

# HOW DID THE FEUDAL ECONOMY WORK? THE ECONOMIC LOGIC OF MEDIEVAL SOCIETIES\*

Economies have not had the same internal structure across human history. Some of the simplest elements of economics are of course found pretty much everywhere, such as the relationship in commercial transactions between supply, demand and price. But there are fundamental differences between, in particular, economic systems that are based on the taking of surplus, in products, services or money, from peasants, and those that are based on paying wages or salaries to workers. There are other such systems too, but these two have been the most widespread in recorded history. The first of the two, what Karl Marx called the feudal mode of production, was the most widespread and longest lasting of all — capitalism, the second, has only had, after all, a couple of centuries of existence — but it is capitalism whose internal logic, whose patterns of development and change, has been by far the most fully studied, from Marx himself onwards. So, if we want to understand history — or economics — better, we need to understand feudalism better.<sup>1</sup>

\*I gave the first version of this text as a lecture to honour the memory of Eric Hobsbawm, sponsored by Birkbeck, University of London, on 14 May 2019. I thank Jan Rüger, Rebecca Darley and the whole of the Birkbeck History Department for a highly stimulating occasion. I am very grateful to Leslie Brubaker, Sandro Carocci, Chris Dyer, John Haldon, Matthew Hilton, Kevin O'Rourke, Paolo Tedesco and especially Shami Ghosh for critiques of this text; they do not all agree with its conclusions. It has later struck me that it is also so influenced by Rodney Hilton, Hobsbawm's long-time associate, that it is appropriate to honour his memory too.

<sup>1</sup> I need to add a terminological note from the start: I shall refer to the feudal economy (or mode of production) and feudalism interchangeably. These words are not ever to be taken here as referring to the fief–vassal relationship among the medieval military aristocracy, which is also called 'feudalism' in the literature; I discussed the range of meanings of the word in 'Le forme del feudalesimo', *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo*, xlvii (2000). For more detailed characterizations of what feudalism means in the context of this article, see section I below.

These are not particularly controversial statements, except possibly the last; all the same, an unevenness in analytical focus has too often meant that the underlying rules of capitalist economics are taken, implicitly, to be valid across all time and space. Even the new wave of non-European economic histories of the pre-industrial period, which aim to show — and in my view do show — that parts of China and India were as economically complex as parts of Europe up to and into the eighteenth century, do not spend any pages on establishing alternative logics for the economies they are studying.<sup>2</sup> The most systematic challenge to this of course comes from Marxism itself, which takes it as axiomatic that capitalist rules are contingent, and can in the future be superseded; but this has remained a challenge on the level of economic and political theory, as actual empirical examples of post-capitalist economies have been hard to establish on any long-term basis so far. The most sustained empirical challenge has in fact come from substantivist anthropology, which has identified and theorized the economic practices of relatively egalitarian societies across the globe, dramatically divergent as they generally are from any capitalist logic; but in practice this work has been mostly restricted to societies without classes, and it scales up less well once issues of political and economic dominance come in.<sup>3</sup> So I want in this article to try to get beyond that, by offering an at least partial analysis of the internal economic dynamic of the

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000); Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and R. Bin Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge, 2011); and R. Bin Wong's important contribution, 'China before Capitalism', in Larry Neal and Jeffrey G. Williamson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2014), i, ch. 6, an often strange book. For discussions, see at n. 21 below.

<sup>3</sup> Classics include Maurice Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics* (London, 1972), 243–319; Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972). The original substantivist theorist, Karl Polanyi, certainly thought that his categorizations were valid for class societies — see, above all, Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg and Harry W. Pearson (eds.), *Trade and Market in the Early Empires: Economics in History and Theory* (Glencoe, Ill., 1957); but for me his empirical applications wear considerably less well than his underlying approach.

feudal mode of production. To do so, I focus on data from the Middle Ages in Europe, although I extend my discussions into North Africa and Asia, and both before 500 and after 1500, where relevant. A global economic history of feudalism is much needed, and by now is probably possible, at least in outline, but it would extend far beyond the confines of a single article.

Marx wrote about this sometimes, of course, above all in his *Formen*, ‘Forms that Precede Capitalist Production’ in its full title. This was part of his *Grundrisse*, which was not written for publication, and was not easily available until an East German edition appeared in 1953. Eric Hobsbawm translated the *Formen* into English in 1964, with a lucid introduction that still stands as one of the most systematic accounts of what Marx actually thought about pre-capitalist economies, and about how these functioned and changed in the light of their own contradictions. The problematic posed by Marx in this context will be a point of reference for me here. But only his problematic, not his actual conclusions. Marx was writing unpublished notes to himself in this text, not any kind of full discussion; and, as Hobsbawm indeed remarked, neither here nor anywhere else did he spend any time discussing the internal dynamic of feudalism — otherwise put, its economic logic (Marx might have preferred — as with his analyses of capitalism — its ‘laws of motion’).<sup>4</sup> Plenty of people have tried to guess what Marx would have said had he actually done this. This is effort wasted; no one working in the 1850s and 1860s knew enough about feudal societies to be able to make any kind of systematic analysis of their underlying economic logic. Probably, I regret to say, this is still true today. Restricting myself to the medieval period here, the list of what we do not know about fundamental elements of its economy (or

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, trans. Eric J. Hobsbawm (London, 1964); see 41–3 for Hobsbawm’s summary of Marx on feudalism, and 62–4 for global feudalism. This book still has to be read, for the force of Hobsbawm’s introduction, but as a translation it has been superseded by Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1973), 471–514, not least because the latter has the advantage, since the text is complete, of including the section on the original accumulation of capital, 459–71, which immediately precedes the *Formen* and gives a context to the latter section. One of the best descriptions of the feudal mode, Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Bernd Michael, ‘Zur Struktur und Dynamik der “feudalen” Produktionsweise im vorindustriellen Europa’, in Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Bernd Michael (eds.), *Feudalismus: Materialien zur Theorie und Geschichte* (Frankfurt, 1977), does not actually, despite its title, tell us much about its dynamic.

economies) is at least as long as the list of what we know with relative certainty. But we do have a lot more data, and sometimes, in well-studied regions, we have quite a detailed understanding of economic patterns in different medieval centuries; so we can perhaps get closer to an analysis of what was going on economically in the period. I have myself complained that no one has properly worked out the dominant economic logic of medieval societies, in earlier work. This is actually not entirely fair, for there have been a number of substantive discussions, particularly in the last two decades, which make important points for at least parts of medieval Europe and beyond; here I bounce off the work of several of them.<sup>5</sup> All the same, we need to confront the issue more explicitly; for to establish a model of feudal economics that can be set against the standard assumptions of capitalist economics is fundamental to any real understanding of how the medieval period worked as a whole, and not just the medieval period.

In this article I focus on relatively dynamic examples of feudal economies, which I argue are the most useful, because they are the most complex, guides to how a feudal economic logic might have worked, including in situations in which peasants have considerable access to markets. After introductory scene-setting in section I, which will inevitably be largely familiar to the experts, some of these examples will be worked through in more detail in section II, so as to make the empirical elements that underpin the arguments of the article as clear as possible. Only after that, in section III, will I have enough material to allow me to confront directly the main point that I want to make here, which is to propose how the basic structures of the logic of the feudal economy, taken as a whole, could actually be understood.

## I

Let us begin with a problem. In the pre-industrial world, there were many regions in which the economy showed great complexity, and in some sectors dynamism. There were large cities housing plenty of artisans producing for the market (many

<sup>5</sup> In rough chronological order, Rodney Hilton, Witold Kula, Robert Brenner, Guy Bois, Chris Dyer, John Haldon, Jane Whittle, Larry (S. R.) Epstein, Jairus Banaji, Bas van Bavel, Jessica Goldberg, Shami Ghosh. I cite their work in the notes that follow.

of them wage-labourers), Smithian growth based on developing divisions of labour, market-orientated agrarian economies in many cases (as indeed there would have to be if cities were large), and complex networks of exchange — sometimes underpinned by what we can legitimately call capital investment, and in some cases also by factor markets, that is, relatively integrated markets for land, labour and credit. Different parts of the Roman Empire in the first to sixth centuries, Iraq in the ninth, Egypt in the tenth to fourteenth, the Yangzi valley in the eleventh to thirteenth (many people would extend these Chinese dates into the eighteenth), Byzantium and Islamic Spain in the twelfth century, Flanders in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, north-central Italy in the thirteenth to sixteenth, south Germany in the fifteenth to seventeenth, Bengal and south India in the sixteenth to eighteenth, and also Holland and England in the sixteenth to eighteenth — all these dates are approximate and often contested at the margins — are most of the main examples, and there were others too. But almost none of them lasted, at least with the same degree of dynamism, even when they maintained a steady level of high-functioning productive and exchange intensity thereafter, which several of them did. When their dynamism did last, historians from the countries concerned are very keen to insist on it, but micro-regional analysis tends to undermine that insistence. In the case of the last two, in particular, it is an inconvenience to Dutch economic historians that industrialization actually started in Belgium, not in the exchange focus of the lands around Amsterdam, and in a relatively marginal area at that, in the middle Meuse valley; it is an inconvenience to English historians that the same change began in Lancashire and the West Midlands, also relatively marginal areas before 1600 or so, and not in early proto-industrial heartlands such as Gloucestershire and Kent.<sup>6</sup> So why did they not last, or become even more complex?

<sup>6</sup> See, for an insightful global survey of these economies, and others, Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium* (Princeton, 2007). For the Netherlands and Belgium, see, for example, Jan de Vries and Ad M. van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815* (Cambridge, 1997); Joel Mokyr, *Industrialization in the Low Countries, 1795–1850* (New Haven, 1976). For England, see the important regional discussions in Pat Hudson (ed.), *Regions and Industries: A Perspective on the Industrial Revolution in Britain* (Cambridge, 1989). Yorkshire is the clearest English case of a major proto-industrial focus (on wool

(cont. on p. 8)

The problem is a well-known one, of course, in a generic way at least. As a result, notwithstanding how excited historians can get when they analyse the high points, a metanarrative of failure — a failure to develop further in the direction of capitalism, that is — has underlain much of global economic history-writing. It goes back to a long-held assumption by historians, often into the 1970s (Marx held it too, in part), that towns and trade, and the use of money, were antithetical to the supposedly closed, subsistence-only, system of the feudal economy, and would in the end dissolve it, or should do so, at least.<sup>7</sup> Few people actually believe this any more, but the idea hangs around, getting in the way of more structured analyses. As a result, most explanations for ‘failure’ — I now put scare quotes around the word — have been piecemeal, focused on one region at a time. War, conquest and plague recur in these explanations: the break-up of the Roman Empire, the Mongol invasion of China, the Black Death, the British in India. Nor would one really want to doubt at least some of these specific interpretations (for some of them work much better than others), although it is worth saying already that, for many of these cases, historians have also stressed internal structural problems: as with, for example, a highly stimulating recent study of factor markets in three of the cases I have cited (Iraq, Italy and the Netherlands) by Bas van Bavel.<sup>8</sup> But why did a fall back from economic dynamism happen so regularly? Here, ‘failure’ is not at all the point, as I discuss later; for I would answer that it has to do with the logic of feudalism.

All of this obviously begs the question of what feudalism is, for I am here using the word in a way that evidently extends well

(n. 6 cont.)

production) that did become an industrial focus; see Pat Hudson, *The Genesis of Industrial Capital: A Study of the West Riding Wool Textile Industry, c. 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> See, emblematically, Michael M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (Berkeley, 1972), 212–13; Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Englewood Cliffs, 1971), 148–64. For Marx’s double view of the issue, contrast *Capital, Volume III*, trans. David Fernbach (London, 1981), ch. 20 with ch. 47.4. Against, a good — because it is explicit — instance is R. H. Hilton, *English and French Towns in Feudal Society: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1992); but see also the (still) interesting brainstorming over the issue already in the 1950s, in Rodney Hilton (ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Bas van Bavel, *The Invisible Hand? How Market Economies Have Emerged and Declined since AD 500* (Oxford, 2016). See below, section II, for Italy.

beyond medieval western Europe, its traditional location. Here, as stated already, I am using it in its economic sense as a mode of production, derived again from Marx and his contemporaries, but generalizing out from them; in its ideal-type form, it is a socio-economic system based on the exploitative relations of production between peasants, that is to say subsistence cultivators, and lords. At its core are peasant family units, who work the land and raise animals, usually do some subsistence artisanal work such as weaving, and also, in regions where they are available, mine metals. I will, I need to state at the outset, treat the peasant family as a unit, so will not discuss gender; inside the family, work was highly gendered — men ploughing and women spinning and weaving was a cliché from France to China — but that is not my topic here.<sup>9</sup> I apologize to medievalist readers for the basic level of what I am going to say for the next few paragraphs, but it is necessary to set out the ideal type more fully, so as to be clear.

Peasants were the vast majority of the inhabitants of the world in any period between the Neolithic and the twentieth century. They controlled and, where peasantries continue to exist, still control the production process, what is actually produced on the land. Not all of them had lords in any period, but in feudal societies most of them did. The main relationship of dominance and system of surplus expropriation here consists of peasants giving surplus, often but not only in rent and services, to lords, in various forms, under the at least implicit threat of

<sup>9</sup> I stress here feudal relations of production; I do not see the other part of the Marxist dyad, technology and productive knowledge (the ‘productive forces’), as determinant here. See Chris Wickham, ‘Productive Forces and the Economic Logic of the Feudal Mode of Production’, *Historical Materialism*, xvi (2008). Actually, however, medieval agrarian technology has often been underrated: see, for example, Stephan R. Epstein, *Freedom and Growth: The Rise of States and Markets in Europe, 1300–1750* (Abingdon, 2000), 38–49; Bruce M. S. Campbell, ‘Progressiveness and Backwardness in Thirteenth- and Early Fourteenth-Century English Agriculture: The Verdict of Recent Research’, in Jean-Marie Duvoisquel and Erik Thoen (eds.), *Peasants and Townsmen in Medieval Europe: Studia in honorem Adriaan Verhulst* (Ghent, 1995); Janken Myrdal and Alexandra Sapoznik, ‘Technology, Labour, and Productivity Potential in Peasant Agriculture’, *Agricultural History Review*, lxv (2017). For gender stereotypes, see, for example, Odo of Cluny, *Vita s. Gerdaldi Auriliacensis comitis*, 1.21, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia latina*, cxxxiii (Paris, 1881), cols. 639–704; David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (New York, 1990); Li Bozhong, *Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620–1850* (Basingstoke, 1998), 143.

violence.<sup>10</sup> The surplus that lords take thus depends on actual or potential class struggle, and is not based directly on the market.<sup>11</sup> Lords can affect the production process by demanding different types of rent, and they frequently do. But they do not have a structural role in production, and their attempts to exercise forms of direct control over it, although these are certainly documented (indeed, quite well documented, as our records tend to be the work of lords), have seldom lasted all that long. They are thus not only external as exploiters, but also for the most part very visibly so — unlike under capitalism, where capitalists dominate the labour process directly, and the exploitation involved is hidden by the apparently free nature of the wage-labour contract. Such external powers, which I am here generically calling ‘lords’, can be landlords extracting rent, or states and other political powers exacting tax or tribute, or both. In the medieval period, rent, and even tax, could be in labour, on the lord’s directly cultivated land (the ‘demesne’) or on public roads, fortifications, or dykes; it could be in produce (the default pattern in all societies); but only if exchange was sufficiently developed would it be in money, for peasants would have to be able to sell produce systematically to get the coins to do so. Exchange could indeed be highly developed, and peasants

<sup>10</sup> Actual violence during rent-taking is less well documented; rent was relatively routinized, and, if customary, relatively accepted by peasants — the point will be developed later. (Tax-taking had much more of a violent aspect in many societies, precisely because it was less accepted.) But it was there as a threat all the same, and the potential for lordly violence was in general very visible, if only because it was used frequently (and often at peasants’ expense) in conflicts with other lords.

<sup>11</sup> There are nuances here; there were some relevant market forces, such as the scarcity of tenants after the Black Death. Additionally, even in the Middle Ages, there could be lease markets, linked to land markets, which were quite stable — for one example, from twelfth-century Lucca, see Arnold Esch, ‘Lucca im 12. Jahrhundert’ (Univ. of Göttingen Habilitation thesis, 1974, unpubd), 47 ff., 83; van Bavel, *Invisible Hand?*, has others, esp. at 157–9, for the late medieval Low Countries. But coercion and resistance lay behind the setting of rent levels in the first place, given the differences in power between landlords and tenants, and, with some exceptions, the relative lack of mobility of peasant families. That was true even around Lucca, where landlordly power was in fact relatively restricted: Chris Wickham, *Community and Clientele in Twelfth-Century Tuscany: The Origins of the Rural Commune in the Plain of Lucca* (Oxford, 1998), 21–8. In most feudal environments, furthermore, lease markets hardly existed; and land markets, although better documented, tended to work differently in feudal contexts, given the close relationship between gaining land and gaining power — see Laurent Feller and Chris Wickham (eds.), *Le marché de la terre au Moyen Âge* (Rome, 2006). Thanks to Kevin O’Rourke for forcing me to clarify my ideas here.

could produce substantially for the market, but they had to be sure of their subsistence needs first. Pure cash cropping, where peasants produce only for sale, and have to buy food in, was almost unknown under feudalism, and indeed was rare until the twentieth century even under capitalism. (Partial cash cropping was, by contrast, frequent, when lords required it and/or markets made it advantageous, but that was in addition to subsistence needs, not replacing them.)<sup>12</sup> These are patterns that can be found very widely in the history of Eurasia, from well before the Roman Empire up to the present, and extending to much of sub-Saharan Africa and the New World, although neither of the last-mentioned had many landlords in the strict sense before the Europeans arrived.

This is why I have never had any difficulty seeing feudalism as a world system. In 100 AD, say, the core of the system was the same from Roman Gaul to Han China, and so it was throughout most of post-Roman and post-Han history. The serfdom-and-labour-service version of this, well known to Western medievalists, and thought by many of these historians (as also by Marx) to be *the* feudal economy, was only one variant of the system. And, indeed, it had plenty of variants, even in the Middle Ages. Landed estates could have rent-paying tenants, forced labour, and wage-labour all at once, or move between them; although wage-labour is quintessentially part of capitalism as a system, it had plenty of antecedents in feudal economies, certainly in artisanal production in towns, but also in rural society, as a minority form of exploitation, very often seasonal.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Wickham, 'Productive Forces and the Economic Logic of the Feudal Mode of Production', for more discussion; some of the phrases used here are taken from it (that article is a counterpart to this one, covering slightly different points, although it is more tentative). Compare also Marx, *Capital, Volume III*, ch. 47, on forms of pre-capitalist rent.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), 259–302, 535–6; for the non-European world, for example, Chris Wickham, *Land and Power: Studies in Italian and European Social History, 400–1200* (London, 1994), 43–75; Chris Wickham, 'Jiangnan Style', in John H. Arnold, Matthew Hilton and Jan Rüger (eds.), *History after Hobsbawm: Writing the Past for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, 2018), ch. 7. Feudalism on the global level (here called the 'tributary mode', an alternative and equally valid term) is best discussed by John Haldon, *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (London, 1993). I have sometimes described the feudal mode too summarily as simply constituted by rent-taking; Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden, 2010), 2–3 is right to criticize that — one has to understand the whole system,

(cont. on p. 12)

The ways that rent and its analogues were presented and justified also varied greatly. Lords, being highly visible as exploiters, needed to justify their claimed rights to take surplus; they risked resistance if they did not, and, even though they had a superiority in weaponry, they were hugely outnumbered by peasants. Some of that justification was in terms of property rights, as, even though peasants possessed the land, they did not always — not usually — have full rights over it. Some of it derived from claims that a proportion of peasants had an intrinsically subject status, so, as unfree people, were subject to direct control on the part of lords; the latter extracted ‘servile’ burdens, which in practice were simply heavier rents, services, and other dues (English sadly lacks the useful French word *prélèvement*, which covers all such levies). Closely related to that, at least in the specific case of western Europe, were the similar ‘seigneurial’ dues demanded by many lords as local political powers, justified by claims of lordly protection and local justice; these were sometimes devolved public rights, with lords taking on the local role of the State, but they were also often in competition with the taxation or tribute-taking of rulers.<sup>14</sup> Tax and tribute, widely across Eurasia, were taken by kings, emperors, caliphs, sultans — or, sometimes, a local city state — as a form of super-lord, deriving from their own political rights of command and dominance, in return, once again, for protection and justice. In Europe, we can add churches, which developed their own quasi-taxation, the tithe, on top of their landowning, to finance their activities.<sup>15</sup> Some unfortunate peasant groups owed dues of all of these kinds at once.

(n. 13 cont.)

and to recognize that every mode uses a variety of labour forms, a point Banaji makes across his book. Direct cultivation through slave labour, in itself a different mode of production, was also in the Middle Ages dominated by the structure of rent-taking, as on a few Carolingian manors. See n. 46 below; and we will amply see references to wages in feudal formations later. But I resist Banaji’s associated claim (*Theory as History*, 198–203, see also 74, 145–7), that some peasant tenures were so circumscribed by lords, and so difficult to live off, that they really constituted a ‘wage in land’, and can thus be assimilated to wage-labour; as far as I can see, most of these examples were still subsistence, peasant, cultivation.

<sup>14</sup> There are convenient collective surveys of this variety in Monique Bourin and Pascual Martínez Sopena (eds.), *Pour une anthropologie du prélèvement seigneurial dans les campagnes médiévales (XI<sup>e</sup>–XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 2004–7).

<sup>15</sup> For tithe, see, for example, Michel Lauwers (ed.), *La dîme, l’Église et la société féodale* (Turnhout, 2012); for taxation, see n. 56 below.

I am just listing here; to be more systematic, I would have to unpick all the different forms each took, separately and (very often) together, in a hundred or more different societies. Each varied greatly in scale, too; taxation could be the main form of surplus extraction, or else hardly visible when compared with rent. It is also important to recognize that, of all of these forms of surplus extraction, taxation was usually far and away the most efficient (even when not the heaviest), and that states based on an effective system of taxation had a wholly different political structure, and far greater stability and power, than the kingdoms or lordships of any king or lord whose wealth principally derived from the rents from landowning. This is a topic I have discussed at length elsewhere, in fact;<sup>16</sup> but it is not the focus of this article. Nor is political change in general, which before 1800 went more with shifts in the balance of the different types of feudal surplus extraction than with its underlying logic. Here, rather, it is simply necessary to stress that all of these separate institutional forms, each of which had its own history and patterns of development — and each of which has also had intensive study in most parts of Eurasia — had in one respect the same essence and purpose, namely to justify taking away agricultural and other surplus from peasants, who could see very well that it had been created by themselves. Peasants were sometimes convinced; interestingly, judging by what they revolted against (which they did more frequently than historians tend to claim, at least in some periods and regions), they were convinced most often by landowners' claims to property rights, least often by justifications for taxation and unfreedom, with seigneurial rights and tithe in the middle.<sup>17</sup> But they were at least quasi-convinced, above all if dues were sanctioned and — crucially — stabilized by custom, which meant that they knew where they were and could make their own forward calculations. Rent and tax were actually sometimes hard to distinguish; but when they were, they were just separate institutional forms, and also separate ideological forms, of the same relationship of

<sup>16</sup> Among others, Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 56–150.

<sup>17</sup> See Justine Firnhaber-Baker and Dirk Schoenaers (eds.), *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt* (Abingdon, 2017) for recent work; Samuel K. Cohn Jr, *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200–1425* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006) for the frequency of European revolts.

surplus extraction: peasants having to give their products to lords, with the implicit threat of force.

This was then the core feudal, and for my purposes here also the core medieval, social and economic relationship. On a simple level, all of the rest of society — all the bits of the medieval world that people tend to think of first — was based on this: royal courts and their finery, ambitious buildings, literature and art and music, law, madrasas and universities, armies, and also all the buzz of commercial activity in the dynamic regional economies listed at the start of this article, at least insofar as that commerce was directed to the buying power of lords and their entourages, which it was in large part. It was all paid for by forcing peasants to hand over their produce. For that reason, I have often resisted the imagery of economic ‘development’ as a simplistic positive construct when discussing the medieval (and also most of the ancient and early modern) world; for what it means, to a very substantial extent, is simply lords getting more out of peasants, so that they can spend it on themselves in more complex ways.<sup>18</sup> We all know it, actually; even politicians know it, which is a major reason why ‘feudal’ is by no means a polite word in political discourse, even most of that of the far right, and indeed has not been since it was popularized by Montesquieu in the 1740s. But we tend to forget it in practice, when we celebrate whichever aspect of medieval culture and society most attracts us. All this is, anyway, what historians like Rodney Hilton meant when they said that the basic feudal ‘prime mover’ was class struggle, over, precisely, these rents and dues.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> This sets aside urban economic development, which did indeed — as it was generally driven by increases in artisan production — genuinely add to the overall prosperity of regional economies, and peasants benefited from this too; this will be discussed further below, with reference to Italy. But we will also see there that even that development remained part of a feudal economic system; the logic did not change, except in relatively restricted sectors.

<sup>19</sup> Montesquieu was thinking first of fiefs and vassals, the strand of feudal categorization not discussed here (see n. 1 above), but he automatically extended this (for example, *De l'esprit des lois*, bk XXX, ch. 20) to seigneurial rights of justice, that is, part of the ‘feudal’ dues abolished by the National Assembly in 1790. For Montesquieu and his predecessors, see Ian Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013), 19–41. For the class struggle over rent, a classic formulation is Rodney Hilton, ‘Introduction’ and ‘A Comment’, in *Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, 9–29, 109–17; see also, more recently,

This much is clear, then; but what is rather less clear is how the consequentials worked. How, exactly, did the ‘struggle for rent’ underpin the rest of the economy, including the commercial economy, and its internal logic? Here we are not helped by much of the historiography. Modern-orientated European economic history tends, still today, to see pre-capitalist (or pre-industrial, or just ‘pre-modern’) economies as basically primitive, ‘backward’ as they are sometimes described, unable to take advantage of the technological breakthroughs that presented themselves; or else — or, sometimes, as well as — simply potentially modern societies, running by modern economic rules, but just undermined or blocked by institutional failures, or sometimes furthered by their efficiencies, as in much New Institutional Economic history.<sup>20</sup> Different regions get brownie points for being more *like* modern societies; the active economies in the list I began with get seen as handing the torch on, one to another, until it finally ended up in its natural home, seventeenth- or eighteenth-century England, ready for industrial society to be born. There is more thoughtful work, of course, but I am not exaggerating this as a general tendency; it explains, among other things, the heat with which economic historians of England initially reacted to Kenneth Pomeranz’s arguments that the Yangzi Delta region in eastern China had as complex an economy as England as late as the eighteenth century, for unusually heated arguments are always a guide to the hidden but ideologically crucial assumptions of micro-communities of historians — in Jacques Derrida’s terminology, they illuminate the unrecognized aporias in metanarratives.<sup>21</sup> I would add, as an

(n. 19 cont.)

John Haldon, ‘Theories of Practice: Marxist History-Writing and Complexity’, *Historical Materialism*, xxi (2013).

<sup>20</sup> One influential New Institutional Economic treatment of medieval commerce is Avner Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge, 2006); some of his specific empirical claims are effectively contested in Jessica L. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and Their Business World* (Cambridge, 2012), 41–2, 148–9, 155–6, 357–8. Sheilagh Ogilvie, ‘“Whatever Is, Is Right”?: Economic Institutions in Pre-Industrial Europe’, *Economic History Review*, lx (2007), critiques New Institutional approaches — from inside the same field, but, convincingly, by stressing the considerable role of institutions in economic coercion. There are other recent modern-focused theoretical approaches to the medieval period, but for me they have even less traction.

<sup>21</sup> See Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*; and the debates in *Journal of Asian Studies*, lxi (2002), lxii (2003). See further the analyses of the next stages of the debate in

(cont. on p. 16)

example of general incomprehension, the tendency for many economic historians, even good ones, to ‘explain’ the uniqueness of early modern England (plus Holland) by showing that documented wage rates in these countries were much higher than in southern Europe, never mind Asia, or indeed the Roman Empire: neglecting the fact that peasants were not actually paid wages, and that the proportion of wage-labourers in early modern China, the main Asian comparator, was only some 10 per cent.<sup>22</sup>

As for traditional European medieval economic history, both Marxist and non-Marxist, it was for a long time hardly more

(n. 21 cont.)

Peer Vries, ‘The California School and Beyond: How to Study the Great Divergence?’, *History Compass*, viii (2010), and especially Shami Ghosh, ‘The “Great Divergence”: Politics and Capitalism’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, xix (2015), which analyses some major recent contributions. The debate has by now become calmer, with more agreement that the Yangzi — and, now, parts of India (see n. 2 above) — and England were similar until at least 1700.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cambridge, 2009), 33–48, 112–30; Robert C. Allen, ‘The Great Divergence in European Wages and Prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War’, *Explorations in Economic History*, xxxviii (2001); Robert C. Allen, ‘Real Wages in Europe and Asia: A First Look at the Long-Term Patterns’, in Robert C. Allen, Tommy Bengtsson and Martin Dribe (eds.), *Living Standards in the Past: New Perspectives on Well-Being in Asia and Europe* (Oxford, 2005); Robert C. Allen, ‘How Prosperous were the Romans? Evidence from Diocletian’s Price Edict (AD 301)’, in Alan Bowman and Andrew Wilson (eds.), *Quantifying the Roman Economy: Methods and Problems* (Oxford, 2009) — the least helpful parallel, but the article is in large part a *jeu d’esprit*; Stephen Broadberry and Bishnupriya Gupta, ‘The Early Modern Great Divergence: Wages, Prices and Economic Development in Europe and Asia, 1500–1800’, *Economic History Review*, lix (2006). Allen is associated above all with this approach, as is evident; but, conversely, he has direct research experience of the fact that peasants were generally outside the wage economy, as shown in his *Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands, 1450–1850* (Oxford, 1992), an important work, and he himself recognized the point that wages are not a good proxy in his ‘Agricultural Productivity and Rural Incomes in England and the Yangtze Delta, c.1620–c.1820’, *Economic History Review*, lxii (2009), which for me is the real place to start. Ghosh, ‘The “Great Divergence”’, 28–9, makes a similar point. Paolo Malanima in his *Pre-Modern European Economy* (Leiden, 2009) discusses agricultural productivity as a whole, but pays strikingly little attention to rent and other forms of surplus extraction; his calculations of the constraints on the ‘pre-modern’ agricultural economy, esp. *ibid.*, 129–57, 353–81, are almost entirely focused on demography and productivity per head, with land-owners or states hardly featuring (his characterization of peasant subsistence even claims that it describes ‘in modern terms ... a kind of wage’, *ibid.*, 113). For the rough 10 per cent China figure, see, for example, Kenneth Pomeranz, ‘Their Own Path to Crisis? Social Change, State-Building, and the Limits of Qing Expansion, c.1770–1840’, in David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c.1760–1840* (London, 2011), 190–1.

helpful. It worked into the 1970s on the general assumption that lords took all disposable surplus from peasants, leaving them little extra to do anything else with — except insofar as peasants had to have access to markets by the twelfth century in much of Europe, for the simple reason that they increasingly had to pay rents in money, which they could not have got hold of any other way. As the peasants of Cliviano in the central Italian Apennines said just before 1100, *seniores tollunt omnia* — ‘lords take everything’.<sup>23</sup> So any demand for commodities that could develop into a complex and dynamic exchange sector, such as that in thirteenth-century Flanders or Italy, would have to come from lords. This is, broadly, wrong. Of course, it could often be true; there were plenty of highly oppressive agrarian regimes; and even when there were not, aristocratic demand could often determine the scale of exchange itself, as in most of the European early Middle Ages, a point that I will come back to. But the last generation of work has made it clear that in many environments peasants routinely had quite reasonable disposable surpluses — or at least the richer among them did, and at least in years when crops were good enough — which they marketized wherever there were markets to allow them to do so. Since the millennium, commercialization theory has had a considerable impact on the later medieval economic history of England, in particular, even though England was far from the most complex European economy in this period. Bruce Campbell has shown how rents in the thirteenth century were much lower than they could have been, giving many peasants considerable flexibility when they decided what to do with surpluses; Christopher Dyer and Jane Whittle have stressed the fact that peasant life cycles allowed for a considerable use of wage-labour, not least among newly adult sons and daughters who had not yet inherited farms

<sup>23</sup> See, as extreme ends of the argument, but agreeing on this, Michael M. Postan, ‘Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England’, in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, ed. M. Postan, i, *The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1966), for example at 602–4; Robert Brenner, ‘Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe’, now in T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985), for example at 33–4. For the quote, *Il Regesto di Farfa*, ed. Ignazio Giorgi and Ugo Balzani, 5 vols. (Rome, 1879–1914), n. 1303; this much-cited text is best characterized in Alessio Fiore, *Il mutamento signorile: assetti di potere e comunicazione politica nelle campagne dell’Italia centro-settentrionale (1080–1130 c.)* (Florence, 2017), 60.

and married; and Richard Britnell has shown that there were hundreds of rural markets, growing in number in every century but with a sharp upward curve in the thirteenth, in which peasants routinely not only sold produce for money to pay in rent, but also bought artisanal goods, ironwork and, increasingly, cloth.<sup>24</sup> This English picture, showing a considerable peasant participation in the market, can very easily be generalized to other parts of medieval Europe, and indeed Eurasia, as we shall see in a moment.

Before I develop this last point, some distinctions need to be made. We can see in medieval and early modern Europe, in particular, three broadly characterized ways in which the feudal economy intersected with commercial exchange. In the early Middle Ages, and for rather longer in much of eastern and northern Europe, the less powerful that lords were in a given region, the less exchange there tended to be: a statement that archaeology backs up, consistently, across the continent. Indeed, in many parts of Europe, peasants were sufficiently independent that feudal relations had not yet been fully imposed; since peasants who are left entirely to themselves tend to consume most of their surplus, there was not enough accumulation of goods to sell or buy on any scale. That is to say, there was not a dense enough exchange network for autonomous peasant societies to have much of an access to a market, whether or not they had enough surplus to sell; by contrast, most demand for artisanal goods and non-local foodstuffs came from lords and their entourages. So the basic patterns of exchange were limited, with few interregional links, except in areas where we know lords were strong and the feudal mode was more fully established, as in, above all, the political heartland of northern Francia. The areas of the early medieval world where exchange was more complex lay outside Europe: in Islamic regions such as Egypt

<sup>24</sup> Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'The Agrarian Problem in the Early Fourteenth Century', *Past and Present*, no. 188 (Aug. 2005); Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition?: Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), esp. 211–32; Jane Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (Oxford, 2000), 225–304; Richard H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1500*, 2nd edn (Manchester, 1996), with the maps in R. H. Britnell, *Britain and Ireland, 1050–1350: Economy and Society* (Oxford, 2004), 162–5. See further, for an England–Germany comparison, Shami Ghosh, 'Rural Economies and Transitions to Capitalism: Germany and England Compared (c.1200–c.1800)', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, xvi, no. 2 (2016).

and Syria, which had maintained a tax and landowning pattern largely unchanged from the Roman period, and some East Asian regions, in particular in China; in each of these, patterns of surplus extraction, accumulation and commercialization went much further back in time.<sup>25</sup>

The second way developed in western Europe, for the most part with the 'seigneurial revolution' of the eleventh century, although it was matched by a parallel development on rather different grounds in the Byzantine Empire; both for the first time began slowly to develop as complex an economy as that of their Islamic neighbours.<sup>26</sup> In western Europe in particular, aristocratic economic dominance over essentially all social groups fully established itself in this period, which means that there was more lordly exploitation, and thus surplus, and thus demand. Market- and urban-based commercial exchange developed as a result, all the more so because this process coincided with a period of demographic and agrarian expansion; and peasants, when they had goods to sell, found it increasingly easy to find outlets to do so. This was a form of feudalism in which peasant demand could nonetheless rise too, for reasons we will come back to later; in some circumstances, as with many of the particularly dynamic economies I listed at the start, it could equal or more than equal lordly demand in quantity, even if the latter tended to continue to structure commercial exchange, taken as a whole. There is a paradox here: that a greater strength for aristocrat-led demand led to economic environments in which peasants had more access to exchange than they had in periods where they were more autonomous. But the steadiness of lordly demand, now that lords were clearly dominant and thus wealthy across wide areas, made an exchange network possible in which peasants could also participate — although the logic of the system, as we shall see, did not in itself alter. This was the most common form, across medieval Eurasia at least, that the feudal mode took, for the tax-raising states that extended from al-Andalus in the west, through the Byzantine and Islamic Middle East, to India and China, similarly created ruling classes, funded by taxation (and, often, rent as well), whose demand was at least as steady as that of Latin Europe

<sup>25</sup> See, for all this, Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, chs. 6, 9, 11.

<sup>26</sup> For Byzantium, see Angeliki Laiou and Cécile Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy* (Cambridge, 2007), esp. 90–165.

after 1100, and usually rather steadier. This high-functioning, but also high-equilibrium, economy will, as already stated, be my main focus for the rest of this paper, for it is through its complexities that we can best identify what the logic of the system actually was.

The third way was one in which rural wage-labour, in agriculture and rural artisanal activity (developing into proto-industry), was steadily more present. This was a characteristic of much of late and post-medieval north-west Europe, and indeed, in some areas by 1600 or even earlier (parts of Germany, the Low Counties and England), wage-labour matched or actually overtook peasant subsistence agriculture and rent-paying as the commonest form of rural social relations; exchange, as a result, became still more important as a basic element of the economy.<sup>27</sup> I will come back to this briefly later, as its implications for the way the economy worked are important; but it will not be analysed fully, as this paper concentrates above all on the Middle Ages.

## II

The recent recognition that peasant demand and market access was important for most versions of the feudal economy has opened up the field, and has made it possible to explain more easily the set of complex economies listed at the start. I want next to develop the implications of this with some concrete examples; and then in the last section of the article to come back to the economic logic that underpinned them. I begin with examples from a source base that is less skewed by documentary bias towards the powerful, namely archaeology. The availability of mass-produced artisanal products, particularly ceramics, on peasant sites is visible in archaeological field surveys and village excavations in a variety of places. In fourth- and fifth-century North Africa, for example (essentially modern Tunisia), good-quality red slip tableware pottery, usually from local kilns, is found on nearly every site, large or small. In this case, productions that had long existed had become newly available to peasants, and not just, as previously, made for export as mass-

<sup>27</sup> See nn. 24, 48, for the contributions of Dyer, Whittle, van Bavel and Ghosh on this topic, and n. 47 for proto-industry; each, especially Ghosh, has a substantial bibliography.

produced fine-wares; so, given that the products were there already, it is a new period of relative peasant prosperity and buying power that we can see in late Roman Africa.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, production and consumption developed hand in hand. In twelfth-century central and southern Byzantine Greece, a dense set of surveys shows for the first time the wide availability, both in villages and isolated farms, of polychrome-glazed ceramics and also wine amphorae, from specialized urban production centres like Chalkis and Corinth, which had themselves only recently developed as major producers; glazed pottery was not cheap, but was clearly easy for better-off peasants to buy, once it became available. In Greece, where the incidence of aristocratic landowning was probably lower than in much of western Europe, these peasants may sometimes have been landowners, although they still paid substantial taxes to the state.<sup>29</sup> In lowland England after 1200, where, alongside surveys, deserted medieval villages have had numerous excavations, Britnell's models are amply borne out: non-local pottery, some with a simple glaze, is a normal find, often from several different sources, together with knives and some coins, and, interestingly, rather few loom-weights on some sites, indicating that peasants — here, very seldom independent owners — were buying cloth from elsewhere rather than making it themselves.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Leslie Dossey, *Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa* (Berkeley, 2010), 62–97; Matthew S. Hobson, *The North African Boom: Evaluating Economic Growth in the Roman Province of Africa Proconsularis (146 BC–AD 429)* (Prothsmouth, RI, 2015), 141–2, 149–52.

<sup>29</sup> See for the surveys, among several others, Pamela Armstrong, 'The Survey Area in the Byzantine and Ottoman Periods', in William Cavanagh *et al.* (eds.), *The Laconia Survey*, i, *Methodology and Interpretation* (London, 1996), 353–68; Pamela Armstrong, 'Greece in the Eleventh Century', in James Howard-Johnston (ed.), *Social Change in Town and Country in Eleventh-Century Byzantium*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming; Joanita Vroom, *After Antiquity: Ceramics and Society in the Aegean from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century A.C. A Case Study from Boeotia, Central Greece* (Leiden, 2003), 133, 152–64, 192–3; Athanasios K. Vionis, 'Current Archaeological Research on Settlement and Provincial Life in the Byzantine and Ottoman Aegean: A Case-Study from Boeotia, Greece', *Medieval Settlement Research*, xxiii (2008).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, David Hinton, 'Deserted Medieval Villages and the Objects from Them', in Christopher Dyer and Richard Jones (eds.), *Deserted Villages Revisited* (Hatfield, 2010); Christopher Dyer, 'The Material World of English Peasants, 1200–1540', *Agricultural History Review*, lxii (2014), 13–14, 17–20; Paola Orecchioni, 'I contesti ceramici nel basso medioevo: riflessi dei cambiamenti sociali nella cultura materiale' (Univ. of Rome Tor Vergata, Ph.D.

We can compare to this some document-based instances, from Egypt and China. Eleventh-century Egypt is well seen in the letter collections surviving in the Fustāt *geniza* (the *geniza* was a synagogue basement full of waste paper with writing on, thrown away by Jews who would not destroy writing for religious reasons, in this case after 1025 or so). The great Jewish merchants in Fustāt, the ancestor of modern Cairo, bought raw flax from south of the capital and sent it down the Nile to the sea, to be sold to linen-weaving establishments in Sicily and Tunisia; they sold other things too, but this was the core of their activities, and it is intensely well documented. They bought flax from many places, but above all from Būṣīr, a small-town entrepôt near the Nile, 70 km south of Fustāt, and they regarded flax bought there as being by and large of the best quality, commanding the highest prices. Merchants went to the Būṣīr markets regularly; the rules for sale there were standardized, and, although flax prices were slightly higher, as a result it was not necessary to trail around the villages and risk being cheated by the peasants (who were famous among the Jewish community for being shrewd dealers). A network of villages around the town thus specialized in flax, whose peasants sold to local Būṣīr merchants, who in turn sold to the Fustāt merchants. There was, thus, a commercial system in place in Būṣīr that must have funnelled a lot of money into this part of the Nile valley, for the scale of flax-buying there was very large; but it was a system dependent largely on peasant sales, apparently made autonomously (Egyptian peasants paid high taxes, and local coercion as a result was not minor, but in this period many of them, as in Greece, owned their own land). If there was a cash-cropping monoculture anywhere in medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, it could well have been around Būṣīr in the eleventh century; and it seems to have been practiced by independent, and as a result presumably often well-off, peasants.<sup>31</sup>

(n. 30 cont.)

thesis, 2015/16), esp. 346–70; she sets this against the parallel situation in Tuscany, in a comparative approach that is unusual in this field.

<sup>31</sup> See A. L. Udovitch, 'International Trade and the Medieval Egyptian Countryside', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xcvi (1999); Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean*, 101–4; Moshe Gil, 'The Flax Trade in the Mediterranean in the Eleventh Century AD as Seen in Merchants' Letters from the Cairo Geniza', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, lxiii (2004). For

(cont. on p. 23)

We can, finally, see something similar in later medieval China. Here, in the most prosperous regions on the east coast, Jiangnan in the Yangzi Delta and Fujian to its south, a substantially independent peasantry, easily self-sufficient in rice, turned more and more after 1200 or so to silk- and then to cotton-weaving as well, selling their cloth through intermediaries throughout the south and centre of the empire. Mulberry trees for silk and, soon, cotton were cash crops (some cotton was imported too), although that was in addition to local rice cultivation, except in some specialist areas such as Songjiang near Shanghai, where by 1500 cotton production easily matched the role of flax in Būṣīr. Although we know much less here about peasant buying power, it will have been considerable, given what we know about peasant cloth-making; local ceramic productions, at least, were on a markedly large scale. They must have been designed to some extent for a mass rural market; for, matching the importance of rural artisans, levels of urbanization were always low in China.<sup>32</sup>

So peasant access to markets could indeed be substantial, and this means that there could have been far more exchange complexity in many medieval societies than has sometimes been claimed, since peasants were such a large majority of the inhabitants of Eurasia in every period. I will develop this through a longer example, from one of the particularly dynamic

(n. 31 cont.)

merchants buying from peasants, see especially (I cite from the database of the Princeton Geniza Project, at <<https://geniza.princeton.edu/pgp/pgpsearch>>) T-S NS 308.119, T-S 12.227, T-S 10J12.26, 8J22.10, Moss. II, 188.1, T-S Ar. 51.87, ENA 4020.20, T-S 13J13.11, 10J20.12, 13J16.19, ENA 4020.43, T-S 8.255, ENA 1822a.67, T-S 12.793, 13J27.18, 8J7.21, ed. in Moshe Gil, *Be-malkhut Yishma'el bi-tekufat ha-ge'onim* [In the Kingdom of Ishmael] (Jerusalem, 1997), nn. 191, 193, 253 [S135], 255 [S80], 256, 299, 468, 479 [S102], 491 [S101], 493 [S112], 504, 505, 515 [S107], 640, 643, 728. 'S' here denotes the translations in Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Jews in Sicily, i, 383–1300* (Leiden, 1997); for the others, I am indebted to the help of Maayan Ravid and Marina Rustow. See, now, Lorenzo Bondioli, 'Peasants, Merchants, and Caliphs: Capital and Empire in Fatimid Egypt, 900–1200 CE' (Princeton Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2020), who inter alia stresses and documents the coercive aspects of the tax system and the way it was exploited through rural credit, which the same merchants engaged in.

<sup>32</sup> See Wickham, 'Jiangnan Style', 129–36, which gives the basic English-language bibliography. For cotton, see especially Harriet T. Zurndorfer, 'Cotton Textile Manufacture and Marketing in Late Imperial China and the "Great Divergence"', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, liv, no. 5 (2011). Taxation was relatively low in China too: see n. 56 below.

economies listed at the start — thirteenth- to sixteenth-century north-central Italy, particularly Lombardy and Tuscany. This example shows how we might understand the internal structuring of a complex economy across time, and, in particular, how it can be seen to relate to a feudal economic logic.

The documentation we have for north-central Italy in the thirteenth century shows that its cities were in many cases very large for the period; nowhere else in Europe except Flanders matched Italian levels of urbanization. These cities were large because of substantial concentrations of artisan production. Italy's productive take-off did not stretch very far back in time, although, when it began, it was rapid; it can mostly be dated to the last quarter of the twelfth century and onwards from there.<sup>33</sup> It is anyway only after 1200 that we get signs of its productive and commercial activity in many different types of source at once, to different degrees, in two dozen cities. The increasingly independent cities of the Po Plain had a de facto hierarchy, with Milan at the top, the port cities of Genoa and Venice next, and Milan's neighbours and enemies in Lombardy a little further behind. (Tuscany was more balanced as yet; Florence did not become the main centre there until the late thirteenth century.) Urban growth had started by the mid-twelfth century everywhere, as new and enlarged town walls show; elaborate aristocratic tower-houses appear too.<sup>34</sup> This goes, in our documents, with evidence for increased seigneurial dues on peasant communities after around 1100,<sup>35</sup> so is in part simply a sign of greater exploitation, given that elites were above all city-dwelling; but the expansion of the cities themselves shows people moving in for work. We find cloth-making everywhere by the thirteenth century, with metal and leather second and third; most cities made some cloth, with interlocking specializations, and some made it on a huge scale, notably Milan and, later, Florence. Wool was the main cloth here, as elsewhere in Latin Europe, but Milan and Cremona, among others, also made fustian, a cotton–linen mix, which relied on cotton imports from

<sup>33</sup> Chris Wickham, 'Prima della crescita: quale società?', in *La crescita economica dell'Occidente medievale: un tema storico non ancora esaurito* (Pistoia, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> See Étienne Hubert, 'La construction de la ville: sur l'urbanisation dans l'Italie médiévale', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, lix (2004); and, for towers, for example, Fabio Redi, *Pisa com'era* (Naples, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Fiore, *Il mutamento signorile*, 58–72.

Sicily and the eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, the expansion of wool production, too, was sufficiently fast that it outpaced the growing specializations in Italian sheep farming; imports of wool via Genoa from what is now Algeria, and, later on, from other suppliers in Castile and England, became normal.<sup>36</sup> So also, from the early thirteenth century, did imports of wheat from Sicily and Puglia, for many north Italian cities expanded beyond the capacity of their hinterlands to supply them.<sup>37</sup>

The rapid expansion in production thus depended directly on an international exchange network. Exports to all around Europe and, especially, the Mediterranean were normal too, and, given the scale of production and imports, were necessary. The Italian cities were plugged into a web of international demand, competing with the international cloth that was also being made in Flanders. Although the further they went the more their cloth was seen as a relatively luxury product, there was even more production of less luxurious types for an Italian market, too. The thirteenth century shows the expansion of civic amenities, such as sewers and water supply — that is to say, a concern for the health of urban populations, which cost money, and is thus a sign not only of the prosperity of towns, but also of their ambition. Credit expanded enormously to match that economic hyperactivity, not least via a developing banking system; by the end of the thirteenth century Florentine and other banks were lending internationally too, including to kings.<sup>38</sup> The economic process underpinning credit and banking

<sup>36</sup> For recent surveys, see François Menant, *L'Italie des communes (1100–1350)* (Paris, 2005), 267–89; Franco Franceschi and Ilaria Taddei, *Le città italiane nel Medioevo: XII–XIV secolo* (Bologna, 2012), 48–52, 71–87; for Milan, see above all Paolo Grillo, *Milano in età comunale (1183–1276): istituzioni, società, economia* (Spoleto, 2001), 209–34.

<sup>37</sup> For Sicily, see Henri Bresc, *Un monde méditerranéen: économie et société en Sicile, 1300–1450* (Rome, 1986), 523–78; Stephan R. Epstein, *An Island for Itself: Economic Development and Social Change in Late Medieval Sicily* (Cambridge, 1992), 270–84.

<sup>38</sup> On credit, Menant, *L'Italie des communes*, 169–74, 299–312; for lending to kings, Edwin B. Fryde and Matthew M. Fryde, 'Public Credit, with Special Reference to North-Western Europe', in M. M. Postan, E. E. Rich and E. Miller (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe from the Decline of the Roman Empire*, iii, *Economic Organisation and Policies in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1963), 455–61; Armando Saporì, *La crisi delle Compagnie mercantili dei Bardi e dei Peruzzi* (Florence, 1926), 50–86, 140–82, 204–6; with the caution in Edwin S. Hunt, 'A New Look at the Dealings of the Bardi and Peruzzi with Edward III', *Journal of Economic History*, 1 (1990); for the role of Florence, Alma

was clearly a capitalist one, by any criterion: money was loaned to create or distribute commodities, which were in turn sold for more money. And class struggle in the urban context was the work of wage-earners, sometimes contesting wages and working conditions, both issues that look more to capitalist than to feudal productive relations — although this has to be nuanced by a recognition that many more urban revolts in Italy focused on political rights, which were rather less signs of a novel economic system.<sup>39</sup>

What is most important for us, however, is the relationship between cities and the countryside, where, even with Italy's intense urbanization, up to three-quarters of the population still lived. Cities relied on the countryside in order to be fed, and that process was by no means entirely reliant on rents coming to urban landowners; cities had to buy food too, and thus sustained complex market structures running throughout the countryside. These were not all market structures dominated by lords, for Italy had plenty of peasant owners in this period, who were, as in Egypt and China, happy to produce for sale as well — sale of food, but also of primary products for artisans, wool and flax and metal. Peasants bought urban goods in return; urban productions of ceramics, the best archaeological marker of exchange as we have seen, reached peasant buyers in the countryside of Tuscany to an ever greater extent in the thirteenth century; the same was doubtless true, and probably even more so, for cloth. Credit was not only urban; as Philippe Lefevre has recently shown for the territory of Florence, small rural moneylenders, rich peasants or local smiths, are well attested, some of them lending to rural monasteries — although landowners lending to peasants, and city leaders lending to rural communes, were far more common, generating debt relationships that were more obviously an exercise of power.<sup>40</sup>

(n. 38 cont.)

Poloni, 'Una società fluida: l'economia di Firenze nel tardo medioevo', *Storica*, lxi–lxii (2015), 184–90.

<sup>39</sup> See Cohn, *Lust for Liberty*, 57–74, 208–20, 228–42. For capitalism operating in this context, see Jairus Banaji, *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism* (Chicago, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Philippe Lefevre, 'La notabilité rurale dans le contado florentin, Valdarno Supérieur et Chianti aux XII<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles' (Univ. Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne Ph.D. thesis, 2016), 366–9, 373–95; for ceramics, Francesca Grassi, *La ceramica*,

(cont. on p. 27)

Which is where lordly dominance kicks in, however. The picture we get in the recent accounts of England already mentioned — England being the point of reference simply because it has the best medieval economic history currently — is one in which twelfth- and thirteenth-century peasant tenants gained access to the market, slowly. They did so as rural agricultural markets developed to help feed towns, which also matched peasants' need to sell goods for cash to pay money rents; but then artisanal products, made in those same market villages and towns, steadily came to be produced on a larger scale and therefore more cheaply, and were bought by peasants as well. In Italy, it must have been similar, although landowning peasants were commoner in the same period, and the more entrepreneurial of them seem to have reacted fairly well to the new opportunities offered by urban demand, which was far greater than in England. But lords could react effectively too. Italian landowners focused more on rents in produce, and profited themselves more and more from urban sales, often cutting peasants out of the grain market.<sup>41</sup> Successful citizens also increasingly bought up rural land, often by calling in peasant debts, and thus extended urban ownership at the expense of independent peasants; they were using their commercial profits to establish themselves as part of the most status-filled social group, major landowners, and some of them eventually abandoned commerce and urban production altogether, and returned to landowning alone.<sup>42</sup>

Add to this, across the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the power that cities had as ruling bodies in their own right. This was demonstrated by an increase in the weight of taxation — the

(n. 40 cont.)

l'alimentazione, l'artigianato e le vie di commercio tra VIII e XIV secolo (Oxford, 2010), 21–56; for more power-laden forms of debt, see François Menant, *Campagnes lombarde au Moyen Âge: l'économie et la société rurales dans la région de Bergame, de Crémone et de Brescia du X<sup>e</sup> au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Rome, 1993), 301–6, 544–57.

<sup>41</sup> See L. A. Kotel'nikova, *Mondo contadino e città in Italia dal XI al XIV secolo: dalle fonti dell'Italia centrale e settentrionale* (Bologna, 1975), 26–93; George W. Dameron, *Episcopal Power and Florentine Society, 1000–1320* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 131–40; see further for important nuancing, Lorenzo Tabarrini, 'The Countryside of Florence and Lucca during the High-Middle Ages (11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> Centuries): A Study on Land Management and Its Change' (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2019).

<sup>42</sup> For Tuscany, see Giuliano Pinto, *La Toscana nel tardo medioevo: ambiente, economia rurale, società* (Florence, 1982), 157–223.

Italian city states had the most developed fiscal system in Latin Europe by far — and, in some places (Tuscany more than Lombardy), by moves to prevent any rural industry that might be in competition with those of cities. It was logical for ruling groups to do this: it increased and safeguarded their resources. Similarly, it was logical for lords to seek, fairly successfully, to take over market profiteering from peasants. Conversely, these developments decreased the resources of peasants in the countryside, and therefore also decreased the scale of local demand that cities needed for any product that was not luxury enough to be sold abroad. And an Italian productive system that relied more on sales abroad was thus more dependent on the demand of landowning elites — as well as being more exposed to changes in international trade patterns, which were frequent. In Lombardy, whose cities survived unusually well the crises of the post-Black Death period, and where investment was not only in urban industry but also in agriculture, through the establishment of canal networks, hostility to rural industry was also less successful than in Tuscany. The result of all this was that, in the later Middle Ages, the great cloth cities began to have to compete with (but were also backed up by) widespread proto-industrialization in the smaller towns and villages of the northern Po Plain.<sup>43</sup> This preserved and indeed extended north Italian competition abroad and allowed, here at least, both production for a rural market, and rural demand itself, to remain strong.<sup>44</sup> All the same, the rural market as a whole,

<sup>43</sup> For the post-Black Death period, see now, especially, Paolo Grillo and François Menant (eds.), *La congiuntura del primo Trecento in Lombardia (1290–1360)* (Rome, 2019); for rural industry, Epstein, *Freedom and Growth*, 106–46; see further S. R. Epstein, ‘Cities, Regions and the late Medieval Crisis: Sicily and Tuscany Compared’, *Past and Present*, no. 130 (Feb. 1991); Stephan R. Epstein, ‘I caratteri originali: l’economia’, in Francesco Salvestrini (ed.), *L’Italia alla fine del medioevo: i caratteri originali nel quadro europeo*, i (Florence, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> This was after 1450 matched, again above all in Lombardy, by the use of rural wage-labour, for the first time on any scale in Italy, on newly forming large irrigated estates, focused on agrarian sales; this wage-labour further underpinned rural demand. See Giorgio Chittolini, ‘Alle origini delle “grandi aziende” della Bassa lombarda: l’agricoltura dell’irriguo fra XV e XVI secolo’, *Quaderni Storici*, xxxix (1978); Luisa Chiappa Mauri, ‘Riflessioni sulle campagne lombarde del Quattro-Cinquecento’, *Nuova Rivista Storica*, lxxix (1985); for Italian rural wage-labour in general, stressing its rarity before the Black Death and its complementary role even after, Francesco Panero, ‘Il lavoro salariato nelle campagne dell’Italia centro-settentrionale dal secolo XII all’inizio del Quattrocento’, in Alfio Cortonesi, Massimo Montanari and Antonella Nelli (eds.), *Contratti agrari e rapporti di lavoro nell’Europa medievale* (Bologna, 2006).

especially outside Lombardy, was not large enough to allow a further expansion of production and commercialization; and after 1600, when Italian cloth exports ceased to be able to compete with the rise of those from England, the entire Italian commercial economy contracted in size, until the very different industrialization of the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup>

This Italian story has been told plenty of times. It contains elements that not all would agree on: among others, exactly when and why artisanal production faltered in the face of international competition; exactly when and why mercantile elites turned to landowning; and how important in the overall process was the fact that cities were not only centres of merchant capital but also territorial rulers (late medieval Lombard cities, for example, failed to prevent rural proto-industry precisely because they no longer directly controlled the state under the Visconti and Sforza dukes of Milan). But these do not matter here; the main lines of the story remain the same; and, as noted earlier, it has above all been seen, as elsewhere at the end of periods of particular commercial complexity, to be one of 'failure'. But we have to ask: failure in what, exactly? North-central Italy has interested historians because it was so prominent in 1300, but was far from the most active economy in Europe by 1700. All the same, no one proposes that Italy was ever, in these centuries, on any verge of a transition to a fully-fledged industrial capitalism. Nor were any of the other highly commercialized societies of medieval and early modern Europe. In 1500, the most economically complex parts of Italy, particularly by now Lombardy, looked very like early modern southern Germany and the Netherlands in their basic structure, with agriculture for sale, large towns and rural proto-industry, but, even if Lombardy lost some of that complexity later, neither Germany or the Netherlands were quick to move towards industrial capitalism either. What each of them was doing was shifting, gently, up and down a league table of prosperous and active high-functioning systems, which gave a lot of space to the commercialization of produce, the movement of goods, but which were, all the same, not on the edge of major changes.

<sup>45</sup> See, above all, Paolo Malanima, *La fine del primato: crisi e riconversione nell'Italia del seicento* (Milan, 1998), which also stresses late seventeenth-century restructuring.

And why *should* they be? The core point, in all these cases, and in all the others I listed at the start, is that the major, dominant, relationship of surplus extraction, was still peasants giving rents and taxes to lords, the feudal mode that is to say. As we have just seen at several points, the history of Italy's commercial expansion was constantly affected by changes in that relationship. The logic of lords taking over profitable marketing from peasants, for example, was a feudal logic, part of the perennial conflict between the two classes; so was the rise in urban taxation. And the wider expansion of urban artisanal production, based largely on wage-labour, so large-scale in Italy by 1300 that it is often called industrial (although technically it was not; individual workshops remained at the base of it, with little need for high levels of capital investment), was circumscribed by the simple fact that peasants could easily, as part of their subsistence strategies, make most of their necessary goods themselves. They otherwise only needed quite small-scale local experts, often part-time artisans backed up by a peasant holding, to help them with cloth (when it was not made inside individual households), ironwork and ceramics. They enthusiastically participated in the urban market for all these goods when they became cheap enough to buy, it is true, but they did not strictly need them, and urban marketization always had to contend with the possibility that peasants would not buy at all, or not buy enough — which was one of the things that was happening in the seventeenth century.

This was true nearly everywhere up to 1700 at the earliest. As a result, the surest market for urban production (outside the networks of producers themselves) remained lords and their entourages — that is to say, social groups living off, at one remove or two, the surplus from rent-taking. One of the most visible forms of genuine capitalist relations was large-scale mercantile credit, epitomized by the success and wealth of the great Florentine banking families around 1300; but they ended up lending to kings, despite the alarming track record some kings had for defaulting on loans, because high royal interest rates and other political favours encouraged risk-taking, to obtain benefits that substantially exceeded those deriving from the profits of urban production and exchange. In other words, the scale of capital had here, temporarily, outgrown the

possibilities of a feudal economic system, but was still dominated by that system — for financing royal wars was an intrinsic part of it.<sup>46</sup> Proto-industry, with its rural waged sector, was more an adjunct to peasant survival than anything that undermined the peasantry; agriculturalists on the edge of destitution could use part-time wages, or wages of one family member, to allow them to stay on the land — one important reason why so few regions of proto-industry were actually among the first to industrialize fully.<sup>47</sup> Even rural wage-labourers, who have been well studied in England, Germany and the Netherlands, more than in Italy in fact (they were also more common in these countries than in Italy), were still part of the peasant world. Some were, as stated earlier, simply adult children waiting to inherit a peasant plot — they could travel quite widely as labourers, but would then return; some had the structural role of family servants, who were given board and lodging while they worked and were only paid at the end, so were part of the peasant economy. Only in quite small areas, such as Guelders to the east of Amsterdam, do we see substantial percentages of fully proletarianized agricultural wage-labourers before, again, 1700 at the earliest.<sup>48</sup> So what

<sup>46</sup> Compare Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Nicolaus, 106–8: ‘In all forms of society, there is one specific kind of production that dominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others’. The most theorized account of the structures of domination of one mode by another remains Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London, 1970), for example, 98–9, 181–93, 302–8. I am not using here the distinction between ‘mode of production’ and ‘social formation’ that has been developed as a result of this, but my discussions of the dominance of a single type of economic logic seem to me to fit with that distinction.

<sup>47</sup> For proto-industrialization, see the classic Peter Kriedte, Hans Medick and Jürgen Schlumbohm, *Industrialization before Industrialization* (Cambridge, 1981), and Sheilagh C. Ogilvie and Markus Cerman (eds.), *European Proto-Industrialization* (Cambridge, 1996), as well as Sheilagh Ogilvie’s model study, *State Corporatism and Proto-Industry: The Württemberg Black Forest, 1580–1797* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> Ghosh, ‘Rural Economies and Transitions to Capitalism’, 268–72, 279–80, makes this point very well. For wage-labour in England, see n. 24 above, especially Whittle, *Development of Agrarian Capitalism*, 225–304; the articles in Jane Whittle (ed.), *Landlords and Tenants in Britain, 1440–1660* (Woodbridge, 2013); and, for Guelders, Bas van Bavel, *Manors and Markets: Economy and Society in the Low Countries, 500–1600* (Oxford, 2010), esp. 205–13, with Bas van Bavel, ‘Rural Wage Labour in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries’, *Continuity and Change*, xxi (2006). For the change to a dominance of a more proletarian form of wage-labour in English agriculture in the eighteenth century, see Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, esp. 79–101. Leigh Shaw-Taylor, ‘The Rise of Agrarian

these dynamic elements show us is not something that is not feudal, or even potentially not feudal, but, rather, the most complex form of feudal relations, one in which rent-taking has allowed for the development of all kinds of extra social structures — which makes the work of analysis more complex, but whose documentation also makes trying to understand how a feudal economic logic might have worked in some respects easier.

### III

Which brings me finally to some of the elements of that logic. It is implicit in what has just been argued, but its elements, even if not surprising in themselves, need to be teased out more. Much of the work on this has concentrated on cycles of price formation, which I shall set aside here; it is interestingly complex, but it has been adequately confronted by others, from Ernest Labrousse through Witold Kula to Luciano Palermo.<sup>49</sup> What is most important, however, was the longer-term structural dynamic of feudal relations of production. I think it went like this. (In this final section, I use exclusively European examples, for the data are better for Europe, but I would argue that the overall patterns described here would be valid for most of Eurasia.) Lords were for the most part external to the process of production, as we have seen. The ‘struggle for rent’ was, however, usually relatively peaceful because it was structured by custom. This was not immutable, but lords did not always have

(n. 48 cont.)

Capitalism and the Decline of Family Farming in England’, *Economic History Review*, lxxv (2012), puts this change earlier than Allen does, but, as the main focus of the article is on the 1850s, does not manage to push the argument home.

<sup>49</sup> Ernest Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1933), esp. 137–66, 357–64, on the cycles of wheat pricing; Witold Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System*, trans. Lawrence Garner (London, 1976); Luciano Palermo, *Sviluppo economico e società preindustriali* (Rome, 1997), a book that, especially at 85–160, goes well beyond pricing to offer its own economic modelling for the Middle Ages, but which argues that peasant subsistence can be reduced theoretically to a salary, which undermines the usefulness of its models for the arguments presented here. See, further, Julien Demade, ‘Ponction féodale et société rurale en Allemagne du sud (XI<sup>e</sup>–XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles)’ (Univ. of Strasbourg II, Ph.D. thesis, 2004), esp. 280–420, which discusses and theorizes a situation in which seigneurial exactions are greatly increased by lords buying grain from peasants at advantageous times of the year to sell in towns.

the necessary resources on the ground to tighten it effectively as the economy changed, or, in some cases, as Christopher Dyer has shown for England, even to police it successfully. Both of these gave a tactical advantage to the peasantry, who were there on the ground, as lords were not for the most part. This for me is the key point. As a result — it is a point Guy Bois made particularly clearly in his work on late medieval Normandy — in periods of economic expansion, with the clearance of new land and better yields, plus (in the case of money rents) slow inflation, the package of rents and dues, stabilized by custom, tended to fall steadily in real terms. This, when the economy was expanding, still produced more for lords, but also gave peasants more surplus to buy things with, or to become small entrepreneurs on their own account; and it did not change back again if and when the economy contracted.<sup>50</sup> Other things being equal, that is to say, there was a secular trend towards lower rents and dues, with the balance tending to favour the peasantry.

Of course, lords could break custom, and increase total surplus extraction by force. This is what happened when newly powerful local lords in France, and then Italy and northern Spain, had initially, around 1000 or later, imposed by violence seigneurial levies on woodland, mills, justice, and so on, plus outright random payments in some cases.<sup>51</sup> The rise of royal taxation in late medieval western Europe is another example of the enforcement of greater levels of peasant payment. And the

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Dyer, 'The Ineffectiveness of Lordship in England, 1200–1400', in Christopher Dyer, Peter Coss and Chris Wickham (eds.), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages: An Exploration of Historical Themes* (Past and Present Supplement no. 2, Oxford, 2007); Guy Bois, *The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy, c.1300–1550* (Cambridge, 1984), esp. 384–408. Bois's argument survives the criticisms by Brenner in *The Brenner Debate*, 231–2, 242–6. But see the discussion of peasant strategies in Robert Brenner, 'Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong', in Chris Wickham (ed.), *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, 2007), 63–83; in my view this article understates the buying power of the peasantry, at many moments in European history, but the basic choices available to the peasantry as a class are effectively set out.

<sup>51</sup> The historiography on this is too vast and complex to cite here; but a detailed description of many different seigneurial regimes can be found in Robert Fossier, *Enfance de l'Europe, X<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> siècles, aspects économiques et sociaux* (Paris, 1982), 288–601. The equivalent in England was the imposition in c.1200 of a more generalized serfdom, which had the same effect: see, for example, Rodney H. Hilton, 'Freedom and Villeinage in England', *Past and Present*, no. 31 (July 1965).

establishment of the 'second serfdom' over formerly free peasants in eastern Europe in the late Middle Ages, which asserted new forms of manorial control, complete with forced labour on demesnes, was perhaps the clearest act of violence of all.<sup>52</sup> There were also many others, of course. But, however numerous, they were all one-offs; and they took a lot of work. As economists would say, such increases were sticky. The rest of the time, lords were not there on the ground, and peasants were; they could more easily erode the weight of the mostly customary rents and dues they owed, as the economic environment changed. And class struggle could work in the other direction as well: for example, when peasants in France, Italy and Spain managed in a long twelfth century to stabilize the arbitrary aspects of seigneurial levies, and to turn them into standardized, usually cash, payments, which then again steadily lessened as a proportion of total surplus. The same thing happened with the post-Black Death peasant resistance, which led to the fading away of the last elements of serfdom in much of western Europe.<sup>53</sup> It is because of this, too, that peasants often had greater disposable surplus in the central and later Middle Ages than historians used to think, in good years at least.

Since feudal relations of production above all channelled surplus to lords, it is not surprising that most commerce was structured by lordly demand *first*. Indeed, as implied earlier, in the early Middle Ages the differing intensity of exchange is almost a direct proxy for differing levels of aristocratic domination.<sup>54</sup> In western and southern Europe, after the 'seigneurial revolution' of the eleventh century, the first of the major periods of increased exactions just mentioned, lordly dominance over essentially all social groups fully established itself, and from then onwards commerce steadily developed everywhere. But it is also from then on that the ways peasants

<sup>52</sup> See, for an up-to-date survey of the 'second serfdom', Marian Dygo, 'Zur Genese der sog. "zweiten Leibeigenschaft" in Polen (15.–16. Jahrhundert)', in Paul Freedman and Monique Bourin (eds.), *Forms of Servitude in Northern and Central Europe: Decline, Resistance, and Expansion* (Turnhout, 2005); for the considerable nuancing now necessary for later periods, see n. 57 below.

<sup>53</sup> For the twelfth century, Bourin and Sopena (eds.), *Pour une anthropologie du prélèvement seigneurial dans les campagnes médiévales*, 2, 161–309; for the post-Black Death period, Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe' still stands as a comparative survey.

<sup>54</sup> See text to n. 25 above.

could use their tactical advantage are most visible. Which means that we have a balance. Given the dominance of lords, urban economies developed substantially everywhere, to match their demand above all. But, conversely, it was also from here onwards that the customary nature and thus slowly decreasing level of exactions began steadily to favour peasants and peasant buying power too; and, increasingly from 1150 or so, urban (including small-town) production had a peasant element to its demand base, as we have seen. This was the period of the fastest medieval expansion in population, agriculture and urban production. Nor was the expansion in production reversed.<sup>55</sup> There continued, from then on in most of Europe, to be considerable levels of production, marketization, regional specialization and international exchange, with the regional highs that I listed at the start. And the context in which this occurred was that of the economic logic of feudalism, based on the fact that the peasant majority was necessary to the basic production process, and lords were not; this continued steadily to bring down rents and taxes, except when lords (and by now states) put the effort into increasing them, which meant that peasants tended to maintain their participation in this commercialized world.

So a general tendency of the economic logic of feudalism was to establish, eventually, reasonably high-functioning production and exchange systems, which in some cases showed considerable dynamism. What would happen next? Essentially, there were two directions. One was for lords to intervene by force, to raise rents, cut peasants out of the exchange system, and take rural profit for themselves. This was, as we have seen, a lot of work, but it certainly did happen; images of grinding poverty are hardly uncommon in the historiography of the medieval

<sup>55</sup> The possible period of the Malthusian trap of overpopulation after c.1290 has had increasing criticism, and was, insofar as it occurred, dramatically inverted with the mortality of the Black Death of 1347–52. See now, for southern Europe above all, Monique Bourin, François Menant and Lluís To Figueras (eds.), *Dynamiques du monde rural dans la conjoncture de 1300: échanges, prélèvements et consommation en Méditerranée occidentale* (Rome, 2014), with an important critical survey of the English-language debate in the editors' intro., 9–101; Grillo and Menant (eds.), *La congiuntura del primo Trecento in Lombardia*; and Sandro Carocci, 'La "crisi del Trecento" e le recenti teorie economiche', in Diane Chamboduc de Saint Pulgent and Marie Dejoux (eds.), *La fabrique des sociétés médiévales méditerranéennes: les Moyen Âge de François Menant* (Paris, 2018), equally critical of much recent economic history modelling.

countryside, as earlier and later too, and some of them are justified. Increased taxation did not do it systematically, as systems of accurate exaction hardly existed in the Europe of this period outside northern Italy and the Ottoman Empire, both of which surpassed China in their detail — even if late medieval fiscality could be high, which generally across Eurasia massively increased state power and stability, and which could certainly at times take considerable resources out of the countryside to the advantage of elite groups.<sup>56</sup> And the late medieval and early modern ‘second serfdom’ in eastern Europe — in a region where commercialization had anyway moved less far — meant that the major expansion in grain exports in, particularly, Poland in the early modern period, profited lords for the most part, and peasants much less. This certainly did nothing to diminish the force of the feudal economic system as a whole, and indeed Kula, whose theory of prices was mentioned earlier in passing, based himself precisely on the early modern Polish example. Peasants in east-central Europe had to begin again in working to decrease lordly exactions on the ground. All the same, they did so successfully in many places even then; this type of economy by no means always, or permanently, cut peasants out of the market, as recent work is making increasingly clear.<sup>57</sup>

In parts of Europe where this did not happen, what we see instead is the continued role of commerce for a rent-paying

<sup>56</sup> For taxation in Europe, see especially the data in Richard Bonney (ed.), *Economic Systems and State Finance: The Origins of the Modern State in Europe* (Oxford, 1995); and Richard Bonney (ed.), *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe, c. 1200–1815* (Oxford, 1999); for Italy, Maria Ginatempo, ‘Finanze e fiscalità’, in Salvestrini (ed.), *L’Italia alla fine del medioevo*, 241–94. For less systematic rural surveys and tax-gathering in late medieval and early modern China, and also rather lower tax rates than one might have expected, see Ray Huang, ‘The Ming Fiscal Administration’, in Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, viii, *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 2* (Cambridge, 1998), 126–34.

<sup>57</sup> Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System*; contrast, for example, Markus Cerman, *Villagers and Lords in Eastern Europe, 1300–1800* (Basingstoke, 2012). For how peasant resistance worked on the ground in Brandenburg, see William W. Hagen, *Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500–1840* (Cambridge, 2002), esp. 524–92; William W. Hagen, ‘How Mighty the Junkers? Peasant Rents and Seigneurial Profits in Sixteenth-Century Brandenburg’, *Past and Present*, no. 108 (Aug. 1985). For the complexity of the different regions of early modern Germany in particular, with serfdom, rural wage-labour and rural markets operating side by side, see the survey in Ghosh, ‘Rural Economies’, and the essays in Freedman and Bourin (eds.), *Forms of Servitude in Northern and Central Europe*.

peasantry, which maintained, with ups and downs, reasonable access to surpluses and to buying at markets — at least for the most prosperous peasant strata, and at least in peacetime. But what this also means is that there was no systemic trend to the ‘immiseration’ of the peasantry, its structural weakening, and, eventually, its loss of control over the land, which also means no systemic trend away from the fact that peasants did not need to buy products in order to subsist. I have already briefly characterized this world, with richer peasants growing for surplus, poorer peasants often kept alive and on the land by part-time proto-industry, and wage-labourers for the most part engulfed in the long-standing rhythms of peasant production, often possessing small plots of land, even if not enough to live on, and/or absorbed into peasant family economies as farm servants. There is an implicit tendency in much recent work to stress the persistence of what I would call a feudal logic for the economy until past 1700, everywhere, even in England, where it is generally supposed to have broken down first.<sup>58</sup> And it makes sense that it should, given that high levels of commercialization did not in themselves undermine that logic.

There are two key points here, both of which fortified that persistence. First, exchange in this system had a double limit, in that elite, or lordly, demand, the fundamental motor for exchange, and capable of considerable growth, was always restricted by the fact that elites were a small minority; and peasant demand was, given the peasantry’s unmarketized subsistence base, finite.<sup>59</sup> Second, the more solid commercialization was, under normal circumstances, the less likely it would be that most peasants would be forced off their holdings for economic reasons, and potentially proletarianized. Lords can of course coerce peasants to leave their holdings in some circumstances, or limit peasant economic resources coercively, as with enclosure movements, but these are, as I have stressed, complex and difficult actions to achieve, and need a lot of targeted work. In England, this did indeed happen in the end; ex-peasants would

<sup>58</sup> As, for example, in the (otherwise quite different) work of Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*; Ogilvie, *State Corporatism and Proto-Industry*; and Ghosh, ‘Rural Economies’.

<sup>59</sup> Compare Wickham, ‘Jiangnan Style’, 138. See also, from an analogous but distinct standpoint, Robert Brenner, ‘Economic Backwardness in Eastern Europe in the Light of Developments in the West’, in Daniel Chirot (ed.), *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe* (Berkeley, 1989), esp. 31–9.

thus be compelled either to leave for London and the factory towns of the north or to become deracinated rural wage-labourers, purely dependent on the market. Evidently, however, such a development did not take place elsewhere, usually before as late as 1850, and, I would say, this is precisely because of that commercial solidity for peasants and lords alike. But, conversely, if commercialization slipped back, as it regularly did, weakening (though seldom entirely cancelling) the dynamism of all the regions listed at the start of this article — as could only too easily happen if lordly demand fell at times of political difficulty, or if there were too many transaction costs (such as seigneurial tolls) attached to markets, or if too much competition from other regions pushed the system out of gear, or if urban interest groups undermined rural proto-industry — the result would not be proletarianization either, but simply a return to higher levels of peasant production for subsistence.<sup>60</sup> Either direction, that is to say, under normal circumstances, would further, rather than undermine, the solidity of a feudal economic system. This is, indeed, the core reason why such systems have lasted so long.

Of course, wage-labour, if paid for in money rather than produce, does indeed imply as a general rule a more solid and permanent demand for food and essential artisanal goods. Peasants might not have to buy such goods, but anyone entirely reliant on wages did. As wage-labour increased in scale after 1500 or so, particularly across the arc of regions stretching from south Germany through the Low Countries to England, there would be more such demand. But anyone who wants to see this as in itself leading to the further development and then dominance of capitalist relations needs to recognize the fact, which I have several times stressed, that for most of this area it did not. This adds force to the argument that modes of production are not simply defined by rent, wages, and so on;

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Epstein, *Freedom and Growth*, 49–88, 127–42, for some of these constraints; Ghosh, 'Rural Economies', for an effective account of the way high-equilibrium systems did not necessarily change into anything else. Van Bavel, *Invisible Hand?*, esp. 1–38, 251–87, also stresses that factor markets, as they develop — and sometimes push already complex economies along — tend to operate as a constraint later, creating a cycle that tends to lead to economic involution. This is a powerful additional argument in some cases, even if it is not clear that it is a universal one.

they are entire systems. That is to say, rural wage-labour, however substantial, did not necessarily undermine the logic of the feudal mode of production. Even when it was very extensive, a dominance over the system by peasant economic strategies could evidently prevent the logic of the system from flipping over to a capitalist one. This would indeed be for me the key question when we look at the moment of change in England, at some time in the eighteenth century: when and how did those strategies lose force, allowing the logic of the system to flip over, in the countryside?

But to develop such questions further would be inappropriate in an article focused on the Middle Ages. It is even less part of my remit to move further on still, and to offer here an explanation of the northern English industrial revolution. I am entirely an external reader of the literature on it, which, I have found, is anyway by no means in agreement, even less than it used to be in fact, over its basic causes or even, sometimes, its basic elements. My sympathies certainly lie with those who tend to see it as the result of a chance concatenation of events; there was so little in the English economy, as far as I can see, that really marked it out as different from any of the other high-equilibrium systems that were operating in Eurasia as late as 1700, except for the easy availability of coal. I have always been more interested in Kenneth Pomeranz's England–China comparison than in the reactions of his critics for that reason too, although Pomeranz himself had little interest in the relations of production, which have been my main focus here.<sup>61</sup> So I simply want to end by stressing my interpretation, at least, of the logic of the feudal, and therefore of most of the medieval,

<sup>61</sup> For coal, see, for example, Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 59–67 (and 72–6 for brief comments on relations of production); and, for a very different but still analogous view, Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cambridge, 2009), esp. 80–105. This latter book and Joel Mokyr (ed.), *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective*, 2nd edn (Boulder, 1999), contain convenient historiographical surveys, which show the wide range of recent views. British colonial exploitation, of course, would also have to be brought into the explanatory frame at this point, as Pomeranz does, although it is well known that the Spanish and British colonial empires — the two largest in the mid-eighteenth century — had very different economic effects on the colonial power itself; that is to say, endogenous causal factors had a greater role than exogenous ones. But, right or wrong, the point is marginal to this article.

economy, which focuses on the control by peasants of the production process, and the great difficulty lords had in taking it away from them. Feudal rules for the economy had a very long history, and a great staying power, lasting millennia in some places. We may not like — none of us like — the implications of these rules, which were based from start to finish on coercion and oppression; but they do also deserve some respect for that staying power.

*University of Oxford,  
University of Birmingham*

*Chris Wickham*