
UNIT 15 TRANSITION TO CLASS SOCIETY

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you should be able to :

- understand what we mean by a modern class society;
- distinguish between pre-modern and modern class societies;
- learn something about the factors that led to the emergence of a modern class society; and
- understand the relationship between nation and class in modern class society.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

The expansion of capitalist industrial economy and the growth of modern politics, which you read about in your earlier Units, greatly transformed European Society and life. They resulted in significant structural changes, of which the emergence of a modern class society was a significant component. By this modern class society we mean not simply what was happening to older social classes and the new social classes which emerged with large scale industrialisation, but the entire gamut of social expressions through which the new society defined itself as an industrial society.

Industrialisation and the French Revolution formed the historical context for the modern class system – the context in which the modern classes emerged defined themselves and played out their historical roles in relation to each other and in shaping society and politics from the 18th century to our own days.

The socialist movements, and especially Russian Revolution of 1917 presented a major challenge to this arrangement of society. How the different classes responded to this challenge depended, to a great extent, on their situation in the capitalist social order. The collapse of the socialist system in the former U.S.S.R and Eastern Europe has again greatly affected social and political initiatives by different classes in the capitalist world.

In this Unit we will talk about the break up of the older, pre-bourgeois social order and the transition to the modern class society, essentially a bourgeois-liberal society.

15.2 CLASS SOCIETY DEFINED

What do we mean when we say that a class society came into being in the 18th century with industrialisation and the French Revolution? Were different sections of society not unequal

In the art and literature of the Middle Ages three basic social groups were represented : those who fought as mounted knights (the landed nobility), those who prayed and 'looked after' the spiritual welfare of society (the clergy) and those who laboured in fields and shops (the peasantry and village artisans). After the revival of towns there emerged a fourth social group, the distance traders and merchants. The central axis of the medieval economy was the relationship between the landed aristocracy and the peasantry, as much rooted in the specific relations of production as modern class relationships are. The landed aristocracy derived its income from the ownership of land, on which it did not perform any economic function. The peasant-serf, forced to work on the lands of the lord, was reduced to dependence even as he managed the land that sustained his own family with labour. The entire edifice of feudal hierarchies, their consumption patterns and social practices/forms stood on the extraction of surplus from the peasantry subject to labour services and feudal dues. This is what Marx referred to when he wrote that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of 'class struggles'. Even the towns to begin with were dominated by feudal lords. Politically, a whole complex of relationships was formed when the less powerful individuals sought the protection of more powerful lords and promised life-long loyalty and military service in return, in lieu of which they were given land. Thus landed wealth and appropriation of agricultural surplus through a specific relationship with the peasantry became the basis for decentralisation of power in medieval society – a decentralisation that ensured the social, economic and political dominance of the landed aristocracy, essentially feudal in nature.

Cutting across this essentiality, and reinforcing this dominance were other extra-economic and jurisdictional forms of control inbuilt into the medieval economic system. The source of one's wealth, the antiquity of one's title, and the number of armed and paid retainers at one's disposal signified one's status in society. A noble, though possibly not as rich as an urban merchant - burgher, entranced him by prestige, so much so that these families often tried to marry their daughters to landed aristocrats as a means of enhancing their status. Apart from special marks such as insignia and dress and social codes, it was the special mark of the nobility that, whatever their situation, they lived off the labour of others. They neither participated in agricultural production nor engaged in commerce, both of which they considered beneath their dignity. Their profession was knighthood through which they ensured their distinctiveness in society. Knighthood was legally restricted to men of high birth. The nobility, both men and women, in that sense constituted a separate order or estate. The clergy derived their special place as first estate through their self-proclaimed role as mediator between God and humanity, and by virtue of this role enjoyed a number of privileges, chief among them the exemption of taxation for themselves and the Church as an institution. These privileges had the sanction of the nobility, even as serfdom had the sanction of the Church. The Church was an integral arm of the feudal system. It owned land and derived income from it through serf labour in much the same way as lords did. Churchmen also enjoyed immunity from legal jurisdiction. The higher clergy were powerful and wealthy, created the legal institutions and justified them in the eyes of the common people, controlled education, transformed art into sacred art, ruled society and controlled a great deal of its wealth. Along with the nobility they created the notion of the three orders or estates - nobility, clergy and commoners - in which the commoners station in life destined them to produce the wealth that sustained the two orders. The control over land, the appointment of noblemen to the high ecclesiastical offices, the construction of chapels and churches by lords and the appointment of their incumbents by them created strong economic, political and social links between the two orders. The legal ordering of the three estates which survived serfdom, enabled a continuity in their dominance long after serfdom and other medieval institutions were either dismantled or transformed.

Therefore, when we talk of the transition to a class society we do not mean that classes emerged for the first time. We mean essentially that there was transition to a modern class society which had no place for privilege based on birth, status and legal shackles that bound all outside that circle of privilege to being subjects of those who were privileged. The birth of this modern class society is inseparably linked with the emergence of bourgeois-liberalism and the development of capitalism. The change did not occur overnight. It was a process of the old society, continued through the last years of the old regime, and was accomplished in the throes of the industrial revolution.

It triumphed when capital became the dominant element on a global scale. In one way, therefore, the unfolding of the modern society is a long, complex, and a multi-dimensional process. In another way, it was sudden and dramatic. The pace of historical development increased by

bounds in comparison with the ancient and medieval world, and at different places at different times a whole generation suddenly felt their old world uprooted. The entire social landscape and their relationship with the outside world was transformed overnight. They felt themselves transformed, found new identities for themselves, and felt their lives organised in a completely new way. They began to belong to new collectivities. New classes emerged and the older classes were transformed.

15.3 THE TRANSITION

Historically the premises for the transition to the modern class society were created within the womb of the pre-modern society. The challenge to the feudal social structures came from the class struggles of the peasantry and the bourgeoisie, and the nation state as a political formation. The transition was quite complex, as it involved the transformation of the landed aristocracy and village communities which were the mainstay of the feudal social structure. The terrain and forms of class struggle of the feudal economic system was undermined and capitalism developed. You have read something about it in your earlier Units. There was no unilinear progression towards the modern bourgeois-liberal society.

Early modern Europe saw the establishment of strong centralised monarchies, with many of the characteristics of a modern state and nation. These absolutist states increasingly undermined the political position of the feudal landed aristocracy, and the growth of trade and commerce and improvements in farming techniques transformed the nature of this aristocracy. The state system of Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century was characterised by the tension between monarchies that attempted to extend and centralise their authority, often by appeal to divine right, and landed aristocracies that generally resisted them, seeking to reassert traditional privileges. In most cases the monarchies prevailed to a greater or lesser degree, although the claims of the privileged classes, both nobility and the emerging capitalist groups, to a share of state power and patronage in return for supporting the royal authority remained a limitation on their absolutist powers.

In the new nation states there was a natural alliance between the bourgeoisie and the monarchies. They opposed tolls, tariffs and other petty regulations that restricted trade and other commercial activity. The towns and the bourgeoisie became major forces in the transition from feudal societies to modern class societies organised as nation states. The estate system was modified, if not completely undermined, once the economic relationships that sustained them were eroded. The emergence of a significant commercial bourgeoisie, whose sources of wealth were based on sources other than wealth, and the development of a unified market, domestic and international in scale, set in motion social forces in European societies whose interests and value system was very different from that of the former lords, the peasants and even the artisans organised in guilds. In the rural society too the putting out system of production strengthened the nascent bourgeoisie, which was freed at the expense of the artisans organised into guilds. The take over of Church lands not merely decapitated the Church which was a pillar of the feudal order, the sale of Church lands resulted in landed property no longer remaining the preserve of the older landed aristocracy. The growth of manufactories and then factory units resulted in the emergence of a working class solely linked to industrial production, and a bourgeoisie linked with industry. Entry of the bourgeoisie as land managers or capitalist farmers, particularly in England after the Enclosures, created a significant agricultural proletariat. Thus two new classes - a bourgeoisie spread out into the commercial, financial and industrial sectors, and a proletariat in agriculture and industry - initiated a transformation of the social spectrum by the 18th century.

The landed aristocracy, however, retained its social and political dominance over Europe. Landed property still remained the basis of status, and a significant source of wealth. Social, political and economic relationships of the old regime, about which you would have read in your earlier Units, remained alive in some form or the other throughout Europe. The landed aristocracy still enjoyed a wide variety of inherited legal privileges, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches still remained linked to the landed aristocracy, a large part of the urban labour force was still organised in guilds, and the peasantry had not gained freedom from high and feudal dues almost throughout the Continent. Despite the emerging industry, the nobility of every country was the single wealthiest section of the population. Though it derived its largest source of income from land, the role of the landed aristocracy was not limited to its estates. Their influence was felt in every area of life. The 18th century continued to be the age of the dominance of the landed aristocracy, though this aristocracy itself was now rooted in the

emerging capitalism. A new kind of society had come into being, that still retained something of the old.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How is the pre-modern class society different from the modern class society ?

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- 2) What was the role of centralised monarchies in Europe ?

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- 3) What do we mean when we talk about the transition to a modern class society ?

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15.4 ELEMENTS OF SURVIVAL OF THE OLD : THE ESTATES AND CORPORATE BODIES

The most visible forms of the old regime in the new society was the survival of the estates and corporate bodies well into the 19th century. Even in England where the Revolution of 1640 set England on to the path of parliamentary government and economic developments which ultimately resulted in full fledged capitalism, the nobility and the gentry constituted an important support base for the state and enjoyed considerable amount of power in the countryside. The Parliament of the 18th and early 19th centuries was very different from our present day ones which are meant to represent the interests of everyone, rich and poor, who lives in a parliamentary democracy. The representative bodies throughout Europe represented only the upper classes as participation in them was permitted to only those people who owned certain kinds of property, and were called 'free' subjects. The rest of the population, consisting of the poorer classes, were not considered as having any rights. Therefore when members of Parliament spoke in defence of liberty and property, it meant rather privilege and property. The revised order that these parliamentarians wished to bring in, involved increasing the privileges of their own propertied classes, not of the common people - although when they found themselves facing a ruler who refused to listen to their demands they were forced to look for support base outside their own class.

Even as ideas of the French Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity, popular sovereignty and nation as constituted of the entire people, led to the birth of modern politics and modern public opinion, representative institutions throughout Europe continued to exclude people as representatives. Democracy continued to be interpreted in the light of the interests of the propertied classes, and until well into the 19th century the landed aristocracy continued to safe-

guard its interests through its monopoly and control of parliamentary-representative institutions.

In England the existence of 'pocket' boroughs, a property criteria for franchise which excluded even the bourgeoisie till the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, and greater representation for countryside as opposed to towns where population became concentrated, allowed the landed aristocracy to safeguard their own class interest even as the bourgeoisie emerged as a strong social and economic contender for power. The House of Lords in Parliament represented by the richest four hundred families in Britain continued the tradition of the 'estate' of the nobility, even after the composition of the House of Commons changed in favour of the 'commoners' through a series of Reform Acts of Parliament. In France the continued existence of local aristocratic estates and the continuing dominance of the landed aristocracy in the parliaments and provincial diets ensured the same. After the Restoration, there was a bi-cameral legislature with the upper house nominated by the King. In the assemblies in the different states and after unification in Germany the landed aristocracy dominated the upper house, and Bismarck, the Chancellor was responsible to the Emperor, who still held considerable powers. In the Russian Empire the charter of Nobility, the pre-reform provincial assemblies, and the post-reform zemstvos ensured the separation of landed aristocracy and bourgeoisie in a legal sense, as the landed aristocracy and peasantry continued to 'estates' and legal categories into the 20th century. These political institutional arrangements hampered constitutionalism and handicapped the class struggles for greater political democracy.

15.5 IDENTITIES

The feudal system in Europe strengthened the idea of each state or society as a community constituted of numerous smaller communities. People till the 18th century did not enjoy what are regarded as individual rights. A person enjoyed such rights and privileges as were guaranteed to particular communities or groups of which he or she was a part. The 'community' might include the village, the municipality, the nobility, the church, the guild or the parish. Each of them enjoyed certain privileges or disabilities as the case may be. In your Unit discussing the French Revolution you would have read about the old regime in some detail.

15.5.1 Community

The basis of this community life and communal consciousness was the pre-industrial household economy with the larger extended family household as the basic unit of consumption as well as production. The customary collective rights of the community were integral to this family economy, and the earliest struggles of the oppressed were inspired by assertion of these collective customary rights against encroachments and denial of these rights by the landed aristocracy. The earliest expressions of class struggles also assumed the form of assertion of community rights and a millenarian harking back to an ancient past of collective freedom and egalitarianism. These early anti-feudal struggles formed the bridge for the dissolution of the primordial community and the emergence of peasant consciousness - a new identity based on the class interests of those working in the land. In France the popular uprisings across the countryside in 1789-91, along with those in the cities, transformed the social as well as political life of the nation. They were instrumental in the transformation of the Estates General into a National Assembly. In England there was a wave of anti-enclosure peasant rebellions. In Germany, the peasants did not take the changes bound with the change in institutional arrangements lying down. In the Russian Empire, there was a considerable transformation in the peasant uprisings after the post 1861 reforms.

15.5.2 The Landed Aristocracy

The landed aristocracy in its perception of itself as a class as opposed to an 'estate' traversed the same course. To begin with they asserted that to be an aristocrat was a matter of birth and legal privilege. In times of change they tried to assert their control over offices on the basis of birth and lineage. This is true of all Europe. Throughout the 18th century and parts of the 19th, in Russia till much later, the highest appointments to the Church, the army, and the bureaucracy tended to go to the nobles already established in court circles. Some privileges still remained 'hereditary'. Secondly, they attempted to preserve their exclusivity by making entry into their ranks and institutions more difficult, even as monarchies tried to create new aristocracies. On the continent they also tried a reassertion of their feudal dues. They also sought to

maintain their dominance in the countryside in the same manner. In England they legislated on game laws which gave them exclusive hunting privileges, and which they could guarantee because they also served as local justices of peace who administered the laws and imposed penalties for their violation. In France 'the notables' tried to prevent the erosion of the privilege of exemption from taxation for themselves and the Church by calling the Estates General in 1789. In Germany they retained a number of privileges even after 1848 revolution and the Frankfurt Assembly. In Russia, apart from control over all posts, they stood by the autocracy in defence of their privileges.

With changes in economy and their adaptation to capitalist development the aristocracy asserted its direct control over the land especially in England, East German states, and the Russian Empire. The enclosures and investments in roads, canals, railways, coal mines etc. in England, the emancipation of peasants in East Germany without land, the tenancy laws in Western Germany, and the terms of Emancipation in the Russian Empire were expressions of class interests/ domination as a landed class, and the emergence of landed aristocracy as a class with a stake in capitalist development.

15.5.3 The Bourgeoisie and the Workers

The trajectory of the creation of a bourgeoisie as a class for itself is slightly different. From the beginning, as it emerged within the womb of the pre-modern, feudal society, and even as it was still part of a larger 'commoners' estate, it had nothing to look back on. It emerged as the instrument of the destruction of feudalism, and continually broadened and transformed itself from the early merchant-burgers into the commercial, financial and industrial representatives of capitalism.

The first artisans destroyed machinery which they saw as destroying their livelihood and way of life, subsequently evolving into the first trade-unionists. The emergence of a factory proletariat finally led to the dichotomy of capital and labour as the primary contradiction in the modern class society. This proletariat represented in its labour process and in its objective situation 'a class in itself' whose interests were necessarily opposed to that of the bourgeoisie, and to capitalism itself as the organising principle in society. With the emergence of capital as the dominant element in economic production, the bourgeoisie became the representative of status quo, and the class struggles of the working class the moving forces of history. As Marx pointed out, a class had been created whose emancipation would/could result in the end of class exploitation itself. The whole basis of economy and society had become transformed. The relationship between those who owned property and those who worked it was very different from feudalism. The birth of modern politics, as expressed through the ideals of the French Revolution and the following revolutions of 1830 and 1848 meant primarily that no privilege could any more remain unquestioned. The forces of democracy unleashed by these revolutions ended all legitimacy of estates. Class identities rooted in production relations of capitalism became predominant, and with this the transition to a modern class society became complete in most parts of Europe.

15.6 COMPETING IDENTITIES : THE NATION

The emergence and development of modern class society parallels the birth of the nation-state and emergence of the nation as an organising principle. In fact the political form given to the modern society was that of a nation. The French Revolution in democratising the concept of the nation to guarantee the fundamental rights of all people also legitimised the link between the two. The transition to citizenship from being subjects of kings and queens was inseparably linked to equality before law as well as private property and a unified market. During the course of the 19th century the press, the educational system, the religious movements, and the inter-imperialist rivalries contributed to the strengthening of national identities and the growth of self-conscious nationalist movements. In Italy, Germany and Central Europe, they represented powerful forces, and incorporated the class interests of the lesser gentry and the emerging middle class. The people got naturally carried along with these nationalist movements, even as their class interest remained unrealised and sometimes even unrepresented within them. In some countries which were already nations the peasants became Frenchman or German as the case may be. With the outbreak of World War I the working classes in all these countries rallied around the call of their government to 'defend nationalist interests'. This entire trajectory of events have been discussed in great detail in your earlier Units, and you

would be quite familiar with the different kinds and stages of nationalism. Yet, it is worthwhile remembering that national identity did not really diminish class affiliations. The working class movements were an important political force in Germany, Italy and Russia, and the Social Democratic Parties, overwhelmingly working class in their membership and orientation, were the largest political parties throughout Europe. In Russia the working class was the major social force in the Revolution of 1917, and in overthrowing the capitalist order. The bourgeoisie, even in its most extreme evocation of nation, identified the nation with its own class interests. It is important to remember this as we talk of nation as cutting across class identities.

15.6.1 Other Identities

Women's movements, particularly feminist movements, and women's studies, have led to the creation of a gender identity, shaped largely by the experience of inter-action between women's movements and labour struggles. There was a growing realisation that their aspirations could not be subserved within the general class demands. The struggle for vote, equal wages for equal work, inheritance rights and various manifestations of patriarchy contributed to awareness of gender issues.

In recent decades the restructuring of the western economies away from the manual and industrial sectors has meant the dwindling of the old manual 'working class', and the coming of what has been called 'post industrial' society. There has been a corresponding rise of new sorts of employment of a non-manual kind, in the service sector chiefly. These changes have been seen as having considerable effect on people's sense of collective and personal identity. Particularly the movement 'from production to consumption' is perceived as creating new bases for structural divisions and unities in society, as well as for people's conceptions of themselves and the social order. This 'post-industrial' society is seen as mass society, with the basic divisions into elite and masses, and an end to class society. Gender, regional, ethnic and community identities are at the fore.

This is a view that does not remain uncontested. Perceptions apart, classes remain a basic reality of contemporary society, and class solidarities still retain considerable significance. Greater technical expertise is true only of a small proportion of the workforce, and many of the new non-manual jobs are so deskilled as to be indistinguishable from those performed by manual workers. The reality of all wage labour under capitalism today is that it is still necessarily exploitative and organised in the interest of Capital. Class relations may have become mystified or hidden under the force of media, and more sophisticated forms of production and consumption, but the relationship between Capital and labour retains its essential contradiction in the post-industrial capitalist social order. The dichotomy of capital and labour also remains the essential basis of contemporary society, in the larger sense that the exploitation of labour can end only with the overthrow of the capitalist order itself.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What role did community consciousness play in the pre-industrial society ?

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- 2) How did the landed aristocracy try to preserve itself ?

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15.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you saw :

- how capital reshaped the older feudal order in the wake of its dominance,
- how the pre-modern society based in numerous small community identity was being undermined in various ways,
- how the new experiences of the industrial society led to formation of new collectivities and identities.

15.8 KEYWORDS

Centralised monarchies: Kingships which consolidated political power in the king. This tended to undermine the power of nobles and other feudal lords.

Ecclesiastical offices : Offices created by the church.

Borough : A parliamentary constituency in England.

Zemstovs : A Russian assembly.

15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 15.2. You could talk about the role of community etc.
- 2) See Section 15.3. You could talk about its role in undermining the feudal landed aristocracy.
- 3) See Section 15.2. You can talk about undermining privilege on the basis of birth etc.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See sub-section 15.5.1
- 2) See sub-section 15.5.2. You could talk about attempts to promote privilege by birth etc.
- 3) See sub-section 15.5.3, section 15.6 and sub-section 15.6.1.

SOME USEFUL BOOKS

- 1) P Laslett, R Wall (ed) *Household and Family in Past Times*, Cambridge 1972.
- 2) R Wall, J Robin, P Laslett (ed.) *Family Forms in Historic Europe*, Cambridge, 1983.
- 3) Wrigley & Roger Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871*, Cambridge, 1981.
- 4) Barrington Moore (jr), *Social Origins of Dictatorship & Democracy*, 1974.
- 5) Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848*, Rupa & Co., 1992.
- 6) Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital*, Rupa & Co., 1992