
The aim of Jane Whittle’s book is to identify and explain the origins of agrarian capitalism in England. Its motivation lies in testing Robert Brenner’s influential class-based explanation of the origins of capitalism with a detailed empirical study of historical change. Her study focuses on the village of Marsham, part of the manor of Hevingham Bishops in north-east Norfolk, eastern England, in the period of 1440–1580. Comparisons are made with nearby manors and villages where evidence survives. This area was chosen because of its wealth of surviving evidence, Norfolk’s advanced commercial credentials, and its particularly rebellious population having featured strongly in both the 1381 rising and Kett’s rebellion of 1549 (pp. 1–2).

Whittle’s particular explanation emphasizes property structures and class in the determination of the transition to capitalism, and she accepts Marx’s assertion that the most important aspects of the transition are the dissolution of serfdom and the subsequent expropriation of the peasantry from the land (p. 16). However, she takes issue with Brenner’s application of Marx in regard to the chronology of the changes, the concept of ‘prime mover’ in determining change whether class, demographic, or commercialisation, the extent of lordship interference versus autonomous peasant activity, the role of class alliances in the changes, and the question of the security of land tenure. Before looking more closely at these points of contention, Whittle’s overall conceptual apparatus for understanding the transition will be addressed.

Feudalism versus peasant society

Whittle is critical of the use of the concept of feudalism and its theoretical capacity to develop into capitalism, the latter being defined as a system ‘dominated by production for the market and a particular type of labour’, and only fully developed by the late eighteenth century after the parliament-induced enclosures finished off a long process of transition. She equates the feudal mode of production with the social relations of serfdom, and so it follows that because serfdom largely died out in England by about 1420, ‘we have to accept the period from the mid-fifteenth century to the late eighteenth century as a “gap” between modes of production, rather than “transitional” or “mixed”. Her preferred concept is ‘peasant society’ which she says offers a more useful and flexible theorization of the type of economy preceding capitalism in
England and other parts of the world, than feudalism can provide. Her application of the concept of ‘peasant society’ focuses on the peasant household and family labour for subsistence with partial market integration. The household exists, however, within a larger political unit, or state, where peasants’ political and legal rights are inferior to those of the ruling class to whom they pay rent or tax (pp. 10–12). She then goes on to suggest that ‘a model in which peasant economy and society merges into capitalism is preferable to that in which capitalism is seen as rising inevitably out of a void created by the collapse of feudalism’ (p. 16).

These formulations will frustrate historians engaged in the transition debate, particularly Marxists. To begin with, her definition of peasant society cannot be distinguished from generally acknowledged applications of it within feudal terms, except that it importantly de-emphasises the presence and role of the feudal ruling class and its property and power base. But most significantly, serfdom, that is, labour rent and other servile or customary services, forms only one aspect of the feudal rent or levy imposed upon peasants within feudal society. Other aspects include seigniorial monopolies of mills and ovens, court fines, enforced money rents and state taxation to which the large percentage of freeholders were also subject to, along with the peasants from manors and regions where serfdom dues were either very light or non-existent. An end date for feudalism in 1420 is therefore misleading, as is the consequent denial of a possible transition from feudalism to capitalism. As I understand it, the concept of the transition from feudalism to capitalism assumes that elements of these distinct societies co-exist within a transitional social formation, and the capitalist mode of production and the related institutions and culture that form capitalist society become predominant over time following the circumstances of its uneven emergence and its extension. Whittle’s perspective serves the purpose for her emphasis on the natural workings of the market and autonomous peasant activity in determining change, and I will return to this point below.

The prime mover

Whittle’s rejection of Brenner’s assertion of class as prime mover in the transition is based upon a misreading and a misunderstanding. Firstly, she accuses him of emphasising class relations without reference to demographic change and wider economic factors, and, secondly, she asserts that ‘prime mover’ explanations ‘have an inherent weakness, creating the impression that historical change was inevitable once certain conditions are attained’ (pp. 26–7). The first point cannot be sustained as Brenner has consistently asserted, most recently in his paper on the Low Countries, that the outcomes of demographic change and commercialisation are determined by their mediation by the given social-property structure and the balance of class forces in a particular region.2 The second point carries little force where it concerns class as prime mover. It is in the nature of class struggle that outcomes are open-ended and not inevitable. As Brenner states in an early essay, ‘it needs to be remembered that even in the west the collapse of serfdom did not lead in any automatic way to capitalism or successful economic development’.3