
UNIT 3 TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO CAPITALISM-DEBATE 2

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to understand:

- how scholars looked beyond Europe (e.g. Japan) to understand the transition from feudalism to capitalism;
- how the transition from feudalism to capitalism is understood by some scholars in terms of struggle between classes and in terms of forces of production; and
- how other scholars refute this thesis by pointing out the dynamics of trade, urbanisation and demographic cycles in weakening the feudal relations and facilitating the transition to capitalism.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As we mentioned the previous unit, one strand of thinking thought that transition from feudalism and capitalism occurred in Europe. It became a main point of contention whether rest of the world figured in this development or not. Both Brenner and Anderson concentrated attention on the development in Europe to understand the process of change or transformation. While Brenner was more rigid, Anderson at least made an attempt to widen the discussion of feudalism beyond Europe by including Japan, as we shall see. But Anderson also believed that the legacy of Rome was essential to the existence of feudalism in the first place and to the eventual development of the capitalist notion of private property. Meanwhile Emmanuel Wallerstein's world systems approach attempted to view the development of European capitalism from a perspective which included the non-European countries. Initially Takahashi's had stressed a perspective beyond Europe. Later Hobsbawm related the issue to uneven and combined development. But the earlier phase of discussion of the transition question had hardly touched on the world outside Europe.

3.2 EXAMPLE OF JAPANESE FEUDALISM: DEBATE BETWEEN TAKAHASHI AND ANDERSON

Takahashi believed that Japanese feudalism was similar to that of the West, and its transition to capitalism was an internal affair in which threat of Western imperialism also played a role. The Meiji Restoration, or so-called capitalist revolution from above, was the outcome. Takahashi particularly credited the top-down nature of Japanese capitalism to the flexibility of its feudalism. When capitalism was growing in the West, the feudal regime consolidated itself in Japan. The Tokugawa Shogunate in the seventeenth century was based on very heavy rents-in-kind and personal serfdom. The economic aspirations of the petty producers in Japan were crushed by the weight of feudal rent and the development of usury. These burdens on the peasants stimulated increased commercialization of the surplus. As a result, proto capitalist manufacturing and commercial agriculture based on wage labour emerged in the countryside. According to Takahashi, the dominant economic power of the urban merchants and financiers depended on the feudal state and great landlord magnates. Centralized collection of revenue made possible a high degree of commercialization and urbanization as well as an extreme level of peasant exploitation. On the eve of the Meiji Restoration, voice of middle peasants and small manufacturers against the merchant and financial monopolists tied to feudal magnates could be heard. Over-exploitation of peasants by landlords led to increasing misery in rural areas and population decline. This demographic and economic crisis was a main reason for the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Yet Japanese feudalism proved much more robust than that of the states of the West, and its resilience fundamentally determined the nature of the capitalism that did emerge. Over-exploitation created food shortages, peasant revolts and population decline. These Popular and proto-capitalist revolt acted as a catalyst. The popular anger was used by a modernizing political elite to dismantle the institutions of the feudal regime while preserving the essence of landlord power over the peasantry. But revolt from below fundamentally failed to transform the feudal Japanese social and political order. The military power of the landlords was broken but they continued to control their tenants socially and economically. The political and economic freedom of the bulk of producers remained fundamentally constrained. As a consequence it was the state rather than the petty producers that was to take the lead in capitalist development. For Takahashi, the intrusion of the West was merely a catalyst which set off what was already the internal evolution of Japan toward capitalism.

Anderson dealt with Japanese feudalism in a long note or appendix added to his book *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. He agreed with Takahashi that feudalism set the stage for a capitalist development and that the Japanese feudalism resembled the Western counterpart in many ways. Anderson emphasized the gains in the productivity of Japanese feudal agriculture in the seventeenth century and eighteenth centuries. This period was marked by increased commercialization, including the spread of cash crops like sugar, cotton, tea, indigo and tobacco. The urban merchant class expanded and became more influential while the cities grew prodigiously. The potential for capitalist development present. However, Anderson rejected Takahashi's idea that Japan could have abolished feudalism through the power of its own internal contradictions. The separation of Japan

from the world market blocked its independent evolution from feudalism toward capitalism. The expansion of Western trade acted as an external catalyst for the fall of the feudal regime and led to the Meiji Restoration. Anderson argued that for capitalism to develop, connections to the world market and an appropriate set of social relations of production are both necessary.

3.3 PERRY ANDERSON'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE TRANSITION DEBATE

But, for Anderson, only Western European feudalism could have created capitalism. Anderson's view of feudalism and its downfall combines an emphasis on class struggle with acknowledgment of the significance of exchange relations. The emergence of the territorial state and expanding global market both provided very important foundations for emergence of capitalism. In feudalism the peasant producer was tied to the land by being legally bound to the soil as a serf. Agrarian property was privately controlled by a class of feudal lords who extracted a surplus in the form of rent from peasants by political-legal or extra-economic coercion. Despite this feudal bondage, it provided the setting for an impressive boost in productivity during the High Middle Ages. In contrast to Dobb and Hilton, however, Anderson stresses the exhaustion of the possibility of further advances in the forces of production as the source of the feudal crisis. In his view, this was not due to over-exploitation of the producers. The pressure of increasing population forced clearing of increasingly marginal land, while necessary investments in improving the productivity of existing cultivated soil was not undertaken. The subsequent economic crisis provoked widespread peasant revolts. The revolts failed in short-term. However, the long-term impact of revolts was that the income and wages of the peasantry improved and serfdom declined.

Anderson also insisted that urban commercial networks tended to weaken and erode feudal social relations. Towns served as potential refuges for fugitive serfs as well as artisans in peasant revolts. Indeed, the centres of the most significant rural revolts were located near towns. In the long term the noble lords' need for commodities produced in the towns led them to commute labour services of serfs into rents-in-cash. They also began to lease out demesne to peasant tenants. In England in the fifteenth century serfdom almost vanished and peasant incomes rose. Social differentiation increased in the villages, as a stratum of rich peasants emerged at the top and wage labour at bottom. Anderson acknowledged that trade was built-in the feudal mode of production. Dobb had already suggested that the early modern state was above all designed to defend the nobility, and Anderson agreed and gave a convincing evidence of this thesis. The end of serfdom did not bring feudalism to an end.

The consolidation of the territorial monarchies at the end of the Middle Ages modified the apparatus of feudal domination. The class power of the nobility had diminished as a result of the disappearance of serfdom to some extent. But it was reconsolidated with the emergence of the new territorial monarchies, which became the principal instruments for the maintenance of noble domination over the peasantry. Moreover, in so far as nobles blocked the emergence of a free market in land and peasants retained access to their means of subsistence, feudal relations persisted. In the medieval period political and economic control had been combined in the hands of feudal landlords. With the appearance of the territorial state in the early modern period, political power began to be separated

from immediate control over the economy, allowing capitalist forces to emerge. The political order remained feudal while society under its protection became more capitalistically oriented. According to Anderson, the emerging territorial state was based on two things: firstly, under the threat of peasant unrest there was more centralization of powers in the new absolutist State. Secondly, the pressure of mercantile or manufacturing capital within the Western economies also increased. The development of the territorial state bolstered feudalism and it also provided an enlarged political space within which capitalism could develop. In such a space lay the market. Just as Merrington saw the medieval market as built-in, natural element in the power of *seigneur*, Anderson also insisted that the capitalist market was a creation of the territorial state and almost as much a political as an economic institution. Anderson's insight into the role of the state is critical to understanding the transition.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss Takahashi's contribution to the debate on transition from feudalism to capitalism.

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- 2) How did Perry Anderson look at the transition to capitalism?

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3.4 BRENNER AND THE LATE MEDIEVAL CRISIS

Beginning with Dobb, scholars demarcated the period of the decline of feudalism from the period of the rise of capitalism. Dobb and Sweezy, two chief protagonists in the initial debate, both recognized the existence of an intermediate period prior to the emergence of capitalism. In this phase of a weakened feudalism, there was a relatively more freedom for petty producers to produce for market and distant trade prior to the emergence of full-fledged capitalism. Moreover, most of the participants in the debate, while stressing one or another factor leading to the transition, nonetheless tended to concede a multiplicity of causes. Dobb, Hilton and Anderson stressed the vital importance of class struggle in the decline of feudalism. But Brenner took the importance of agrarian class struggle a step further, arguing that as it unfolded in England in the late Middle Ages, it not only destroyed feudalism but created a path leading directly to the emergence of

capitalism. So, in Brenner's view, there was no conceptual and chronological divide between the decline of feudalism and the origins of capitalism. His authoritative thesis, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550–1653*, which while not bearing on the end of feudalism debate, proved important to the controversy on the English Revolution.

Dobb and Hilton had already emphasized the decline in late medieval population and ensuing class conflicts central to their conception of the crisis in England and elsewhere in Europe. In Brenner's view such conflicts arose from a crisis of peasant accumulation, productivity and ultimately subsistence provoked by over-exploitation. Excessive landlord exploitation and the inherent conservatism of the peasant mode of production placed definite limits on the productivity of peasant agriculture. Brenner stressed that landlords used extra-economic coercion to extract more and more surplus from the producers. More specifically he demonstrated the inherent economic limits of the peasant subsistence mode within the constraints of the medieval manor. The economic objectives of peasants within the bounds of the manor were not to improve their holdings, maximize output or deepen their relation to the market, but rather to ensure the reproduction of the family unit of subsistence production. As a result a definite limit was imposed on economic growth. In the resultant crisis the survival of the mass of producers was put into question. Following the demographic collapse of the fourteenth century, intense class struggles revolved around the issue of serfdom and the control of land. The outcome of these struggles in the different parts of Europe depended on varying historical and social circumstances. Brenner denied that trade or towns were important in the transition. Indeed, he rejected the idea that the towns in any way contributed to the dissolution of feudalism. On the contrary, it was the development of rural networks of solidarity and cooperation that was important to the varying outcomes of the late medieval class struggles, notably between West and East Europe.

In Eastern Europe the weakness of the peasantries faced with landlord power led to the strengthening of serfdom. In the class struggles in France, in contrast, the peasantry not only consolidated its free status but was able to hold onto land and rights into the early modern period. Surplus extraction sufficient to maintain the nobility transferred itself from the local to a higher level through the crystallization of the territorial state. Whereas local rents withered, royal taxes were employed to benefit the warrior and court nobility, amounting to a new system of centralized rent. The feudal system was perpetuated as a result.

England represented a third way that led to agrarian capitalism. Peasants were able to win personal freedom but were less successful in the class struggle than their French counterparts. As a result English nobles were able to retain most of the cultivable land, and from the late fifteenth century onward, they began to rent this land to rich farmers on favourable terms of enhanced rents based on growing profits. According to Brenner, with the peasants failure to establish essentially freehold control over the land, the landlords were able to occupy, consolidate and enclose cultivable lands. They created large farms and to begun to lease them to capitalist tenants who could afford to make capital investments. Unlike medieval peasants, capitalist tenants needed to improve productivity in order to meet landlords' demands for higher rents. In order to obtain higher rents landlords found themselves advancing capital to tenants in order to improve

output. An economic logic of accumulation was initiated. On this basis there emerged the classic threefold division of rural society into landlord/capitalist tenants/ wage labourers which transformed English agriculture in a capitalist direction. In feudalism both the exploiting landlords and peasant producers had direct access to the means of reproducing their existence: that is, land for the peasants, rent for the landlords. In pursuit of their subsistence, the goal of the peasants was to produce as much of their subsistence based crops from the land as they could without resort to the market. In the prime of feudalism labour rents or rents-in-kind provided for the maintenance of the landlords. Consequently there was no need for both classes to produce for the market, and therefore the need to produce for exchange or to sell competitively was almost absent. They were not required to cut costs and therefore to improve production through innovation, specialization and accumulation. Whatever innovations there might have been were absorbed into the way of life of the peasant class, which was based largely on economic subsistence. The new relationships between landlords and proto-capitalist tenants at the end of the Middle Ages broke this traditional logic of subsistence production and imposed another based on cumulative economic growth so as to increase their share in agriculture produce and income.

Brenner's insistence on the role of class struggles in the countryside as decisive to the fall of feudalism and transition to capitalism was with more rigour. It lent empirical and conceptual rigor to a perspective previously taken by Dobb and Hilton. Brenner's emphasized relations of production or social property relations approach for understanding the transition. He criticized Sweezy for his insistence on the importance of trade or exchange relation. He also criticized the neo-Malthusian historical school exemplified in the work of Michael Postan and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. They argued that the decline of population accounted for the disintegration of feudalism. We will discuss their views later in this unit. He nonetheless conceded that in the absence of technological change, the ratio of land to labour determined the upswings and downswings of the population. But for him this argument reinforced the centrality of class relations. The class-relations set the parameters of demographic cycles and ultimately helped to burst through their limits.

3.5 CRITIQUE OF BRENNER'S VIEW: GUY BOIS, CHRIS HARMAN AND TERENCE J. BYRES

Critics of Brenner attacked on his over-emphasis on class, and his misunderstanding of late medieval class relations. As against his one-sided insistence on the determining influence of class struggle, they insisted on the importance of a forces of production. Class struggle remains at the crucial point of their view of the decline of feudalism. The French medieval historian Guy Bois was the first to voice such objections to Brenner's view of feudalism's downfall. He argued that class should not be understood in narrow economic sense. He insisted on the importance of the forces of production perspective, understood as the material and non-material resources at the disposition of a class. Bois agreed that Brenner's rightly pointed out political and social agency of class. Bois acknowledged that Brenner's introduction of strong doses of class struggle into his account was admirable, and that it had been ignored in the past. However, he objected to the sketchy and overly ideological manner in which

Brenner introduced such conceptions. He objected that Brenner's ideas were unconnected from all other concrete objective contingencies and from laws of development specific to a particular mode of production. In other words, Bois complained that Brenner's view is based on too superficial a view of the economic history of the medieval period and of the dynamics of its mode of production.

Bois insisted, for example, that the medieval hierarchical network of markets based on small and large towns could not be separated from the development of the *seigneur* or manor. The market, according to Bois, developed by accident with and was dependent on the system of manors. The market was in no way an entity which was alien to feudal society. But the medieval market was not simply an autonomous economic mechanism which peasants entered or withdrew from at will, as pictured by Brenner. It was in part a coercive institution through which peasant surplus was extracted and commercialized by landlords using merchants as intermediaries. This insight of Bois's that markets were not strictly economic entities but also had a coercive or political element is of critical importance to an understanding of both the feudal and capitalist modes of production. With regard to the decline of feudalism, furthermore, Bois asserts that feudalism declined because of the tendency of diminishing rents, which resulted from the structural opposition of large-scale property and small-scale production. The dominant landlord class was unable to maintain the economic base of its supremacy because there was an erosion of the productivity of family labour on the increasingly small patches of arable land as a result of population growth. Bois felt that feudal crisis went beyond the realm of economy and found manifestation in political, religious, cultural – reflected as a crisis of values but also of class conflict.

Chris Harman also has engaged with Brenner and his followers by insisting, like Bois, on the importance of the forces of production, in opposition to Brenner's emphasis on class. Harman insisted that the social capacity of a class depends on the productive forces that undergird it. Such forces include the material, intellectual and political resources at its disposition. The capacity of a class to change the social relations of production depends on its ability to mobilize such resources. Historic change occurs when the existing social relations block the further development of the forces of production. In Harman's view Brenner turns these relationships upside down, subordinating the forces of production to the determination of class relations. Harman insists on the increases in the productivity of agriculture in the High Middle Ages both in England and on the European Continent. Agricultural surpluses were marketed in the towns, manufactures were consumed not merely by nobles but also by peasants and townspeople, and commercial ties between producers in town and country were strengthened. Wage labour began to be employed on a limited basis by embryonic capitalists. Social differentiation among the peasantry strengthened these tendencies. The late medieval crisis confirmed rather than negated these economic and social advances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. During that period of difficulty the lead in opposition to the nobles was taken by those peasants and craftspeople who were most in command of the forces of production that had developed in the previous period of prosperity. In other words, Harman considers the social upheavals of the fourteenth century throughout Western Europe to be a proto-capitalist revolution brought on by the development of the forces of production in the High Middle Ages and their fettering by the perseverance of feudal relations. According to Harman, the religious heresies, new cultural movements and

revolutionary social movements of the late Middle Ages were important factors in the decline of feudalism, but find no place in Brenner's standpoint.

Whereas Brenner minimized social differentiation within the medieval peasantry, stressing its homogeneity as a class, Terence J. Byres makes the differentiation of the peasant class the key player in his notion of capitalist development. So, rather than suggesting that it was the land leases that affected brought the class formation Byres argued that it was the rich peasantry that forced the pace, rather than the landlords. The peasantry was not a uniform, homogenous class. In the thirteenth century, the peasantry were internally divided and stratified between rich, middle and poor peasants. Rich peasants had more livestock and land, and often worked for the lords as bailiffs, stewards and rent collectors, helping the lords maintain control of the bulk of the peasants. Contrary to Brenner's notion of an essential equality among medieval peasants, the prosperous peasants' enforcement of legal-political control over the rest of the peasantry on behalf of the nobility amounted to economic control over them. The power of the rich peasants increased during the thirteenth century as they were able to market part of their agricultural surplus and purchase the labour of poor peasants and embryonic wage earners. Their ability to produce surpluses had been enhanced by previous gains in productivity or improvements in the forces of production. In the late medieval crisis their power grew alongside that of the rest of the peasantry in relation to the nobles, as rents and personal servitude declined and more land became available for purchase. The crisis reduced the numbers of poor peasants and wage earners, limiting the ability of rich prosperous peasants at this stage to hire labour. It was the middle peasants whose numbers and incomes rose most notably during this period. But from the late fifteenth century onward it was rich peasants who came to the forefront, benefiting in particular from the cheap labour increasingly available as a result of the rise in population. This was a process which occurred across the face of Western Europe but assumed decisive significance in England. As we have noted, Brenner stressed the offering of economic leases by landlords to prosperous farmers as integral to capitalist beginnings. But he said nothing about where the farmers able to take up such leases came from. According to Byres, such farmers were the creation of preceding process of social differentiation and especially during the period of feudal breakdown. They then became the prime movers of sixteenth-century capitalism, which was based on the dispossession of a growing mass of peasants and their subjection to the emerging power of rural capital.

3.6 THE DEMOGRAPHIC MODEL OF TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO CAPITALISM

This was put forward by scholars like M. M. Postan, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, W. Abel and A. E. Verhust. This viewpoint was in opposition to Marxist analysis which generally dominated the debate. According to demographic model, freedom of peasants in medieval Europe was dependent on demographic fluctuations or rise and fall of populations. In cycle of population growth, when population outstripped agricultural production, it led to decline in population automatically due to certain natural checks. Once the balance between production and population was restored, the cycle began again. This increase and decrease in population determined relative freedom of peasant cultivator. In other words, the fate of

institution of serfdom in medieval economy was dependent on demographic factors. Postan and Habbakuk were among the first to stress on the role of population in the long term changes in the economic structures. Ladurie and Postan used the data from the church records to explain the long term growth, and the decline of the population in the Middle Ages and after. They have drawn attention to non-human factors like climate change and plague which along with social factors like the age of marriage and economic incentives to have large or small families influence the demographic cycle.

From tenth to middle of fourteenth century, it is generally accepted that it was a period of an expanding demographic base. Families, cities, markets, guilds, and fairs multiplied everywhere in Europe. Centers of commerce and industry grew at a great rate. Prices remained comparatively stable throughout this period. The only major economic problem was the so-called “money-famine” of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. During the thirteenth century, large parts of rural Europe became more densely settled than they would ever be again until the twentieth century. The cause of medieval population-growth was mainly an increase in fertility, not a decline in mortality. The most rapid rises appeared in the price of energy, food, shelter and raw materials- items most heavily in demand during a period of population growth, and least elastic in their supply. Population related rising prices also affected the movement of wages, rents and interest. In the early stages of the great wave, wages had kept pace with prices, and during some decades even increased more rapidly. But as inflation continued in the mid-thirteenth century, money wages began to lag behind. As a consequence real wages fell, slowly at first, then with growing momentum. By the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries real wages were dropping at a rapid rate. At the same time that real wages fell, rents and interest rose sharply. Returns to landowners generally kept pace with inflation and even exceeded it. Many historians estimate that Europe lost between 25 and 40 per cent of its inhabitants during the Black Death. This great depopulation had many economic consequences. The price of food rose sharply during the epidemic years, then began to fall very rapidly as there were fewer mouths to feed. At the same time prices of manufactured goods tended to rise, partly because artisans and craftsmen could demand higher wages, and also because of dislocations in supply.

M. M. Postan asserted that operation of market forces in medieval period did not automatically lead to disappearance of serfdom. Basing himself on empirical data derived from Domesday Book, statistics of Black Death and historian J. C. Russell's estimates, Postan concluded that population was steadily rising in Europe till fourteenth century. A stage reached when agricultural produce was not able to meet the food requirement of the existing population leading to a collapse of population due to famine, scarcity and phenomenon like the Black Death. The constant pressure of population on land and other ecological resources caused diminishing return from the soil due to decline in productivity, fragmentation of landholdings due to pressure of population leading to shortage of food supply. The high level of population also led to fall in wages for labourers and increasing rents by landlords due to increased demand for land for cultivation. Population pressure forced people to cultivate more waste and less productive lands which was uneconomical. As there was huge reserve of labour available, there was less need for the landlords to tie cultivators to lands in the form of serfs. So in such phase, serfdom as an institution declined. So, in demographic model, agrarian crisis is seen as a product of demographic factors especially changes in population

level. W. Abel assign the main role to external factor such as epidemics and war causing either stagnation or a fall in population in fourteenth and again in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His book *The Peasants of Languedoc* is a rural history and author narrates the life of the peasants.

Le Roy Ladurie proceeded with a “Malthusian model” governed by a demographic structure in which biological factors were still determining and productive capacities remained limited but in which a market economy already existed so that the movement of the prices and population increase led to pauperization and intensified class conflict. His notion of agrarian cycle including successive phases of growth and decline is linked to demographic changes. In the first phase, called the low water mark, covering from 11th to 15th century, the preconditions of growth were prepared (low rent rate, more plentiful food).The second phase is the advance- from late 15th to 1600 is the period of expansion. The third phase is maturity from 1600 to 1650 or 1680 and he called this the period of rent offensive by the landlords. The fourth phase was the long period of recession or contraction. These phases were interwoven with his neo-Malthusian idea of a rural population fluctuation.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Critically evaluate Brenner’s ideas on the process of transition from feudalism to capitalism.

- 2) Describe the so called ‘Demographic Model’ of transition from feudalism to capitalism.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

One of the most lively academic debates in recent times relate to the question of what led to the decline of feudalism and the emergence of capitalist mode of production that led to the creation of the modern world. Divergent explanations have offered on the nature of feudal relationship and the moving forces responsible for its decline and the linkage of this decline had with the birth of capitalism. probably we could not single out a solitary factor as the cause of this transition. Since a social formation is complex, interaction of various causes highlighted

separately by various scholars may have played a role in the social change. Moreover, the process of transition was not uniform in time and space. The trajectories of transition may have varied from region to region as evident in the case of Japanese feudalism.

3.8 KEYWORDS

Demography: The science of studying populations and their trends such as birth and death etc.

Class struggle: In the Marxian conception the struggle between classes is seen as a driving force of social change and is termed class struggle.

3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 3.2
- 2) See Section 3.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 3.4
- 2) See Section 3.6

3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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