

Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism- A Debate

- One of the most lively debate in recent times relate to the question of what led to the decline of feudalism and the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. This controversy began with the publication of Maurice Dobb's stimulating work '*Studies in the Development of Capitalism*', after the Second World War. Another Marxist Scholar Paul Sweezy challenged the thesis of Dobb. Later the debate drew attention of many Marxist and non-Marxist scholars.
- The first major explanation provided by for the decline of feudalism, is generally described as the '**property-relations' perspective or the 'inner-contradiction model'**'. Dobb defines feudalism as a system of self-sufficient natural economy. According to him, feudalism is a system under which economic status and authority are associated with land tenure and according to law and customary right and the direct producer is under obligation to provide a certain portion of the produce or his labour to his superior. The economic demands of an overlord placed upon the producer could take the form of services or dues, in money or in kind or in the form of gifts.

- The production is generally for the immediate needs of the household or for the village community and not for the wider market. According to Dobb and many others like Rodney Hilton, K Takahashi, it is the internal relationship of the feudal mode of production that determines the system's disintegration or its survival. Evidence indicates that it was the inefficiency and incapability of feudalism as a mode of production that failed to satisfy the material demands placed upon it and the growing need of the ruling class for enhanced revenue that was primarily responsible for its decline. The low and the stationary state of labour productivity and hardly any margin from which surplus product could be extracted, makes the system inefficient. The absence of technology, low productivity of the manorial economy, the attempts by lords to augment taxes, an increased need of revenue for wars, brigandage and crusades, and the extravagances of the nobles through costly displays and lavish feasts all combined to act as a special drain on feudal revenues and this pushed feudalism towards a crisis.

- The response of feudal nobility to the feudal crisis varied in different parts of Europe. In some parts like France, the lords were forced to give concessions to attract or retain labour. This meant mitigation of servile burdens and at the same time, substitution of contractual relationship with money payment. Elsewhere, the feudal response was in the form of tightening of feudal burdens and the adoption of firm measures of attachment of serfs to feudal estates, re-imposition of servile obligations, as it happened in Eastern Europe.
- Dobb describes the period beginning with the emergence of feudal crisis in the late-fifteenth century, till the triumph of capitalism associated with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, as the period of transition.
- Rodney Hilton lends support to the 'property-relations' perspective of Dobb. He suggests that the fundamental law of feudal society was the tendency of the exploiting class to realize the maximum rent from the labour of the direct producers. This conflicted with the necessities of social growth resulted in contradiction within the exploiting class itself. The members of this class tried to increase the feudal rent in order to maintain and improve their position and began competing with others to establish their domination. Thus it was the struggle for power and land-control that ignited the crisis in which feudal rent became the prime mover.

- **The Market centric explanation:** Paul Sweezy and Immanuel Wallerstein bring out the role of market and exchange economy in the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. The 'exchange relations perspective' of Sweezy defines capitalism as a system of production for profit through market exchange that depends on an international trade-based division of labour. He argues that since feudal society was a system of production use, there existed no internal dynamic that would stimulate long-term growth and expansion. According to him, the rise of exchange economy that led to monetization of relations between feudal lords and the peasant mass somehow signalled the dissolution of feudalism.
- Sweezy believes that even the most primitive economy requires a certain amount of trade. Once trade outgrew the peddling stage and localized trading and trans-shipment centres were established, a qualitative new factor was introduced. Manufactured goods could be brought much cheaper from the outside centres as they had higher form of specialization based on the division of labour than anything known to manorial economy. These were powerful pressures which brought the feudal estates within the orbit of the exchange economy. Thus not only traders but also the members of the feudal society developed a business-like attitude towards economic activities.

- According to Sweezy the expansion of commercial economy promoted demand for new products as fresh tastes were created for food, dress, household items and weapons. The expansion of trade and rise of towns opened up new opportunities to the servile population of the countryside. All these factors, according to him were sufficiently 'pervasive and powerful' to ensure the breaking up of the existing system of production. Sweezy suggests that, the limited development of town life and lack of urban centres offered little alternative to the agricultural workforce in eastern Europe. Limited market structure checked the rise of capitalism there.
- Takahashi rejects Sweezy's thesis and suggests that the contradiction between feudalism and capitalism is not the contradiction between 'system of production for use' and 'system of production for the market' but between feudal land –property (serfdom) and an industrial capital (wage-labour system). The fundamental processes of the passage from feudalism to capitalism are, therefore, the change in the social form of existence of labour power consisting in the separation of the means of production from the direct producers.

- Immanuel Wallerstein in his work *'The Origins of the Modern World System'* defines capitalism as a world system. His discussion of capitalism involves three major components, described by him as 'zones'. The core represents the most developed region. It has the capability to exploit the available resources through world market, it enjoys the most advanced technology in the manufacturing process and has the power to control wage-labour. The periphery in the world-economy consists of those regions or societies that are technically and economically least developed and is exploited by other regions, particularly by core areas. The periphery specializes in the production of raw materials, agricultural products and minerals with the use of forced labour. The third area mentioned by Wallerstein is the semi-periphery zone. It forms an intermediate zone between core and periphery, with an intermediate level of technology and economic development. It exploits the periphery but is itself partly exploited by the core. Its production includes both raw materials as well as finished and manufactured good. Hence it has wage-labour as well as coerced cash-crop labour. Wallerstein sees the emergence of capitalism between 1450s and 1640s.
- According to Wallerstein, the first capitalist states were Spain and Portugal with their vast colonial empires that they exploited. But soon they lost their core status. The true core status was achieved first by the Netherlands and subsequently by England and northern France.

- The arguments of Wallerstein is not acceptable to many scholars. It is argued that Wallerstein fails to explain those factors that made some states into cores. The internal dynamics of a society is virtually ignored by him. It underestimates the extent to which trade and commercial expansion is compatible with feudalism. Paul Bairoch and Patrick K O'Brien points out that even as late as the 1790s, hardly 4 per cent of Europe's gross national product was exported beyond the national boundaries.
- **Demographic Explanation:** M M Postan and H J Habakkuk are among the first to stress the role of population in the long-term changes in the economic structures. This demography-centric explanation is also called 'Malthusian model' as it is based on the population theory of Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834). W Abel, A E Verhulst and Le Roy Ladurie endorsed the importance of population in their studies of pre-modern Europe. The main argument is that European feudalism underwent significant economic and demographic growth from about 11th till the end of the 13th century. The steady growth led to overpopulation and a conflict between material resources and population developed. A constant pressure on agriculture and other natural resources caused declining returns, shortage of food grain, lowered wages and increasing rents. All these led to an agrarian crisis.

- This Malthusian crisis, the problem of growing demand and limited resources, had its own cure. Famines, malnourishment and natural calamities like the Black Death epidemic caused a sharp decline in population. This trend began to reverse after 1450s. The demographic crisis of the 14th century caused severe shortage of labour and sharp fall in incomes of the landlords. This shifted the earlier social balance away from the aristocratic class towards the peasants. The nobility responded to this situation in different ways. Some placed new forms of bondage on the populace; some transformed feudal dues into money rents while some others appropriated the land belonging to the peasants or the common lands and turned them into pastures for sheep farming. The latter landlords were showing trends towards capitalist farming.
- The 'demographic model' has been criticized on various grounds. Robert Brenner confronts the Malthusian model for introducing a level of orthodoxy that is dependent 'built-in-mechanism of self-correction'. He feels that demographic interpretation runs into even more serious problems in explaining the general trends of total production, economic growth or stagnation. He questions the demographic theory of comparative analysis. He notes that different economic and social outcomes proceeded from similar demographic trends at different times and in different areas of Europe. While in one region, the Malthusian crisis led to the disappearance of serfdom, in another region a counter-tendency could be observed.

- **The Class-Relations Model:** For Brenner, it is the structure of class relations that determine the manner and degree to which particular demographic or commercial change will affect long-term trends in the distribution of income and economic growth, not vice versa.
- Through comparative analysis, Brenner explains how different class structures and their historical developments determined specific historical outcomes in transition to capitalism. By comparing the agrarian class-relations in England and France, he highlights the role of the state. In France, the centralized state appears to have developed in the large parts, feudal class character. The state was able to increase its power by intervening between peasants and landlords to ensure peasant freedom, hereditability and fixed rents. It made rulers independent of parliamentary taxation and helped in perpetuating small peasants and at the same time prevented rural differentiation and agrarian transformation. In England the state support enabled the English landed aristocracy to raise rents and fines to such levels that small tenant farmers were forced to leave. The enclosure movement undermined peasant property, thereby introducing differentiation in peasant population and opening the path to agricultural capitalism. This was based on free wage-labour and large units of production during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Brenner insists that it was not the rising population or markets and grain prices but the productive use of agricultural surplus that was the key to England's economic development.

- Brenner suggests that the contradiction between the development of peasant production and the relations of surplus extraction that defined the class relations of serfdom tended to lead to a crisis of peasant accumulation, of peasant productivity and ultimately of peasant subsistence (*Brenner Debate*). The crisis was accompanied by an intensification of the class conflict inherent in the existing structure. Citing the example of western Germany where the peasants had organised themselves through local village institutions as a powerful line of defence against the incursions of landlords; he contends that the peasants were able to considerably limit the claims of the aristocracy and helped the process of the dissolution of serfdom. He also contends that the cause of dependence on grain exports and backwardness and unequal distribution of income in East Germany was rooted in the nature of class structure.

- A number of scholars however criticized Brenner thesis. H Wunder finds flaws in Brenner's study full of factual inaccuracies as it was based on secondary literature and not on original research. M M Postan and John Hatcher insist that Brenner's class-relations model cannot sufficiently replace their own model and they counter Brenner's criticism by insisting that they never assigned an all determining role to the demographic trends in medieval society at the expense of social factors.
- Guy Bois generally agrees with Brenner's criticism of the Malthusian model and his stress on the decisive role assigned to the class struggle in the long-term evolution of capitalism, but he believes that the birth of capitalism is by-product of the socio-economic functioning of the feudal system as a whole and not confined to regions, as brought out by Brenner. Another criticism made against Brenner is his belief that the development of capitalism is based on large-scale units of production. Dobb and Hilton had emphasized on the complex process that led to rural social differentiation in which even some small peasant-proprietors could become capitalist farmers over a long period of time. Patrica Croote and David Parker argue that the real agricultural revolution was a long-term process of good husbandry involving new techniques and crops. Thus the peasants may provide impetus to economic development. According to them, Brenner misunderstood the position of the peasantry in France and hence exaggerates its independence. In England he provides a 'lord centric' explanation and misses out the role of 'customary tenants' and 'short term leaseholders'.

- Another viewpoint worth mentioning is that of Perry Anderson. Like Dobb and Hilton he believes that changes in social relations preceded the development of productive forces in the emergence of capitalism. Like Brenner he assigns a role to political factors in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. He partially accepts the importance of towns and international trade. For Anderson the primary element in the eventual emergence of the capitalist absolute property rights was the incorporation of Roman Law into the feudal system. This helped the process of centralization and brought about fundamental transformation in feudal property relationship.
- There are some other writers who give credit to the nation-states for the rise of capitalism. Like Anderson they suggest that the rise of nation-states rationalized law, freed land for market speculations, removed internal barriers, established standardized taxation, uniform currencies and brought about redistribution of incomes. However, these views have still to gain ground and the debate on transition remains unresolved.

Source:

Arvind Sinha, *Europe in Transition- From Feudalism to Industrialization*.