

**European Feudalism: Structure, Organization of Production, Technological Developments,
Various Theories, the Crisis of Feudalism**

DC – I, Course -II

**Paper: Social Formations and Cultural Patterns of the
Ancient and Medieval World-1**

**Lesson: European Feudalism: Structure, Organization
of Production, Technological Developments, Various
Theories, the Crisis of Feudalism**

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Definition and Meaning:

The social system that existed during the middle ages in medieval Europe in which people were given land and protection by a nobleman, and had to work and fight for him in return is called feudalism. It was also an alternative of the slave social formation contained Roman as well as Germanic elements. Here the authority of the king who symbolized the state was hierarchically distributed among a large number of feudal lords.

However before we delve into any debate of an academic nature pertaining to the genesis of West European feudalism it is important for us to briefly understand the precise connotation of the term *feudal* and the context in which it is used. The term *feudal* in its European form is an old adjective, which to begin with was used in a very narrow sense to refer to a certain kind of property i.e. the *fief* which denoted the importance of land tenure and the rights and privileges attached to it. However by the 18th century the term acquired a wider connotation and it came to be used in a broader sense to refer to a certain kind of social formation that came into existence at the dawn of the 10th century as a result of the fusion of Romanic and Germanic elements. Also feudalism for long was seen and understood by several scholars as a social formation that was dominant in and peculiar to the societies in Western Europe in course of the middle ages, though subsequent research has tended to significantly undermine this presumption.

Before going to the point we should know the real meaning of feudalism. Feudalism was primarily based on the personal kinship ties and impersonal bureaucratic politics. It was basically a relationship between overlords and vassals or lords in which the overlords grant land to the lords or vassals and in return of which the vassals gave military services to their master. Feudalism arises in some parts of Ancient Rome when central government broke down and public functions, obligations erupted. Feudalism was basically a chain of kinship ties and relationship among four groups; king, overlord, lord, and client in which the king was the supreme governing body. The overlords or lords provided fief- a grant in return the forms of land to their vassals in return of their service. This all was the feudal landed property and had three tenures/ land holdings:

1. Church Tenure
2. Military Tenure

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3. General Tenure

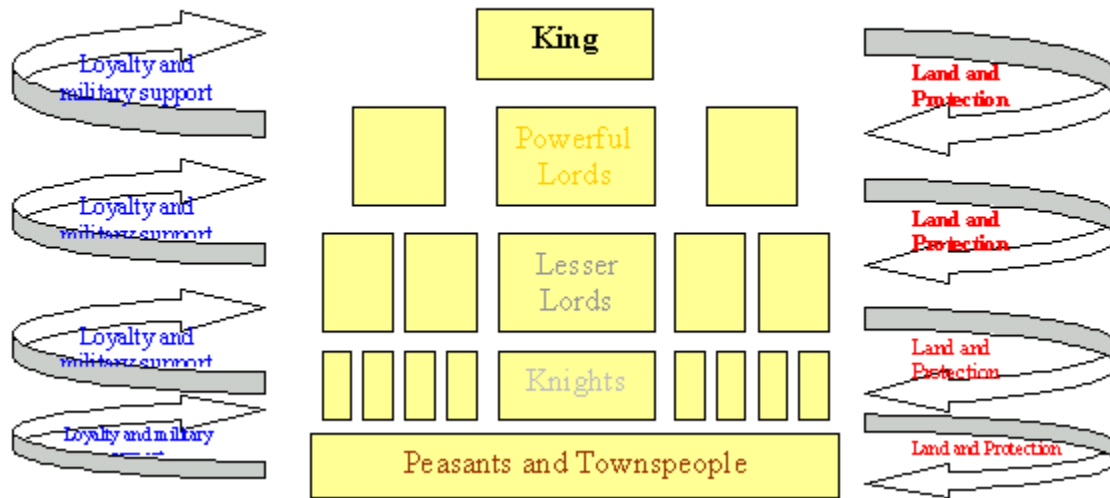
In the church tenure the Christian people paid tithes (one tenth of their income) to the church in return of which the church provided spiritual benefits to the people and in some cases nothing in return. The second one was military tenure in which the clients had to give forty days work in a year to overlord's army, home and in some cases they worked as guards to overlords home. The third tenure was the general tenure in which the vassals gave (equipments, military horses) etc. to the overlords.

If we see the feudal society in relation to the feudalism the whole of the feudal society was based on kinship ties and relationship and economy that society was based on the functioning of land. The whole fact wonders about the manorialism (was essentially a relationship of dominance and subordination between those who claimed authority over the land and those families who cultivated it and in the feudal society at one time there was fall in the market commodities and production. The manor came as a method to improve the production. For the production the manor was divided into; demesne and dependent peasant tenements. The demesne was the portion of the estate which was managed directly by the lord. It was also a part on which serfs or personal households worked and second was the part on which peasant worked in which land was allotted to them.

The dependent peasants of medieval Europe, called serfs, were tied to the soil and were completely subject to the authority of the lord. The lord should have been interested in having a portion of the estate under his direct management because there were not enough peasants/serfs available and it was impossible to find sufficient dependent tenants. The demesne had three advantages---most fertile and best located, the lord had the means, which serfs lacked, to invest in better techniques and the lord could exercise a high degree of coercion to mobilize labour for the demesne. Wherever the land was transferred the serfs who were attached to it were also transferred along with it so that the population of a village would be distributed among several manors. These ties promoted village level solidarity which in the later medieval period became a significant factor in the struggle against serfdom. In the feudal society a special ritual was conducted in which the vassals take a vow to serve his lords all his life in return of which the lords gave them homage and the vassal was selected as lords men.

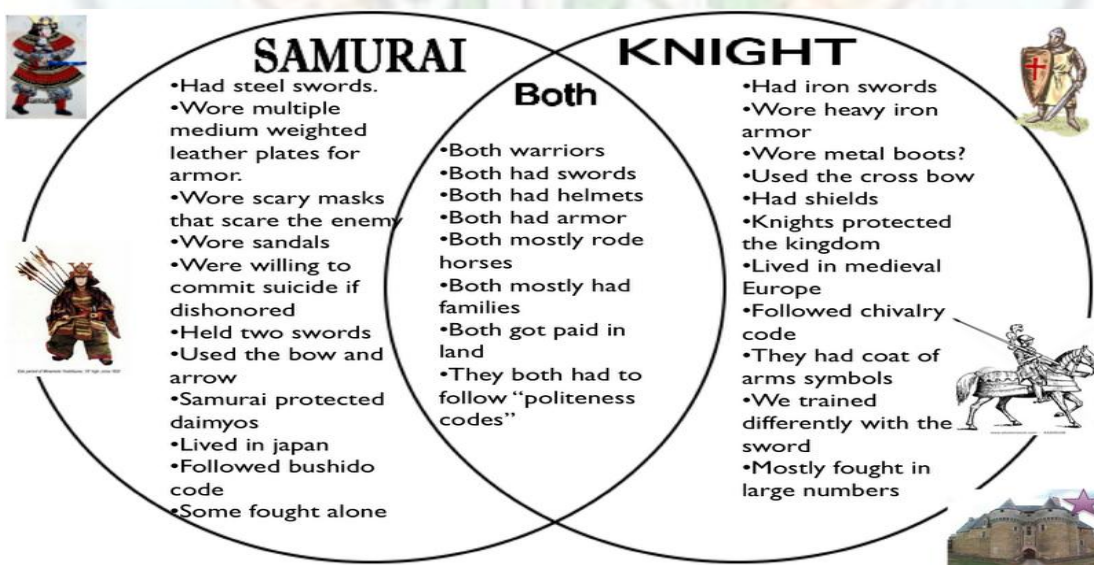
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Feudal Hierarchy & Obligations



<http://www.regentsprep.org/Regents/global/themes/politicalsystems/feudalism.cfm>

Broadly speaking feudalism can be described as a system that was characterized by the social, political and economic pre-dominance of a land holding elite, the fractioning of political power with a paternalistic government machinery being most effective at the local level, existence of private armies and a well defined code of honor and lord-vassal relationship. Though there were many Differences between European and Japanese Feudalism but there were many similarities between the functioning and also in the structure of Samurai and Knights. The following diagram will explain those similarities and differences:



<https://sites.google.com/site/mrnorrisyear8history/4-5-japanese>

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In the feudal mode of production, the peasants were completely at the mercy of landed magnets and their condition deteriorated due to the inability of the government to protect the people from the onslaught of the Germanic tribes. Ordinary peasants were forced to exchange their liberty for the promise of security from anyone who was military strong enough in their locality. At the local and regional levels landed magnets and warrior chieftains were the real government. The exploitation of the serfs by the lord was the dominant surplus extraction relationship of the feudal social formation. The specific arrangements of the contract those were basic to the military protection and service. The contractual relationship was a way of reconciling the tension between authority and liberty by way of contract.

Vassals who possessed extensive fiefs divided out portions of them in a process known as subinfeudation. It resulted that every landholder in the feudal system became both a vassal and an overlord excepting the lord king and the lowliest vassal holding a single indivisible fief. In actuality, lords had little control over their lesser vassal. The description phrase of the time, 'the vassal of my vassal is not my vassal' describes the dissolution of the ability of the overlord to maintain effective authority over fiefs granted to vassals. To maintain tenure of the strips assigned to them, serfs owed more than labour service to the landlord. Along with the customary dues and rents, the peasants were obliged to give a percentage of all they harvested to the lord, a tithe to the priest, and perhaps a share to the steward. There were also extra obligations, such as gifts made to the landlord on certain occasions and there was additional labour owed, such as collecting fire wood or maintaining roads and bridges on the manor. All these obligations were satisfied by labour and produce.

The landlord controlled certain products, known as banalities including products of manorial wine press, gristmill and oven, which belonged to the lord and which the serfs had no choice but to use and for which use they shared their wine or flour with the lord. And if they wished, lords could arbitrarily impose additional charges on their serfs. Landlords were also obliged to make land or some other means of livelihood available to them and once all obligations to the landlord were satisfied, peasants were granted what remained of their produce for their own needs. The functions of the state were vertically dispersed among social groups with overlapping politico-

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legal rights and powers. Parcelization of sovereignty enabled urban and rural communities to evolve along increasingly antithetical paths.

The first phase which lasted from c. 900 to 1200 saw the emergence, expansion and climax of feudalism. The tenth to thirteenth centuries may be regarded as the classical age of western European feudalism. The second phase from c. 1200 to the 1320's was a period of significant changes in the feudal economy. The third phase began around the 1320s and continued till the end of the fourteenth century. There was a cycle of agricultural growth, sizeable increase in population, food shortage, famines, demographic crisis, and decline of population, equilibrium and a repetition of the cycle. In the first phase of feudalism unpaid labour services performed for the lord on his demesne by dependent peasants constituted the main source of surplus extraction by the feudal ruling class. This situation began to change with the increase in population. Instead of taking feudal rent in the form of labour services the lords began to demand dues either in kind or money.

The genesis of feudalism can be traced back to the period of the 5th century and it lasted up to 15th century and one of the pioneers in tracing the genesis of West European feudalism was a scholar by the name of Heinrich Brunner who published his work in 1887. Infact the study of feudalism has generated a lot of excitement amongst scholars and there is no dearth of academic writings both in qualitative as well as quantitative terms. Some of the finest academic work in this field has been done by scholars like Perry Anderson, Marc Bloc, Lynn White Junior, Heinrich Brunner and Henri Pirenne to name a few.

But scholars such as Heinrich Brunner who have been regarded as pioneers in setting the tone for the debate surrounding the genesis of feudalism characterized feudalism essentially as a 'military system' that was geared towards organizing society for 'instant warfare' in order to deal with the sense of looming sense of insecurity generated by constant Germanic, Arabs, Slav and Magyar invasions. Brunner argues that since the king lacked a regular army he had to rely on vassals to marshall together troops to ward off the invaders. Brunner regarded the battle of Poitiers in A.D 732, a period that coincided with the initiation of reforms by Charles Martel, as a turning point in the evolution of the character and organization of the Frankish army, which now gave increasing importance to cavalry over infantry largely as a response

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to the advance made by the Arab armies, whose source of effective strength was mounted combat on horses. Now the Franks too tried to organize their cavalry along similar lines, for Martel realized his failure to consolidate on his early victories and repel the Muslims permanently because of a slow moving infantry.

Further he argues that due to the rudimentary nature of tax collection system the only feasible way to be able to maintain mounted warriors was in large numbers was through land endowments. This land for distribution was obtained by confiscating the church's landed property, this land was redistributed amongst vassals who were obliged to maintain troops and horses out of its produce and serve him on horse back. Failure on part of the vassal could lead to a revocation of the estate and interestingly in course of time the ancient custom of swearing allegiance to the ruler was fused with the granting of the fief. Brunner asserts that this new system that was evolved as a response to the Arab invasions, eventually led to the growth of an aristocracy of mounted warriors and the crystallization of the proto- feudal, seigniorial elements. Thus for Brunner it is the Arab invasions of the age that give birth to feudalism. The advent of technological innovations such as the stirrup bolstered the emergence of a cavalry based military.

Brunner's hypothesis has been critiqued particularly by the military historians who assert that the second quarter of the eighth century did not witness any substantial changes in methods of fighting as argued by Brunner. Further it has been rightly pointed out that while the importance of cavalrymen undoubtedly grew with time the footmen were never eliminated altogether.

March Bloch who is regarded as an authority on European Feudalism in his work entitled 'feudal society' while acknowledging the role of stirrup in the evolution of the Carolingian cavalry and other such technological inventions such as the nailed horse shoe yet he asserted that these questions required more serious and in-depth analysis. He also stressed that trade and monetary exchanges were never entirely absent from the feudal economy. The self-sufficient feudal economy coexisted with a tiny monetized sector. Without some amount of monetary exchange, however restricted it might have been, the lords would not have been able to exchange their surplus for many of the luxuries that they consumed. The shift from labour services

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to dues payable in money was facilitated by the growth of urban centers and trade by the twelfth century.

Lynn White Junior arguing somewhat along similar lines as Brunner and reworking some of his assumptions published his views in his work entitled '*Medieval technology and social change*' in 1962. White argues that the introduction of the Stirrup was one of the primary catalyst in the crystallization of the feudal system for its introduction had not just military but even political and social implications as well. Militarily the stirrup gave to the cavalymen tremendous strategic advantage and made mounted shock combat possible and transformed the nature of medieval European warfare. This technique asserts White was adopted by the Carolingian military leadership under Charles Martel and made a large cavalry increasingly indispensable.

At the socio-political level it helped foster the growth of a class of feudal knights who were given estates in return for military service and effectively controlled the reins of power. This land to sustain this military apparatus was made available by confiscation of ecclesiastical property of the church. It is at this point that Lynn White makes a significant departure from Brunner's line of argument by arguing that the confiscation of church property under Martel came close on the heels of the Arab invasion of France and this has led historians like Brunner to draw a direct relation between reform of the Frankish army and the advance of the Arabs.

Lynn White drawing our attention to the revised and now broadly accepted date for the battle of Poitiers as being accepted as 733 instead of 732 on the basis of research of a scholar by the name of Baudot who published his findings in 1955, argues that the 'reorientation' of the Frankish army under Martel took place in 732, which is a year ahead of their encounter with the Arabs at Poitiers. Further White is of the opinion that the Arab factor in shaping feudal elements has been somewhat overstated by Brunner for the Arab threat soon receded significantly due to internal skirmishes amongst the Umayyads in Spain. White saw the advent and dissemination of the Stirrup as the primary catalyst in the drive towards the emergence of feudalism as the politico-military order of the day.

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Critics of White have accused him of 'technological determinism' for he makes technology as the lynchpin of social and political change and thereby tends to overstate his case. While the role of technology as a force for change certainly cannot be ignored but it must be contextualized appropriately. But While keeping in view the limitations of White's work one must give him the credit for having explored the role played by technology in historical processes, an area of study that had remained largely uncultivated.

An altogether different line of argument was propounded by Henri Pirenne who wrote extensively on the topic at hand in the 1920's and 30's in works such as '*The Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe.*' Pirenne opines that in the ancient times Europe was essentially a 'Mediterranean civilization' and goes on to argue that the social and economic formations in Europe were determined by the decline and revival of trade in the region of the Mediterranean. He asserts that this Mediterranean peace was shattered by the Islamic expansion into the heart of Spain and the Mediterranean was transformed into what he calls as a '*Muslim Lake*' in course of the seventh century. The Islamic invasions and subsequent occupation of Alexandria in the east and Gibraltar in the west by the Muslims destroyed the age-old trading links between the east and the west, as the Mediterranean became a barrier.

This disruption of traditional trading links asserts Pirenne led to a decline of commerce, which in turn resulted in a fall in the fortunes of the merchant class and consequently decay in urban life, which to a great extent was sustained by them. To further substantiate his point Pirenne draws attention to the fact that gold currency gave way to silver coinage- a clear indicator of the rupture with the economy of the traditional Mediterranean world. Yet fallout of this development on the economic plane was that the estate which was one of the hallmarks of feudal socio, political and economic organization was that with the disappearance of commerce and towns it ceased to be a participant in the general economic activities in its capacity as producer of foodstuffs and consumer of manufactured articles. As a result each estate owner was compelled to consume his own produce and this gave rise to what Pirenne terms as a "closed estate economy" that was to characterize Europe well into the eleventh century. Thus, for Pirenne it is the Islamic invasions of the age that play

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a pivotal role in shaping the nature of social formation that eventually comes into existence in Europe.

However between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries the waning of Islamic power once again led to a restoration of traditional trading linkages and this had important ramifications on the feudal system. For the revival of trade turned around the fortunes of the merchant class and marked a revival of urban life, art, growth in money economy which slowly but steadily made inroads into the self sufficient economy which opened up the markets. These developments coupled together ultimately led to a dilution of feudal ties.

However the model propounded by Pirenne above fails to satisfactorily explain the changes taking place in European economy at this point of time. His argument regarding the "closed estate economy" doesn't hold good for there continued to be a degree of production for the market and while long distance trade may have declined to an extent we have evidence of the existence of short distance trade. Another major flaw in his analysis according to his critics is that while arguing about a debasement of Roman coinage as a clear indicator of declining money transactions Pirenne it is pointed out fails to satisfactorily explain the fact that while the debasement took place in about the third century whereas the beginnings of feudalization are seen only by the fifth century. So how does one account for this nearly two hundred year gap?

The French historian Marc Bloch's, who hails from the anal school, his work entitled '*feudal society*' traces the genesis of feudalism to the beginnings of invasions that Europe was subject to ranging from the Germanic invasions (5th century), Muslim invasions (7th century) to the invasions by the Magyars of Hungary (9th century) and the Scandinavians (10th century). These invasions in Bloc's opinion were primarily responsible for the creation of what we understand as the feudal social formation. He asserts that these invasions created a sense of hysteria and looming sense of insecurity amongst the people. In such a turbulent scenario clan ties could no longer provide adequate protection of life and property and this created a situation in which every man felt the need to be sheltered by someone more powerful. The powerful man in turn in order to sustain his prestige and ensure his safety was compelled to secure for himself the support of his subordinates who were bound to his service.

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Thus, this gave birth to a vast system of personal relationships operating at various levels of society and these ties have been christened by Bloch as ties of 'interdependence.'

These ties of interdependence according to Bloch were the lynchpin around which feudal social formation was structured. Bloch stated that 'each one was the lord of some and each one was the vassal of the other, except the King who was the vassal of none and the peasant who was the lord of none.' For Bloch these ties of 'interdependence' were the prime movers in fostering the growth of a corresponding ideology i.e. feudalism. Thus, Bloch saw feudalism essentially as a system of human relations and analyzed medieval world primarily from the point of view of the social order.

While Bloch has undoubtedly made immense contribution through his rich and in-depth analysis of the topic at hand however one and perhaps the only major ground on which his work has been faulted is that Bloch in his analysis of the creation of ties of 'interdependence' which he saw as being central to feudal social organization tends to convey the impression that these ties were entered into voluntarily and in doing so he conveniently seeks to ignore physical and extra economic coercion that was employed effectively to create and foster the growth of these ties. Infact recent research by scholars based on use of techniques like dendrochronology and glaciological studies have revealed that harshness of climatic conditions, scarcity of labour and specter of food starvation was what gave impetus to indulge in the practice of extra economic coercion.

Gerald A.J Hodgett arguing along the above stated lines in his work demonstrates how the underlying economic realities shaped feudal ties, he says that due to considerable reduction in the amount and the erratic pace with which money in circulated the amount of capital available at the disposal of the cultivator to fulfill his tax and other obligations was limited thereby making his position extremely precarious. Hodgett asserts that in case of marginal peasants their situation was compounded by the bad season or disease, which could destroy crop or wipe out livestock. It was against such a setting that the peasant turned to large local landholder either lay or ecclesiastical, who could provide protection with larger resources at his disposal. In exchange the peasant very likely seems to have bound

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himself and his heirs to the services of the lord. Thus, these ties generally speaking were usually not the outcome of benefice as Bloch asserts in his work but rather of the underlying economic and social realities and compulsions of the age.

Perry Anderson's while tracing the genesis of feudalism argues from a Marxist perspective in his work entitled '*Passages From Antiquity To Feudalism*'. Anderson asserts that the feudal social formation was born out of the catastrophic collision of two modes of production, which, were on the throes of transition namely the primitive Germanic tribal system, and the ancient Roman Slave mode of production. Thus feudalism for Anderson was the specific creation of the fusion of Germanic and Romanic legacies, a process that reached its high point with the first wave of Germanic invasions on the last day of 406, which were followed by a subsequent wave of invasions that swept Western Europe in 439. The invasions overwhelmed the Roman system and shattered the military, economic and political unity of Western Europe.

However the Germanic rulers realized they could never build up an alternative social, economic and political universe and hence they along with introducing certain Germanic elements also sought to restore as much possible of the Roman edifices and this gave birth to kind of a dualism in Europe. For instance the system of vassalage that came to characterize this system was rooted in either the German *comitatus* or the Gallo-Roman *clientela*: the two forms of aristocratic retinue that existed on both sides of the Rhine. While the manor came from the Gallo-Roman villa or *fundus*. The institution of serfdom regarded as the hallmark of the feudal order was derived from the *colonus* and the process of a slow degradation of Germanic peasants by employment of 'quasi-coercive' means to the clan warriors. This dualism is mirrored in the system of justice too where traditions of folk justice left a deep impact on the juridical structures of feudalism on the one hand and on the other the Roman legacy of codified and written law also acquired importance in the juridical tradition of the middle ages. This dualism points Anderson can be seen even at the apex of the feudal hierarchy i.e. in the institution of the monarchy, where the monarch represented an amalgam of a Germanic war leader with semi-elective, rudimentary secular functions and the Roman imperial ruler who was a sacred autocrat wielding considerable amount of power and authority. Thus the institutional structure that made feudalism had a deep double derivation, which in turn was the

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product of the clash and resultant subsequent synthesis of two very different systems according to Anderson.

As the above debate would have revealed that a rich plethora of work has produced by scholars on the question of the different genesis of feudalism. Of all the hypothesis that we have examined above in my opinion probably Perry Anderson's approach comes closest to being the most comprehensive of the lot though it too has certain limitations and can in no way be seen as representing the final word for the study of the topic at hand. To elevate any text to the status of a canonical text is an unhealthy attitude that goes against the very spirit of history, which teaches one to constantly engage with facts and use them as a tool to carry out rational enquiry. On the basis of current research it appears that feudalism was born from a milieu of a complex variety of factors. To attribute the rise of the feudal order to one principal factor alone at the current stage would not be correct especially since the embers of the debate still glow bright.

Account for the Crisis of Feudalism

The term 'feudalism', which goes back to the 17th century, is a complex one, and difficult to define. It can be used in a very narrow sense or, as in the present day usage, can cover a whole complex of ideas. Feudalism generally refers to the type of society that existed in Europe in the 6th-14th century A.D. It had a dominant class of landlords, who extracted surplus product and labour services from peasants by extra-economic means. Peasants carried on the actual production, and also performed 'forced labour'. They were attached to the soil held by these landed intermediaries placed between the king and labour. The system was based on a self-sufficient economy in which things were mainly produced for the local use of the peasants and their lords. Towards the end of the 13th century, however, Europe seemed to be facing a crisis. A whole corpus of literature has been written on feudalism, which expresses the views of a number of scholars on its emergence, characteristics and decline. There is a dynamic debate surrounding the 14th century crisis in feudalism, as well as the causes for feudal decline, which this essay will examine.

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One of the earliest models on the rise and decline of feudalism was forwarded by the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne. He explained the dynamics and crisis of feudalism on the basis of economic factors, i.e., trade and commerce. According to him, the impact of Islam in the 7th-8th centuries destroyed the flourishing economy of antiquity. A growing "economy of exchange" was replaced by a new "economy of consumption" in Western Europe. This was the 'feudal' economy, where land was the sole source of wealth and the most important institution was "the Great Estate". It was a closed, self-sufficient economy. Thus he explained the emergence of feudalism as arising out of the disappearance of trade and towns.

Similarly, for Pirenne, the eventual revival of the economy resulted in the death of feudalism. There was a re-emergence of trade around the 11th century during the Crusades, when the Europeans moved into the Middle East to reclaim it; and with the beginning of active trade with northern Europe. The maritime commerce soon penetrated inland, and with the revival of markets, agriculture also underwent changes. This process was related to the rise of medieval towns and cities in the 12th and 13th centuries called *bourgs* or *burgs*, which transformed over a period of time from religious-administrative centers to commercial centers. With the return of commerce, land lost its importance. These towns forced exchange and consequently, the opening up of the Estate. The new group of independent merchants and artisans that emerged absorbed the landless peasants and the younger sons of peasant families. The bourgeoisie then claimed freedom as its legal status, and instituted vast socio-economic changes. Hence there were changes in these spheres, along with the recovery of taxation, which had disappeared during the feudal era. On the basis of these changes, Pirenne argued for feudal decline. Such a theory implies that feudalism is stagnant and can be uprooted only by an external change.

Perry Anderson concentrated on changes taking place in spheres other than economy, focusing on various facets of social existence. He stated that the feudal mode of production that had emerged allowed the peasantry minimal scope to increase the yield at its own disposal, given the harsh constraints of manorialism. Land reclamation was thus started by the peasantry, beginning in the 11th century, who wanted to rid themselves from the economic burdens and buy their freedom. So Anderson pointed to a dual process of enfranchisement and commutation of dues. By 1300 A.D. then, there was the formation of a free-labour market and an increase in

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the surplus. Increased agricultural productivity, according to Anderson, contributed to the survival of urbanization.

This trend lasted till the 14th century, when crisis struck the entire continent. Rural reclamation over-reached limits of both terrain and social structure. An increase in population was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in yields, because the reclaimed land usually contained poor, wet or thin soil. Since fertilizers had not been used, the top soil exhausted quickly. Also, animal husbandry suffered as the grazing ground contracted on account of the advance of cereal acreage, and with it, the supply of manure for arable farming. Further, the diversification of feudal economy with the growth of trade had led, in some regions, to a decrease in corn output at the expense of other branches of agriculture being expanded, such as vines, flax, wool and stock-breeding. As a result, there was an increased dependence on imports as well.

Disasters, such as the famines in 1315-16, further added to problems. Lands began to be abandoned and birth rate fell. At the same time, the urban economy was hit with certain critical obstacles to its development. From 14th century onwards, the scarcity of money affected banking and commerce. This was because silver mining ceased to be practical or profitable in the main zones of Central Europe due to the increase in ground-water levels and lack of ways of sinking deeper shafts or refining impure ores. As a result, there was debasement of coinage, leading to spiraling inflation. This led to a widening gap between agriculture and urban prices. A decline in population led to a decrease in demand for subsistence commodities, hence grain prices slumped after 1320. In contrast, urban manufactured luxury goods became more expensive. This contradiction had a serious impact on the noble class – income from demesne cultivation and servile dues decreased and expenditure on their lifestyle increased. It led to a wave of intense warfare as knights everywhere tried to recoup their fortunes with plunder.

To complete this picture of devastation, there was the invasion of Black Death in 1348. The plague traveled through Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, England, and the Low Countries, Scandinavia and Russia. With the demographic resistance already weakened, the Black Death wiped off a quarter of the inhabitants of the continent. The indebted nobles were now faced with the serious problem of

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acute shortage of labour. They attempted to regenerate a surplus by tying the peasantry to the manor or battering down wages in both towns and countryside. For example, the Statutes of Labourers in England in 1349-1351 and the French Ordinance of 1351 were passed. This action on the part of the landlord is called "feudal reaction".

This was met with stiff resistance when the peasants refused to bear the cost of the crisis. Most such resistance movements were spontaneous and carried out at an individual level. Peasants would refuse to pay the dues demanded from them; they might abandon their fields and even flee to some other parts of the country. At the same time, there were a large number of organized peasant revolts in 14th century as well, which played a decisive role in breaking the hold of the lords over the serfs. For example, the Grand Jacquerie of 1358 in Northern France, the Peasants' Revolt in England in May 1381, the wars of *Remença*s (serfs) in Catalonia from 1460-80's etc. These revolts were part of a larger movement of social upheaval going on in Europe, and included many socio-religious movements like the Heresy Movement, the Peace of God Movement, and so on, even though the peasants were not necessarily religious in character.

The peasant revolts have been characterized differently by different scholars. Marc Bloch viewed the peasant movements as a natural extension to the seigniorial regime, just as strikes are a part of modern-day capitalism. Michel Mollath saw them as an expression of the peasants' misery and anger. Daniel Walley argued that peasant unrest was a by-product of the 14th century crisis. Georges Duby opined that peasant rebellion reflected the social and economic tensions of the Late Middle Ages.

An aggregated view of these rebellions will show a common thread running through all these instances of peasant discontent. Most revolts were directed against three social groups – the top Church leadership, nobles and the big merchants. Everywhere, peasants saw themselves as defending customs and accused lords of breaching customary relations. All revolts were against heavy taxation and against withdrawal of concessions which had been granted to them. But they were fighting from a conservative standpoint, defending the system under threat, and also lacked any cohesive political orientation. Though these revolts were politically repressed,

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they did change the balance of the class forces on land and thus, undermined feudalism in Europe.

Anderson located this significant outcome within the dual articulation of the feudal mode of production. For him, it was the urban sector that could and did decisively alter the character, course and outcome of the class struggle in the rural sector. Most of the great peasant revolts were located in zones with powerful urban centers. The presence of cities led to the spread of market relationships into the surrounding countryside, weakening the traditional seigniorial order. Further, many of the towns even actively supported or assisted the rural rebellions. They offered discontented peasants a flight from serfdom. Thus the presence of these towns put constant pressure on the nobles, who could not risk, beyond a point, driving their peasants away into vagrancy or urban employment. They were therefore compelled to accept a general relaxation of servile ties on the land. This led to a gradual commutation of dues into money rents in the West, and an increasing leasing-out of demesne to peasant tenants by 1450.

Certain aspects of Anderson's model have been questioned, such as the question of the driving force behind progress and crisis between the 11th and 14th centuries. According to Postan, demography was the driving force, while Lynn White Jr. credited it to technology. Brenner and Dobb agreed upon class struggle as the major driving force behind the crisis, while Sweezy, like Pirenne, believed it to be trade and towns. We can now briefly examine these views.

Postan and Ladurie, following the Neo-Malthusian model, argued for demography being the driving force in the middle ages. There was a decline in population in 14th century Europe. The economic trends visible in the Early Medieval Period – the rise in prices and rents, extension of area under cultivation, and growth of towns and rise of population – were not only halted, but put into reversal by the 14th century. Initially the rate of decline of population was slower than that of the decline of medieval economy. As a result, the standard of living, measured according to per capita income, also declined. Also, a fall in demand for land resulted in a fall in rents, accompanied by a shortage of labour force. Thus, even to Barbara Harvey, 'the feudal crisis' of 14th century was concomitant to the crisis of the economy.

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Postan and Ladurie have further argued that agriculture was not only the primary source of livelihood, but also the dominant sector of medieval European economy. Hence the crisis which started in the sector of agrarian production soon engulfed the urban and commercial sectors, assuming the proportion of a 'general crisis'. Like Anderson, they too speak of the colonization of marginal lands to meet rising needs of a growing population. But this agricultural expansion was accompanied by little qualitative or technological improvement in the economy. The infertility of these lands and the Great Famine of 1315, among other reasons, undermined the economic and demographic situation in medieval Europe.

Postan and others, however, have been criticized for their overemphasis on the role played by marginal lands and fertility of soil, especially as land is not a given and exhaustible commodity, but highly variable in nature. Moreover, its nature is dependent on many factors such as climate, labour input, crop rotation patterns and so on. They have also been accused of discussing the symptoms of the crisis, rather than its causes. According to Brenner, this theory can be critiqued as demography cannot be the only determinant for patterns of income distribution and serfdom; the qualitative character of landlord-peasant class relations was also important. Thus this model is also inadequate.

The 'monetarists', led by J. Day and J.H. Munro, have argued that rural influences were not the determinant factor in the medieval economic life. Rather, specialized sectors exemplified in long-distance trade, large-scale transactions, and monetary, credit and exchange systems, termed by Pirenne as "the Great Commerce", played a detrimental role. A major component of the medieval European economy, according to the 'monetarists', was the urban market sector, which required a continuous money supply. However, from the last quarter of the 13th century, there was a decline in mint production and money supply was no longer able to sustain the chain of transactions holding together the mercantile economy. This resulted into a general economic crisis.

Postan, however, has objected to this hypothesis. He speaks of new sources of precious metals being discovered in Africa and the Levant, and also of credit operating as a substitute to money, which could be used to settle obligations and effect transactions if real money was immediately unavailable. Patterson, in turn, has

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critiqued Postan's suggestion of Europe having access to precious metal supply outside Europe. According to him, some quantity of precious metal is lost every year, through the process of wear and tear and the system of chipping and sweating. The rate of loss is usually 1-2% per annum, which indicated that a complete depletion would have occurred within a century. Also, he asserted that credit can merely supplement real money, but never substitute it.

R.H. Gautier has suggested that the 14th century crisis had an adverse side-effect on the beneficial growth of agricultural specialization, which had led to a universal division of labour. This very abundance of cheap labour became an inhibiting factor in technological innovation, resulting in economic retardation.

Georges Duby is of the opinion that historians have unnecessarily romanticized the idea of a 'general crisis' and have ignored the considerable progress made in the urban sector and in the cultural fields to propagate their theory. Perry Anderson, however, argued that the major crisis in the agriculture had gripped other sectors of the economy and society as well.

In 1946, the feudalism debate was given a new dimension by Maurice Dobb, who contested Pirenne's argument that the self-sufficient system of feudalism declined because of the pressures of trade and urbanism in the 14th and 15th centuries. Dobb shifted the focus from exchange relations to social relations and analyzed the internal dynamics and nature of feudalism as a mode of production to explain the crisis. He argued that the primary reason for feudal decline was the inefficiency of the feudal mode of production. This was accompanied by the growing needs of the ruling 'parasitic' class for revenue, which were expanding because of natural growth of rural families, subinfeudation and multiplication of retainers, and extravagance and war. All this had to be supported by the surplus labour extracted from the serf population. Thus the main cause of the decline of feudalism was over-exploitation of the labour force, resulting in its exhaustion and disappearance in some cases, undermining the very system that it had nourished.

Paul Sweezy, in his critique of Dobb in the spring edition of *Science and Society* (1950), has argued that class struggle is not enough to explain the decline of feudalism. According to him, the factors suggested by Dobb that led to the growing

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demands of the ruling class take place outside the system of feudalism. He doubted that there was a significant relative growth in the size of the ruling class since warfare took its toll mainly on the upper orders and held that the increase in the size of the ruling class was matched by a growth of the serf population. He regarded the growing needs for revenue of the ruling class as a consequence of the expansion of luxury trade in the 11th century. Moreover, he highlighted the important role of towns in aiding the decline, pointing out that the serfs would not simply desert the manors, no matter how exacting their masters might have become, unless they had somewhere to go. Instead, this was a calculated move with the object of emigrating to rapidly growing towns, since they offered freedom, employment and an improved social status, acting as a powerful 'urban magnets' for the oppressed rural populace. He further sought the prime mover for the decline of feudalism in an external factor, i.e., the expansion of trade. Growth of long-distance trade from the 14th century onwards facilitated the establishment of local trading centers, and acted as a creative force that brought into co-existence a system of production for exchange alongside production for use. This transformed the existing socio-economic relations in society, bringing about a decline in the feudal mode of production.

In his reply, Dobb challenged the notion of the feudal economy as static, stagnant and incapable of movement from within. Further, he clarified that holding just one cause, whether external or internal, as the prime mover would be an oversimplification of the issue. The causes of change must be seen in interaction with each other. But he dismissed Sweezy's explanation of feudal decline in terms of an internal conflict or an external force as being much too mechanical and simplistic.

Brenner, forwarding a social interpretation of the crisis, emphasized on the structure of property rights in the middle ages. He assigned broadly two main features to the medieval society – first, the base, consisting of un-free peasants, who were the direct producers; and second, the aristocratic superstructure, which was supported by the rent extracted from the direct producer. It was this excessive rent extracted from the peasantry, and not an increase in population, that prevented the sustained growth of the economy. The late medieval crisis was thus a crisis of decreasing seigniorial revenues, and was thus not merely concomitant to the general crisis, but was in fact the central cause of it.

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Recent research has, however, indicated that pauperization of the peasants did not alone lead to such far reaching socio-economic changes, but there were more factors involved. Most peasant uprisings were in those areas where there was more prosperity than poverty. Peasant rebellions in England and Flanders were examples of discontent among the well-off and prosperous peasants of Europe.

Kohachiro Takahashi critiqued Sweezy's use/exchange dichotomy. According to him, feudal relations can accommodate money, economy and commodity production, and therefore, one cannot see them as factors that destabilized feudal relations. Rather, one must examine the way in which commodities are produced, means of production are held and social power is wielded. He also said that in considering various modes of production, the basic thing to take into account should be the existence-form of labour power, which he believed to be the decisive factor.

In 1953, Rodney Hilton came up with his arguments against Pirenne's orthodox view. Hilton believed that trade and urbanization allowed for more efficient exploitation within feudal mode of production. He focused on how in the late 10th century and early 11th century, the demographic increase, peasant resistance to labour services and the breakdown of the Carolingian Empire resulted in decentralization of feudal power and its autonomization in the hands of the vassals. Trade and commerce thus grew from the logic of rent maximization and due to a shift from labour to money rent, as the need for money increased. So Hilton argued that the appearance of money may have helped increase feudal exploitation. The character of feudal relations did not necessarily change – the lord still appropriated rent – only the form of exaction changed. So feudal power did not decline but the variables constituting it were altered.

Conclusion:

The feudal social formation replaced the slave social formation at the beginning of the tenth century in Western Europe. Feudalism was the system of production which succeeded the slave mode of production sustaining the political, military, economic and social structure in the Western Europe. Feudalism in medieval Europe was accelerated through social factors and technological advancements in agriculture and military equipments. Though feudal lords did not completely abandon slavery, they adopted the qualitatively different feudal system as dominant mode of

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production. Thus, to conclude, one can say that no one view or model can be used to fully explain the 14th century crisis and the decline of feudalism. Each view has its own unique features and shortcomings. Moreover, there is no mono-causal factor for the crisis of feudalism, as all the above mentioned factors become operative in a specific context, in a specific type of social relationship. So feudalism has to be studied and understood as a complex, operating within various different but specific contours and outlines.

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