

## Dobb-Sweezy debate on transition from feudalism to capitalism

One of the liveliest academic debates in recent times relate to the question of what led to the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. It is commonly identified as the 'transition debate'. The Dobb-Sweezy transition debate began between the Marxists and later amongst shifted to the Marxist and non-Marxist scholars too. The main controversy began on the issues such as the causes that led to the transition, whether these were internal or external; the principal social class responsible for this transition and the class that dominated the society during this change; whether it was market or the class struggle that delivered the output of this transition and the second issue was the stages in the transition [whether it was a result of two stages (Dobb) or three stages (Sweezy)].

This unending debate began with the publication of Maurice Dobb's stimulating work- "studies in the development of capitalism" (1946). It was vehemently challenged by Paul Sweezy, who also gained the support of Wallenstein. This debate expanded among wider range of historian who supported either Dobb or Sweezy. Dobb's views are strongly supported and elaborated by scholars such as Hilton, Porchnev, Hill, Takahashi, Anderson and many others.

Henri Pirenne has given a background to this debate. According to him, the classical understanding of the decline of feudalism and consequent rise of capitalism was in terms of a so called "commercialization model". The primary tenant of this model was the socio-economic formations in Europe in the feudal period were primarily determined by the decline and revival of trade in the Mediterranean region. The waning of Islamic power in the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century in this region led to the revival of European trade, which had widespread effect on the European feudal system. It led to the growth of new trade- communication, rise of town, percolation of money etc. Capitalism was thus coming home to the Europeans.

In 1946, Maurice Dobb published his work 'Study in the Development of Capitalism'. His work challenged the 'Commercialisation Model'. In his work, he tried to highlight issues related to the factors responsible for the transition from feudal society to capitalist society. He provides the first major explanation for the decline of feudalism. Dobb asserts that the feudal economy can't simply be described as 'natural economy'. According to him, trade never disappeared from feudal society and in fact could be a significant part of the feudal society. Hence development of trade does it for the desolation of feudalism. Dobb representing the classical Marxist approach assigns the decisive role to internal relations of feudalism. He feels that the need of additional revenue promoted and increased the pressure on the producer to a point where this pressure became unbearable. According to Dobb and many other scholars like Hilton, Takahashi and Eric Hobsbawm, it is internal relationship of feudal mode of production that determines the system's disintegration. The absence of technology, low productivity, of the manorial economy, the attempts by lords to augment taxes, an increased need of revenue for wars, brigandage and crusades and the extravagances of the nobles, combined to act as a drain on feudal revenue and pushed feudalism towards crisis. Moreover, Dobb says, desolation of feudalism was very slow and

uneven all over Europe, due to various factors. One of the factors was the access of the peasantry to alternative places with fewer feudal restrictions. Another important factor was the relative political power of the land owning class and serfs. This differed in various parts of Europe. In Western Europe, peasants had managed to accumulate small freedoms and rights for themselves over the centuries and gradually the balance of power tilted towards the peasantry to such an extent that when 14<sup>th</sup> century feudal crisis occurred, the peasantry was able to use it at their advantage. Thus, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century continuous depredation of land of western tribes ended. This led to an agrarian revival and extension of agriculture leading to expanding population. By the end of 13<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 14<sup>th</sup> century, Land-Man ratio reached proportions where population may outstrip production. The ensuing massive scarcity of labour underlay the 14<sup>th</sup> century feudal crisis.

After the feudal crisis, feudal relations crumbled and the feudal mode of production reached an advanced stage of disintegration. But this didn't immediately lead to smooth capitalist relations. There was a period of transition, characterised by production that was neither feudal nor yet capitalist. Independent from feudalism, this mode of production was characterised as 'petty mode of production'. According to Dobb, once the petty mode had freed itself from feudal control, the process of social differentiation within petty mode started, leading to accumulation of capital.

The transition to capitalism was a long drawn process which took in different phases. Hobsbawm supports and elaborates the arguments of Dobb. He points out the transition from feudal to capitalist mode of production was uneven and not straightforward process. Hilton says, the crisis of feudalism also involves the most advanced section of 'bourgeois' development within the feudal system. For Hobsbawm, the definite triumph of capitalism is reflected through the industrial, American and French revolutions.

Rodney Hilton lends full support to the 'property relation' perspective of Dobb. He agrees that the growth and decay of feudalism was the result of the factors operating within it and he considers feudal rents to be the prime mover. He suggests that the fundamental law of feudal society was the tendency of the exploiting class to realize the maximum rent from the labour of direct producers. This conflict with the necessities of social growth resulted in a contraction within the exploiting class itself. The members of this class began to compete with each other to establish their domination. This struggle for power led to an increase in the feudal rent to maintain their position. Thus, it was a struggle for power and land control that ignited the crisis in which feudal rent became the prime mover.

Dobb argues that it were the internal factors within the feudal society he describes as 'dynamic mode of production' that led the transition towards capitalism. According to him, the wastage and inefficiency of the feudal mode of production brought about the crisis in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, with this the continuous wars and excessive exploitative nature of this system which caused a number of evidences of peasant protest accelerated the process towards transition. He also argued that this feudalism was a 2 stage process i.e. between 9<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century the society was feudal dominant and with the start of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the transition to capitalism took place.

Sweezy objects Dobb's identification of feudalism and his explanation for the transition, he is of the opinion that Dobb's theory has a number of problems associated with it. He is of the opinion that there was no major historical work to support Dobb's analysis and the major works that are present are against his theory. There are significant aspects in his analysis that no historical evidence supports and does not sustain his analysis (such as the 'stage of realisation'). He also critiques Dobb for projecting the internal factors responsible for the transition but he fails to explain the motor force resulting only in transition to capitalism. He also objects Dobb's identification of feudalism with 'serfdom' as interchangeable terms, and calls his definition inadequate. He also disagrees with Dobb's analysis that the transition process was a 2 stage process as for him it was a 3 stage process (i.e. 9<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century, feudalism was a dominant process; 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century was an interim phase which was distinct from both feudalism and capitalism in its economic, social and political characters, and the last was the 18<sup>th</sup> century which saw the rise of capitalism.

According to Paul Sweezy, the distinctive feature of feudalism was its objective of production (i.e. for self-consumption rather than for market). Hence, it is a mode of production that lacks trade and market.

Sweezy along with the support from Wallenstein bring out the role of market and exchange economy in the decline of feudalism and rise of capitalism. Sweezy provides an alternative antithetical view. He adopts a market centric approach called "commercial model". The main characteristic of feudal mode according to Sweezy was actually a "system of production" for use that is the amount to be produced is known and limited. He looked at the economy of lord's manor- one using serfs/labour, production for the lord, his retinue and dependent population that is, a limited circle. According to him, the rise of exchange economy that led to monetization of relations between feudal lords and the peasants mass somehow signalled the dissolution of feudalism. He believes that the external factor was the prime mover, as he identifies primarily the expansion of trade. Though he is not very detailed about from where to begin looking for trade, he says, there were several ways in which the "system of production" for exchange acted upon the system of production for use. First, it provided a wide variety of communities, sufficient to draw out the feudal classes into market. In this manner it makes them willing to enter the system of exchange production. Thus, the feudal lords were connected to the market in a sure way. The need to buy generated a pressure to sell and the only way they could sell, was to produce more efficiently, therefore there was a need to re organise the manors. This really changed the system of production for use.

He is of the opinion that it was the external factors such as 1) long distance trade and market 2) urban trading centres 3) the merchant class which were responsible factors for the transition.

He explains that the revival of long distance trade in the 14<sup>th</sup> century played an important role in the transformation. Also the emergence of urban centres acted as magnets to the over-exploited peasants and led to mass migration resulting in the dissolution of feudal ties and relations. These new centres emerged politically outside the feudalism and belonged to the new class of merchants, the urban centre economy was no longer a self-production unit

but catered to long distance. He believed that it was the emergence of urban centres that led to the decline of feudalism as without it, the emergence of long distance trade could not bring the change and the new social class of merchants that emerged in these centres provided leadership to the process of transition.

According to Dobb, while defining feudalism Sweezy gives over emphasis on the nature of circulation and consumption to determine the nature of feudal mode of production, which was incorrect because in the Marxist mode of production, the nature of production determined the nature of consumption and not vice-versa. The factors pointed out as external according to Dobb, were actually internal processes.

Dobb believes that trade and market were important for feudalism as any other market. He also points out that the merchant class was not extinct in feudal system, as they traded in luxurious objects and the trade that emerged during 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century was feudal trading class. The principal factors for transition pointed out by Sweezy were incorrect as capitalism did not occur in urban centres, prime trading centres or place that had numerous merchant class population. He cites the example of Manchester, north England which first experienced rise of capitalism which was rural in character and not urban. He also points out the reasons given by Sweezy to describe feudalism as static was incorrect as it was dynamic mode as according to him, feudalism never stabilizes.

Dobb is of the opinion that it was the role of "independent petty producers" that was far more significant in transition than that of merchant class as they invested their profits in a very different way as compared to the merchant class who did not invest to widen the production base but to purchase feudal property and titles, etc. whereas the independent petty producers invested in modernization and in the expansion of the mode of production, hence their role was far more revolutionary than that of the merchant class, this conclusion was deprived from Marx's *Capital* vol II. Dobb calls long distance trade as a subordinate cause which Sweezy has pointed as the principle cause. Dobb also believes that class equilibrium that Sweezy believes, can never exist and was his piece of imagination as it was the aristocrat class that was dominant and the subsequent works prove it.

Takahashi argues that the belief that the emergence of money rent was somehow incompatible with the feudal economic relations is not borne out by evidence. He rejects Sweezy's thesis and suggests that the contradiction between feudalism and capitalism is not the contradiction between 'system of production for use' and 'system of production for market' but between feudal land and industrial capital. He observes that Sweezy had not given a clear and explicit definition of feudalism and asserts that several of his criticism of Dobb was not substantive and in fact it was just word play. He assigns the role of prime movers to inner contradiction and says that trade influences the process of disintegration only to the extent to which, these internal contradictions have been worked out. He says, Dobb is right in saying that origins of capitalism should be seen not in the utilities of bourgeoisie but in small bourgeois. He also criticises Dobb for claiming he was wrong in saying that the putting out system in the first way is a transitional phase. He finds Sweezy more correct here. He finds Dobb confused between the putting out system and the domestic

system. He writes that the way in which capitalism develops is determined by pre-existing social structure.

Giuliano Procacci feels that while Dobb and other writers are convincing in their regulation of Pirenne's thesis. They are less convincing in their historical reconstruction of the internal dialectic of feudalism, for they often seem defensive and critical.

Hill also intervened in the debate and said that until a feature of feudalism had fully disappeared one cannot speak of the passage of feudalism so this was the period of decline of feudalism with simultaneous development of capitalism and supports Dobb's theory of transition.

The debate between Dobb and Sweezy was on every aspect of this transition. For Dobb, the definition of feudalism has 2 key aspects (force of labour, form of exploitation) whereas for Sweezy it was the objective of production that was of importance. Dobb called feudalism a dynamic mode of production to which Sweezy disagreed and instead called it a static mode of production. The debate was also on the matter of causes whether external (Sweezy) or internal (Dobb) factors led to this transition. This debate still remains unsolved and with every new discovery it is again open for debate among the historians.

## Bibliography

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