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The Use of Feudalism in Comparative History

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I: The problem of definition

The word feudalism invites – even compels – some kind of historical comparison. It purports to represent the nature of any society that is described as feudal, which implies distinguishing feudal societies from those that are not feudal. Since the eighteenth century the adjective feudal, originally applied to medieval Europe, has sometimes been extended to societies elsewhere on the ground that what observers saw there looked like what they saw in the European Middle Ages. Since then historians of medieval Europe have discussed which countries were more or less feudal and which became "feudalized," or ceased to be feudal, earlier or later. The trouble is that the words feudal and feudalism are used in many different senses, so that they represent not one concept but many. While in colloquial and journalistic use the adjective feudal can apply to any system or behavior that is seen as hierarchical and oppressive, historians of the supposedly feudal European Middle Ages quite often use both it and the noun feudalism without definition or explanation. Some of those who hope to avoid problems of definition by not using the noun nevertheless continue to use the adjective. Either way, where meanings can be guessed from the context they are very varied. The resulting misunderstandings and muddles constitute the first and most obvious pitfall in the comparative use of feudalism. I shall therefore use the first half of my contribution to our discussions in trying to establish the main characteristics of what seem to me the most significant varieties of the concept in past and present historiography.

Three types of feudalism

In 1974 Elizabeth A. R. Brown and Cor van de Kieft both drew attention to the confusions arising from different definitions, or implied definitions, of feudalism.[1] In 1985 John O. Ward listed eleven "overlapping and competing meanings"

1 Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe," *American Historical Review* 79 (1974), 1063-88; Cor van de Kieft, "De feodale maatschappij der middeleeuwen," *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 89 (1974), 193-211.

behind twentieth-century uses of the word.[2] In 2000, however, Chris Wickham suggested that the various concepts could be classified into three main types.[3] His classification seems to me convincing and useful. I shall therefore follow it, calling the three types (which I discuss in the opposite order to his) Ganshof, Bloch/Weber, and Marx.

In *Qu'est-ce que la féodalité*, translated into English as *Feudalism*, François- Louis Ganshof defined feudalism in the sense that he would use it as

> ... a body of institutions creating and regulating the obligations of obedience and service – mainly military service – on the part of a free man (the vassal) towards another free man (the lord), and the obligation of protection and maintenance on the part of the lord with regard to his vassal. The obligation of maintenance had usually one of its effects the grant by the lord to his vassal of a unit of real property known as a fief. ...[4]

Ganshof pointed out that this sense of the word, which he called its legal sense, was "obviously more restricted and more technical" than when it was used to denote a whole society. His kind of feudalism, concerning relations within a military landowning upper class, whose members are linked together by vassalage and hold their land as fiefs, has been favored by a good many western, non-Marxist medievalists, though they often in practice slide into the second type, that I have called Bloch/Weber.

Marc Bloch's definition, which appears at the end of his classic *La société féodale*, is quite often quoted in comparisons with non-European societies.[5] Max Weber does not provide such a neat formulation but passages from his main discussion of the subject can be paraphrased (I hope without distortion) to suggest that his concept was very like Bloch's – and may, indeed, have influenced Bloch.[6] This can be seen by setting a quotation from the English translation of *La société féodale* alongside a paraphrase of passages from the English translation of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft:*

2 John O. Ward, "Feudalism: Interpretative Category or Framework of Life in the Medieval West?" in *Feudalism: Comparative Studies*, ed. Edmund Leach and others (Sydney, 1985), pp. 40-67.

3 Chris Wickham, "Le forme del feudalesimo," in *Il Feudalesimo nell'alto Medioevo*, Settimane di Studio del Centro italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo 47 (Spoleto, 2000), pp. 15-46.

4 François-Louis Ganshof, *Feudalism*, trans. Philip Grierson, 3rd English ed. (London, 1964), p. xvi (*Qu'est-ce que la Féodalité*, 2nd ed. [Brussels, 1947], p. 12).

5 Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (London, 1965), p. 446 (*La Société féodale*, 2 vols. [Paris, 1939-40], 2: 249-50). On comparisons, see below, part II.

6 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, trans. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York, 1978), pp. 255-62 (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann [Tübingen, 1976], pp. 148-53); Otto G. Oexle, "Marc Bloch et la critique de la raison historique," in *Marc Bloch aujourd'hui*, ed. Hartmut Atsma and André Bourgière (Paris, 1990), pp. 419-33.

Bloch, *Feudal Society*, p. 446	**Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 255-57**
A subject peasantry;	Non-fiefholders are patrimonial dependents
widespread use of the service tenement (i.e, the fief) instead of a salary, which was out of the question;	Fiefs are contractual and become hereditary, held by knights who share a distinctive status and values. Services are primarily military
the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors;	Knights' services as above. Hierarchy of ranks corresponding to subinfeudation
ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man and, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage;	The political corporate group is replaced by a system of relations of purely personal loyalty between lord and his vassals and between them and their sub-vassals (subinfeudation)
fragmentation of authority – leading inevitably to disorder;	Only the lord's own vassals are bound by fealty to him [implying fragmentation]
[with] survival of other forms of association, family and State...	Subinfeudation is not a hierarchy of authority in the bureaucratic sense. All political powers are subject to feudal grants and fully appropriated like the property rights in fiefs

Both these definitions include fiefs and vassalage in much the same sense as in Ganshof's, but they are obviously much wider, apparently embracing the whole of society, though concentrating particularly on social and political relations among the upper classes. Otto Hintze's concept looks very similar but, as it probably owed a good deal to Weber, I leave him out of the title of my second type.[7]

7 Otto Hintze, *Staat und Verfassung*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen, 1962), pp. 84-119: the part discussing European feudalism is translated in *Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe*, ed. Fredric L. Cheyette (New York, 1968), pp. 21-31.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels also looked at the whole of society but concentrated on the economic basis of social and political relations – what they called the mode of production. The best brief formulation of their concept of feudalism that I have found is that of Rodney Hilton, in the introduction to a collection of essays on the transition from feudalism to capitalism.[8] As Hilton put it, Marx used the word

> ...to describe a whole social order whose principal feature was the domination of the rest of society, mainly peasants, by a military, landowning aristocracy ... , basing his analysis on the specific form in which the labour of the direct producer, once that producer's subsistence necessities had been fulfilled, became the income of the ruling class. By analogy with his full analysis of capitalism, which was Marx's principal objective, we refer to the feudal mode of production as composed of the forces of production (the material basis of the productive process) and the relations of production (the relations between the main classes). The essence of the feudal mode of production...is the exploitative relationship between landowners and subordinated peasants, in which the surplus beyond subsistence of the latter, whether in direct labour or in rent in kind or in money, is transferred under coercive sanction to the former. This relationship is termed "serfdom," a term which ... causes some difficulties.

Here the emphasis is quite different, with only a brief reference to the character of the ruling class, and no specification of their rights in their land or on the bonds between them. I shall return to this, and to the difficulties caused by "serfdom," along with other difficulties about all the types, later on. Now, however, having separated the varying uses of the word feudalism into these three categories, I suggest that the best way of understanding how the word has come to be used in such different senses, and why the different concepts are sometimes combined or confused, is to trace the history of the concept or idea of feudalism. Before doing that, however, it may be useful to consider the difference between words, concepts, and phenomena, since a good many of the problems of feudalism, including that of using it comparatively, seem to come from a tendency to confuse them.

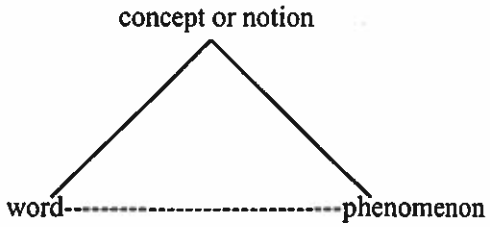
Words, concepts, and phenomena

The distinctions I draw between words, concepts, and phenomena have long been made by those who study language and meaning. They have used a

8 Rodney H. Hilton, introduction to Paul Sweezy and others, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1976), p. 30. His longer description in "Feudal Society," in *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1991), pp. 191-96, raises problems discussed below, at n. 52.

variety of different words for the trio, but for my limited purposes "word," "concept," and "phenomenon" seem the clearest.[9] Different languages use different words to denote the same thing, and in any one language the same word may be used for many different things (e.g., tables with legs, tables as a way of setting out information in books) and may change its meanings over time. To refer to "things" may suggest physical objects, like tables, but we also use words for other, more abstract entities, which I include in what I call phenomena. By this I mean what the *Oxford Dictionary* puts as its first definition of the word "phenomenon": "A thing that appears, or is perceived or observed; an individual fact, occurrence, or change as perceived by any of the senses, or by the mind: applied chiefly to a fact or occurrence, the cause or explanation of which is in question."[10] In between the word and the *phenomenon* comes something else: a *concept* or *notion*, however vague and unthought-out, that we have in our minds when we say, write, or hear a word. A concept or notion may remain the same irrespective of the particular word we choose but, at the same time, different people may have rather different notions in their heads when they use the same word or refer to the same phenomenon.

Words are thus directly related to concepts, and concepts are directly related to phenomena, but word and phenomenon are related only through concepts. This has sometimes been illustrated in a diagram like this:



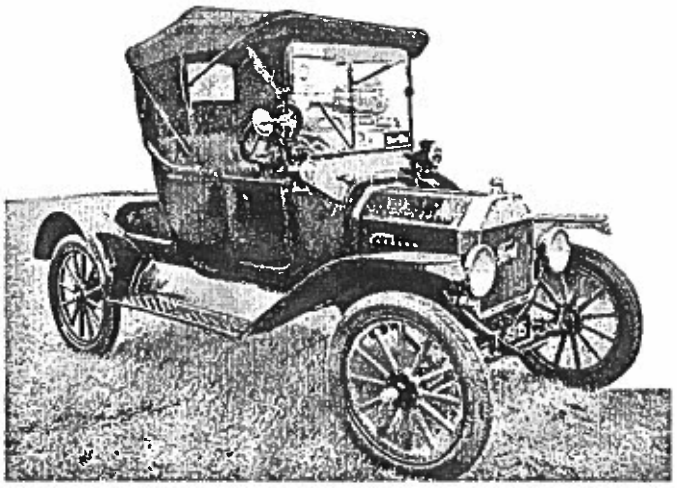
To explain the relevance of all this to historians, I shall start with a simple and concrete case – cars. The English word car was used for vehicles before the internal combustion engine was invented and is still used for other kinds of vehicle, as when one is told to pass right down the car, please, in the London Underground. The French and German words *voiture* and *Wâgen* have similar derivations. On the other hand Americans sometimes say automobile or auto,

9 Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London, 1923), pp. 13-15; later discussions in e.g. John Lyons, *Semantics*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1977), 1: 95-119, 175; Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure* (London, 1988), pp. 114-16.

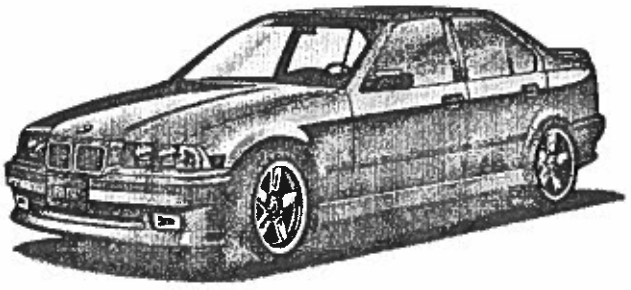
10 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford, 1989), 11: 674.

and Italians say *macchina*, which obviously has a different derivation. These variations do not reflect the difference between, say, Renaults, Volkswagens, Chryslers, and Fiats.

Cars and their engines have changed since their nineteenth-century beginnings but, though words have changed (motor-car and auto, for instance, are less frequent than they were) that change does not correlate particularly well with changes in the phenomenon. Changes in concepts and phenomena have correlated rather better, though not always closely. When I was a child in the 1930s the word car evoked in my mind something like this:



Now it evokes something more like this:



But, since I am interested in cars only as a convenient (if environmentally deplorable) means of transport, my notion or concept of a car includes only the sketchiest notion of what goes on under the bonnet (to Americans, the

hood, to French *le capot)*. Other people's concepts of cars are different and many people's are much more informed, exact, and up to date. Words, concepts, and phenomena change, but they do not always change together.

To understand the relation of word and concept, and how it may have changed, one needs to look at the phenomena – in this case, the actual development of cars, transport, and the motor industry – apart from either words or concepts. Separating what is a concept in any one context from what is a phenomenon is not always simple.

When we consider the concepts or notions about cars (or anything else) that people have had in the past, we are considering such concepts themselves as phenomena that we perceive, outside our own concepts or notions about cars. We may well see that more easily if we try to look at our own concepts or notions first and think about possible differences between them and the phenomena to which they relate. The differences between words, concepts, and phenomena, our concepts and those of the past, are relatively easy to grasp in the case of cars. To judge by the ways that historians talk and write about feudalism, and about fiefs, vassals, or serfdom, they are harder to grasp about such abstractions.

Fiefs, for example, are important in what I have called the Ganshof and Bloch/Weber types of feudalism. Historians who define them generally say that they are defining the "concept of the fief."[11] They then quite often start by discussing the etymology of the words *feodum, feudum, fevum* etc. These, however, were used in medieval Latin texts in different contexts and senses, not always about land held by nobles or knights, or about land to which the same rights and obligations were attached. It seems reasonable to conclude that they related to a variety of phenomena and reflected different concepts or notions in the minds of those who used them. The concept of the fief in the Ganshof and Bloch/Weber types of feudalism is essentially post-medieval. It comprises a set of ideas or notions about what historians over the centuries have come to see as the essential attributes of pieces of property that they have defined as fiefs, even if some of these properties were not called fiefs in the relevant medieval sources. It is, of course, perfectly reasonable for historians both to use their own words and to think in terms of their own concepts, but it is easier to distinguish evidence from interpretation if one distinguishes whether a concept is ours or is that of people in the past. If we are to use words like fief, vassalage, or serfdom in comparisons we must define the phenomena that we think they denote: that is, in the case of fiefs, the rights and obligations attached to any property that we call a fief. Otherwise the comparisons are meaningless. Yet definitions are often assumed, so that the word *gult* in Ethiopian texts, for instance, is simply said to mean "fief," as if European fiefs

11 This paragraph recapitulates Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: the Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 12-13.

(or what European medievalists call fiefs) always had more or less the same rights and obligations. If, as in this case, the historian is primarily interested in a Marxist type of feudalism, we may wonder why fiefs need to come into the discussion.[12]

The history of the concept of feudalism

Although neither the English word feudalism nor its equivalent in other languages occurs, so far as I know, before the late eighteenth century, the way of thinking about medieval society and politics that it came to represent in the Ganshof and Bloch/Weber definitions had been developing since the sixteenth century. It started from discussions among learned lawyers and historians during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries about what they called the feudal law. This law had originated in twelfth-century Italy when scholars of the newly developing academic study of Lombard and Roman law began to tackle problems about one particular sort of property to which neither Lombard nor Roman law seemed to provide answers.[13]

This was property granted to free people by the emperor or king, by great churches, or by counts, on more restricted terms than were usual for free men's property. Generally this meant that it was granted for a restricted period (often for the life of the grantee or for his life and the lives of one or two members of his family) rather than with the normal full rights of permanent inheritance. It sometimes also owed more specific or heavier services (generally military) than were usual. In a compilation of little treatises that was put together in the twelfth century about the problems of this kind of property, the holdings were variously called *feuda* (fiefs) or *beneficia* (benefices, i.e,. things granted as favors), while those who held them were called *fideles*, *milites*, *clientuli*, or *vasalli*. Early in the thirteenth century a standard "Vulgate" text of the compilation was established that came to be known as the *Libri Feudorum* or *Consuetudines Feudorum*. It became attached to the books of Roman law so that it was sometimes studied in universities where Roman law was taught.

The important point that I want to emphasize is that the "feudal law" embodied in these texts and commented on by later scholars started as an academic construct – a set of discussions about problems and of solutions to problems – not as a statement of custom. The rules about fiefs that it worked out were different from the norms of earlier customary law about property. The family property of nobles and free persons in Italy and elsewhere had not hitherto generally been called fiefs or benefices and had not been held on the kind of terms that interested the academic and

12 Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia* (Oxford, 2000), p. 10; idem, "Abyssinian Feudalism," *Past & Present* 89 (1980), 115-38.

13 Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, pp. 215-31.

professional lawyers who wrote and studied the new law.[14] Nobles and free men might hold some land granted to them by churches or kings as favors or "benefices," but this was generally an addition to what they had by inheritance or purchase, which they normally held with as full, permanent, and independent rights as their society knew. Contemporary evidence does not suggest that they normally held this permanently heritable land because of the grant – or even the supposed grant – of anything like fiefs to them or their ancestors. Whatever service they owed, they normally owed it not because they were vassals or tenants of a lord, but because they were subjects of someone more like a ruler.

Such evidence as we have of political relations between kings and nobles, or between nobles, lesser nobles, and other free men before the twelfth century, moreover, does not suggest that they were based exclusively, or even mainly, on the individual, interpersonal bonds described in the Ganshof and Bloch/Weber models of feudalism.[15] Forms of the word vassal, like forms of the word fief, are found in early medieval sources before *vasallus* was used in the twelfth-century treatises but they do not generally seem to have had the sense of "fiefholder" that they would have in the new law derived from the *Libri Feudorum*. From the eighth to the eleventh century most references to *vassi* or *vassalli* seem to be to lay servants, mostly of free but not very high status, who served kings and lords in armies and in general work of government and defence. Some were granted land, some had land of their own, but the word did not in itself imply landholding. Nor does it seem, at least in my reading of the sources, to imply any close, affective relationship with a lord. In what seems to be its earliest recorded vernacular use, in twelfth-century French *chansons de geste* and romances, it seems to mean simply a soldier or gallant warrior. Though of course most soldiers served under someone and owed loyalty to him, the vernacular word itself seems to carry no sense of relationship, of being essentially the vassal *of* someone.

So much for the word vassal. So far as phenomena are concerned and the way they were conceptualized, I argue that what historians call vassalage – an interpersonal, dyadic relationship – was not the main bond of medieval society either before or after the development of the academic feudal law. It could not have been. It leaves out too much of society and too many other relationships, like those with families and neighbors. There is, I maintain, ample evidence of collective solidarities and activities and of strong collective values in the early Middle Ages. Such solidarities and values, moreover, seem

14 Early uses of forms of the word fief are surveyed ibid., pp. 120, 160-80, 193-96; on *Lehn/Lehen*, ibid., pp. 428-30.

15 Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900-1300*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1997), pp. xvii-xviii, xx-xxx, et passim.

to have been felt both by nobles and by humbler people, and often extended beyond immediate local groups. All the inhabitants of a kingdom, including peasants, were thought to have obligations to kings, however distant, and to the kingdom as a collective group – a people. The authors of the treatises that made up the *Libri Feudorum* started, as they were bound to do, from the values and customary law of their society, but they were not discussing the bonds of society or the general rights and obligations of free men. They were discussing property law – and not property law as a whole, but the law of a particular sort of property that caused problems just because it was not the normal sort of property. The disputes such property provoked interested lawyers because they were between free men who could take their grievances to public courts and pay lawyers to argue for them. The authors of the *Libri Feudorum* were not concerned with the property of unfree peasants. Though often more or less hereditary in practice, it had heavier obligations and more restricted rights, and, most importantly in this context, unfree peasants could not appeal from their lord's court to public courts about their rights and obligations in the way that free people were supposed to be able to do and that interested the lawyers.

From the twelfth century on, legal professions developed alongside more systematic, bureaucratic and demanding governments.[16] Except in England, the lawyers who practised in high courts tended increasingly to be educated in universities in some of which the *Libri Feudorum* might be studied or at least known. Its vocabulary of fiefs and vassals therefore came to be absorbed, except in England, into an increasingly technical vocabulary of property law. For reasons that I cannot fully explain, the word fief came to be extended to all noble property and thus to imply the rights normally claimed by nobles, which, except in England, generally included jurisdiction over humbler people living in the fief. It is, however, important to note that the word does not seem to have implied any obligation to military service: nobles did not, simply because their lands were now called fiefs, owe any more fixed obligations than they had ever done. In France, for instance, formal obligations to service were imposed on nobles in the later thirteenth century, but that was in the new context of increased royal power and increasingly bureaucratic government. In England, where the word fief came to be used of all free and heritable property, rather than just that of nobles, military obligations were recorded and fixed in law from the twelfth century (and possibly before), but they were imposed, not on fiefs as such, but on one particular sort of fief – the knight's fief *(feodum militis, feodum militare)*.[17]

In the sixteenth century arguments started among French academic

16 Susan Reynolds, "The Emergence of Professional Law in the Long Twelfth Century," *Law and History Review* 21 (2003), 347-66.

17 Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, pp. 309-11, 349-52.

lawyers about the authority of Roman law in France. Because the law of fiefs was closely associated with Roman law, its authority came into discussion too, and with it, the question of the origin of fiefs. Crucial to this was a short passage at the beginning of the *Libri Feudorum* which purported to explain how fiefs had first been granted and had later become hereditary.[18] It looks now like a piece of purely conjectural history, thought up by an early twelfth-century north Italian lawyer with a rationalizing mind, but French scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw in it a framework that would give the shape they wanted to the history of France. Historians of other countries took over the study of the feudal law as a way to understand their own national histories, so that the vocabulary of fiefs and vassals became imprinted in their minds too, and with it the problem of the stages by which fiefs had become hereditary. By the eighteenth century historians had begun to study more sources, both documentary and narrative, and were framing more ambitious ideas about historical development and human progress. The feudal law then came to be seen as the law of what came to be called feudal governments and feudal societies. For Adam Smith the stage of feudal government came after the hunting and pastoral stages and before what he called the commercial society of his own day.[19] In spite of this widening of historical debate, arguments about the origin of fiefs and the date when they became hereditary went on in much the same way and indeed still go on, undisturbed by doubts that might have been raised by the source of the problem in the *Libri Feudorum.*

Well into the eighteenth century those who discussed feudal law and feudal society saw both of them largely in terms of property law and systems of government, showing relatively little interest in vassalage and interpersonal relations within the noble class.[20] That aspect of what would soon come to be called feudalism or "the feudal system" seems to have first attracted attention as a result of the eighteenth-century interest in chivalry and study of medieval vernacular literature. Because of the way that medieval French had used the word vassal to mean soldier or warrior, eighteenth-century literary scholars often saw it as interchangeable with "knight," so that the vassals of the feudal law became assimilated to the knights of chivalrous romance. In 1817 the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* depicted "the intercourse betwixt" lord and vassal before "the romantic ideas of chivalry ceased" as having been "of the most tender and affectionate kind." Early nineteenth-century historians took over the idea, highly suited as it was to the Age of Romanticism, of

18 Carl Lehmann, ed., *Consuetudines Feudorum*, I:*Compilatio Antiqua 1.2* (Göttingen, 1892, repr. Aalen, 1971), p. 8; discussed in Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, p. 229.

19 Adam Smith, *Lectures in Jurisprudence*, ed. Ronald L. Meek and others (Oxford, 1978), pp. 244-65.

20 This paragraph is based on Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, pp. xix-xxiv, where references are given.

knights or vassals living and fighting in a social and political void. The Middle Ages became the age of Feudal Anarchy. Public spirit was assumed to have gone with the end of the Roman Empire, so that historians who were only or chiefly interested in high politics and the relations between kings and nobles, could easily assume that the only or primary bonds of society were those of vassalage.

This was the background of historiography against which Marx and Engels worked out their idea of feudalism. Although they both read quite widely in what was then available about medieval history, and therefore started from the picture of feudal society and government drawn by other historians, they were interested in it chiefly as the background or thesis to capitalism's antithesis.[21] They took over the idea of stages of history propounded by Adam Smith and other scholars of the eighteenth century and argued, by an adaptation of Hegel's dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, that what causes the movement from one stage to another is the inevitable conflict between those who work and those who rule them and live off their work. The relations between kings and nobles that had hitherto interested most historians were less important to Marx than were those between landlords and peasants. Serfdom, rather than fiefholding and vassalage, was therefore the defining characteristic of his concept of feudalism. That made it quite different from the concept that his contemporaries had adopted and which many later medieval historians would continue to cherish and elaborate.

Throughout the twentieth century, and even into the beginning of the twenty-first, the historiography of medieval Europe has continued to be shaped by the ideas of fiefholding that sixteenth-century scholars derived from late medieval academic law and the ideas of vassalage that eighteenth-century scholars drew from literary sources. As knowledge has expanded, it has been fitted into a framework of feudalism that has been enlarged with very little rethinking. Some medievalists avoid the problem of fitting the phenomena they find or do not find into the enlarged framework represented by Bloch's and Weber's definitions by appealing to ideal types, though sometimes without much consideration of how an ideal type should relate to empirical phenomena, or how the varying concepts of feudalism might constitute one.[22] In the twentieth century the interests of historians widened to cover more of society than upper-class politics, while Marx's insights could not be entirely ignored even by those who rejected their political implications. Some historians explicitly adopted his model, but a good many combined it with bits of Ganshof or Bloch/Weber, so that the framework has

21 Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, trans. Jack Cohen, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm (London, 1964); for Marx on non-European societies: Brendan O'Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production* (Oxford, 1989) and below, n. 54.

22 This is discussed briefly below, at n. 29.

bulged even more. It is easy enough to see how this has happened. The use of the single word feudalism discouraged analysis of the difference between what Marx was talking about and the broader version of the pre-Marxist concept that came to be expressed in the Bloch/Weber formulation.

It was not, however, just a matter of words. German has two words: *Lehnswesen* for the feudalism of fiefs and vassalage, and *Feudalismus* for the whole of society and particularly for the Marxist type. French historians have quite often made a distinction between *féodalité* (*les liens féodo-vassaliques*) and *seigneurie* (or *le régime seigneurial*), with *féodalisme* either including both or, again, particularly used in Marxist contexts. Anglophone historians sometimes similarly separate "the feudal system" (fiefs, vassalage, etc.) from the manorial system. Italians, however, use their two words (*feudalesimo*, *feudalità*) differently from the French words they resemble.[23] Since historians do not agree about the phenomena they want to distinguish, or where to draw the line between them, none of these attempts to distinguish the words has eliminated misunderstandings and confusions. None of the terminological distinctions has shaken the old framework in which the interpersonal relations of vassalage and property rights derived from conditional grants are seen as distinguishing features of the society of the European Middle Ages. The framework bulges but for many it still seems strong enough to hold the essential features of medieval society.

Most European historians of medieval Europe during the twentieth century concentrated in practice on the history of their own countries, interpreting the evidence of land-holding and political relations within the framework of feudal law and society embodied in something like the Bloch/Weber definition. Some have seen the feudalism of their own area as the most typical or complete, some have stressed its exceptional qualities, but relatively few have been ready to question whether the various phenomena they describe were all part of the same thing – whatever model or type of feudalism they accept or imply. As a result, where evidence of some supposedly feudal phenomenon in their own country is lacking they can either interpolate it from elsewhere or explain its absence as an exception that need not affect the general picture. In England and France historians have used different bits of the Ganshof and Bloch/Weber types to describe, and by implication to explain, quite different situations. Feudalism in England is characterized by a hierarchy of property (though the word tenure, which sounds more feudal, is generally preferred to "property") and of military service owed from "knights' fees" – what Bloch called "service tenements." In England, however, these Blochian characteristics are associated with a strong central power that made noble jurisdiction over peasants relatively unimportant.

23 Cinzio Violante, in *Structures féodales et féodalisme dans l'Occident méditerranéen*, Collection de l'École française de Rome 44 (Rome, 1980), p. 14.

Feudalism in France, on the other hand, as in Germany, has been seen in terms of fragmented power, with a weak monarchy and a nobility holding "immunities" of jurisdiction over their tenants, while noble obligations to military service have had, in the absence of much evidence, to be assumed.

All these anomalies have stimulated much historical ingenuity but little serious rethinking. The result has been to make comparisons within Europe very difficult. Outside Europe they are even harder. The prospect seems full of pitfalls.

II: The problem of comparisons

If it is accepted that concepts of feudalism, however varied, can be roughly divided into the three types already discussed, then it will probably be agreed that comparisons between societies can be profitably made only if one decides which type one is comparing.[24] Of the three possibilities – Ganshof, Bloch/Weber, and Marx – I propose not to discuss the use of Ganshof's type of feudalism for comparative history. One reason is that I have already written a whole book arguing that the medieval evidence does not support his view of fiefs and vassalage.[25] The other is that fiefs and vassalage come into the Bloch/Weber type anyway so they can be discussed as part of it.

Bloch/Weber

Some historians comparing other societies with Western Europe cite Bloch's definition, while others, including some who are ostensibly concerned with Marx's stages of history, seem to have something like the Bloch/Weber formulation in their minds. It is often taken to apply particularly well to Japan, to which Bloch himself applied it.[26] Bloch's concept is often referred to as constituting an ideal type, which seems reasonable in view of its close similarity to feudalism as defined by Weber, from whom the concept of the ideal type is generally derived.[27] Weber himself referred to aspects of feudalism in terms of "ideal" or "pure" types, while making it clear that its

24 For a particularly cogent argument against using different types of feudalism in comparisons: Frank Perlin, "Concepts of Order and Comparison," in *Feudalism and non-European Societies*, ed. T. J. Byres and Harbans Mukhia (London, 1985), pp. 87-165, at pp. 89-123.

25 Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*; also "Debate: Susan Reynolds Responds to Johannes Fried," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, London* 19.2 (1997), 27-37, and "Afterthoughts on *Fiefs and Vassals*," *Haskins Society Journal* 9 (2001), 1-15.

26 Bloch, *Feudal Society* (see above, n. 5), pp. 382, 446-7, 452, probably influenced by Kan Ichi Asakawa, some of whose works are in Bloch's bibliography. For Asakawa's view of feudalism, see his *Land and Society in Medieval Japan* (Tokyo, 1965), pp. 78-82, and the comments of John W. Hall, ibid., pp. 3-21. Marx had also found feudalism in Japan: *Das Kapital*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1974), 1: 745, n. 192 (chapter 24.2).

27 Max Weber, *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Fuchs (Glencoe, IL 1949), pp. 49-112 (*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* [Tübingen, 1951], pp. 146-214).

characteristics, like those of any pure type, were never entirely realized in practice.[28] I suggest, however, that accepting Bloch/Weber feudalism too readily as an ideal type may get in the way of looking at it as closely and critically as it deserves.

There has been much discussion of ideal types and how they can best be used by historians.[29] This is not the place for another: for one reason, it could too easily turn into an argument about words and what each user thinks the term means or ought to mean. The easiest and least problematic kind of ideal type is that which takes one phenomenon or characteristic to be contrasted with another. The use of an ideal type to characterize a whole complex system is more difficult. In such a case it is presumably intended, as John Haldon puts it, to describe "a set of coherent structures and relationships which are conceptually necessary to the construction of a causal explanation of such systems, on the basis of certain common denominators."[30] The important point in the context of Bloch/Weber feudalism seems to me to decide how far the items in their lists of characteristics constitute coherent structures and relationships. I shall argue that they are not a coherent set, but a collection of items put together out of what successive generations of historians have found or thought they found in medieval European society.

Most of the items on Bloch's list seem to derive from older ideas of feudal law and feudal society rather than from the medieval evidence.[31] Most free and noble properties, as I have argued, did not originate in grants made by rulers of lords. When the word fief came to be generally applied to them it did not normally (or, so far as I know, ever) imply fixed or legal military obligations. "Service tenements," in other words, were not the dominant form of property. Nor does it seem that all land was thought of in Western Europe, at least before the very late Middle Ages, as belonging ultimately to the king or derived from royal grants. This idea, sometimes seen as characteristic of feudal societies in general, seems to derive from post-medieval conceptualizations

28 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (see above, n. 6), pp. 149, 150, 153 (*Economy and Society*, pp. 256, 257, 262, though the translation on p. 257 obscures the reference to *idealtypische lehensmässige Verwaltung*).

29 E.g., Eileen Power, "On Medieval History as a Social Study," *Economica* N.S. 1 (1934), 13-29: John W. M. Watkins, "Ideal Types," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Herbert Feigl and May Brodbeck (New York, 1953), pp. 723-43; Don Martindale, "Sociological Theory and the Ideal Type," in *Symposium on Sociological Theory*, ed. Llewellyn Gross (New York, 1959), pp. 57-91; Reinhard Bendix and Bennett Berger, "Images of Society and Problems of Concept Formulation in Sociology," ibid., pp. 92-118; Perlin, "Concepts" (see above, n. 24), pp. 89-91; Edmund Leach, "Talking about Talking about Feudalism," in *Feudalism*, ed. Leach (see above, n. 2), pp. 6-24; John Haldon, *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (London, 1993), pp. 52-57; Wickham, "Le forme" (see above, n. 3), pp. 35-36.

30 Haldon, *The State*, p. 52.

31 Bloch's treatment of property in "Village et seigneurie," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* 9 (1937), 493-500, at p. 497, is more careful than in *Feudal Society*, p. 115 (on which: Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals* [see above, n. 11], pp. 51, 53, 59, and index under *proprietas*).

of English society after 1066. In some countries outside Europe it may have been introduced or read into earlier sources by Europeans who brought their ideas about feudal society with them.[32] The whole idea of the importance of service tenements in both Bloch's and, even more surprisingly, Weber's treatments seems to imply a rather restricted view of the ways rulers can secure obedience and service. Both of them explain that service tenements were made necessary by the impossibility of paying salaries, as if these two forms of reward are the only means by which rulers in any society can get military and other services. In many small and unbureaucratic societies the pressure of beliefs, values, and public opinion seems to work fairly well. Though such pressure was not sufficient on its own in the bigger and more economically divided societies of medieval Europe, rulers still seem to have relied on it, as well as on their subjects' ambition or taste for adventure, for a good deal of the military and governmental service they needed. This kind of motivation, however, may have looked less obvious in the age when ideas of feudal law and feudal society were first being worked out.

The fourth item on Bloch's list, vassalage, ignores what I consider the ample evidence of collective values and obligations in the early as well as the later Middle Ages.[33] It also ignores what anthropologists have found – though particularly since Bloch's death – about other societies: there is no evidence that so-called "primitive societies" generally lack a sense of the public good and do not demand "public spirit." Even when societies are small and simple enough for most relations to be interpersonal the requirement to conform and cooperate collectively is often very strong.

In Bloch's fifth item, the fragmentation of authority, he was, like many of his predecessors, presumably thinking of tenth- and eleventh-century France. Weber, on the other hand, may have been thinking of late medieval Germany, where fragmentation occurred in quite different legal and political circumstances from those of early medieval France. Weber's ideas about the hierarchy of subinfeudation seem to be a combination of German ideas of political and social hierarchy derived from Eike von Repgow's description of the *Heerschild* with structures and rules about property that seem to have been peculiar to England.[34] The idea of fragmentation implies the existence, or desirability, of a model political unit larger than that of the units that are seen

32 Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, e.g. pp. 346-47; Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism" (see above, n. 12), p. 130; Irfan Habib, "Marx's Perception of India," *The Marxist* 1 (1983), 104; Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 51-52. On the problem of distinguishing rent from taxes (and thus "ownership" of land): Halil Berktay, "State and Peasant," in *New Approaches to State and Peasant in Ottoman History*, ed. Halil Berktay and Suraiya Faroghi (London, 1992), pp. 122, 125-31. See also Lucy Mair, *Introduction to Social Anthropology* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 137-42.

33 Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities* (see above, n. 15), and the works by others cited p. xii n. 2.

34 Eike von Repgow, *Sachsenspiegel: Landrecht*, 1. 3. 2, ed. Karl A. Eckhardt in *MGH, Fontes iuris*

as fragments. Neither the kingdom of France nor the kingdom of Germany (let alone other kingdoms) was always as fragmented in the Middle Ages as Bloch and Weber suggest. Their predecessors who had envisaged the Middle Ages as a time of Feudal Anarchy had been drawing an explicit or implicit contrast between it and the centralized bureaucratic nation-states of their own days. It is not impossible that Bloch and Weber too, though undoubtedly thinking primarily of the medieval kingdoms of France and Germany, had in the back of their minds, as predestined natural units, the France and Germany in which they lived.

I maintain therefore that only two items on Bloch's list seem to have been anything like defining or predominant characteristics of society in the area of medieval Western Europe (including Germany) with which he was primarily concerned. One is his first, a subject peasantry. That seems to fit the evidence, but it is not very helpful in defining a feudal society. Subjection is a general attribute of peasants in most definitions, whether the society in which they live is seen as feudal, capitalist, or something else. Eric Wolf, for instance, saw peasants as

> rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in turn. ...It is this production of a fund of rent which critically distinguishes the peasant from the primitive cultivator.[35]

The word is used today in different senses in different countries and circumstances but I think that in general historical use it often implies a small farmer in contrast to a more upper-class landowner. Peasantries, in other words, are normally in some degree subject or subordinate to other classes.

Bloch's third item, the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors, also seems to correspond fairly well with medieval evidence, particularly if it is amended to mean the supremacy or dominance of a military (and landowning) aristocracy. Even then we need, I suggest, to envisage the aristocracy during much of the Middle Ages as one which had a military ethos and prided itself on military skills, rather than one that monopolized arms and fighting. Arms were not generally restricted to the upper class, while most armies were led by nobles and "specialized warriors" rather than being exclusively, or even largely, composed of them. We also need to avoid assuming that medieval society was divided into nobles on the one hand and horny-handed peasants

Germanici antiqui, NS 1 (1973), pp. 72-73; Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, pp. 288-95, 345-46, 356, 382-83, 437, 480, and index under hierarchy, subinfeudation.

35 Eric Wolf, *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), pp. 3-4, 10; see also Teodor Shanin, *Defining Peasants* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 23-27.

on the other, with a hard and fast line between them. This image seems to derive more from nineteenth-century ideas of the Ancien Régime than from medieval evidence. Medieval society was very unequal but its layers merged into each other, while there is evidence in most countries and periods of some social mobility.[36]

My conclusion is that some or most of the items in Bloch's list did not form dominant characteristics of medieval Western European society: the phenomena did not correspond closely to his definition. Some lack of correspondence need not prevent Bloch/Weber feudalism from forming an ideal type. As Weber said, "pure types are very exceptional," and the heuristic value of an ideal type does not depend on finding all the characteristics in all societies or even in one.[37] The lack of correspondence here, however, seems to me excessive, while most of the items in the Bloch/Weber lists seem to relate to each other less as what Haldon called "a set of coherent structures and relationships" than as residues of successive historiographies. It may be that there is, as it were, more glue in the bundle of characteristics than I can find.[38] The case needs to be argued further.

Whether or not one chooses to call Bloch/Weber feudalism an ideal type is less important for the purposes of comparative history than the practical difficulty of using a bundle of characteristics for comparisons. Trying to fit one whole society into a composite model derived from another involves what Colin Jeffcott has called the Cinderella slipper strategy of comparative study.[39] In this case, since the model of feudalism seems to be derived, not from what is now known about the European society, but from a series of past interpretations of what was then known about it, Cinderella's slipper does not seem to fit Cinderella.

That does not mean that one should not compare the evidence about the separate items in the Bloch/Weber lists that relate to different areas either within or outside Europe. Three possible cautions about doing that nevertheless occur to me. First, starting from these lists of characteristics may invite one to ignore what is not in them. Second, the formulation of the characteristics in the lists tends to suggest the nature of what is to be found. It might be better to recast the aspects of different societies that are to be compared in terms that do not prejudge their character. That could imply, for instance, comparing the

36 Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, pp. 37-45.

37 *Economy and Society* (see above, n. 6), p. 262 (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, p. 153).

38 John W. Hall, "Feudalism in Japan," in *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Medieval Japan*, ed. John W. Hall and Marius B. Jansen (Princeton, 1968), pp. 15-51, discusses Japanese feudalism in terms of ideal types while Wickham, "Le forme" (see above, n. 3), pp. 35-36, argues that Bloch's feudalism should be seen as one.

39 Colin Jeffcott, "The Idea of Feudalism in China," in *Feudalism*, ed. Leach (see above, n. 2), pp. 155-74, at p. 158. Also Jack Goody, "Feudalism in Africa?" *Journal of African History* 4 (1963), 1-18; Perlin, "Concepts" (see above, n. 24), p. 91.

rights and obligations of landowners, rather than simply looking for "service tenements"; or considering any evidence of other bonds and values as well as the interpersonal links between lords and "vassals," and weighing the different kinds against each other. Third, Bloch's reference to a subject peasantry is cursory – much more cursory than his own earlier work would suggest – while Weber's mention of "non-fiefholders" is even more allusive. Neither definition therefore encourages the historian to pay as much attention to the great mass of the medieval population as to the upper classes, on which both definitions focus so much more closely. That has not in practice prevented medieval historians since Bloch's time from doing a great deal of work on agrarian society, a good deal of it inspired by him, but that is testimony to his empirical research and historical imagination, rather than to the definition of feudalism that he put at the end of *La société féodale.*

None of the criticisms that I have directed at the Bloch/Weber concept of feudalism is intended to deny that Bloch was a great historian or Weber a great analyst of societies. Bloch's greatness does not depend on his definition of feudalism. *La société féodale* as a whole is so wide-ranging, perceptive, and innovative as to make the definition at the end a matter of detail.[40] The same applies to *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft.* No historian and no sociologist can shed all the traditional baggage that he or she has inherited. It may be hardest to do so when formulating neat generalizations about large subjects. Questioning the interpretations of our great predecessors is not a mark of disrespect any more than it is when natural scientists question what theirs thought. If historical knowledge is to advance we need not only to look for more empirical information but to interpret it, and reinterpret it, as best we can. We shall not get it all right, but we may shed some of the baggage of the past that now looks less useful than it once did.

Marx

While the Bloch/Weber model of feudalism is quite often used for comparisons with non-European countries, the Marxist type is even more popular, especially with non-Europeans who want to answer questions about historical development so as to fit their own countries into some convincing general scheme. Though Marx himself was primarily, if not exclusively, interested in Europe and did not really consider how far his arguments might apply elsewhere,[41] his analysis invited extension to the rest of the world. If capitalism grew out of feudalism in Europe and if socialism will grow out of capitalism, does that mean that societies elsewhere have to be feudal in order to reach the later stages? What was it about feudalism that produced

40 Cf. his definition of serfdom: Paul Freedman, *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 7.

41 See below, at n. 54.

capitalism? When and why did Europe begin to produce changes of an unprecedented character and conquer so much of the rest of the world?

Marx's feudalism seems to me better suited to comparisons than is the Bloch/Weber model, for the same reason that it is better suited to be an ideal type.[42] That is, its simplicity. Rather than comprising a bundle of characteristics which may or may not be structurally related, as does Bloch/Weber feudalism, it focuses simply on the economies and economic structures of different societies – what Marxists generally call their modes of production – as their defining characteristics.[43] The feudal mode of production can thus be contrasted both with the "ancient mode," which Marx saw as slavery, and with the capitalist mode of a money economy and wages. In looking at the stages of history Marx was chiefly interested in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. There has been a good deal of argument about that, with a particular burst of discussion in the 1970s.[44] Here, however, I concentrate on the more recent debate about the transition from antiquity to feudalism.[45] This, combined with all the empirical work that has been done on medieval Europe, both by Marxist and non-Marxist medievalists, has brought out important points on which it is necessary to amend Marx's concept of feudalism.

It is, notably, no longer possible to see the transition from the ancient mode of production to the feudal mode as a change from slavery to serfdom. Historians of the late Roman Empire now see slavery as less important than they did. In most societies there is more than one mode of production: what matters in classifying societies according to Marx's methods is the mode that is sufficiently dominant in the economy to shape the society and its classes. Slavery, it seems, was not the dominant mode of production in the late Roman Empire. Similarly serfdom, however defined, was less important in the Middle Ages than Marx thought.[46] The difference between words, concepts, and phenomena is important here. The word *servus* meant different things in terms

42 Weber, *Methodology of the Social Sciences* (see above, n. 27), p. 103, himself saw Marx's interpretations as involving ideal types.

43 Above, at n. 8. There has been much argument about modes of production, forces of production, relations of production etc. Some of it is surveyed, e.g., by Stephen H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, 2nd ed. (Manchester, 1998); Haldon, *The State* (see above, n. 29).

44 E.g., Sweezy, *Transition* (see above, n. 8); Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London, 1975).

45 Chris Wickham, "The Other Transition," *Past & Present* 103 (1984), 3-35, and idem, "The Uniqueness of the East," in *Feudalism*, ed. Byres and Mukhia (see above, n. 24); Halil Berktay, "The Feudalism Debate," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 14 (1987), 291-333, and idem, "State and Peasant" (see above, n. 32); Haldon, *The State* (see above, n. 29); Guy Bois, *La mutation de l'an Mil* (Paris, 1989): various authors discussed his arguments in *Médiévales* 21 (1991).

46 On early medieval freedom/unfreedom: Chris Wickham, "Problems of Comparing Rural Societies," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6. 2 (1992), 221-46 (repr. in his *Land and Power* [London, 1994]); H. W. Goetz, "Serfdom and the Beginnings of the 'Seigneurial System' in the Carolingian

of rights and obligations at different times and in different areas, but it is clear that, whatever it meant, the majority of the peasantry of Western Europe in the Middle Ages were not considered to be serfs, villeins, or unfree in the sense either that the words were used then or that they are generally used by historians now. Rather than taking serfdom as a defining characteristic, therefore, we need to adapt Marx's view of feudalism in the way that Hilton did, so as to see a feudal society as one dominated by a military, landowning aristocracy living off the peasants and with coercive power over them.[47] While the description of the aristocracy as "military" needs the same qualification as it did in the Bloch/Weber formulation, the addition of the reference to the landlords' coercive power makes this definition more specific and therefore more useful than Bloch's "subject peasantry." Even so, there were times and places in which peasants remained fairly free of any close and coercive control, especially during the early Middle Ages and in remote and mountain areas even later. As with the Bloch/Weber concept, moreover, it is important to note that it is not easy to divide medieval society simply into nobles and peasants, rulers and ruled, with a gulf between them.

Given that the transition from the ancient to the medieval economy was not simply one from slavery to serfdom, one suggestion has been that it was from an economy in which the surplus was extracted by tax to one where it was extracted by rents: that is, from a society in which the central government extracted the surplus from the peasants and distributed it to the upper class to one where individual lords extracted it for themselves. This looks persuasive, but, according to some recent arguments, the distinction between rent and taxes is not decisively important in defining modes of production as Marx saw them: both are better seen as variants of what Samir Amin has called the tributary mode.[48] The difference, in this view, between taxes and rents is not a difference in the mode of production itself, but merely in the distribution of the surplus within the ruling class. Both the Roman and medieval economies were largely based on peasants cultivating their holdings, under varying degrees and forms of subjection, and paying both rent and taxes or rents that went to make up taxes.

Amending Marx's analysis to eliminate a transition in the mode of production between the ancient and medieval worlds forces us to look for some change within the postulated single tributary mode in order to explain the changes in

Period," *Early Medieval Europe* 2 (1993), 29-51; Wendy Davies, "On Servile Status," in *Serfdom and Slavery, ed.* Michael L. Bush (London, 1996), pp. 225-46; J.-P. Devroey, "Men and Women in Early Medieval Serfdom: the Ninth-Century Frankish Evidence," *Past & Present* 166 (2000), 3-30. Later drawings of the borderline: e.g., Paul R. Hyams, *Kings, Lords and Peasants in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1980); William C. Jordan, *From Servitude to Freedom* (Philadelphia, 1986).

47 Above, at n. 8.

48 Samir Amin, *Class and Nation* (London, 1980); Wickham, "The Uniqueness of the East," pp. 183-85; Haldon, *The State*, pp. 76-87; Berktay, "State and Peasant;" O'Leary, *The Asiatic Mode* (see above, n. 21), pp. 197-214.

political and legal structures that took place in the early Middle Ages. That need not mean denying Marx's emphasis on economic structures and relationships as the basis on which "superstructures" of politics and law rested. Though some of their followers have been more economically reductionist, Marx and Engels seem to have allowed that the same economic base could produce a wide variety of political forms and ideologies.[49] The ending of the political structure of the Western Roman Empire clearly brought great changes to Western Europe, not only in the formal ways in which surpluses were extracted and coercion was exercised, but in the beliefs and values, powers, responsibilities, and relationships of those who did the extracting and coercing. The empire was broken up into separate kingdoms. At first some were very small and unstable, while the bigger ones were much less centralized than the empire had been. Marx, however, like his predecessors and like Bloch and Weber after him, exaggerated the fragmentation of medieval society. Local lords certainly exercised control and coercion over the peasantry, but coercion in Western Europe never seems to have been entirely surrendered to local lords. Medieval government consisted of layers of coercive authority, with kings or other regional rulers at the top always claiming, and generally retaining, some control over lesser lords.

Coercive authority, moreover, was never entirely arbitrary, even over peasants. Medieval political ideas embodied an ideal of harmony: rulers were *supposed* to look after their subjects, and subjects were *supposed* to be contented and obedient. The lord's power to coerce and punish was always *supposed* to be restrained by an obligation to submit to collective judgements made by representative assemblies of his subjects. Lords seem to have accepted this, at least to the extent that they often manipulated or influenced the judgements that their subjects pronounced rather than ignoring them. Rulers and lesser lords were, after all, brought up to believe that their government was supposed to be just, that they had a duty to protect the weak, and that judgement was supposed to be collective.[50] The evidence suggests that, as a result, though lords often won struggles with peasants in the end, their coercion was considerably restrained in practice. That does not mean that Marx was wrong in seeing the conflict of economic interests between lords and peasants as real. There is plenty of evidence of peasant resentment and resistance, especially when lords tried to enforce or increase services and raise rents. Conflicting economic interests underlay the ideals of harmony that were expressed in the political and social writing of the time. Even when peasants apparently accepted the system, their interests

49 See e.g. the quotation from *Capital* in Haldon, *The State*, 43; Eric Hobsbawm, "Marx and History", *New Left Review* 143 (1984), 39-50.

50 Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals* (see above, n. 11), pp. 35-38, and *Kingdoms and Communities* (see above, n. 15), *passim*.

were often opposed to those of their lords. Ideals and norms – ideologies in Marx's terms – matter, but we have to look at the evidence of practice too: in other words, we need to notice the difference between the concepts of the time and the phenomena revealed in the evidence of practice.

If it is right that what changed with the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, or at some time after that,[51] was not the dominant mode of production but relations, superstructures and ideologies within it, then, so far as feudalism is defined by its mode of production, it becomes a very large category. The feudal or tributary mode would, in this light, embrace not only much of the ancient classical world but much of the rest of the world before capitalism as well. Within that huge category there was clearly room for a great variety in relations of production, political ideas and structures, and legal systems. Making Marxist feudalism into such a huge category may make it look less useful in explaining the extraordinary economic development of modern Western Europe than it has seemed to be to those (including some who claim to be using the Marxist concept) who have found the uniqueness of Europe in its service tenements, vassalage, and so on.[52] But even if these items in the Bloch/Weber model were better attested as dominant characteristics of medieval European society, it is not clear how the relationships within the ruling class that they imply would relate to Marxist modes of production or how they might have promoted the rise of capitalism. There may be a connection, but it needs argument. Without more than I have found, questions about the presence or absence of fiefholding and vassalage in Africa or India, or about the date of their supposed introduction into medieval Russia, are surely peripheral to Marxist analysis.[53] One point that has been made by a number of scholars in the past fifty years or so and that is relevant to the use of Marxist feudalism for comparisons outside Europe is that we do not need to postulate a single unilineal development – an invariable succession of stages – to cover the whole world. Marx did not really address this, but

51 For a recent discussion of dates: see e.g,. Bois, *La mutation* and the discussion in *Médiévales* 21 (1991).

52 E.g., Rodney H. Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, 2nd ed. (London, 1990), p. 13 (in an essay not included in the first edition), p. 156 (p. 229 in first edition); idem, "Feudal Society" (see above, n. 8).

53 E.g., Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism" (see above, n. 12); Irfan Habib, "Classifying Pre-colonial India," in *Feudalism*, ed. Byres and Mukhia (see above, n. 24), pp. 44-53, at pp. 44-45 (on fiefs). R.S. Sharma, "How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?" ibid., pp. 19-43, at p. 20, and Harbans Mukhia, "Was there Feudalism in Indian History?" ibid., pp. 253-92, at pp. 278-79, both refer to Bloch's concept. Damodar D. Kosambi, *Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, 1975) and idem, *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (Bombay, 1962) are fundamentally about Marxist feudalism, but note the definition in *Myth and Reality*, p. 31, and cf. Ashok Rudra, "Against Feudalism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 16 (Bombay, 1981), 2133-46, at 2139. Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus, 750-1200* (London, 1996), p. 369.

the implications of his allusions to the Asiatic mode of production are that he did not think that all societies went through the same stages.[54]

Even if Marx's feudal or tributary mode of production now looks less useful to explain why capitalism developed in Europe than it once did, his focus on modes and relations of production still seems useful to comparative history, if only because it makes one think about the extent to which the shape of a whole society is conditioned by its economy and technology. The model needs to be supplemented and refined by attention to what Marx considered superstructure and ideology, but he himself seems to have paid more attention to them, though in a rather unsystematic way, than some of his followers have done. Whether inside Europe or outside, there is plenty to be done if we are to know enough about variations and changes within the feudal or tributary mode of production in any one area in order to be able to compare them with those in any other.

Using and testing the Marxist model should mean investigating variations within the whole huge category of agricultural societies with a dominant landowning class and a subject peasantry. In doing this, it is not enough to put labels on peasants as serfs or slaves or free according to whether they owed labor services and could or could not leave their holdings. To make sense of relationships between classes it is necessary to try to establish the rights and obligations of the different kinds and levels of landholders, whether nobles, peasants, or something in between, analyzing them into separate rights and separate obligations, and seeing how any of them changed. How far at any time and any area were landlords subject to control from above, and how far did they and their subjects have to pay taxes? How far did the subjection of peasants to local authorities vary according to whether they were subject to what we would call hereditary landowners or to the officials of some kind of more distant government? Were their burdens increased or decreased as authority was delegated or usurped by local lords? How far were all peasants in any area subjected? What was the dominant mode of production and of surplus distribution in each area? Two other subjects that need investigation, despite the doubts that I have expressed, are the importance of "service tenements" held by members of the upper class, and the extent to which bonds between its members resembled the Bloch/Weber concept of vassalage. As I suggested when discussing the use of the Bloch/Weber model in comparative history, however, it would probably be better

54 O'Leary, *The Asiatic Mode* (see above, n. 21); Eckhard Müller-Mertens, "Zur Feudalentwicklung im Okzident und zur Definition des Feudalverhältnisses," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 14 (1966), 52-73; Arif Dirlik, "The Universalisation of a Concept: from "feudalism" to "Feudalism" in Chinese Marxist Historiography," in *Feudalism*, ed. Byres and Mukhia, pp. 197-227; Timothy Brook, "Capitalism and the Writing of Modern History in China," in *China and Historical Capitalism*, ed. Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 110-57; Ashok Rudra, "Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production in Non-European Societies," in *The Feudalism Debate* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 318-44.

to cast these questions in more open forms.

Many of these questions may be unanswerable but they need to be at least posed. Some of them may turn out to be, in Marxist terms, merely matters of superstructure – though the word "merely" may be a mistake. Much as the relation between base and superstructure, and the links between them, have been discussed by Marxists, they still need more thought in connection with feudalism. Answering some of the questions I have suggested – and others that I have not thought of – ought to reveal more about how the mode of production worked in whatever society or societies one is comparing. It might show that modes of production changed within pre-capitalist societies more than recent discussions have suggested. It might even help to explain the origin of capitalism.

Conclusion

Feudalism has in the last two centuries been extremely useful in stimulating the study of the European Middle Ages and of other pre-capitalist societies. Of the three types into which I have divided it, Ganshof's has been the least helpful, because it covers so little of society. It has also been least good in practice because those who use it seem often to drop into the pitfall of using it not as an engineer's model to be tested, but as something more like a fashion model to be followed. They tend to find fiefs and vassals wherever they expect to find them, even if the words are not used in their sources. If the words are there historians have too often assumed that the concepts behind them were the same as their own and that the phenomena fitted. Part of the Bloch/Weber model fails for the same reason but, in spite of some rather uncritical use of it, there is no doubt that the work of both has been enormously stimulating to comparative history. Of all three types, however, Marx's concept seems to me to offer most to the comparative historian because of its simplicity – provided it is kept simple.

I nevertheless suggest that feudalism, however defined, has outlasted its usefulness as a tool of comparative history. Trying to fit one society into the Cinderella slipper of a composite model derived from another – or, in this case, derived from a model once thought to fit another – is surely not the best method of comparison.[55] Categories like feudal or capitalist have their uses but they cannot encapsulate all the significant features of societies. Sticking any single label on a society is seldom useful. Labels tend to discourage close and critical study of what is under them. We should do better to start by taking separate aspects of different societies to compare with each other – whether their economies, technologies, relations of production, kinship and inheritance systems, property rights, political structures and ideas, legal

55 See above, at n. 39.

systems, religions. We should then be in a better position to see how far the different elements seem to go together in different societies. This does not mean avoiding big questions and generalizations about whole societies, but approaching them only after or alongside consideration of the evidence of the phenomena covered by the generalization. We need to combine bold hypotheses with rigorous testing of them against the evidence.

Comparative history, as Jürgen Kocka describes it, is difficult.[56] It must, as he says, be systematic, and it involves distinguishing clearly the aspects of each society that one wants to compare. It means looking hard at the evidence about more than one society, and preferably, I would say, at more than two. Looking at only two risks polarizing them and assuming that there are no other possibilities. But even looking at only two is very hard work if one tries to consider the evidence for each in any detail. Most of the small amount of the comparative work involving feudalism that I have read makes what Kocka calls asymmetrical comparisons. Some seem very asymmetrical indeed. Some European or American historians who mention Japanese feudalism in passing, for instance, seem to accept simply that it was very like European feudalism, referring at best only to Bloch on Europe and not even to works on Japan in European languages.[57] Some who work on Japanese history similarly seem to know little about Europe, though they are pretty confident about its feudalism.[58] The same applies to some comparisons of other areas with European feudalism.[59] That historians cannot master the literature, let alone the sources, on more than one society is not surprising: there is too much to know. When one moves outside the area of Western Europe to which all three types of feudalism were originally meant to apply, moreover, there are vast problems not only of the language of the historical literature but of the languages, alphabets, and accessibility of the sources. At least, however, we can be aware of the problems.

56 Jürgen Kocka, "The Uses of Comparative History," in *Societies Made Up of History: Essays on Historiography, Intellectual History, Professionalisation, Historical Social Theory and Proto-Industrialisation,* ed. Ragnar Björk and Karl Molin (Edsbruk, Sweden, 1996), pp. 197-209.

57 E.g., Carl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, 1957), pp. 414, 417.

58 E.g., Jeffrey P. Mass, "The Early Bakufu and Feudalism," in *Court and Bakufu in Japan*, ed. Jeffrey P. Mass (London, 1982), pp. 123-42, and idem, *Antiquity and Anachronism in Japanese History* (Stanford, 1992), pp. 70-90. The difficulties are illustrated by Frédéric Joüon des Longrais, *L'Est et l'Ouest: Institutions du Japon et de l'"Occident comparées* (Tokyo, 1958) just because the book (though inevitably now out of date) is so much more thorough and subtle than most comparisons. Pierre Souyri, "La Féodalité japonaise," in *Les Féodalités*, ed. Éric Bournazel and Jean-Paul Poly (Paris, 1998), pp. 715-54, says that Japanese historians have now turned more to comparisons with other Asian societies than with Europe.

59 E.g., Ann Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 53-54, with references elsewhere to "vassals," "feudatories," and "fiefs"; Jacques Maquet, *Power and Society in Africa*, trans. Jeannette Kupfermann (London, 1971), pp. 191-217, though see his reservations at 203-5; Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism" and idem, *Land and Society* (see above, n. 12).

Comparisons, I submit, are not going to be much use in testing the validity of a model which has been built out of such a miscellaneous collection of bits of evidence drawn from different parts of Europe at different dates. Studies of feudalism have indeed stimulated comparisons and warned us of the problems. Let us now move on. The prospects for serious comparative history of pre-capitalist societies may be daunting but they are worth exploration, especially if we avoid the pitfalls that have confronted those who have approached it through feudalism.