
UNIT 2 TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO CAPITALISM – DEBATE 1

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the rise of the modern west in the context of the debate on transition from feudalism to capitalism;
- Analyze how different historians focused on contradictions between forces of production and relations of production in feudalism to highlight the emergence of capitalism;
- Examine how historians later tried to bring in the role of trade and the rise of towns to bring forward new factors which contributed to decline of feudalism;
- Know how in the debate the role of class struggle and class conflict was brought in to highlight how a dynamic process encompassing classes, modes of production and trade and commerce played in the transition from feudalism to capitalism; and
- Discuss how a broader approach taking in to account capital accumulation from colonies and their exploitation brought forward a picture of uneven transition from feudalism to capitalism.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Marx believed that history of human civilization passed through different modes of production: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism and capitalism. He thought that dissolution of obsolete capitalism will usher in communism. The *mode of production* of a society is simply the way a society goes about producing goods and services. Since no human society can produce things or necessities of life without human labour power and other productive tools (raw-material, machinery, land, plants and infrastructure etc.). These were the *productive forces* of a society. But these productive forces are used and controlled in the context of

property and rules regarding how productive assets are to be used, there is also need for social rules, laws, customs and power relations between individual and at the broader level between group of people or classes. These were designated as *relation of production* by Marx. As long as productive forces in a society are attuned to or are in sync with the relation of production, the society moves smoothly and economy grows but when there is tension (*contradiction*) between them, society is ready for transition from one mode to another mode of production through revolution. It is generally accepted that changes started to take place in the Feudal mode or system of medieval Europe in 14th century which gradually led to development of a capitalist economy. This period of transition is one of the most controversial and scholars, historians have argued on the nature of this process of transition depending on their perspective. This and next Unit will narrate and explain views and arguments of scholarly community about this significant change which sets in motion the process of the rise of modern capitalist economy. It is, therefore, necessary to know some general features of a feudal and a capitalist society before we go into the depth of arguments about transition from feudalism to capitalism.

2.2 GENERAL FEATURES OF A FEUDAL AND A CAPITALIST SYSTEM

The feudal system was primarily based on agrarian subsistence economy. The manor or the large tract of land was the centre of the feudal system and the manor was owned by the feudal lord. This land was allotted to the feudal lord by the overlord or the king. The feudal lords, being the superior class, did not cultivate lands themselves. The land was cultivated by serfs, who were tied to the landlords' manor having limited control over their labour power and partial control over small patch of land on which he and his family survived. The serf was the actual tiller of the land who worked on the lord's land (*demesne*) and also on the plot of land allotted to him. The serfdom was based on use of *extra-economic coercion* for controlling the labour and fate of serf-cultivators by feudal lords. The feudal lords enjoyed legal and judicial power and privileges over serfs. The entire system worked on mutual obligation. The king allotted land to the nobles and the nobles were supposed to provide money and soldiers to the king. Similarly, the feudal lords got the land grant and were supposed to provide protection and services to the overlords. Serfs were expected to till the feudal lord's land and his land (a small patch of land from the lord for the subsistence of his family) and in return the lord provided them protection. So in a feudal society, the king was at the top and the serf was at the bottom of the feudal hierarchy. But apart from secular lords, the clergy or the priestly class also owned large tracts of lands and acted like feudal lords. The Catholic Church was the largest land lord of the medieval Europe which was equally oppressive despite its claim to work for the salvation of the people. In such society, access to social opportunities and status was determined by the accident of birth. The ascribed role or status of individual was assigned by virtue of factors outside his or her own control. This assigned role was rationalized as divinely ordained and natural and was legally recognized and approved by religious-normative order of the society. However, many towns also coexisted with manors in medieval Europe representing non-agrarian segment of the economy. These towns were involved in manufacturing activities. The manufacturing in these centres was done by an association of artisans, craftsman and professionals called guild. The guild was responsible for the production and

sale of commodities. The quantity and quality to be produced and the price was determined by the guild. The guild was also responsible for the socio-religious aspects of its members, and their lives. The produce of the guild was sold to manors and to long-distance markets.

In contrast to feudal system, capitalism is an open market-oriented economy characterized by mass-scale commodity production and with high level of division of labour and specialization and use of machinery. So the products are not for subsistence use, rather they are meant to be sold in market to earn profits. There is a separation of producer and consumers in time and space. The Products and services are, therefore, exchanged through markets using money as a medium. The means of production or productive assets are privately owned in this system and the owners of these private assets buy labour power to use in their production operations to produce for the market where they sell their products to earn profits for themselves. Production for profit or accumulation is the sole implicit purpose of all production under this system and it is characterized by individualism, acquisitiveness, maximizing behaviour of most of the economic agents. (maximizing of profits for the producers and maximizing of satisfaction for the consumers). The individual's professional or occupational role came to depend on individual effort and ability at least formally and legally in the capitalist system, thus, allowing for limited mobility.

2.3 THE BEGINNING OF THE DEBATE

Disagreements amongst historians can be more overtly ideological in character. But more often it is on the basis of evidence and interpretation of facts. The debate was initiated after the publication of Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, published immediately after the Second World War and revised edition appearing in 1963. Dobb based his approach to the transition from feudalism to capitalism on Marx's notion of the mode of production. While he recognized that one mode of production dominated a given epoch, he also accepted that elements of other modes of production could coexist with the dominant mode. According to him, in transition from feudal to the capitalist mode, He laid emphasis on three key things – the crisis of feudalism in the fourteenth century, the beginning of capitalism in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution. The decline of feudalism and start of capitalism are separated by at least two centuries. It was from the latter half of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century that capital began to penetrate production to a considerable degree. Dobb defines feudalism as a 'system under which economic status and authority were associated with land-tenure, and the direct producer was under obligation based on law or customary right to devote a certain quota of his labour or his produce to the benefits of his feudal superior'. Feudalism here consisted of social relations between feudal lords and peasants. Feudal lords ruled over peasants and their lands. The 'serfs' or kind of bonded cultivators utilized their small lands with their labour work and were required to allocate a part of their labour to the feudal lords.

He argued that the decline of feudalism was the result of inner contradiction within the feudal mode of production. This explanation is generally described as the 'inner-contradiction model'.

He argued that trade and merchant capital did not directly change the feudal economic system. The development of trade was closely related to the growth of division of labour, and that division of labour depended on rise of productivity of labour. According to him, capitalist development was brought about by the emergence of an urban setting. In his view, 'lord-peasant' class relations and the outcome of 'lord-peasant class conflict' was important to understand the growth of towns in the feudal society that led to the rise of commercial-industrial capital. During the period of the transition, development of towns in feudal societies were due to increased demand for weapons and luxury products coming from feudal class. This was also the reason for growth of trade. As a result of this, there was rise of interest in exchanging peasant-produced food for luxury goods. Dobb's analysis on transition of feudalism to capitalism does at some point contradict itself.

Modern discussions of feudalism have been plagued by long drawn-out controversies over its conceptualization. These disputes have centred on whether feudalism should be thought of in essentially political and legal or socio-economic terms. Dobb laid emphasis on economic aspects. According to him, the feudal mode is defined as the extra-economic extraction by overlords of rents or services from a class of subsistence producers. The peasant producers largely control the process of production but are not legally free. Feudalism and serfdom were synonymous. The rise of the political and economic autonomy of the corporate towns, followed immediately by the economic decline of the fourteenth century, marked the crisis of the feudal mode. According to Dobb, towns had some part in the decline of feudalism. The towns provided shelter to runaway serfs and served as the oasis of freedom in late medieval peasant revolts. But the antagonism and confrontation between peasants and landlords in the countryside was the main arena of class-struggle.

At the end of the Middle Ages, serfdom had vanished while medieval forms of government and the class power of landlords continued to exist. Though the peasantry as a class had grown stronger, they remained subject to manorial authority. The emerging class of hired labourers was subject to a good deal of coercion. So the wage labour was still a supplement to a livelihoods based on from subsistence farming. The merchant bourgeoisie became more powerful but cooperated for the most part with the landlords. However, the urban craftspeople and well-to-do and middle class peasants become independent of feudalism. They were petty producers who were not yet capitalists, but certainly contained a potential to become so. In Dobb's conception, it was this petty mode of production which predominated economically in the two hundred or so years between the beginning of the feudal crisis and the advent of the capitalist mode in the mid-sixteenth century.

Until Dobb it was generally assumed that the intensification of market exchange and the growing role of money brought about the decline of feudalism. On the contrary, Dobb demonstrated that money and exchange actually strengthened serfdom and feudalism. The emergence of merchant capital was fully compatible with feudalism. Rather it was the economic weakness of the feudal mode of production, coupled with the growing need of the ruling class for revenue, which was responsible for the system's crisis. The lack of economic incentive to work hard and the low level of technique placed a limit on peasant productivity. Feudal-class demands on peasants increased inordinately due to the expansion of its

numbers and due to growth of landlords' establishments and retinues. The burden on cultivators increased due to feudal landlords' demand for more and more luxury consumption and the exigencies of war and brigandage. The competition between leading nobles increased spending on feasts, luxury commodities, pageants and wars. All this increased economic pressure on producers. The result was economic exhaustion, flight from the land and peasant rebellion.

Over-exploitation and stagnant productivity resulted in a decline in population after 1300. Subsequent labour shortages, peasant resistance or threat of flight led to widespread commutation of labour to money rent. The manorial system was further weakened by the thinning of the ranks of the nobility through war, the growing practice of leasing demesne, the emergence of a stratum of rich and middling peasants differentiated from the mass of peasant poor, and the growing use of wage labour. By the end of the fifteenth century, the economic basis of the feudal system had disintegrated. The late medieval social differentiation of the peasantry, a key theme of Dobb's work, prepared the way for the later dispossession of the mass of peasants. The emergence of this drifting population heralded the coming of capitalism, setting the stage for the emergence of capitalist wage labour. The role of the towns was above all to act as a magnet attracting the serfs fleeing from countryside.

Dobb's perception on the role of the towns was later strongly contested. Dobb's explanation that the collapse of feudalism was the result of its own internal contradictions, stemming from the over-exploitation of the peasant producers was more acceptable. In Dobb's own words: "it was the inefficiency of Feudalism as a system of production, coupled with the growing needs of the ruling class for revenue, that was primarily responsible for its decline; since this need for additional revenue prompted an increase in the pressure on the producer to a point where this pressure became literally unendurable." Dobb's interpretation of the decline of feudalism set off the celebrated transition debate.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss Maurice Dobb's views on the transition debate.

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- 2) Do you agree with Maurice Dobb that the collapse of feudalism was due to its own internal contradictions?

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2.4 PAUL SWEEZY'S INTERVENTION

Paul Sweezy, another celebrated Marxist economist and co-founder with Paul Baran of the *Monthly Review*, was first to contest Dobb viewpoint. Sweezy agreed with Dobb that serfdom was the dominant relation of production in Western feudalism. But organized around the economically self-sufficient manor, feudalism, according to him, was a mode of production for use, and as such tended to stagnation. It needed an external force, the growth of trade and increase in production for exchange, to undermine the system. He rejected Dobb's view of internal contradiction for the decline of feudalism. This, in his views, can only be explained as arising from causes external to the system. Sweezy's view of an external prime mover was necessary to explain decline of a closed, self-sufficient system producing only for use. He disagreed that the prime mover of change was internal to the feudal system. Dobb for one rejected Sweezy's view that feudalism tended toward stagnation, and insisted that it had its own momentum based on its internal – especially class – contradictions. Class conflict between peasants and lords did not directly lead to capitalism. What it did was to lessen the dependence of the petty mode of production upon feudal over-lordship, eventually freeing the petty producer from feudal exploitation. Sweezy's notion of trade-driven external prime mover appear to be simple single cause explanation of decline of a complex social system. Dobb's view was more historically and theoretically better informed and a more refined view of feudalism as an internally dynamic system driven by economic growth and class conflict. While placing greater emphasis on internal factors, Dobb also considered the growth of trade a factor. Sweezy further criticized Dobb for not signalling the existence of a system of pre-capitalist commodity production which was neither feudal nor capitalist in the wake of feudalism's demise.

2.5 KOHACHIRO TAKAHASHI AND RODNEY HILTON IN FRAY

Marxist economic historian Kohachiro Takahashi insisted in the first place that the debate be widened beyond the English case to include the experience of feudalism in the Continental Europe. Takahashi rejected Sweezy's conception of feudalism as a self-sufficient, closed economic system which produced only for use rather than exchange. Commodities were produced and circulated in different modes of production including the feudal. It is important to know how products were produced. As such Takahashi strongly supported Dobb's view that the decline of feudalism was due to internal factors like class struggle rather than an external factor like trade. But according to Takahashi, Dobb's definition of feudalism was inadequate in that he immediately started from the abstractions of feudal landed property and serfdom. But just as Marx began his analysis of capital from the commodity, so likewise the analysis of feudalism had to begin from the fundamental social units of Western feudalism: the *virgate* (cottage, small plot, collective rights), the village community and the manor (*seigneurie*). It was the manor which dominated the other two and became the basis for the extraction of surplus from producers in the form of feudal rent and the mobilization of labour.

Rodney Hilton also questioned Sweezy's view and argued that long-distance trade was not responsible for decline of feudalism. Sweezy's view was based on

the so-called Pirenne thesis. Henri Pirenne was a famous Belgian historian of medieval period. He claimed that the economic decline of the West coincided not with the fall of the Western Roman Empire but with the closure of the Mediterranean as a result of the Muslim occupation of the Eastern Mediterranean coast in the eighth century. Contrariwise the economic revival of Western Europe began with the reopening of the Mediterranean during the crusades of the eleventh century. Arguing against Pirenne, Hilton maintained that the decline of the Roman Empire in the West was the result not of the disruption of trade but of internal factors. The decline of production for trade and exchange in the Empire began as a result of internal economic and demographic weakening as early as the third century, hundreds of years before the collapse of Roman political authority. It was not due to the Arab intrusion into the Mediterranean. Likewise internal factors within Western Europe led to the recovery of production for distant markets before the start of the crusades. If development of feudalism was due to internal factors and mechanisms, its decline was also due to internal factors.

Hilton, like Dobb, supported the idea that decline of feudalism was a result of internal class struggle. It was the main cause for decline of feudalism and this was dependent on the growth of the forces of production. As its dynamic element, class struggle between overlords and peasants led to the flourishing of the feudal mode of production in one phase and then to its decline in another phase. The nobility and princes also engaged in political competition with one another while striving to maximize their rental income. The resultant quest for increased rent at first stimulated technological innovation, the development of towns and commerce, and increases in productivity, only later contributing to feudalism's decline. Hilton underscored the growth of the forces of production when feudalism reached its highest point of development. The interaction of these factors, including growing production for the market, led to increased social and class differentiation among the peasants. The richer peasants were able to increase the size of their land-holdings and employed more and more wage labour, which was increasingly that of the completely landless rather than that of smallholders. The prosperous peasants resented the demands of lords for more rent, and their resentment was supported by small and poorer cultivators because demand for more rent was also imposing a restriction on economic expansion and was equally undermining the subsistence and livelihood of smaller peasants.

The struggle over rent intensified and reached a peak in the fourteenth century. Income from rent declined and was only partly compensated for by increases in state taxation, warfare and plunder, and commutation of rents into cash payments. Feudal rent no longer remained an incentive to production, and landlords' dependent on it for income ultimately had to look to the emerging power of the state for continued existence. The number of tenants obliged to labour on their lord's demesne and the value of rent, now paid predominantly in cash, declined. Overall the legal claims of the lords over the persons of their tenants weakened. Money rent favoured the social stratification of the population of the manor into rich and poor. The sale and purchase of land begun leading to creation of a land market. The holdings of the rich peasants in the manor expanded at the expense of the rest. More peasants were forced to resort to wage labour. Rich peasants and lesser nobles were the most efficient producers in an increasingly market-oriented economy, which began to take capitalist forms. With Hilton's vivid demonstration of the role of class struggle both in developing the forces of production under feudalism and in its decline, this became, along with peasant

social differentiation, the fundamental pivot around which debate on the transition would now revolve.

In Hilton's views, the role of towns and trade, seen by others such as Sweezy as a principal reason for decline of feudalism or as a prime mover, was itself the outcome of class struggle. For Hilton argued that the commutation of rents into cash payment furthered the development of merchant capital and the growth of larger towns within the context of the feudal mode of production. Hilton's view of the towns as part of the feudal system rather than as an external catalyst to capitalism was greatly influenced by an article by John Merrington which appeared originally in *New Left Review* and was republished as the final contribution to the debate over *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, edited by Hilton in 1976. Merrington argued that town-based commerce facilitated the expansion of the feudal mode of production. The urban corporate form or the guilds, although at times in opposition to local feudal landlords, actually functioned as a 'collective seigneur' under feudalism, and strengthened its economic foundation. Feudalism accorded an autonomous place to urban production and exchange in its structure.

Merrington argued that towns and trade were natural, built-in components of feudalism. They were not external capitalist forces working to undermine functioning of feudalism. So, they did not play any significant role in the emergence of capitalism. For merchant capital did not create surplus value, it only redistributed it. While it played a key role in primitive accumulation of capital, it could not be a source of a permanent self-reproducing accumulation.¹ For that to occur the extension of the market in the territorial state and the emergence of agrarian capitalism were necessary, and when they did emerge, urban merchant capital was reduced to a declining sphere of operations. Merrington's arguments were a powerful reinforcement of the role of class struggle and the internal logic of feudalism's decline. He, however, overlooked three aspects of their role in its decline. First, the towns served as a potential or actual refuge for the subject rural population, as Dobb pointed out. Second, urban markets strengthened social and political links between rural producers. Finally, as Merrington himself noted, merchant capital played a role in primitive accumulation which was a necessary if not sufficient condition for the development of the capitalist mode of production. These aspects of the role of towns and trade could not be so easily dismissed, and as we shall see below, later accounts came to see class struggle and trade as joint factors in the rise of capitalism.

2.6 ROLE OF "UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT": E. J. HOBBSAWM

As already discussed, Takahashi had pointed to the need to broaden the discussion on feudalism to include Continental Europe and Japan. This was part of a general trend in Marxism to extend the concept of feudalism in analyzing non-European pre-capitalist societies, rather than employing the problematical and Eurocentric concepts of communal and Asiatic modes of production. Feudalism, at least after Hilton's intervention, was seen as a progressive mode capable of evolving toward capitalism, whereas the other two categories of communal ownership of property and Asiatic mode of self-sufficient village economy discussed by Marx were seen as stagnant, unchanging and hence not in conformity with Marxist method

of dialectical change in society. In a deceptively simple contribution, Eric Hobsbawm helped to free Marxist understandings from the problems associated with notions of Asiatic and communal modes of production, and reconnected them with ideas about uneven and combined development.

Hobsbawm unreservedly admitted that the forces making for economic development in Europe were also present elsewhere in the world. Japanese feudalism, in particular, resembled the European model of feudalism closely, and it was conceivable that capitalism could have emerged there independently of European influence. In his view, the intrusion of European imperialism ruptured a genuinely internal process of development in non-European societies. Having raised the possibility of non-European forms of capitalism, Hobsbawm nonetheless insisted that the accomplishment of capitalism in Europe was unique and very special. He argued that there is no getting round the fact that the transition from feudalism is, on a world scale, a case of highly uneven development. We should note that the notion of uneven development was not new and Marx mentioned it in his work *Grundrisse* (1857-58), where unevenness represents the condition for a transition from one declining mode of production to another expanding and more progressive mode. Moreover, uneven development is a fundamental feature of the capitalist form of development. With respect to uneven development in Western Europe, according to Hobsbawm, the crisis of feudalism involved the most advanced sectors of capitalist development within Western Europe as well.

The remarkable thing about the 14th century crisis was, in his view, not only the collapse of large-scale feudal demesne agriculture, but also demise of the Italian and Flemish textile industries. England advanced industrially but the much greater Italy and Flanders industries could not recover. Unevenness characterized not only the crisis of feudalism but also the emergence of capitalism itself. Overall European development from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries was marked by repeated crises in which regression in one place allowed progress elsewhere. West European advance came directly at the expense of Eastern Europe and Asia, Africa and Latin America. The process of West European transition to capitalist economy was accompanied by simultaneously turning other areas into dependent economies and colonies. Seizing resources from advanced areas or later on from colonized regions became an inherent feature of West European capitalist development. In other words, the emergence of capitalism in Europe has to be understood in terms of an ongoing world-wide process of appropriation based on uneven development both within and outside Europe. Hobsbawm concluded that 'the net effect of European capitalism was to divide the world ever more sharply into two sectors: the "developed" and the "under-developed" countries, in other words the exploiting and the exploited.' Hobsbawm's conception of the transition is one in which unevenness plays a vital part. Gain in one place is invariably at the cost of other places, even those that were initially more developed. Hobsbawm's sense of the dialectical quality and the unevenness of the process of transition was an impressive insight, representing a significant contribution to the transition debate.

Hilton's editing and republication of the 1950s transition debate (in 1976) was the consequence of the revival of the dispute in the 1960s. The *New Left Review*, started in 1960 as a bimonthly political academic journal, played an important part. Brenner, Anderson and Wallerstein and other left-leaning historians published

their important contributions to the transition debate. Scholars such as Poston, Ladurie, Abel and Verhust put forward the 'demographic model theory'. This theory was constructed in opposition to Marxist's model, further enriching the debate. We will continue to discuss all these ideas and contest of ideas in next unit.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Outline the differences between Paul Sweezy and Rodney Hilton.

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- 2) What did Hobsbawm mean by uneven development? Explain.

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the long and uneven process of transition from feudalism to capitalism. The debate over question emerged among Marxist scholars with the publication of Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. Given the long duration of transition, the uneven nature of social-economic change and differences in the perspectives of scholars, a lively and historically enriching debate has been discussed in this Unit. Some like Paul Sweezy arguing for an external catalyst like long distance trade and market forces to explain the demise of feudalism while others like Dobb and Rodney Hilton trying to relate the transition to the endogenous factors like class struggle between feudal landlords and peasant cultivators. There are variations in arguments regarding the nature of class struggle and specific role of towns and trade and the process unevenness was highlighted by scholars like Hobsbawm and Takahashi. The debate demonstrates that as history is not something fixed and unchanging, so its interpretations are also full of lively debates and discussions about the exact nature and mechanisms of social change.

2.8 KEYWORDS

Mode of Production : A heuristic term used to capture the concepts of relations of production and forces of production taken together as a whole to designate the dominant production process of a social formation. For example, feudalism, capitalism, socialism.

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 2.3
- 2) See Section 2.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 2.5
- 2) See Section 2.6

2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Dobb, Maurice (1946/1963), *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. New York: International Publishers/London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

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