Conscripts of "Transformation": An Introduction to the Seminar

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No part of the Middle Ages in Europe has been more stringently defined by the debate on historical periodization than the centuries between 850 and 1150. This is hardly surprising, for the central centuries of the Middle Ages witnessed a radical process of political transformation – from centralization to fragmentation – that had profound implications for the mechanisms of the distribution of power and, to an extent that is still hard to define, for the economic and demographic expansion of western Europe. What we do know about this process is that there was a moment between 850 and 1150 when European society underwent a structural transformation of such import that from then on it is more useful to speak of a post-Carolingian than of a Carolingian Europe.[1] This distinction raises the question of what were the defining features of post-Carolingian Europe, of how correct it is to define it as a feudal society – by contrast with Carolingian Europe, which should be excluded from this definition – and, finally, of whether this long process of change can be properly called a revolution.

Alessio Fiore, who teaches medieval history at the University of Turin, has produced an admirable book that examines this process in Italy. Originally published in 2017, *Il mutamento signorile* has been superbly translated into English by Sergio Knipe and pub-

[1] Wickham, 1997, p. 202.

lished as part of the prestigious Oxford Studies in Medieval European History series under the title *The Seigneurial Transformation: Power Structures and Political Communication in the Countryside of Central and Northern Italy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020). Annette Grabowsky and I have accordingly invited the author and six scholars to offer their reflections on the book. They are: Isaac Smith and Christoph Haack (University of Tübingen), Giulia Vollono (University of Buffalo), Igor Santos Salazar (University of Bologna), Thomas Kohl (University of Tübingen) and Charles West (University of Sheffield). As a way of introducing this collection of essays, the present (very personal) foreword will proceed in four steps. The first two sections will outline the concepts of feudal society and feudal revolution, providing some orientation for the following sections on, respectively, *The Seigneurial Transformation* and the related scholarly discussion.

Feudal Societies

Medieval Europe between 600 and 1300 can be categorized in Blochian terms as a feudal society. Its defining characteristics were the primacy of "the politics of land" and the decentralization of the means of coercion in the hands of local landholders. The absence of systematic taxation prevented rulers from taking direct control over specific tracts of land; control over land and rents was consequently the chief source of wealth and power for all the kings, aristocrats and lords in Europe during this period.[2] This broad characterization includes as a possible (but not inevitable) historical element the political and social order imposed in those areas where the institution of the fief – as conditional landed property deriving from the nexus between benefice and vassalage – involved jurisdiction over a dependent peasantry.[3]

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[2] Bloch, 1961, p. 446; Wickham, 2000, pp. 28-32, esp. at p. 29; 2009, p. 523.
[3] Mitteis, 1933 and Ganshof, 1957, pp. 10-13; see also the discussion in Guerreau, 1980, pp. 75-116, 177-210; Wickham, 2000, pp. 21-27; Patzold, 2012.

Our main concern here is to determine how this system functioned in the four centuries between the "Carolingian experiment" (750-850) and the establishment of post-Carolingian Europe (850-1150).[4] Over this long stretch of time, structural differences emerged in terms of how power over land was distributed between rulers and local magnates and then imposed on the peasantry. The Carolingian century 750-850 was the age in which the landowning elites established, often by force, their hegemony over their landowning peasant neighbours, whose situation grew harsher than in the two preceding centuries. After 750, particularly in northern France and southern Germany, but also in northern Italy, we observe the steady extension of new estate structures, which we call "bipartite estates" or manors. These estates were divided into two main parts: a "demesne", under the direct control of the lord, and the tenant holdings that paid him rent (in kind and in the form of labour services). The rest of the land was used by the tenant workforce for their own subsistence. In general, the manorial system was bound up with the expansion of exchange networks, but it also involved a greater exploitation of the peasants working the land.[5] Therefore, it was the year 800, not 1000, that witnessed the ascendancy of the local landowning elites in the countryside in most parts of Carolingian Europe. In acquiring this dominant role, these elites were actually assisted, not hampered, by their position as officials in the Carolingian state system.[6] Indeed, during this period there was still a central source of legitimacy for local practices, in the form of the most ambitious public power to emerge in medieval Europe before the late thirteenth century.[7]

In post-Carolingian Europe, by contrast, the regionalization of the aristocracy after 850 or so simply meant that lords increasingly

[4] Wickham, 2016, pp. 61-79.
[5] Verhulst, 2002, pp. 61-64; Wickham, 2005, pp. 287-301; 2009, p. 530, 534; Fiore, 2020, p. 52. On manors and exchange, see Toubert, 2004, pp. 27-115, 145-217.
[6] Wickham, 1991, p. 38; Barthélemy, 1996, p. 202.
[7] Wickham, 2016, p. 198.

used their lands as a tool in regional politics. Seldom before 1000, but often by the 1050s, their "politics of land" led to the "fragmentation of powers" and to changes in two main spheres. The first involved the redefinition of relationships between the political forces represented by kings, counts, dukes and bishops, on the one hand, and local lords, on the other. In this domain, all dissension was eminently political, that is to say, the conflict was between landed elites and centered on control over the territory and its inhabitants: greater vs. lesser lords; aristocrats legitimized by a public office vs. those without any office; and, last but not least, clerics vs. laity.[8]

The second transformation was the development at the local level of increasingly formal personal relationships and social boundaries between magnates and peasants (what Robert Fossier has called "*encellulement*").[9] During this process, peasants were increasingly excluded from the public world of the army and assembly, and thus from kings' jurisdiction and interest.[10] Already by the year 1000, in some parts of Europe (notably France, but much of Italy as well), such exclusion meant the direct subjection of peasant communities to the judicial control of local lords in the framework of the *seigneurie banale*, a complex basket of rights derived from a set of formerly royal prerogatives (the so-called Carolingian king's bannum).[11] The *seigneurie banale* and castles became the markers and typical bases of seigneurial powers, particularly in the post-Carolingian lands after around 900, and increasingly, in steadily more localized forms, after 950/1000.[12] The *seigneurie banale* was nonetheless only an extreme development of the general tendency toward the subordination of the free peasantry. The process of *incastellamento* in central Italy illustrates a different form of control that lords could exercise over the peasantry even without seigneurial rights. In this process,

[8] Wickham, 2016, p. 198.
[9] Fossier, 1982, I, pp. 288-318; Reuter, 1997, p. 177; Wickham, 1997, pp. 206-7; West, 2013, pp. 64-77.
[10] Wickham, 2009, p. 515.
[11] Duby, 1953, pp. 207-214; Poly-Bournazel, 1990, pp. 25-39.
[12] Wickham, 2009, pp. 516-18.

in the tenth and eleventh centuries, lords moved their free dependants, often by force, from their original settlements to hilltop villages, sometimes on new sites, reorganizing their tenures and rents as they did so.[13] In northern Italy, *incastellamento* just meant the founding of castles as markers of political power and status, alongside or above pre-existing villages and hamlets, as in northern Europe.[14] These are largely separate developments, linked to considerable differences in patterns of land tenure and peasant differentiation, yet they all point in the same direction: economic pressure on peasant society increased through the imposition of new burdens on a territorial and jurisdictional basis, atop the more traditional demands based on land ownership. Overall, systematic restrictions on the peasantry were imposed everywhere as a result of these diverse processes. What we find, therefore, is not a mere localization of power practices and structures, but the reorganization of the concrete modes in which control was exercised and agrarian surplus was appropriated through the combination of various extra-economic means of coercion (customary rent and jurisdictional rights). Although lordly domination in the countryside had clearly become consolidated as early as 850, the political framework in which this power was expressed was substantially different by 1150: the territorial seigneuries constituted an innovative form of power compared with the past, marked by an explicit formalization and patrimonialization of jurisdictional prerogatives.[15]

The Feudal Revolution

No historian disputes that the society of the 800s or 850s was different from that of the 1150s, but historians do disagree about how its transformation took place. This divergence of views has given

[13] Toubert, 1973, pp. 315-368, 450-93.
[14] Wickham, 1985, pp. 53-78; Carocci, 2018, pp. 17-35.
[15] Wickham, 1997, p. 198; 2009; West, 2013, p. 255; Fiore, 2020, p. 73.

rise to a lively debate on what has come to be known as the "feudal revolution." This is not the place for detailed discussion of the different positions, which are well set out in numerous publications.[16] Still, it may be worthwhile to spell out the issue at the crux of the dispute. The central tenet of the "feudal revolution" thesis is that around the year 1000 (or 1060) the violence of the feudal lords caused a severe crisis in the political culture and structure of society. Georges Duby was the first scholar to present the year 1000 as a turning point in the history of France in his 1953 monograph on the Mâconnais district.[17] Subsequent studies sought to demonstrate the validity of Duby's model elsewhere (Catalonia, Languedoc, Burgundy).[18] However, the dispute gathered momentum only in the wake of the publication (and subsequent English translation) of the studies by Jean-Pierre Poly and Eric Bournazel in 1980 (English translation: 1990) and Guy Bois in 1989 (English translation: 1992).[19] These works drew a vigorous reaction from Dominique Barthélemy, who was uneasy about the image of a "totalizing moment" of change, whether one called it a revolution, a mutation, or even a transformation.[20] Simply put, his central criticism is that a sharp contrast between the tenth and eleventh centuries is off base; rather, we should take note of the real changes that took place around 900 and 1100, and acknowledge that the society of the turn of the millennium developed out of that of the ninth century.[21] A parallel discussion took place in *Past and Present* following the 1994 article by Thomas Bisson, who rehashed the feudal revolution thesis.[22] There ensued a stream of responses from Barthélemy, Stephen White and Timothy

[16] Bourin, 1991, pp. 5-10; Wickham, 1997, pp. 196-208; Poly, 1998, pp. 3-12; Barthélemy, 2009, pp. 1-11, 302-313; 2017, pp. 93-140; Buc, 2019, pp. 289-300.
[17] Duby, 1953, pp. 172-204.
[18] Bonnassie, 1975-6; 1991a, pp. 104-131; Bois, 1989.
[19] Poly-Bournazel, 1980 and 1990; Bois, 1989 and 1992.
[20] Barthélemy, 1992; 1993; 2009. On Bois 1989, see also Rosenwein, 1991, pp. 11-16; Wickham, 1991, pp. 27-38; Bonnassie, 1991b, pp. 39-46; Fossier 1991, pp. 77-79; Verhulst, 1991, pp. 195-203.
[21] Barthélemy, 2009, pp. 10-11.
[22] Bisson, 1994, pp. 6-42; 1997, pp. 208-25.

Reuter, all opposed to Bisson's argument, as well as from Chris Wickham, who took an intermediate position.[23] Then, in his important book, published in 2013 and significantly titled *Reframing the Feudal Revolution*, Charles West refined the terms of the dispute. In West's view, the change that occurred between 800 and 1100 was linked to a process of formalization of social relations that developed in continuity with the general thrust of Carolingian reform.[24]

The debate between the proponents of "revolution" and "transformation" is really an argument about particular societies and the means of changing them. The fundamental distinction is between the notion of societal change based on intervention – sometimes violent intervention – and the idea of a course of political development which began in the Carolingian period (or because of the end of the Carolingian order) and unfolded through a slow mechanism of transformation that remained constant in most of western Europe for two or three hundred years.[25] From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that the feudal revolution debate has revolved primarily around violence, taken by historians as a discriminating factor to compare how societies worked in the years (or decades or centuries) around 1000.[26] The traditional and simplistic dichotomy between a "before" and an "after" stage has been abandoned since the 1990s. The contrast is no longer a simple one between peace before the turn of the millennium and violence after it, but between an older form of violence whose primary function was to maintain the existing order and a newer form of violence practiced by castle lords and their followers, the structures and culture of which still remain to be fully identified.[27] The research questions have changed accordingly. Did feudal lords choose to engage in specific practices in view of certain advantages these ensured? And did these advantages, once

[23] Barthélemy, 1996, pp. 196-205; White, 1996, pp. 205-23; Reuter, 1997, pp. 177-95; Wickham, 1997, pp. 196-208 and 2014, p. 32.
[24] West, 2013, p. 255, 263.
[25] Wickham, 1997, p. 201, 208.
[26] Wickham, 1997, p. 208.
[27] Reuter, 1997, p. 181.

accrued, modify the culture and indeed the very structure of society? After all, a revolution is a change of culture wrought by practices whose bearers structurally rank below the hitherto dominant class, which they replace. Given this premise, the short answer is that the feudal lords ranked below the traditional holders of power (kings, counts, etc.) and their fundamental motivation for the use of force in the political arena was the struggle for such power. There is, however, a difference between revolutions in which those who plan and implement the disruption are inspired by some sort of vision of a new political and social order, and "unrevolutionary" revolutions that aim to reproduce the existing mode of power distribution by merely replacing the old incumbents with new occupants as the recipients of political privileges (including the right to predatory extraction).[28] If we are dealing with a revolution of the latter sort, the question becomes: Does it make sense to distinguish between changes carried out through an "unrevolutionary" revolution and those occurring via transformation? Obvious though this may be, it is perhaps worth emphasizing, once again, that not only have the terms of the debate changed, but the very concepts we use to explain change (or its absence) have assumed new meaning.

Italy's Seigneurial Transformation

Let us now try to situate Fiore in this debate, summarizing the central thesis of *The Seigneurial Transformation*. Fiore argues that the changes that occurred in Italy in the period from 1080 to 1130 were sufficiently coherent and resulted in a sufficiently different political order to deserve to be called a "revolution". By defining the process of seigneurial transformation as a revolution, Fiore takes up an original position in Italian scholarship. Traditionally, medieval studies in Italy have focused on long-term transformations and processes. In sharp contrast to French and English scholarly traditions, which

[28] Scott, 2004, pp. 88-9.

are interested in watershed moments such as the year 1000 or 1066, Italian scholarship generally avoids stressing breaks determined by short chronological phases.[29] On the other hand, Fiore's preference for the label "seigneurial" over "feudal" is consistent with an additional defining characteristic of Italian historiography, namely the distinction between territorial lordship and the feudal order (according to Mitteis/Ganshof's definition, recalled above).[30] Italian historians tend to discuss the former in parallel – and, at times, in conflict – with the rise of cities as an alternative locus of political order. By combining these two different orientations, *The Seigneurial Transformation* argues for the political and economic centrality of territorial lordships, thus suggesting that the development of medieval Italy took place in the countryside even before the rise of communes. In so doing, Fiore's *Seigneurial Transformation* corrects Sabatino Lopez's *Commercial Revolution* along the lines argued by Chris Wickham in his studies on the Italian communes.[31]

The book is divided into two parts of five chapters each. The first part sets out the historical framework and examines the determining factors in the seigneurial transformation: civil wars, political fragmentation, the consolidation of territorial lordships, the caging of the peasantry by new forms of power. The strength of Fiore's analysis lies at a lower level of specificity – in his comprehensive concern with what Michael Mann has called "the exact infrastructures of power", including the details of their organizational techniques on the ground.[32] What lends such versatility to his rural sociology of the phenomenon is this deep focus on the organization of diverse, sometimes contrasting types of power: seigneurial dominance over a dependent peasantry, the rural space under the control of urban communities, and the far less numerous autonomous rural communities.

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[29] Tabacco, 1969, pp. 5-37; 1993, pp. 304-19; Sergi, 1986, pp. 371-93; Carocci, 1997, pp. 49-91.
[30] Provero, 1998, p. 15, 164-9; Albertoni, 2015.
[31] Lopez, 1971, pp. 56-60; Wickham, 2014, pp. 49-53; 2015, pp. 5-8.
[32] Mann, 1986, p. 30.

The supplementary second part investigates in greater detail the reshaping of the rural political culture of these diverse communities. Fiore examines four major issues, all somehow related to the fabric of political languages, including the means by which the various actors reconfigured their mutual relationships. He identifies a set of specific political discourses: fidelity, pacts, customs, and violence. The major problem with this evidence is that, insofar as it is offered by the creators or proponents of a particular narrative, it is often too integral to the narrative itself to be fully trustworthy.[33] To overcome this problem, Fiore displays not only the evidence, but the evidence of the evidence; put differently, he bases his analysis on the interplay between different pieces of evidence and forms of evidence. The result is a study of impressive analytical precision.

Trajectories

The *Seigneurial Transformation* gives us a taxonomy, as well as an analysis, of political and social change. So, it is the topic of change, and the explanation of change (in political discourses, material culture, religious orders, and the economy), that the following contributions address from various intersecting perspectives. In the opening article, Christoph Haack and Isaac Smith tackle some of the major issues in accounts of the relationship between texts and the production of history, and – even more importantly – between language as reportage and language as description, as problematized by cultural theorists and anthropologists in discussions about violence and its transformative impact on cultures and/or structures. In the second essay, Giulia Vollono moves from texts to archaeology to investigate the influence of the seigneurial regime on the rural landscape. Castles and the process of *incastellamento* are her main focus, as they appear to be indicators of a new form of lordly dominance in the countryside. Igor Santos Salazar's essay also focuses

[33] Reuter, 1997, p. 179.

on the distribution of material resources, especially fiscal lands, understood as markers of the changing yet enduring relationships between imperial/royal authority and local powers. Thomas Kohl shifts the centre of attention from the "feudal revolution" to the "ecclesiastical reform". In his view, the "Gregorian rupture" imposed a new ideological system that set the normative rules for certain legal, social, and economic relationships within western medieval culture.[34] In his dense essay, Charles West returns to the crucial link between the feudal revolution and the Gregorian reform, but he also expands his analysis to consider their impact on the economic sphere and beyond the limited geographical bounds of feudal Europe. Fiore's closing reply offers a series of thorough responses that expand on the issues touched upon by the discussants.

The essays nicely reflect the ambition of this collected volume and open the door to what I like to call "theoretical pluralism". Collectively, they manifest their authors' determination to move beyond a "totalizing reading of events" with a more nuanced interpretation of the historical process which goes under label of "transformation". Individually, however, they offer different – at times conflicting – interpretations of this concept. In some cases, transformation is seen as a historical process characterized by continuity between 800 and 1100 (or 1150). In others, transformation seems to pass through internal phases or cycles marked by mutations (and, at times, revolutions) that account for historical distinctions within the same period of time. These two models lead to very different historical conclusions.

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[34] Kohl, 2019; Mazel, 2010, pp. 233-98, 447-91.

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