
The Feudal System in Medieval Europe (7th-14th Century A.D.)¹

A Summary

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An Introduction

At the beginning of medieval age in Europe, based on a feeble resource of data, it is believed that between 80-90% of the economic activity was agriculture. Nearly everybody therefore, earned a living through agriculture as an economic activity. The economic structure prevailing then became known as *Feudalism*, a term which has come to mean, an economic system based on Lordship (ownership) of vast Land (also known as the 'manor' or 'estate'), owned by a senior lord, who gave the right of cultivation (fief) to a lower rank of people called the *vassals*, who in return paid a stipulated amount from the harvests or from services rendered or - later on - through money, to the Lord of the manor. The vassals also received security from the lord of the manor.

The origin of feudalism is sometimes traced back to the expansion of the Roman Empire. In Italy for instance, there were present large portions of land owned by Roman soldiers who had received the allocation of land in return for military services rendered to the Caesar. There also existed ownership of large track of land in Gaul before the Roman

¹ *This document is a summary of the European feudal system in the medieval ages from an excerpt by: SB Clough y RT Rapp, Historia Economica de Europa. El desarrollo Económico de la Civilización Occidental, Barcelona, Omega, 1986, Cap.3.*

invasion. Few people escaped this form of economic structure for reasons of living in the mountains or where the land was densely cultivated. There is evidence that this form of Roman ownership of land prevailed through the invasion of the German tribes until the beginning of the medieval period. The Romans had intended that the Farm or 'Estate' would be auto sufficient. This concept prevailed especially in the 8th and 9th Centuries resulting in the farms being *nearly auto-sufficient*. In return, the social economic system became rigid and so did the resulting social - cultural structures. The effect of this rigidity was what became known in Europe as Feudalism.

In feudalism, every man owed allegiance to another higher than him and at the highest level was the King. The lord of the farm or 'manor', also known as the 'Vassal' or in Spanish "Caballero" owned allegiance to another man senior, like the 'Conde' or 'Baron', who in turn owed his allegiance to the King or Emperor who in turn was the head of the feudal system. The vassals could distribute the right of cultivation of land given them in trust to other men. Thus the structure went on down to the peasantry. Those of higher rank like the King, the Barons and the Knights hungered for power in order to maintain powerful control of the others below them, to live well and to impose law and order. The medieval king was, above everything else, a warrior. From the 9th to the 14th centuries—the heyday of feudalism—the most important element in making war was the armoured and mounted knight. To maintain a retinue of knights was, however, very expensive. In return for providing the king with warriors, tenants-in-chief were granted large holdings of land. Besides, the king and those of higher rank also needed servants for other public services. They invoked the law of land ownership from time to time to reclaim title of property over the others in order to make concessions for the recruitment of soldiers or other certain specific services for the King or Lord. Some lords organized local governments for the sake of law and order. In every case, the vassal had juridical allegiance only to his immediate superior.

This allegiance was basically a form of slavery since the vassal knew he could not liberate himself from

his Lord. As a result the entire society remained attached to an intricate system of allegiances and services. The men below of lower rank were not *slaves as such* but in effect were workers without any rights (given to servitude). They had no economic recourse other than the land and could not leave it. If they did, the life away from the land was vandalism and adventure such as that of “Robin Hood” which was rather much worse. In effect Feudalism was a political system which decentralized and localized power.

The system came to its Zenith at the beginning of the 12th Century. At this time most of the farming land belonged to most senior people, dioceses and monasteries. It turned out that administration of these estates became very difficult owing to the fact that most land owners had come into possession through various, hereditary paths. They owed loyalty to various warring vassals and thus administration of estates became very difficult.

Politically, economically and socially, the feudal system was a way of making administration and communication easier especially to reach the furthest corners least populated or far stretched away from the centre. Those who gained most were the lords and the higher vassals. Nevertheless, the system gave rise to contractual obligations which maintained a semblance of economic well being for everyone. It also guaranteed economic benefits paid through military or public service. The nature of relationships between the Lords of the estates and the workers has been studied under various theories in later day Europe. Of this, two theories have crystallized;

- 1) The first is what we may call the *Contract theory* maintained by medieval lawyers and modern economists (a strange marriage!). This theory maintains that there

existed a contract between the lords and the workers who entered into the contract freely realizing one of the strongest social bonds in the medieval times. Life in the agricultural estate was divided between the proprietor and the tenants dividing the risks between them. The lord of the estate had the duty of fending for the court (his family) and maintaining his army without having to farm. The servants duty was to protect the land from invasion, pillage or other disorders from inside or from outside. Besides the system ensured the security and law and order for the servants since they were paid based on days worked and not through money.

- 2) The second theory may be described as the theory of coercion which sees in feudalism a vast demonstration of slavery on the part of the lordship over the agricultural workers. The key to this theory is that this servitude was based on the elimination of mobility of work effort and with it the abolition of the labour market rudimentary as it was. Economist Evsey Domar, proposes that this elimination of labour mobility was as a result of;
- a. Large tracks of land available to the Lords, the higher echelons of society.
 - b. Scarce labour due to low population
 - c. Political and military strength in the hands of the lords of the land to do whatever they wanted.

In fact the two theories do not vary completely since they both agree to a certain sense of servitude and mutual assistance. The real fact is that the estate structure varied from one estate to another and from one epoch to another. Hence, to come to an agreement between the two would be very difficult.

Description of life in the Estate

The feudal method of holding land was by fief; the grantor of the fief was the overlord, and the recipient was the vassal. The fief was formally acquired following the ceremony

of homage, in which the vassal swore an oath of fealty, while, the lord invested the vassal with the fief. Honours or rights, as well as land, could be granted as fiefs. Gradually, with the advent of hereditary succession and primogeniture, renewal of the fief by the heir of the deceased became customary, and little by little the fief became hereditary. The nobility was essentially a military class, with the knight as the typical warrior. Since equipping mounted fighters was expensive, the lord could not create his armed force without the obligation of the vassal to supply a stipulated number of armed men. The gradations of nobility were, therefore, based on both military service and landholding. At the bottom of the social scale was the squire, originally the servant of the knight. Above the knight were classes that varied in different countries—counts, dukes, earls, barons, and other nobles. The vassal owed, in addition to military service, other dues and services that varied with local custom and tended to become fixed. The obligation of the overlord in the feudal contract was always the protection of the vassal.

At the centre of the Estate was the lord's highly secured castle and close to it, the Church. The servants were housed below the castle in a lesser environment with all they needed for their daily life like the wells. Away from the walled castle and the servant's house (which could be considered the modern day town or village) were to be found the common forest, the pastures and the arable land for cultivation. Each peasant had his piece of land to cultivate and this became very stable over time. This rigidity made it very difficult for the servants to change their destiny and thus better themselves. The servant had to pay an amount to the vassal or land owner and to the church. Sometimes these payments were very heavy making it very difficult for the servant to remit them.

The land for cultivation belonging solely to the lord of the estate was the centre of technological development in land use. The system of planting which developed in the 8th and 9th century became known as the 'trialterno' or tri-annual rotation of plantations. The system gave rise to a high productivity which in turn augmented the growth of the population. Later better methods of using animals to till the land were improved. However, methods of maintaining soil fertility simply eluded them. Productivity was very low in comparison to current farming technology.

In conclusion, this growth in productivity especially between the 10th and 12th Century did not result in better economic conditions and life style for the peasants. The diet was a monotonous repetition of bread, vegetables, little meat and dry salted fish. The unpredictable weather patterns always left the agricultural life and therefore the people in the risk of hunger. Population kept growing and the farms were hard put to feed all. These became the sources of the decadence of feudalism. Paradoxically, in the very success of the system we find the root of its decadence.

Decadence of the Feudal system

Economic growth in the medieval age gave impetus to high population growth and anachronism which in turn gave a death blow to the feudal system. Based on estimates of European population growth between 700 A.D and 1300 A.D. made by Merrill K. Bennett (1954) the population in Europe moved from an estimated 27 million people to 73 million people. It seems, thanks to the menace of disease and war that within 50 years, between 1300 and 1350 A.D the population reduced by an estimated 20 million people. Paradoxically, therefore another reason that exacerbated the fall of the feudal system was the sudden diminution of labour force in the farms when the expansionist wars in Europe in the 14th Century stopped.

In addition, commerce and industry in urban life became more and more predominant in European society. This growth together with the new agricultural structure of industrial farms invited most of the population to go and work in the urban areas. There was greater and greater auto-sufficiency on the part of the urban population through growth of commerce with power still vested on the king. The King had a more centralized army and power. New colonies to exploit agricultural resources in virgin country increased resulting in new methods of working the farm in which servitude died a natural death giving way to more liberal work conditions in smaller farms and based on work produced. The nature of relationships between the Land owner and the

Peasant farmer changed so rapidly towards an employer employee relationship with a pay for work done system emanating. Soon the payment system of these new contracts was based on money 'cents'. The land owners changed attitude towards subsistence production and started producing for commercial purposes (Gutscherrenschaft), selling produce in exchange for money, or dividing and renting the farms for money such as the German system called landherrschaft. This new system was found in most in most of Europe towards the end of the 12th Century.

We could say, in summary, that that the most common system of agricultural production which also gave birth to the Politico-Socio-Economic structures in most of Europe had slowly evolved. By the 14th century the agrarian revolution, away from a rigid economic structure of agricultural production, wrought with servitude of peasantry with little or no recourse to freedom, had developed into what we can safely call, today, a capitalistic system. The peasant farmers started acquiring more legal privileges that arose from the granting of letters of privilege previously granted to the merchants of the cities. This gave them the right to elect leaders and have certain administrative autonomy. Besides, the new agricultural system resulted in higher productivity of the land which increased by almost 50%. The land ownership still remained in the hands of the Lords, and religious institutions; thus, the birth of the Capitalist system in many ways still present today.