
UNIT 13 DEBATES ON FEUDALISM

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13.1 INTRODUCTION

The debates on feudalism cover a wide spectrum of themes ranging from the precise meaning of the term to the origins, nature and consequences of the system under survey. Although one may find the Latin word *feodalis*, from which the word ‘feudal’ has been derived, in medieval Europe, the term was employed in a strictly legal sense. It was used to connote the fief (one particular form of real property right), and not to denote a complex type of social organization. The word ‘feudalism’ was popularized through the works of the eighteenth-century French philosophers, notably by Boulainvilliers and Montesquieu, who used it to indicate the parcelling out of sovereignty among a host of petty princes and lords during the Middle Ages. However, with the progress of the French Revolution, the term practically came to be used as a general description covering the many abuses of the *Ancien Régime*. Since then, different meanings have been attached to the word ‘feudalism’ and the historians have applied the term with varying emphases and connotations, with the broad agreement that feudalism, either as a political structure or as a social formation, was the dominant system in western and central Europe at least between the tenth and the twelfth centuries.

In this Unit, we will study the views of various scholars on feudalism in Europe. Beginning with the early formulations about the origin of the feudal system we will review the recent debate on it. Main views discussed in this Unit will include Henri Pirenne thesis, The Feudal Revolution thesis, the Plough and Stirrup thesis and the recent debates on it. We will also study the views which represent feudalism as ties of dependence or as mode of production.

13.2 THE EARLY FORMULATIONS

The early historians of feudalism often emphasised the purely legalistic aspects of this system, namely fiefs, vassalage, knightly or military service and justice by the lords. The pioneering work of F. W. Maitland, a British historian of

law in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, was carried out within this understanding of feudalism. According to this tradition of scholarship, the basic characteristics of feudalism in medieval Europe were fragmentation of political authority, public power in private hands, and a military system in which an essential part of the armed forces was secured through private contracts. In other words, feudalism was conceptualized as a method of government, and a way of securing the forces necessary to preserve that method of government. Drawing upon this legal and rather technical use of the term, many present-day historians think it necessary to restrict the use of 'feudalism' only to the specifically voluntary and personal bonds of mutual protection, loyalty and support among the members of the administrative, military or ecclesiastical elite in medieval Europe, to the exclusion of the involuntary obligations attached to the unfree tenures. The bonds which the term 'feudalism' excludes, according to this formulation, may be treated under a separate category of Manorialism.

However, almost all these characteristics of the medieval European political organization appeared to have formed a sharp break from the traditions of Antiquity. As a form of the disintegration of the political authority, the origin of feudalism was therefore located in the customs and practices of the 'barbarian' Germanic tribes who engineered the dissolution of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. In the early legalistic and dynastic histories the term usually carried a sense of political decline and economic retrogression. Conditions of a 'natural economy', as Max Weber argued, or those of a 'closed house-economy', as Karl Bucher put it, were said to have enveloped the feudal Europe. However, by the end of the nineteenth century most of the professional historians came to abandon such catastrophic views of the 'barbarian invasions' and began to appreciate the complexities of the transition from the ancient world to medieval civilization. Fustel de Coulanges developed a theory of Roman origins of feudalism, which stressed the Roman precedence of the *mansi* and the *villa*, and had a significant influence on historical interpretations in his day. In the early decades of the twentieth century, many historians tended to emphasize the elements of continuity between the Germanic kingdoms and the Roman Empire, among whom the French historian Henri See, Belgian historian Otto Seeck and the Austrian historian Alfons Dopsch were particularly important.

Tracing the roots of the various forms of landholding, social classes and political structure to the organization of the later Roman Empire, Dopsch argued that in medieval Europe, save for the temporary disturbances caused by the invasions, trades still circulated along the Roman roads, carrying not only the luxuries but also the necessities of life. For Dopsch, the towns continued to exist and innumerable local markets gave a lie to the theory of regression to natural economy. He also could not see any cultural break between the late antiquity and the middle ages: "The Germans were not enemies to destroy or wipe out Roman culture, on the contrary they preserved and developed it". Even the French historian Ferdinand Lot, who believed that the end of Antiquity had a disastrous consequence for the European civilization, held the pace of transition to have been quite slow and observed that the continued contact and gradual fusion of the Roman and Germanic worlds enabled many Roman institutions to pass into the structure of the barbarian kingdoms.

13.3 THE PIRENNE THESIS

The question of continuity with the classical world took a radically new turn between the years 1922 and 1935 when the distinguished Belgian historian Henri Pirenne began to put forward his famous thesis regarding the impact of the Islamic expansion on the development of feudalism in Europe. The thesis was divided in two distinct parts, one showing the continuation of the classical tradition in the Merovingian period, the other demonstrating the fundamental change of society in the Carolingian age. According to Pirenne, the Germanic invasions destroyed neither the Mediterranean unity of the ancient world, nor the cultural unity of the 'Romania' as it still existed in the fifth century. From the fifth to the eighth century the Syrian merchants continued to bring the spices and luxury clothes of the Orient, the wines of Ghaza, the oil of North Africa and the papyrus of Egypt to the ports of the West from those of Egypt and Asia Minor. The royal revenue was derived in the largest measure from the indirect taxes (tonlieu) on this commerce and the use of the Roman gold solidus, at once the instrument and symbol of the economic unity of the Mediterranean basin, was preserved. As the land-locked sea remained the highway of communication with the Byzantine Empire for the barbarians established in Italy, Africa, Spain and Gaul, the Mediterranean character of the ancient civilization was not actually ruptured in the Merovingian period.

The cause of the break with the tradition of antiquity, Pirenne argued, was the rapid and unexpected advance of the Arab Muslims under the Umayyad caliphate which closed up the Mediterranean along the coast of Gaul [modern day France] about the year 650, and severed Gallic relations with Syria and Egypt, drying up the stream of commerce from Marseilles. Although the Byzantine imperial navy succeeded in repulsing the Arab offensive from the Aegean Sea, the Adriatic and the southern shores of Italy, the Tyrrhenian Sea fell completely under the domination of the Saracens. They encircled it to the south and the west through Africa and Spain, with the strategically located naval bases at the Balearic Isles, Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily. The upshot of this advance was the final separation of the East from the West, and the end of the Mediterranean unity. From the beginning of the eighth century the whole economic movement in the region was directed towards Baghdad, and countries like Africa and Spain, previously important members of the Mediterranean community, were drawn into this new orbit. In Pirenne's formulation, the Mediterranean functioned no longer as a channel of commercial and intellectual communication between the east and the west, but rather as a barrier between two strikingly distinct, if not hostile, civilizations.

This was, according to Pirenne, the founding moment of feudalism in Europe. Having been thus 'bottled up', the West was forced to live upon its own resources. In the course of the eighth century, the urban life and the professional merchants disappeared, credit and contracts were no longer in use, the importance of writing decreased, gold coinage yielded to silver monometallism, and the former 'exchange economy' was substituted by an economy without markets. This was in fact an economy of regression, occupied solely with the cultivation of the soil and the consumption of its products by the owners, where payments were largely rendered in kind and each estate aimed at supplying all its own needs. The utility of the innumerable small weekly local markets was limited to satisfying the household needs of the surrounding population. While

a number of Jew traders were certainly engaged in long-distance trade, this was principally a spasmodic and occasional commerce in expensive commodities which only a very limited clientele could afford and consequently its effect on the entire economy was minimal. As a result of such 'commercial paralysis', the empire of Charlemagne, in striking contrast to Roman and Merovingian Gaul, was essentially a land empire. Movable wealth no longer played any significant part in economic life. The possession of land began to determine the nature and modes of social existence. The return of society to a purely agricultural civilization was expressed in the political sphere through the disintegration of public authority in the hands of its agents, who, thanks to their territorial possessions, had become independent and considered the authority with which they were invested as a part of their patrimony. On a larger scale, again, the shattering of the Mediterranean unity restricted the papal authority to western Europe, and the conquest of Spain and Africa left the king of the Franks the master of the Christian Occident, the only temporal authority to whom the Pontiff could turn. In this sense, Pirenne wrote in a famous sentence, "Without Islam the Frankish empire would probably never have existed and Charlemagne, without Mohammed, would be inconceivable."

Pirenne's thesis drew both applause and criticism. Many historians refused to admit that the growth of Islam had been so decisive a factor in the development of feudalism in Europe, particularly since there was no satisfactory evidence indicating an active Arab policy of prohibiting commerce in the Mediterranean. Pirenne was also criticized of overstating both the cultural unity of the Roman world and the role of Oriental commerce in the economic life of Merovingian Gaul. Later research emphasized the extent of trade and commerce in the Carolingian age. The studies of M. Sabbe on the commerce in precious commodities attempted to show that the Mediterranean trade was interrupted less completely than Pirenne had thought. R. S. Lopez (*Birth of Europe*) and F. L. Ganshof (*The Carolingians and the Frankish and Feudalism*) demonstrated that there was still a considerable degree of commerce in the Mediterranean ports between the eighth and the tenth centuries. However, Pirenne's work certainly inaugurated a closer scrutiny of the economic evidence, widened the field of historical inquiries and stimulated research in several new directions.

13.4 FEUDALISM AS TIES OF DEPENDENCE

While the Pirenne thesis undeniably offered a powerful and provocative explanation of the origin of feudalism in medieval Europe, it did not concern itself very much with the definition of feudalism. By the early half of the twentieth century at least two opposing, though related, conceptualizations of feudalism were in circulation. The mainstream liberal view, springing from the legalistic school of history, tended to regard it as a body of institutions that created and regulated the exchange of obligations of obedience and service on the one hand and those of protection and maintenance on the other when one free man (known as the vassal) used to surrender himself to another free but more powerful man (known as the lord). Since the lord, in order to fulfil his obligation of maintenance, usually granted to his vassal a unit of real property known as a fief or feodalis, historians such as F. L. Ganshof and F. M. Stenton argued, the term feudalism covered no more than the institutions which involved these practices. It was precisely in this technical sense, they maintained, that the term could be properly applied to describe the states born of the break-up of the Carolingian empire and the countries influenced by them.

On the other hand, the Marxist and especially the Soviet historians expanded the use of the term to address a more general examination of the economic structure of the concerned society. In the nineteenth century Karl Marx had already proposed an understanding of human history based on the gradual rise and fall of different modes of production which were said to have determined the general character of the social, political and ideological processes. In keeping with this formulation, they tended to characterize the system of reciprocal but unequal personal relations among members of the military elite as a mere derivative of the larger social relations of production which had to work within a mode of production marked by the absence of commodity exchange.

Largely moving away from both the restrictive legalistic view and the economic deterministic conceptualization of 'feudalism', the French historian Marc Bloch chose to explain the phenomenon by exploring the various forms of, what he called, 'the ties between man and man'. Bloch viewed feudalism as a set of social conditions where the relations of personal protection and subordination immensely expanded as the dispersal of political authority operated through an extreme subdivision of the rights of real property. Examining the overlapping careers of family solidarity and feudalism, Bloch argued that the bond of kinship progressively tightened with the development of feudalism. The group founded on blood relationship functioned both as a springboard of help and protection for the individual (which could be most effectively mobilized in the cases of blood-feuds), as the power of the state to provide such protection declined, and as an impediment for his possession rights. There was an important aspect of economic solidarity too, since several related households frequently formed 'brotherhoods' which not only shared the same room and board and cultivated the same common fields, but were also held collectively responsible for the payment of dues and commutation of services to the seigniorial lord.

In spite of several social and regional variations, Bloch argued, the principle of a 'human nexus' where one individual rendered himself as a subordinate to another permeated the whole life of feudal society. At one level, vassalage was the form of such dependence peculiar to the members of the militarized upper classes. Both the political necessities and the 'mental climate' of the age attached great value to the exchange of protection and obedience. Since the question of salary was precluded in the overwhelmingly agrarian economy with limited money exchange, fiefs or stipendiary tenements for the vassals were in widespread use. At another, the lower orders of the society were bound by a whole group of relationships of personal dependence – servitude – which had as their common characteristics a rigorous subjection on the subordinate's part, and on that of the protector a virtually uninhibited authority, productive of lucrative revenues. Bloch did not consider the manor to have been a feudal organisation in itself, though he agreed that it had positively assisted in extending the grip of feudalism over a much larger population. Within this broad framework of the pervasive ties of dependence, Bloch located the divergences both within and between feudal societies, most notably in the forms or complexity of noble association, the extent of peasant dependency and the importance of money payments. In this sense, for Bloch the term 'feudalism' was a heuristic device for comparative studies of local phenomena, rather than as a blanket definition of the medieval social order.

Bloch also underscored the transformations that occurred over time within this overall structure. Arguing that the European society underwent a series of

profound and widespread changes during the middle of the eleventh century, he proposed a theory of two feudal ages. While the second feudal age did not make a complete break with the first, in almost all spheres of life some qualitatively different advances were made. The evolution of the economy in this age – primarily involving demographic growth, consolidation of human settlements, development of intercommunication, increase in trade, urban growth, and amelioration of the currency situation – entailed a genuine revision of social values. Paralleling the decay or transformation of the ‘classical feudalism’, as it were, a sort of contraction in the size of the kindred groups as well as a loosening of the kinship bonds were in process. In the new sectors of growth and development the emergence of the individual was already being signalled. The formation of Latin Christianity, the process of linguistic assimilation, the revival of interest in Roman law and eventually the repeated enfranchisements contributed in varying proportions to this process.

While Marc Bloch’s study constituted a definite breakthrough in the analysis of the medieval societies and continues to be a classic in the field, the researches it stimulated have proposed major modifications of his thesis. Historians have pointed out that while Bloch’s rich description is extremely well aware of the constant though slow changes in the feudal society, there is no identification of a driving force of change or its decline. Bloch describes, but often does not account for, the inner dynamism of the social process. Bloch has also been criticized on the grounds of a loose chronology, an inflexible conception of state and a dated conception of lineage.

13.5 THE FEUDAL REVOLUTION THESIS

Taking the cue from Bloch, Georges Duby, one of the most original and influential post-war historians of medieval society, attempted to look beyond the economic to the ideological dimensions of feudal institutions. His detailed study of the political, economic, and social life in the Maconnais settlement in France from the tenth through the twelfth centuries was published in 1953 and focused a generation of historical research on what he called the “feudal revolution” of the early eleventh century. Arguing that fief never played “more than a peripheral part in what is generally known as feudalism”, Duby documented how with the collapse of royal authority in the late tenth and early eleventh century, the castellans forced the lesser landlords into vassalage and imposed on all peasants a new kind of lordship – seigneurie banale – based on taxation rather than tenure. Previously, Duby argued, the obligation to work in order to feed a master fell upon slaves, but since this period, with the increased weight of the seigniorial power, this burden came to be borne by all villagers. This involved a realignment of the social functions. On the one hand, the difference between the freemen and the serfs came to be blurred as all the villagers were subjected to identical and heavier levies. On the other hand, the differences between the laymen and the clergy came to be more sharply pronounced, with the clergy strongly defending their exemption from seigniorial exactions. The bearing of arms also became a crucial marker of social distinction in this period, with the horsemen or the knights forming a lower stratum of the aristocracy. The term ‘feudal revolution’ signifies this entire social process, slow but unmistakable, which not only transformed the previous economy of war and plunder, but also restructured the aristocratic family into the patrilineage and effected related changes in the domains of mental attitudes. Duby developed a fresh perspective

on the question of the decline of feudalism. Unlike the Pirennean and the dominant Marxist models, which visualized the collapse of feudalism resulting from a blow from outside – either in terms of the Crusades or in relation to the increased peasant flight into the cities – Duby chose to see the decline as a slow and dynamic process which reflected the internal developments within the rural economy and society.

In his subsequent works, Duby turned to explore the ways in which the substantial growth of the rural economy after the feudal revolution accentuated the contrast between leisure and labour. His researches on the practices of family, the marriage customs, the chivalric code and the governing medieval imagination of ideal society as a sum of three distinct unequal orders (those who pray, those who fight and those who toil) attempted to elucidate the perceptions, concepts, and attitudes behind medieval institutions and practices. He called this the “imaginary” or the “mental attitudes” of the period. Focusing on the construction and function of as well as the changes in the reigning ideological models of the feudal society, Duby simultaneously mapped the social changes they were reproducing.

While much of the historiography of feudalism has now moved into Duby’s perspective’s shadows, his work has also generated an intense and vigorous debate among the historians. Dominique Barthelemy, in his detailed study of the feudal Vendomois society, has questioned Duby’s vital methodological assumptions and argued that Duby has mistaken the change in style of documentation as the change in society itself. Theodore Evergates has pointed out that Duby’s insistence on the absolute dichotomy between independent castellanies and the monarchical state has retained an old Blochian model that does not take the diverse forms of local power configurations into account. Constance Bouchard and other feminist historians have criticized Duby for underplaying the diverse ways in which the women related to the feudal revolution. His refusal to engage the secular documents, especially the royal and princely administrative registers, has also invited disapproval from many historians.

13.6 THE PLOUGH AND THE STIRRUP THESIS

Lynn White Jr. made an important intervention in the growing debate in 1962 by strongly emphasizing the role of technology in shaping the feudal societies. He argued that remarkable technological improvements in the fields of agriculture sustained and even improved the conditions of the peasantry and the artisanate even while government fell into anarchy, trade was greatly reduced, and the so-called higher realms of culture decayed. According to White, the larger medieval culture of technology was rooted in the Christian theological traditions, which greatly honoured the dignity and spiritual value of labour and encouraged the production of labour-saving machines.

At one level, White’s analysis focused on the immense significance of certain technological inventions for medieval agriculture which include the use of the iron plough for tilling, the stiff-harness for equine traction, the crank in hand- querns and on rotary grindstones, the water-mill for mechanical power, marling for soil improvement and the three-field system for crop rotation.

These constituted, in White's words, no less than an agricultural revolution in the Middle Ages. The development and diffusion of the northern wheeled plough — equipped with coulter, horizontal share and mouldboard — not only greatly increased production by making the tillage of rich, heavy, badly-drained river-bottom soils possible, it also saved labour by making cross-ploughing superfluous, and thus produced the typical northern strip-systems of land division, as distinct from the older block-system dictated by the cross-ploughing necessary with the lighter Mediterranean plough. Moreover, this heavy plough needed such power that peasants pooled their oxen and ploughed together, thus laying the basis for the manor which was the medieval co-operative agricultural community. The effects of the heavy plough were supplemented and greatly enhanced in the later eighth century by the invention of the three-field system in the late eighth century. Under the two-field system the peasants' margin of production was insufficient to support a work-horse; under the three-field system the horse displaced the ox as the normal plough and draft animal of the northern plains. The traditional yoke-system of harness which neither allowed the horse to exert its full force in pulling the plough nor enabled the ancients to tie up one animal in front of another was immensely improved by the sudden and almost simultaneous appearance of the horseshoe, the tandem harness and the new horse-collar in the late ninth or early tenth century. We shall take up these issues in greater details in Unit 23. Here we pause to observe that according to White, through the shift from the ox and the two-field system to the horse and the three-field system, the northern peasantry was able to increase labour productivity by the later Middle Ages.

At another level, White claimed that the invention of the stirrup and the horseshoe played a significant role in shaping the military organization of feudal society. The stirrup not only saved the horsemen from fatigue, it also increased the effectiveness of his charge by giving him a better seat and allowing him a vastly improved footing from which to hurl his lance or swing his sword, mace, or battle-axe. White went into great detail to show that the stirrup had not been in general use in western Europe until the Carolingian Franks adopted it for their heavy shock combat cavalry in the eighth century. This cavalry was effective and expensive in equal proportions and hence, he argued, it led the early Carolingians to reorganize their realm along feudal lines so as to support mounted fighters in much greater numbers than even before. "The requirements of the new mode of warfare which the stirrup made possible found expression in a new form of western European society dominated by an aristocracy of warriors endowed with land so that they might fight in a new and highly specialized way."

White has been criticized by later historians for isolating the technical improvements from the larger social and economic processes that marked the period. In this sense, Hilton and Sawyer argued, White's thesis retained a strong content of technical determinism. In a similar vein, Perry Anderson argued that the simple existence of technological innovations was no guarantee of their widespread utilisation. Pointing out that a gap of some two or three centuries separates their initial sporadic appearance and their constitution into a distinct and prevalent system, he criticized White for overlooking the internal dynamic of the mode of production itself. The stirrup thesis was also challenged by several military historians who pointed out that it did not explain the effective use of heavily armoured cavalry without using stirrups outside France

long before 700 AD or the continued use of armoured cavalry with stirrups outside France after 700 AD but without “feudalism”. Most importantly, many historians have questioned White’s fundamental assumption that the Franks were the first to exploit the stirrup. The individual works of Ian Heath, Philip Barker and David Nicolle have credited the Byzantine Empire and the Arab caliphate with its devising, and the Avars and the Lombards with its introduction to Europe, thereby disputing the proposed correspondence between the stirrup and feudalism.

13.7 FEUDALISM AS MODE OF PRODUCTION

It has already been mentioned that within the Marxist tradition the importance of the forces and relations of economic production were consistently emphasized since the other aspects of the feudal society were considered as reflections and expressions of this complex. Although feudalism had continued to be analyzed as a mode of production dominated by land and a natural economy within this tradition for long, the theory was fully developed and worked out in the work of the British historian Perry Anderson in 1978. It is important to mention that the different use of Marxian perspective has produced a variety of historical perspectives. While in France Guy Bois’s intensive study of the village of Lournand not only confirmed Duby’s findings on the small scale but also extended Duby’s thesis into an intriguing argument concerning the dialectical role of economy and productive relations during the period between the Germanic invasions and the first millennium, in the context of late feudal England the Marxist historians like Dobb, Brenner and Hilton have argued in differing ways.

Anderson’s analysis contradicted the conventional characterization of feudalism as an economy of regression or an era of decline and disintegration. Maintaining that feudalism was a more advanced system of enhancing agricultural productivity and the agrarian surplus than the classical slave mode of production, he argued that there were several structural contradictions within feudalism whose overall consequences were to drive the whole agrarian economy forward. The class of feudal lords extracted the surplus from the peasants or the primary producers in various forms of labour services, rents in kind or customary dues. This form was expressed through the politico-legal relations of compulsion of which serfdom was the most general form. Its necessary result was a juridical amalgamation of economic exploitation with political authority; in Marxist terminology it is known as extra-economic coercion. The peasant was subjected to the jurisdiction of his lord. At the same time, the property rights of the lord over his land were not absolute. His right in land was mediated at both ends through a lord who was his superior to whom he owed military (among other) obligations, and a vassal who was subordinate to him, who in turn owed him services and dues of various kinds. The chain of such dependent tenures linked to military service extended upwards to the summit of the system – in most cases, a monarch – who at least in principle held all lands as his domain. The consequence of such a system was that political sovereignty was never focused on a single centre. Anderson contended that while the functions of the State were thus disintegrated in a vertical allocation downwards, at each level the political and the economic relations were integrated. In this way, according to him, the parcellisation of sovereignty was constitutive of the whole feudal mode of production.

Returning to the early debates about the genesis of feudalism, Anderson chose to see the phenomenon as a 'synthesis' of elements released by the concurrent dissolution of primitive-communal and slave modes of production. In the real historical scene, he insisted, the mode of production never existed in a pure state anywhere in Europe. The concrete social formations of medieval Europe were always composite systems, in which other modes of production survived and intertwined with feudalism proper. Following the Soviet historians Liublinskaya, Gutnove and Udaltsova, Anderson advanced a three-fold zone-wise typology of feudalism. i) The first zone comprised of northern France and its neighbouring regions. In this 'core region of European feudalism', which roughly corresponded to the homeland of the Carolingian Empire, Anderson saw a 'balanced synthesis' of the Roman and the Germanic elements. ii) The second zone that lay to the south of the core region included Provence, Italy and Spain. Here, especially in Italy, the Roman legacy was much more dominant in the recombination of barbarian and ancient modes of production. Hence, the Roman legal conceptions of property as free, heritable and alienable, qualified feudal landed norms from the very beginning. The rural society was considerably heterogeneous, combining manors (mostly in Lombardy and north Italy), freehold peasants (principally in central Italy), latifundia (particularly in south Italy) and urban landowners in different regions. Precisely for the survival of the classical traditions, the municipal political organization could also flourish in the area from the tenth century onwards. iii) In the third zone, lying to the north and east of the core region and consisting of Germany, Scandinavia and England, the influence of the Roman rule was either superficial or non-existent. Consequently, in these places an allodial peasantry strongly held on to its communal institutions which remarkably slowed down the pace of the transition towards feudalism. As a result, serfdom was not introduced into Saxony until the late twelfth century, and in fact, it was never properly established in Sweden at all. It was only due to the persistence of these older local traditions, Anderson argued, that a full-blooded feudalism arrived in Germany as late as the 12th century, while the Norman conquerors had to systematically implant from above an imported model of centralized feudalism in England.

Emphasizing the dynamic character of the feudal economy, Anderson argued that the lords and the peasants were objectively engaged in a conflictual process which in the ultimate instance tended to stimulate productivity at both ends. On the one hand, the lord sought to maximize labour services on his manor as well as dues in kind from the peasant strips, and net productivity on the noble demesnes remained substantially higher than on the peasant plots. On the other hand, the direct role of the lord in managing and supervising the process of production declined as the surplus itself grew. As a combined effect of peasant resistance, improvements in technical equipment and the customary nature of the feudal dues, a margin was created in the course of time for the results of improved productivity to accrue to the direct producer. Similarly, in characteristic opposition to the argument of urban decline in medieval Europe, Anderson claimed that although the largest medieval towns never rivalled in scale those of the ancient world, their function within the social formation was an advanced one. Because of this qualitative leap, a dynamic opposition between an urban economy of increasing commodity exchange and a rural economy of natural exchange was possible only in the feudal mode of production. The contradiction between feudalism's own rigorous tendency to a decomposition of sovereignty and the class unity of the nobility also proved to be fruitful to

the extent it provided, Anderson argued, the objective condition for the political autonomy of the towns in the later middle ages.

However, the very progress of medieval agriculture, according to Anderson, began to incur its own penalties from the middle of the thirteenth century when the forces of production tended to stall and recede within the existent relations of production. Here he substantially modified the older Marxian thesis which attempted to explain the demise of the feudal system in terms of developments extraneous to the medieval dynamic. Anderson argues, both in agriculture and mining a technical barrier was reached at which exploitation became unviable or even detrimental. The ‘basic motor of rural reclamation’, which had driven the whole feudal economy forward for three centuries, eventually overreached this objective limit of the forces of production. As the population grew while yields fell, the seigneurial income progressively decreased. In order to compensate the decline in the revenue, the lords increasingly engaged themselves in warfare and plunder which in turn, aided by the waves of pestilence, resulted in a devastating scarcity of labour. The lords responded to the crisis by trying to reinforce harsher servile conditions that unleashed a desperate class struggle on the land. One of the fundamental contradictions of the regime – the dual articulation of the feudal mode of production in the urban and the rural sectors — now developed to a point where the former, structurally sheltered by the parcellisation of sovereignty in the medieval polity, could decisively influence the outcome of the class struggle in the latter. The towns, which increasingly came to perceive the runaway serfs as a positive labour input for urban manufacture, had already contributed to the slow but steady process of commutation of dues into money rents. Now they actively assisted the process of the dissolution of serfdom. Thus the particular mode of production crumbled because it had begun to impede the expansion of society’s productive capacity. Far from the general crisis in the feudal mode of production worsening the conditions of the direct producers in the countryside, it ended by ameliorating and emancipating it.

Anderson’s discussion has been criticized for being too schematic. While he insists on the ‘catastrophic collision’ or class struggle as the driving force which brings about both feudal society and its demise, his concentration on this single aspect leaves out the larger and more diverse picture of the feudal societies.

13.8 THE RECENT STATE OF DEBATE

The debate on feudalism is far from being closed. In fact, in the recent years the debate on feudalism has taken another interesting turn. In a 1974 essay Elizabeth Brown has severely criticized the unthinking use of the term ‘feudalism’ to describe heterogeneous phenomena in medieval Europe and argued that attention must be paid to the shifting meanings of the key jargons (like fief and vassal) as well as to the diverse social realities they represented. Building on the work of Brown, the historian Susan Reynolds has questioned the validity of not only the term ‘feudalism’, but also the system it claims to represent. Reynolds argued that the previous historians had been too ready to read back the eleventh and the twelfth century legal terminology onto the much more variegated ninth and tenth century societies. This had ended up creating a ‘feudal world’ which simply did not exist, or which, at most, described only small parts of France for short periods. The enormity of the claim has predictably led to a re-evaluation of the existent historical literature on feudalism.

13.9 SUMMARY

We hope this Unit has familiarized you with the views of various scholars and with the debates on feudalism. You must have noticed how scholars have tried to define feudalism, trace its origins and analyze it as a political structure and social formation. In early formulation feudalism was conceptualized as a method of government and a way of securing the forces necessary to preserve that method of government.

Pirenne felt that the disruption of trade in Europe greatly contributed to the development of feudalism. Marc Bloch examined the feudalism from the point of view of ties of dependence and argued that the bond of kinship progressively tightened with the development of feudalism. Duby called the rise of “feudalism as feudal revolution” which altered the entire social process. Lynn White Jr. put forward the view that the technology played a crucial role in shaping the feudal society. Perry Anderson considered feudalism as a more advanced system of generating agricultural productivity and agrarian surplus than the classical slave mode of production. He argued that it took the whole agrarian economy forward. The view of these and many other scholars will be further referred to in the next two Units also where we will discuss forms and structures, phases and decline of feudalism.

13.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Explain Pirenne’s thesis about the rise of Feudalism in Europe.
- 2) Elaborate Marc Bloch’s views on feudalism as a set of social conditions.
- 3) What do you understand by feudal revolution?
- 4) Give a brief account of the concept of feudalism as a mode of production.