

A Reply to Prof. Takahashi and Prof. Dobb

Paul M. Sweezy

The problems that troubled me most when I first took up Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* were very briefly, these: There existed throughout most of Western Europe in the early Middle Ages a feudal system such as Dobb well describes on pp. 36—37. This mode of production went through a process of development which culminated in crisis and collapse, and it was succeeded by capitalism. Formally, the analogy with the life history of capitalism—development, general crisis, transition to socialism—is very close. Now, I have a pretty good idea about the nature of the prime mover in the capitalist case, why the process of development which it generates leads to crisis, and why socialism is necessarily the successor form of society. But I was not at all clear about any of these factors in the feudal case when I sat down to Dobb's book. I was looking for the answers.

The greatest tribute I can pay to Dobb's book is that when I had finished studying it I felt much clearer in my own mind about all these questions. This was partly because he succeeded in convincing me and partly because he stimulated me to look into other sources and to do some fresh thinking on my own. My original article in *Science & Society* was in the nature of a report on the tentative answers I had reached. (I think, incidentally, that I should have made this plainer. Dobb

of course formulated his problems in his own way, and he was interested in much that bears only indirectly if at all on the questions to which I was seeking answers. Some of my "criticisms," therefore, were really not criticisms at all; they should have been presented as supplementary suggestions and hypotheses.)

In his "Reply," Dobb indicates various points of disagreement with my answers, and Takahashi, if I understand him rightly, rejects them very nearly *in toto*. But I know little more about what Dobb's answers are (to my questions, of course) than I did after finishing the book, and I know next to nothing about what Takahashi's are. I should therefore like to use the opportunity afforded by this rejoinder to restate my questions and answers as concisely as possible and in a form which may perhaps invite alternative formulations from Dobb and Takahashi.¹⁾

First Question. What was the prime mover behind the development of Western European feudalism?²⁾

1) In what follows, I refer to Dobb's book as *Studies*, to my review-article as "Transition," to Dobb's reply as "Reply," and to Takahashi's article as "Contribution."

2) I insist on speaking of *Western European* feudalism, because what ultimately happened in Western Europe was manifestly very different from what happened in other parts of the world where the feudal mode of production has prevailed. The extent to which this may be due to variations

In the case of capitalism, we can answer this question positively and unambiguously. The prime mover is the accumulation of capital which is inherent in the very structure of the capitalist appropriation process. Is there anything analogous in the case of feudalism?

Dobb's theory finds an analogue in the feudal lords' growing need for revenue. In his view, "it was the inefficiency of Feudalism as a system of production, coupled with the growing needs of the ruling class for revenue, that was primarily responsible for its decline; since this need for additional revenue promoted an increase in the pressure on the producer to the point where this pressure became literally unendurable." (*Studies*, p. 42.) As a result, "in the end it led to an exhaustion, or actual disappearance, of the labour-force by which the system was nourished." (P. 43.) The question is whether the lords' growing need for revenue—the *fact* of which is not in dispute—can be shown to be inherent in the structure of the feudal mode of production. I gave reasons for doubting that any such relation exists ("Transition," pp. 138—140), and I showed how the lords' growing need for revenue could readily be explained as a by-product of the growth of trade and urban life.

Dobb is rather impatient with my emphasis on this subject. According to him, I seem to

among different feudal systems, and the extent to which it may be due to "external" factors are of course very important questions. Since, however, I do not pretend to be able to answer them, the only sensible thing for me to do is to confine my attention to Western Europe. By doing so, I do not want to imply that I think other feudalisms are subject to different laws of development; I want to evade the question altogether.

feel that the development of feudalism is

a question of *either* internal conflict or *external* forces. This strikes me as much too simplified, even mechanical, a presentation. I see it as an *interaction* of the two; although with primary emphasis, it is true, upon the internal contradictions; since these would, I believe, operate in any case (if on a quite different time-scale), and since they determine the particular form and direction of the effects which external influences exert. ("Reply," p. 160.)

Historically, of course, Dobb is entirely right. It *was* an interaction of internal and external factors that determined the course of feudal development, and I never intended to deny it. But the same can be said of the historical development of capitalism, a fact which does not keep us from seeking and finding the prime mover within the system. I cannot agree, therefore, that Dobb is justified in describing my formulation of the question with regard to feudalism as "mechanical." It is a *theoretical* question, and I continue to believe that it is crucial to the whole analysis of feudalism.

The second half of the foregoing quotation clearly indicates that Dobb does in fact take a position on this question, despite his reluctance to formulate either the question or the answer in a clear-cut fashion. And the position is precisely the one which I attributed to him on the basis of the book, namely, that feudalism does contain an internal prime mover. Since he adduces no new arguments in support, however, I can only remain unconvinced.

So far as I can see, Takahashi contributes little to the clarification of this issue. His interesting analysis of the *elements* of feudalism ("Contribution," pp. 318—319) does not

lead him to any formulation of the "laws and tendencies" of the system, and when he does address himself specifically to this question, the result is not very enlightening, at least to me. In feudal society, he writes,

the means of production are combined with the producer, and productivity develops (collapse of the manorial system and development of small-scale peasant agriculture; formation of money rents; tendency of the rent rate to fall; *crise seigneuriale*) as the productivity of the direct producer himself; and therefore the law of development in feudalism can only lead in the direction of the liberation and independence of the peasants themselves. (*Ibid.*, p. 334.)

Here rising productivity is treated as the crucial factor, but it is certainly not self-evident that rising productivity is an inherent characteristic of feudalism. In fact, there is a good deal of historical and contemporary evidence that suggests precisely the opposite hypothesis. Here again, as in the case of Dobb's growing need of the lords for revenue, I think we have to do with the influence of forces external to the feudal system.

On this whole question of external forces, Takahashi takes me severely to task:

Sweezy does not take the break-up of a given social structure as the result of self-movement of its productive forces; instead he looks for an "external force." If we say that historical development takes place according to external forces, the question remains, however, how those external forces arose, and where they came from. ("Contribution," p. 325.)

The latter point, of course, is a valid one

which I never intended to deny. Historical forces which are external with respect to one set of social relations are internal with respect to a more comprehensive set of social relations. And so it was in the case of Western European feudalism. The expansion of trade, with the concomitant growth of towns and markets, was external to the feudal mode of production,³⁾ but it was internal as far as the whole European-Mediterranean economy was concerned.

A thorough study of Western European feudalism—which Dobb of course never claimed to offer—would have to analyze it in the context of this larger European-Mediterranean economy. How this can be done has been brilliantly demonstrated by Pirenne who argued, first, that the origins of feudalism in Western Europe are to be sought in the isolation (by the Arab expansion of the seventh century) of that relatively backward region from the real economic centers of the ancient world; and second, that the later development of feudalism was decisively shaped by the re-establishment of these broken commercial ties.⁴⁾ Viewed in this way, the growth of

3) I am unable to understand Dobb's reasoning when he says that "to some extent" he believes that the growth of towns was an internal feudal process. ("Reply," p. 161.) Surely, the fact cited by Dobb in this connection that feudalism "encouraged towns to cater for its need of long-distance trade" does not prove the point. One would have to show that the feudal ruling class took the initiative in building the towns and successfully integrated them into the feudal system of property and labor relations. Undoubtedly this did happen in the case of some towns, but it seems to me that Pirenne has conclusively shown that the decisive trading centers typically grew up in an entirely different way. But what particularly indicates the non-feudal character of the towns was the general absence of serfdom.

trade from the tenth century on was obviously no mysterious external force, such as Takahashi quite mistakenly accuses me of "looking for." But when attention is narrowly centered on feudalism as such—as Dobb was quite justified in doing—it seems to me not only legitimate but theoretically essential to treat the growth of trade as an external force.

The answer to the first question, then, seems to me to be this: the feudal system contains no internal prime mover and when it undergoes genuine development—as distinct from mere oscillations and crises which do not affect its basic structure—the driving force is to be sought outside the system. (I suspect that this applies pretty generally to feudal systems, and not only to Western Europe, but this is an issue which is beyond the scope of the present discussion.)

Second Question. Why did the development of feudalism in Western Europe lead to crisis and ultimate collapse?

Having determined that an external prime mover is behind the developmental process, we must of course conclude that the answer to this question is to be sought in the impact of this external force on structure of feudalism. As Dobb rightly insists, in other words, the process is one of interaction, and I take it that Takahashi would not disagree. There are therefore no basic differences here. My chief criticism of both Dobb and Takahashi in this connection is that in their anxiety to

minimize the importance of trade as a factor in the decline of feudalism they avoid a direct analysis of this interactive process. Both of them, for example, tend to treat the substitution of money rents for labor services or payments in kind as largely a matter of form and to lose sight of the fact that this change can occur on any considerable scale only on the basis of developed commodity production.

My own effort to deal with the interactive process and its outcome was given in my original article. ("Transition," pp. 141—147.) It doubtless contains many weaknesses—for example, in the treatment of the so-called "second serfdom" which Dobb criticizes but I still think it has the merit of being an explicit theoretical analysis. I would like to see others improve upon it.

Third Question. Why was feudalism succeeded by capitalism?

If one agrees with Dobb as I do, that the period from the fourteenth century to the end of the sixteenth century was one in which feudalism was in full decay and yet in which there were no more than the first beginnings of capitalism, this is a genuinely puzzling question. One cannot say that feudalism had created productive forces which could be maintained and further developed only under capitalism—as, for example, one definitely can say that capitalism has created productive forces that can only be maintained and further developed under socialism. True, the decline of feudalism was accompanied (I would say "caused") by the generalization, and, as Marx repeatedly emphasized, "commodity production and developed commodity circulation, trade, form the historical preconditions under

4) In addition to Pirenne's *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*, see also his *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, the posthumously published work which gives the author's fullest treatment of the twin problems of the end of antiquity and the rise of feudalism in Western Europe.

which it [capital] arises." (*Capital*, I, p. 163.) But historical preconditions do not in themselves provide a sufficient explanation. After all, the ancient world was characterized by highly developed commodity production without ever giving birth to capitalism; and the clear beginnings of capitalism in Italy and Flanders during the late Middle Ages proved abortive. Why, then, did capitalism finally catch on and really get going in the late sixteenth century, especially in England?

Dobb throws a good deal of light on this question, though I'm sure that he would be the last to claim to have given the definitive answer. Much of his emphasis is placed upon what Marx called "the really revolutionary way" for industrial capitalists to develop, which Dobb interprets to mean the rise of small men from the ranks of petty producers. In my original article, I criticized this interpretation of Marx, but Dobb's reply and further reflection have led me to conclude that while it is not the only possible interpretation, it is nevertheless a legitimate one which points in a fruitful direction. What is required now, it seems to me, is a great deal more factual research on the origins of the industrial bourgeoisie. This kind of research should do more than anything else to unlock the secret of the definitive rise of capitalism from the late sixteenth century.

I am not at all clear about Takahashi's position on this question. He criticizes Dobb for going too far in describing the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as transitional. Presumably, his meaning is that feudalism survived essentially intact until the rise of capitalism overthrew it and that there is therefore no

disjunction between the processes of feudal decline and capitalist rise such as both Dobb and I assert. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that Takahashi agrees with Dobb as to the revolutionary significance of the rise of small producers from the ranks; and I assume that he would also agree with me as to the urgency of more factual research on the nature and extent of this phenomenon.

One final point in this connection. Developing Dobb's suggestion that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries seem to have been "neither feudal nor yet capitalist" (*Studies*, p. 19), I proposed that the period be given the name of precapitalist commodity production. Dobb rejects this proposal, preferring to consider the society of that period as one of feudalism "in an advanced stage of dissolution." ("Reply," p. 162.) He says;

The crucial question which Sweezy has apparently failed to ask...is this: what was the ruling class of this period? ...it cannot have been a capitalist class...If a merchant bourgeoisie formed the ruling class, then the state must have been some kind of bourgeois state. And if the state was a bourgeois state already...what constituted the essential issue of the seventeenth century civil war? It cannot (according to this view) have been *the* bourgeois revolution. We are left with some such supposition as...that it was a struggle against an attempted *counter*-revolution staged by crown and court against an *already existent* bourgeois state power...If we reject the alternatives just mentioned, we are left with the view (which I believe to be the right one) that the ruling class was still feudal and that the state was still the political instrument of

its rule. ("Reply," pp. 162—163.)

I recognize that these are questions that British Marxists have been earnestly debating for some years now, and it is perhaps rash of me to express any opinion on them at all. Let me, therefore, put my comment in the form of a query. Why isn't there another possibility which Dobb does not mention, namely, that in the period in question there was not one ruling class but several, based on different forms of property and engaged in more or less continuous struggle for preferment if not supremacy?

If we adopt this hypothesis, we can then interpret the state of the period in accordance with the well-known passage from Engels:

At certain periods it occurs exceptionally that the struggling classes balance each other

so nearly that the public power gains a certain degree of independence by posing as the mediator between them. The absolute monarchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was in such a position, balancing the nobles and the burghers against one another.⁵⁾

In this interpretation, the civil war was *the* bourgeois revolution in the straightforward sense that it enabled the capitalist class to master the state and achieve definitive ascendancy over the other classes.

I would like to ask Dobb and Takahashi what the objections are to this solution of the problem of the ruling class in the period of transition between feudalism and capitalism.

⁵⁾ *Origin of the Family*, Kerr ed., p. 209. Engels clearly was thinking of the continent; for England the dates were earlier.