**The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism**

The development of distinctive property forms in English agriculture entailed new forms of class struggle. If we want to sum up the ways in which class struggle between landlords and peasants 'liberated' capitalism, it might be closer to the truth to say that capitalism was advanced by the assertion of the landlords' powers against the peasants' claims to customary rights.



Map of Mediaeval Manor

The most salutary corrective to the naturalization of capitalism and to question-begging assumptions about its origin is the recognition that capitalism, with all its very specific drives of accumulation and profit-maximization, was born not in the city but in the countryside, in a very specific place, and very late in human history. It required not a simple extension or expansion of barter and exchange but a complete transformation in the most basic human relations and practices, a rupture in age-old patterns of human interaction with nature.

**Agrarian Capitalism**

For millennia, human beings have provided for their material needs by working the land. And probably for nearly as long as they have engaged in agriculture they have been divided into classes, between those who worked the land and those who appropriated the labour of others. That division between appropriators and producers has taken many forms, but one common characteristic is that the direct producers have typically been peasants. These peasant producers have generally had direct access to the means of their own reproduction and to the land itself. This has meant that when their surplus labour has been appropriated by exploiters, it has been done by what Marx called 'extra­ economic' means - that is, by means of direct coercion, exercised by landlords or states employing their superior force, their privileged access to military, judicial, and political power.

In early modern France, for example, as we have seen, where production was dominated by peasant owner/occupiers, appropriation took the classic pre-capitalist form of politically constituted property, eventually giving rise not to capitalism but to the 'tax/office' structure of absolutism. Here, centralized forms of extra-economic exploitation competed with and increasingly supplanted older forms of seigneurial extraction. Office became a major means of extracting surplus labour from direct producers, in the form of tax; and the state, which became a source of great private wealth, co-opted and incorporated growing numbers of appropriators from among the old nobility as well as newer 'bourgeois' officeholders.

Here, then, is the basic difference between all pre-capitalist societies and capitalism. It has nothing to do with whether production is urban or rural and everything to do with the particular property relations between producers and appropriators, whether in industry or agriculture. Only in capitalism is the dominant mode of appropriation based on the complete dispossession of direct producers, who (unlike chattel slaves) are legally free and whose surplus labour is appropriated by purely 'economic' means. Because direct producers in a fully developed capitalism are propertyless, and because their only access to the means of production, to the requirements of their own reproduction, even to the means of their own labour, is the sale of their labour-power in exchange for a wage, capitalists can appropriate the workers' surplus labour without direct coercion.

This unique relation between producers and appropriators is, of course, mediated by the 'market.' Markets of various kinds have existed throughout recorded history and no doubt before, as people have exchanged and sold their surpluses in many different ways and for many different purposes. But the market in capitalism has a distinctive, unprecedented function. Virtually everything in capitalist society is a commodity produced for the market. And even more fundamentally, both capital and labour are utterly dependent on the market for the most basic conditions of their own reproduction. Just as workers depend on the market to sell their labour-power as a commodity, capitalists depend on it to buy labour-power, as well as the means of production, and to realize their profits by selling the goods or services produced by the workers. This market dependence gives the market an unprecedented role in capitalist societies, as not only a simple mechanism of exchange or distribution but the principal determinant and regulator of social reproduction. The emergence of the market as a determinant of sodal reproduction presupposed its penetration into the production of life's most basic necessity: food.

This unique system of market dependence has specific systemic requirements and compulsions shared by no other mode of production: the imperatives of competition, accumulation, and profit-maximization, and hence a constant systemic need to develop the productive forces. These imperatives, in turn, mean that capitalism can and must constantly expand in ways and degrees unlike any other social form. It can and must constantly accumulate, constantly search out new markets, constantly impose its imperatives on new territories and new spheres of life, on all human beings and the natural environment.

Once we recognize just how distinctive these social relations and processes are, how different they are from the social forms that have dominated most of human history, it becomes clear that more is required to explain the emergence of this distinctive social form than the question-begging assumption that it has always existed in embryo, just needing to be liberated from unnatural constraints.

The question of its origins can be formulated this way: given that producers were exploited by appropriators in non-capitalist ways for millennia before the advent of capitalism, and given that markets have also existed 'time out of mind' and almost everywhere, how did it happen that producers and appropriators, and the relations between them, came to be so market-dependent?

Now obviously the long and complex historical processes that ultimately led to this condition of market dependence could be traced back indefinitely. But we can make the question more manageable by identifying the first time and place that a new social dynamic of market dependence is clearly discernible. In the previous chapter, we considered the nature of pre-capitalist trade and the development of great commercial powers that flourished by availing themselves of market opportunities without being systematically subjected to market imperatives. Within pre-capitalist European economy, there was one major exception to the general rule. England, by the sixteenth century, was developing in wholly new directions.

We can begin to see the differences by starting with the nature of the English state and what that reveals about the relation between political and economic power. Although there were other relatively strong monarchical states in Europe, more or less unified under monarchy, such as Spain and France, none was as effectively unified as England (and the emphasis here is on England, not other parts of the British Isles). In the eleventh century (if not before) , when the Norman ruling class established itself on the island as a fairly cohesive military and political entity, England already became more unilied than most countries. In the sixteenth century, England went a long way toward eliminating the fragmentation of the state, the 'parcelized sovereignty,' inherited from feudalism. The autonomous powers held by lords, municipal bodies, and other corporate entities in other European states were, in England, increasingly concentrated in the central state. This was in contrast to other European states, where powerful monarchies continued for a long time to live uneasily alongside other post-feudal military powers, fragmented legal systems, and corporate privileges whose possessors insisted on their autonomy against the centralizing power of the state - and which continued to serve not only 'extra-economic' purposes but also as primary means of extracting surpluses from direct producers.

The distinctive political centralization of the English state had material foundations and corollaries. Already in the sixteenth century, England had an impressive network of roads and water transport that unified the nation to a degree unusual for the period. London, becoming disproportionately large in relation to other English towns and to the total population ofEngland (and eventually the largest city in Europe), was also becoming the hub of a developing national market.

The material foundation on which this emerging national economy rested was English agriculture, which was unique in several ways. First, the English ruling class was distinctive in two related respects.

On the one hand, demilitarized before any other aristocracy in Europe, it was part of the increasingly centralized state, in alliance with a centralizing monarchy, without the parcelization of sovereignty characteristic of feudalism and its successor states. While the state served the ruling class as an instrument of order and protector of property, the aristocracy did not possess autonomous 'extra-economic' powers or 'politically constituted property' to the same degree as their continental counterparts.

On the other hand, there was what might be called a trade-off between the centralization of state power and the aristocracy's control of land. Land in England had for a long time been unusually concentrated, with big landlords holding an unusually large proportion, in conditions that enabled them to use their property in new ways. What they lacked in 'extra-economic' powers of surplus extraction they more than made up for with increasing 'economic' powers.

This distinctive combination had significant consequences. On the one hand, the concentration of English landholding meant that an unusually large proportion of land was worked not by peasant-proprietors but by tenants (the word 'farmer', incidentally, literally means 'tenant' - a usage suggested by phrases familiar today, such as 'farming out'). This was true even before the waves of dispossession, especially in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, conventionally associated with 'enclosure', and was in contrast, for example, to France, where a larger proportion of land remained, and would long continue to remain, in the hands of peasants.

On the other hand, the relatively weak extra-economic powers of landlords meant that they depended less on their ability to squeeze more rents out of their tenants by direct, coercive means than on their tenants' success in competitive production. Agrarian landlords in this arrangement had a strong incentive to encourage - and, wherever possible, to compel - their tenants to find ways of reducing costs by increasing labour-productivity.

In this respect, they were fundamentally different from rentier aristocrats, who throughout history have depended for their wealth on squeezing surpluses out of peasants by means of simple coercion, enhancing their powers of surplus extraction not by increasing the productivity of the direct producers but rather by improving their own coercive powers - military, judicial, and political.

As for the tenants, they were increasingly subject not only to direct pressures from landlords but also to market imperatives that compelled them to enhance their productivity. English tenancies took various forms, and there were many regional variations, but a growing number were subject to economic rents - rents fixed not by some legal or customary standard but by market conditions. There was, in effect, a market in leases. Tenants were obliged to compete not only in a market for consumers but also in a market for access to land.

The effect of this system of property relations was that many agricultural producers (including prosperous 'yeomen') became market-dependent in their access to land itself, to the means of production. Increasingly, as more land came under this economic regime, advantage in access to the land itself would go to those who could produce competitively and pay good rents by increasing their own productivity. This meant that success would breed success, and competitive farmers would have increasing access to even more land, while others lost access altogether.

This market-mediated relation between landlords and peasants is visible in the attitude to rents that was emerging by the sixteenth century. In a system of 'competitive rents', in which landlords, wherever possible, would effectively lease land to the highest bidder, at whatever rent the market would bear, they - and their surveyors became increasingly conscious of the difference between the fIxed rents paid by customary tenants and an economic rent determined by the market. We can watch the development of a new mentality by observing the landlord's surveyor as he computes the rental value of land on the basis of some more or less abstract principle of market value, and measures it explicitly against the actual rents being paid by customary tenants. Here, in the careful estimates of these surveyors, who talk about 'the annual value beyond rent' or 'value above the oulde [sic] rent', and in their calculation of what they consider to be the unearned increment that goes to the copyhold tenant paying a customary rent below the value of land determined by competitive market conditions, we have the rudiments of later, more sophisticated theories of value and capitalist ground rent. These conceptions of value are based on the very concrete experience of landlords at a critical moment in the development of the competitive system of agrarian capitalism.

The development of these economic rents illustrates the difference between the market as opportunity and the market as imperative. It also exposes the deficiencies in accounts of capitalist development based on the conventional assumptions. The ways in which those assumptions have determined perceptions of the evidence is nicely illustrated in an important article from the transition debate on the structural role of towns in feudalism. John Merrington suggests that although the transformation of feudal surplus labour into monetary rents did not in itself alter the fundamental nature of feudal relations, it did have one important consequence: by helping to ftx surplus labour to a constant magnitude it 'stimulated the growth of independent commodity production.'

But this proposition seems to be based less on empirical evidence than on the market-as-opportunity model, with its assumption that petty producers would choose to act like capitalists if only given the chance. The effects of monetary rents varied widely according to the property relations between the peasants who produced those rents and the landlords who appropriated them. Where the extra-economic powers of feudal lords remained strong, peasants could be subjected to the same coercive pressures as before from landlords seeking to squeeze more surplus labour out of them, even if now it took the form of monetary rents instead of labour services. Where, as in France, the peasants' hold on property was strong enough to resist such increasing pressures from landlords, rents were often fixed at a nominal rate.

Surely it is precisely in a case like this, with peasants enjoying secure property rights and subject not only to fixed but also to modest rents, that we might, on the basis of Merrington's assumptions, expect to find a stimulus to commodity production that might eventually give rise to capitalism. But the effect was just the opposite. The evidence outlined by Brenner suggests that it was not fixed rents of this kind that stimulated the growth of commodity production. On the contrary, it was unfixed, variable rents responsive to market imperatives that in England stimulated the development of commodity production, the improvement of productivity, and self-sustaining economic development. In France, precisely because peasants typically enjoyed possession of land at fixed and nominal rents, no such stimulus existed. It was, in other words, not the opportunities afforded by the market but rather its imperatives that drove petty commodity producers to accumulate.

By the early modern period, even many customary leases in England had effectively become economic leases of this kind. But even those tenants who enjoyed some kind of customary tenure that gave them more security, but who might still be obliged to sell their produce in the same markets, could go under in conditions where competitive standards of productivity were being set by farmers responding more directly and urgently to the pressures of the market. The same would increasingly be true even of landowners working their own land. In this competitive environment, productive farmers prospered and their holdings were likely to grow, while less competitive producers went to the wall and joined the propertyless classes.

So, as competitive market forces established themselves, less productive farmers lost their property. Market forces were, no doubt, assisted by direct coercive intervention to evict tenants or to extinguish their customary rights. Perhaps some historians have exaggerated the decline of the English peasantry, which may have taken much longer to disappear completely than some accounts suggest. But there can be little doubt that in comparison with other European peasantries, the English variety was a rare and endangered species, and market imperatives certainly accelerated the polarization of English rural society into larger landowners and a growing propertyless multitude. The famous triad of landlord, capitalist tenant, and wage labourer was the result, and with the growth of wage labour the pressures to improve labour­ productivity also increased. The same process created a highly productive agriculture capable of sustaining a large population not engaged in agricultural production, but also a n increasing propertyless mass that would constitute both a large wage-labour force and a domestic market for cheap consumer goods - a type of market with no historical precedent. This is the background to the formation ofEnglish industrial capitalism.

The contrast with France is illumination. The crisis ofFrench feudalism was resolved by a different kind of state formation. Here, the aristocracy long retained its hold on politically constituted property, but when feudalism was replaced by absolutism, politically constituted property was not replaced by purely economic exploitation or capitalist production. Instead, the French ruling class gained new extra-economic powers as the absolutist state created a vast apparatus of office by means of which a section of the propertied class could appropriate the surplus labour of peasants in the form of tax. Even then, at the height of absolutism, France remained a confusing welter of competing jurisdictions, as nobility and municipal authorities clung to the remnants of their autonomous feudal powers, the residues of feudal 'parcelized sovereignty' These residual powers and privileges, even when they ceased to have much political force, were jealously preserved - and even revived or reinvented - as economic resources.

The divergence between property relations in France and those in England is nicely encapsulated in the contrast between the mind-set of the late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century English land surveyor we encountered before and that of his French counterpart, then and long thereafter. While the English were preoccupied with market valuations and competitive rents, at a time when French peasants were consolidating rights of inheritance and French lords had little benefit from rents, the French surveyor was obsessively combing the records for any sign of seigneurial rights and peasant obligations that could be revived - or even invented. So while the English went in search of 'real' market values, the French were using the most up-to-date and scientific methods to chart a revival of feudalism.

In these conditions, where the preferred economic strategy for ruling classes was still to squeeze the peasants by extra-economic means rather than to encourage competitive production and 'improvement', there was no impetus to capitalist development comparable to England's until England itself succeeded in imposing its competitive pressures on an international economy. If anything, the effect of the French system of social property relations 'was to prove disastrous to economic development'. In its efforts to preserve its tax-producing base, the absolutist state strengthened old forms of peasant possession, and the new system of surplus extraction 'was oriented even more single-mindedly to conspicuous consumption and war'.5 This system was more effective than the old in squeezing surplus out of the direct producers, which meant not only that there was little incentive for the appropriators to encourage labour productivity and the development of productive forces but also that it was even more of a drain on the productive forces of the peasantry.

It is worth noting, too, that while the integrated national market - which Polanyi described as the first kind of market to operate on competitive principles - developed in England quite early, France had to await the Napoleonic era to remove internal barriers to trade. The important point is that the development of a competitive national market was a corollary, not a cause, of capitalism and market society. The evolution of a unified, competitive national market reflected changes in the mode of exploitation and the nature of the state.

So, for example, in France, the persistence of politically constituted property, or 'extra-economic' forms of exploitation, meant that neither the state nor the economy was truly integrated. Powers of exploitation that were political and economic at the same time, in the form of state office as well as the remnants of old aristocratic and municipal jurisdictions, tended to fragment both state and economy even under absolutism. In England, there was a clearer separation between the political, coercive powers of the state and the exploitative powers of propertied classes that derived their wealth from purely 'economic' forms of exploitation. The private economic powers of the ruling class did not detract from the political unity of the state, and there was both a truly centralized state and an integrated national economy.

Peasants have since time immemorial employed various means of regulating land use in the interests of the village community. They have restricted certain practices and granted certain rights, not in order to enhance the wealth of landlords or states but in order to preserve the peasant community itself, perhaps to conserve the land or to distribute its fruits more equitably, and often to provide for the community's less fortunate members. Even private ownership of property has been typically conditioned by such customary practices, giving non-owners certain use rights to property owned by someone else. In England, there were many such practices and customs. There existed common lands, on which members of the community might have grazing rights or the right to collect firewood, and there were various other kinds of use rights on private land, such as the right to collect the leavings of the harvest during specified periods of the year.

From the standpoint of improving landlords and capitalist farmers, land had to be liberated from any such obstruction to their productive and profitable use of property. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, there was growing pressure to extinguish customary rights that interfered with capitalist accumulation. This could mean various things: disputing corrununal rights to corrunon lands by claiming exclusive private ownership; eliminating various use rights on private land; or challenging the customary tenures that gave many smallholders rights of possession without unambiguous legal title. In all these cases, traditional conceptions of property had to be replaced by new, capitalist conceptions of property - not only as 'private' but as exclusive. Other individuals and the corrununity had to be excluded by eliminating village regulation and restrictions on land use (something that did not, for example, happen in France in anything like the same ways and degrees), especially by extinguishing customary use rights.

**Enclosure**

This brings us to the most famous redefinition of property rights: enclosure. Enclosure is often thought of as simply the fencing in of common land, or of the 'open fields' that characterized certain parts of the English countryside. But enclosure meant not simply a physical fencing of land but the extinction of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihood.

Early enclosures were sometimes undertaken by, or with the agreement of, smaller farmers and not always to their detriment. But the first major wave of socially disruptive enclosure occurred in the sixteenth century, when larger landowners sought to drive commoners offlands that could be profitably put to use as pasture for increasingly lucrative sheep farming. Contemporary commentators held enclosure, more than any other single factor, responsible for the growing plague of vagabonds, those dispossessed 'masterless men' who wandered the countryside and threatened social order.7 The most famous of these commentators, Thomas More, though himself an encloser, described the practice as 'sheep devouring men' These social critics, like many historians after them, may have overestimated the effects of enclosure at the expense of other factors leading to the transformation of English property relations. But it remains the most vivid expression of the relentless process that was changing not only the English countryside but also the world: the birth of capitalism.

Enclosure continued to be a major source of conflict in early modern England, whether for sheep or increasingly profitable arable farming. Enclosure riots punctuated the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and enclosure surfaced as a major grievance in the English Civil War. In its earlier phases, the practice was to some degree resisted by the monarchical state, if only because of the threat to public order. But once the landed classes had succeeded in shaping the state to their own changing requirements - a success more or less finally consolidated in 1688, in the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' there was no further state interference, and a new kind of enclosure movement emerged in the eighteenth century, the so-called 'Parliamentary enclosures' In this kind of enclosure, the extinction of troublesome property rights that interfered with some landlord's powers of accumulation took place by acts of Parliament. Nothing more neatly testifies to the triumph of agrarian capitalism.

**The Origin of Capitalism, Class Struggle, and Bourgeois Revolution**

It should be clear at this point that the development of distinctive property forms in English agriculture entailed new forms of class struggle. Here again, we can highlight the specificity of agrarian capitalism by contrasting the English situation to the French. The differences in property forms and modes of exploitation that, as we have seen, characterized these two major European powers were reflected in different issues and terrains of class struggle, and different relations between class and state.

This raises some important questions about the role of class struggle in the development of capitalism. What, for instance, can we say now about the argument that class struggle by peasants against landlords promoted capitalism in England by throwing off the shackles of feudalism and liberating commodity production? While the configuration of class relations was too complex to be reduced to any simple formula, if we want to sum up in a single sentence the ways in which class struggle between landlords and peasants 'liberated' capitalism, it might be closer to the truth to say that capitalism was advanced by the assertion of the landlords' powers against the peasants' claims to customary rights.