Chapter 4

Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism

In the foregoing critiques of Robert Brenner, the theme of the relative strength of England’s lords and peasantry – social classes viewed as organised political communities – has often been central. This is necessarily so given that, in Brenner’s account, the feudal crisis of the early fourteenth century in England, and the unintended emergence of agrarian capitalism in the following century, were the outcomes of fundamental conflicting strategies for reproduction between lords and peasants, as determined by specific feudal social-property relations in England. One of the pillars of Brenner’s thesis is the identification of a relatively stronger lordship and cohesive aristocracy and monarchy in England vis-à-vis the peasantry (compared to that in France between 1100 and the feudal crisis of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries), and his conclusion that this relative strength and cohesion determined divergences in economic and political developments between these two countries in the fifteenth century and early modern period.

England emerged after the conquest by the Normans with one of the most centralised polities in Europe, and with a mutually supportive monarchy and aristocracy. This translated into relatively mature centralised parliamentary and legal systems by the end of the thirteenth century. Brenner argued that, as a consequence of this cohesion amongst the English ruling class, English lords were able to extract an increasingly greater proportion of income from the peasantry during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries following the tightening of dues during the conquest itself. He cited the well-known consignment of half of the peasantry to villeinage in a legal revolution around 1200 which removed their ability to appeal beyond their lord’s manorial lordship to royal justice, and subjected them to relatively high rents and arbitrary exploitation.1 He argued that it was the ability of English lords to continuously raise dues from a large section of the English peasantry which helped them to profit from the economic expansion and intensive commercialisation of the thirteenth century. Hence they were able to maintain their incomes during a century in which inflation trebled the prices of arable produce, and in which there was pressure on lords for increased expenditure on political accumulation, warfare and display. At the same time, lords resisted uncompromisingly any move on

1 Important statements on the depression of the status of the peasantry in this period are in Hilton 1976, pp. 174–91, but see also P.R. Hyams, 1980, and Dyer 1996, pp. 277–95.
the part of the peasantry towards charted rights in their customary holdings, something that the peasants in France achieved. Brenner cited the well-known evidence of lordship victories in the spate of legal battles with their peasant tenants in England in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries as evidence of their continuing strength relative to lords in France, a country which in the same period typically experienced peasant victories. The feudal crisis began from the middle of the thirteenth century in France as French lords experienced a reduction in their income because peasants managed to secure fixed rents in what was an inflationary era. By contrast, in England the problems for lords began only in the early fourteenth century, hence the more assertive nature of lords against peasants in the courts at this time.

For Brenner, this continuous reduction in the real income of peasant households in England undermined the ability of peasants to invest and improve their holdings. At the same time, it increased their liability to impoverishment and famine as holdings got smaller due to increasing population pressure on the land and declining labour productivity. To add weight to his case, Brenner pointed out that where tenures were freer, such as in parts of East Anglia, greater densities of the peasant population were achieved on very small holdings as peasants had more options to improve labour productivity, and had time for industrial sidelines before crisis ensued. In France the decline of lordship income led to improvements in the financial machinery of the French state by the late thirteenth century. The consequent increase in the state-imposed tax burden on the peasantry undermined the high density and freer customary peasant property there. The property of French peasants was further undermined by warfare which took place on French soil in the early fourteenth century, warfare which the extra taxation funded. Developments in state taxation in England at the same time, in order to fund warfare, also served to undermine the better-off peasants in England who were subjected to it.

So for Brenner it was the nature of feudal social-property relations and feudal rules for reproduction that led to specific forms of feudal evolution and feudal crisis. Lords were forced to extract a surplus from the peasantry thereby undermining production, and they were forced to expand laterally into new holdings rather than allow customary peasants the freedom to improve productive efficiency on the old. The strength of feudal lordship, namely the capacity of lords to coerce the peasantry into giving up a surplus, and the unequal allocation of property, determined the income distribution between lords and peasants in different regions and this led to feudal crisis in different ways and at different times. When the crisis was confirmed and exacerbated by the Great Famine and the Black Death, the land-labour ratio tipped in favour of the peasants in the long run. Yet unlike in France, the continuity of relative