

Again on
“The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism”

Maurice Dobb

Paul M. Sweezy

The following communications have been received from Mr. Maurice Dobb and Mr. Paul M. Sweezy as comments on Mr. Takahashi's critical essay, originally published in *The Economic Review*, Vol. 2 No. 2 1951 titled “The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism—A Critique on Dobb-Sweezy Arguments” and later reproduced in *Science & Society*, Vol. XVI No. 4. 1952. Mr. Takahashi's essay was in criticism of the discussion between Mr. Dobb and Mr. Sweezy, published in *Science & Society*, Vol. XIV No. 2, 1950 and reproduced in *The Economic Review*. Vol. 2 No 1, 1951.

—Editor—

A Reply to Prof. Takahashi

Maurice Dobb

With Professor Takahashi's stimulating article on 'The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism', which makes such an important contribution to deepening and extending our appreciation of the important questions at issue, I find myself in general agreement, and there is very little that I wish or am competent to add to what he has said. In particular, I find his development of the notion of the “two ways” and his use of it to illuminate the contrast between the way of the bourgeois revolution and that of Prussia and Japan specially enlightening. With reference to what he has said in criticism of myself I would

like merely to make three comments.

He is, of course, quite justified in saying that my book paid “inadequate attention to French and German writing”: he might have added with even more justice that I had almost entirely ignored the experience of southern Europe, Italy and Spain in particular. I can only explain that this was done advisedly, and that my book was entitled *Studies in...* to indicate its selective and partial character. No pretence was made of writing, even in outline, a comprehensive history of Capitalism. The method adopted can, I think, be described as consisting of a treatment of certain

crucial phases and aspects in the development of Capitalism primarily in terms of England as the classic case, with occasional references to continental parallels (as with developments in the guilds or the putting-out system) or contrasts (as with the feudal reaction in Eastern Europe or the creation of a proletariat) to illuminate the particular issues that I was trying to clarify. To have developed these parallels and contrasts as they deserved, and to have made from them anything like a complete comparative study of the origin and growth of Capitalism under diverse conditions would have required a range of knowledge of the historical literature of Europe to which I could lay no claim. Even a much more encyclopaedic mind than mine would probably have had to wait upon a decade or so of "cooperative advances in these studies" to which Professor Takahashi refers.

Secondly, in asserting that in my book I spoke of the period from the 14th to the 16th century in England as "neither feudal nor yet capitalist" I think that Professor Takahashi has been misled into accepting my posing of a problem as my own conclusion about it. If he will look at the passage on page 19 of my book again, I think he will see that I am here asking a question (there is in fact a question-mark at the end of the sentence)—formulating a difficulty which has presented itself to so many students of this period. On the very next page I state that, despite the disintegration of Feudalism and the appearance of "a mode of production which had won its independence from Feudalism: petty production...which was not yet capitalist although containing within itself the

embryo of capitalist relations", one still could not speak of the end of Feudalism ("But unless one is to identify the end of Feudalism with the process of commutation...one cannot yet speak of the end of the mediaeval system, still less of the dethronement of the mediaeval ruling class"—p. 20). Admittedly the sparseness of my references to agriculture (which he criticises) left my conclusion much less supported than it might have been. But here I believe that, despite the illumination shed by Tawney and some others, much field-work remains to be done by specialists in this period—specialists who are guided by the method of Marxism. Again, I am very ready to admit that earlier viewpoints of my own, embodied in earlier drafts, may have left their trace in the final version and have been responsible for the presentation being less clear than it might have been. But it was certainly not my intention to endorse the view that the period between Edward III and Elizabeth was "neither feudal nor yet capitalist"; and the statement that this period was "transitional", of which Professor Takahashi speaks as a "correction" introduced only in my "Reply" in *Science & Society*, was in fact made on page 20 of the book.

I should continue to defend, however, my other and distinct statement that "the disintegration of the feudal mode of production had already reached an advanced stage before the capitalist mode of production developed, and that this disintegration did not proceed in any close association with the growth of the new mode of production within the womb of the old". It does not imply that these transitional centuries were "neither feudal

nor yet capitalist”, but rather the contrary; and I believe that it provides a key to the difficulty which has led so many to adopt something akin to the Sweezy-view of this period. I regarded it as a statement in general and preliminary form of the thesis which I gather that Professor Takahashi fully accepts: namely, that the disintegration of Feudalism (and hence its final and declining stage) came, *not* as the result of the assault upon it of an incipient ‘Capitalism’ in the guise of ‘merchant capital’ wedded to ‘money economy’ as has been commonly supposed, but as a result of the revolt of the petty producers against feudal exploitation. This partial independence of the petty producers resulted in an acceleration of their own disintegration (even if this was not the start of the process) by accelerating the process of social differentiation among them; and out of this process (but *only* after its maturing during a transitional period of feudalism-in-decline) the capitalist mode of production was born. In Professor Takahashi’s own words: “As rent in kind gives way to money rent, these small-scale peasant farms, the petty mode of production in agriculture, become more and more clearly independent, and at the same time their self-disintegration too goes on more rapidly and freely”. The only disagreement between us here seems to be a possible difference of emphasis on the degree of this “self-disintegration” at an earlier period and a later period.

Thirdly, as regards the “two ways” and my references to the putting-out system, Professor Takahashi’s interpretation is correct when he speaks of me as including the putt-

ing-out system of the English petty domestic-industry type as belonging to Way No. 1. I thought, however, that I had made clear in my chapter on ‘The Rise of Industrial Capital’ that I regarded the putting-out system, not as a homogeneous economic form, but rather as a generic name for a complex phenomenon embracing several different types. One, the pure *Verlager*-type of industry organised by merchants of companies like the Haberdashers, Drapers, Clothworkers, Leather-sellers, I treated as merchant-into-manufacturer Way No. 2 (see pp. 129—134 of my *Studies*); and immediately went on to contrast with it the movement of which the rise of a class of merchant-manufacturer employers from among the ranks of craftsmen composing the (subordinate) “Yeomanry” of the Livery Companies and the challenge of the new Stuart corporations formed from these elements (of which Unwin wrote) were the expression (pp. 134—48). On whether this organised-from-below form of the putting-out system is a peculiarly English phenomenon, or whether it has continental parallels, I should hesitate to venture a dogmatic opinion. Here I can do no more than suggest that preoccupation with the search for the large-scale capitalist *entrepreneur* may possibly have blinded continental historians to the rôle played by the small and *parvenu* type of merchant-manufacturer, and that the true picture of the *Verlagssystem* may not, even in Germany, be quite such a systematic and tidy one as German economic historians have represented it. Again one must appeal to those “cooperative advances” in the study of such questions in various countries, of which Professor Takahashi speaks.