

Marc Bloch and the Historian's Craft¹

Alan Macfarlane

The French historian and co-founder of the Annales School of historiography, Marc Bloch (1886-1944) has been a source of inspiration ever since I first read and indexed his *Feudal Society* in 1971. One way to give some indication of my reaction to his work is to provide my thoughts in different decades to his work for, like Malthus, he meant something different to me in different phases of my work and my understanding of what he was saying has shifted considerably. In the 1970's it was his *Historian's Craft*, *The Royal Touch* and *Feudal Society*, which I read and enjoyed. In the 1980's his *French Rural History*. In the 1990s I returned to *Feudal Society* and read *Land and Work in Medieval Europe* more fully.

Marc Bloch and the craft of the historian

In 1973 I read and indexed Marc Bloch's *The Historian's Craft*, written in 1944 while Bloch was in a prisoner of war camp and before he was executed. For some years after that almost every talk or essay that I wrote used to start with 'As Marc Bloch once said'. Bloch seemed to distil so much wisdom in this short book.

Bloch explained simply many things about the historian's craft which I half-recognized but had been unable to articulate. He helped to give me confidence in my attempts to bring together history and anthropology and to pursue the gruelling work of detailed reconstruction of lost worlds. Here are a just a few of the many wise observations which I found most helpful.

Bloch explained why I had found it necessary to do anthropological fieldwork in a non-industrial society. Living even further into a new technological order, I had realized how distant my agrarian ancestors were becoming. Bloch explained that 'successive technological revolutions have immeasurably widened the psychological gap between generations. With some reason, perhaps, the man of the age of electricity and of the airplane feels himself removed from his masters'.²

Yet this does not absolve us from the duty to live and participate and try to understand our own world, for 'Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present.' As he continues, 'This faculty of understanding the living is, in very truth, the master quality of the historian.'³

¹ This piece was compiled from various writings on Bloch; it was written in July 2007.

² Bloch, *Craft*, 36.

³ Bloch, *Craft*, 43.

Bloch stressed the need for comparison. He himself compared many parts of Europe, and his stray remarks on the similarity between Japanese and European feudalism was one of the inspirations for my later work on Japan. I found my work on comparative anthropology was encouraged by his thoughts. He wrote that ‘there is no true understanding without a certain range of comparison’.⁴

Working on the borders between disciplines, trespassing into anthropology, sociology, demography, I felt encouraged by his remarks that we should pursue topics across apparent boundaries, following where the problems lead. ‘The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.’⁵ There is no way of breaking up the past or the present into watertight compartments, ‘For in the last analysis it is human consciousness which is the subject-matter of history.’⁶ All history is linked, ‘for the only true history, which can advance only through mutual aid, is universal history’.⁷

Bloch stressed the need to assemble large bodies of material from which to generalize, and to organize this properly so that it could be used efficiently. I found this particularly encouraging at a stage when I was gathering a very large set of computerized materials for the study of the English past. He realized that ‘One of the most difficult tasks of the historian is that of assembling those documents which he considers necessary’.⁸ This is partly because for every problem many different kinds of material are needed. ‘It would be sheer fantasy to imagine that for each historical problem there is a unique type of document with a specific sort of use. On the contrary, the deeper the research, the more the light of the evidence must converge from sources of many different kinds.’⁹ And then, as the material is being assembled, it is necessary to think carefully about how to organize and index it, for ‘to neglect to organize rationally what comes to us as raw material is in the long run only to deny time – hence, history itself’.¹⁰

Bloch also stressed the need to cross-question historical sources in the manner of a detective. He explains why this is the case, for ‘even when most anxious to bear witness, that which the text tells us expressly has ceased to be the primary object of our attention today. Ordinarily, we prick up our ears far more eagerly when we are permitted to overhear what was never intended to be said’.¹¹ We therefore need to interrogate our materials; ‘From the moment when we are no longer resigned to purely and simply recording the words of our witnesses, from the moment we decide to force them to speak, even against their will, cross-examination becomes more necessary than ever. Indeed it is the prime necessity of well-conducted historical research’.¹²

⁴ Bloch, *Craft*, 42.

⁵ Bloch, *Craft*, 26.

⁶ Bloch, *Craft*, 151.

⁷ Bloch, *Craft*, 47.

⁸ Bloch, *Craft*, 69.

⁹ Bloch, *Craft*, 67.

¹⁰ Bloch, *Craft*, 147.

¹¹ Bloch, *Craft*, 63.

¹² Bloch, *Craft*, 64.

Finally, I found myself particularly struck by his warnings concerning the almost universal temptation to move into abstract and vacuous high-level theorizing, or particularistic delving into details. Maintaining the tension between general questions, and detailed research is extremely difficult. Bloch's passage on this has constantly remained in my mind, just as his own example in a life of working to preserve this tension is an inspiration to us all.

'For history, the danger of a split between preparation and execution is double-edged. At the outset, it cruelly vitiates the great attempts at interpretation. Because of it, these not only fail in their primary duty of the patient quest for truth, but, deprived of that perpetual renewal, that constantly reborn surprise, which only the struggle with documents can supply, they inevitably lapse into a ceaseless oscillation between stereotyped themes imposed by routine. But technical work suffers no less. No longer guided from above, it risks being indefinitely marooned upon insignificant or poorly propounded questions. There is no waste more criminal than that of erudition running, as it were, in neutral gear, nor any pride more vainly misplaced than that in a tool valued as an end in itself.'¹³

Marc Bloch on the Royal Touch

In early 1973 I was asked to review *The Royal Touch* by Marc Bloch, translated by J.E. Anderson. My admiration for Bloch, and the way in which I saw his work interlinking with that of my teacher Keith Thomas, can be seen in this review.

*

Many of the qualities which have made Marc Bloch one of the most respected historians of the century are evident in this newly translated work, which was written when Bloch was aged thirty-seven. It is enormously erudite, highly imaginative, clearly and simply written (and excellently translated it seems). It treats a complex, important and hitherto largely neglected theme without over-simplification or patronage. It opens up questions, and brings together fragments from diverse sources to present a most enjoyable mosaic. Bloch was willing to learn from other disciplines such as ethnography and psychology, if they seemed to help. Equally at home in French or English archives, written or visual evidence, the medieval or early modern period, it is an amazing achievement for a man in his mid-thirties.

Bloch's main problem is to explain how people believed in various royal 'wonder-working power when they did not in fact heal'.¹⁴ How are we to explain this 'collective error'? The major aspect of the healing power was the belief that the touch of a king could cure 'scrofula', a term used in practice to cover many kinds of complaint affecting the head, eyes and neck, but especially the tubercular inflammation of the lymph glands of the neck. This was a painful and often deadly illness. The fact that it was more lethal than Bloch thought is, as Keith Thomas has pointed out,¹⁵ one of the few modifications that need to be made to Bloch's work.

¹³ Bloch, *Craft*, 86.

¹⁴ Bloch, *Royal*, 238.

¹⁵ Thomas, *Religion*, 192, note 2.

It is possible to gain some figures of the large numbers who came to be healed, and one of the fascinations of the subject is that these can be used as an index of the popularity and sacred veneration accorded to the monarchy or a particular monarch. In the thirty-second year of his reign, Edward I ‘blessed’ 1219 people, in his eighteenth year 1736; Edward II was much less in demand, but Edward III again blessed widely.¹⁶ In France, Louis XIV was also very popular. Ill of gout one Easter he was unable to touch, and was consequently faced with nearly three thousand sufferers at Pentecost.¹⁷ The Stuart kings were particularly popular; in just over four years from 1660 Charles II touched more than 23,000 people.¹⁸ The Hanoverians did not practice the royal touch, and the Stuarts took the art away with them. During their interregnum they had also maintained a monopoly, and ‘an ingenious merchant ran organized tours by sea for the English or Scottish scrofula sufferers to the Low Country towns where the prince had his meagre court’.¹⁹

Bloch’s approach is a narrative one, on the whole. He establishes, as far as possible, the origins of the belief, and shows how it fitted alongside other ideas concerning the divine nature of kingship. He links the decline of touching to a ‘deep-down shattering of faith in the supernatural character of royalty that had taken place almost imperceptibly in the hearts and souls of the two nations’.²⁰ He admits, however, that beyond political causes, he is unable to explain the reasons for this ‘shattering of faith’. Nor are the reasons for the emergence of the phenomenon very clear, despite the much greater detail provided.

One of the difficulties, to which Bloch constantly alludes,²¹ is to separate general causes, a general ‘collective consciousness’ or mode of thought which allowed such miraculous things to be accepted, an absence of a barrier between natural and supernatural which we find hard to comprehend,²² from particular chains of events. The latter level of explanation seeks to understand why this phenomenon emerged and then disappeared at a particular point in time in two such countries as England and France.

As to the problem of how people came to believe that the cures worked, Bloch concentrates on two explanations. He points out that a number of sufferers may have been cured through belief in the healers if their illness was not in fact tubercular, but psycho-somatic. He then shows how human beings in need will turn a healing rate that is hardly higher than would randomly be expected if the disease were untreated into a basis for hope and action. Probably we would now stress his first interpretation more heavily, but otherwise his conclusions seem unassailable.

Two questions which Bloch raises without really attempting to answer are the local attitudes to healing by touch, and the way in which such healing was just one part of a

¹⁶ Bloch, *Royal*, 56-7.

¹⁷ Bloch, *Royal*, 204.

¹⁸ Bloch, *Royal*, 212.

¹⁹ Bloch, *Royal*, 210.

²⁰ Bloch, *Royal*, 214.

²¹ Bloch, *Royal*, 28, 90, 146.

²² Bloch, *Royal*, 42.

whole semi-magical world view which historians had hardly started to investigate. As he writes, 'the notion of the royal miracle would seem to have been related to a whole magical outlook upon the universe'.²³ But he himself failed to develop this hint, and he also did not comb through the local records of the period to study healing by touch undertaken by men other than the King. It is therefore fortunate that an English historian who matched Bloch in erudition, imagination, clarity and width of vision should have taken up his work.

Keith Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) provides a study of magical beliefs within which Bloch's work can be more fully appreciated, and Thomas also contributed some very valuable information on healing by touch in England.²⁴ The two are complementary works, and need to be read in conjunction. Together they help to escape the rationalist pre-occupations of most nineteenth-century historians and open out a new dimension in the study of the past.

Marc Bloch and the transformation to modernity.

I drew on Marc Bloch's work in *The Origins of English Individualism* to support the idea that England and France were increasingly different from the thirteenth century onwards. But as I began to move on to consider the implications of *Individualism* for the way I was to approach the history of the English family, I found that Bloch's work contained a double message. In January 1979 I wrote the following short piece on my reactions to his work on the development of European family systems. I have not altered this piece, in order to preserve my sense of slight disappointment at the time.

*

Marc Bloch's immense erudition and width of vision have made him very influential. Yet his work is a mixed blessing for those trying to untangle the past history of England. The difficulty seems to be that the very weight of his opinion has helped to promote a general view of the development of west European societies which sometimes distorts the English past. Although he himself was usually cautious and aware of differences, his sweeping survey, particularly in **Feudal Society**, can too easily be held to apply equally to all of Europe. There are, in fact, two different interpretations which could be drawn from his work, and it seems likely that modern historians have tended to select one rather than the other.

One interpretation lends support to the idea that all the western European nations went through roughly the same stages, with England perhaps a little precocious, but basically similar. The underlying thesis is that once there were groups based on kinship ties. These broke down but then consolidated during the period of 'feudalism' into a new type of organization, not based on kinship. Then out of this emerged the conjugal family. We are

²³ Bloch, *Royal*, 216.

²⁴ Thomas, *Religion*, 192-211.

told that 'Early societies were made up of groups rather than individuals. A man on his own counted for very little.'²⁵ The community and the kinship group were central.

It is worth seeing how Bloch envisaged the change. The village fields in Europe

were the creation of a large group, perhaps - though it is only conjecture - a tribe or clan; the **manses** must have been the portions assigned - whether from the beginning or only at a later date is impossible to say - to smaller sub-groups, communities within the community. The organism which had the manse as its shell was very probably a family group, smaller than the clan in that it was restricted to members whose descent from a common ancestor was a matter of only a few generations, yet still patriarchal enough to include married couples from several collateral branches. The English 'hide' ... is probably descended from an old Germanic word meaning family ... the term **manse** signifies an agrarian holding worked by a small family group, probably a family ... This progressive disintegration of the primitive agrarian unit, under whatever name, was to some extent a European phenomenon. But in England and Germany the process was far more gradual than in the open countryside of France...²⁶

This leads Bloch on to speculate as to how this change occurred over the whole of Europe, including England. The story he tells is the widely believed one of the gradual 'narrowing down' of the family over time.

We know all too little of the history of the medieval family. However, it is possible to discern a slow evolution, starting in the early Middle Ages. The kindred, that is to say the group related by blood, was still a powerful factor. But its boundaries were becoming blurred ... Prosecution of a vendetta was still expected by public opinion, but there were no precise laws detailing joint responsibility in criminal matters, whether active or passive. There was still plenty of life in the habit of preserving the family holding intact, to be worked in common by fathers and sons, brothers, or even cousins; but it was nothing more than a habit, since individual ownership was fully recognized by law and custom and the only established right enjoyed by the kindred was the privilege of pre-emption when a holding came on the market. This loss of definition at the edges and the sapping of its legal force hastened the disintegration of the kindred as a group.²⁷

This, argues Bloch, led to a change in the structure of the household.

Where communal life had once been broadly based on the vast patriarchal family, there was now an increasing tendency to concentrate on the conjugal family, a narrower community formed from the descendants of a married couple still living. It is hardly surprising that the fixed territorial framework of the old patriarchal community should have disappeared at the same time.²⁸

Clearly Bloch was thinking of some kind of extended family system, with fixed corporate groups, presumably based on some kind of unilineal (agnatic?) descent. He seems to have believed that this was present over all of Europe and continued until at least the twelfth century. This is rather curious, since he must either not have read, understood, or agreed with Maitland's long passages on Anglo-Saxon kinship and the absence of family groups in a world of cognatic kinship. He even says that the wider kinship groups died out sooner in France, where, 'In contrast with England, where a system of taxation based on the hide was in force until well into the twelfth century...'²⁹ These changes, in which the family shrank in

²⁵ Bloch, *French*, 150.

²⁶ Bloch, *French*, 158-161

²⁷ Bloch, *French*, 162.

²⁸ Bloch, *French*, 162-3.

²⁹ Bloch, *French*, 163

importance and size, were not confined to the 'feudal' areas, for in Norway too there was 'the dispersal of the primitive patriarchal community...'³⁰ Presumably by 'patriarchal', Bloch meant patrilineal.

What, in fact, Bloch thought he saw throughout Europe was the change from some kind of clan organization, through a middling stage of a smaller joint family of married brothers living together, to the modern conjugal family of husband, wife and young children. This movement, if it occurred, would have immense consequences, for it would mean that the family could no longer act as the basis for wider political structures.

He then proceeded to show how, though France had moved from stage one to stage two earlier than England, certain regions lingered on in the extended family stage right up to the nineteenth century. He comments no further on England, but would presumably have believed that while it moved more slowly from stage one to two, it passed more quickly on to stage three.

By the thirteenth century, speaking of Europe as a whole, Bloch wrote that 'We have seen that the familial community had nearly everywhere made the transition from **manse** to simple household.'³¹ But this 'simple household' was not what we mean by the modern conjugal family, it was an association which was

'also known as "**freresches**", meaning an association of brothers. The children continued to live with their parents even after marriage and on their parents' death frequently remained together, sharing "hearth and home", working and possessing the land in common ... Several generations lived together under the same roof ... This habit of living in common was so widespread that it became the basis of **mainmorte**, one of the fundamental institutions of French serfdom...'³²

After the 'clan' period, Bloch is envisaging a period of what anthropologists would call joint or stem families. This middling stage then began to fade away at different rates in different parts of France. 'In time the habit of communal living also disappeared, slowly, as is the way with habits, and at dates which differed widely according to the region.' For example, 'Around Paris the practice appears to have virtually died out before the sixteenth century. In Berry, Maine and Limousine and in a whole sector of Poitou it was still very much alive on the eve of the Revolution.'³³ Bloch does remark that England, with its legal system of primogeniture was different,³⁴ but it would be easy to infer that he thought that England would have gone through the same stages.

*

The other major outline of the supposed evolution of kinship systems is given in Bloch's **Feudal Society**. At the time of the Germanic invasions 'it seems certain that groups of this nature (i.e. vast **gentes** or clans) had still existed among the Germans.' It would appear from

³⁰ Bloch, *French*, 164.

³¹ Bloch, *French*, 164.

³² Bloch, *French*, 164-5.

³³ Bloch, *French*, 165.

³⁴ Bloch, *French*, 167.

this that Bloch believed that agnatic kin groups, based on unilineal descent through the male line, existed among the peoples who conquered the disintegrating Roman Empire. But this principle and these groups rapidly disappeared, for very early on in the feudal period 'kinship had acquired or retained a distinctly dual character'.³⁵ This dual or cognatic descent led to a central weakness in the kinship system in relation to political and economic affairs, for there was no bounded group based on blood ties through only one line and 'the group was too unstable to serve as the basis of the whole social structure'.³⁶ As occurs with ego-centered cognatic descent any individual will find that he or she is related to both sides if 'feuds' break out.

Nevertheless, Bloch still tries to portray a middle stage of kinship, both cognatic and hence more fluid, but still based on some kind of joint or stem organization. When alienating land, for instance, it was 'considered only prudent...to ask the consent of as many collaterals as possible'.³⁷ Notice here the word 'prudent' - a far cry from the proper **restraint lignager** which one would find in real descent groups in India or China. Furthermore, in the country districts, the 'communities', 'long continued to gather together many individuals under one roof - we hear of as many as fifty in eleventh-century Bavaria and sixty-six in fifteenth-century Normandy.'³⁸

A gradual change towards the isolated nuclear family of modern times started, Bloch believed, 'from the thirteenth century onwards', a 'sort of contraction was in process. The vast kindreds of not so long before were slowly being replaced by groups more like our small families of today'.³⁹ Bloch thought that the change from one system 'varied greatly from place to place'.

As to the cause of 'a change which was pregnant with important consequences', Bloch tentatively suggested the growing power of those alternative institutions which were to replace kinship, politics and economics. He singled out the activities of governmental authorities which limited the sphere of the lawful blood-feud. And he suggested that 'the development of trade conduced to the limitation of family impediments to the sale of property'.⁴⁰ Why this should have happened in Europe, but not in other large agrarian civilizations is not entirely clear, though it may have been linked to the idea of the massive disruption caused by the collapse of the Roman Empire. This is suggested by his brief reflections on England. He thought that there was a 'premature decay' in England of 'the old framework of the kindred', which he suggested was the result of the 'rude shock to which England was subjected - Scandinavian inroads and settlement, Norman Conquest'.⁴¹ Unfortunately he does not specify an exact date. All we know was that in England, as well as elsewhere, 'the large kinship groups of earlier ages began to disintegrate in this way'.⁴²

³⁵ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 137.

³⁶ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 138.

³⁷ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 139.

³⁸ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 139.

³⁹ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 139.

⁴⁰ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 140.

⁴¹ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 140.

⁴² Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 140.

The argument is complex, however, for there is not a 'steady progress towards emancipation of the individual'.⁴³ To a certain extent, the feudal period saw a resurgence of kinship ties.

The period which saw the expansion of the relations of personal protection and subordination characteristic of the social conditions we call feudalism was also marked by a real tightening of the ties of kinship. Because the times were troubled and the public authority weak, the individual gained a more lively awareness of his links with the local groups, whatever they were, to which he could look for help.⁴⁴

Thus Bloch is arguing that within feudalism, which he defines elsewhere as a period of the 'dissolution of the State', both feudal ties and kinship ties grew in power.

His argument then is that when feudalism began to turn into what others have termed 'bastard feudalism', both feudal ties and kinship ties were weakened. 'The centuries which later witnessed the progressive metamorphosis of authentic feudalism also experienced - with the crumbling of the large kinship groups - the early symptoms of the slow decay of family solidarities.'⁴⁵ Bloch does not make an exception of England here, so we must presume that he believed that with the decline of 'feudalism' in that country too, wider kinship ties would fall apart.

Thus we have the following argument. As the Germanic peoples invaded, they lost their agnatic kin group and became cognatic. As feudalism of the 'dissolved state' kind spread, there was a temporary and partial strengthening of kin ties. During this middle phase there were kinship groups - but relatively small ones based on parents and married children living together - joint or stem families. As feudalism changed into the various forms that succeeded it, so the middle phase gave way to the nuclear family.

It is an appealing story, and may well have some elements of truth. But it is also shot through with difficulties. There is no evidence presented that the early Germanic peoples really were agnatic. They may have for long been cognatic, before invading the Roman Empire. It is too easily assumed that the powerful kingdoms of England went through the same stages as the splintered and anarchic regions of France. An alternative scheme to the above, at least in relation to England, would be that the people who arrived (Anglo-Saxons) had no trace of agnatic descent. They brought an almost purely cognatic system. The flexibility of this system never solidified into any kind of kinship groupings - the speculations about the 'hide' and 'manses' as kinship based are probably completely wrong. There is no evidence, except possibly among a few very rich families, of any kind of joint or stem family from the earliest records. Thus there was no middle phase to dissolve at the supposed end of feudalism into something else.

What we do get out of Bloch's attempt, however, is the vital insight that it is in the relations between kinship and politics (feudalism) that the secret of European and specifically English peculiarity lies.

⁴³ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 141.

⁴⁴ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 142.

⁴⁵ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 142.

*

The other strand of Bloch's thought was concerned with the differences between England and the Continent. It is not surprising that his remarks on this subject have not been fully appreciated since Bloch himself is ambivalent on the subject. One conclusion one can draw from his work is that nearly of Europe went through the same 'stages', that is to say pre-feudal, feudal, post-feudal. There were a few blank spaced on the map of feudalism, the Scandinavian peninsula, Frizia, Ireland but England is not one of them.⁴⁶ Like most of central Europe, England passed through a 'feudal' phase.

What exactly, then, was such feudalism? Bloch's most concise definition is as follows.

A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of a salary, which was out of the question; the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man and, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage; fragmentation of authority - leading inevitably to discord; and, in the midst of all this, the survival of other forms of association, family and State, of which the latter, during the second feudal age, was to acquire renewed strength - such then seem to be the fundamental features of European feudalism.⁴⁷

Although Bloch was aware that such a feudalism was not unique to Europe, for 'Japan went through this phase',⁴⁸ on the surface he seems to lump much of Europe together, including England. Yet there are signs that he also saw a profound difference between England and France, and it is worth exploring whether this was merely a difference in degree or in kind.

Although he appears only to have quoted Maitland directly once,⁴⁹ Bloch had absorbed some of the lessons of Maitland. He seems to have been aware that English 'feudalism' was very different from that on the Continent from at least the twelfth century. These differences are discussed in various places. We have seen that he talked of the 'premature decay of the kindred' in England and that this may have been related to a peculiarity of England, the frankpledge system which was, he thought, pre-Norman and gave added security and hence undermined the political need for wider kin links.⁵⁰ Both of these features were related to a wider feature, the unusual strength of the central power in England.

One reason, Bloch argued, for the 'really profound contrast with France' in the lord's relations with his serfs was that 'in this remarkably centralized country' the royal authority could re-capture runaway serfs⁵¹. This was because under the influence of the Normans and Angevins, 'The judicial powers of the crown had developed to an extraordinary degree'.⁵² In England there was the 'creation of a completely original legal system', so that 'English feudalism has something of the value of an object-lesson in social organization'.⁵³

⁴⁶ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 445.

⁴⁷ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 446.

⁴⁸ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 447.

⁴⁹ On the absence of **noblesse** in England, Bloch, *Land*, 107.

⁵⁰ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 271.

⁵¹ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 271.

⁵² Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 272.

⁵³ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 274.

From the words ‘completely original legal system’, we might have concluded that Bloch was aware of an unusual and special phenomenon emerging on this island. Yet he draws back from saying that it was absolutely different, for he was too aware that there were parallels with the Continent. Thus he writes that ‘despite its distinctive features, the course of development in England presented some obvious analogies with that in the Frankish state.’⁵⁴ Bloch seems to be arguing that for about a century after the Norman Conquest England and parts of the Continent went along the same ‘path’, but towards the end of the twelfth century, in relation to the powers of the seigneur or lord, for example, ‘It is here that the two paths noticeably diverge. In England from the twelfth century onwards royal justice made itself felt with exceptional force’, for ‘In France the evolution of royal justice lagged a good century behind that of England and followed a totally different course.’⁵⁵

It is in the same period, namely the second half of the twelfth century, that another structural difference became visible, namely the peculiar position of the English villein. Bloch points out ‘How often has English villeinage been treated as the equivalent of the French **servage** in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries ... But this is a superficial analogy ... Villeinage is in fact a specifically English institution.’ This was a result of ‘the very special political circumstances in which it was born’, namely that ‘As early as the second half of the 12th century ... the kings of England succeeded in getting the authority of their courts of justice recognized over the whole country.’⁵⁶ The differences grew wider and wider so that ‘The French serf of the 14th century and the English serf or villein of the same period belonged to two totally dissimilar classes’.⁵⁷

The peculiarity of England was not limited to the lowest class in the society, for, as Stubbs, Freeman, Maitland and others had noted, there was a curious absence of a property nobility at the top as well. When discussing the central feature of Continental feudalism, that is ‘nobility as a legal class’, Bloch found it necessary to write a section on ‘the exceptional case of England’.

Demographic Structures and Cultural Regions in Europe

A few months after writing the piece above, I gave a lecture at the Institute of British Geographers annual conference in Cambridge in 1979. This was turned into a paper published in 1981 in *Cambridge Anthropology*. It ranged broadly over various aspects of European history. The section on March Bloch shows my appreciation of his analysis of the relations between culture and the material world, and his broad comparative approach.

*

⁵⁴ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 370.

⁵⁵ Bloch, *French*, 127, 128.

⁵⁶ Bloch, *Land*, 58-9.

⁵⁷ Bloch, *Land*, 61-2.

The material world could affect demography in a subtler but equally powerful way by means of technology. The techniques of production, man's tools, would seem a fairly remote candidate for an explanation of demographic differences were it not for the brilliant insights of Marc Bloch who pointed to the existence in Europe of two major, opposed, agrarian civilizations.

He was particularly interested in the manifestation of these systems in France. He isolated a set of inter-linked features of the agrarian system which were contrasted in northern and southern France. In the north there was a triennial crop rotation, in the south a biennial one. In the northern there were long narrow fields, in the south, irregular rounder fields. This altered the nature of the layout of the village and was linked to different attitudes to communal village land, to the nature of the community, to the patterns of the family, and many other features.⁵⁸ Thus he argued that the economic, physical and social characteristics of these two civilizations were very different. But the reasons for this division were largely a mystery, a puzzle that was particularly intriguing since Bloch's line, 'North of Poitou we enter the domain of triennial rotation', was almost exactly the same as that between the northern and southern demographic regimes discovered by historical demographers.⁵⁹

Bloch was fully aware that physical features could not explain the differences: 'it cannot be explained by reference to geographical factors in their narrowest sense; the areas concerned are too vast, their physical characteristics too diverse. Moreover, the boundaries of both zones extend far beyond the frontiers of France.' Bloch admitted that he was mystified.

The confrontation of the two systems in France represents the collision on our soil of two major forms of agrarian civilization, which may conveniently be called the northern and southern types; how these civilizations came to take their distinctive form is still a mystery, though it is likely that historical, ethnic and no doubt also geographical, factors all played their part.⁶⁰

This contrast, the coexistence in France of agrarian institutions belonging to both main types of agriculture, the southern and the northern', Bloch believed to be 'one of the most striking features of our rural life'.

He made only one serious attempt to explain the difference, in terms of technology. Bloch pointed to the existence in the two areas of two different kinds of plough. In the north the plough mounted on wheels was 'a creation of the agrarian technology which ruled the northern plains', while in the southern region there was the unwheeled plough; 'the area now occupied by the wheeled plough ... corresponds very closely to the region of long-furlong open fields; the unwheeled plough on the other hand belongs to the country of irregular open-fields.'⁶¹ He then points out that it was much more difficult to turn the wheeled plough, hence the long narrow strips and the whole differences in the social and economic organization.

⁵⁸ Bloch, *Land*, chapter 2; Bloch, *French*.

⁵⁹ Bloch, *French*, 31.

⁶⁰ Bloch, *French*, 34.

⁶¹ Bloch, *French*, 52.

It is certainly very tempting to trace the whole chain of causation back to a single technological innovation. The wheeled plough produced long-furlong fields; long-furlong fields provided a powerful and constant incentive to collective practices; and hey presto, a set of wheels fixed to a ploughshare becomes the basis of an entire social structure.⁶²

Yet Bloch is too intelligent a historian to fall into such an easy deterministic trap. He points out that there were other equally attractive solutions to the problems posed by different kinds of plough. Furthermore, there is the problem of why the different ploughs were accepted in the first place. Ploughing reflects the organization of labour as much as the other way round: 'we might say that without communal habits of cultivation the wheeled plough could never have been adopted'. Bloch therefore ends on a more modest correlation, leaving the causal relationship somewhat vague:

for as far back in time as we can go, the wheeled plough (parent of the long-furlong field) and a collective habit of cultivation are the twin characteristics of one very distinct type of agrarian civilization; where these criteria are lacking, the civilization will be of a totally different type.⁶³

What mystified Bloch leaves us equally puzzled. Bloch was convinced that there were two agrarian civilizations in France, which extended over much larger areas of Europe as well. He rejected geography, politics and also race as explanations. Concerning the last of these, felt that any simple explanation in terms of Celts, Romans, Germans and Slavs was inadequate in several respects.⁶⁴ Thus, while we have seen through his work one demonstration of the fact that the demographic fault lines also run along economic and social divisions, we are little nearer a satisfying solution.

Marc Bloch and F.W. Maitland

I returned once again to the work of Marc Bloch in the late 1990s. I was writing half a book on the work of F.W.Maitland and towards the end wanted to provide an assessment of Maitland by several of his contemporaries and successors. Bloch was clearly a comparative thinker of great stature and an obvious choice. So I wrote the following piece, which appeared as a section in *The Making of the Modern World; Views from the West and East* (2002).

*

Since Maitland's account, if correct, would be such an elegant demonstration of the accuracy of the guesses of Montesquieu, Smith and Tocqueville, it is worth assessing his authority by one further test. Although he was deeply knowledgeable about continental law and far from being a 'little Englander' we may wonder whether England was really so odd, and whether the divergence during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries is as real as Maitland argued. In order to pursue this, we can look at the problem from another angle, through the eyes of arguably the only other medievalist who can vie with Maitland in width and depth,

⁶² Bloch, *French*, 54-5

⁶³ Bloch, *French*, 55-6.

⁶⁴ Bloch, *French*, 62.

namely Marc Bloch. What did Bloch think of that comparison between continental and English development which was at the centre of the theories of all these thinkers?

In relation to England, Bloch seems to have developed a three-period model which is in many respects parallel to Maitland's. The Anglo-Saxon period constituted the first phase. In his great work on **Feudal Society**, Bloch noted that from Anglo-Saxon times there was something independent and different about England, it was 'a society of a Germanic structure which, till the end of the eleventh century, pursued an almost completely spontaneous course of evolution.'⁶⁵ Part of the reason for its oddness, as Maitland had argued, was that 'Britain lacked that substratum of Gallo-Roman society which in Gaul ... seems clearly to have contributed to the development of class distinctions.'⁶⁶

Then, as Maitland had argued, there was about a century and a half of considerable overlap, namely between about 1100 and 1250. 'Despite its distinctive features, the course of development in England presented some obvious analogies with that in the Frankish state.'⁶⁷ Thus the 'evolution of the **de facto** nobility at first followed almost the same lines as on the continent - only to take a very different direction in the thirteenth century.'⁶⁸

The divergence began pretty soon for, again echoing Maitland, Bloch argued that from about the end of the twelfth century the relations between the power of the Crown and the lords developed in a different direction in England. 'It is here that the two paths noticeably diverge. In England from the twelfth century onward royal justice made itself felt with exceptional force.' In France, on the other hand, 'the evolution of royal justice lagged a good century behind that of England and followed a totally different course.'⁶⁹

There were several areas where the growing divergence from the later twelfth century showed itself. Among these were the following. The 'distinction between high and low justice always remained foreign to the English system.'⁷⁰ The allodial estates common on the continent, which prevented the final penetration of feudal tenures to the bottom of society, were totally extinguished in England, where all land was ultimately held of the king and not held in full ownership by any subject. England was exceptional in not having private feuding sanctioned after the Conquest; it therefore avoided that disintegrated anarchy which was characteristic of France.⁷¹ Indeed, English feudalism, we are told 'has something of the value of an object-lesson in social organization', not because it was typical of feudal society but because it shows 'how in the midst of what was in many respects a homogeneous civilization certain creative ideas, taking shape under the influence of a given environment, could result in the creation of a completely original legal system.'⁷² It is this 'completely original legal system' which provides the key to the problems which we have been discussing.

⁶⁵ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 181.

⁶⁶ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 184.

⁶⁷ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 370.

⁶⁸ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 184.

⁶⁹ Bloch, *French*, 127, 128.

⁷⁰ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 370.

⁷¹ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 128.

⁷² Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 274.

At a deeper level, Bloch was saying that, as Maitland had argued, England had moved a long way away from that feudalism through which much of the continent had passed. Bloch noted the centralization and uniformity of the English political and social system. This was different from his major feature of feudalism, devolution, disintegration and the dissolution of the state. The contrasts come out when he compares England and France.

In England there was the Great Charter; in France, in 1314-15, the Charters granted to the Normans, to the people of Languedoc, to the Bretons, to the Burgundians, to the Picards, to the people of Champagne, to Auvergne, of the **Basses Marches** of the West, of Berry, and of Nevers. In England there was Parliament; in France, the provincial Estates, always much more frequently convoked and on the whole more active than the States-General. In England there was the common law, almost untouched by regional exceptions; in France the vast medley of regional “customs.”⁷³

Thus England was uniform and centralized, France varied and regionalized. Because ‘the public office was not completely identified with the fief’, Bloch argued, ‘England was a truly unified state much earlier than any continental kingdom.’ Furthermore, the English parliamentary system had a ‘peculiar quality which distinguished it so sharply from the continental system of “Estates”’ linked to ‘that collaboration of the well-to-do classes in power, so characteristic of the English political structure...’⁷⁴

Related to these differences was a peculiar status system. England had no formal blood nobility, while such nobility did develop in France. It was true that ‘England had an aristocracy as powerful as any in Europe - more powerful perhaps...’ At the top was a narrow group of earls and ‘barons’, who were in the thirteenth century being endowed with privileges. Yet somehow these privileges took a different shape from those on the Continent. They were ‘of an almost exclusively political and honorific nature; and above all, being attached to the **fief de dignite**, to the “honour”, they were transmissible only to the eldest son. In short, the class of noblemen in England remained, as a whole, more a “social” than a “legal” class.’ Although, of course, power and prestige lay with this group, it was ‘too ill-defined not to remain largely open.’ Thus ‘In the thirteenth century, the possession of landed wealth had been sufficient to authorize the assumption of knighthood, in fact to make it obligatory.’⁷⁵ Therefore ‘in practice, any family of solid wealth and social distinction’ never ‘encountered much difficulty’ in obtaining permission to use hereditary armorial bearings.⁷⁶

Bloch’s story is that there was a confusion of ranks up to the Norman invasion, and during the crucial twelfth and thirteenth century England did not move in the continental direction. No nobility based on law and blood, no incipient ‘caste’ in Tocqueville’s sense, emerged. This, as his predecessors had argued, gave the English aristocracy their enduring flexibility and power. ‘It was mainly by keeping close to the practical things which give real power over men and avoiding the paralysis that overtakes social classes which are too sharply defined and too dependent on birth that the English aristocracy acquired the dominant

⁷³ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 425-6.

⁷⁴ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 430, 371.

⁷⁵ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 331.

⁷⁶ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 331.

position it retained for centuries.’⁷⁷ It is not surprising that Bloch should head the section, ‘The Exceptional Case of England.’ At the level of European feudalism, Bloch had demonstrated that indeed, England, as Tocqueville had much earlier guessed, had not moved from contract (feudalism) to status (caste ranks). It had not reversed Maine’s famous dictum that ‘the movement of the progressive societies is from status to contract’.

Likewise in the lowest rank, there developed something strikingly unlike the situation in France. It is in the same period, namely the second half of the twelfth century, that another structural difference became visible, the peculiar position of the English villein. Bloch points out ‘How often has English villeinage been treated as the equivalent of the French **servage** in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries...But this is a superficial analogy... Villeinage is in fact a specifically English institution.’ This was a result of ‘the very special political circumstances in which it was born’, namely that ‘As early as the second half of the 12th century...the kings of England succeeded in getting the authority of their courts of justice recognized over the whole country.’⁷⁸ The differences grew wider and wider so that ‘The French serf of the 14th century and the English serf or villein of the same period belonged to two totally dissimilar classes’.⁷⁹ Elsewhere he elaborates on how, ‘in this remarkably centralized country’ the royal authority could re-capture runaway serfs.⁸⁰ This was because under the influence of the Normans and Angevins, ‘the judicial powers of the crown had developed to an extraordinary degree.’⁸¹ He confirms Maitland’s view that in the ‘England of the Norman Kings there were no peasant allods’ while these were present in France.⁸²

All of these structural differences set England along a very different path to much of continental Europe. Bloch even linked these differences to a growing divergence in relation to liberty and property. In his essay ‘A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies’, originally published in 1928, Bloch elaborated the effects of some of these differences. English agriculture became ‘individualistic’ while French agriculture remained ‘communal’, A ‘new notion of liberty’ was born in England where ‘no man, not even the King, may come between him [the serf] and his lord. But there was nothing like this in France. There, royal justice was much slower in developing, and its progress took a quite different course. There were no great legislative enactments like those of Henry II of England.’⁸³ Thus although England and France were ‘neighbouring and contemporary societies’ the ‘progress and results’ of their individual development ‘reveal such profound differences of degree that they are almost equivalent to a difference of kind...’⁸⁴

Thus we see in Bloch, as in Maitland, a narrative which basically fills out the guesses of earlier theorists. Some of the roots of our peculiar modern world lie in the Anglo-Saxon period. For a century or a little more England and the continent converged. Then, from the twelfth century, law and social and political structures diverged. Much of the continent

⁷⁷ Bloch, *Feudal*, II, 331.

⁷⁸ Bloch, *Land*, 58-9.

⁷⁹ Bloch, *Land*, 61-2.

⁸⁰ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 271.

⁸¹ Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 272.

⁸² Bloch, *Feudal*, I, 248.

⁸³ Bloch, *Land*, 60-1.

⁸⁴ Bloch, *Land*, 66.

moved towards Tocqueville's caste and absolutism. For particular reasons one island retains a balance of forces and a dynamic tension between parts of the institutional structure. This would provide shelter for the inventions and ideas of its larger European neighbours.

REFERENCES

- Bloch, Marc *The Historian's Craft* (1954), trans. J.E.Anderson
Bloch, Marc *Feudal Society* (1962), 2 vols. Trans L.A.Manyon
Bloch, Marc *French Rural History; An Essay on its Basic Characteristics* (1966), trans. Janet Sondheimer
Bloch, Marc *Land and Work in Medieval Europe. Selected Papers by Marc Bloch* (1967), trans. J.E. Anderson
Bloch, Marc *The Royal Touch* (1973), trans. J.E.Anderson
Thomas, Keith *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971).