Continuity and Discontinuity in the Development of the Feudal System in Eastern Europe (Xth to XVIIth centuries)

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I. *The stages of development and the characteristics of feudalism in Eastern Europe.*

Our understanding of the general processes of economic and social development in pre-industrial Europe has increased greatly in recent years, and the nature of the mechanisms lying behind these processes has begun to attract new scholarly interest, especially in the case of the crisis of feudalism and the transition to capitalism [1]. The debates arising from M. Dobb's studies on the development of capitalism (to go no further back) [2] have more

[1] In Particular, R. Brenner's 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe', published in *Past and Present*, LXX (1976), pp. 30-75, was discussed in *Past and Present*, LXXVIII (1978), LXXIX (1978) and LXXX (1978); I. Wallerstein's, *The Modern World-System. Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, (New York, San Francisco, London 1977), was discussed in *Europa*, I (1977), pp. 67-88, and in *Comparative Politics*, X, pp. 419-438. Brenner wrote a comprehensive paper concerned with Wallerstein's book, namely 'The Origins of Capitalist Development: a Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism', *New Left Review*, I (1978), pp. 25-92. Also such books as G. Bois, *Crise du feodalisme* (Paris 1976) and P. Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London 1978) have evoked many comments and discussions.

[2] M. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (Cambridge and New York

recently been revived in the controversy over the crisis of the XVIIth century in Europe [3]. The debate now tends to polarise on one hand around the theoretical models of the mechanisms of economic development in pre-industrial Europe advanced by R. Brenner or of the structure of the early capitalist economy in Europe proposed by I. Wallerstein [4], both of which have been constructed largely in abstraction from empirical historical processes, and on the other the more tentative explanations and models suggested by the more specific research carried out by authors such as G. Bois and E. Le Roy Ladurie. The gap which separates these former abstract models from the real historical processes which they pretend to explain is nowhere more evident than in the case of Eastern Europe.

As is well known, there is as yet no general theoretical model of the feudal system. All existing theoretical explanations are regional in nature, and therefore present particular and partial historical examples.[5] And one must doubt whether it will be

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1963). See also the discussion of the passage from feudalism to capitalism reprinted in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London 1976).

[3] Cf. the numerous papers and discussions which appeared in *Past and Present* (1952-1962). A concise survey is to be found in the introduction to C. Hill's selected papers, *On the Seventeenth Century Crisis in Europe 1560-1660*, ed. T. Aston (London 1965).

[4] Cf. footnote 1.

[5] This is the case of W. Kula's book on the feudal system in Poland from the mid-XVIth to the mid-XVIIIth century, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System* (London 1976) (this is a translation from Polish of his *Teoria ekonomiczna ustroju feudalnego* (Warszawa 1962)). Likewise, G. Bois' book is concerned with mediaeval Normandy, although its theoretical part takes into account at least a vast region of Western Europe. Attention could be drawn to other more general works, but these do not usually reflect any conscious attempt to construct models and theories. A tentative model of the transition from feudalism to capitalism can be found in: J. Topolski, *Narodziny kapitalizmu w Europie XIV-XVII wieku* [The Rise of Capitalism in Europe from the XIVth to the XVIIth Century] (Warszawa 1965), now translated into Italian: *La nascita del capitalismo in Europa. Crisi economica e accumulazione originaria fra XIV e XVII secolo* (Torino 1976). Jan Rutkowski was the pioneer of the study of East European feudalism, and attempted to construct a theory of that system. In his book *Badania nad podziałem dochodów w Polsce w czasach nowożytnych* [Studies in the Repartition of Incomes in Poland in Modern Times] (Krakow 1938) he studied the mechanism of the distribution of revenues between lord and peasant, which in practice meant the study of the fundamental contrad-

possible within the foreseeable future to arrive at a convincing general theory of feudalism. The way forward will almost certainly be through further localised studies, in the attempt to move towards a theory through the generalisations based on particular local circumstances.

Empirical studies have shown [6] however, that the feudal system did not have any single source, but emerged from a number of local centres. It does not seem justified therefore to treat that feudalism which was born in the area that roughly corresponded to the Carolingian Empire as 'classical' or as the cradle of the European feudal system. That claim would, perhaps, be tenable only with reference to England, where the traditional Anglo-Saxon communities that were evolving toward feudalism were subjected in the XIth century to an accelerated feudalization by the Norman invaders from northern France. But large parts of Germany, most of Spain, and especially Scandinavia [7], were marked by their own individual rates, and even trends, of socio-economic development. This is not to deny, of course, that in these cases, especially once local forms of feudalism became advanced, there were various mutual influences (through commercial contacts and as a result of armed or political or cultural conflicts, etc.).

In Eastern Europe, feudalism was developing in a similar way, through the spontaneous evolution of the agrarian communities toward the emergence of private property and aristocracy. By Eastern Europe we here mean primarily Poland (in

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iction in the feudal system, the contradiction between the feudal ownership of land, which implied extra-economic coercion and acquisition of the feudal rent, and the basing of production on the labour provided directly by the peasants, who did not enjoy the right of the full disposal of the means of production (i.e., primarily the land).

[6] Cf. H. Łowmiański, *Początki Polski* [The Origins of Poland], 5 vols. (Warszawa 1963–73); A. Novoseltsov, V. Pashuto, and L. Cherepnin, *Puti razvitia feodalizma* [The Paths of the Development of Feudalism] (Moskva 1962).

[7] Cf. A. Y. Gurevich, *Problemy genezisa feodalizma v zapadnoi Evrope* [Problems of the Origin of Feudalism in Western Europe] (Moskva 1972).

its present frontiers), the eastern part of Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the early populated parts of Russia. Nor do these areas reveal any essential differences in chronological terms. In the Polish territories (which we shall treat as the typical example of the areas under consideration), and also in other Slavic territories, such as Bohemia and Moravia, contrary to the old prejudices which are occasionally still upheld (e.g., by P. Anderson), permanent agriculture had developed as in all those parts of Europe where the natural conditions were similar, (as has been shown, by G. Duby) gradually from the beginning of the first millennium A. D., the process intensifying from the VIth century on. The breakthrough occurred in about the VIIth century, but the process continued until the XIIth century. The asymmetric coulters, which show that the trenching plough was gradually evolving toward the modern plough, which have been found by archaeologists in Poland, Bohemia, and the Kiev region of Russia, date from the VIIIth to the Xth century.[8] The three-field system entered agricultural techniques in Western Europe (France) only in the IXth century, and that primarily in the case of large real estates held by the Church; but it became common only in the XIIIth century.[9] In Poland, the three-field system also developed slowly, and it was established by the XIIth century. Only in the XIIIth century did it became standard, due to the influence of the West-European organization of rural estates. This coincided with the emergence of the feudal ownership of land (which also gave the lord the authority over the population of his land, and hence the possibility of imposing upon that population, the duty of paying feudal rents) and of the class of the feudal land owners, on the one hand, and the dependent

[8] Very valuable comparative information can be found in Z. Podwińska, *Technika uprawy roli w Polsce średniowiecznej* [Technique of Land Cultivation in Medieval Poland] (Wrocław, Warszawa, Krakow 1972), pp. 108–72.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 170.

peasants, on the other. It may be said that in the XIIth century the Polish countryside was already feudal in character, although the system was still evolving. There were no essential differences in agricultural techniques or in the social organization of agricultural production (if we disregard the Mediterranean and the Alpine region) between Poland, on the one hand, and Western Europe, where the feudal system had emerged in the Xth century (e.g., in France), but became dominant only in the XIIth and the XIIIth century (e.g., in Germany), on the other.

But because of its ancient heritage, Western Europe was marked by more developed towns, greater density of population, and more advanced forms of political life and feudal ideology. That was why Western Europe came to providex organizational and cultural models especially for the organization of the state and large landed estates, and why these in turn contributed to the evolution of the feudal system in Eastern Europe. The state accelerated the expansion of the feudal owners, who were supported by it to a large extent. It also led to the creation of an effective fiscal system, and even of its own economic sector, which, in Poland for instance, took the form of the training of many thousands of peasants in production and services. These peasants were grouped in special villages charged with services, and satisfied the needs of the state within the poorly developed market economy.[10] The free peasants who had formerly been individual land-holders came to be treated as subjects of the state, and were accordingly obliged to provide serf labour (*corvée*) and tributes. The state, and hence also the land, was treated as the patrimony of the ruler, who identified himself with the state.

The development of the aristocracy was indispensable for the existence and consolidation of the state, yet advances in the

[10] This system is well explored in Poland's case thanks to the recent studies of K. MODZELEWSKI, *Organizacja gospodarcza państwa piastowskiego X-XIII wieku* [The Economic Organization of the Polish State under the Piast Dynasty in the Xth to XIIIth Centuries] (Wrocław, Warszawa, Krakow, Gdansk 1975).

market economy were undermining the system. Grants of land and immunity privileges (exempting of various areas from the control of the ruler, which began in the XIth century) gave rise to the emergence of the typically feudal landowners directly interested in the management of their estates. These privileges gave them authority over the peasants, who thus became their subjects, and the source of their incomes, whereas the state ceased to be the main support of this new group of feudal lords.

While in the Xth and XIth centuries the state and its needs (and also the Church) had been the main factor that dynamized the economy; in the XIIIth and the early XIVth century that role was played primarily by the feudal land-owners. They were active and conscious of their status, and strove to secure an appropriate income in order to maintain and consolidate that status. This group reorganized its estates, as also occurred in Western Europe. The peasants were required to pay bigger rents in money and in tributes in kind (instead of the serf labour typical of the earlier period); forests were cleared to provide more arable land; new settlements were promoted, which — mainly due to German influence — adopted the West European model of village organization. Municipal rights were granted to existing towns, and many new towns were founded. The process, which in Polish history is traditionally termed colonization based on German law (which did not extend beyond Poland's eastern frontier), intensified and practically completed the reform.[11] It was marked by a significant influx of Germans only in Western Pomerania and in Silesia, although notable groups of merchants and craftsmen (mainly from Germany) also settled in the major expanding towns.

Reform of the organization of the rural areas and the granting of the right of self-government to towns created better condi-

[11] Cf. N. J. G. POUNDS, *An Economic History of Medieval Europe* (London 1974), pp. 176-80.

tions for the development of peasant holdings, which benefitted from the fixed feudal rent even when it was increased. From the mid-XIIIth century, and in paricular in the XIVth and the XVth century, the economy was no longer dynamized by the activity of the states or of feudal lords, but by individual peasant holdings (of eight to fifteen hectares) on which production was expanding. Peasant holdings were increasing in size, livestock breeding was expanding considerably, and the standards of material life and general prosperity were rising. This was accompanied by a marked increase in the cultural participation of the peasants. Even as late as in the second half of the XVIth century, some 10 percent of the students who attended Cracow University were sons of peasants. Stratification among the peasants developed and the emergence of a stratum of well-to-do peasants became visible quite early. This provoked envy on the part of the owner of the village, who had to be content with the small output of his demesne (*praedium*) and with fixed tributes and rents, whose value was falling as a result of the inflation and devaluation of money that accompanied increased economic activity. The reforms which strengthened those peasant holdings producing for the market thus bred the mechanism which led to the fall in feudal rent and threatened the incomes of the landlords. In Eastern Europe the XVth century witnessed both the consolidation of the independent peasant holdings, and a growing involvement of the landlords, in the production and sale of agricultural produce, and hence in the expansion of their seigneurial demesnes in an attempt to increase their incomes. West European landlords also resorted to the reconstruction of rural seigneuries as a way of increasing their incomes,[12] but that tendency did not become dominant in the West.

The victory in Eastern Europe of the tendency to expand

[12] Cf. G. FOURQUIN, *Les campagnes de la région parisienne à la fin du moyen age* (Paris 1964), p. 540; G. FOURQUIN, *Seigneurie et féodalité au moyen age* (Paris 1970), p. 243.

demesne agriculture and large noble domains based on forced labour which was established by the XVIth century, (but in some areas, e.g. in Bohemia and Moravia, only in the XVIIth century) meant the abandonment of the initial model of feudalism, which had been similar to that prevailing in Western Europe — the dominant element being the independent peasant-holding paying rent in cash and in kind in favour of the model in which the demesne farm became the dominant element in the economic life of the village. This provided a solution to the crisis of landlord incomes by strengthening the feudal system — making the peasant a dependent, and reducing his holding to that of a subsistence unit, within a socio-economic structure largely shaped by the feudal lord. The peasant's relationship to the land deteriorated, which strengthened the feudal demesne (including the range of extra-economic coercion it could exercise).

Intensification of forced labour changed the fairly mild serfdom of peasants as it was between the XIIIth and XVth centuries into *glebae adscriptio*, which was a *peculiar* return (in a more 'organized' form) to the conditions that had existed before the XIIIth century. Engels was right in calling that 'the second serfdom'; [13] 'refeudalization' or 'refeudalization processes' also seem to be accurate descriptions. In the XVIIth century those processes affected not only Eastern Europe, but to some extent many areas in Western Europe as well (except for England).[14] Of course, in Eastern Europe the chronology of those processes varied, and there were some unpopulated areas (mainly on the borders of Eastern Europe) which came to be cultivated only

[13] On this I do not agree with P. Anderson, who thinks that F. Engels when using the term *second serfdom* was referring to Eastern Europe alone, where it was to be 'the second one' in the geographical and not in the chronological sense, because 'the first one' was in Western Europe. Such an interpretation is quite arbitrary and is at variance with both Engels' intentions and the empirical data.

[14] Cf. J. Topolski, 'La réféodalisation dans l'économie des grands domains en Europe Centrale et Orientale (XVIe-XVIIIe ss.)', *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*, VI (1971), pp. 51-63.

in modern times and where the feudal system was introduced only then. Eastern Europe cannot be treated as a homogeneous bloc with chronologically parallel paths of development. Its very thinly populated areas in the East and in the North East have to be treated separately.

II. *Comparative analysis of the mechanisms of the development of the feudal system in Eastern Europe*

Until the end of the XVth century, when the paths of economic and social development in Western and Eastern Europe came to part, the general trends in the development of feudalism in both parts of Europe (with the exclusion of the lately populated regions and border areas) were similar, despite the differences referred to above (the density of population and the degree of development of the towns).

As has been shown by the earlier studies of M. Postan and W. Abel, and confirmed by the more recent research of E. Le Roy Ladurie and G. Bois, in Western Europe a fairly well marked process of economic growth of long duration was halted in the second half of the XIIIth century; this was followed (regardless of such external factors as the plague of 1348 and the Hundred Years' War, which intensified the working of economic mechanism) by alternating phases of depression and expansion, at a pace gradually slowed down by accumulating difficulties.

The blocking of economic growth in the XIIIth century, which as G. Bois has claimed prevented the West European economy from getting out of the impasse even in the XIVth and the XVth centuries,[15] was due to a mechanism that was Malthusian in nature: namely, the discrepancy between the rapidly growing population (the rise was 10 per cent. between

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[15] G. Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, pp. 241, 308, 364. See also J. Topolski, *Narodziny kapitalizmu...*, p. 39.

the mid-XIIIth and the early XIVth century) and the ceiling reached by agricultural productivity. This resulted in the division of holdings, the increase in agricultural prices, combined with a fall in prices of manufactures (from which only a few rich peasants could profit), decreasing productivity of land as a result of the working of the law of diminishing returns (since poorer and poorer lands were being tilled) [16] combined with an increase in production, the fall of wages in agriculture, and disturbances in the monetary system. All those who had to live on their own production or on wages found themselves in a very difficult position.

The downward trend which made itself felt in the early XIVth century (in Normandy ca. 1315-7), began with a food crisis (connected with a still greater temporary increases in agricultural prices) caused by pooor crops. That incidental climatic factor sufficed to bring about a decrease in the size of population, a fall in agricultural prices (combined with a relative rise of industrial prices), an increase in wages and a fall in production. After 1360 economic life began to stabilise, and the indicators mentioned above became reversed, even though the scale of the natural economy was extended. Output began to rise, thus making a considerable increase of population possible, and compensated the losses with a surplus.[17] The early XVth century saw a repetition of the situation characteristic of the overheated economy of the late XIIIth century — and a new reversal of the economic trend towards a recession, aggravated, in the case of Normandy, by the devastations resulting from the military operations of 1436-50.

It was only after 1450 that there was a rapid upward trend in the economy, which ended the depression of the XIVth and

[16] Cf. M. M. Postan, J. Hatcher, 'Population and Class Relation in Feudal Society', *Past and Present*, LXX (1978), pp. 23-37.

[17] G. Bois, *Crise du féodalism*, p. 278 (he estimates the growth for Normandy between 1348 and 1413 to have been 65%).

the XVth century. But, as G. Bois claims, the XVIth century again saw — although on a different scale — all the features of the situation which prevailed in the late XIIIth century: stagnation of production, inflation, pauperization of the rural population, which formed the specific background for growing commercial and urban development and for the primitive accumulation that paved the way for capitalism.

This Malthusian or Ricardian mechanism did not work in Eastern Europe. Throughout the period from the Xth to the mid-XVIth century the region as a whole experienced population growth, expansion of the cultivated area, increased agricultural productivity and total agricultural production (industrial as well), accompanied by a slow but steady rise in agricultural prices relative to industrial prices, which stimulated the development of agriculture. Wages in agriculture, as far as we can judge from the very scanty evidence, probably fluctuated periodically, the overall trend being downward. But since only a very small percentage of rural inhabitants had to buy their own food and hired labourers, who were very numerous in the rural areas in the XVIth century (for they were used by both the lords who were expanding their demesnes and did not have enough forced labour at their disposal, and by the increasingly less numerous village headmen), were remunerated in kind, the impact of the fluctuations of prices and wages upon the position of the population was less marked than it was in Western Europe. As a result the increase in production kept pace with the rise in the population, and not only in Eastern Europe as a whole, but also in those areas which were relatively densely populated.

Our estimates concerning Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, and Masovia show that the population there increased by about 100% between the Xth and the mid-XIVth, and by a further

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[18] Cf. J. Topolski, 'Croissance économique de la Pologne du Xe au XXe siècle', *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*, II (1968), p. 26.

140%, between the mid-XIVth and the mid-XVIth century. In the same period the production of grain crops per capita was more or less constant (340 to 385 kilogrammes per year), and the consumption of iron (if we disregard the Xth century, when it was very low) more than doubled between ca. 1340 and ca. 1580. The general indicator of economic growth, which primarily reflects the increased output of industrial goods per capita (because the indicator of agricultural production oscillated around a fairly constant number) is as follows: 1.2 ca. 1000, 1.7 ca. 1340, and 2.0 ca. 1580.

Eastern Europe did not experience the so-called depression of the XIVth and XVth centuries, which made it possible for that region (especially the areas situated closest to Western Europe) largely to reduce the difference in the density of population and the level of urbanization. The differences nevertheless did continue. This poses a problem: does not this analysis of development in Eastern Europe cast doubt on the existence in Western Europe (despite breakdowns due to plagues and wars) of a general depression, understood as a structural slow-down in the rate of growth, with its peak in the XIIIth century? I would emphasize such doubts, which I have voiced earlier,[19] the more so since G. Duby has adopted a similar interpretation.[20]

The Malthusian (or Ricardian) model, in those cases to which it is applicable, explains to some extent the movements of the system (its ' respiration '), but is unable to explain its structural transformations (development), namely its decomposition and the emergence of a new developmental stage. This is why, to go beyond Neo-Malthusian interpretations, G. Bois introduced into his model of the economic growth of the feudal system in Western Europe an additional element in the form of the feudal rent, which — as he claims — reflected the contradiction between

[19] Cf. J. Topolski, *Narodziny kapitalizmu...*, pp. 35-7.

[20] G. Duby, ' Les sociétés médiévales: une approche d'ensemble ', *Annales E. S. C.*, 26 année, No. 1 (janvier-février 1971), pp. 11-2.

the individual nature of peasant production and the feudal character of property. Bois maintains that his analysis shows that in Western Europe the periods of economic growth (up to 1315, between 1360 and 1400, and from 1450 to 1550) were accompanied by the rise in the total volume of the rent combined with a decline of its rate, while the periods of depression were accompanied by the inverse process. As Bois writes, regardless of these fluctuations the whole period was marked by the tendency of the rate of the rent to decline, and this was a specific characteristic of the feudal relations of production.

The introduction of feudal rent into the general model and the identification of its development as the source of the dynamics of the system [21] is in my opinion correct. But as it is interpreted by Bois it raises a number of queries, which become even clearer when we realize that, alongside the tendency of the feudal rent to fall, Bois also singles out the tendency to accumulation, which despite this obstructing mechanism, he claims also took place within the feudal system itself [22] and so overcame the second fundamental contradiction within the feudal system which he had described. The first contradiction made a change in the system imperative, while the second was the carrier of the new system — capitalism. Bois does not explain the tendency to accumulation: for him it simply exists within the system.[23] He explains the tendency of feudal rent to fall by the dominance, which he assumes *a priori* of economic mechanisms over extra-economic coercion, which placed the peasant, as the direct producer, in a better position than it did his lord in the conflict over the feudal rent.[24] In my view, however, the possible tendency in Western Europe of the feudal rent to fall and the pos-

[21] G. Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, p. 355.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 361.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 346-7.

sible dominance there of economic mechanisms over extra-economic coercion, the intensification of accumulation processes in the XVIth century and the rise of capitalism are specific and individual historical processes, which took place as a result of definite causes, but were not, as it were, mere elements fixed in advance in the historical process.

Before we suggest a hypothetical solution based on other theoretical assumptions we have to go back to the facts. In Eastern Europe the evolution of feudal rent until the early XVIth century followed a somewhat different course from that of Western Europe. In Eastern Europe the peasants experienced three changes in their obligations, and all of them (i. e., that carried out by the state in the Xth to the XIIth century, that carried out by the feudal lords in the XIIIth and XIVth centuries, and that consisting in the transition to rent in the form of coerced labour in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries) resulted in an increase in the rate of the rent in relation to the area of the land cultivated by the peasants, but because of the stabilization of burdens and the increased importance of money rents, the two earlier ones proved advantageous for the peasant holdings and their productivity. One can conclude, therefore, that in the whole of late medieval Europe the rate of the feudal rent declined, due to the ways in which the feudal system was related to the mechanism governing the market.

In Eastern Europe, however, despite a further development of market relations, the fall in the feudal rent was halted quickly in the late XVth and in the XVIth century through recourse to extra-economic coercion, which resulted in a long-term reversal of the trend. As in Western Europe, in Eastern Europe medieval feudal lords made some accumulation of capital, which was not, however, intended for investments: it was kept for consumption and used as a hedge against the great fluctuations in production and incomes, and against the imperfections of the market. But it was only in the XVIth century, for purely his-

torical reasons and not because of the functioning of any immanent 'trends' within feudalism, that the European feudal lords began to accumulate capital with investment in production in mind. Bois described very well how the Norman nobles began doing this, together with the merchants, around 1510-20. But in describing these facts he went beyond the immediate framework and tried to apply them to his theoretical model which was based on assumptions that are either *a priori* or much too generalized.

How can we bring theory and historical events into line? The data on the fluctuations in the rate of the feudal rent can provide only fragmentary knowledge, and we must look at the whole system to construct a more comprehensive model. In order to explain the economic activity of the lords and the peasants, we have first of all to know the relations between incomes (and hence the feudal rent, too) and commitments in the case of both the lords and the peasants.

Only by studying the trend of incomes in relation to the commitments that went with social status (attained and ascribed) can we acquire genuine information about the structure of individual, group, and class behaviour. Feudalism in its pure form (that is, as a system of natural economy) would not possess any mechanism of change, if we assumed additionally that the needs of the lords and the peasants were stable (the same largely applies, for reasons we shall not discussed here, to the Asiatic mode of production). Since, however, the feudal mode or production was almost from its very birth accompanied by a developing market and expanding towns (that is, by an external factor integrated with the system, but at the same time affecting it through its impact upon the incomes and needs of the various groups and classes), the contradiction between the contribution of labour by the various groups and the income derived by them, which would have remained dormant in a system of pure feudalism, must have manifested itself quite quickly.

III. *Analysis of the causes of dualism in the economic development of Europe and the refeudalization of Eastern Europe*

The parting of the paths of development of Europe in modern times has been a subject matter of interest of many generations of historians in the various East European countries and has led them advance various theories which are generally little known outside those countries.[25]

Without going into details[26] we may say that the most developed theory that explained the spreading in Eastern Europe of demesne agriculture based on forced labour was presented at the International Congress of the Historical Sciences in Oslo (1928) by Jan Rutkowski.[27] He argued that the necessary, and at the same time sufficient conditions, for the development of that system consisted in the coexistence of favourable conditions for the sale of agricultural produce (whether at home or abroad), and the serfdom of the peasants (which was connected with the political supremacy of the feudal lords and the weakness of the towns). Other explanations derived from Rutkowski or advanced independently of his ideas, pointed to the same factors. One of the latest was a paper by J. Blum, who — among the other causes (such as the weakness of the towns exports) — laid special emphasis on the political supremacy won by the East European lords.[28] In the older literature of the subject attention was also drawn to such factors as the re-organization of the army,

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[25] J. Blum's paper, 'The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe', *American Historical Review*, LXII (1957), is one of the many studies that advance similar arguments.

[26] Cf. J. Topolski, 'The Manorial-Serf Economy in Central and Eastern Europe in the XVIth and XVII Centuries', *Agricultural History*, XLVIII (1974), pp. 341-52; J. Topolski, 'Le deuxième servage en Europe Centrale et Orientale', *Recherches internationales à la lumiere du marxisme*, LXIII-LXIV (1970); A. L. Shapiro, ed., *Agrarnaia istoriia severozapada Rosii XVI veka* [Agrarian History of North-Western Russia in the XVIth Century] (Leningrad 1974).

[27] J. Rutkowski, *La génese du régime de la corvée dans l'Europe Centrale depuis la fin du moyen age*, Congrès International des sciences historique Oslo (Warszawa-Lwow 1930).

[28] See footnote 25.

which forced the medieval knights to change their occupation; the fall in the value of the rent; the existence of abandoned land, which — as those authors claimed — could be cultivated only by making use of coerced labour; and the natural conditions in the areas to the east of the Elbe that favoured the production of grain.

A closer examination of those theories,[29] which were often considered contradictory to one another, shows that some factors (the fall in the value of the rent, changes in the nature of the army) explain the deterioration of the position of the lords in the late Middle Ages in the whole of Europe, while the others (the good opportunities for selling agricultural produce, soil and climatic conditions, existence of abandoned land) explain the adoption by the East European lords of a certain form of organization of production. Some theories penetrate deeper by pointing to the conditions that helped the lords make serfdom harsher (the weakness of the towns, winning of political supremacy).

Theories of economic growth inspired by the study of Third World countries, which usually link the economic growth of certain territories with the retardation of others, also had some influence on the explanations of the differences in the development between Western and Eastern Europe. It was claimed that foreign trade, which made it possible for some countries to exploit others, was responsible for that uneven growth.[30] The same line, although without reference to any specific economic theory, was followed by M. Małowist [31] and certain other historians. Małowist drew the conclusion that as a result of the mechanisms governing foreign trade (exports of grain, imports of industrial goods), the East European countries, and primarily Poland, become an economic colony of the West, which blocked

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[29] See footnote 26.

[30] Cf. A. G. FRANK, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York 1969).

[31] C. M. MAŁOWIST, *Croissance et régression en Europe XVIe-XVIIe siecle* (Paris 1972).

their economic development and social evolution and was decisive for their economic backwardness [32] (i.e., the second stage of refeudalization). But he did not link the emergence of the systems of demesnes based on coerced labour (i.e., the first stage of refeudalization) to foreign trade: he argued that the causes must have been more complex, but he did not enlarge on the subject.

I. Wallerstein, too, referred (1977) to the trade factor as a cause of the uneven economic development of the world and the resulting interdependences. His interpretation is based on a theoretical model of trade inspired by Smithian and neo-classical political economy. The schema suggested by Wallerstein is very simple. He is not concerned with explaining the internal processes (including, for instance, the intricate processes of primitive accumulation) which in the various regions led from feudalism to capitalism, but suggests that capitalism emerged, as it were, automatically alongside changes in the structure of foreign trade. In his opinion, the threshold of capitalism is to be seen in the XVIth century transition from the medieval trade in luxuries to the international trade in bulk goods, which meant a new stage in the international division of labour. It also meant the transition to a new form of surplus appropriation from the direct surplus appropriation through tributes and the feudal rent to its appropriation by certain regions through the intermediary of the mechanisms of the international market. According to Wallerstein, these mechanisms were already capitalistic in nature, and they split the European world economy (which emerged in the late XVth century) into core-states, which intercepted the surplus, the semi-periphery, the periphery, and the external areas (outside that system), which provided raw materials.[33] Eastern Europe formed part of that European world economy

[32] M. Małowist, 'The Economic and Social Development of the Baltic Countries from the XVth tthe XVIIth Centuries', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., XII (1959), p. 184.

[33] I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, p. 307.

(but not Russia), and within its boundaries Poland was an extreme case. Through grain exports Poland had the strongest and earliest commercial connections with Western Europe (i.e., with the core-states), and belonged to the periphery together with Bohemia and Hungary. This area, therefore (like Russia, which lived its own life and where an internal cereal market was developing), saw the emergence of capitalistic agriculture, in Wallerstein's opinion, because it was not based on small peasant holdings.

The fact that large noble farms employed coerced serf labour is not relevant for Wallerstein, and he dismisses not only the existence of serfdom in Eastern Europe in modern times (which he claims to have vanished by the end of the Middle Ages, as it had done in Western Europe), but also the existence of feudalism as well. Since he cannot deny that the existence of labour as a commodity is a characteristic of capitalism, he says that under agrarian 'capitalism' remuneration for labour could be based not only on wages, but also on slavery, sharecropping, and serfdom, which — in order to avoid that term — he calls 'coerced cash-crop labour'. Clearly then Wallerstein's system cannot be related either to Marxist concepts of modes of production (to which Wallerstein would like to refer) or to any empirical historical research concerned with Eastern Europe, since the existence in modern times of the feudal ownership of land, of serfdom, and of the feudal rent, which vanished only after the agrarian reforms in the XIXth century, cannot be denied.

In connection with Wallerstein's interpretation, which empirically pivots upon the data about trade in cereals, it is worth mentioning that exports to Western Europe were insignificant in relation to the total output of cereals in Eastern Europe. A. Wyczański has recently found that in the second half of the XVIth century the exports of grain from Poland did not exceed 2.5% of total production.[34] And K. Glamann concluded when reviewing

[34] A. Wyczański, 'Czy chłopom było źle w Polsce w XVI wieku' (Did the Peas-

recent research on trade with Western Europe that 'supplies from the Baltic were marginal in relation to total demand and total supply'.[35] It can thus be said that Wallerstein's interpretation which is an extreme example of certain earlier interpretations of the conditions in Eastern Europe, hangs in an empirical vacuum.

A new interpretation of the changes in the economic and social structure of Europe in the pre-industrial epoch has been advanced by R. Brenner. His point of departure was a sharp criticism (a Marxist one, in his opinion) of the Malthusian and commercial model of the economic and social processes taking place in that time. An important place in his critique was devoted to an analysis of Wallerstein's interpretation, which he took as an example of what he termed the Neo-Smithian interpretations of Marxism, identifying the development of capitalism with that of international trade, and characteristic of such authors as P. Sweezy and A. G. Frank. Brenner dismissed totally the causal effect of the Malthusian mechanism, which as Bois had shown was an element in the economic and social conditions prevailing in medieval Europe. That model, as Bois is right in stressing, does not explain the collapse of the feudal mode of production and the advent of capitalism, but it does explain (and this Brenner failed to see) the specific 'undulation' of the economy in Western Europe. The model advanced by Brenner might be termed a model based on class struggle. He presents a theoretical model in which economic changes are deduced from class relationships, and these in turn from class struggle, which is interpreted as a relatively autonomous process. According to Brenner, what accounted for the difference between the English and French

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ants Have it So Bad in Sixteenth-Century Poland], *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, LXXXV (1978), p. 629.

[35] K. Glamann, *European Trade*, Fontana Economic History of Europe. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, ed. C. M. Cipolla (London 1976), p. 466. See also J. A. Faber, 'The Decline of the Baltic Grain Trade in the Second Half of the XVIIth Century', *A. A. G. Bijdragen 9* (1963).

type of development and that observable in Eastern Europe was a difference in the balance of class forces between the peasants and the lords. In Brenner's opinion, in Western Europe that ratio was favourable for the peasants, whereas in Eastern Europe it was favourable for the landlords. This was why, he says, in Western Europe the lords failed in their endeavour to worsen the position of the peasants, while they succeeded in doing in Eastern Europe. The difference in the distribution of class strength between the two parts of Europe is explained by Brenner by differences in the inner organization of villages. In Eastern Europe, he argues, that organization was weak and the solidarity of the peasants was almost nil. While emphasising the role of class struggle in the emergence of this second serfdom Brenner discounts any major influence from foreign trade, fluctuations in the size of the population, or the weakness of the towns.

One can agree with Brenner only on his point that the lack of peasant resistance (or a lack of conditions for the development of such resistance) should be taken into consideration when we analyse the birth in Eastern Europe of the system of demenses based on coerced labour. But it cannot be taken as the cause of the emergence of that system. The lack of resistance was merely the lack of one of the many historically possible impediments. Of course, had the peasants offered any effective resistance, the lords could not have carried out their plans, but they were still induced to carry out those plans by other factors. This is to say that Brenner failed to demonstrate that the demesne system developed as a result of a definite balance of class forces. In fact, he merely tries to convince us that a lack of effective peasant resistance made the emergence of that system possible. He thus shows that a certain (' peasant ') path of development was blocked, without explaining why the events took the course they did.

It should be added that Brenner's comments on the organization of villages and on class struggle in Eastern Europe are at variance with empirical evidence. In Eastern Europe the very

structure of land distribution imposed close co-operation, due to the common rotation of fields under the three-field system. Village self-government, even after the abolition of the office of the village headman, was well organized because it was needed also by the lord of the village. Innumerable examples drawn from XVIth century sources show that the peasants knew, when necessary, how to use self-government for their own purposes. The class struggles of East European peasants (except for certain areas) did not develop openly not because the peasants lacked the appropriate social organization, but because their situation was continually improving throughout the Middle Ages. It is only in the XVIth century that there was a rising tide of peasant resistance, but this could not have achieved any broader scale since during the XVIth century the incomes of the Polish peasants increased by three or four times (the findings of A. Wyczański), among other things due to favourable terms of trade. It was only as the demesne system was developing that the situation began to change in that respect.

IV. *Stages and causes of refeudalization in Eastern Europe*

What, then, were the causes of the refeudalization processes in Eastern Europe? In my view, expressed already several times, the promotion by the lords of demesne farming and of commercial production in Eastern Europe was a reflection of a more general European phenomenon that consisted in increased economic activity on the part of landlords, and which is particularly evident in the XVIth century. That increased activity was the lords' response to the crisis besetting them, namely the widening gap between their incomes and needs.

In Western Europe, as we have said, the landlords experienced a similar crisis, but they coped with it in a different way, which on the whole created better opportunities for the rise of capitalism and later made the landlords face an even acuter crisis,

consisting in the emergence of new and gradually consolidating social forces, namely the bourgeoisie. The feudal landlords eventually lost and let themselves be absorbed by the growing capitalist system. As is well known, the process was most thorough in England, and less so in France. The differences, let us note, did not have much to do with a difference in the class strength of the peasants in the two countries, but were linked to definite economic processes, about which much has been said in the discussion of Brenner's thesis, especially where the historical inadequacy of his arguments has been revealed.[36] During this crisis, West European landlords experienced both better and worse times, and F. Billacois is right in pointing out that at the turn of the XIVth century the landlords were favoured by a reversal in the economic trend and a rise in the value of the land.[37]

By developing their own (cereal-growing or animal-breeding) demesnes, the landlords wanted to increase their incomes. But the cause-effect chain: fall in income (i.e., deterioration of the the ratio of incomes to needs) — threat to class status — increased activity — does not explain the differences in the forms of that activity in the various countries. Why did the English feudal lords resort to sheep breeding, the Bohemian lords to a pond economy, and the Polish lords to cereal growing on their own demesne farms?

It can be said that this depended on the specific local situation especially in relation to (i) man-power, (ii) the market, (iii) natural conditions. In Eastern Europe, where serfdom had not vanished by the end of the Middle Ages and where the lords (among other things, due to the relative weakness of the towns) succeeded in strenthening their political position in the state (regardless of the political system of that state), the possibilities of changing feudal rent from that paid in specie and in kind

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[36] See footnote 1.

[37] Cf. F. Billacois, 'La crise de la noblesse européenne (1560–1650), *Revue d'histoire moderne et cintemporaine*, XXIII (1976), p. 273.

to that contributed in the form of forced labour were much greater than in Western Europe. The lords could accordingly shift to labour-consuming agricultural production based on forced labour and on serfdom, the latter taking an aggravated form as a result of the extension of forced labour. This aggravation of serfdom was favoured by the relatively good position of the peasants and the constant rise in their incomes, which continued even in the XVIth century. Well-to-do peasants who were connected with the market and whose position was dominant, did not feel the gradual changes very acutely, often because they used to hire the poorer inhabitants of the village to do the forced labour for them. In many areas (e.g., in Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary) demesne farming developed only in the XVIIth century.

When it comes to the market, it must be understood that no big market was needed for the development of demesne farming. At first, in the XVth century, when that form of farming began to develop, it was almost exclusively devoted to the local market. Demand was ensured by the developing towns. Next the demand from Western Europe began to increase, but it was important for some areas and for some types of feudal property only, the costs of transportation being a fundamental restricting factor. Foreign demand for cereals influenced production considerable in the areas which had easy access to the Baltic by rivers, but even there, when the export opportunities shrank in the second half of the XVIIth century, the demesne farms did not stop producing cereals. Additional opportunities for sale were then also being sought on the local markets. In that respect the production of beer and vodka, and their sale, often compulsorily, to the peasants who had to find money for them was very important. In Russia, Bohemia, and Moravia the foreign demand for cereals did not at the period play any essential role in the growth of demesne farming.

The demesne farms of Eastern Europe did not sell cereals only. Trade in cattle with Western Europe was an important

factor to southern Poland, the Ukraine, Wallachia, Moldavia, and especially Hungary, the buyers being German, Austrian and North Italian towns.

The demesne landlords of course also took existing market opportunities into account, and the production profile of a given form ultimately depended upon local natural conditions, which might favour cattle breeding in some regions, and cereal production in others, and many lords simply imitated others, as the knowledge spread about methods which succeeded in increasing incomes. The expansion of demesne farming can then also be explained in terms of the actions and motives of the lords.

Turning then to the rise and development of demesne farming as a process rather than the simple expression of human actions, we have to divide our explanation into two parts. The first must explain the conditions sufficient (and where possible, necessary) for the development of the process in which we are interested. For this it seems appropriate to turn to J. Rutkowski's thesis, in which he argued that the coexistence of good terms for the sale of agricultural produce and the serfdom of peasants (although still in its mild form) provided the sufficient (and necessary) condition for the rise and development of demesne farming. We know from comparative studies that demesne farming only developed where these two conditions were coexistent, so guaranteeing the sale of farm products and enabling production to be started with a small initial capital input. Yet these factors can only be treated as the causes of the rise and development of demesne farming in those cases in which they determined the behaviour of the landlords, and where they were discernible elements leading to the decision to expand their farms in this way.

A more general explanation should reveal the contradictions within the process, since contradictions are the source of history's dynamics. In Eastern Europe (and — in my view — in Western Europe as well) economic growth in the late Middle Ages mainly benefited the direct producers (or direct participants in the market

economy) and thus acted to the detriment of the feudal lords, who were moreoever obliged to incur considerable expenses. This gave rise to the well known contradiction between the levels of their incomes and their needs, which induced the landlords to rectify their situation in ways that produced tensions of various kinds. In their attempts to resolve to this contradiction the landlords availed themselves of all existing objective factors: the possibility of intensifying serfdom and forced labour (which was no longer possible in Western Europe) and the possibility of producing cereals, cattle, and forest products for sale. In this way the evolution of independent peasant holdings and farms held by village headmen towards early capitalistic stratification was halted. But this also changed the trend of contradiction within the process itself: they stopped the process whereby the peasants weakened the feudal property (and hence also the functioning of extra-economic coercions) and were able to derive considerable advantages *qua* direct producers. The form of that change was determined by objective factors (primarily serfdom and market conditions). Likewise, the inevitability of the change was due to the situation as a whole: the structure and mentality of feudal society, its economic development, and the advances in the material civilization.

The fundamental contradiction inherent in feudalism ceased to be dormant as a result of a change in the relation between the needs and the income of the feudal lords.

Refeudalization (i.e., more rigorous forms of serfdom, extension of coerced labour, deterioration of the peasants' titles to land) made it possible to eliminate the adverse relationship between the landlords' income and expenditure, and blocked the enterprise of the peasants *qua* producers. Therefore it quite quickly began to affect the development of productive forces negatively. Yet in the XVIth century the growth in the total area of cultivated land meant that the demesne farms increased the production of cereals, even though from the very beginning

the expansion of those farms diminished cattle breeding on peasant holdings (by reducing available pastures and reducing the time available to the peasants who had now provide forced labour, etc.). But by the early XVIIth century the indications were already evident of a general stagnation in agriculture, which later turned into economic regression (the process being first observable in Poland, where demesne farming developed earliest and most dynamically). The demesne farms, which availed themselves of the unpaid labour provided by the peasants (and also of their implements and draught animals) took no interest in advances in agricultural technology. The peasants had no incentives to work efficiently on the demesne farms, nor were they stimulated by the market to produce on their own plots more than the subsistence level required. To make matters worse, the land lords showed no interest in changing the economic structure of the country, and hence also of promoting industry.

These developments varied from region to region but in general had the result of posing a renewed threat to the incomes of the landlords. Under the existing conditions, since the lords, incomes could not be increased without fundamental changes in the system, their incomes were in direct proportion to the size of their respective demesne farms. This led to the concentration of property and to the supremacy, especially in the political sphere, of the upper strata of the demesne lords (the aristocracy, magnates). In Poland, the concentration of landed property resulted primarily in the disappearance of so-called partial lords, or those who owned only part of a village.

The landlords, especially in the XVIIIth century, tried to cope with the new disproportion between their needs and their incomes by encouraging new settlers on their lands, switching from forced labour to money rents, encouraging industry, etc., but in most cases by intensifying their exploitation of the peasants (e.g., by exacting more and more forced labour). But this only

aggravated the difficulties, and also led to the exacerbation of the class struggle with the peasants.

In the XVIIIth century, however, the imbalance between the landlords' needs and their incomes was not the result of a correlation between the level of the productive forces with that of the relations of production but, on the contrary, was caused by a growing contradiction between these two factors. As we have seen, the relations of production clearly began to hamper the development of productive forces, so working as a brake on production (especially in agriculture) and thereby on the incomes of both the lords and the peasants, albeit the needs of the latter were growing more slowly. We are, of course, referring to the subjective needs experienced in connection with the way of life, mentality, etc. This contradiction and its economic and social consequence paved the way in Eastern Europe for a long process of agrarian reforms, which in the XIXth century brought (though not completely) the feudal system to an end. Increasing the incomes of the owners of the large landed estates was then only possible through far-reaching changes in the economic and social system which were capitalistic in nature. In Western Europe, where the landlords had earlier engaged in other forms of economic activity, an evolution in the same direction had been taking place gradually from the XVIth century on. Elements of a similar form of evolution, which also appeared in Eastern Europe in the XVIth century, were then wiped out by the transition to demesne farming. In the XVIth century, the adverse relationship between the landlords' needs and their incomes occurred in a period of general growth in productive forces, production, and national income, so that it sufficed to change the distribution of that income, whereas in the XVIIIth century it was necessary to change the organization of production in an attempt to bring about an increase in the national income and in its redistribution.