The Brenner Debate

Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe

Edited by

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Introduction

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Robert Brenner's challenging article, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe", published in issue no. 70 of *Past and Present* (February 1976), initiated a debate of intense interest, not only to historians, but to all concerned with the causes behind transitions between successive social formations. In some respects it might be regarded as a continuation of that other well-known debate concerning the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which had been sparked off by the criticism by the American economist Paul Sweezy of the analysis given by Maurice Dobb in his *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. That debate, however, which began in the American journal *Science and Society* in 1950, was largely conducted between Marxists.[1] And although it undoubtedly had a resonance beyond them, it was inevitable that it should be seen as a debate within Marxism rather than one addressed to a wider public. This so-called "Transition debate" is hardly referred to in the "Brenner debate", even though there is considerable overlap in subject-matter, and even though Brenner himself, in a critique of Paul Sweezy, André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, referred extensively to the Transition debate in the pages of the *New Left Review* in 1977.[2] Nevertheless, those interested by the discussion in the pages of this volume would find much of interest in the Dobb–Sweezy controversy.

The responses to Brenner's article were of varying character. Since Brenner was attacking what he considered to be a form of demographic determinism in the interpretation of the development

[1] M. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London, 1946; repr. London, 1963, 1972). The *Science and Society* debate was republished, with supplementary material, as *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, introd. R. H. Hilton (London, 1976).

[2] R. Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism", *New Left Rev.*, no. 104 (1977).

of the pre-industrial European agrarian economies (and to a lesser extent a commercial interpretation), some of the earliest responses were from historians whom he designated as "neo-Malthusians". Whatever these historians may have said about the deficiencies or otherwise of Brenner's factual basis, the main conflict was between rival explanatory theories concerning historical development. This seems to have been the principal motivation behind the responses of M. M. Postan and John Hatcher and of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. Another weighty theoretical critique of Brenner's thesis came, however, not from a neo-Malthusian but from as severe a critic of neo-Malthusianism as Brenner himself. This was Guy Bois, whose then recently published *Crise du féodalisme*, a detailed study of late medieval Normandy, had paid particular attention to population movements between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.[3]

Somewhat different reactions came from historians who did not concern themselves so much with overarching theoretical interpretations as with the factual underpinning of Brenner's argument. Patricia Croot and David Parker questioned Brenner's perception of agrarian structures and developments in early modern France and England. Heide Wunder expressed doubts about his appreciation of the agrarian histories of western and trans-Elbian Germany. The remaining contributors were not in fact so locked into the argument with Brenner as were those historians already mentioned. My own essay was based on a lecture given in Germany in 1977 and was unrelated to the Brenner debate, but included in the symposium because of the relevance of its theme. J. P. Cooper's article, unrevised because of his death, was, no doubt, influenced by the debate but was a development of his own particular interests in the economic and social history of early modern Europe. It would seem too that Arnošt Klíma's article is similarly a development of his own preoccupation with the early history of Bohemian capitalism rather than a specific response to Brenner.

As will be seen, then, the contributions to the symposium relate to issues raised by Brenner but in rather different ways. Brenner's long and comprehensive summing up brings together most of these rather disparate contributions, absorbing and synthesizing, and, it must be said, giving no ground to his critics as far as his original

[3] G. Bois, *Crise du féodalisme* (Paris, 1976); Eng. trans., *The Crisis of Feudalism* (Cambridge, 1984).

position is concerned. It would seem that the gap between the opponents has much more to do with their theoretical starting-points than with the evidence adduced.

Brenner has some justification in referring to neo-Malthusianism (or demographic determinism) as the prevailing orthodoxy in historical studies of pre-industrial economic development. This orthodoxy should not, of course, be regarded merely as something imposed by academic mandarins. It is linked with the development of historical demography since the 1950s as an indispensable contribution to historical studies (though not, as some seem to think, as a separate discipline in itself).[4] It is true that M. M. Postan, who could be regarded as an early standard-bearer of this orthodoxy in medieval studies, hardly mentions Malthus in his many writings on medieval economic history. Nevertheless, he gives pride of place to population expansion and decline. His seminal contribution, as Brenner remarks in his first article,[5] was in his report on medieval economic history to the Tenth International Congress of Historical Sciences at Paris in 1950,[6] in which he rejected, *inter alia*, a monetarist explanation of long-term price movements and firmly asserted the primacy of the demographic factor. It is interesting, however, that he confessed that his definition of the "economic base" of society[7] "carries with it a certain early-Marxist implication".[8] Nevertheless, the theme of "population and land settlement", without concern for "the working of legal and social institutions" or "relations of class to class", recurs in his subsequent work, whether as a background to writings on trade, or more specifically in relation to demographic problems, as in his well-known article "Some Economic Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages".[9]

[4] About which, many general works. For example, T. H. Hollingsworth, *Historical Demography* (London, 1969); E. A. Wrigley, *Population and History* (London, 1969).

[5] Below, p. 15.

[6] M. M. Postan, "[Section 3, Histoire économique:] Moyen âge", in *IXe Congrès international des sciences historiques, Paris, 1950*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1950–1), i, *Rapports*; repr. in his *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge, 1973).

[7] Quoted by Brenner, below, p. 15.

[8] Postan, "Moyen âge", p. 225 (p. 3).

[9] M. M. Postan, "Some Economic Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., ii (1949–50); repr. in his *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy*.

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie on the other hand was, early on in his career, firmly attached to the Malthusian model of population expansion beyond the means of subsistence with inevitable regression as famine, plague and war brought population back to its "proper" relationship with resources. He built this model into his major and formidable work *Les paysans de Languedoc*,[10] whose second section was subtitled "Renaissance malthusienne", the whole work ending with an evocation of Malthus. This work did not ignore the social and political dimensions of peasant existence. In fact, its third section was subtitled "Prises de conscience et luttes sociales". However, by the time of his inaugural lecture to the Collège de France, "L'histoire immobile", in 1973, his Malthusianism was more pronounced – "it is in the economy, in social relations and, even more fundamentally, in biological facts, rather than in the class struggle, that we must seek the motive force of history".[11] And again, "from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries inclusive, the economy is servant rather than master, led rather than leading . . . in the last analysis it is meek enough before the great forces of life and death. And as for politics or the class struggle, their moment of power is still to come".[12]

It should not be assumed that Postan, at any rate, was totally hostile to Marxist historical interpretations. In spite of evident clashes of opinion, the Soviet historian E. A. Kosminsky thanked him for his help to him at the Public Record Office and for introducing him to English historians. Postan welcomed Kosminsky when he visited England in the 1950s, a by no means propitious period for such contacts. Postan used to refer to Marx as "that universal genius"[13] and in 1977 reviewed in a very friendly fashion for the *New Left Review* the work of the Polish Marxist historian, Witold Kula.[14]

It is not suggested that Brenner has, as a Marxist, for polemical reasons, exaggerated the distance between the neo-Malthusian (or neo-Ricardian) and his own position. But then, the reader of this debate needs to understand that there are different ways of under-

[10] E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, 2 vols. (S.E.V.P.E.N. edn, Paris, 1966).
[11] E. Le Roy Ladurie, "L'histoire immobile", *Annales E.S.C.*, xxix (1974), p. 675.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 689.
[13] Personal communication with the author.
[14] M. M. Postan, "The Feudal Economy", *New Left Rev.*, no. 103 (1977), review of W. Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System* (London, 1976).

standing the Marxist position. As will be clear from the ensuing articles, what most clearly differentiates Postan and those of his school from Brenner is the exclusion of the "relations of class and class" from the subject-matter of economic history. For Brenner, and for many Marxist historians, the issue of class exploitation and class struggle is fundamental for understanding essential aspects of the medieval economy.

In medieval society, as in all pre-capitalist economies, agricultural predominated over industrial production. The peasants, who were overwhelmingly the principal producers, certainly put some of their product on to the market in order to acquire cash to buy industrial goods and products like salt, and especially to be able to pay rent and tax. But most of their production was for self-subsistence and economic reproduction. The luxury goods of international trade; the cathedrals, castles and other massive building enterprises; arms and armour for war and plunder; and all cultural artefacts, depended primarily on upper-class demand. Variations in the demand for non-agricultural products by the peasant majority of the population only minimally affected the upper reaches of the economy. It was variations in the incomes of the landed ruling class and its states which were crucial. But what determined these fluctuations? Since the principal component of these incomes was rent, one must enquire what determined the level of rent. It is here that the Marxist contribution becomes relevant. Medieval peasants were not free agents in a market for land which they could take up or leave as they wished. Most of them lived in traditional communities which probably pre-dated feudal lordship. A high proportion were legally servile or, if free in status, were nonetheless dependent on the power of the landlord. For Marxist historians, whatever may have been the influence of the land/labour ratio or of the technological level of agrarian production, the power of the landlord was a crucial element in determining the level of rent. The relationship between landlord and tenant was "political" rather than "economic", hence the use of the term "non-economic compulsion" – contrasted by Marx with the free bargaining between capitalist and wage-worker in a capitalist economy. Non-economic compulsion was not, however, uniformly successful. The exaction of rent, whether as labour service, in kind or in cash, would be seen by the peasant producer as an open appropriation of his product. It was resisted more or less strongly and in many different ways, ranging

from labour service inadequately performed to open rebellion. This was the conflict of classes, central to Marxist theory.

Central, but not exclusively so. The contribution of Guy Bois to this debate reminds us that there are important divergences between historians working in the Marxist tradition. To understand these divergences, it is necessary to be aware of the principal tenets of historical materialism. This is by no means a fixed canon: there is debate within Marxism as well as between Marxists and non-Marxists. Nevertheless, the concept of the "mode of production" is accepted by all Marxist historians as an essential tool in undertaking historical investigation. Since Marxism is a materialism, a mode of production is understood as being based, first, on what Marx called the "forces of production", that is, natural resources, technology and labour power – the relations between humanity and nature in the struggle to exist and to reproduce. The second element in the definition is the "relations of production". This brief term essentially describes the relationships between the owners of the means of production and those who, through their labour, provide not only their own subsistence but the income of the owners. The relations of production naturally vary considerably according to the level of development of the forces of production. In what Marxists call the feudal mode of production, this is essentially the relationship between peasants and landlords – or perhaps one should say that it begins with that relationship, for historical development produces other classes and other relationships, in particular with the development of markets and urbanization.

"Modes of production" are simply the bare bones of a Marxist analysis of the historical process. The mode of production is simply the infrastructure of a society, whose laws, religions, state forms and cultures are superstructural features closely related to or developed from the economic structure. Nothing is simple: a given social formation, though primarily shaped by a dominant mode of production, can contain elements of other modes and their superstructural forms. One need only consider survivals of feudalism in capitalist societies from the eighteenth century to the present day. Nor is there necessarily agreement among Marxists as to what is infrastructure and what belongs to superstructure. Is law always superstructural? Some would argue that in feudal society the laws of serfdom entered so deeply into the process of "surplus extraction" that they should be regarded as part of the relations of

production rather than as part of the legal, political and ideological superstructure. It could be argued perhaps even more strongly that the law of slavery, in making men and women simply instruments of production, was unquestionably an element in the economic infrastructure.

This sketchy presentation of some of the problems of Marxist historiography is meant to provide background to an important element in the Brenner debate. What caused movement in history? For Brenner, the class struggle has primacy. But his Marxist critics are aware that Marx himself, as well as many working in his intellectual domain, emphasize that developments in the *forces* of production – new technology, new means by which labour is organized, the economic success of new social classes – come into conflict with the existing *relations* of production, and, of course, with the legal, political and ideological superstructure. So, to which element in the mode of production do we ascribe primacy in causing movement from one social formation to another? It is possible, somewhat crudely, to give primacy to technological development ("The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist" to quote an early formulation of Marx).[15] But it is also clear that those who would give primacy to class conflict must recognize that, however crucial in feudal society was the determination of ruling-class incomes through the struggle over rent, this struggle by no means occurred in an unchanging context. In particular, as Maurice Dobb suggested many years ago, the land/labour ratio is of crucial importance in a society where peasant production predominates. It can hardly be doubted that the conflict over rent will result in different outcomes where there is an abundance of land and a shortage of tenants as compared with the situation characteristic of western Europe around 1300, where land was over-occupied to such a degree that with a shortage of pasture and an overcrowding of infertile arable, the productivity of agriculture was severely reduced. These contradictions cannot be understood without appreciating that labour power is crucially affected by the essential elements in the demographic profile of a society – birth, fertility and mortality. This, above all, in a society where the basic

[15] Frequently cited by G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Oxford, 1978), e.g. pp. 41, 144, quoting Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847] (Moscow, n.d.), p. 122. Cohen argues that Marx gave primacy to the forces of production.

units of production – the peasant holdings and the artisan workshops – had a labour force based on the family.

Brenner, as will be perceived by readers of the debate, strongly emphasizes the class struggle rather than developments in the forces of production as being the determinant of the various historical developments in the countries of late medieval and early modern Europe. This leads, among other things, to the conclusion that a successful struggle by peasants to protect the integrity of the tenancy of their holdings led to a sort of historical regression. This was because small-scale production was by its nature incapable of technological innovation and that this had to be left to proto-capitalist landowners and well-to-do yeomen, who would lay the basis for fully fledged capitalist agriculture. Whether small-scale agricultural production was incapable of innovation is a matter for debate not only among historians but also among those concerned with surviving modern (especially Third World) peasantries. One might suggest that the question is not necessarily blocked by the fact that England, pioneer of industrial capitalism, did happen to develop, to begin with, an agrarian capitalism based on the destruction of the peasantry.

As has been indicated, there are Marxist historians who, without denying the importance of class conflict in feudal society, lay more emphasis than does Brenner on economic factors, which (in Marxist terminology) would privilege the "forces of production" rather than the "relations of production". Some of them, in fact, see an inner logic in the feudal mode of production analogous to an argument of Marx about modern capitalist development which was not linked to class conflict. Marx suggested that capitalist technological progress in large-scale factory production brought about a changing organic composition of capital (an increasing amount of capital invested in machinery and raw material as against labour power), a falling rate of profit and periodic crises of over-production. Both Bois and Kula lay stress (though inevitably in different ways)[16] on a structural contradiction within feudalism between large-scale feudal landownership and the smallholding peasant unit of production. In medieval feudalism there was a long-term fall in the rate of feudal levy, beginning (according to Bois) during the expansion phase, when increas-

[16] Kula's *Economic Theory of the Feudal System* is concerned with early modern Poland.

ing numbers of peasant families were forced into the sub-class of smallholders without adequate subsistence. This economic logic was by no means identical to that perceived by Marx in capitalist production, but it was not, at any rate totally, determined by the conflict between lord and peasant at the political level (in Brenner's meaning of the term).

It may be of interest that the divergence between Marxists who particularly emphasize the role of class conflict and those who rather look at the whole mode of production without privileging the class struggle is not peculiar to this debate. It has, for instance, arisen in discussion among French Marxist historians concerning the crisis of the ancient world. Some accept a view also held by some non-Marxists that the mode of production based on slavery was becoming less and less profitable because of the shortage of slaves and because of the technological backwardness which was a legacy of reliance on cheap slave labour. Others insist that ancient slavery was itself profitable, provided that the control of slave labour could be assured – but that this failed because of the increasing success of slave rebellions in the later Roman empire.[17] Those emphasizing class struggle accuse their Marxist critics of "economism", and these in turn accuse their opponents of "politicism". It goes without saying, of course, that each tendency denies the overemphasis of which it is accused. In the same way, the neo-Malthusians deny that they neglect social structure, class divisions and the realities of exploitation. The readers of this volume will have plenty of opportunity to judge these matters and to retread the paths cleared by Robert Brenner and his critics.

[17] See P. Dockès, *La libération médiévale* (Paris, 1979); Eng. trans., *Medieval Slavery and Liberation* (London, 1982), and the discussion in the *comptes-rendus* of the *Séances de la Société de l'étude du féodalisme* for December 1979.