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Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

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Feudalism*

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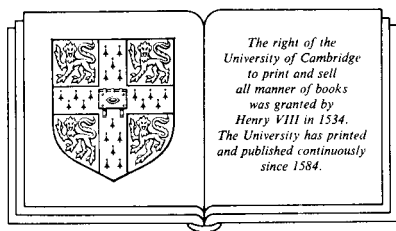
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The Crisis of Feudalism

*Economy and Society in
Eastern Normandy c. 1300–1550*

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Author's Foreword to the English Edition

The French edition of this book (1976) provoked a discussion and some criticisms to which I intend to refer in this foreword. I am not proposing any sort of extended reply to the main objections that were raised. Rather I wish to make more clear the main direction of the work, to forestall misunderstandings and in this way to help the reader.

One of the main issues that has been raised is the relationship of my work to the neo-Malthusian model which, as Robert Brenner has so rightly emphasized, still exercises a dominant influence on historical studies. Is *The Crisis of Feudalism* to be approached according to this perspective? A rapid reading might suggest so. I attributed a considerable role to the demographic factor and still hold totally to this position. Western Europe, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, was collapsing under the pressure of population; for the most part, the peasantry was condemned to a life of poverty on tiny smallholdings; the supply of foodstuffs to the town was becoming ever more precarious. Over-population was a reality which cannot be denied. It was one of the factors, and by no means the least important, of the crisis which was about to begin. On the other hand, the 'golden age' of the second half of the fifteenth century would be incomprehensible without the mortality developing from the year 1316. Some ambiguity of interpretation could now – inevitably – arise, or be made to arise. When E. Le Roy Ladurie, a leading historian of the Malthusian trend, used my conclusions to legitimate his own, a confusion was deliberately created, since he implied that behind a sort of Marxist camouflage, I was simply putting forward his own thesis. As far as I can see this was simply a clever tactical defence in a battle of ideas in which the stakes are of some importance. The tactical skill lay (apart from setting one Marxist against another) in emphasizing some convergences of interpretation, whilst ignoring those which contradicted his own conceptions.

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So I categorically reject this crude assimilation. The interpretation of long-term movements of growth and contraction is not based here on a simple confrontation of the population curve with that of available resources. It attributes the determining role in the last analysis, to the movement of incomes, of lords and of peasants. The crisis of the fourteenth century results above all from the brutal appropriation, by fiscal means, of peasant income, resulting in a long de-stabilization of productive capacity. I would further add, that if demography remains one of the main parameters of my model, it is thought of in terms of a demographic order specific to the economic and social system with which we are concerned and which, for convenience, we call the feudal system. There is no reference, implicit or otherwise, to some general law of population. *This* system was based essentially on small-scale family production and a stable technology, so that demographic and economic growth were much more closely linked than in any other system. In other words the proposed model is much more comprehensive (rightly or wrongly) than the Malthusian. The initial impetus is not attributed to population movement but to the rules governing the relationship between the economic subjects, lords and peasants – and, beyond those rules, to the logic of the development of a system, a specific feature of which is the role attributed to the demographic factor in the process of economic reproduction. That this leads to some conclusions similar to those of E. Le Roy Ladurie and M.M. Postan is certain; but the over-all perspective is radically opposed to Malthusianism.

Another reproach which I have had directed at me, above all from various Marxist critics, has been a tendency towards ‘economism’. Such objections, in discussions from Cuernacava to Calcutta, have been voiced by both historians and economists, whose interest in the theoretical problems of feudalism is clearly greater than that found in Europe, for these relate to their most recent history. If it is true, I am asked, that feudal society moves according to long term tendencies or ‘socio-economic laws’, what is the place, in these conditions, of the conflict between classes? An old Marxist debate, from Plekhanov to Lenin ... An old debate, too, among historians concerning the status of the ‘economic’.

I willingly accept that, to some extent, *The Crisis of Feudalism* invites this criticism, so I will use this occasion to dispel any ambiguity. In the first place, the reader should not forget that if only the

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economic and demographic aspects of the late medieval crisis are dealt with, this was because the focus of my research required a strict delimitation of the field of study. The evidence shows that there were certainly political, intellectual, religious and moral aspects to the crisis; but however important these may have been, they did not enter into my field of investigation. Yet, within this limited field, there was for me no question of considering the economy as a closed area which could be isolated from other aspects of social life, even less a view of medieval societies as if they were governed by purely economic mechanisms, as by clock-work. When one says, for example, that a lord was only able, around 1300, to appropriate a smaller proportion of peasant production than in previous periods, this expresses, first, an economic reality (diminution of rent as a result of monetary debasement) and second, a social reality (the weakening of the lords' authority over the peasants, that is, their power of coercion). More generally, when I emphasize the long-term tendency for a fall in the rate of seigneurial appropriation, I do not marginalize the class conflict but, on the contrary, place it at the heart of the historical process. In other words, my 'economism' seems to be more appearance than reality.

Let us, however, go further. The set purpose of my research was to tackle – even if seemingly over-generalizing – the phenomena of production, reproduction, distribution and consumption, which are the material basis of all societies and have a coherence which it is necessary to elucidate. This approach, still novel, follows the line of its first pioneer, the historian Witold Kula, and must lead to an economic theory of the feudal system. But, in itself this does not imply an economic determinism. Did Marx accept such when he was constructing his economic theory of capitalism? There is certainly the risk that one could drift in that direction. Precautions against such a drift could never be over-done. But the central issue is this: is one to avoid deviations along a difficult path or is one altogether to reject that path?

One cannot get round this issue, which brings me to Robert Brenner, leader of the shock troops against 'economism'. During the course of the debate, begun at his initiative, I accused him of a sort of 'politicism' in the way in which he accounted for advances towards (or retreats from) the road towards capitalism solely in terms of the class conflict, without locating that conflict in the very working of the feudal system. His reply is very revealing. His central

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argument, indeed, the only one which could justify his approach, is as follows: the study of a feudal economic system involves an anachronism; the autonomy of the economic is a product of capitalism; before capitalism, political factors, in this case seigneurial coercion, were at the root of all social movement, just as in more archaic societies it was kinship relations. This hypothesis, which is at the basis of Brenner's thinking, deserves extended comment. First of all, what are the implications of this notion of the 'autonomy of the economic' which is the privilege of capitalism? Does he believe that factories can be worked in the absence of the laws and the overall political structures which guarantee property and the relations of capital and labour? And turning to medieval societies, how can phenomena such as the rules of economic behaviour, long-term economic trends, monetary mechanisms, the processes of the accumulation (or the contrary) of landed property, be straightway merged into the 'political'? This seems to me to be a rash theoretical short-cut, which is simply a mirror image of that 'economism' which he wishes to combat, and which might even be strengthened by the excesses of his own approach. Much as I agree with Brenner on the risks of the drift referred to above, I decline to follow the very speculative line which he proposes.

There has been another objection, more widely held than those referred to above: our model may be relevant to a given region – upper Normandy – but by what right can we endow it, even implicitly, with a more general relevance, as indicated by the title *The Crisis of Feudalism*? Provided this is not simply a misunderstanding, this objection could be weighty. Now I have never for one moment thought – or written – that the Norman model could be transposed to other parts of western Europe. The many specificities of Normandy would make this impossible. Thanks to its precocious development (possibly due in part to the Scandinavian invasions), Normandy had reached an exceptional demographic level by 1300; it then became the preferred battle ground of the Anglo-French conflict, the region most ruined by war, especially between 1435 and 1450. That alone marks it out. But can we not conclude that we have here one manifestation of the many crises of feudalism – ten or twenty, from Sicily to England and from Spain to the Empire, not to speak of areas of lesser disturbance?

On this essential point, I shall risk certain reflections, some of which are directly inspired by that masterpiece of Fernand Braudel,

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Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XV^e-XVIII^e s. (1979). One can no longer conceive of the fabric of the medieval economy as a simple juxtaposition of dissimilar and largely autonomous regional groupings. The Christian world of the middle ages, quite apart from its institutional, religious and social unities was an organic and functional unity at the economic level: price curves over Europe as a whole show only secondary disparities; the chronology of the phases of population expansion and contraction is the same everywhere; the whole system seems to be governed by the same rhythms, suggesting a coherence of the economy and society on a considerable territorial scale. Were one to take over Braudel's conceptual framework, one would speak of a 'world economy' or of a 'feudal world economy'. Within this world there was indeed a hierarchy of zones. The centre or core was in northern France, in the Parisian basin, distinct in every sense – densely populated, a rich agriculture, politically and intellectually preponderant. Beyond, a ring of brilliant secondary zones, from the Thames basin, to Flanders, to southern Germany, to the Po valley and to northern Spain. Further afield begins a more backward periphery: late in developing, backward in techniques, more sparsely populated, unfavourable terms of trade with the central zones and loose political structures. In short, within the space of feudalism, as was later the case within the space of capitalism, uneven development was the rule; nothing, perhaps, would be more useful than to establish an exact geography of these different levels of development, on the basis, of course, of a common series of parameters.

This is the context into which the fourteenth century crisis must be placed. It was general insofar as it affected the densely populated centre of Europe. This was not accidental; it was precisely here that the contradictions of feudal development reached their peak. And, of course, the crisis at the 'centre' affected the whole of Europe. Economic effects with the conjunctural down-turn; political effects with the generalization of conflict, including the divisions within the church; biological effects with the spread of epidemics in a deteriorating climate – the plague would only be halted when and where a widening of the population-network would hinder its spread.

There was, then, a general crisis, but clearly the zones described were subjected to it in different ways. The centre was hit hardest; everything conspired to intensify the depression; the major crises seemed like cataclysms; phases of recovery were brief. The second-

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ary zone was not spared but was nevertheless able to gain advantages from the collapse at the centre. England well illustrates this phenomenon. What with ransoms, pillage and confiscations, its nobility was able to cope better with the fall in its traditional sources of income. The English peasantry was saved, for the time being, from too savage a fiscal exploitation. The relatively small size of the kingdom and the strength of its central government saved England from the political disintegration which, in France, made all aspects of the crisis worse. Thus, bit by bit, during the crisis and partly because of it, England, in spite of some backwardness (especially the weight of serfdom) was able to lever itself towards the top of the European ladder. The relative success of the Kingdom of Aragon and of Barcelona was, in many respects, comparable. As for the Milan of the Visconti, this emerged without loss, obtaining the mastery of most of the Po valley and of the Alpine passes as a consequence of the collapse of the other powers. The countries of the periphery went in another direction. Distance removed them from the effects of the plague, of war and even of economic difficulties. These areas separated themselves from the centre and their relative importance increased: their towns developed, cultural centres emerged, the lot of their peasants improved. These promising developments were not checked until after 1450, when the feudal system of western Europe was rebuilt; when it tightened its grip on its eastern margins, thanks to the penetration of the merchant capitalism, which it now embodied; and when the conditions for eastern Europe's second serfdom were created. So, the process of the fourteenth-century crisis seems to us both global and contradictory, characterized by diversity. One cannot refute the lessons of the Norman example by appealing to the Milanese. If this model, as I believe, has implications beyond its regional framework, this is precisely because of what is exceptional about it, namely that it applies to the central 'core' of the 'feudal world economy'.

Nevertheless, one misunderstanding should not replace another. My reference to the Braudel conception does not imply that I accept it entirely. Its chief interest is its emphasis on the internal solidarities within a determined space – or 'portion of the planet'; it emphasizes, too, the historical importance of unequal exchange – for this is as old as exchange itself. This mechanism, however does not explain everything, or even the essence. The conceptual framework of 'the world economy' does not seem to me to have as wide an operational

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validity as Braudel attributes to it, with his idea that it could be a substitute for the concept 'mode of production'. Consequently, I use the concept in a restricted sense: the 'feudal world economy' was certainly an organic unity, but it was above all the space which was dominated by the economic and social system or 'mode of production'. It is this which is for me the central concept for historical research.

In conclusion, it remains for me to thank my friend, Rodney Hilton, who has done so much for the English edition of this book.

Paris, February 1983

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Abbreviations

AC	Archives Communales
ADH	<i>Annales de Démographie Historique</i>
ADSM	Archives Départementales de la Seine-Maritime
AESC	<i>Annales. Economies. Sociétés. Civilisations</i>
AHES	<i>Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale</i>
AN	Archives Nationales
<i>A Normandie</i>	<i>Annales de Normandie</i>
BEC	Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes
BEHE	Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale
BSAN	<i>Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de Normandie</i>
EHR	<i>Economic History Review</i>
MSAN	<i>Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de Normandie</i>
<i>Norm</i>	<i>Normannia</i>
RH	<i>Revue Historique</i>
RHES	<i>Revue d'Histoire Economique et Sociale</i>