Chapter 3

Review of Guy Lemarchand, *Paysans et seigneurs en Europe*

It was in sixteenth-century England (and Holland) that capitalism first appeared. Its origins were dealt with by Marx especially in Part Eight of *Capital* entitled ‘So-called Primitive Accumulation’.¹ This discussion became the foundation of Maurice Dobb’s celebrated *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, which appeared just after World War Two.² Dobb’s work gave rise to the famous transition debate of the 1950s on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, involving Marxist luminaries such as Dobb, Paul Sweezy, Rodney Hilton and Kohachiro Takahashi.³ Georges Lefebvre, who held the professorship on the French Revolution at the Sorbonne, was the only French contributor. Lefebvre acknowledged Dobb’s emphasis on the role of the petty producers to the transition but, conscious of the long evolution of the *Ancien Régime*, insisted on the importance of merchants and the state to the development of capitalism. Lefebvre underscored that the moment of transition from feudalism to capitalism in France coincided with the revolution and that conflict between petty producers and merchants was an intrinsic element in the revolutionary process.⁴

Lefebvre was part of a line of distinguished French historians who held to the Marxist view that the revolution was capitalist and bourgeois, a view that gradually made itself dominant in France in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.⁵ Lefebvre’s interpretation, which came to the fore from the 1930s onwards, was extended by his successor at the Sorbonne, Albert Soboul, whose massive work on the revolutionary urban masses or *sans-culottes* of Paris was published at the end of the 1950s.⁶ The Marxist interpretation of the revolu-

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2 Dobb 1946.
5 Mazauric 2009.
6 Soboul 1958.
tion was challenged from the 1970s onward by a revisionist trend whose most important protagonist was François Furet. The revisionist view of the history of the French Revolution was part of a broad reaction against Marxism in scholarship, culture and politics that marked the neoliberal period. Revisionist historiography was especially strong in the English-speaking countries but never established itself as dominant in France despite the influence of Furet. The Marxist interpretation in fact was convincingly reasserted by Soboul’s successor in the Sorbonne chair, Michel Vovelle, who successfully incorporated the quantitative and culturalist approaches of the *Annales* school into the Marxist view as can be seen in a masterwork such as *Religion et Révolution: la déchristianisation de l’An II*.

Likewise upholding the Marxist view in the closing years of the twentieth century was Guy Lemarchand of the University of Rouen, who published *La fin du féodalisme dans le pays de Caux*, a profoundly materialist analysis which examined the roots of the crisis of feudalism in Normandy at the end of the Ancien Régime. Lemarchand’s deep study of the contradictions of feudalism which led to the revolution in the *pays de Caux* was published in 1989, the year of the Bicentennial. In the face of revisionist challenges Lemarchand’s patient and exhaustive investigation of the roots of the revolution in upper Normandy coolly demonstrated once again how effective a Marxist approach to the study of the revolution could be. A few years later Lemarchand followed up with an analysis of the overall economic and social history of France during the period 1770 to 1830. Lemarchand convincingly showed that, despite continuities with its rural and traditional past, France as a whole experienced a revolutionary transition to bourgeois rule and the capitalist mode of production.

The transition to capitalism continues to be an ongoing source of interest to scholars. But so, too, does the nature of the feudal mode which was antecedent to the rise of capitalism. Of particular interest is the question of whether feudalism was in fact a mode of production unique to Europe or whether it was common to different formations across Europe and Asia and perhaps might be better understood as part of a more comprehensive mode of production which includes other pre-capitalist formations. The question of the uniqueness of

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7 Christofferson 2001.
8 Vovelle 1976.
10 Lemarchand 2008.
11 Heller 2011.
12 Blackledge (ed.) 2011.