

## ROUGH DRAFT ONLY

### The disappearance of feudalism and the rise of free labour and mobility.

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#### A preliminary model

If one were to set this title as an examination question, adding a little so that it read 'In what ways was the disappearance of feudalism and the rise of free labour and mobility related to changes in demographic patterns over the last two thousand years at a world level?' an intelligent undergraduate with some knowledge of the world outside western Europe might answer as follows.

Let us start by defining our key term. By the word 'feudalism' we mean a form of tied labour, where unfree workers ('serfs') work for lords. There is little market penetration and basically the population is divided into three ranks. There are the rulers (the military and the clerics or other literati), the merchants and craftsmen and town dwellers, and a huge mass of 'peasants' or illiterate country agriculturalists. These peasants are not only unfree, but depend very heavily on family labour to meet their obligations. In such a world there is a direct link between production - mainly agricultural - and biological reproduction. If one can increase one's family size in a peasant society, it will be both to one's own and one's lord's advantage.

This peasant-feudal world existed in all the great agrarian civilizations from Portugal in the west to Japan in the east, from Russia in the north to India in the south. Indeed it was also to a large extent found in the Maya and Inca civilizations of southern America, in South East Asia, and, some would even argue, in some of the centralized kingdoms of Africa. Thus one could say that after the neolithic revolution all civilizations went through this phase, and if one had looked at the world in 1350, it was (with the exception of small pockets of tribal and hunter-gatherer people) one vast sea of 'peasant-feudal' civilization. Such a view is consistent with the writing of most of the great thinkers from Voltaire to Marx. Such a mode of production and reproduction leads to what E.A. Wrigley terms a 'high pressure' demographic regime, where fertility is high and balanced by high mortality (either perennial or crises). It was the **ancien regime** biological regime of which, for example, Braudel wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Our intelligent student would then chart how some time after the crisis of the Black Death a number of civilizations started to move away from this feudal-peasant pattern. Marx and Weber and others thought that it first happened in the Protestant parts of north western Europe from about the fifteenth century. The 'serfs' were emancipated, the market expanded and free labour and mobility became widespread. What happened first in places like the Netherlands, parts of Scandinavia and particularly in England between say 1350 and 1650, in other words the 'decomposition' of feudalism, occurred in much of continental Europe in the period between about 1700 and 1900 as the **ancien regime** demographic and social regimes shifted from 'feudalism' to 'capitalism'. The change occurred even later in much of the world outside Europe, perhaps in Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century and in Latin America, India and China in the second half of the twentieth.

The effects of the move from what Karl Polanyi called 'embedded' economies with bound labour, peasantries and 'feudalism', to market capitalism and 'free' labour were immense, not least in terms of demography.<sup>2</sup> The 'nexus' between reproduction and production was cut. Children now owned their own labour and went off to employ it in the market. There were no longer lords who had an interest in pressurizing their serfs both to produce and reproduce. The number of children per family fell through various mechanisms such as later age at marriage, selective marriage, contraception, abortion and infanticide. In other words the 'demographic transition' was linked to a vast socio-economic transformation. Children now 'cost' as much or more than they returned to their parents and kin. The 'wealth flow', as Jack Caldwell demonstrated, moves from a vertical one (children to parents) to a

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to Wrigley on 'high' and 'low' pressure regimes and reference (possibly quote) from F. Braudel.

<sup>2</sup> Reference to Polanyi on embedded economies - same point as Marx.

lateral one (earning individuals through the state to each other and their children).<sup>3</sup> Children became luxuries rather than necessities. So that as economic calculations and forces inserted themselves between production and reproduction, the Malthusian cycle was broken.

Malthus believed that the only human drives that were strong enough to counter the 'passion between the sexes' were human greed, avarice and the desire for status. This counter-balance did not work in the feudal-peasant formations since biology and economics/social esteem all worked in the same direction. But what 'capitalism' does, founded on private, individualized, property and free labour, is to set each member of a society against the other. And, in the end, human 'rationality' (means-ends calculations) will triumph and people control<sup>4</sup> their family size since they see that otherwise they will be financially distressed and socially depressed.

The change in fertility that came from the shift from feudal to capitalist modes then helped in various ways to move societies into a virtuous circle. Firstly, the Malthusian law that population will grow to absorb any expansion in resources no longer operated; capital accumulation could occur, new technologies (especially foodstuffs) could develop without a 'population explosion'. Secondly, the devastating and wasteful 'positive checks' of war, famine and disease were diminished and a more peaceful, better fed and healthier population not only became more productive, but realized that it did not need to 'insure' against perennial or crisis mortality by having 'extra' children. This further lowered fertility.

Our confident student might end with a flourish which tied up the capitalist and demographic revolutions. He or she might write that peasants, feudalism, high-pressure demographic regimes are inextricably linked in causal chains. They are at the opposite end of a continuum from free labour, capitalism, markets, non-feudal political structures, which are in turn causally linked to 'modern' demographic regimes. The world started to shift from one to the other at the western tip of Eurasia in the fifteenth century and this has spread over the whole world so that by the end of the twentieth century (with the notable exceptions of two areas, sub-Saharan Africa and some Islamic societies) the shift has usually occurred.

If suitably supported by some of the very considerable literature from the eighteenth to late twentieth century which argues along these lines, the student might well get good marks, for the story has an initial plausibility and is indeed widely believed. What I want to suggest now are some qualifications and point to the way in which a somewhat distorted picture has been built up on the basis of half truths and over-simplifications.

### **Some qualifications.**

I should here declare an interest. I roughly believed this story until my mid 30's (i.e. into the 1970's) and indeed could well have written the essay above. Yet the second half of my intellectual life has been devoted to questioning almost every aspect of it. My feelings that it is a tapestry woven from some fascinating half-truths has emerged as the result of bringing together four very different experiences.

With Sarah Harrison I have been engaged on the most detailed reconstruction ever undertaken of the records of an English parish (Earls Colne in Essex, 1350-1850) so that one can examine through the records the supposed 'transition from feudalism to capitalism'. This showed that it did not happen in the way suggested by the model.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly I have spent over thirty years on the most intensive reconstruction of the social history of a Himalayan community in Nepal ever made, based on more than a dozen visits and three years of fieldwork. Again, the model appears very over-simplified since the demography has not changed much with the increasing penetration of the market.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Reference to Jack Caldwell's work, though this is an extension to that.

<sup>4</sup> Reference to Macfarlane, Marriage, XXX, where there is a discussion of contrary drives.

<sup>5</sup> Reference to Earls Colne WWW web site with full documentation, and also Macfarlane, Origins of Individualism.

<sup>6</sup> Reference to Macfarlane, Resources and Population and other materials on Nepalese demography.

Thirdly, since 1990 I have carried out a detailed study of Japanese social and demographic history over the last thousand years. This suggests that Japan cannot just be lumped with China or anywhere else, and that many of the features of a 'low pressure' demographic regime were present in Japan in periods such as the middle Tokugawa (eighteenth century) which are broadly described as 'feudal'.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, during the last ten years I have devoted a great deal of effort to re-examining the classical examinations of the dynamics of agrarian civilizations as surveyed by the greatest thinkers who investigated them, from Montesquieu, Hume and Adam Smith, through Malthus and Tocqueville, to Maitland and Weber.<sup>8</sup> Again, the story they tell about the nature and effects of feudalism and the trajectories of different parts of Europe does not fit with my earlier model, as represented by the student essay above. In the available space all I can do is to put a question mark against a number of the student's assertions and assumptions, as follows.

The meaning of the word 'feudalism' is far more problematic than assumed. There is a loose, commonly used, sense which might fit the story above, but once one examines the technical literature on feudalism it becomes apparent that there are major differences between areas, and that if it is to be a useful concept it cannot be applied indiscriminately to all agrarian civilizations. For example, the 'feudalism' of England in the middle ages was very different from the 'feudalism' that developed in France. That in France, and some other parts of northern Europe, as classically described by Marc Bloch was in essence founded on 'the dissolution of the state'. The English version, as analysed by F.W.Maitland, was the opposite, the unification of the state so that every inch of England was, ultimately, held of the Crown and every allegiance was primarily to the sovereign. The stretch of feudal property, the core dynamics, all sorts of aspects of the socio-political and legal framework were different, particularly after the twelfth century.<sup>9</sup>

At a wider level, the 'feudalism' of western Europe was in many respects very different not only from the supposed 'feudalism' in parts of Africa, as Jack Goody rightly pointed out long ago, but also from the so-called 'feudalism' of India, China, Indo-China and so on. Only a very debased form of Marxist analysis could ever lump them together.<sup>10</sup>

Yet while the world was not one feudal mass up to say the fourteenth century, and we need to differentiate forms and structures, it is equally important to notice some odd similarities which have been buried. My experience of investigating medieval England and Japan between about 1100 and 1400 A.D. suggest that the 'feudal' structure in these two islands was almost identical. The mixture of politics and economics, the delegation of power down a chain of allegiance to lords, the fealty and oaths, the importance of the ruler's court (though in the Japanese case this was split between Emperor and Shogun), even the system of judge-made customary law, was almost identical for a period of several hundred years. So, two islands (and it is not difficult to see how it is somehow related to islandhood) had a peculiar and particular form of 'feudalism', with immense consequences.<sup>11</sup>

The second point to make is that the central core of feudalism, as the great lawyers and to a certain extent Marx realized, was that it signified a shift from what Sir Henry Maine termed 'status' to 'contract'. In other words, where true feudalism existed, it placed the political and economic obligations made through choice or 'contract' (archetypically by the contract of service and lordship, the giving of fiefs etc) in place of the birth-given relations either of kinship or 'caste'. Putting it simply, in England and Japan the ideology supported the idea that a person's primary allegiance was to the political power. This was also true in much of continental Europe, but the difference was that in England the primary 'liege lord' was always the King, whereas in 'dissolution of the State' feudalism, it was to the person above one in the feudal chain. But in both cases politics (and implicitly economics) was based on 'choice' while status (that is birth) came second. In contrast, almost all other agrarian civilization, including the Confucian model in China, put the family bond first. Thus in Confucian China if one's

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<sup>7</sup> Reference to Macfarlane, *Savage Wars of Peace*.

<sup>8</sup> Reference to Macfarlane, *Riddle of the Modern World* and (forthcoming), *The Making of the Modern World*.

<sup>9</sup> Reference to chapter of Macfarlane, *Making of Modern World*, discussing the peculiarities of English feudalism.

<sup>10</sup> Reference to Jack Goody article on 'feudalism in Africa'.

<sup>11</sup> Reference to Macfarlane articles on Norman Jacobs, 'Japan in An English Mirror' and 'Law in England and Japan'.

father told one to kill the Emperor, that was one's duty. In neo-Confucian Japan, if the ruler told one to kill one's father, that was one's duty.<sup>12</sup>

Now it may be wondered what relationship this has to demographic patterns. There are many ways to answer this. One would be to explain that starting from different 'feudalisms', various parts of Europe developed in diverging directions. As Tocqueville graphically put it, most of continental Europe, in its attempt to unify and overcome the centrifugal force of feudalism (often employing later Roman Law) moved towards political absolutism and social 'caste' as he put it, as well as the entrenchment of a world of lords and peasants.<sup>13</sup> England, however, never had a true peasantry, and move towards an increasingly contractual, market based and free labour world. So by 1700, on the basis of a divergence which had been occurring over the previous half millenium, England and much of continental Europe (but not all, for example the Netherlands) had very different social structures. One effect of this was that just as England never had peasants, it may never have had an **ancien regime** biological regime, where production and reproduction reinforced each other.

Indeed, as far back as the records take us, it seems to have had an unusual system whereby the children had no automatic right in their parent's wealth, there was no 'restraint lignager' (automatic right of the family), property was held by individuals and a person's labour was very often 'free'. Male primogeniture was established first amongst the nobility and then throughout the population. Even in law, and with the most 'bound', that is the serfs or bond-men, they were free in relation to all other individuals except their lord, in the way that a servant today is 'free' except in relation to his or her master. Thus they were very far from being chattels or slaves, as both Bloch and Maitland noted.<sup>14</sup>

This peculiar trajectory means that as early as the sixteenth century the situation which Malthus hoped for had been reached. As Wrigley and others have shown, there was a 'low pressure' demographic regime. When wealth increased, it was not directly and immediately ploughed back into increased reproduction. Marriage was selective and at a relatively late age, fertility was controlled. Thus wealth accumulates in sich a situation so that the infrastructure for a modern industrial civilization was being laid down centuries before the steam engine made it an actuality. Something similar happened in the Netherlands as well and there are hints of the phenomenon in other parts of Europe (for example Catalonia, in parts of Italy or southern Germany). But the extreme case of a whole, fairly large, agrarian nation of this form was England. Then, between about 1620 and 1740, there was a conspicuous growth of per capital and gross national product and almost no population growth.

The fascinating fact is that we get almost exactly the same pattern, except occurring half a century later, in the one other country which had developed the peculiar and paradoxical form of 'centralized feudalism', namely Japan. There also a system of fiefs, male primogeniture and effective partial disinheritance of other children had developed. Above all, the supremacy of 'contract' in its politico-economic form, over 'status' in its birth-given and familistic meaning, had been laid down in the medieval period. Then, like England, there was a period of moderately rapid population growth for a hundred years or so. This happened in England in the sixteenth century, in Japan from the later sixteenth to later seventeenth. Then, like England, there was a century and a half of steady economic growth, but, nationally at least, population did not grow. So the infrastructure which again would support a burst of industrialism.

Of course there were also major differences, and one of them concerned what happened to 'free labour'. In England, human labour was increasingly supplemented by non-human energy through the development of 'machines'. These machines were driven by water, wind and animals in the earlier phases, and then increasingly by coal from the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Thus England moved fairly smoothly through a proto-industrial to industrial revolution where most power came from non-human labour. In such a world, labour costs were high, but instead of encouraging population growth in order

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<sup>12</sup> See article on a comparison of Confucian and neo-Confucian thought on this in 'Past and Present'.

<sup>13</sup> Tocqueville's views are summarized in Macfarlane, *Riddle of the Modern World*, xxx.

<sup>14</sup> For recognition of the odd nature of English serfdom, see Macfarlane, *Making of the Modern World*, xxx.

<sup>15</sup> On the great importance of coal in England from at least the sixteenth century, see Nef and later Wrigley.

to provide extra labour, it paradoxically encouraged labour-saving technologies which, when used by skilled humans led to a further rise in labour cost, and more machines and non-human power.

Japan, particularly after the agricultural 'revolution' of the sixteenth century (when new varieties of rice, improved irrigation and tools doubled production), in Akira Hayami's famous distinction, moved towards an 'industrious' rather than 'industrial' revolution. People worked harder, took more care, increased output on the very limited arable lands by replacing 'wasteful' animals by more 'efficient' humans. Non-human sources of energy actually declined, the wheel and animals faded out, water and wind were usually neglected.<sup>16</sup> Yet, interestingly, the process, where labour was cheap and worked enormously long hours, did not lead to continuous high fertility.

As new land was opened up at the start, the population grew rapidly, but as this was a shift from extensive to intensive, the principle of the 'ecological' and 'demographic' niche was developed. Each holding could only support one heir, so that the practices of abortion, infanticide, children leaving home for the city became widespread.<sup>17</sup> With these smaller families, parents could deal with the risk of not having a suitable heir by the extraordinary practice of kin and non-kin adoption to correct any imbalance. So the final outcome by 1850 both had structural similarities to the English case (a controlled fertility, escape from most of the Malthusian positive checks) and a great difference (industrious rather than industrial).

### **Wider implications of this revision.**

In order to assess the implications of these refinements, it is helpful to start by a classificatory exercise in relation to major forms of labour organization. From the conventional literature we might distinguish four major forms that need to be separated from each other. One is 'free' market relations, wage labour and so on. This tends to prompt mechanization and industrialization since those with wealth basically wish to dispense with human labour, which is often expensive, argues, and often finds strategies for reducing the surplus value passed over to the wealthy. If possible, humans should be replaced by machines and other sources of energy. In a market labour system, people can objectively assess the alternatives and decide that since labour is so expensive (i.e. requires leisure, high wages etc.) it is better to find a substitute. All else being equal, one would expect restricted fertility in such a system.

A second form is serfdom. In this system, people are not quite slaves, they are not animals or rightless, yet they can be worked very hard and hence are better at producing surpluses for their owners than are workers in many other forms of production. East Europe, including Russia, is perhaps the most famous historical location of this phenomenon. The second enserfment in Eastern Europe in the fifteenth century is an example of this tendency. Here one might well expect a pressure towards large families to provide labour for the family and the lords.

A third form is slavery, the characteristic form of the classic ancient civilizations. This was one of the great products of the neolithic revolution; the technologies of metals, writing, weaving, ploughing and so on led for centuries to vast slaveries. Rome was the last great civilization in the West to be based on slavery, the end of an era lasting over three thousand years. Slavery, as has often been pointed out, was often linked to labour shortage and there was often, though not always, a pressure on slaves to reproduce as well as produce.

Finally, there is a widespread form of labour organization which has never really been given a name, though peasantry, domestic mode of production, and other terms approximate to it. Its central feature is that the compulsion to work is exerted neither through the market (money and wages) mechanism, nor through direct lordly power (serfdom, slavery), but at one remove from the lord through the compulsion of the family. There is often an enormous pressure towards hard work, but this comes to bear on the individual through filial piety (and patriarchal power) and often a desperate need to extract a living and pay rents to the overlord.

Now this last form is just as hostile to experimentation with non-human labour, and to the replacement of humans by machines, as is slavery. It is almost always 'cheaper' to work all hours, than to invest and keep capital locked up in animals, mills and other machinery. So this form, which covered

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<sup>16</sup> Reference to Macfarlane on technological growth and stagnation in (ed.) John Ziman volume.

<sup>17</sup> Documentation for this is in Macfarlane, *Savage Wars of Peace*, ch. Xxx.

much of East Asia and India, and to a certain extent Mediterranean Europe, drives down technologies. In this respect it shares this feature with three out of four of the forms of labour organization. Slavery, serfdom and what I shall call domestic drudgery all have the tendency to replace all other sources of energy by human labour, in other words, to de-technologize. It also tends to link production and reproduction. To increase family size is to increase wealth and security.

With these four patterns in mind, we may ask where the English and Japanese trajectories fit in. The answer is that while elements from all of the above (except slavery) can be found, they do not really fit well into any one. The nearest one can get is to blend the capitalist with the serf, taking elements of each to form a distinctive form which historians have sometimes termed 'centralized feudalism'. There is a powerful market allocation of labour, but there are also usually some restrictions through such mechanisms as lord-master relations of a more durable kind - servanthood, apprenticeship, serfdom of a particular kind and so on. This rather unusual case seems to lead to an unusual demographic regime where the link between growth in resources and the usually automatic investment in higher fertility is broken. This means that while one **may** have rapid population growth, such growth was not correlated directly and immediately with periods of economic growth.

What is clear is that parts of western Europe and Japan do not fit well into the 'peasant' form. Thus it distorts the picture to lump all agrarian civilizations as 'feudal-peasant', each of which gradually broke away from this pattern. For example, despite various revisionist attempts to suggest the contrary, I would argue that the divergences between the two ends of Eur-Asia, and indeed between Japan and China, and England and much of continental Europe are both very considerable and occurred long before 1800 (as Pomerantz argues) or even 1450 (as in the simple form of the Marx-Weber chronology).<sup>18</sup>

So China, India, South America and other agrarian civilizations and their history is covered over if we approximate them to some Euro-centric model of 'universal feudalism', just as much as if we do the reverse and make western Europe just another form of 'universal peasantry'.

Secondly, in the debate between Montesquieu (who thought feudalism specific in time and space) and Voltaire (who thought it universal), I would side with Montesquieu.<sup>19</sup> And, if this is so, it has large implications for our understanding of demographic processes. To repeat, the central feature of feudalism in all its branches is to contribute to Maine's famous shift (which also Engels and Marx claimed was also their central point) from 'status' to 'contract'. That is why most thinkers from Montesquieu to Perry Anderson believe that feudalism is the necessary 'gateway' from 'embedded', status-based, civilizations, to modern societies.<sup>20</sup> Although we can now see that there are have been other paths in the twentieth century, up to the nineteenth century they were probably right.

To break birth-given links, whether of rank (caste) or kinship is extremely difficult. As civilizations become densely settled and agrarian, one might say, with Montesquieu and his successors, that the normal tendency is towards status, not contract. In the fluid period after the collapse of the Roman Empire, or the collapse of the Chinese phase in Japan during the Kamakura shogunate, fluidity, a relatively free disposition of human labour becomes possible. No doubt one can find such phases in India, southeast Asia, China. But normally the system 'congeals' again into status, that is birth-based and ascriptive forms. The nexus between production and reproduction is re-inforced. The **ancien regime** biological regime dominates, so that high fertility to produce enough heirs and to produce enough labour becomes the best strategy at every level. We see these patterns over much of continental Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, and in India and China between the seventeenth and nineteenth.

The movement in the opposite direction is against the grain. It happened to a considerable degree in Japan, but was linked to an intensive and labour-consuming rice technology. It happened in Holland and various cities and small regions of western Europe and, in particular, in England. The demographic-economic balance was peculiar as Wrigley has shown.<sup>21</sup> And this peculiarity stems from

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<sup>18</sup> For some revisionists see Gunder Frank, Hanley and, in particular, Pomerantz books.

<sup>19</sup> Reference to the Voltaire and Montesquieu views (at start of M.Bloch, Feudalism).

<sup>20</sup> Reference to key passages in Marx and Perry Anderson's work on feudalism as the gateway to capitalism.

<sup>21</sup> Reference to work of Wrigley (and Schofield) on peculiarities of English demography.

an unusual form of 'feudalism', which, as Maitland famously quipped meant that England was either the most, or the least, feudal civilization in history.

Maitland also pointed out that if one asks when 'feudalism' (and one might add a 'peasant civilization') came into England, one could plausibly argue that it was in the 1680's - when it was invented by a number of comparative thinkers.<sup>22</sup> Or one could take the opposite view, which is that if one asks when the feudal system ended in England, one could argue that it has never ended. Certainly the place where I am sitting writing this, King's College, Cambridge, and the University of Cambridge which surrounds it is in many ways still 'feudal' in certain senses. Perhaps the fact that until relatively recently (the nineteenth century) one also lost one's college Fellowship if one married neatly illustrates the point. One had to choose - allegiance to one's 'lord' (the Provost) or to one's desires (or those of one's kin). Most Fellows opted for the wine and the stipend. It is not just the famous carols that take one back to medieval England.

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<sup>22</sup> Reference to Maitland's jokes about England as most and least feudal, and feudalism coming into England in later seventeenth century.