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Leon’s Model of Political Development in Medieval England in Yeoman’s Terms

"Feudalism, Collaboration and Path Dependence in England’s Political Development," by Gabriel Leon, explores the development of England's political history. It aims to understand why feudalism persisted in England while declining in other parts of Europe. The main puzzle the paper addresses is why England, despite having a strong monarchy, also developed a system of feudalism where power was decentralized among lords. Leon argues that collaboration between the monarchy and the elite class of feudal lords played a crucial role in shaping England's political development. He suggests that this collaboration created a path-dependent system where the monarchy relied on the support of the lords, leading to the persistence of feudalism. This path-dependent system, according to Leon, pushed the country along the early path to democracy.

The paper poses a theoretical model with historical evidence to support the argument that collaboration between the monarchy and feudal lords created a path-dependent system that was persistent in English political history. The historical evidence in question focuses on the period following the Norman Conquest; Leon argues that this was the crucial point at which England began to diverge (in terms of government institutions and collaborative rights) from the rest of Europe. Along these lines, Leon’s theoretical model of the extension of elite rights highlights the importance of collaboration between the monarchy and feudal lords in maintaining political stability. It suggests that this collaboration created a feedback loop where the monarchy granted privileges to the peasant class, thereby including them in the elite class (composed of the king himself and his feudal lords), in exchange for their support, leading to the consolidation of feudalism. In simple terms, the model suggests that the relationship between the monarchy and the elite class influenced the trajectory of political development in England, resulting in the persistence of feudalism despite the presence of a strong central authority. Given this cursory summary of Leon’s argument, this paper will analyze the details of Leon’s model, examining the various players, incentives, and payoffs in a clear and concise manner. This analysis will lead into a critique of the model itself, especially as it compares to competing models of political development, and finally a reflection on the significance of this research.

Leon explains his model of the extension of elite rights in stages, and this paper will do the same. He begins with the historical setting and rent payments, then outlines the three classes of players: the king, the barons (also referred to as feudal lords or the elite class), and the peasants. He goes on to explain the timeline of the game, considering the various sequential actions that players can take, before finally presenting his mathematical reasoning for the decision-making process behind these actions. After explaining the model, Leon reverts to historical evidence to support the model. By examining the responses of six English kings to baronial revolts, Leon attempts to match historical evidence to the trends that his model would suggest.

The first part of the model that Leon introduces is the setting, with short descriptions of the players, the timeline, and the in-period decision making process. He considers a society composed of a small elite class (with barons and a king) and a large peasant class. The king receives income from crown payments and rent payments, the barons receive only rent payments, and the peasants receive a wage; all individuals are otherwise identical. Individuals live for one period, and social class is inherited, meaning that the children of peasant families become peasants in the next period, the children of baronial families become barons in the next period, and the king’s child becomes the next period’s king (unless the current king is ousted).

Next, Leon explains rent payments. These payments are available to members of the elite class only, and are shared equally among them. This indicates that a larger elite class would lead to smaller rent payments for each baron and the king, and vice versa. Additionally, the degree of rivalry among the elite class affects each baron’s rent payments. Leon explains that rivalry depends on the nature and source of the rent payments: if they are derived from natural resources, rivalry is high because of the finiteness of these rents. On the other hand, if rent payments are derived from access to legal institutions, rivalry is low because access can be expanded indefinitely. When rents are non-rival, all elites receive the full benefit of these rent payments. In this case, rent could be considered a public good for the elite class, such that all members benefit from the full amount. On the other hand, when rents are rival, each elite receives a share of the rent equal to their share of the population. The total rent payment that a member of the elite class receives is thus a function of the number of elites, the rivalry of the rent payment, and the total amount of rent collected.

After outlining the setting and rent payments, Leon introduces the players. The king wants to maximize his payoff, which comes from rent payments and the crown income. If the king faces a baronial revolt, his probability of defeating the revolt and defending his position depends on the strength of the monarchy. This probability is increased if the king recruits collaborators from the peasant class; his ability to do so is determined by factors outside the scope of the model, such as the king’s personality and leadership skills. If the king recruits collaborators, he must either pay them an increased wage (in addition to their standard wages) or extend to them elite rights (thereby including them in the elite class). In either case, the king’s payoff decreases due to the cost of collaboration. If a revolt occurs and the king successfully defends his position, then depending on the original strength of the crown without collaborators, he can potentially increase his payoff by taking back the additional wage or elite rights that he extended to his collaborators. In the case that the king attempts to defend against the baronial revolt but fails, or attempts to renege on his peasant collaborators but fails, he is removed from office and receives a baron’s payoff. If the barons do not organize a revolt, the king can increase his payoff by taking a fraction of their rent payments and/or expelling some barons from the elite class (thereby increasing his own share of the total rent payment).

Next, Leon details the baron’s strategies, noting that barons also want to maximize their payoffs, which come exclusively from rent payments. The barons begin by deciding whether to try to revolt or not; here, it’s important to note that the baron’s decision to try to revolt does not necessarily mean that a revolt occurs. If the barons decide to try to revolt and successfully organize a revolt, then the probability that they oust the king is dependent on the crown’s strength (which in turn depends on the king’s decision to recruit collaborators or not). A successful revolt results in a new baron being selected for the monarchy at random. If the barons decide to try to revolt and fail to organize a revolt, the barons may face punishment in the form of rent expropriation by the king or the restriction of the elite class. If the barons decide not to try to revolt, the king will certainly punish them in this manner in an effort to increase his own payoffs.

Finally, Leon explains the role of the peasant class. The peasants want to maximize their income, which comes from wage payments and potential additional benefits from collaboration with the king. If a peasant is not offered collaboration or rejects the king’s offer, they receive only their standard wage payment. If a peasant accepts the king’s offer to collaborate, they receive an increased wage, a share of rent payments (if they are included in the elite class), or both. However, if the king later reneges on his collaborative agreement with the peasant, they will receive nothing.

Now that the setting and players are explained in detail, the timeline of the game is established. First, the barons decide whether to try to organize a revolt. Next, if they decide to try and are successful in organizing a revolt, the king then decides whether to collaborate with some number of peasants. If he does so, he offers additional wages or elite rights to these peasants. At this stage, if the revolt is successful with collaboration, the king is ousted and a new king is randomly selected. If the revolt is unsuccessful, the king rewards his peasant collaborators and attacks his baronial opponents. If he does not collaborate, his chance of defeating the baronial revolt is smaller. If the revolt is successful without collaboration, the same occurs: the king is ousted and a new king is selected. However, if the revolt fails in this case, the king does not have to reward any peasant collaborators, and could still potentially increase his payoff by attacking the barons by taking a share of their rent payments or shrinking the elite class. If the barons decide to try and are unsuccessful in revolting, or if the barons decide not to try to revolt, the king can attack the barons.

With an established setting, players, and timeline, Leon now considers the mathematical reasoning behind the various decisions that the king makes. He considers these decisions via backwards induction, starting first with the king’s decision to renege against his collaborators following a successful defense against revolt or his decision to attack the barons if they do not try to revolt. Lemma 1 states that following a successful defense against revolt, the king will renege on paying increased wages to his peasant collaborators when the elite class is large, because more collaborators will be necessary and the cost of collaboration will be high. He will renege on extending elite rights to his collaborators when the elite class is small, because the dilution of the elite class will be more significant and the cost of collaboration will be high. It turns out that in equilibrium, the king never reneges; this is because the potential benefit of added income or rent payments is outweighed by the potential cost of losing his position (and thereby the valuable crown income). On the other hand, lemma 2 states that if the barons do not try to revolt, the king will always attack and succeed in his attack. This is logical because the crown is constantly trying to reduce the power of the barons by restricting the elite class or expropriating their income.

The second decision Leon considers is the decision to offer compensation to the collaborators, in the form of increased wages or extending them elite rights. In order to ensure that the peasants he attempts to collaborate with accept his offer, assumption 1 is made; that any offer made by the king must be at least equal to the peasant’s standard wage. This is clear in the case of the additional wage payment offer, but less so in the case of extended elite rights. With this assumption, collaboration is always possible if the king is willing to extend rights to the peasants he wants to collaborate with, and that only one of the two offers are necessary. Lemma 3 adds to the takeaways from assumption 1 that all collaborators are paid in the same way, either with an additional wage or with elite rights. Leon outlines how much the king will pay in wages in lemma 4: if the elite class is small, the king offers a wage equal to the peasant’s standard wage and does not renege. In this case, the cost of collaboration is low enough that the king is willing to pay to increase his chance of defending against revolt without later jeopardizing his position. However, if the elite class is large, the king will have to hire more collaborators in order to increase his chances by an equivalent amount, and the cost of collaboration increases. In this case the king will want to renege, since the possible savings are large relative to the cost of collaboration. Knowing that the king will want to renege, the peasants will demand a higher wage reward in order to agree to collaborate. In short, for a small elite class the king will make a smaller offer in wages to the peasants for collaboration, while for a large elite class, the king will have to make larger offers.

The third decision that Leon tackles (which is truly the second stage of the game, as Leon is solving from end to start) is the king’s response to baronial revolt. Lemma 5 establishes that in equilibrium, the king never reneges, regardless of the form of compensation for collaboration. In either case the king will not find it worthwhile to renege, as the potential loss in crown income is greater than whatever small wage bill or rent payments he would give up. Assumption 2 follows, and states that for whatever elite class size, there is some amount of crown strength under collaboration that makes it optimal for the king to collaborate. This ensures that, regardless of how and how much peasants are compensated, a strong monarch will always choose to collaborate (thereby increasing the chances of furthering his reign). With considerations of equilibrium made, Leon summarizes the optimal choices made by the king when faced by a baronial revolt in proposition 1. There are three cases: in the first, if the strength of the crown under collaboration is less than or equal to the strength of the crown without collaboration plus either expropriated peasant wages or elite rent payments, then the king will not collaborate. In the second, if the strength of the crown is greater under collaboration than without collaboration plus appropriated wages, and the elite class is small, then the king will collaborate and compensate his peasant collaborators with additional wages. In the third, if the strength of the crown is greater under collaboration than without collaboration plus appropriated rent payments, and the elite class is large, then the king will collaborate and compensate his peasant collaborators with extended elite rights.

The fourth and final decision that Leon addresses, and thus the first stage of the game, is the barons’ decision to try to organize a revolt; this decision is outlined in proposition 2. Knowing that the king will attack if they do not organize a revolt, the barons will always choose to try to do so. If they succeed and revolt, the king responds as outlined in proposition 2. If they fail to revolt, the king attacks them successfully, expropriating their rent payments and removing some random barons from the elite class. In other words, conflict among the elite class is a constant feature of the society that Leon outlines. The crown will take any opportunity to weaken the barons, and knowing this, the barons will always try to preempt this attack with a revolt.

With a clearer understanding of the model we can begin to apply it to history; how might this conflict between the barons, the peasants, and the king change the size of the elite class over time? This question is answered in proposition 3. Leon postulates that there are two paths that a society like the one outlined in the model may take: a contracting path, in which the elite shrinks over time, or an expanding path, in which the elite class grows over time. The determining factor of the path followed by a society is the initial size of the elite class. If the elite class is initially small, the king will prefer to pay in wages when he collaborates, and any attacks on the barons will lead to a smaller elite class. If the elite class is initially large, the king will prefer to pay in extended rights when he collaborates, which will negate and eventually overwhelm any attacks on the barons. In all, the size of the elite class generates the feedback which gives rise to path dependence. It follows that a society may switch between expanding and contracting tracks as a result of exogenous shocks to the size of the elite class. Leon argues that this is precisely what happened in England in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest; a society with a contracting elite class experienced a sudden increase in size, and switched to the expanding path.

Leon examines the trajectory of two societies to compare how the size of the initial elite class determines whether that society continues on an expanding path or a contracting path. In comparing England and Normandy after the Norman Conquest, Leon presents a sort-of difference-in-differences analysis. Before the Conquest, the size of the elite class was small and shrinking in both societies. Leon assumes that if this event had not occurred (in the counterfactual situation) the sizes of the elite classes in the two societies would have continued to shrink. In reality, after the Norman Conquest, the size of the English elite class rose from four to about 200 individuals, a significant increase which was not seen in Normandy. This sharp increase changed the way that English kings responded to baronial revolts: they began to further dilute the elite class by granting elite rights to collaborators, which is exactly what the model suggested they would do.

With that, the model has been fully explained and contextualized and can now be critiqued. I will consider Leon’s critical analysis of his model before adding my own critiques. First, Leon considers three alternative explanations for the persistence of feudalism and an expanding elite class in medieval England. The first alternative, related to the work of Acemoglu and Robinson, focuses on conflict between the masses and the elite, and postulates that the king would make concessions to the barons in order to prevent revolts outright. However, this model is inconsistent with the historical record, as revolts occurred often. The second alternative, based on the work of Lizzeri and Perisco, focuses on conflict within the elite class. Their model argues that barons, rather than the king, would extend rights to the peasant class in order to induce the king to provide public goods. However, this is also inconsistent with the historical record. Kings, not barons, extended rights in the medieval period, and medieval kings had limited state capacity and therefore would not have been able to provide public goods except for maintaining social order. Finally, the third alternative is based on Bueno de Mesquita and Smith’s forays into applying selectorate theory to institutional change. This alternative model is most similar to Leon’s own, but differs in its application to medieval England. Leon’s framework better accounts for the facts of historical context, and also emphasizes the importance of collaboration between different social groups in the positive feedback loop which leads to path dependence.

I tend to disagree with Leon’s rejection of the alternative models. Although it may be true that Leon’s model fits the best with the historical context of post-Norman Conquest England, he does not apply any of the alternative models to Normandy in the medieval period, which is an essential part of the quasi difference-in-differences analysis that he conducts. Furthermore, it could be the case that other models fit better for parts of history before or after the post-Norman Conquest period that Leon examines in this paper. Indeed, Leon himself notes that the type of class conflict occurring in later periods was not related to baronial revolts, but rather trade competition and international wars. Would a model of elite class expansion that was based on conflict between the masses and the elite class not fit this historical context better? Despite my critique, the significance of this article is clear, though potentially small in scope. It contributes to the literature on long-term processes of political development, and makes a compelling argument for the significance of collaboration between the elite and non-elite classes for the establishment of path-dependent political trends. It may even contribute to our understanding of the historical development of modern democracy.

Works Cited

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