

THE OLD BUT AS YET GREEN DEBATE

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To serious students of European economic history, Maurice Dobb's celebrated book 'Studies in The Development of Capitalism' is considered a classic. It was the first serious Marxist attempt to study and theorize the subject. Dobb's analysis of the decline of feudalism in the 'Studies' came to be a matter of serious debate, however. It started with Paul Sweezy's critical examination. The debate ran in the forms of comments and rejoinders on the pages of the illustrious journal *Science and Society*. In the seventies, this debate, after the publication in a book form, got a large number of readers across the globe, but it should be conceded that for many, including this reviewer, who read it in their early youth and did not have much grounding in European history, the reading was not very deep. The debate has been referred to in many papers and books, and naturally the need remained for the later generation to know and understand it more fully, and for the earlier readers to deepen their understanding through a fresh study. The reason is simple : learning about a debate from interpretations, however eminent the interpreters may be, is scarcely a substitute for studying the original articles that figured in the polemics. In this sense, a reprint of the articles in a single volume must be regarded as a welcome event. For those who went through the debate in the seventies can and should also study it for the second time only for the reason— if not for anything else— that it will help them in refreshing their own idea about the subject. This is more so because the reprint contains a few other contributions to the debate. For the more seriously interested readers who wish to follow assiduously the whole tradition of scholarship in this regard, the print of Dobb's book also is a most welcome event. This is more so because this reprint being done by an Indian publisher, the *book is available at a modest price in this period of devaluation that has rendered the books published in the Occident in general outside the purchasing power of Indian readers except the highly affluent ones.

The subject, complex and multidimensional as it is, has its own problems. In this respect, Rodney Hilton's introduction to the volume containing the debate is highly instructive. He pointed out that although the participants were Marxists by conviction, they frequently drew upon the works of non-Marxists. He himself commented with great insight. 'To define and elaborate the law of motion and particular shifts which eventually generate the conditions for the transition from feudalism to capitalism requires an effort of research and not only of logic. It means the critique and utilization of the achievements of bourgeois scholarship. It also means the application of critical methods to contemporary sources. Such a critical method must be Marxist, based on an understanding of the concept of the mode of production.' This introduction has many other interesting points to offer. For example, in discussing the role of commutation of labour rent into money, Hilton made the observation, 'But the general history of European feudalism shows quite clearly that labour rent was not an essential element in the feudal relations of production, although the

coercive character of these relations perhaps appears most clearly in the organization of forced labour on the demesne.' In his *Studies*, Dobb remarked, 'So far as the growth of the market exercised a disintegrating influence on the structure of Feudalism, and prepared the soil for the growth of forces which were to weaken and supplant it, the story of this influence can largely be identified with the rise of towns as corporate bodies, as these came to possess economic and political independence in varying degrees.' Hilton's comment on this subject presents a contrast, 'Undoubtedly the independent urban commune has been an important component of the special features of European, as distinct from other, feudalisms'. It would, however be as wrong to attribute to communal independence the development of either of merchant capital, or of urban based craft industry, as it would be to lay stress on the fragmentation of sovereignty (itself a concept of non-Marxist historiography).

Sweezy argued that Dobb's virtual identification of feudalism with serfdom is too general to be immediately applicable 'to the study of a particular region during a particular period' and goes on to argue that 'What Dobb is really defining is not one social system but a family of social systems.' To this Sweezy refers to Dobb's points of characterization and says 'Dob refers to a system having these characteristics as the 'classic' form of feudalism, but it would be less likely to mislead if it were called the western European form.' To this Dobb replies, 'Admittedly this production-relationship is itself capable of considerable variation, according to the form which the compulsory extraction of the surplus product takes... But the distinction between these does not correspond to that between western European feudalism and feudalism in eastern Europe.' Sweezy obviously wanted to characterize West European feudalism as a distinct type, and by citing the points mentioned by Dobb, suggested that 'it would be less likely to mislead if it were called the western European feudalism.' Thus according to Sweezy, there are several forms of feudalism, of which the 'western European' was one. Sweezy's portrayal of Dobb is thus clear; Dobb extends his definition of feudalism to include many social systems, but while mentioning the characteristics of feudalism, he concentrates on just one specific type of one social system, let alone a family of social systems. Dobb, in contrast, argued "Sweezy points out the importance of long-distance trade in the disintegration of feudalism, quite in line with his suggested conflict between production for market and production for use. When trade outgrew its peddling stage and 'began to result in the establishment of localized trading and transshipment centers, a qualitatively new factor was introduced. For these centers, though based on long-distance exchange, inevitably became generators of commodity production in their own right. They had to be provisioned from the surrounding countryside... the inefficiency of the manorial organization of production—which probably no one recognized or at least paid any attention to, as long as it had no rival—was now clearly revealed by contrast with a more rational system of specialization and division of labour. Manufactured goods may be bought more cheaply than they could be made, and this pressure to buy generated a pressure to sell. Taken together, these pressures operated powerfully to bring the feudal estates within the orbit of the exchange economy.' Dobb here replies, "I think that Sweezy is wrong in asserting that there is necessarily a correlation between

feudal disintegration and nearness to centers of trade.” Dobb cites two examples in favour of his argument.

“It was precisely in the backward north and west of England that serfdom in the form of direct labour services disappeared earliest, and in the more advanced south-west, with its town markets and trade routes that labour services were most stubborn in their survival. Similarly, in many parts of Eastern Europe intensification of serfdom in the 15th and 16th centuries was associated with the growth of trade and the correlation was, not between nearness to markets and feudal disintegration, but between nearness to markets and feudal serfdom.”

In his rejoinder, Sweezy argued : “The expansion of trade, with the concomitant growth of towns and markets, was external to the feudal mode of production, but it was internal as far as the whole European – Mediterranean economy was concerned.

A thorough study of Western European feudalism... would have to analyze it in the larger European-Mediterranean context of the economy. How this can be done has been brilliantly demonstrated by Pirenne who argued, first, that the origins of feudalism in Western Europe are to be sought in the isolation (be the Arab expansion of the seventh century) of that relatively backward region from the real economic centers of the ancient world, and second, that the later development of feudalism was decisively shaped by the re-establishment of these broken commercial ties.” Sweezy suggested that the prime mover of feudalism was external., and that the crisis and collapse of feudalism has to be explained in terms of its impact on the structure of feudalism. Rodney Hilton’s comment in this respect expresses many disagreements with the Pirenne thesis on the importance of the Mediterranean trade. Hilton considers the struggle for rent as the prime mover of feudalism. One quotation from him should illustrate his viewpoint. “The peasants would strive to increase the portion of the surplus kept by them and could either do this by enforcing an absolute or relative reduction of rent, or by increasing the productivity of the holding without a corresponding increase in rent. Such strivings would lead to peasant revolts and to the cultivation of new land. The lords would of course want to increase the amount of surplus coming to them, and in addition would try to bring fresh land under their control, either already settled by rent-paying tenants (not only direct rent from land but rent disguised as the fiscal benefits of justice), or as yet uncultivated and ready for settlement. Hence, the general expulsion of cultivation which was certainly going on until the end of the thirteenth century, and which was a major contribution of the feudal order, was a product of the rent struggle. Hilton argues that the increase in cultivation as the outcome of this rent struggle led to an increase in the social surplus and this provided the basis for the development in commodity production within feudalism.

One very interesting issue that figured in the debate was how to characterize the economic system that prevailed in western Europe during the 15-th and 16-th centuries. Sweezy called it ‘pre-capitalist commodity production’ arguing that during this period, the growth of commodity production undermined

feudalism, and after the completion of this process, prepared the ground for the growth of capitalism. Dobb, in his rejoinder, argued persuasively that such a characterization necessarily brings the subject of the character of the ruling class and the English revolution of the seventeenth century. After considering the various views offered on the subject, Dobb argues that 'the ruling class was still feudal' and that 'the state was still the political instruments of its rule.' He also wisely distinguishes here the nature of money rent as contractual ground rent and as feudal rent. But the weakness of Dobb's analysis of the internal causation of the breakdown of feudalism is pointed out by Giuliano Procacci in his excellent survey of the debate. He argues that unless the rise of towns that were centers of commerce are shown to be the consequence of the internal development of feudalism, Dobb's argument about the location of the prime mover of feudalism within feudalism itself does not stand on very solid grounds. Here a question comes up; was the rise of towns the prime mover?

Eric Hobsbawm's contribution to the debate, incorporated later, raises interesting questions and cautions against any type of simplistic formulation.

"What we see time and again (as in the 14th and probably the 17th centuries) is that a crisis of feudalism also involves the most advanced sections of bourgeois development within it, and therefore produces an apparent setback". Maurice Dobb's final note is characteristic. In it, he does not show any concern to prove that the rise of towns was the prime mover or that it was internal to feudalism. He plainly recognizes that the basic conflict was between direct producers and their feudal overlords, and goes on to provide a formulation of the link between peasant revolts (which is very much emphasized by Rodney Hilton) and the appearance of bourgeois relations of production. "To the extent that the petty producers were successful in securing partial emancipation from feudal exploitation—perhaps merely an alleviation of it (e.g. a transition from labour rent to money rent)—they were able to retain some element of the surplus product for themselves. This provided both the means and the motive for improving cultivation and extending it to new lands, which incidentally served to sharpen antagonism against feudal restrictions still further. It also laid the basis for some accumulation of capital within the petty mode of production itself and for the start of a process of class differentiation within the economy of small producers..." "This note by Dobb gives the suggestion that the characterization of his view of the dissolution of feudalism as some sort of a techno-economic determinism is somewhat unjustified. Finally there is John Merrington's insightful contribution on the rural-urban divide. His profoundly wealthy article suggests that capitalist division of labour promotes urbanization on one hand and 'realization' on the other. Needless to say, this 'ruralization' means bringing the rural society to the imperatives of capitalist development.

In brief, the volume is very important. Contributions by Hobsbawm and Memington, as well as the additional comments by Hilton and Dobb must enlighten those already familiar with the debate, simply because they were not previously seen. To the new generation of students of economic history, the volume is a must. ~~del del~~

*THE TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO CAPITALISM,
Rodney Hilton (ed) Indian Edition, Aakar Books, Delhi, 2006, pp 191, Price Rs. 150.