

## *International Socialism*

Chris Harman & Robert Brenner

### **The origins of capitalism**

This is the transcript of the discussion which took place between Chris Harman and Robert Brenner at a school in London in November 2004 organised jointly by the journals *International Socialism* and *Historical Materialism*.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Chris Harman**

We are discussing one of the most profound transformations in human history. Societies in western Europe and right across the world 1,100 years ago were characterised by a situation in which 98 or 99 percent of people lived in the countryside, living off food they produced themselves, with very few towns, very few roads, very poor communications, a very low level of literacy, very little use of money, very little exchange taking place and when it did in the form of barter. The question is how that transformed itself into the society we have known for more than 100 years in Europe—a society characterised by people living in large conurbations, almost universally eating food produced by others and paid for by a money system, and the massive growth of industry and communications. How did this huge transformation, the change from what we usually call feudalism, to capitalism, take place? Why did it take place first in Europe and then spread out to the rest of the world?

This discussion has involved many different points of view, both Marxist and non-Marxist. What I consider to be the often very arid writings of Max Weber are concerned with this question. More recently David Landes, a free market economic historian, has attempted to approach this question. What we are talking about today are the debates within the Marxist tradition.

These have involved three distinct stages.

The first stage took place in the 1940s and 1950s and was conducted between a group of Marxists roughly connected with the Communist Party, although not necessarily members of it—Paul Sweezy, Maurice Dobb, Eric Hobsbawm—all participated in this debate. The second stage took place in the 1970s, involving Robert Brenner debating with people like Emmanuel Wallerstein and Gunder Frank. The third stage of the debate, which is current today, involves a number of writers like Kenneth Pomerantz and again Bob Brenner talking about the development of capitalism on a world scale.

There are two elements in the current debate. There is a narrow debate about why capitalism developed in Britain as opposed to the rest of Europe, and a wider debate about whether capitalism could have developed outside Europe.

The first stage of the debate in the 1950s was polarised between two positions, which remain essentially intact today. Paul Sweezy argued that capitalism developed as a result of the growth of markets and trade in Europe in the 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. Europe in the Dark Ages, Sweezy said, basing himself on the views of non-Marxist historian Pirenne, had been cut off from rest of world by the Islamic conquest of the Mediterranean region. Then, when these trade routes reopened, the development of trade led to the growth of towns and markets, and this opened the way towards capitalism.

In counterposition to Sweezy, Maurice Dobb argued that it was not external pressure, but internal pressures within feudalism that produced the change towards capitalism. The development of petty production within feudalism had somehow created forces pushing towards capitalism.

In the second phase of the debate, Emmanuel Wallerstein took up Sweezy's position and elaborated it by stressing the flow of gold to Europe after the conquest of the Americas by the Spanish from the 1490s onwards. This, he argued, permitted Western Europe to buy goods on the cheap from the rest of the world and gave a push to the development of capitalism.

Brenner argued strongly against this: to understand the transformation from feudalism to capitalism we had to look at what happened within feudalism itself and not at some external force.

When I first read this debate my sympathies were with Robert Brenner as against Wallerstein and Sweezy. There is no evidence that the Islamic armies were not interested in trade. In fact they established extensive trade routes, which went into parts of Europe, but did not penetrate deeply because Europe was not developed enough to be interesting to them. Wallerstein's position also raises other questions. Why did Europeans conquer the Americas, rather than the Chinese, who were more advanced in every sense than the European powers a century before the Spanish conquest? Why did Britain and Holland develop rather than Spain and Portugal, which got the gold? The Sweezy-Wallerstein argument puts the cart before the horse. We have to explain how Europe was able to conquer the rest of the world.

Wallerstein's position also has political implications. According to his logic, capitalism could only be overthrown by Third World countries, with Western workers occupying a privileged position in relation to them. Brenner sees the centre of capitalism in advanced industrial countries, and so the precondition for the liberation of the world is the revolution spreading to industrial countries.

However, there was one great problem with Dobb's and Bob's positions. They do not really locate the internal force inside feudalism pushing for the transformation. Bob puts great stress on how in the period after the Black Death in the 14th century the huge fall in the agricultural population led to a shift in the balance of power between

peasants and feudal lords. Big class struggles broke out across Europe. He argues that in Britain the peasants lost control of the land but were not so defeated as to allow the reintroduction of feudalism. As a result what emerged was the classic pattern of capitalist agriculture with big landowners leasing out their land to farmers who then employed wage labour to till it. Capitalist relations emerged in the countryside, with systematic production for profit in agriculture.

There are elements of truth to this analysis, but it is unsatisfactory in three senses. Firstly, it does not explain the timing, why the transformation occurred in the 14th and 15th centuries rather than after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the 5th century or after the collapse of Charlemagne's empire in the 9th century. Secondly, it does not explain, apart from the accidents of class struggle, why the changes happened in Britain, not France or Northern Italy, or, if you want to look at the later debate, in Sung China in the 10th or 11th centuries.

Thirdly, the outcome depended on the peasants neither winning nor losing. The slogan seems to be 'Those who half make a revolution, make capitalism'. If peasants had kept full control of the land, there was no surplus for capitalist farmers to get hold of. If they lost completely, there was a continuation of feudalism. This is an unsatisfactory account.

There are other problems with Bob's account. He focuses exclusively on what happens in the countryside. Yet he later wrote a book, *Merchants and Revolution*, about the English Revolution, which focuses on the role of traders based in the towns. There does not seem to be any connection between the two, between the rise of capitalism in the countryside and the English Revolution.

More importantly, the account seems to break the connection between three sets of events that take place simultaneously: first, the rise of capitalism, slowly developing over three or four hundred years; second, the great ideological transformations that take place—the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment and rise of modern science; and third, the great revolutionary upheavals—the religious wars in Germany and France, the 30 Years War, the Dutch Wars of Liberation, the English Revolution, the French Revolution, and the revolutions of 1848. It seems to me like the old argument that used to claim it was just a coincidence that you had a rise in lung cancer among people who smoked cigarettes.

If this is true of Bob's original position, it is even truer of some people who developed their ideas from it—like Ellen Meiksins Wood, George Comninel, Benno Teschke. They carried Brenner's argument to the extreme, arguing that capitalism only developed in Britain, and did not develop in France until the 19th century; that the French Revolution may have been carried through by people calling themselves bourgeois, but they were in fact part of the Absolutist order and were not in any way connected with the rise of capitalism. They go on to argue that Absolutism cannot be seen, as it was by classical Marxists, as some sort of combined social formation with market relations developing within the feudal system with the rise of capitalism. These writers call themselves Marxist but they diverge significantly from the classical Marxist tradition. This does not in itself mean they were wrong. Not everything Marx said was right.

More importantly, they diverge from the facts. A Canadian Marxist, Henry Heller, has written a book putting together facts and figures that exist in historical literature about industry and agriculture in France during the absolutist period, and more recently has produced a manuscript about industry and agriculture in France during the revolutionary period. His findings run in absolute contradiction to the assertions of Wood, Comninel, Teschke and so forth. There is lots of other recent literature that confirms this.

Neither Brenner nor Wood and the others can come to terms with why the transition in the countryside began to happen in the 14th and 15th centuries.

I think there is a tendency on both sides of the debate on the transition to ignore something noted in much of the economic literature of the last 50 years. The assumption used to be that the feudal period was characterised by stagnation, that pre-capitalist societies saw no development of productivity and no economic growth. The reality, we now know, was that the middle medieval period, from the 9th or 10th century through to the 14th century, saw sustained economic growth in both agriculture and industry. This does not mean there was anything comparable to growth figures you would get under modern capitalism. The figure given is half a percent a year, which is a very low level—unless you use compound interest tables, and then you see that there is massive growth over three or four hundred years, a massive transformation. It is precisely such a transformation we witness in Europe from the 10th to the 14th centuries. In the countryside there was an increasing surplus from the peasants. There was an increase in the extent of cultivation—which Bob does recognise—but also a massive increase in the output of certain crops. In the 10th century one grain of seedcorn would grow into two grains of barley or oats. By the 14th century, one seedcorn grew into four or five grains. This represented a massive increase in productivity per acre. Along with this you have the use of new rotational methods, the use of manures as fertilisers, the slow replacement of oxen by horses, semi-industrial techniques such as water mills for grinding grain and fulling cloth, and at some point the introduction of the wheelbarrow from China, and the development of iron-tipped ploughs. This series of developments had the cumulative effect of transforming the face of Europe by the 14th century.

In the 9th and 10th centuries lords lived in rough mud or wooden castles. By the 14th century there were huge castles and gigantic cathedrals, big towns, new patterns of consumption among the ruling class, the increasing replacement of rents in kind by money rents, and peasants beginning to buy a few goods manufactured in the towns such as harnesses for plough teams and iron for their ploughs.

This transformation was accompanied by something else which is missing from Bob Brenner's picture—a degree of differentiation among some of the peasantry, with some who began to use the wage labour of others on quite a considerable scale. This was not common, but it does exist by the beginning of the 14th century. And combined with this, sections of the peasantry begin to concentrate on producing products for the towns. At the same time, in the towns new groups emerged who were connected with the new developments on the land. The English Marxist historian Rodney Hilton showed how there developed networks of local markets and small towns. You did get something Bob Brenner and Ellen Wood emphasise: the merchants who benefited from the new methods in the towns did often buy their way

back into feudalism, imitated the trappings of feudalism and even became feudal lords. But you also had other processes taking place. Certain feudal lords became increasingly interested in getting involved in commerce, in taking small-scale measures to increase their surplus, such as the introduction of mills. And in the towns there was a differentiation: as big merchants bought into feudalism, some of those below them begin to resist them and base themselves on the networks which connected them with people involved in capitalist production in the countryside.

This relates to something in Marx's picture of the transition which is missing from Brenner's and Wood's accounts. Marx put forward a three-level picture of how social change takes place. Human beings produce their livelihoods by working together. How they do so becomes crystallised into certain relations of production which become fixed and are presided over by a ruling class which exploits the people at the bottom. The ruling class then establishes a political and ideological superstructure—a state and the propagation of certain notions—to stop further changes that might put its position at risk. But Marx also notes that there is a tendency in human history for human beings at a micro level to discover new ways of producing that create new nexuses of relations between people running in contradiction to the old ways of exploitation and the old political and ideological superstructure. This is Marx's essential picture in the preface to his 1857 Critique of Political Economy.

Marx may have been wrong to say there is a tendency for the forces of production to develop throughout history. That is an empirical question. But certainly, if you look at the early feudal period in Britain, there is a tendency. I would argue more than that, that if you look at the conjoined continents of Europe, Africa and Asia you see this process taking place spasmodically, at greater and lesser speeds, from the rise of class society onwards, so that techniques arising in part of one continent spread to the others. So techniques developed in China by the 9th and 10th centuries found their way to Europe four or five centuries later. They are adopted by some people in Europe, resisted by others. There is resistance in terms of cultural traditions: people do not always want to change the ways they produce things. But you eventually see the new techniques adopted. This accounts for the massive transformation you see in Europe before the rise of capitalism. And it is in this situation that you see elements developing within feudalism—not external to feudalism as in the Sweezy-Wallerstein position—which created nexuses of people, small groups of farmers, manufacturers in the city and some merchants, who began to exploit labour in a new way. They see free labour as more productive than unfree labour. They employ it systematically to pump out surpluses. This development occurs within feudalism, but in contradiction to feudalism. It explains why the great crises of feudalism lead to the beginning of the breakthrough to a different form of society.

If you read Rodney Hilton's *Bondmen Made Free* you can see the role of some farmers who already own considerable amounts of land and employ some free labour in leading other peasants in revolt; you see there was a connection between middle ranking burghers in the towns and the peasants' uprisings; you see how out of this people begin to develop a different model of society. If you look at the Reformation in Germany, the religious wars in France, the Dutch Revolution, the English Revolution, you see people coming forward who begin to see in the crisis of feudalism the possibility of a different form of organisation of society. These people do not reshape the old ideology completely in their own image. In the great crises of feudalism, in the 14th century, the 16th and 17th centuries, and the end of the 18th century, all the old

ideas are thrown into turmoil and all sorts of challenges emerge. Different classes look to reformulating the old ideas in their own image. So social historians dealing with the German Reformation speak of a peasant reformation, a burgher reformation and a prince's reformation, as each group attempts to use the challenge to the old religious orthodoxy in its own way. There is ideological confusion, but in that people begin to see a way to develop a new society.

Changes in the forces of production begin to change relations of production at the micro level, which then challenge the wider relations of production, the political superstructures and the ideologies of the old order, which lead to potentially revolutionary upheavals.

Did this only happen in Europe? People like Pomerantz want to argue there are elements pushing for capitalism across the whole world. On this I am in agreement with them. But they throw the baby out with the bathwater. They often say that anyone who concentrates on why capitalism broke through in Europe is 'orientalist' or 'Eurocentric'. But capitalism did break through in Europe and not elsewhere.

We can see elsewhere in the world, in Mogul India, Sung China and Ming China, elements which could become embryos of capitalism, such as the emergence of free labour, the rise of merchants who sometimes clashed with the old order ideologically and physically. But you don't see the breakthrough, you don't see the transformation at the micro level producing enough momentum to produce the ideological transformations and the physical clashes with the old order and revolutions.

What is important about this whole approach is seeing the connection between the economic, the ideological and the political. The economic changes produce the potential for what Marx called an epoch of revolution. But it was not inevitable that the new forces break through. That depends on the level of organisation of the class, and ultimately requires the leadership of a Cromwell or a Robespierre to break through.

## **Robert Brenner**

Chris's interpretation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism is premised on the primacy of the forces of production in historical development. He therefore takes as his model the general theory of societal transformation driven by the productive forces outlined by Marx in his Preface to the Critique of Political Economy. In the Preface, as every one knows, Marx views the rise of new forces of production as calling into being new social relations of production and in turn new class relations, which ultimately bring about the transcendence, by way of revolutionary overthrow, of the old mode of production. As it happens, Chris does not actually apply this famous theory directly to explain the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In order to provide an account of the latter, like Marx before him, he supplements the forces of production model with a theory of the maturation of capitalism within the womb of the old order by way of a process of commercialisation. In Chris's version, this takes the form of a theory of 'capitalist sprouts', in which the rise of commerce makes for the germination of a dynamic agrarian capitalism out of the cold soil of pre-capitalist society.

In what follows, I will lay out what I believe to be the disabling difficulties in the theory that Marx sets out in the Preface, indicate why when that theory is used to understand the transition from feudalism to capitalism it is inevitably supplemented by a conceptualisation in which a commercialisation drives the social transformation, and provide reasons why this latter conceptualisation is unsustainable. On that basis, I will present my own, relations of production centred, view, showing how it resolves the difficulties that arise if one takes as one's point of departure the primacy of the productive forces and compels a very different way of posing the problem of the transition.

Marx's theory of the primacy of the productive forces depends on two distinct forces of production determinisms, one anatomical and static, the other developmental and dynamic. In the first of these determinisms the nature of the productive forces is seen to be responsible for the structure of the relations of production and in turn the whole mode of production. In the Preface Marx is vague about the way in which the forces of production shape the relations of production, saying only that the latter will be 'appropriate' to the former. But in other well-known statements of position Marx is more explicit, arguing, classically, that 'the specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers... grows directly out of production itself' (Capital III, chapter 47). It must be said that the meaning of even this formulation is far from self-evident, and Chris may have an interpretation different from my own. But since in this version 'production itself' is seen to be foundational, with the relations arising from the base it provides, it is hard for me to understand this as referring to anything but the form of cooperation in production, the latter apparently bound up with a given level of technology or productive capacity. The form of cooperation endows certain elements, those who organise production, with control over it. The latter are able to translate their organisational capacity and control into the social power to exploit the direct producers.

Perhaps the case most easily understandable in these terms is the first of the four successive modes of production specified by Marx in the Preface—Asiatic society. There, from this standpoint, agriculture required a centralised irrigation system, which provided those who controlled it with the capacity to turn themselves into a ruling class, capable of taking a rent in the form of a tax from the direct peasant producers. Marx presumably had analogous processes in mind when he designated the three subsequent modes of production—with the organisation of agriculture on latifundia giving rise to the class power of slave owners in the ancient world, the organisation of estate agriculture making for the class power of lords under feudalism, and the organisation of modern industry constituting the base for the class power of the bourgeoisie under capitalism.

Given this understanding of the determination of society's anatomy in terms of the forces of production, Marx's theory of societal evolution naturally follows. It takes it for granted that the productive forces will develop. Advances in the power to produce give rise to new forms of cooperation, which operate new types of labour process. Those who organise cooperation come to constitute an incipient new class of exploiters, who establish relations of production that facilitate at once the operation of the new productive forces and their own capacity to take a surplus from the direct producers. As the new forms of cooperation get stronger, presumably as a result of the

further development of the productive forces, they further strengthen the associated relations of production, which mature within the interstices of the old society, ultimately bursting it asunder. The social revolution destroys, once and for all, the fetters constituted by the old mode, clearing the way for its own free development. The successive modes of production, from Asiatic through capitalist, are thus seen by Marx to 'mark progress in the economic development of society'.

Nevertheless, both of these determinations by the forces of production are problematic, because of so little practical service in interpreting actual historical transitions. They are effectively unsustainable in light of, or in connection with, Marx's own well worked out conception of the social relations of production—what I would call 'social-property relations' (precisely to deny their determination by the productive forces). Social-property relations are politically constructed and reproduced by political communities, expressing the political organisation of social classes, especially the dominant class of exploiters. As such, they constitute powerful constraints on economic activity for societies' economic agents, individual and collective. Indeed, they not only set the possibilities and limits for economic action by individuals and collectives, but induce the adoption by these agents of specific strategies as the best way to pursue their interests. The aggregate outcome of societies' individuals and classes putting into practice these strategies, or 'rules for reproduction', are the distinct developmental patterns and forms of crisis that mark the evolution of different modes of production. In view of what the social-property relations make possible and constrain, it is in my view impossible to sustain the determinisms entailed by Marx's theory of the primacy of the productive forces.

The idea that the form of cooperation in production can itself somehow give rise to surplus extraction relations—which presumably emerge out of the control of the function of organising production—is difficult to cash out in practice. This is because, through most of world history, at least in agriculture, organisers of production distinct from the direct producers seem quite extraneous for the effective execution of the agricultural labour processes. Once settled agriculture emerged, peasant families were almost always to be found in charge of production and requiring little assistance from others to undertake it. Indeed, throughout most of agrarian history, it is difficult to specify technologies and associated labour processes that peasants did not organise and operate, probably because it is so hard to point to labour processes that, to function properly, entailed such large-scale or such elaborate cooperative labour that peasant families themselves could not organise them. As the opposite side of the same coin, throughout the history of agriculture, ruling classes that owed their dominant, exploiting position to their role in production are rare indeed.

Precisely because peasants generally controlled production and possessed the land, tools, and labour power needed to carry it out on their own, pre-capitalist agrarian ruling classes in virtually every case depended on what Marx called surplus extraction by extra-economic coercion to reproduce themselves. They therefore owed their ability to take part of the product of the peasants not to their role in production, but to their capacity to organise themselves politically to exert force against them. The upshot was that a multiplicity of systems of surplus extraction—sometimes centralised, sometimes decentralised, sometimes a mixture of the two—are found across Eurasia and beyond over several millennia in combination with ultimately similar peasant-organised forces of production. In European feudalism, lords' place in



agricultural production, notably via the management of their demesnes, was in general quite limited, and in some places non-existent; but this in no way impeded their ability to dominate and exploit the peasantry, a capacity achieved through their self-organisation into politico-military communities or groups, lordly states on whatever scale. By the same token, it was their position as lords that made possible the role in production that lords actually assumed, not vice versa. The agricultural forces of production could not, and did not, determine the prevailing relations of production...but the latter went a long way toward determining the former.

Chris, inspired by the Marx of the Preface, envisions the transition from one mode of production to another as taking place through a process in which 'changes in the forces of production begin to change relations of production at the micro level which then challenge the wider relations of production'. But, because organising agricultural production required, through most of world history, no directing thus no ruling class, and because, given the omnipresence of peasant possession, the class anatomy of agrarian societies is for the most part constituted extra-economically, it seems to me difficult to understand the transformation of such societies as determined by the development of the productive forces. The upshot is that, for the most part, new forces of production were readily assimilable by already existing social classes, so that it is not easy to think of many cases where new productive forces might have called forth new relations of production and potential new ruling classes.

The examples Chris cites only attest to this conclusion. He points to the introduction in Europe at various points during the medieval period of new agricultural rotations, the use of manures as fertilisers, the replacement of oxen by horses, the turn to water mills for grinding grain, the adoption of the wheelbarrow. But what is actually implied by his resumé is that the peasants who were mainly responsible for carrying out agriculture in this epoch were perfectly capable of assimilating these techniques, and, to a greater or lesser extent, in fact did so. The fact that some of these techniques had their origins in China or that Sung China actually saw the invention and implementation of many others—and apparently to a greater extent than in medieval Europe—only confirms the same point, since Sung China was obviously a peasant economy par excellence, which saw no transition to capitalism.

In concretising his vision of transition as starting from the micro and extending to the macro, Chris speaks of 'elements developing within feudalism' who 'see free labour as more productive than unfree labour...and employ it systematically to pump out surpluses'. But the question that immediately imposes itself is whether this would constitute a productive forces-led or actually a productive relations-led account, since the sort of shift to wage labour to which Chris refers does not seem to require a previous advance of the productive forces to make it happen. A further query that is raised, if one starts from Marxist premises, is where the wage labour is to be found to fuel the extension of such processes of micro-level innovation beyond isolated local instances. How can the hiring of wage labour take place on an economy-wide scale, in a society composed of unfree peasants who possess the means of subsistence and lords who exploit them by taking their surpluses through forceful means, often exerting controls over their mobility?

But there is a more fundamental issue. The only friction Chris acknowledges to the generalisation across the economy of techno-social innovations taking place at the

micro level is ‘resistance in terms of cultural traditions’, and insists that ‘eventually you see the new techniques adopted’. But on what basis can he assert this? To do so is not only to take for granted that elements within the feudal order would find sufficient incentives to bring in the new forms in the first place—that it was enough in their self interest to drive them to make the change and that doing so did not interfere with the pursuit of other overriding goals of theirs. It is also to take for granted that they possessed sufficient resources to introduce the new technique, that they confronted no insurmountable social barriers in so doing, and that mechanisms existed to ensure that their initiatives would be emulated across the economy by others. Can these things really be taken for granted outside of the capitalist mode of production, where entrepreneurs can be expected to develop cost-cutting techniques in order to secure temporary surplus profits or technological rents, where firms can be expected to emulate their rivals’ innovations in order to sustain their profit rates and profit shares, where inter-capitalist competition can be counted on to weed out those who fail to follow the innovator...and where, as the flip side of the same coin, large classes of producers who control much of the land and are shielded from competition by their position in the system of social property relations and/or who take a surplus by extra-economic coercion have already been eliminated? On the other hand, if the rise of new, more powerful forces of production can be expected to throw up appropriate relations of production, and, sooner or later, generalise themselves throughout the economy, it is difficult to understand why human history on a global scale has not been to a much greater extent a narrative of progress and, in particular, why the onset of capitalist development did not take place much earlier and occur much more broadly.

To forestall or transcend the foregoing line of objection, and provide a coherent account of the transition to capitalism, Chris, like Marx, is obliged to supplement his forces of production centred theory, by what might be called the commercialisation story. The idea, at bottom, is that, in the presence of opportunities to exchange and the potential gains from trade, pre-capitalist economic agents can be expected not only to function like capitalists under capitalist constraints, but to bring into being capitalist social relations of production. In *The German Ideology* Marx charted a steady progress, occurring in tandem with the expansion of exchange (and presumably competition), from craft-organised production, to manufacture, to machinofacture, a process in which, bigger and more cost-effective forms of production beat out smaller and less advanced forms of production, carrying new, associated relations of production with them. In a similar manner, in response to the penetration of commerce into the countryside, Chris sees, taking place across much of Eurasia, processes of differentiation of the peasantry, in which larger producers in command of more advanced productive forces making for lower costs beat out smaller producers with more backward techniques, with the former emerging as rural capitalists, the latter falling into the ranks of the rural proletariat, and the former hiring the latter. The model, in both town and country, is that of a capitalist embryo, nourished by trade, maturing in the womb of a quite passive old mode of production.

This theorisation does accord well with Chris’s conception of how transition takes places, but it may be doubted whether it is actually one in which the forces of production play the primary role. In this model, advances in the productive forces implemented at the micro level do pose an economy-wide challenge and eventually prevail, but the reason that they do so is that a fundamental transformation in the

direction of capitalism is implicitly assumed to have taken place. Due to the rise of commerce and the town-country division of labour, economic agents now systematically seek higher profits through cost-cutting innovation, and they are able to bring about at the micro level changes in social relations of production to make these cost-cutting innovations possible. There have apparently emerged, moreover, powerful mechanisms that enable these agents to prevail over backward, laggard counterparts. In short, it is because commercialisation has unleashed a process of capitalist transformation that the productive forces develop, not vice versa. The commercialisation story, in other words, does not so much supplement the primacy of the productive forces in accounting for the transition to capitalism as substitute for it.

The commercialisation story is widely accepted among both Marxists and non-Marxists, whatever their commitment to the primacy of the productive forces. But it is called into question as soon as one takes on board just how universal has been the expansion of trade. Virtually from the rise of settled agriculture there emerged powerful lordly classes able to take part of the product of the direct producers, generally by force. These classes, without fail, made use of this income to demand the military equipment and luxury goods required to bring followers around them, to sustain a form of life that distinguished themselves and their followers as rulers from the rest of the population, and to support the capacity to make war. In response, towns, with their artisans, merchants and other provisioners of services, emerged, also quasi-universally, to provide for the needs of the ruling class and they, in turn, demanded food and raw materials from the countryside. The outcome was that, just about everywhere that one finds the rise of settled agriculture, one witnesses a town-country division of labour providing agriculturalists the opportunity to enter into exchange. The problem is that, despite the ubiquity of the involvement of peasant agriculturalists in the markets, far from quasi-universal or even common, the autonomous onset of capitalist economic development is, historically, quite rare. Not until the early modern period—and then only in parts of western Europe and probably Japan—does one witness either the rise of capitalist social-property relations or a breakthrough to self-sustaining economic growth. Commercialisation is without doubt an indispensable precondition for the onset of capitalist development, but it is, by itself, quite insufficient to bring it about.

The reason that the appearance of opportunities to exchange has failed by itself to bring on capitalism and development is twofold. In the presence of pre-capitalist social-property relations, pre-capitalist economic agents do not, in fact, find it in their interest (or often their power) to seek the full gains from trade, or pursue all out capital accumulation, or adopt the best available techniques. Nor, equally important, do they find it makes sense for them to try to introduce, on a micro, piecemeal basis, capitalist social-property relations. This is most clearly true of feudal lords. Because the peasants upon whom lords depended to work their demesnes possessed the means of subsistence, they not only had little incentive to work on the lords' estates but could not be disciplined with the threat of firing. As a result, lords found that to increase the surpluses they could sell on the market, their best route was to try to improve not the productivity of their peasants, but their ability to forcefully redistribute from them more of their product. This required tightening, not loosening, the feudal bond by building up their means to coercion through increasing the size, sophistication and equipment of their politico-military followers. The same tendency was imposed by the need to stand up to inter-lordly politico-military competition and

the attractions of warfare as means of increasing wealth.

What about the peasants, who Chris seems to see as detonating the transition by way of a process of social differentiation? Peasants no doubt wished to take advantage, to the extent possible, of the access to lower cost goods that comes with involvement in a network of exchange. But the trade-offs, or what they would have had to sacrifice, in order to fully specialise so as to achieve all the available gains from trade, were too great to justify it. Had they sought to fully specialise, they would have become not just involved in the market, but dependent upon it for most of their inputs, and for that reason, obliged to sell competitively on the market to survive. But pursuing the requirement to minimise costs and maximise profits imposed by competitive production was incompatible with pursuing their most highly valued ends.

Peasants had, above all, to make sure of their supply of food. But the food market was uncertain due to the regularity, and unpredictability, of bad harvests, which would inevitably bring not only high food prices, but, by the same token, low prices for non-essentials, precisely because consumers of food would have less money left over to buy other goods. In the event of famine, therefore, those who specialised in non-food commercial crops in order to secure the gains from trade, would find themselves squeezed between elevated food prices and depressed prices for their own goods. But, of course, going out of business was not an outcome that peasants could reasonably contemplate. They therefore chose as their basic rule for reproduction, safety first or produce for subsistence, which meant eschewing specialisation so as to diversify to directly produce everything they needed, marketing only their surpluses. Peasants could and did, therefore, to the greatest extent feasible, involve themselves in the market, but they could not allow themselves to become dependent upon it. But this choice entailed major limitations on peasants' capacity to develop production, especially because the most promising agricultural innovations almost inevitably required specialisation.

To secure social insurance for illness and old-age, peasants had no choice but to rely on their children. And, in view of the fact that they could not count upon those who were born to reach maturity, they had to adopt the rule for reproduction of having many children. But, having lots of kids constituted a burden on the household economy, as they had to be supported for many years before they could begin to bring in an income for the family. The upshot was that securing social insurance, about which there was no choice, was incompatible with keeping down costs, and this radically reduced the potential competitiveness of peasant households—providing another reason why they could not afford specialisation and market dependence, with its requirement for the pursuit of maximal cost effectiveness.

To make sure that their (male) children could indeed support them, to insure the perpetuation of the family line, and to respond to the demands of (male) children for the wherewithal to start families of their own, peasant households, as a norm, subdivided their holdings for the purpose of handing them on. But, for obvious reasons, adopting this rule for reproduction could not be made to work with a strategy of specialisation in particular and cost-cutting in general. This was because it rendered peasant plots ever less economically viable, leaving households ever less prepared to stand up to the rigours of competition, so ever more confined to their policy of safety

first/production for subsistence.

Peasants' adoption of these rules for reproduction led in aggregate to the opposite of the growth of productiveness. Having large families led to a growing population. Production for subsistence limited specialisation. As population grew and peasants subdivided holdings, production was extended to land that was less fertile or more difficult to cultivate, holdings got smaller, the ratios between land and labour and capital and labour diminished, and the productive forces were undermined. It is true, as Chris, asserts, that with population growth and subdivision of holdings, yields grew. But rising yields manifested rising land productivity, an expression in turn of a rising manland ratio, meaning rising labour input per unit of land. Because increasing land productivity went hand in hand with declining land and capital per person, it had to be purchased at the cost of declining labour productivity, which was a central tendency of the feudal mode of production, casting its shadow over the evolution of the whole economy.

Peasants did, eventually, adopt some new techniques quite broadly. But, shielded from the competitive constraint by their possession of the means of subsistence, they were under little pressure to respond to the opportunities provided by the growth of the market by coming up with better ways to produce or by adopting whatever improvements appeared—and, in particular, could and did eschew those advances entailing specialisation. Peasants' adoption of the new agricultural techniques to which Chris refers could therefore do little to counter the overriding trend to declining labour productivity.

The tendency to declining labour productivity in agriculture shaped the development of the feudal economy, limiting in particular the process of commercialisation—the growth of the urban commercial-industrial economy and the opportunities it could offer the agricultural sector. Declining output and therefore surpluses per agricultural worker put definite limits on the proportion of the non-agricultural labour force in general and the urban labour force in particular in the total. At the same time, by making for higher food prices in response to increasing population, declining labour productivity restricted the size of discretionary expenditures and thus the domestic market. As it was, lordly expenditures, made possible by their extraction of surpluses from peasants, composed much of internal demand and went, for the most part, on military and luxury goods that were produced by urban skilled artisans and purchased by lords from merchant middlemen, effectively in exchange for food and industrial raw materials. It should be noted that neither urban artisans nor merchants tended to function as capitalists. Like lords and peasants, they depended on their self-organisation into political communities, which constituted and defended economic rights that were essential to net their incomes. Artisans were self-organised in guilds, generally sanctioned by urban governments, that effectively restricted entry and output, sustaining prices and profits. Merchants secured their profits by buying cheap and selling dear, and so also depended for their income upon controls over entry to their trade and over quantities marketed, secured by chartered monopoly companies.

Because the output of urban labour was consumed mostly by lords, it was in general unproductive, as it contributed neither to peasants' production nor their consumption. Because it was paid for by lords from rent extracted from peasants, it represented a subtraction from the means available for the reproduction of the direct agricultural

producers, further undermining the productive forces. In an important sense, therefore, the process of commercialisation cum urbanisation was parasitic and undermined its own foundation. The upshot was that, in the pre-capitalist agrarian context, commercialisation could bring about only a restricted growth of the commercial-industrial economy and in turn the opportunities that the latter could offer the agricultural sector. Put more generally, so long as pre-capitalist social-property relations prevailed, one could expect feudal patterns of non-development, for the fundamental reason that one could expect the individual economic agents that composed the economy to adopt feudal rules for reproduction.

From this point of departure, it follows that what is required for capitalist development is the adoption, on an economy-wide basis by its constituent individual economic agents, of capitalist rules for reproduction— ie the maximisation of profits by means of cutting costs through the methods of specialisation, accumulation and innovation, as well as moving from line to line in response to changing demand. This is because it is only where these rules for reproduction are generalised that we can expect the tendencies to the ongoing growth of productive forces and the increase of the productivity of labour that distinguish capitalism from all previous modes of production. The inescapable conclusion, at least in my view, is that you get self-sustaining growth only where pre-capitalist social-property relations have been transcended—viz, where the direct producers have been separated from their means of subsistence and economic agents have been deprived of the capacity to take an income by extra-economic coercion. For it is only where the direct producers have been rendered dependent upon the market, and freed to pursue their economic interests, that they will find themselves subject to competition and freely able to respond to the competitive constraint. Simply put, the establishment of capitalist social-property relations is the sine qua non of capitalist development for the straightforward reason that it is the indispensable condition for the generalised adoption of capitalist rules for reproduction. The ultimate conclusion is that to account for the transition from feudalism to capitalism requires us to explain how a system of feudal social-property relations can be transformed into a system of capitalist social-property relations.

If the foregoing argument is correct, it would seem to rule out any attempt to account for the onset of capitalist development by reference to the growth of the productive forces. This is because it finds the ultimate source of capitalist dynamism in the system of capitalist social property relations itself, and it is hard to conceive of the appearance of productive forces that could call these into being. After all, what conceivable technique or set of techniques could, by virtue of its very appearance, bring about the economy-wide separation of the direct producers from their means of subsistence and their subjection to the constraint of competition? One can envision the appearance of new productive techniques that would induce an economy's individual producers to adopt them. But it is virtually impossible to see, in the absence of an already-existing capitalism, how the appearance of new productive techniques would lead individuals to take actions that would, in aggregate, bring about the installation of capitalist social-productive relations. (Of course, once capitalism had come into being in some places, one can certainly conceive how lords might want to move to introduce capitalist social property relations, but even then they could only do so through acting collectively, as with a land reform.)

What about the rise of trade? Could this lead feudal economic agents to bring into being capitalist social-property relations? It is hard to see how the actions of either lords or peasants could have done so. In the presence of entrenched feudal social-property relations, individual lords confronted an economy constituted by peasants in possession of their land and other lords who exploited their peasants by virtue of their domination over them. In this environment, lords could not find it made sense to introduce capitalist social-property relations by freeing and expropriating their peasants from their land, because there was no existing market in wage workers or commercial tenants to turn to. By the same token, larger, more efficient peasants could not beat out their less well off counterparts by virtue of their greater productiveness, reducing them to the ranks of the proletariat, because the latter possessed the means of subsistence. The path to capitalism via the differentiation of the peasantry was thus difficult to travel. Of course, in individual cases, peasants might buy land from others so as to build up larger holdings. Nevertheless, this could not easily happen on an economy-wide basis, since peasants' land was the basis for their survival, and they had few alternative ways to make a living. Peasants would not then easily part with their holdings, and, as a consequence, land prices tended to be driven up. In any case, given the overriding tendency for peasants, large and small, to have large families and subdivide holdings on inheritance in pursuit of social insurance, parcellisation of land could be expected to outrun agglomeration.

Because neither lords nor peasants had an interest in bringing in capitalist social-property relations, I have argued that as a rule the transition to capitalism can only be understood as the unintended consequence of feudal actors pursuing feudal goals in feudal ways. Chris seems to find this paradoxical, and he finds unconvincing my specific proposition that the breakthrough in England took place because peasants succeeded in overthrowing feudal lordship and gaining their freedom, but failed to secure full property in the land. But this account may be less arbitrary than it appears, especially if you grant—as I think you must—that the emergence of capitalist development is indeed dependent upon the transformation of feudal into capitalist social-property relations. In that case, the separation of the direct producers from their means of subsistence leading to their subjection to competition is essential. Marx argued something like the same thing, when he pointed to the centrality of the so-called primitive accumulation, and specifically of English lords depriving their peasants of their land, in making possible the rise of capitalism. But the problem is, as just argued, so long as feudalism is intact, feudal lords have no interest in separating peasants from their means of subsistence, but rather in intensifying their control over them.

So we face a conundrum: where feudal surplus extraction is working, lords have no interest in accomplishing the so-called primitive accumulation; yet they are, in the pre-capitalist context, and notably in England, the only social force with the potential to carry this out. My solution to this problem is two-fold. It is first to note that, across the later Middle Ages, and especially in the wake of the feudal crisis of the 14th century, peasant resistance seriously threatened to bring down traditional feudal lordship, requiring lords to improve their organisation so as to restructure their systems of exploitation if they were to continue to maintain their positions. It is secondly to contend that whereas across eastern and western Europe lords had to, and were able to, accomplish this by reorganising and re-strengthening in one form or another the political structures by which they exploited the peasantry by extra-

economic means, in England lords did not have that option. They could, however, secure their positions if they could take over the land of their now free tenants—and this is what they did. Perhaps I can take this up further in the question period.

## Discussion

**Paul Blackledge:** The strength of Bob's position is the critique of the Smithians.<sup>2</sup> If you take the Smithian position seriously then basically we have got this capitalist human nature that has existed transhistorically and the only thing that has stopped it has been feudal ruling classes and whatever. Bob's strength is the critique of that view and his restressing Marx's position on relations of production.

But the crucial weakness is that if relations of production are your starting and end point, then you have a static model. You try to get out of that by talking of the unintended consequences of class struggle. The trouble with that is that we have had lords and peasants for many thousands of years, in one form or another, and there had been a continual struggle between them, with only three possible outcomes—the lords win, the peasants win, or there is a position halfway between. If that's so, it should have happened somewhere else, at some other time. It's completely random why it should be England in the 14th, 15th, 16th centuries. If you cannot answer that, it's not a theory of history.

If we are talking of the transition itself, Christopher Hill writing on the English Revolution points out that the ending of feudal tenures because of the revolution meant that no one in England after the mid-17th century went hungry because of a lack of food. If we put the revolution in agriculture in the way you do, it is consistent with the weakness of Dobb's approach, which is if feudalism is defined by serfdom then it ends in the 14th century. This raises the question of how the English Revolution can be a bourgeois revolution. Bob's position, for all its strengths, is a static one, contrasting two modes of production. What it does not do is provide a serious explanation of these key political moments in the transition, particularly the English Revolution. Why did they need to fight for this? It does not provide an explanation of why we had this massive social convulsion in the 17th century, of how Britain was part of the feudal crisis and how it broke out of it.

**John Ashworth:** Bob's talk of the resistance to the capitalist form in early modern Europe struck a very strong chord with me. Much of it is applicable to 18th century American history. It is a recognition of what has been called 'safety first agriculture', in which production for the market is on a secondary basis, with subsistence needs put first.

Some of the specific factors that Bob sees as bringing about the transitions seem to be contingent and to some degree exogenous to the social system. That has massive implications for our view of human history. The transition is probably the most important change in human history, and if that is contingent, what does that say about Marx's theory of history, and historical materialism in general?

**Neil Davidson:** Bob described Chris Harman as accepting the Smithian model based on trade. I don't think that is right. It does not assume that capitalism has always existed. It does say that at certain points there are breaks. There are shackles on the



forces of production. I want to give three examples of that from Scotland. You have said war was a significant factor in the development of the forces of production in the Absolutist period. That is right. But it also helped break some of the feudal relations of production. The Absolutist states locked in competition with each other developed massive shipbuilding enterprises, massive gun manufacturing. This does actually affect how production happens. You can't build a ship in a backyard with a few artisans. You have to have thousands of skilled workers. And we know that states actually broke the guilds in order to allow production to take place in ways which broke out of the old feudal ways of doing things.

The second thing: Bob was clearly right in talking of buying cheap and selling dear and one way of doing this is to rely on state monopolies. But it is not the only way to do it. It is also possible to do it by going to the countryside, escaping from the guild system and establishing new relations in the countryside, as happened in Colchester, where the cloth manufacturers moved to make breaches in the feudal system.

A final example: Scotland was not capitalist in any sense in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was the most backward, feudal country in Europe. But in the south west of the country the lords, desperate for money, very hard up, came to an arrangement with some of the peasants for them to buy themselves out of the system. This meant they could set themselves up as independent yeoman farmers who had then to engage with the market by raising sheep. There was no market compulsion on everyone to do this, but they did it because they wanted to separate themselves out from the pressure of the lords. They were still within the juridical power of the lords, even though they were economically independent. This raises the question of the superstructure. There was a ferocious Protestant, Calvinist attitude on behalf of these yeoman farmers. At the ideological level, it strengthened them in their struggle against the lords.

This seems to follow through some of the processes Chris was describing in concrete terms. You don't just get capitalism arriving like the invasion of the body snatchers one morning with market compulsion suddenly there. There is a transition, which involves time in moving from one form of labour to another. It takes place over a period of centuries.

**Gavin Capps:** If lords reached a point where they were so weak that they could no longer extract a surplus, how come they were strong enough to drive the peasants off the land? Wouldn't the peasants have resisted this more?

Secondly, a considerable amount of Marx's writing within *Capital* is devoted to the emergence of the putting out system, as merchants began to organise formerly separated producers in the countryside, leading to specialisation, the development of markets and creating precursors to the factory system as merchants put producers under one roof for purposes of surveillance and control. Where does this fit into Bob's 'big bang' theory.

Bob's theory is elegant and persuasive but it is reductionist as well. To put the whole of the transition down to the class struggle alone between lords and peasants ignores other factors—the relationship with other classes within feudalism, merchants growing up under the umbrella of the system, developing interests distinct and separate from those of the overarching political order. What Chris Harman is talking

about is not a steady and automatic growth within the feudal system until the cells reach a critical mass to become another organism, a kind of evolutionary model. The class struggle does fit within Chris's model. But there is a dialectical relationship between this and the development of new productive forces.

**Gareth Dale:** A question for Bob. I want to find out more about the development of Marx's thought which you mentioned. You said the breakthrough came with the Grundrisse, with its emphasis on the separation of peasants from the land, which was continued in Capital volumes I and III. Before that in The German Ideology there was something more akin to the commercialisation model. But before that Marx wrote the Paris Manuscripts, which puts great emphasis on the battle to get the peasants off the land. And then in Capital volume I the section on primitive accumulation is not just about the lords kicking peasants off the land. There is the discussion of a whole number of different factors—the growth of national debt, for example, driven on by the political accumulation process, war making, etc. Then in volume III there are a number of chapters on rent, where various processes are gone through, with models of serfdom, rent in kind, monetary rent, and finally full-scale capitalist relations on the land. This suggests that Marx still saw processes occurring within feudalism, with the dissolution of the fixed feudal relations of production, which is a picture which does not fit easily with the model you put forward.

**Alan Freeman:** The big issue you face with globalisation theory is that the nation-state is ceasing to exist, with a supranational capitalist class using this or that nation-state as a vehicle. The other model is that the world is fundamentally composed of nation-states which intervene through the supranational institutions which are merely an outcome of the struggle between national or continental blocs of capital. How this relates to the present discussion is: to what extent is the nation-state essential for capital? Was the nation-state necessary to accomplish the transition from feudalism to capitalism? An evaluation not just of Cromwell, but what the Tudors were, is very important, since they carried through a major reorganisation of the state. They finished with the dynastic form of struggle which was still there for the continental states. Every class which depended on money was to their advantage. To me the transition is a process of creating a state which moves things in this direction rather than that direction; when push comes to shove we favour a monetary form of accumulation because that is where the interests of the state lie. That is why Perry Anderson was right when he wrote that Absolutism was in a certain sense a transitional form. It could fall back on the old feudal, dynastic relations, but it brought into existence all those forms of organisation which were associated with monetary organisation—free labour, alienation of the land, merchant class, artisans, etc. Already by the time of Cromwell you had the national form.

**Alex Callinicos:** Bob's accusation against Chris is that he doesn't have a theory of modes of production—but he hasn't proved this. The evidence that Bob produces is that there was falling productivity in the latter part of the Middle Ages. But that is absolutely compatible with the 1859 Preface model of modes of production in which you have a period in which the relations of production stimulate the productive forces and then a period when they hold them back.

I think there are problems with Chris's position, which is that he now has an undifferentiated notion of a pre-capitalist mode of production. He does not distinguish

between what I would call tributary relations of production, in which peasants are exploited by a ruling class that organises itself through the state, as opposed to what we find crystallising in Europe around the year 1000 where exploitation is by a class of feudal lords. This is critical to explaining why you have a dynamic towards capitalism developing then rather than at the time of the fall of the Roman or Carolingian empires. The more intimate involvement of a decentralised exploiting class in the productive process helps to create a momentum towards capitalism. If you read Irfan Habib's book on Mogul India he points to the destructive impact of a tribute-extracting class on the development of the productive forces precisely because of its distance from direct production.

But Bob has problems of his own. He did point to a critical problem with his own argument, which is taken to a point of caricature by Ellen Wood and her followers, for whom god visited England and inaugurated capitalist relations of production there and then abandoned the world until some time in the late 19th century when capitalism begins to appear in other parts of Europe. This is a wholly inadequate perspective. It is not Bob's. But I want to explore the tensions in his own position. Once you have a conception of a crisis of feudalism that doesn't just happen once but happens successively throughout feudalism—this is the suggestion made by the French Marxist historian Guy Bois—you can see how across those cycles of crises you have a disruption of the old feudal structure solidity Bob so emphasises. You have cracks in the feudal relations of production which begin to produce in different ways nodes of crystallisation of capitalist relations of production. Agrarian capitalism in England at the end of the Middle Ages was perhaps the most important node. But it was not the only node. Bob in his book on the English Revolution talks about what seems to be another such node, what he calls 'the new merchants', the groups of merchants in the City of London who were not part of the merchant class integrated into feudal structures but were involved in a global capitalist economy, beginning, for example, through their control over plantations in the New World, to subsume production under capital in a way in which the old merchants did not. The new merchants, Bob shows, were politically important as part of the social forces who carried through the English Revolution and in the process of doing so began to reconstruct the English state so that it could promote competitiveness on a global stage.

If you can have this hybrid form emerging once, as it did, Bob concedes, in the case of the English Revolution, why not in other cases as well? If we look at 18th century France, it had more important slave plantations than England did. Why around those sorts of developments can't you have similar sorts of hybrid formations which help to intensify cracks in the old feudal structure and produce other political breakthroughs, what the old fashioned among us call bourgeois revolutions, in other parts of feudal Europe?

**Simon Mohun:** My question is addressed to Bob Brenner. I am very sympathetic to how you laid out what you saw as the structures of the capitalist and feudal modes of production, and that therefore we have a problem with the transition. But if I understood you, you made the mechanism of that transition labour productivity. If the mechanism was class struggle, why was there an intensification so that the ruling class chose the second best option in the end? I thought you said overpopulation, subdivision of the land, declining productivity, increasing difficulties of appropriation of the surplus, a whole nexus of things around that, intensified the class struggle. If

that were true it would be partly manifested in increasing difficulties in subsistence in the countryside among the producers and also in difficulties in extracting the surplus by the lord. But what is the evidence of that for Britain? My cursory reading of economic history is that overpopulation was never a problem in British agriculture. What period does it date from? If the Black Death killed off a third of the population, where did the problem of overpopulation come from?

**Bob Brenner:** I'll start with Paul's questions. I spoke of the lords losing their ability to extract the surplus by extra-economic coercion and the peasants losing their ability to sustain themselves through production for subsistence. The outcome of these processes was the emergence of a new social system, in which the landlord class had become dependent for its reproduction on commercial rents paid by tenant direct producers who, lacking possession of the means of subsistence, were themselves dependent upon competing successfully in production. By taking account of the epochmaking consequences of these arrangements, we can understand why there was an English Revolution.

Once you got this transformation of social property relations you got a resulting transformation in the way in which the productive forces developed. With capitalist tenant farmers subjected to competition, they could not, as had peasants, subdivide holdings in order to secure social insurance in sickness and old age. At the same time, again as a consequence of competition, the larger more effective producers did beat out the smaller less effective ones. Over the long run, farms got much larger and some agriculturalists fell into the ranks of the proletariat, so you now did get the differentiation of the direct agricultural producers. Once farmers had to specialise to survive, they had every reason to adopt the array of technical innovations that their peasant predecessors of the feudal epoch had eschewed precisely because they required specialisation and dependence on the market. Fodder crops that could not be used for subsistence were now integrated into the new rotations, improving soil fertility and making for the support of greater numbers of animals. By ending in this way the age-old conflict between arable and animal production, you got the agricultural revolution, and, above all, the steady growth of agricultural productivity.

The new capitalism had its core in agriculture, but it was not confined to that. Because you got the steady growth of agricultural productivity for the first time, the economy could support increasing numbers of people off the land in non-agricultural occupations and towns. In the previous period, because of the tendency to declining agricultural productivity, food prices rose compared to manufactured goods, rents rose, and real wages fell with the increase of population. But now this was completely reversed. Because agricultural productivity rose, food became relatively cheaper compared to manufactured goods, and real wages rose, so people gained increasing ability to raise their expenditures on non-food products. This opened the way to the development of the domestic market and the growth of industry to cater to it. The domestic market was no longer dominated by lords, but became the province of farmers, artisans, shopkeepers, and wage workers, so we got the beginnings of a mass market.

The domestic industry that initially grew up to meet the home market—what has been called 'proto-industrialisation'—now underwent a transformation. Under the old mode of production manufacturing was mainly a sideline of peasant production. As

peasants subdivided their holdings they ceased to have sufficient land to produce enough food to survive, so had to enter into industry in the household just to make ends meet, and despite the fact that the prices of manufactures were falling compared to food prices. But with the end of the peasantry and rise of capitalist production, farmers took up domestic manufacturing where they could justify it in terms of the rate of profit. So capitalist proto-industry developed first in relation to the raising of sheep for wool, because there farmers had lots of extra time and using that for manufacturing made their unit of production as a whole more profitable. With the intensification of competition and the increase of the relative price of manufactures compared to agricultural products that came with the growth of agricultural productivity, producers ultimately shed wool production to concentrate on manufacturing, and one saw the rise of specialised industrial districts separated off from farming and beyond the regulation of guilds that still influenced production in the older towns. Eventually these industrial districts evolved into great industrial towns and the sites of the industrial revolution.

The rise of capitalism in agriculture provided the social forces behind the English Revolution. Because capitalism in England developed within a landlord shell, what remained of the feudal landed class was very weak, and the capitalist aristocracy was very strong. On the other hand, the bulk of what remained of a feudal class became directly dependent for its reproduction on the absolutist state, the offices and privileges it provided. Conflict arose because the monarchy and those that lived off the politically-constituted private property that it created—churchmen, officeholders, government financiers, chartered company merchants, industrial monopolists, and so forth—sought to strengthen the embryonic absolutist state. This they tried to do by increasing unparliamentary taxation so as to undermine landed class control via parliament, by building a structure of offices dependent on the crown to replace national and local government dominated by the landed classes, by creating a standing army, and by pursuing alliances with financial support from the Catholic absolutisms of Spain and France. Landlord capitalists, who had in a sense already emerged as the ruling class on the basis of their control over the economy's surplus, but who still did not entirely dominate the state, were the ones most threatened by the absolutist offensive. So the capitalist aristocracy provided the fundamental social base for the anti-absolutist revolutions of 1640 and 1688, which definitively overthrew the old order. In so doing, they undoubtedly had help from colonial merchants, as well as newly emerging industrial capitalists and perhaps traders associated with them, not to mention the traditional revolutionary classes par excellence, the urban artisans and shopkeepers.

Alex and others contended there is an inconsistency between my conceptions of the transition to capitalism and the English Revolution, both focused on agrarian capitalism and landlord capitalists, and my picture of the new colonial merchants, who I argue played a critical and radical role in the English Revolution. I would argue, first of all, that in England the new merchants were able to play the part that they did only because the biggest landed capitalist elements in the countryside initiated the overthrow of absolutism and were willing to enter into alliance with them. It was the subsequent split in the ruling class that enabled them to very much enhance their influence, along with the urban small producers.

At the same time, it's important to note that the new merchants derived much of their

social power and political perspective from their role in developing capitalist production in the colonies, outside England. This role in production may have been as big a determinant of their radical politics as their position as ‘out’ merchants who lacked the privileges that glued the old chartered company merchants to the monarchy. It’s worth asking whether one got the same phenomenon in the French Revolution, whether the merchants emerging from colonial production and trade also seem to have played an oppositional role.

**Chris Harman:** Bob Brenner keeps reiterating the stagnationist thesis—although at one point he did seem to accept innovation spread to Europe from Sung China (where, incidentally, there has been some evidence of the use of waged labour on the land). Whether you want to call them ‘feudal’ or ‘tributary’ modes of production, right across the Eurasia in the medieval period there were waves of innovation that caused transformations in production and increased output in both town and country. These take place spasmodically; they encounter institutional obstruction; there are periods of crisis. But the reality of expansion is there. You cannot deny it. To say that it ends in the crisis and that was the limit of the expansion is right. The feudal mode of production limited the expansion and created the crisis. But the expansion was real and to deny it is nonsense. All the research of the economic historians in Britain and France of the last 50 years has pointed to the reality of the expansion. I don’t know where Bob gets this idea of a secular decline in productivity—certainly there is evidence of a rise in productivity per unit of land (which of course is different to labour productivity). There may well have been a decline in labour productivity with the onset of the 14th century. The traditional argument is that it followed from using the least productive land to absorb the surplus population. But there is no evidence of that in the prior period. That old man Karl Marx may have been wrong about many things, but a certain mode of production can be associated with an expansion of production up to a certain point and then enter into crisis.

This also takes place outside Britain after the crisis of the 14th century. The discovery of the Americas led to the transformation of agriculture right across the world. I’m sorry, but the chilli was not native to India, nor was the tomato. The sweet potato was not native to China. The ordinary potato was not native to Ireland. You can go through the record. The peasants, however cautious and conservative they were, changed their methods. On top of that I can quote you from Georges Duby, Rodney Hilton, Guy Bois, all of whom talk about the transformations of agriculture in the 10th to 13th centuries, before the crisis of the 14th century. There was increased productivity, increased specialisation, increased cash crops, and so forth. And in areas close to towns—it is highlighted in Rodney Hilton’s book about the peasant revolts, *Bondmen Made Free*—there is the development of networks establishing relationships between the towns and the countryside. These are not just a matter of the extraction of surplus from the countryside. They are also about peasants beginning to buy things from the towns. And I have to insist that the growth of the towns is linked to the advance in agricultural techniques. This advance creates the conditions in which there are the beginnings of a differentiation between bigger and smaller peasant holdings, so that some peasants have the resources to protect themselves, at least to some degree, from the uncertainty associated with specialising in certain crops directed to urban markets. These changes, as I said in my introduction, are internal to feudalism and not, as Sweezy held, a product of an external growth of the market. This is what I am talking about when I refer to the advances in the forces of

production creating new low level relations between people in production which in turn begin to impinge on the structure of the wider society.

The class struggle is absolutely central to my picture. I see new classes emerging and providing leadership to dispossessed classes in conflict with their exploiters. But the class struggle is not just a rural class struggle. I once characterised Bob's position not as 'political Marxism' but as 'rustic economism' because he sees the class struggle as just taking place in the countryside. But again, read Rodney Hilton or read the accounts of the peasant war in Germany in 1525, or read the description of the Hussites in 15th century Bohemia, and in each case there is interaction of discontent in the countryside with forces based in the towns which attempt to give expression to it. This is precisely the question not only of class struggle in the economic sense, but also of great ideological and political confrontations shaking society repeatedly over a period of three or four hundred years.

The breakthrough takes place when you have a culmination of the development of the forces of production, creating the beginnings of new classes which confront society in a new way. Then it is a question of the emergence of parties, revolutionary leaders and so forth. At the end of the day the outcome is decided by battles, and if there is bad leadership in those battles it has an effect. If you see this, you can see it is not just in Britain. These confrontations are both won and lost right across what is often called the Old World. It is this which explains the succession of religious heresies in 12th and 13th century Europe; it explains the rise of Sikhism in Moghul India; it explains the clashes between so-called pirates and the Chinese state in the Ming Empire. All these things are reflections of contradictions taking place.

All this is important—and I'm not attacking Bob here—when it comes to dealing with the ideas of people like David Landes that there was some cultural peculiarity of the British, or of the heritage of Graeco-Roman or of Judeo-Christian culture, which produced the breakthrough. In reality there was a clash on a world scale which was bound to break through at one point before others, which then generalises in the centuries after.

**John Molyneux:** I want to approach the question from a slightly odd angle of art history, from an interest in particular in Rembrandt and Michelangelo. In studying Rembrandt I came to the conclusion that he could only be understood as a product of a response to the emergence of bourgeois society in the Dutch Republic through their struggle to create a nation as against Hapsburg Spain. This made it clear to me that England wasn't the first. People continually talk of England as the first bourgeois revolution. Marx actually says in *Capital* that Holland was the premier capitalist country of the early 17th century. It was clear also that the successful Dutch struggle was predicated on the successful urbanisation of the low countries already by the 15th and 16th centuries, which were clearly the most urbanised part of society in Europe at the time. Now I notice also that Engels said that Calvinism was the ideology of the revolutionary bourgeoisie—what you might call the Bolshevism of the rising bourgeoisie.

The Marxist art historian Frederick Antal argued that the Renaissance as a whole was a product of the rise of capitalism within feudal society. And Michelangelo, I think, was the response to the stalling of the bourgeois revolution, the failure of the

bourgeois revolution to take place in Florence and elsewhere. All this shifts the emphasis away from starting with England all the time. It does seem to fit a picture of a general development that is international, and which is punctuated by victories and defeats. Defeated in Italy, victorious in Holland, victorious in England, defeated elsewhere in Europe. It gets us away from the idea that something unique happened in England, which I see as a mistaken view.

**Samir:** I am sympathetic with Bob's argument, but want to approach it from a different angle. I very much agree with the depiction of the transition and the emphasis on the unintended consequences. It says something about how radical this transition was. But it leaves us with a problem of how that transition occurs. At this point you may disfavour your own argument by problemising the transition from the point of view of the balance of power in England, by looking at it in a quantitative way in terms of who is winning and who is not. I think we need to come down to a much more qualitative look at the nature of power in England, because it allows us to see precisely what was distinctive about it. I am thinking here of the common law. I disagree completely with Alex's depiction of the work of George Comninel and Ellen Wood on issues like this. Comninel really emphasises how the development of the common law from the 11th century onwards really laid the basis for the very distinctive type of power that landlords could appropriate, firstly to kick the peasants off the land and put sheep in their place, and later to decide how people would produce, in a much more radical way than was possible elsewhere. So as well as what happened to the lords and peasants, we have to look at the creation of a very distinctive form of power.

**Bob Brenner:** Chris and Paul both raise the question of how my approach can confront the question of why the break to capitalism came in England in the late 14th, 15th and 16th centuries as the unintended consequence of lord-peasant class conflict, when, in one form or another, so many other societies were constituted by lords and peasants across Asia and Europe for several millennia. Why did it happen there and then, and not in China, India, the Carolingian Empire, and so forth? I think the place to start is with the point made by Alex, with his contrast between feudal and tributary modes. Throughout most of history ruling classes took their surpluses through a state, in the form of a centralised take from a peasantry that usually held individually. In these instances, the ruling class got its income indirectly, essentially through a tax that financed offices and privileges. It therefore was completely separated from peasant possession and production and could have no reason to try to undermine it. On the contrary, its main goal was to strengthen the state and thereby centralised surplus extraction.

By contrast, feudalism in Europe was very peculiar, paralleled I think only by that of Japan and perhaps a few other places. Here, at least through most of the medieval period, the ruling class took its surplus individually from peasants, who also possessed individually. As a consequence, members of the ruling class, supported by their feudal group, confronted their peasants one on one, so to speak. So there was at least the potential for their having an interest in expropriating their peasants' land.

With that as background, I can take up the question of how I can seemingly argue that English lords were so weak that that they couldn't continue to exploit the peasants by extra-economic coercion on the basis of serfdom, but were nonetheless strong enough



to kick the peasants off the land. Doesn't my argument depend too much—unrealistically—on a quite particular balance of class forces?

My response relates very much to what Samir was saying. To understand late medieval/early modern outcomes of class conflict, you have to take into consideration the qualitatively different forms of feudal class organisation and surplus extraction across Europe, as they developed out of the process of inter-lordly competition. The latter tended to bring into being ever larger and more cohesive feudal states of very different sorts. What emerged in England during the medieval period, in contrast to most of the Continent, was a highly organised ruling class focused on the centralised monarchy. This enabled manorial lords in England to take their surplus individually, in a decentralised manner, from the peasantry in a highly effective way, where, by contrast, in both western and eastern Europe, lords, politically organised on only a local basis, remained weak and vulnerable.

At the time of the feudal crisis peasant pressure set feudal classes everywhere back on their heels, threatening their very survival. The response in most of western Europe was to strengthen embryonic absolutist states, which integrated an ever greater part of the ruling class into highly organised systems of centralised taxation and office-holding. The response in eastern Europe, over a long period, was to reorganise what had been exceedingly loosely organised feudal classes into provincial and national estates. These provided the intra-lordly cohesion to make it possible for eastern European lords to impose a new tighter serfdom on their peasants. So in both western and eastern Europe, due to earlier developments in each region, the lordly response to feudal crisis was to restructure so as re-strengthen surplus extraction by extra economic compulsion. As a result in neither place did the ruling class have an interest in expropriating the peasantry.

In England, by contrast, because the lordly class had made its decentralised system of surplus extraction work quite well right into the 14th century, its first response to feudal crisis was to attempt to strengthen serfdom. But that failed, and peasant resistance and flight led to the rise of peasant freedom and the lightening of peasant obligations. Because strengthening their controls over the peasantry had not succeeded and because a tax office state was not on the agenda in a society where lords still saw themselves as owning the land, English feudal lords now had little choice but to try to undermine peasant possession and insure that peasant customary land was actually their property. To do so, they naturally turned to their already quite centralised state, contributing in multiple ways to its strengthening and thereby its capacity to defend and extend their rights. This fits in with what Alan Freeman was saying. Once feudal surplus extraction was lost, lords' own political-military followings were rendered extraneous. On the contrary, as beneficiaries of an emerging capitalism, they had every reason to support the incipient monopoly of force of the state. The ever stronger Tudor state thus played a decisive part in insuring the legal developments, plus the defeat of very potent peasant revolts, that made possible the aristocrats' separating of the peasants from their land.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Chris Harman's introduction is taken verbatim from the tape of the discussion, with

minor grammatical changes. Robert Brenner's contributions are based on some reworking of the argument since, as are some paragraphs in Harman's contribution which take up points made by Brenner in his reworking. The contributions from the floor are only presented in a summary form and we apologise if they slightly distort what was said.

<sup>2</sup> The view that the market alone leads to the development of capitalism and economic growth.

