
REVIEW ARTICLES

The Abolition of Feudalism in the Western World

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An international conference on « the abolition of feudalism in the West » was held from 12th to 16th November 1968 in Toulouse, under the auspices of the C.N.R.S. The proceedings of the conference have recently been published.¹ The delay in their publication, caused by technical difficulties and problems of coordination between the various contributors, has done nothing however to lessen the immediate interest of this debate — the richness and originality of which has been well preserved in the two lengthy volumes of proceedings, a fact which is by no means the least of the editor's achievements.

The conference was both suggested and organized by J. Godechot, one of the most distinguished historians of France and Europe during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period. The original plan was rather limited and to some extent « modest ». The objective was to fill in the gaps in information and research for that 'revolutionary epoch' which is so crucial in both European and world history and which, in the span between the 18th and 19th centuries, saw the final collapse of the Ancien Régime throughout the greater part of the European continent. In more precise terms, the aim was to « déterminer d'une manière suffisamment précise ce qu'était le régime féodal en Europe et dans quelle mesure il avait été aboli » (p. 481).

In fact, however, these limits did not prove restricting either in the thirty or so papers presented at the conference or the debate which developed around them. This was due to the fact that not only Europe but also her

¹ *L'Abolition de la 'féodalité' dans le monde occidental*, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1971.

American « appendages » were considered and that the « West » was taken to include Eastern Europe and Tsarist Russia. Also the period under consideration was much broader than the few « revolutionary » decades between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. The studies began with the early disappearance of the feudal system in some areas of North-West Europe between the 16th and 17th centuries and ended only on the threshold of the 20th century, by which time there still survived in Eastern Europe and Russia numerous oppressive vestiges of the feudal system, which itself had been formally abolished only a few decades earlier.

Although the central topic of the conference was the specific situation of the feudal system on the eve of the French revolution and the measures for its abolition which resulted more or less directly from the Revolution itself, attention was also directed to a much wider range of problems. These included, for example, the means and timing of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the connection between the abolition of feudalism and economic development, the importance of the development of manufacturing and commercial activities in the crisis of the feudal system, and the validity (which some challenged) of analysing in terms of class the structure and tensions in a typical society of « orders » such as the European Ancien Régime.

In a brief note such as this it is, unfortunately, impossible to examine or even to list either all the aspects of the five-day discussion or the range of new ideas that a careful reader will discover in the 900 or so pages of the proceedings. It may seem unnecessary to mention that there were many major differences between the papers presented at the conference. But this did not simply result from the varying degrees of effort, experience and ability of the individual contributors. While some gave authentic research papers of differing scope which contained new information, even if the methodological or theoretical premises on which they were based were not themselves new, others simply attempted overall generalization or else discussed well established interpretations. But these differences were not merely the product of the differing levels of complexity and seriousness of the research on the subject attained in different countries, although disparities of the kind were referred to and regretted by the conference. Nor was it simply consequence of the location of the conference and the obligations of hospitality that the majority of the contributors were French and French history was the predominant field of study. The more important and the more obvious differences, however, arose from the diversity of cultural traditions, of ideological attitudes, of methodological approaches and from historical situations that were far from uniform. We shall shortly return to the most important consequences of the conflict of contrasting positions and experiences.

As an initial and summary introduction it is worth noting that two main lines of research emerged during the conference, two sets of problems

that were to some extent distinct but at the same time convergent. Admittedly this is to risk being over-schematic or simplifying — but it is a risk worth taking for the sake of clarity. With this in view some schematization is often useful.

The first line of research was that we might call the French historiographical tradition on the Ancien Régime and the Revolution which, more than a century after the publication of Toqueville's « *L'Ancien régime et la révolution* » has lost none of its precision, passion and resilience, despite the debates and polemics that have always accompanied its development.² All the papers on France and, in a more episodic way, those on Italy and the Netherlands and some others, were related more or less explicitly to this first line of research, which has been enriched over the years by a series of studies — many of which have been massive in scope but nearly always illuminating and informative — on the French economy and society in the 17th and 18th centuries.³ The problems which still remain open in contemporary French research on the « *Féodalité d'ancien régime* » were the ones that received the main emphasis during the debate. In this context it was inevitable that the debate on the use of the adjective « *féodal* » to define the type of society that existed in France up to the revolution should have arisen again. Apart from the reservations of certain medieval and legal historians, which basically re-stated Boutrouche's well known argument,⁴ the discussion centred around whether it was necessary to preserve the traditional distinction between « *féodaux* », « *seigneuriaux* », « *domaniaux* » rights and powers, or whether the dominant « *feudal* » characteristic of French (and European) society between the 16th and 17th centuries should not be seen as the extraction of a more or less regular portion of peasant incomes (up to 20-25% in France, p. 829, between 30 and 40% in some areas of the *Grundherreschaft*, p. 706, as much as 40%, if one includes state taxes, in Hungary p. 829) by a landed aristocracy which was endowed

² To mention only the work that is most important and relevant to these arguments cf. C. MAZAURIC, *Sur la Révolution française. Contributions à l'histoire de la Révolution bourgeoise*, Paris, Editions Sociales, 1970, pp. 21-113, and F. FURET, *Le catéchisme de la Révolution française*, in « *Annales E.S.C.* », 26th year, No. 2, March-April 1971, pp. 255-289. A useful review of the most recent studies on the topic is S.B. CLOUGH and A. DI VITTORIO, *Nuove ricerche e nuovi punti di vista sui fattori di ritardo nello sviluppo economico francese durante la rivoluzione francese ed il periodo napoleonico*, in « *Rassegna economica* », Year XXXV, No. 2, March-April 1971, pp. 281-305.

³ An exhaustive, up to date bibliography on these problems can be found in A. SOBOL, *La société française dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, C. D. U., 1969. This was partly revised and re-published the following year with the title *La Civilisation et la Révolution française*, t. I: *La crise de l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Arthaud, 1970.

⁴ R. BOUTROUCHE, *Seigneurie et féodalité. Le premier âge des liens d'homme à l'homme*, Paris, Aubier, 1968.

with extra-economic means of coercion capable of guaranteeing its power and wealth.⁵

This was not merely, as some thought (p. 663), a battle of words, for this argument, which is apparently over question of terminology, in fact conceals differing evaluations of the power and influence of the aristocracy and feudal revenue in France and elsewhere in the 18th century. Some contributors stressed their powers of resistance, and even of reaction, and so attributed to the Revolution a decisive role in liberating French society and economy from the chains of feudalism (Soboul, Labrousse, Mazauric etc.). Others, however, answered that by the time of the revolution rights and obligations of a strictly feudal nature were of little account while on the other hand seigneurial and domanial exactions and obligations were much more important and oppressive. It was these, much more than the former, which assisted the penetration of capitalism into the countryside and created tensions and conflicts that were not simply anti-feudal but also anti-capitalist in character, especially among the poorest peasant classes.

There were also those who echoed the interpretation of A. Cobban⁶ by contrasting more or less explicitly the « myth » of the French revolution with another — the « English » myth of a gradual and relatively painless evolution from feudalism to capitalism. This would appear to be the meaning of Crouzet's critique of the the solution to the agrarian problem provided by the Revolution, which halted growth, and also of his proposal that one should distinguish between « countries which experienced *two* successive ancien régimes (England, the Netherlands etc.) with relatively unviolent transitions, and those like France which had only *one* ancien régime, which gave way brutally to something new » (p. 654). Later R. Mousnier stressed that from the mid-18th century a rapid process of social change took place in France so one could conclude that « the revolution probably upset society less than we think » (*ibid.*).

When considered in this light the differing assessments of the attitude (which varied from country to country but were essentially the same) of the peasant masses to the measures taken to abolish the feudal regime, of the connection between abolition and the economic development of the countries concerned, and of the importance and efficiency of feudal jurisdiction etc. can be better understood.

⁵ The 'féodalité' d'ancien régime was concisely defined as follows on the agenda approved in the final session of the conference: « un système économique, social et politique caractérisé par le prélèvement d'une partie du revenu des exploitants du sol, par une aristocratie principalement foncière, jouissant des droits de justice et de privilèges politiques » (pp. 884-885).

⁶ A. COBBAN, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1964.

It was the awareness that these and similar differences were not simply technical which led the participants to accept a common definition of « feudalism » and « feudality ». The proceedings give ample evidence of this, while was productive even if it did not definitely solve all the problems involved, and there is no space to examine here all the proposals that were put forward and discussed. But we should point out that it was this search for clear definitions of the most « ambiguous » terms that recurred in the discussion that gave rise to a second group of problems that have for some time interested historians of different countries. In fact, ever since the ' fifties, after the publication of M. Dobb's « *Studies in the development of capitalism* » a major debate has developed among Marxist scholars about the timing and the means of transition from feudalism to capitalism⁷ and these problems have always prompted lively discussion. As an example it is sufficient to mention the reaction even among Italian historians to the publication of *Teoria economica del sistema feudale* by W. Kula. The author's most recent volume, *Sur le féodalisme*,⁸ is a collection of proceedings from a conference on feudalism which was organized by the C.E.R.M. In these studies an attempt is made to clarify fundamental Marxist concepts such as « mode of production » and « socio-economic formation » which provide useful theoretical points of reference in a debate that risks being reduced to a banal analysis of empirical facts and developments which clearly are not unidirectional.

At the Toulouse conference, in fact, the theory, ideology and methodology on which the different contributors based their arguments almost always remained implicit, but they were no less apparent for that. The greatest efforts, which are amply documented by the proceedings, were devoted to definition and analysis of the factors that would allow us to construct, not a « model », but a « typology » of the various forms which the feudal system assumed in the modern period in different European countries and on the American continent, and also the ways in which it was abolished. The proceedings are extremely interesting on this topic. They contain suggestions for establishing the criteria for defining such a « typology » (the economic and social structures of the various countries before the abolition of feudalism, the ways in which it took place, the role of the state and « pressure from below », the solution given to the agrarian problem, total abolition without compensation or partial abolition with redemption, the importance of the national factor etc.) and also take into account the reasons why the possibility of creating an abstract « model » of the feudal system that would be valid for very different historical situations was almost unanimously rejected. On

⁷ P. M. SWEEZY, M. DOBB, H. D. TAKAHASHI, R. HILTON, C. HILL, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism. A symposium*, London, 1954.

⁸ *Sur le féodalisme*, Paris, Editions Sociales, 1971.

this topic W. Kula wrote some years ago: « The more factors we introduce into the model the more valuable will the theory that we construct be; but the number of societies to which this theory will be applicable will decrease proportionately ».⁹

In our opinion the studies of the Toulouse conference confirmed this statement. This is because, while they do not make it impossible to define the essential factors that would permit us to describe as « feudal » a specific economic and social formation¹⁰ they do exclude the possibility of establishing a « type » system by which to measure the « authenticity », in feudal terms, of individual and specific historical situations. This clearly is the implication of the unanimous rejection of the type of formal juridical « model » that is so dear to many legal historians.

It is unnecessary to stress the usefulness of international conferences of this kind on problems of general and common interest. However in conclusion we would point out that not least of the merits of the Toulouse conference was to have provided a vast range of often unpublished articles and a valuable survey of the state of research in different countries on the subjects that were discussed. A useful « multilingual glossary » of the terms related to feudalism closes the two volumes of the proceedings. There can be no doubt that they will be an important source of reference for all historians of the modern period.

⁹ W. KULA, *Teoria economica del sistema feudale. Proposta di un modello*, Turin, Einaudi, 1971, p. 14.

¹⁰ The definition quoted in note 5, even if still somewhat imprecise, seems to us to be acceptable.