The Prime Mover of Economic and Social Development

The focus of criticism against Brenner from a number of leading historians of English medieval society has been on his assertion that class (social-property relations) is the prime mover or fundamental determinant of economic and social development. Indeed many now regard the concept of a prime mover in historical analysis, whether class, population or the rise of the market (commercialisation), as illegitimate. In his early paper in 1976 Brenner had criticised demographic historians by arguing that their theory of historical causation simply replaced the Smithian ‘key variable’ of the rise of the market with their own population-resource driven demographic cycles. While doing so they either rejected class as a concept, or treated it as a dependent variable. Critics, including those same historians who used to privilege demographic fluctuations in historical causation, accuse Brenner of doing the same with what they regard as his own ‘key variable’ of class and class struggle. Many lines have been written recently on the virtue of a pluralist approach whereby all economic and social factors have equal validity in determining a historical outcome and should be taken together without privileging any particular element of causation. What is interesting is that while these historians criticise the concept of a prime mover, Brenner’s use of class in particular, they do so in different ways and this illuminates fundamental flaws in their critiques. Misreadings of Brenner abound, and this is further illustrated by the work of one influential historian whose critique as we shall see below cannot actually identify a prime mover in Brenner’s work. Others, while wishing to join in with the pluralist turn, still privilege the market, and cannot see beyond it.

J. Hatcher and M. Bailey: The Case for Pluralism I

While certainly no Marxists, John Hatcher and Mark Bailey have been cited as representing a move towards acknowledging the contributions of Marxist historians because in a recent work they presented class as a historical determinant of equal importance to population and commerce. In their own words

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1 Wickham 2007, pp. 34–5, referring to Hatcher and Bailey 2001. This is more surprising than it sounds. For example, in 1999 Andy Wood could state that ‘H.N. Brailsford’s comment of
Hatcher and Bailey have described the Marxist, historical materialist, approach as ‘commendably ambitious’ as ‘it opens up the possibilities of constructing a comprehensive overview which maps and measures the multiplicity of interconnections between political, social, economic, legal, cultural and religious institutions, ideologies and practices and of providing explanations of economic and social change which take them fully into account’. For them the Marxist contribution has also been ‘in seeking answers to some of the biggest questions which confront medieval historians, and in searching for the roots of capitalism and the origins of industrialisation in the fundamental changes in agrarian structure, conditions of tenure, and relations between landlords and tenants, which took place within the Middle Ages’.²

However for Hatcher and Bailey the ambition of historical materialism is not matched by what they see as a focus by Marxists on class as the prime mover which determines and drives the ‘multiplicity of interconnections’. According to them, Marxists have resorted to ‘ingenious gyrations’ in order to avoid what they view as the obvious flaws in trying to demonstrate the centrality of class.³ For Hatcher and Bailey, Brenner’s application of historical materialism is one of the least convincing. They argue that he belongs to an older Marxist tradition constituted by Maurice Dobb and Evgeny Kosminsky which mistakenly equates feudalism with serfdom, and locates the instability and collapse of feudalism ‘almost exclusively’ in the struggle for rent and the destructive exploitation of the unfree peasantry. They assert that the strength of the argument of this old defunct Marxism derives directly from its simplicity which is achieved by denying the significance of economic and demographic forces, and by focusing selectively on particular components of the feudal system. This old tradition is set against a more reputable set of ‘Neo-Marxist variants’ which is, according to them, represented in the work of Perry Anderson and of medieval historians Guy Bois and Rodney Hilton. Anderson is praised for his eclecticism while Hilton and Bois are applauded as ‘Marxists who place considerable weight on changes in the whole mode of production, and thus propose broader and subtler interpretations of the forces at work in medieval

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2 Hatcher and Bailey 2001, p. 95.
3 Hatcher and Bailey 2001, p. 120.