

STATE AND CLASS IN EUROPEAN FEUDALISM

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Recent studies of the state have drawn nearly exclusively upon contemporary history for theory building and empirical support.¹ In this essay we shall apply an approach to the relationship between state and economy which we have developed in the context of liberal democratic capitalism² to an earlier social dynamic: the consolidation and decay of feudalism in western and central Europe between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries.

We share with Marxist historical materialism the notion that social formations are in general contradictory systems whose social dynamics can be captured only by understanding both their dominant structures of surplus extraction and the forms of social contestation to which they give rise. Yet our conception differs from the Marxist view in key respects, two of which will be explored in this essay.

First, we do not believe that the social relations governing surplus extraction are exclusively class relations. Nor can they be explained fully in terms of class relations. Feudal society, in particular, can be understood only by treating the state as an independent social force. The changing patterns of alliance and opposition between state- and class-based groupings over the extraction and control of surplus labor time thus play a central part in our account of feudal dynamics.³

Second, we reject the conception of history as a succession of epoch-defining institutions which serve the interests of the dominant class, punctuated by relatively brief periods of revolutionary transition to a wholly new, yet equally functional, set of institutions. Rather, there is no simple mapping from social institutions to class interest, and virtually all social systems exhibit institutions allowing the successful contestation of power and the pursuit of political and other projects by the subordinate classes. In consequence, social struggles normally involve projects toward strengthening versus weakening such structured bases of power. Specifically, European feudalism is distinguished by a structure of peasant power built directly into manorial organization and the constitution of village communities.

In short, we shall here develop a view of feudalism as supporting a *heterogeneity of power*, by virtue of its constitution as a system of *struc-*

tured oppositions between distinct mechanisms of surplus labor extraction, and between dominant and subordinate groups within them.

By *surplus labor time* we mean the total time worked by the producers (in all their pursuits, on demesne lands as well as their own plots) minus the direct and indirect labor time devoted to the production of the goods and services which constitute the standard of living of the producers. By *surplus product* we mean the total output of the society minus the amounts which constitute the producers' average living standard. Surplus labor time is thus a summary index of the heterogeneous collection of luxury goods and personal services, military provisions, investment in the production, and the like, of which the surplus product is comprised. Neither concept is without conceptual difficulty, of course, but much like the concepts of national product and per capita income, they are essential theoretical tools.

The centrality of surplus extraction to our analysis of the dynamics of feudalism is justified by its key role in the reproduction and expansion of diverse forms of social organization, whether they be states, manorial systems, or urban communities. Put very simply, those social forms which reliably conferred upon an elite control over a sizable surplus product permit its undertaking military, cultural, organizational, and productive projects which promote its survival and expansion in competition with other social forms less adept at extracting and controlling surplus labor time.

If the emphasis upon the heterogeneity of power distances our approach from the Marxist, our insistence upon the centrality of surplus extraction distinguishes our analysis from non-Marxist alternatives, as exemplified by Douglass North and Robert Thomas's *The Rise of the Western World*, and John Hicks's *A Theory of Economic History*.⁴ Whereas we focus upon the size and distribution of the controllable surplus in explaining institutional change, these authors stress either the natural tendency toward the spontaneous emergence of commodity forms through voluntary contract, or the structural accommodation to economic forms enjoying superior allocational efficiency.⁵

The Concept of Feudalism

European feudalism may be represented as (a) a form of property-based production and extraction, (b) a form of state, and (c) a specific articulation of the two. These institutions of course coexist with other social forms, notably the family and the church, which are less central to our argument. Property-based production included three related but contrasting sets of social relations whose relative strength varied across time and space: the manor, the village community, and the urban economy.

The feudal state included two strongly competitive institutional forms whose defining rules were sharply contrasting and incompatible. The intense jurisdictional competition between them was mitigated only by their necessarily mutual dependence within a stable feudal order. Royal sovereignty, the first of these competing forms of state, exhibited in prototypical form the modern system of unitary administration, justice, and military organization. Feudal suzerainty, the second of these forms, was marked by the liege-vassal relationship, fragmented jurisdiction, and the hierarchical layering of authority. The unity of the feudal state lay precisely, we shall suggest, in the dynamic underlying the contrast of sovereign and suzerain principles of concentrating power and distributing the prerogatives of office.

We shall suggest that the unique character of feudalism lay in its pattern of *separation* and *fusion* of power. Feudalism involved a separation of powers by virtue of its constitution as a system of *oppositional structures*: within the state, between sovereign and suzerain administration, and within the economy between urban, manorial, and village community production. Yet feudalism no less involved a strong fusion of power, in the form of a structural unity of feudal suzerainty as a form of state and manorial production as a form of economy: the basic unit of agrarian production (the manorial system) coincided with the elemental unit of suzerain jurisdiction (the fief), and the same individual (or individuals in the case of overlapping jurisdictions)—the lord of the manor—occupied the position of dominance in both.⁶

Our conception of feudalism diverges considerably from that of traditional liberal theory which, until recent years, has treated feudalism as a system of social relations among free men, as exemplified by Ganshof.

"Feudalism" may be regarded as a body of institutions creating and regulating the obligations of obedience and service . . . on the part of a freeman (the vassal) towards another free man (the lord), and the obligations of protection and maintenance on the part of the lord with regard to his vassal.⁷

This conception abstracts from the conditions of production and expropriation of the surplus product produced by labor. Yet as we shall see, by ignoring the issue of the distribution of the surplus among "free men," and between free men and a subject peasantry, the commitment to a juridical conception of feudalism renders much of feudal social development quite incomprehensible.

By contrast, Marxist theorists have formulated definitions directly related to the organization of the productive apparatus, while affording juridical and state relationships a distinctly subordinate status. Thus we

are offered the "coercive sanction" conception summarized by Rodney Hilton, "The essence of the feudal mode of production in the Marxist sense is the exploitative relationship between landowners and subordinated peasants, in which the surplus . . . is transferred under coercive sanction of the former."⁸

In the Marxist treatment, the lord-serf replaces the liege-homage relationship as the essence of feudalism. Moreover, the juridical elements of serfdom are themselves ignored by treating the servile condition as merely "an obligation laid on the producer by force and independently of his own volition," to cite Maurice Dobb's well-known definition.⁹

This Marxist conception suffers from an excessive generality: it is unable to distinguish feudalism from any agriculturally based society with a dominant landlord class. As a result, as Perry Anderson has noted, "no term has undergone such an indiscriminate and pervasive diffusion [in Marxist theory] as that of feudalism, which has often in practice been applied to any social formation between tribal and capitalist poles of identity, unstamped by slavery."¹⁰

Anderson responds to this lack of specificity by augmenting the traditional Marxist definition with specific institutional aspects of the feudal state and church, together with a sensitive analysis of feudal "variational forms" whose interactions account for the dynamics of European feudalism as a whole. In particular, he rejects the possibility of characterizing a social formation in terms of its economic relations alone.

pre-capitalist modes of production cannot be defined *except* via their political, legal and ideological superstructures, since these are what determine the type of extra-economic coercion that specifies them. The precise form of juridical dependence, property, and sovereignty that characterize a pre-capitalist social formation . . . [are] . . . the central indices of the determinate mode of production dominant within it.¹¹

While an important step forward, this conception remains flawed. Anderson accepts a notion of "economic" and "extra-economic" essentially equivalent to "market" and "nonmarket" and hence inadequately distinguishes among noncapitalist societies in which market production is relatively unimportant. The feudal state is thus vaulted to the key position in his account of the specificity of feudal society. Yet to remain faithful to the traditional notion of property-based extraction as an essential core, with respect to which surrounding social forms are but embellishments and instruments of reproduction, Anderson is impelled to consider the feudal state as "superstructural," and hence derivative of class relations. This inconsistency disappears, we believe, when the feudal state is treated as an integral aspect of feudalism, an axis of power distinct from yet related to that of feudal production.

A distinct attempt to define feudalism without regard for its characteristic form of state is the "natural economy" conception of Henri Pirenne. According to this conception, accepted by Paul Sweezy and other Marxist theorists, feudalism can be characterized by the absence of markets and trade, and its demise can be directly linked to the resumption and growth of trade in the later Middle Ages. In this view, the rise of towns engaging in regional trade and guild production represents a foreign element introduced into an essentially stable system through external shock.¹² Yet Maurice Dobb's early research questioned the adequacy of this assumption: "It seems probable, if one may venture a tentative judgment, that a majority of towns originated on the initiative of some feudal institution, or in some way as an element of feudal society, rather than as entirely alien bodies."¹³

Subsequent research demonstrated convincingly that such was the case.¹⁴ Thus Hilton could confidently assert that "town life developed, as a consequence of the development of economic and social forces, *within* feudal society, *not* . . . as a result of the external impact of itinerant traders."¹⁵

Lacking the space to address other attempts to characterize feudalism independent from its specific manner of articulating the state-economy relationship, we must rest content with the general observation that none appears devoid of serious conceptual errors or explanatory deficiencies. We shall thus proceed to a sketch of the nature of the feudal articulation.

The key characteristic of the feudal state is its constitution as a structured opposition between the institutions of sovereignty and suzerainty. While the sovereign presence in this totality was in many regions and periods less than fully salient, the principle of suzerainty itself was always complemented by a web of royal institutions operating under the aegis of the highest among the feudal suzerains—the monarch—and his administrative staff. The cultural and technical raw materials of the sovereign state were legacies of the Roman Empire, available throughout Europe, and incorporated in the structure of the Hapsburg branch of the empire, as well as the church as a temporal entity—not to mention the major European monarchies.

The state in medieval Europe was fragmented, but incompletely fragmented. The first fully developed feudal system, the Carolingian, involved a clear interpenetration of decentralized suzerainty and centralized monarchical administration. The latter elements, however, quickly atrophied in the decades following the death of Charlemagne, under external pressure from east and north. But their juridical forms were conserved, to be redeployed in the thirteenth and once again in the sixteenth centuries.

England, incompletely feudalized under Anglo-Saxon rule, devel-

oped a genuine balance of monarchy and infeudation after the Norman invasion. William I set the tradition of king as direct overlord to all lords, and reserved the administration of high justice for the king's courts. Thus through the greater part of English history, the struggle between monarch and feudal aristocracy was distinctly less jurisdictional than representational.

In the German principalities, despite the advanced disintegration of the institutions of empire, the Hapsburg dynasty provided a more than nominal counterweight to feudal decentralization. Finally, as V. G. Kiernan, Otto Hintze, Perry Anderson, and others have stressed,¹⁶ the church itself maintained the traditions of the centralized state throughout the Middle Ages. In Anderson's words,

It was no accident, in fact, that the one medieval monarchy which had achieved complete emancipation from any representative or corporate restraints was the Papacy, which had been the first political system of feudal Europe to utilize Roman law wholesale, with the codification of canon law in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁷

Moreover, it was often in attempting to neutralize the territorial ambitions of the church that medieval states were forced to resort to similar organization practices. The medieval church, notes Kiernan, "which often collided with and seemed to injure the feudal State, in the long run, and by a complex process of interaction, doubled and trebled its strength. The absence alike from China, from India, from Islam, of a Church of this order . . . is of an importance that scarcely can be overestimated."¹⁸

It is often held that the monarchy in the feudal period represented little but a level of suzerainty; that the relationship of the king to his barons was in principle no different from the relationship of the barons to their knights, or any lord to his vassal. Thus, in the words of Anderson, "in principle, the highest superordinate level of the feudal hierarchy . . . was necessarily different not in kind, but only in degree, from the subordinate levels of lordship beneath it. The monarch, in other words, was a feudal suzerain of his vassals . . . not a supreme sovereign set above his subjects."¹⁹

In one respect, this characterization is not only accurate, but central to the character of feudalism: there was little movement of the surplus from the base of the apex of the feudal hierarchy. At least prior to the thirteenth century in England, and even later elsewhere, a monarch strengthened his position by becoming a stronger overlord rather than by becoming a stronger sovereign. Rents, labor services, and feudal levies from royal lands easily eclipsed taxes, duties, and other sovereign ex-

tractions from vassals and state subjects as forms of access to surplus labor time.

The capacity of the state to impose taxes depended closely upon the monarch's ability to obtain the consent of his major vassals, "Down to the end of the Middle Ages . . . few Estates ever yielded to royal rulers the right to raise permanent or general taxation without the consent of their subjects."²⁰

Yet in other respects this characterization of the feudal monarchy is quite misleading, especially in those areas, such as England and France, which were to stand in the forefront of the transition to capitalism. England has often been treated as something of an "exception," due to the nature of the Norman conquest which instituted its feudal institutions: the English state was always more unified than indicated by the feudal principle of fragmented sovereignty.²¹ France, on the other hand, never fully relinquished its Carolingian past.

Another indication of the presence of the sovereign state can be traced in the course of development of private property from the ninth to fourteenth centuries. The transition from the suzerain principle of the inalienability of the fief, based on the pledge of vassal to his lord, to the seemingly more modern principle of private and alienable property, took place within the dynamic of the feudal social formation. Yet private property achieves its legal substance only on the basis of royal law and courts, which were thus woven into the very fabric of feudal society.

Similarly, while the sovereign state had no direct power to extract surpluses, its juridical presence vis-à-vis the peasantry was not negligible. In England, at least, free peasants were protected by the jurisdiction of the king's court,²² and in addition even the serf was free against anyone except his own lord.²³ Nor was it impossible for the dependent serf to sustain an action against his lord—from the earliest times for issues concerning life and limb as well as deprivation of waynage (plow and team), and later in cases of land tenure itself.²⁴

Turning to the manorial system, it is common to assert the unity of the political structures underlying the lord's control. Thus Robert Brenner notes that "it is precisely the interrelated characteristics of arbitrary exactions by the lords from the peasants and control by landlords over peasant mobility that gave the medieval serf-economy its special traits."²⁵ Yet in the same study Brenner, in countering the argument that success of the "second serfdom" in Eastern Europe lay in the latter's lack of towns, points to the *structure of village communities* in explaining the superior power of the peasantry in the West.

Through much of western Germany by the later middle ages the peasantry had succeeded, through protracted struggle on a piecemeal vil-

lage-by-village basis, in constituting for itself an impressive network of village institutions for economic regulation and political self-development. These provided a powerful line of defence against the incursions of landlords.²⁶

M. M. Postan makes the same point in his description of English conditions in the twelfth century: "The village communes could be as active and as effective a vehicle of local authority as the manorial organization itself."²⁷ Perhaps Paul Vinogradoff stresses the importance of the village community in the feudal social formation most generally.

The village is legally recognized as a unit, separated from the manor although existing within it. . . . Indeed, the rural settlement appears in our records as a "juridical person." . . . We see no traces of the rightless condition of villains which is supposed to be their legal lot, and a powerful community is recognized by the lord in a form which bears all the traits of legal definition. . . . The manorial courts were really meetings of the village community under the presidency of the lord or of his stewards.²⁸

In addition, the very division of labor in agriculture, the organization of peasant plots, and even the practices of crop rotation are comprehensible only with a clear understanding of the role of village community and the interest of the subject peasantry in maintaining its power. Marc Bloch consistently stressed that the demographic incidence of the various "types of agrarian civilization" (enclosure, open-field, and individual holdings) in medieval France could not be understood in terms of agricultural technology alone.

Communal grazing . . . was [not] made inevitable by the shape of the fields. . . . without communal habits of cultivation the wheeled plough could never have been adopted. . . . The truth is that communal grazing arose first and foremost from an attitude of mind. . . . the wheeled plough . . . and a collective habit of cultivation are the twin characteristics of one very distinct type of agrarian civilization.²⁹

This communal "attitude of mind" was not, however, simply a cultural accident. It was rather an aspect of the structured opposition between the manors and the village communities over which they exerted their control. Vinogradoff, in expressing his findings from the manorial court rolls, makes this point clear. "The superior right of the community found expression in the fact that the fields were open to common use as pasture after the harvest. . . . Even the lord himself had to conform to the customs and rules set up by the community."³⁰

Our understanding of the origins and persistence of the open field

system is still too murky to state clearly its connection to class struggles. Yet as Vinogradoff makes clear, its tenacity appears incompatible with the standard notion of the manorial apparatus as an undifferentiated system of domination of lord over peasant. "The intermixture of strips in the open fields . . . was therefore a system particularly adapted to bring home the superior right of the community as a whole, and the inferior, derivative character of individual rights. . . . The feudal theory of the lord's grant is insufficient to explain the different aspects assumed by rights of common."³¹ As we shall later stress, the strength and cohesiveness of the village community appears to have played a critical role in determining the character of the transition from feudalism.³²

The structured opposition of manorial and village communal production is neatly contrasted with the structured confluence of political power in suzerain state and manorial economy. Feudal suzerainty involved a series of hierarchical and overlapping juridical regions specified by the creation of fiefs according to the principles of liege-homage. At the base of the feudal state hierarchy the fief tended in general to coincide with the manor (or a union of manors), the site of the direct confrontation of lord and subordinate peasantry. This particular articulation of feudal state with feudal agricultural production gave rise to the most critical of the specific defining characteristics of the feudal social formation: the *fusion of the elementary unit of the suzerain state and the basic unit of agrarian production*.

This fusion can be understood only by recognizing that in feudalism, as in other social formations, class relations possess a political structure distinct from the state. The feudal fusion is in fact expressed by two unities, one institutional and the other political. First, the basic unit of state (the fief) coincides with the basic unit of production (the manor). Second, the apex of the political structure of the basic unit of state coincides with the apex of the political structure of the unit of production, as incarnated in the person of the lord of the manor.

This underlying unity by no means contradicts the structured opposition of manorial and village community systems of production. Clearly the lord's power was far greater in demesne production than in that falling under the jurisdiction of the village community, despite the former's extensive use of an administrative apparatus (bailiffs and haywards have their counterparts in all feudal systems) to protect their interests in the management of communal plots. And as Postan makes clear, even in demesne production the lord's position of dominance was contingent and could be turned against him.

The purely administrative difficulty of running a demesne economy efficiently were those of supervision and control . . . remote and intermit-

tent [control] . . . offered great opportunities to dishonest bailiffs and reeves. . . . Landlords therefore tried from time to time to relieve themselves of their managerial risks by letting out the demesnes as going concerns, or else by dissolving them altogether into peasant tenancies.³³

In brief, the balance of power among the lord, the administrative structure he instituted to protect his interests, and the village community, represented a central locus of class struggle in the feudal period.

The feudal social formation, in short, can be portrayed as an articulation of several distinct sites, the overall pattern exhibiting the character of a contradictory system based on the fusion of fief and manor, and the oppositions of town to manor, of manorial administration to village community, and of suzerainty to sovereignty. In the next section we shall describe the evolution of forms of surplus extraction and argue that our approach allows a consistent explanation of social struggle in the feudal social formation.

The Feudal Extraction Process

The unique character of feudalism lies in its specific manner of juxtaposing a variety of forms of extraction based on both proprietary and state exploitation. In this section we shall discuss the ways in which the dynamics of feudalism depend upon the particular patterns of group alliance and contestation generated by these varied forms of extraction.

Feudal extraction is not only heterogeneous, but distinctly political. Neither attribute is peculiar to feudalism, of course, as extraction processes are often quite heterogeneous³⁴ and are normally mediated by the direct exercise of political power.³⁵ Feudal lords obtained surplus labor time by virtue of three distinct yet interpenetrating social positions they held: control of the process of production on the manorial demesne, claims on the produce of peasant holdings, and rights of feudal suzerainty. Corresponding to each was a distinct form of surplus: labor services, rents, and taxes, respectively. The relative contribution of these varied widely over time and space. In each of the lord's positions of power, moreover, his capacity to extract surpluses from producers depended upon the efficacy of his political organs, and their power in counterposition to those of peasant communities.

A portion of feudal production regularly occurred on the lord's demesne and under his direct administration. Control of the demesne was regularly supplemented by the lord's enjoyment of a monopoly of essential resources complementary to land (water, mills, and roads), and his preferred access to lines of transport and commerce. This aspect of feudal production corresponds to extraction of surpluses through the application of direct peasant labor services.

The level of labor services depended upon the extent of the lord's dominance within the political organization of manorial production. Indeed, the efficacy of this mechanism depended directly upon the contingent ability of the lord to control the demesnal production process. Historical evidence indicates that the lord's access to such forms of demesnal extraction was often, and for extended periods, significantly circumscribed by his inability to supervise and control the delegation of his powers. Postan, for instance, notes that "direct management . . . was easiest in periods when the legal and political regime was so stable and so well ordered that lords could easily exercise their control over their local officials."³⁶ In times of civil or international war, as well as during Crusades, the natural feudal movement was toward the expansion of individual holdings and stronger village organization of production.

Traditionally the extent of recourse to extraction through labor services is considered as dependent upon the degree of market penetration and monetization of economic relations, or the extent of labor scarcity in the feudal economy.³⁷ We agree with Robert Brenner, however, whose research has demonstrated the lack of correspondence between the commutation of labor services and either the degree of market penetration or population density. In defending the centrality of class struggle against the standard demographic and commercial theories of changes in the distribution of income in thirteenth- to fifteenth-century Europe, Brenner concludes that "it is the structure of class relations, of class power, which will determine the manner and degree to which particular demographic and commercial changes will affect long-run trends in the distribution of income and economic growth—and not *vice-versa*."³⁸ His conclusions hold as well, we believe, for the organization of production as for the resulting distribution of income.

The contribution to lordly income of the second form of feudal extraction, rents and dues on lands directly worked by the peasantry, was just as variable across time and space as that of labor services. Since independent peasant production represented the only feasible agrarian alternative to demesnal production in the feudal period, the above analysis implies that the extent of peasant production depended inversely upon the effective power of the lord at the apex of the political structure of manorial production. The level of rents, moreover, reflected in general the relative power of the lord's political and coercive apparatus in counterposition to the power of peasant communities.

The importance of the structured relations of power between lord and peasant is virtually ignored in most interpretations of the level of rents, which regularly refer to notions of "custom" and "subsistence" for their explanation.³⁹ Yet as Bloch stresses, "custom" in the cultural discourse of a feudalism which lacked a tradition of written law was in fact "one of the

most flexible [forms of law] ever known. . . . Because its efforts to imitate the past were inevitably based only on an inaccurate picture of it, the first feudal age changed very quickly and very profoundly."⁴⁰

Custom served two roles in the feudal period. First, it registered and ratified the resultant of class and other social forces through which the level of rents were determined. Second, the perceived violation of customary practices could serve to alter a given balance of social forces by increasing the solidarity and resolve of the injured parties. Thus the oft-noted "inertial" force of custom was itself quite consistently mediated by and dependent upon the socially structured distribution of power. The view that the level of rents was regulated by the subsistence needs of the peasantry is at variance with the observation of wide variations in peasant income over time. Moreover, it depends on the romantic fiction of the absolute power of the lord over his serfs. In the manorial system both tenure and feudal obligations were subject to strict regulation. Certainly the obligations of the lord to his tenants were not limited to that of free men alone. Bloch notes, for instance, "as a tenant the serf had exactly the same duties and the same rights as anyone else; his possession of his holding was no longer [in the Frankish period] precarious, and his labour, once rents and services had been paid, was his own."⁴¹

The condition is general. Vinogradoff cites many cases where the rights of the tenants are upheld by manorial courts.⁴² The reciprocal obligations of lord and tenant, in short, were subject to transformation over time according to the balance of class pressures. And as we shall stress later, the stronger the institutions of the sovereign state, and the greater the independent power of this state against the pressures of the landed elites, the more capable were peasant communities of protecting their interests.⁴³ The "custom of the manor" and its transformation over time is but an expression of this complex of political relations.

The third form of lordly extraction involved taxes, tallages, judicial levies, and related transfers. These levies represent *state extractions*, accruing to the lord by virtue of his position at the apex of the suzerain state, and involve seigneurial burdens imposed on serf and free peasantry alike. These transfers cannot be assimilated to property-based extractions, for the mechanisms governing their exaction were independent from conditions of land tenure.

Neither can their quantitative importance be minimized. Indeed, to quote Rodney Hilton's general observation regarding feudal England,

by the twelfth century, peasant surplus was transferred to the landed aristocracy less in the form of rent calculated on the size of the peasant hold, whether in labor, kind, or money, than in seigneurial taxation (tallage) and in the profits of jurisdiction. . . . The sum total . . . , it has

been calculated, considerably exceeded the previous landlord income which had been based on the yield from the demesnes and the rents from the holdings.⁴⁴

Succeeding centuries witnessed the reversal of this trend, and then its reappearance. Similar conditions held in many other regions of medieval Europe.⁴⁵

In addition many of the observed rental payments accruing to the lord were merely accounting mechanisms for the control of tax exactions, quite removed from a logic of property and production. Such, for instance, were the servile burdens associated with the use of the lord's oven, mill, and brewery.

If feudal production embodies the structured opposition of the lord's manorial administration and the village community, a parallel system of opposition is incorporated into legal and judicial actions themselves. In the words of Vinogradoff, "When the reeve and the four men attend the sheriff's tourn or the eyre, they do not represent the lord only, but also the village community. . . . Indeed, the rural settlement appears in our records as a 'juridical person.'"⁴⁶

Nor can this legal position be understood simply as imposing burdens upon the subject peasantry.

An action committed against the interests of the lord is not punished by any one-sided act of his will, or by the command of his steward. . . . The negligent ploughman . . . is presented as an offender by his fellow-peasants, and according to strict legal formality . . . the whole court with its free and unfree suitors participates materially in the administration of justice, and its office is extended to questions of law as well as to issues of fact.⁴⁷

This is of course not to say that lords always acted through legal channels, or the balance of "justice" was not predominantly on their side. Feudal legal forms do, however, exhibit a system of structured oppositions rendering the extractive capacity of the lord contingent upon the reproduction of an always problematic balance of power vis-à-vis the peasant community.

This discussion of feudal suzerainty and the agrarian economy does not exhaust the major relations of surplus extraction in the feudal social formation. We must deal in addition with the global interrelation among these units—in particular the competition among manors for labor services—and the position of the sovereign state.

As Brenner has emphasized, labor surpluses, while tending to augment the potential power of the landed classes, could be offset by strong peasant communities. On the other hand, labor shortages tended to re-

dound to the benefit of the dependent class. Thus in general, the feudal land/labor ratio must be taken as a *condition* affecting the balance of class forces.⁴⁸

But how is this condition of labor surplus/labor scarcity structurally integrated into feudalism? It is traditionally held that the legal binding of the peasant to the soil circumvents the forces of supply and demand.⁴⁹ Yet the fusion of feudal suzerainty and manorial production renders this mechanism ineffective. The fragmented nature of feudal suzerainty ensured, over the long term, a surrogate market in labor, in the dual sense that competition among manorial units could not be avoided, and the material dependence of a peasant producer on his particular lord could not be guaranteed.⁵⁰

Given the weakness of the sovereign state, the customary prohibitions upon peasant flight were structurally incapable of enforcement. "Every page of the documents," says Vinogradoff, "testifies to frequent migrations from the manors in opposition to the express will of the landowners. The surveys tell of serfs who settle on strange land even in the vicinity of their former home. It is by no means exceptional to find mention of enterprising landlords drawing away the population from their neighbors' manors."⁵¹ In the French case, Bloch agrees. "The departure of a serf was so little a crime against his condition that it was sometimes expressly catered for."⁵²

Indeed, Hilton notes that competition among landlords often lay at the basis of village enfranchisements,⁵³ frequently the central instrument of peasant power in contestation with the lord. The French situation was again in line with the English. "Once enfranchisement had been introduced into a given region it usually spread with great rapidity . . . because of seigneurial anxiety over the loss of tenants."⁵⁴

Thus while the feudal economy gives the *appearance* of "control by landlords over peasant mobility,"⁵⁵ and indeed whole theories have been developed on this basis,⁵⁶ reality was quite otherwise.⁵⁷

It may be argued that the poverty of the peasantry, together with the difficulties and dangers of travel, effectively ensured the laborer's attachment to the soil. No doubt this was an important consideration in the short run; but were it so over the long term, we would expect that the possession of tenants would itself represent a form of feudal wealth, as it appears to have in Russia, where estates were measured in "souls" rather than in hectares. While there were structural constraints against the marketing of landed wealth, these did not apply to serfs. Thus the lack of effective seigneurial control over servile mobility is suggested by the absence of a market in peasant dependents. "Serfs could be bought and sold legally," Vinogradoff reports, "but this occurred rarely (apart from

their tentaments). There was no 'market' in villains . . . it was all but impossible for the lord to treat his man as a transferable chattel."⁵⁸

As result of this structural weakness in the articulation of feudal state and feudal agrarian production, in times of labor shortage, the landlord class was impelled to significantly strengthen the sovereign state apparatus, preferring to vie with it for a share of the peasant surplus rather than face a general decline in the surplus itself.

As is well known, the sovereign state (the monarchy), while initially quite weak, gathered strength in the general course of social development in the feudal core of Europe and in time supplanted feudal suzerainty. Indeed we shall see that the decline of feudalism did not lead to the shift of social surplus to an emerging class, as the traditional Marxist view would expect, but rather facilitated the growth of the sovereign state apparatus. This growth in general did not benefit the landlord class, and as often as not served to undermine lordly power. At the same time, as Marxist interpretations have always stressed, the sovereign state throughout the feudal period held a central position in the reproduction of feudal class relations and the structure of surplus extraction.

But the sovereign state suffered a severe structural weakness in the feudal period: it lacked direct access to surpluses generated through agrarian production, and with few exceptions could tax the peasantry directly only insofar as its judicial and administrative power supplanted that of feudal suzerains. The latter, moreover, could be taxed in general only with their consent, and for purposes subject to their will.

The monarchy thus had a double interest in preserving the economic hegemony of the feudal lords. On the one hand, it was precisely as feudal overlord in his own right that the monarch could most conveniently tap the surpluses of peasant producers. On the other hand, its success in taxing the landlord class was predicated upon the latter's ability to extract surpluses from its dependents. While the global project of the sovereign state apparatus was the control of the landed nobility, the principle of limited sovereign extraction ensured that this project could be accomplished only within the framework of the continued domination of the landlord class over a subservient peasantry. The sovereign states, even as late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, lacked the administrative and military capacity adequately to control the dependent classes from which it drew its surpluses. Conversely, the aristocracy on balance had little interest in weakening the sovereign state, given the structural weaknesses of feudalism to which it was a response.

To increase its extractive power, however, it was clearly in the interest of dominant groups in the sovereign state apparatus to change the rules of the game. In administrative terms this involved expanding the

jurisdiction of royal courts. In economic terms it involved protecting and fostering the development of alienable private property, and promoting commercial relations in urban and international spheres as a secure basis of taxation outside the sphere of feudal relations.

The organic relationship of trade centers to the feudal system is well expressed by Perry Anderson. "Feudalism as a mode of production," he argues, ". . . was the first in history to render possible a dynamic *opposition* between town and country; the parcellization of sovereignty inherent in its structure permitted autonomous urban enclaves to grow as centres of production within an overwhelmingly rural economy, rather than as privileged or parasitic centres of consumption or administration."⁵⁹

Parcellized sovereignty, however, permitted nothing of the kind. Towns were chartered and protected by sovereigns or strong regional princes, and where this process was for one reason or another circumvented, the towns either attained hegemony over the rural areas, thus undermining the feudal dynamic (as in parts of Italy, Germany, and the Low Countries), or they were strangled by predatory lords (as in East Elbian Europe).

The crown's role in creating and protecting international trade routes, sheltering commercial capital from the predation of feudal lords, and ensuring a flow of exportable goods paralleled its role in fostering the autonomy of cities. Thus even in the earliest period of sovereign state development, there was an objective conflation of interests between commercial, urban, and trade interests on the one hand, and the sovereign state on the other. This conflation was to be characteristic of the whole period of European state development.

The mutual attraction of sovereignty and commerce may be traced to two interrelated sources. First, the exigencies of surplus extraction through taxation led monarchies to prefer private property to feudal seisin, and hence Roman to feudal law.⁶⁰ Thus the institution of alienable property was consolidated well *before* the transition to capitalism. Similarly, the possibility of a flexible administration and collection of tax revenue is predicated upon a sufficiently widespread system of generalized exchange. In the words of Gabriel Ardant, "an analysis of the system of taxation in contemporary times as well as in the past shows that *tax collection and assessment are indissolubly linked to an exchange economy*."⁶¹

Second, through the selective control of market relations, the state could gain from the granting of trade monopolies, in a manner quite out of the reach of decentralized feudal suzerainties. The feudal lord not only lacked the military power to control urban communities; he also could not prevent traders from moving their activities outside his jurisdiction. In this sense the mobility of trade as well as labor represented an insupera-

ble structural weakness of the feudal social formation to which the sovereign state was considerably immune. Thus in the absolutist period not only were towns chartered and protected by royal sanction, but a direct link between crown and artisanal producers was created through the granting of guild privileges and the regulation of pricing and production.⁶² This royal strategy was supplemented by granting controlled access to international markets and domestic natural resources, rendering mercantilist economic policy a central tool of surplus extraction.⁶³

Fernand Braudel has often stressed that the extension of commercial relations is a consequence (and in turn a cause) of the consolidation of the sovereign state. Even the Marxist historian Georges Lefebvre has noted that "the merchant community and the State furnished each other with mutual assistance: the former as creditor and supplier of public contracts . . . the latter as distributor of privileges, prizes, monopolies. . . . it is impossible to deny that the collusion between commerce and the State promoted the development of capitalism."⁶⁴

Yet generally this central point is ignored. Accounts of the rise of commercial forces generally attribute their growth either to *exogenous* shocks, or to relations *endogenous* to the feudal economy.⁶⁵ The notion of a social formation as an articulation of distinct forms of surplus extraction affords an explanation of this phenomenon both theoretically coherent and in better harmony with the historical evidence.

The Decline of Feudalism in Europe

Feudalism is an articulation of state and economy. Its transformation must then involve a qualitative change in one or more of the following: the structure of the state, the structure of the economy, and the characteristic articulation of the two. The changes in each of these three spheres accompanying the transformation of the feudal core of Europe in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries may be outlined as follows.

The major changes in economic organization included (a) the withdrawal of the landed classes from the production process, and their transformation into a rentier class; (b) the rise of independent petty commodity producers in the agrarian sector, often technically dynamic and linked by commercial ties; (c) the growth of merchant capital engaged in vigorously expanding maritime trade; and (d) the integration of urban and commercial elites into the system of land ownership and agricultural production for profit. The old feudal aristocracy persisted throughout the period, but was pressed on all sides by an economically resurgent peasantry and a buoyant commercial class eager to usurp the cultural accoutrements of nobility.

In the state sphere, the key changes included (a) a shift in the monop-

oly of the means of coercion to the sovereign state, and a corresponding decline in the military role of the feudal lords; (b) the transformation of the sovereign state into a *direct* extractor of surplus, its juridical and administrative arms reaching to the very base of the dependent producing classes; and (c) its increased potential to behave as an *independent actor* vis-à-vis social classes in the political and distributional struggles of the age.⁶⁶

The major development in the articulation of state and economy in this period involved the dissolution of the fusion of suzerain state and manorial economy characteristic of fully developed feudalism: feudal suzerainty became dissociated from agrarian production per se, and the financing of the sovereign state was separated from the feudal exploitation of a dependent peasantry.

The effect was by no means the laissez-faire articulation idealized in the nineteenth century, but rather what might be termed a "mercantile" articulation: the state closely regulated trade and market-oriented production, while allying with the rising commercial classes by protecting their sources of supply, offering monopolies over the exploitation of natural resources and subject colonies, and guaranteeing the safety of trade routes and access to foreign markets. The newly empowered sovereign state protected its basic source of social surplus, the dependent peasantry, from excessive feudal exploitation through the juridical arm of its administrative apparatus. Finally the feudal aristocracy was increasingly integrated into the military arm of the state apparatus.

The emerging social formation was neither capitalist nor feudal, and is rather characterized by an alliance of commercial interests and the absolute state within the framework of an economic system in which the landed aristocracy, however weakened, remained dominant. Its appellation as "state commercialism" is thus apt.

Why the feudal dissolution? The critical development in the feudal decline, according to our account, was the growing capacity of state elites to gain control of a sizable surplus product, and the superior military and administrative capacities of the sovereign state apparatus thereby made possible.⁶⁷ This view may be contrasted both with the traditional Marxist view which—in one or more ways—sees the feudal demise as an effect of economic developments, relatively narrowly defined, and with the equally common view which postpones the demise of feudalism to the eve of the French Revolution, defining the relevant dynamics as a "transition from feudalism to capitalism."

Marx and Engels, in the *Communist Manifesto* and the *German Ideology*, treat the feudal transition as a process of endogenously developing forces of production recasting the social relations of production into a pattern more conducive to their efficient application, through the medi-

um of class struggle. This explanation has been questioned by modern authors.⁶⁸ For one thing, the collapse of classical feudalism in the fourteenth century involved the exhaustion of old, rather than the pressure of new forces of production.⁶⁹ For another, neither the peasantry nor the commercial classes held a position of economic dominance in the succeeding period.

Another account, the "production for use" theory of feudalism, has been put forward by Paul Sweezy in his notable exchange with Maurice Dobb. According to this view the development of commercial relations outside the nexus of feudal relations acted as "solvents" to feudal relations, revealing the inefficiency of manorial production, and creating a class whose ultimate opposition to feudal hegemony was to be decisive.

However, the development of market relations as often as not involved the *tightening* or even the *imposition* of feudal ties (in Poland, Prussia, Russia, parts of England and France).⁷⁰ Hilton's treatment of feudal England is on this point quite in agreement with Brenner's comparative analysis. Merchant capital, notes Hilton, "was never applied either to agricultural or industrial production in any innovative fashion. The so-called commercial revolution in no way altered the feudal model of production. . . . If anything, it was the declining cash incomes of the feudal aristocracy which was the first symptom of the end of the feudal mode of production."⁷¹

This debate over the transition from feudalism is the backdrop for Perry Anderson's erudite and insightful *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*. Anderson accounts for the commercial character of the succeeding period by abandoning the attempt to capture the specificity of feudal dynamics in terms of an ideal-type feudal mode of production in favor of viewing feudalism as a spatially diverse social formation, the complementary structure of its various parts interacting to produce the conditions for the development and eventual dissolution of the whole, its laws of motion "governed by a complex unity of its different regions, not by any simple predominance of the manor."⁷²

Following Marx's discussion in the *Grundrisse*, Anderson locates the specific character of European feudalism in its birth as a synthesis of Germanic and Roman elements. "The catastrophic collision of two dissolving anterior modes of production—primitive and ancient," he observes, "eventually produced the feudal order which spread throughout medieval Europe."⁷³ Central to the dynamic tension of feudal Europe, he asserts, were the distinct proportions according to which these two elements were combined as we pass from northern to central, and then to southern Europe. The northern variant, always close to the Germanic gentile organization, received a weak contribution from the ancient Roman Empire. Serfdom was weak, seigniorial justice unknown, and the

monarchy always remained feeble. By contrast the southern variant, in Italy and surrounding regions, retained its urban civilization and municipal political organization, and preserved its universalistically minded ecclesiastical power. Only in the central region did a "balanced" fusion of these modes of production produce the classical feudal order.

The tension among the variants in the feudal synthesis accounts both for its development and later for its specific capacity to generate capitalist activity. The Roman contribution to the feudal social formation, embodied in the "southern variant," served as a uniquely corrosive agent in the dissolution of feudal particularism. Roman law and administration provided the concept of private property and the raw material for mercantile practice in the towns. But of greatest importance,

politically, the revival of Roman law corresponded to the constitutional exigencies of the reorganized feudal States of the epoch. . . . the *primary* determinant of the adoption of Roman jurisprudence lay in the drive of royal governments for increased central powers. . . . The juridically unconditional character of private property . . . found its counterpart in the formally absolute nature of the imperial sovereignty.⁷⁴

Anderson's is a sophisticated attempt to come to grips with the anomalies generated in the traditional Marxist theory of modes of production confronted with the complexities of feudalism. He allows the form of state to materially affect the logic of development of the social formation as a whole while broadening the concept of feudalism to include the period from the Black Death to the industrial revolution, through his treatment of the feudal economy as a dynamic opposition between manorial and urban social relations of production.

Anderson thus solves the "transition problem" by denying the existence of any such transition in the period under consideration. Trade relations being integral to feudalism, the rise of commerce defines no fundamentally novel element in the later period. Moreover, he suggests that no fundamental change in economic relations occurred.

so long as aristocratic agrarian property blocked a free market in land and factual mobility of manpower—in other words, as long as labor was not separated from the social conditions of its existence to become "labour-power"—rural relations of production remained feudal.⁷⁵

Finally, despite extensive changes in state forms, the landed class remained dominant. "The nobility underwent profound metamorphoses in the centuries after the close of the Middle Ages; but from the beginning to the end of the history of Absolutism, it was never dislodged from its command of political power."⁷⁶

Yet neither of these assessments can go unquestioned. On the one hand, a developed market in land was well established in many parts of Europe by the fifteenth century, although with some restrictions on ownership. Moreover, we cannot accept the economic relations of the period as "feudal" merely because they are not "capitalist." On the other hand, dislodgment of the nobility is precisely what often transpired. Beginning in the thirteenth century, the process of consolidation of sovereignty proceeded rapidly in several regions, stalled through the cataclysmic economic downturn of the fourteenth century, and regained its pace in the mid-fifteenth. Having abandoned by this time the effort to contain the direct extractive capacity of the sovereign state, the landed classes throughout fought to control taxation through representative bodies. This battle was generally unsuccessful in western Europe, the low point coming in the seventeenth century.

Anderson is of course well aware of this movement; indeed much of *Lineages* is devoted to its chronicles. His interpretation, however, is quite different, "Feudal coercion was displaced upwards, to a centralized monarchy; and the aristocracy typically had to exchange its estates representation for bureaucratic office, within the renovated structures of the state."⁷⁷

The aristocracy was indeed successful in insinuating itself into positions of power within the state apparatus—administration, military, and tax farming. Such a move, from a system perspective, involves a transformation in the structure of exploitation. Anderson conflates one of the structural characteristics of a system (which *did* change) with the patterns of recruitment into elite positions (which did not). The resulting system dynamics will thus be distinct, even if the individual or family recipients of the surplus in some sense remain the same. The relative success of the aristocracy in insinuating itself into the state apparatus no doubt partly explains its continued social eminence, but it cannot be interpreted as evidence of the sovereign state as an instrument of feudal class rule.

Moreover, this success was anything but complete. Venality in its various forms certainly reduced the power of the state to move confidently against aristocratic interests, and limited its overall effectiveness in achieving its own projects.⁷⁸ But these projects were never determined by state functionaries, and monarchs often succeeded in staffing positions of highest power with individuals not beholden to indigenous aristocratic interests.⁷⁹

Compared with structural aspects of the emerging social order, such as the extent to which the aristocracy was transformed into a commercial agrarian class and the character of the renovated military apparatus, the form of state recruitment was of relatively limited importance. This fact can be gleaned from the pattern of "constitutional" and "absolute" states

in the sixteenth and later centuries. The constitutional states (e.g., England, Holland) remained substantively beholden to their leading classes, and relied on taxation only with their consent, while the absolute states (France, Spain, the German principalities) did not. In addition, the constitutional states depended on naval rather than land-based military power. In both cases the leading classes were inserted into the military apparatus, but the land-based powers clearly possessed a superior coercive arm in their dealings with local feudal forces.⁸⁰

Anderson is thus correct in his critique of theories of the rise of the absolute state as either capitalist or a mediator between aristocratic and capitalist interests, "the Absolute State was never an arbiter between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, still less an instrument of the nascent bourgeoisie against the aristocracy."⁸¹ However, he concludes from the fact that the growth of the sovereign state was a condition of existence of the aristocracy in this later period, that it therefore must be a functional instrument toward its reproduction: "Absolutism is just this: *a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination*, designed to clamp the peasant masses back into their traditional social position. . . . it was the new political carapace of a threatened nobility."⁸²

There are several problems with this argument. First, if the fundamental form of surplus extraction is no longer feudal, the state cannot be considered an agent of feudal reproduction, whatever its role in sustaining the preeminence of aristocratic families. Second, even the validity of this account of the origins of the sovereign state would not imply that emergent state power need remain securely within the orbit of aristocratic power. Whether accepted by the landed classes to offset internecine rivalries, to combat external threat, to counter the power of a nascent bourgeoisie, or to more effectively suppress an increasingly restive peasantry, the sovereign state acquired a life of its own. Thus Brustein and Hechter note:

Once the state gained power at the expense of its constituents it was free to pursue its own interests, subject, as always, to existing constraints. At first the modern state enacted policies on behalf of the landed aristocracy. . . . But gradually thereafter, modern western European history tells the story of how the state slowly deprived the landed aristocracy of its prerogatives.⁸³

In addition, it is misleading to say that a centralized state was needed as a more efficient instrument of peasant repression because the first period of sovereign state formation occurred in the thirteenth century prior to the major peasant uprisings.⁸⁴ Moreover, the peasant movements of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—which occurred predominantly

in regions of strong state formation (southeastern England, the Paris basin, Flanders, Lombardy, the Rhine basin, Catalonia) were *reactions* to royal taxation, and did not persist into the later, and stronger, period of state formation.⁸⁵ It would have taken a quite socially aware aristocracy to continue to promote the consolidation of royal power over centuries during which the peasantry was not only relatively quiescent but, when provoked, directed its ire more frequently against the tax collector than the landlord.

Anderson's explanation, moreover, obscures the central weakness of the feudal social formation: its inability, after the atrophy of its protective military function, to control the extraction of surpluses under conditions of labor shortage. The sovereign state, in point of fact, possessed the global means of surplus extraction to a degree never attainable by the decentralized manorial system.

The explanation of the absolute state's emergence as a functional response to the new requirements for the reproduction of feudal exploitation after the fourteenth century thus fails. The structural weakness of the feudal articulation of state and economy, together with the superior extractive capacity of the sovereign state and its heightened effectiveness as a military machine in the context of the emerging nation-state organization of Europe are all comprehensible within the conception of the social formation as an articulation of sites of domination. The emergence of the absolute state does represent a transition involving a new logic of social contestation, but it is not reasonable to treat the "transitional" period as feudal, even within an extended conception of the term.

The State Commercial Social Formation

In this section we will outline the dynamic of the state commercial social formation, limiting ourselves to a discussion of the forms of social contestation generated by this social formation by virtue of its particular structure of exploitation and domination.

First, the break in the fusion of suzerain state and manorial economy effectively withdrew from the hands of the landlord class its traditional means of ensuring the reproduction of its position of social dominance. The first step in this direction was the commutation of services, which deprived the lord of political leadership at the site of feudal production. The refusal of traditional Marxist theory to recognize a political structure *within* the site of production has led to a general underestimation of the importance of this change. But as Bloch has noted, through commutation

the lord had abdicated from his position as head of a large agrarian and

semi-industrial undertaking. . . . Politically speaking, the lord was still a leader to his men, he remained their military commander, their judge, their born protector. But his economic leadership had gone—and all the rest could easily follow. He had become a “stockholder” in the soil.⁸⁶

But the development of sovereign power proceeded then to increasingly restrict the military and juridical functions of the lords as well. By the sixteenth century in France, while the greater part of lordly income derived from juridical fees, Bloch indicates that the scope of seigneurial political power had been severely circumscribed.

seigneurial justice now had a formidable rival in public justice, dispensed whether by the courts of the great principalities or by those of the crown. . . . A large number of cases were removed from the seigneurial courts altogether. . . . lastly, it was now possible to appeal against their judgments.⁸⁷

As a result of this derogation of direct political power of the landed classes, the new social formation supported a qualitatively distinct relationship of state to aristocracy—a curious admixture of mutual support and bitter hostility. Unable to dispense with sovereign rule, in this new period the traditional landed classes fought for the *representative control of and participation in* the state rather than for its dissolution. Indeed, the very concept of representative government was a product of the political project of the traditional nobility of this period.

The position of the state, however, was far more complex, and involved its playing class forces against one another toward consolidating its extractive capacity. Charles Tilly summarizes the situation as follows.

The state-makers only imposed their will on the populace through centuries of effort. . . . In all these efforts . . . the state-makers frequently found the traditional authorities allied with the people against them. Thus it became a game of shifting coalitions, kings rallying popular support by offering guarantees against cruel and arbitrary local magnates or by challenging their claims to goods, money, or services. . . . magnates parading as defenders of local liberties against royal oppression. . . . Ultimately the people paid.⁸⁸

From Catalonia and Castile in the fifteenth century right up to the French Revolution, this dynamic held a central position in European state development.

A particularly striking confirmation of this novel dynamic of surplus extraction lies in a widespread stance taken by the absolute state vis-à-vis the peasantry in this period—a stance involving the *protection* of the peasantry against lordly extraction. Were the state merely an instrument

of aristocratic economic dominance, we would expect diametrically opposed behavior. However, over the protests of the nobility, the sovereign state often acted to promote village enfranchisements,⁸⁹ and often the royal courts promoted structural changes in rural land ownership which was to make the French peasantry among the most independent in Europe.

the slow-moving advance of French royal justice . . . by a curious historical paradox . . . had proved more beneficial to the peasantry than the daring innovation carried through by the Norman and Angevin kings of England. . . . It was fortunate for the French peasant that although the landlords had captured the judiciary . . . the victory of absolute monarchy kept the "feudal reaction" within bounds.⁹⁰

The German princes applied the same strategy (*Bauernschutz*) from the thirteenth century onward, and the English state was prevented from doing so only by virtue of its relatively complete dependence on the smaller landlords in its drive for administrative and juridical centralization.⁹¹

It has often been noted that areas of peasant resistance⁹² and village power⁹³ have tended to coincide with regions of strong towns independent from feudal control. It is possible that the activity of the state rather than the proximity of towns accounts for the increased power of the peasantry in its struggles against feudal exaction in this period. However, a more compelling explanation of the observed correspondence is simply that *both* powerful peasant communities *and* strong independent towns were promoted by a dynamic sovereign state, the extractive efforts of which included the strengthening of these sources of surplus at the expense of the feudal suzerainty. This may indeed have been the case in eastern Europe, Sweden, and England; the general proposition will require a more detailed comparative study than we have either the space or the expertise to undertake.

Yet clearly the sovereign state protected the peasantry only the better to exploit it. A dramatic indication of the centrality of the state in surplus extraction lies in the fact that virtually *all* the major peasant uprisings in the state commercial period were directed in the first instance not against the landlord, but against the tax collector. In the English case, highlighted by the great peasant revolt of 1381, Hilton's *Bond Men Made Free* makes this point quite clear.

Already towards the end of May 1381, villagers in Essex were resisting the attempts of tax-collectors. . . . general hatred [was] felt by the peasants and artisans for all the king's advisors. . . . The morning of Corpus Christi was spent by the rebels pursuing their London enemies, of

whom the most important were the lawyers and others connected with the judicial system.⁹⁴

Hilton is thus led to call this greatest of English peasant uprisings an "anti-tax riot" (p. 151). Nor, according to Hilton, is this phenomenon limited to England.

It was the imposition of the indemnity tax by the king of France . . . which pushed the self-assertive, unservile peasants and artisans in the maritime districts of Flanders into rebellion; it was the requisition for the victualling of the castles of the nobility in the region of Paris . . . which provoked the Jacquerie in 1358; it was the insolent taxation imposed by the king's lieutenant . . . which began the . . . Jacquerie of the Tuchins.⁹⁵

It is important to add that both fourteenth- and sixteenth-century peasant revolts occurred in periods of *falling* lordly incomes, though *rising* taxes.⁹⁶

Perhaps the most critical of the new dynamics of surplus extraction in the state commercial social formation—certainly concerning its contribution to the subsequent emergence of capitalism—lay in the heightened importance of the symbiotic relationship between sovereign state and commercial forces to which it gave rise, and through which prodigious surpluses were extracted. The state in this period pursued imperial policies through the logic of its own interests, and promoted commercial capital as an aspect of consolidating its position as an extractor of surpluses; the fortunes of commercial capital thus become complementary to the aggrandizement of the sovereign state.

It may be argued, however, that the most vibrant and progressive commercial regions lay *outside* the core areas of state consolidation, in the Italian peninsula and the Low Countries. Certainly this is the case in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but this fact does not contradict the notion that the general ascendancy of commercial capitalism was in large part the product of the extraction strategies of sovereign state consolidation. The decline of Italian trade hegemony, coincident with the shift from Mediterranean to overseas trade routes, was a precondition of the rise of the Atlantic states, and there is no reason to believe that Holland and the other northern trading areas would not have been swallowed up or marginalized, as prior loci of trade had been, had feudal Europe followed a different logic of social development. The attempts of Charles V and Phillip II to mulct these regions in the interests of consolidation of the empire ultimately failed,⁹⁷ but the position of the northern trade areas was tenuous at best.

Moreover, a good deal of the resilience of the independent trading

states was derived from their intimate ties with the new monarchies, whose wars and administrative expenses they underwrote in return for access to exploitable trade routes and natural resources.⁹⁸ Ultimately, however, the new sovereign states begrudged their dependence upon the foreign traders, and made every effort to supplant them with domestic commercial interests that could be rendered more accessible to state policy. This effort was, of course, ultimately successful.

Conclusion

In our approach to the period, feudal development is explained by the contradictory articulation of feudal social structures. While conserving the Marxist notion of the centrality of the mechanisms of surplus extraction and their contestation, our analysis stresses the complexity and contradictory nature of these mechanisms.

The attractions of this analysis, we believe, are manifold. It permits a clear differentiation of feudalism from other forms of precapitalist agrarian rent extraction exhibiting quite different social dynamics, and explains the bitter struggles among dominant groups in feudal society, the shifting sources of their revenues, and the heterogeneous character of peasant rebellions, in a manner not available to a theory which treats all exploitation as a reflection or redirection of property-based surplus extraction.

The conception of feudalism as a contradictory totality also clearly poses the question of the structural weaknesses of the feudal system. While these weaknesses are in part explicable in purely economic terms, key aspects can be understood only in terms of the inability of feudal suzerainty, as a form of state, to secure lordly control over labor services in a period of labor scarcity and increased mobility, and to exploit the expanding scope of surplus transfer through the establishment of commercial trade routes. By virtue of these weaknesses, the manorial system proved unable to compete with more favorably placed forms of surplus extraction—especially with the sovereign state in league with commercial capital. The future of feudal social formations depended in no small part on the outcome of these structural contradictions.

The concept of feudalism as a particular state-economy relationship allows for a wider range of alternatives in formulating the structural changes involved in the transition process. The proposition that the disintegration of feudalism involved the breakdown of the fusion of feudal suzerainty and manorial production in the face of the increased power (often in alliance) of both sovereign state, village community, and free-holding peasantry is impossible in a conception of the transition as an "economic" process.

Finally, our stress upon the state as a constitutive part of the social

formation renders comprehensible the nature of the postfeudal social formation. The key to the period, which we have referred to as "state commercialism," was the position of the absolute state as the linchpin of a complex set of class alliances and antagonisms, involving peasantry, aristocracy, commercial capital, and urban production. The "problem" of the transition from feudalism to capitalism is thus easily resolved: there was none.

Despite its sophistication, the contemporary Marxist theory of the state has failed to question the most critical of the founding assumptions of classical Marxism: the conception of the state as an effect or reflection of class relationships. The ultimate subordination of the state is thus taken for granted, and the research project (whether historical or theoretical) is conceived as a quest for the precise social mechanisms by means of which this subordinate status is stabilized and reproduced. We consider this aspect of Marxism an unwarranted functionalism. The feudal state, while continually engaged in the reproduction of feudal class relations, at the same time was so situated as to undermine these very relations. Functional theory cannot conceive how structurally articulated sites, each of which contains within it the conditions of existence of the other, can serve ultimately as their mutual conditions of destruction. The secret, we believe, lies in the capacity of social struggles to transform the characteristic articulation of sites.

Thus in the case of feudalism the sovereign state, in the persons of the monarch and his administrative and military hierarchy, safeguarded the position of the landed classes over the dependent producers, while attempting to gain direct access to producer surpluses through the capacity of direct tax exactions. The landed classes, by contrast, sought in general to maintain the power of the sovereign state vis-à-vis its external enemies and usurpers among its ranks, yet limit and contain its direct access to producer surpluses. The history and ultimate demise of feudalism consists in part of the playing out of these forces.

NOTES

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1. See Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Claus Offe, *Strukturprobleme des kapitalistischen Staates* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972); Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1978).
2. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "Structure and Practice in the Labor Theory of Value," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 12, no. 4 (Winter,

- 1981): 1-26; "The Crisis of Liberal Democratic Capitalism," *Politics and Society*, 11, no. 1 (Winter, 1982): 51-93.
3. Thus while we are in complete agreement with the careful attention given to the concept of the economic surplus in Kula's seminal work, we depart considerably from his analysis, which focuses almost entirely on "relations among economic subjects" and which by defining feudalism broadly as an economic system (without reference to state structures) extends the concept of feudalism to virtually any exploitative rent-based society: "Feudalism . . . is in a certain sense a universal fact: in one form or another every society which has left the stage of primitive communism has known it." See Witold Kula, *Teoria Ekonomiczna del Sistema Feudale: Proposta di un Modello* (Torino: Einaudi editore, 1970; Warszawa, 1962), p. 6 [translation ours].
 4. Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); John Hicks, *A Theory of Economic History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).
 5. For a general critique of this approach, we refer the interested reader to Alexander J. Field, "The Problem with Neoclassical Institutional Economics: A Critique with Special Reference to the North-Thomas Model of pre-1500 Europe," in *Explorations in Economic History* 18 (1981): 174-91. The North-Thomas interpretation is in many respects close to the Marxist model directly critiqued in this essay. Both explain the feudal decline by relying on a notion of institutional change driven by the tendency of productive forces to overcome institutional inertia. They differ in that North and Thomas offer a theory of institutional accommodation and Marx a theory of class struggle and revolution as the means whereby such change is affected.
 6. This fusion of course contrasts with ancient, capitalist, and other societies in which there is a formal *separation* between state and economy, in terms both of institutional interpenetration and the staffing of positions of power.
 7. F. L. Ganshof, *Feudalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. xvi.
 8. Rodney Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 30.
 9. Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 35.
 10. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 401.
 11. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 404.
 12. Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936); Paul Sweezy, "A Critique," in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. Rodney Hilton (London: New Left Books, 1976), pp. 33-56.
 13. Dobb, *Studies*, p. 78.
 14. A. B. Hibbert, "The Origins of the Medieval Town Patriciate," in *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology*, ed. Philip Abrams and E. A. Wrigley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 91-104. See also Susan Reynolds, *English Medieval Towns* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

15. Hilton, *Transition*, p. 111.
16. V. G. Kiernan, "Foreign Mercenaries and Absolute Monarchy," *Past and Present* 11 (April, 1957): 66-87; Otto Hintze, *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Anderson, *Lineages*.
17. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 28.
18. V. G. Kiernan, "State and Nation in Western Europe," *Past and Present* 31 (July, 1965): 24.
19. Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 151.
20. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 46.
21. H. Mitteis, *The State in the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co., 1975); Anderson, *Passages*; Marc Bloch, *French Rural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).
22. Paul Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1923), p. 130.
23. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, p. 70.
24. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, chap. 2. See also Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).
25. Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe," *Past and Present* 70 (February, 1976): 35.
26. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure," p. 56.
27. M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. 120.
28. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, pp. 212-13.
29. Bloch, *French Rural History*, pp. 46-56.
30. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, p. 230.
31. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, p. 277.
32. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure"; Michael Hechter and William Brustein, "Regional Modes of Production and Patterns of State Formation in Western Europe," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 5 (March, 1980): 1086.
33. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, p. 952.
34. Jeanne Koopman Henn, *Peasants, Workers, and Capital: The Political Economy of Labor and Incomes in Cameroon* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1978).
35. Bowles and Gintis, "Structure and Practice in the Labor Theory of Value."
36. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, p. 96.
37. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*; Dobb, *Studies*; Paul Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1946).
38. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure," p. 31. See also Hilton's insightful summary of the fourteenth-century English case, in *Transition*, p. 25.
39. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Dobb, *Studies*; Sweezy, "A Critique."
40. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 1:113-14.
41. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 1:263.
42. See, for example, *Villainage*, pp. 80-81.

43. Bloch, *French Rural History*, chap. 4; *Feudal Society*, chap. 19.
44. Hilton, *Transition*, p. 17. Hilton's description, we should note, does not hold for the following century, when expansion of the demesne resumed.
45. See, for example, Bloch, *French Rural History*, chap. 3.
46. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, pp. 358–59, 368.
47. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, p. 378.
48. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), vol. 1, chap. 33.
49. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure"; Evsey D. Domar, "The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom: A Hypothesis," *Journal of Economic History* 30, no. 1 (March, 1970): 18–32.
50. By this we do not mean that the wage—the "price of labor power"—is market determined. This is no more true for capitalism (cf. Bowles and Gintis, "Structure and Practice in the Labor Theory of Value") than it is for feudalism.
51. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, p. 158.
52. Bloch, *French Rural History*, p. 87.
53. Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (London: Methuen and Co., 1973), p. 74.
54. Bloch, *French Rural History*, p. 111.
55. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure," p. 35.
56. Domar, "Causes of Slavery or Serfdom."
57. See J. A. Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility: Studies in the Social History of the Medieval English Village* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1964), and for an overview on the mobility question Alan MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
58. Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, pp. 151–52.
59. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 422.
60. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 27.
61. Gabriel Ardant, "Financial Policy and Economic Infrastructure of Modern States and Nations," in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
62. Harry A. Miskimin, *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe, 1300–1460* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 107ff.
63. Eli Heckscher, *Mercantilism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955).
64. In *Transition*, ed. Hilton, p. 125.
65. See Hilton, *Transition*, and Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
66. By "independent" we mean "irreducible to other social actors or structures." Clearly this is compatible with the state's being significantly influenced by such actors.
67. This approach to the development of the early modern state was proposed by Charles Tilly in *The Formation of National States*.
68. Cf. Hilton, *Transition*, and references therein.
69. Dobb, *Studies*; Anderson, *Lineages*.

70. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure." Surprisingly similar issues arise in the interpretation of eighteenth-century France as a "feudal" period. See Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), and Frank A. Kafker and James M. Laux, *The French Revolution: Conflicting Interpretations* (New York: Random House, 1976).
71. *Transition*, pp. 23–24. Anderson also cites studies showing that the decline in seigneurial incomes, due to declining terms of trade between industry and agriculture, preceded the Black Death in France, and precipitated bitter interaristocratic rivalries. See *Passages*, pp. 200ff.
72. Anderson, *Passages*, p. 151.
73. Anderson, *Passages*, p. 128.
74. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 27.
75. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 17.
76. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 18.
77. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 429.
78. Franklin L. Ford, *Robe and Sword: The Regrouping of the French Aristocracy after Louis XIV* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).
79. For a contrasting view, see J. F. Bosher, *French Finances: 1770–1795* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), and Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
80. Cf. the discussion in Michael Mann, "State and Society, 1130–1815: An Analysis of English State Finances," in *Political Power and Social Theory*, ed. Maurice Zeitlin (Greenwich, Conn.: Jai Press, 1980).
81. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 18.
82. Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 18.
83. Hechter and Brustein, "Regional Modes of Production," p. 1086.
84. Joseph Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pt. 2, pp. 57ff.
85. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*.
86. Bloch, *French Rural History*, pp. 100–101. For a similar judgment on the part of Vinogradoff, see his discussion in *Villainage*, p. 182.
87. Bloch, *French Rural History*, p. 103.
88. Tilly, *The Formation of National States*, p. 24.
89. Bloch, *French Rural History*, p. 109.
90. Bloch, *French Rural History*, pp. 129, 134.
91. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure"; Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*.
92. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*.
93. Hechter and Brustein, "Regional Modes of Production."
94. Pp. 138, 145.
95. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, pp. 114–15.
96. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, p. 153. We might add that the relative success of the English landlords in curbing royal extraction meant that Kett's Re-

bellion and other uprisings of the sixteenth century were more clearly directed against the landlord than in other areas of Europe.

97. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pt 4, sect. 1.
98. Violet Barbour, *Capitalism in Amsterdam in the 17th Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), chap. 6.