, tracking arguments on the Indian left over whether peasant revolts were revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. The debate died away partly due to Rudra’s sudden declaration that India was no longer feudal (or semifeudal) but capitalist, and that in consequence peasant revolts were progressive movements worthy of left support. But the issues that sparked the debate were never settled. What is important for our purposes is

that while the focus of the debate was on how to define capitalism, the default assumption was that whatever failed to map into capitalism was *feudalism*. The “feudal” functioned as the sign of economic difference, as *exploitative-yet-differently-ordered-than-capital*.

Rudra’s shift parallels work by Marxist feminists who bypass, suppress, culturalize or localize economic difference within a *capitalocentric* frame. Absent any *other* way of addressing the problem of exploitative relations that are different-from-capital, the only way forward is to understand difference as localized variation.

Rethinking the Terrain

What has enabled so many diverse forms of social organization, with diverse particular cultural modes of subjectification, to be gathered under the rubric of the feudal? Part of the answer is that once the Asiatic mode was set aside, the Marxist analyst was left with three exploitative modes: slave, feudal, and capitalist. In this system, slavery is visible, openly *coercive* exploitation, while capitalist exploitation is masked to the point of invisibility by markets and an ideology of equality. As I argue in Charusheela (2007, 14, emphasis added), feudalism

has been used as a catchall category for everything else: all cases in which there is exploitation that is neither fully “masked” by the languages of equality and market valuation nor upheld through the exploited being completely and formally owned by the exploiter ... “[F]eudal” spans that vast terrain where we see exploitation that is not fully masked (i.e., where the exploitation is “out in the open”, as it were), and *those who are exploited seem to consent to this openly recognized performance and appropriation of surplus despite not being completely and formally owned and controlled by the exploiters*. “Culture” then becomes the necessary terrain for defining the feudal form/mode—people caught in tradition, religious belief, role, who seem to keep accepting their subordinate position despite the absence of either a direct and visible control as with slavery, or invisibility and pretense of equality as under capitalism. In short, the slavery/feudalism/capitalism typology functions as a way to avoid, or at least to contain, the problem of subjectivity.

A consequence is that “feudalism” ends up defined negatively as any exploitative system that is neither slave nor capitalist (Charusheela 2007, 15). Once slavery is put aside, as in the transition debates, “feudalism” emerges as the space of the noncapitalist or nonmodern. In more recent literatures on globalized capitalism, the “cultural” or “local” steps in to do the detritus-gathering work that was done by “feudal.”

“Recovering Feudal Subjectivities”

To assign noncapitalist exploitative relations to these backward detritus categories is to assume that they lack radical dynamism. My preferred alternative takes seriously

the internal ethical imagination of social formations that are often described as feudal, and focuses on their capacity to generate radical political imaginaries. In the article that provides the title for this section, Serap Kayatekin and I (Kayatekin and Charusheela 2004) sought to reimagine feudal subjectivity as a differential space of exploitative subject formation.²

As noted above, a key feature that made “feudalism” attractive for describing a variety of exploitative relations was that, in imagined opposition to the covertness of capitalist surplus extraction, feudalism makes no bones about exploitation: it names social spaces characterized by socially mandated, open control over the product and labor of the worker. To explain why open hierarchy and exploitation could be so widely accepted by all parties, including the exploited, the analysts turned to “traditional” culture.

But the “feudal” is hardly unique in possessing “cultural processes” that normalize exploitation. Kayatekin and I concluded that it is not the *fact* of culture that marks the feudal, since *all* class-based societies, including capitalist ones, entail processes of hegemony that solicit consent (Gramsci 1975). Rather, scholars using the term must be marking off the *modalities* by which feudal hegemony normalizes exploitation—as opposed, for example, to the ways capitalist hegemony normalizes it. Thus, we argued that *feudal* hegemony solicits consent from the exploited via modalities that normalize hierarchy.³ That is, *feudal* hegemony rests on consolidating consent *even as it posits hierarchical orders within a society*, with the attributes of groups linked to the roles they perform.⁴ This is in contrast to the modality of capitalist consent, which masks hierarchy by presenting the social order as formally equal.

How does a hierarchical order generate *consent*? The relationship between groups is understood as reciprocal, generating social harmony. The exploited defer to the exploiters, but such deference must be reciprocated by the caring love given by the exploiter. Drawing on Kayatekin’s work on sharecropping in the U.S. antebellum South (2004), we can see the operation of this imagination in Thompson’s (1975, 211) description of the relationship between tenant and landowner:

The plantation thus came to resemble the patriarchal family with authority and affection, subordination and personal responsibility existing side by side. The planter often boasted of what he did for his people and of his defense of them. He often regarded a wrong done to his slaves as an outrage to himself and championed their cause against others. A sense of magnanimity and *noblesse oblige* thus developed more or less directly out of the planter’s original exuberation of strength and individuality.

2. The original paper presented at the symposium provided substantial discussion from this article. I have cut out much of that discussion here, including the detailed discussion of the European case which formed a key portion of our analysis, since it is already available in print.

3. This consent operates in addition to any physical coercion.

4. Georges Duby (1978) and Jacques Le Goff (1988) depict a tripartite society in medieval Europe—those who pray to secure the kingdom of God on earth, those who fight, and those who till the land. “The members of the highest order turn their attention heavenwards, while those of the two others look to the earth, all being occupied with the task of upholding the state... The intermediate order provides security, the inferior feed the two” (Duby 1978, 1).

The feudal subject’s consent to this hierarchical order is *neither* a passive acceptance of fate *nor* an unthinking acceptance of a pregiven order via a simple or simplistic notion of false consciousness, fatalism, and such. Using the concept of consent (rather than the conceptions of “norms” or “traditions”) orients our attention to the actual “common sense” and “modes of reasoning” by which consent emerges. Thus, we argued that acceptance of hierarchy and subordination is generated out of a moral perception of the *justness* through which members in the hierarchy perform their roles.

The moral order through which a “feudal” mode constitutes consent can be a potent source of ethical imagination, generating an *internal* subjective framework for reflecting on social relations. This can generate internal challenges that require no recourse to modernist conceptions of “individual” or “equality.” Consider three radical imaginaries that the mechanisms of consent within a hierarchically organized order can throw up: dignity, parity, and reciprocity. Each provides an alternative to capitalist-modernist concepts of justice, grounded in equality among abstract universal individuals.

Hierarchical orders attend to fine-grained nuances of interpersonal behavior. Continuing with the example of sharecropping in the U.S. South, consider struggles over appropriate and dignified titles for U.S. blacks. It is by marking off someone as not having the right to dignified interactions at a personal level that feudal hegemony cements itself. Demands for dignity can emerge from feudal principles of reciprocity.

Hierarchical orders are attuned to difference, and take difference as a ground for subjectivity. But as a result, in addition to concepts of ranks above and below, they provide concepts for “same rank.” Since hierarchical orders entail fine-grained attention to the interaction between groups, they throw up concepts about the appropriate ways to engage not only with those who are above (deference when benevolence is appropriately provided) or below (benevolence when deference is appropriately provided), but also with those of equal rank (reciprocal shows of courtesy, modes of greeting that recognize equivalent rank while acknowledging difference). Much radical activism entails using concepts of social parity to “re-rank” a social grouping within the order. These modes of conceptualizing equivalence-in-difference we term social parity. Parity works *across* difference, in a context where difference is openly acknowledged. That is, it does not seek to bypass or elide difference within a sea of sameness. It therefore gives us a possibility of imagining parity outside the “equality versus difference” dilemma (Scott 1988).

Conclusion

Can rethinking feudalism contribute to a transformative feminist politics? Gendered difference—whether it is women’s difference from men, or difference between women—operates on precisely this terrain, naming a boundary of difference from capitalist modernity’s universalist self-imagination. It is not accidental that we find such a strong role for gendered metaphors in imagining the order of hierarchical reciprocity within feudalism: The demesne is imagined as a home, the feudal lord is a patriarch, the serf is a feminized dependent. In terms of theorizing gender itself, the

turn to the “cultural” to explain the constitution of such economic difference marks a point of contact. Feminists emphasize that cultural conceptions of gender are not superstructural but essential to the constitution and consolidation of gendered visions of labor.

The approach that Kayatekin and I take cuts through the issue of economic difference by placing the logics of differentially ordered subjectivity at the center of analysis. We also provide ways to recuperate a radical politics in the face of economic difference. One example can be seen in the value of the concept of “social parity” for feminist politics. Comparable worth debates, for example, differ from equality debates precisely by highlighting parity over equality. Similarly, efforts to recover ideas of dignity and end hierarchy *without* losing the moral order of reciprocity (which is not the same as “equal pay”) can be seen in the difference between the feminist care literature and the literature, on unpaid labor: the former values reciprocity rather than asking only for “equal wages” for household labor.

These imaginaries of parity, dignity and reciprocity also point to alternatives to capitalism. A purely capitalist imagination of equality and rights traps us in a liberal, limited imagination; any blanket rejection of feudal imaginaries limits our capacity to imagine communal alternatives. (If one is going to argue that *any* cultural form connected with exploitation is irretrievably tainted, then one must on the same principle toss out all ideas of individual rights connected with capitalist modernity.)

Once we connect this discussion to feminism, we see the potential for a radical politics in the space of economic difference that exceeds a simple rights-based imagination. If there remains one true space of communal imagination in the West in terms of mass public imagination, it is, oddly, in the home. It is in the homes that they will create that my students expect and desire a communal form, where they imagine they will have a system not of just equality and rights, but also of parity and dignity and reciprocity, where they consider “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need” an essential ethical guide. They may be too optimistic about their ability to achieve this ideal. But when it is treated not as anti- or post feminist patriarchal ideology, but as aspirational imagination, something different becomes possible.

So, when confronted with the transition debates, an approach that avoids capitalocentrism can finally enable a fully communal imagination as it rejects hiving off the “feudal” imaginary as “romantic nostalgia.” Indeed, a genuine communal imagination requires a dialectical integration of *both* capitalist and feudal ethical imaginaries. After all, when asked whether they prefer equality or caring-in-difference, the correct feminist answer is not one or the other, but both and neither. We want both, but we want neither as constituted under the current social organization.

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