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Note

The Rise and Fall of the Manorial System: A Critical Comment

In a recent issue of this JOURNAL North and Thomas outlined a model of the rise and fall of the manorial system, with special reference to England.¹ Unfortunately, their model contains a number of inaccuracies which weaken quite seriously its applicability. The propositions of the model are based upon a confusion of terms and an oversight of authorities, both of which have led to a questionable factual and theoretical interpretation. In the following paragraphs an attempt will be made to elaborate upon these criticisms, and to suggest an alternative approach.

The argument of North and Thomas is undermined from the outset by their failure to make an adequate distinction between "manorialism" and "feudalism." This is not just a historian's quibble, for what is involved is a confusion of two different concepts. As Marc Bloch has pointed out, the manor, though an essential ingredient of feudalism, was older than, and outlasted, European feudalism. Bloch maintained that, "in the interests of sound terminology it is important that the two ideas should be kept clearly separate."² Feudalism was primarily a system of government, a political institution, which drew its vitality from a fusion of military and economic power in the hands of a warrior class.³ It disappeared in western Europe in the face of the increasing importance of the central authority of the State, and in the face of an "economic revolution" which brought about a decisive shift in economic power.⁴ The manor, however, was primarily an economic organization. It could maintain a warrior, but it could equally well maintain a capitalist landlord. It could be self-sufficient, yield produce for the market, or it could yield a money rent. The manor possessed an inherent flexibility so that it continued to evolve, whereas feudalism disappeared.

¹ D. North and R. Thomas, "The Rise and Fall of the Manorial System: A Theoretical Model," JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC HISTORY, XXXI (Dec. 1971), 777-803.

² M. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, II, trans. L. A. Manyon (Paperback edn. London: Routledge, 1965), p. 442.

³ These characteristics are drawn from Bloch, *Feudal Society*, pp. 442-3; J. R. Strayer and R. Coulborn, "The Idea of Feudalism," *Feudalism in History*, R. Coulborn (ed.) (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), pp. 4-9; J. R. Strayer, "Feudalism in Western Europe," *ibid.* p. 16; and F. L. Ganshof, *Feudalism*, (London: Longman, 1952), p. xv.

⁴ See C. Stephenson, *Medieval Feudalism*, (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 11th ed, 1967), p. 98; and for an interesting study, E. J. Nell, "Economic Relationships in the Decline of Feudalism: An Examination of Economic Interdependence and Social Change," *History and Theory*, VI, 3 (1967), 313-50, esp. pp. 323 ff.

North and Thomas may have indicated something about the decline of the feudal system in England, but they are mistaken in their assumption that manorialism died out by about the year 1500.

The origin of the confusion between the manorial system and feudalism becomes clearer on an examination of the purpose of the North and Thomas model. North and Thomas seem to imply that their model is an alternative to Marxian theories of historical evolution.⁵ Disciples of Marx have usually accounted for the decline of feudalism as a mode of production, rather than as a political institution. Consequently, their various explanations for the collapse of feudalism contain elements of the ill-advised identification of feudalism and manorialism.⁶ In attempting to break away from the Marxian thesis, North and Thomas have retained parts of it in their alternative model, confusing one phenomenon (the decline of feudalism) with another, separate phenomenon (the decline of manorialism). Moreover, the absence of any reference to the work of Marxian historians should not disguise the fact that Marxians discussed the so-called "contractual basis" of the medieval rural economy long before North and Thomas alighted on their "contractual shift" explanation. Maurice Dobb and Rodney Hilton have both suggested that the decline of the feudal economy may be explained, in part, by the development of a new contractual basis between landlord and peasant.⁷ Hilton has described this process as "the struggle for rent," and his thesis has found support from the Russian scholar, Kosminsky.⁸ In other words, a part of the argument of North and Thomas has been stated before, only under a different label.

In detailing the emergence of pre-industrial capitalism out of the decay of feudalism, Marxian historians have emphasized the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the period of transition, or of "crisis."⁹ Although North and Thomas have sought a fresh point of departure, they have not attempted to abandon the evolutionary framework of historical materialism, for they, too, envisage the emergence of a money economy by the end of the fifteenth century. They adopt the position that the rise of a money economy is sufficient to explain the collapse of the manorial system, and that the chief stimulus to the development of a money economy is to be found in population growth.¹⁰ This standpoint is a curious mixture of the Marxian and the non-Marxian. On the one hand, North and Thomas seem content to retain the time-scale of historical

⁵ North and Thomas, "Rise and Fall . . .," p. 777.

⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, Introduction to K. Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, J. Cohen (trans.) (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1964), pp. 45-6.

⁷ M. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, (London: Routledge, 1946), pp. 54-5; R. H. Hilton, "The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism," *Science and Society*, XVIII (1953), 340-8.

⁸ Hilton, "Transition . . .," p. 345; E. A. Kosminsky, "The Evolution of Feudal Rent in England from the XIth to the XVth Centuries," *Past and Present*, VII (1955), 12-44.

⁹ Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, pp. 114-5; Dobb, *Studies . . .*, p. 48.

¹⁰ North and Thomas, "Rise and Fall . . .," p. 793-4.

materialism, while ignoring Postan's critique of the "rise of a money economy."¹¹ Thus, they appear to accept the view that historical development implies a cumulative and progressive advance toward some goal, during which each succeeding stage of advance is of greater value than its antecedent.¹² On the other hand, they acknowledge the importance of population movements as determinants of economic trends, but fail to take into account Postan's work on the effects of population movements on the economy of England in the later Middle Ages.¹³ It may be recalled that Postan has suggested that, in pre-industrial England, the rise of a money economy was not uninterrupted, and in that sense not progressive.¹⁴ Postan instanced the fifteenth century as a period of declining population,¹⁵ of a declining money economy and growing self-sufficiency.¹⁶ Indeed, if North and Thomas believe that population movements gave the impetus to a money economy, then they have failed to indicate the effects of the plague years of the later Middle Ages upon the development of that economy.

Arising from the confusion between manorialism and feudalism, and from the incomplete rejection of the Marxian analysis, North and Thomas have drawn up a misleading summary of the condition of the manorial system in 1500. By this time, they maintain that the "manorial system" was "in an advanced state of decay," for the feudal relationship had disappeared, the body of traditional, manorial law had been replaced by an impersonal code, the self-sufficient manor was being replaced by farms producing for the market, and, finally, the manor as an isolated, independent economic unit had disappeared as population, towns, trade and political authority all grew in scale.¹⁷ While this summary contains elements of fact, much of it may be doubted, and the bases of the assertions require reviewing and restating. The criticisms of the summary derive from the failure of North and Thomas to provide an adequate guide to manorialism. They have focused attention upon the landlord and the estate, and ignored completely the other side of the manorial economy, the peasant family farm. In a peasant society it was the latter which was the all-important feature,¹⁸ especially in fifteenth-century England,

¹¹ M. M. Postan, "The Rise of a Money Economy," *Economic History Review* XIV (1944), 123-134.

¹² For a critique of this view see, N. Rotenstreich, "The Idea of Historical Progress and its Assumptions," *History and Theory*, X, 2 (1971), 197-221, especially pp. 297, 201.

¹³ North and Thomas, "Rise and Fall . . .," pp. 794-7; M. M. Postan, "The Fifteenth Century," *Economic History Review* IX (1939), 160-7; "Rapport Moyen Age, Histoire Economique," *IXth International Congress of Historical Sciences*, I, *Rapports*, (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1950), 225-241; "Some Economic Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages," *Economic History Review* II, 3 (1950), 221-246.

¹⁴ Postan, "Money Economy," p. 129.

¹⁵ Postan, "Fifteenth Century," p. 166.

¹⁶ Postan, "Money Economy," p. 131.

¹⁷ North and Thomas, "Rise and Fall . . .," pp. 780-1.

¹⁸ T. Shanin, "The Peasantry as a Political Factor," *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, T. Shanin (ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 241; D. Thorner, "Peasant Economy as a Category in Economic History," *Ibid.* pp. 205-6.

where the demesne economy had collapsed. The criticisms may be grouped into two. First, there are criticisms of fact, and second (and more fundamentally), there are those which stem from the conviction that North and Thomas have misunderstood the nature of the economy and society which they have attempted to study.

North and Thomas maintained that manorial by-laws had been replaced by the end of the fifteenth century, as the major regulative force in everyday life in rural England. In their stead, there had developed the impersonal law of the central government. The falseness of their assertion springs from a misconception of the durability of manorialism and the strength of tradition. Almost any manorial court roll of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries will bear witness to the continuing vitality and importance of manorial by-laws,¹⁹ and it was these laws which remained dominant in rural life.²⁰ The law of the state did not relieve the law of the manor of its central position in people's lives, but developed alongside it. A similar, and equally false, assertion is that which states that the feudal relationship had disappeared. Up to a point, North and Thomas are correct, but their stated concern is the *manorial* system, not the feudal system. In this instance, North and Thomas should refer more properly to the *manorial* relationship. The strength of the landlord-tenant relationship remained unimpaired long after the specifically feudal vestiges of personal ties (serfdom) had vanished. Political and economic change attacked feudalism rather than manorialism. Feudal exploitations and oppressions may have disappeared, but landlords did not.

The factual inaccuracies and the terminological confusion in the argument of North and Thomas are symptomatic of their failure to grasp, first, the theoretical inadequacies of an explanation based upon a progressive evolution, or of a counter-explanation in terms of stages of evolution, and second, the specific qualities of a peasant economy and society. The arguments for and against the general theory of historical materialism have produced the unfortunate effect of telescoping historical explanation into a search for large-scale progressions from one system of production to another, more advanced system. North and Thomas have not escaped this effect, and so they have presented a model which incorporates a transformation from one system of production to another without allowing for different rates of structural change. As Harvey Franklin has pointed out, ". . . change is a structural matter, not a question of timing, progression or precedence."²¹ It is unhistorical to imagine that all feudal or manorial institutions collapsed at the same time. In certain sectors of the economy the medieval order changed relatively rapidly

¹⁹ For some examples of the importance of by-laws after 1500 see W. O. Ault, *Open Field Husbandry and the Village Community: A Study of Agrarian By-Laws in Medieval England* (Philadelphia: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series 55, pt. 7, 1965).

²⁰ A. Everitt, "Farm Labourers," *Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV, 1500-1640*, J. Thirsk (ed.) (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), p. 459.

²¹ S. H. Franklin, "Systems of Production: Systems of Appropriation," *Pacific Viewpoint*, VI, 2 (1965), p. 147.

during and after the fifteenth century, while in others the traditional order continued relatively undisturbed until the onset of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions. The North and Thomas model is a type of evolutionary explanation of social and economic development which has been discarded by several social theoreticians.²²

The social and economic history of the later Middle Ages may be served better by adopting a sociological model of peasant society. While North and Thomas may be correct in stating that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the disappearance of the "isolated manor," they have neglected the peasant economy in the countryside as a basically stable social structure in which certain features remained as ingrained in and after 1500 as in, say, 1200. The emergence of large farms and a network of markets failed to disturb the peasant way of life which characterized the greater part of the countryside and its inhabitants.²³ Peasant self-sufficiency continued to a greater or lesser degree in midland England long after North and Thomas claim that manorial self-sufficiency had vanished.²⁴ Among the more compelling traits of peasant life may have been a double orientation toward the market and to subsistence,²⁵ plus an ability to withdraw from market relations during periods of crisis,²⁶ an acceptance of custom and tradition as decisive governing factors in daily life,²⁷ and a social as much as an economic evaluation of land-holding.²⁸ While it is impossible to do full justice to the richness of the concept of a specific peasant economy within the confines of the present note, some indication may be given of the advantages it possesses as a model of explanation over the North and Thomas model. In particular, three may be noted. First, although peasantries have long formed a major societal type rather than any sort of "transient" production system akin to slavery, feudalism or capitalism, in England, at least, the peasantry disappeared finally during and after the Industrial Revolution.²⁹ Thus, it

²² See A. Inkeles, *What is Sociology?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 33; and M. Nash, "The Organization of Economic Life," *Tribal and Peasant Economies: Readings in Economic Anthropology*, G. Dalton (ed.) (New York: Natural History Press, 1967), pp. 3-4.

²³ Everitt, "Farm Labourers," p. 400.

²⁴ For an example, see W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (Paperback edn, London: MacMillan, 1965), pp. 190-2.

²⁵ Thorner, "Peasant Economy as a Category," p. 207.

²⁶ Shanin, "The Peasantry as a Political Factor," p. 240.

²⁷ Shanin, *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, p. 15.

²⁸ M. M. Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime—England," *The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages*, M. M. Postan (ed.) (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), pp. 625-6: "To a wealthy peasant as much as to a poor one, the possession of land was an object to be pursued in all circumstances and at all costs. To him, land was not only a 'factor of production,' but also a 'good' worth possessing for its own sake, and enjoyed as a measure of social status."

²⁹ This may be judged at two levels: first, the total economy of the country, and second, the farming community. The criteria for distinguishing a peasant economy as the characteristic feature of a region or country have been spelt out by Thorner, "Peasant Economy as a Category," pp. 203 ff. His argument is further crystallized by

possesses its own time-span, firmly straddling the "problem" period between the medieval and the modern. Second, as peasant society included the majority of the population in pre-industrial England, radical social alterations may be separated from more superficial changes by virtue of their effect on the cohesiveness and stability of peasant society. And third, the study of *the* major social structure through time can lead to the fruitful study of processes of change and development, whereas the definition of stages of evolution, or of modes of production, only leads to a loss of a proper perspective of historical development.³⁰

To establish a satisfactory model of peasant society, and thus of economic and social change, historians will need to have increasing recourse to the work of anthropologists and sociologists as well as economists. At the present, they may draw upon theories and concepts derived from studies of peasantries, both past and present—studies of developing scope and rigor.³¹ Historians are already provided with a part of the methodological equipment necessary to conduct comparative studies of peasant society,³² and the completion of the equipment awaits the ability and inclination of individuals to master the mass of detail contained in manorial court rolls, the chief source of information on peasant life in England in the later Middle Ages.³³ Sociologists and eco-

S. H. Franklin, "Reflections on the Peasantry," *Pacific Viewpoint*, III, 1 (1962), pp. 4-9 *et passim*. At the level of the farm the criteria for separating peasants from "agriculturalists" are summed up by J. D. Henshall, "Models of Agricultural Activity," *Socio-Economic Models in Geography*, R. J. Chorley and P. Haggett (eds.) (London: Methuen, 1968), pp. 430-432.

³⁰ For an expansion of this point see, H. C. Prince, "Real, Imagined, and Abstract Worlds of the Past," *Progress in Geography*, III, C. Board, R. J. Chorley, P. Haggett and D. R. Stoddart (eds.) (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), pp. 14, 23-4.

³¹ Perhaps the most important advances in recent years have sprung from the translation of A. V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, B. Kerblay, D. Thorner, and R. E. F. Smith (eds. and trans.) (Homewood, Illinois: American Economic Association, Translation Series, 1966), and from the work of S. H. Franklin in "Systems of Production: Systems of Appropriation," *Pacific Viewpoint*, VI, 2 (1965), 145-166; "The Case of the Missing Chef" (Review of Chayanov), *Pacific Viewpoint*, IX, 2 (1968), 196-201; and, *The European Peasantry: The Final Phase*, (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 1-19. The work of Chayanov, first published in the 1920's, relates to the Russian peasantry under the last decades of Tsarism. In 1969, Franklin wrote, ". . . looking at the same phenomenon [peasant economy] generations apart we [Chayanov and Franklin] produced a similar sort of explanation," *The European Peasantry*, p. xiii.

³² See M. Bloch, "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," *Enterprise and Secular Change: Readings in Economic History*, F. C. Lane and J. C. Riemersma (eds.) (Homewood, Illinois: American Economic Association, 1953), pp. 494-521. For further formulations see, J. A. Raftis, "Marc Bloch's Comparative Method and the Rural History of Medieval England," *Medieval Studies*, XXIV (1962), 349-368, and W. H. Sewell, Jr. "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History," *History and Theory*, VI, 2 (1967), 208-218.

³³ This approach has been pioneered by J. A. Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility: Studies in the Social History of the Medieval English Village*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Studies and Texts 8, 1964), and taken further by his pupil E. DeWindt, *Land and People at Holywell-cum-Needingworth* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Studies and Texts 22, 1971).

conomic anthropologists have devised various models for the study of stable social institutions,³⁴ and traditional society in change,³⁵ and historians may well adapt these to the study of peasant society. However, it is as well to be wary of the trap into which North and Thomas have fallen, of sacrificing factual accuracy to the appeal of the model. Their experience should alert historians to the dangers of unsound theoretical explanations based on a sketchy assemblage of factual data. While one welcomes the greater regard for theory in history, the theory must be carefully tested against the results of an adequate empirical investigation.

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³⁴ For example, M. Gluckman, "The Utility of the Equilibrium Model in the Study of Social Change," *American Anthropologist*, LXX, 2 (1968), 219-237.

³⁵ N. J. Smelser, "Toward a Theory of Modernization," *Tribal and Peasant Economies*, pp. 29-48.