

Karl Marx on the transition from feudalism to capitalism

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Studies of Marx's theory of history are complicated by the fact that Marx himself never provided a systematic treatment of its central principles. As a result, the task of elaborating historical materialism has fallen to Marx's interpreters, who are required to distill its tenets from Marx's historical writings and from general statements in which he summarized his historical method. Within the last decade, this task has attracted considerable scholarly attention occasioned by Cohen's successful restoration of an orthodox version of Marx's theory that had fallen into desuetude. On this reading, historical materialism is guided by the thesis "that history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and that forms of society (which are organized around economic structures) rise and fall according as they enable and promote, or prevent and discourage, that growth."¹

The most promising alternative to Cohen's interpretation is one that awards causal primacy to class and class struggle. The best treatment of this thesis is Brenner's historiography, where it guides his analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in early modern Europe.² Brenner replaces the logic of production with the logic of exploitation at the center of his historical analysis. The relations of production and the class struggles arising from them, and not the productive forces, determine the internal composition and evolution of social formations in history. Material progress is only a by-product of the course of development of class struggle.

Cohen's defense of historical materialism did not neglect Marx's emphasis on class. He sought to accommodate it, arguing that class conflict serves to facilitate major historical change, while the deeper cause of revolution lies in the autonomous tendency for the productive forces to develop throughout history. "If we want to know why class

struggle effects this change rather than that,” Cohen explains, “we must turn to the dialectic of forces and relations of production which governs class behaviour and is not explicable in terms of it, and which determines what the long-term outcome of class struggle will be.”³ His challenge to a version of Marx’s theory that makes class struggle fundamental is to “explain, other than by reference to the disposition of classes to develop the productive forces, what makes successful classes succeed.”⁴

Brenner does not offer a satisfactory answer to this problem. One of the weaknesses of this study of the genesis of capitalism is its failure to account for fundamental changes in the nature of class relations. My intention in this article is to show that Marx’s own text provides a response to Cohen’s challenge. Specifically, I argue that Marx’s analysis of the rise of capitalism in England, presented in his mature works, contains a conception of the inherent logic of class conflict that explains epochal change quite independently of the character of the forces of production. Marx’s study of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England was the wellspring of his theory of epochal change; it has also provided the crucial empirical test of its conceptual innovations and controversial claims.⁵ The interpretation of Marx’s theory offered below poses questions for the investigation of other transitions; whether and to what extent this interpretation is generalizable awaits further study.⁶

The argument of this article moves back and forth between two levels of analysis. The first level is that of Marx’s mature historical studies. There exists a widely recognized disjuncture in Marx’s writings between his ascription of the basic cause of historical change to, on the one hand, technological progress and, on the other, class struggle.⁷ Marx’s earlier works, notably the *German Ideology*, provide an account of human history that awards primacy to material progress. When generalizing about history, Marx typically defends the technological thesis. In his later writings, particularly in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Marx’s practice as a historian awards primacy to classes. Marx did not, however, spell out the logic of the historical explanations at work in these texts. My aim, then, is to lay bare and explicate the causal principles shaping Marx’s own historical judgements. The result of this study is a “reconstruction” of Marx’s theory of epochal change that seeks to correct several misunderstandings of its central claims.⁸

The second level of analysis is that of the recent historical literature on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England. Specifically, my focus is on the role played by the peasants in this transition. Some of the most fruitful studies in recent historiography address the peasantry's contribution to the supersession of feudalism by capitalism. Marx's own texts assign peasant class struggles a critical progressive role, although this emphasis in his account has been generally neglected. There were of course limits to Marx's knowledge of pre-capitalist economic history, both in the depth of contemporary scholarship and in the extent of his attention to pre-capitalist history.⁹ Accordingly, my aim is to assess the historical adequacy of Marx's account in light of the research of modern economic historians. Conversely, I examine whether Marx's historical studies shed light on the conclusions these historians have reached. Underlying this method is the conviction that conceptual clarifications of Marx's texts "will only produce real knowledge if they derive from and return to controllable historical research."¹⁰

This article is divided into four sections. The first places the controversy about Marx's theory of history in the context of his account of the rise of English capitalism. The second examines Marx's conception of the feudal dynamic and its characteristic crisis complex. This section argues that Marx's understanding of the fundamental contradiction precipitating the dissolution of a social formation is sharply at odds with that which Cohen attributes to him. The third section reconstructs Marx's analysis of the class conflicts resulting in a qualitative social transformation. This section shows that Marx's text provides an explanation for why successful classes succeed (and fail) that relies solely on the internal dynamic of class conflict. The concluding section formulates the logic of epochal change that emerges from Marx's historical study.

The primitive accumulation of capital

For Marx, capitalism is quintessentially a class system distinguished by the specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labor is appropriated from the direct producers. The accumulation of socially produced wealth as *capital* therefore presupposes the prior establishment of capitalist class relations. Accordingly, Marx's study of the genesis of capitalist production provides an analysis of the process that broke up feudal class relations, giving rise to a capitalist class enjoying private ownership of the means of production facing a working class owning nothing but their labor power.

Marx's explanation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism delineates an intervening period, neither feudal nor capitalist, characterized by the prevalence of independent peasant cultivators. "In England," he writes, "serfdom had practically disappeared in the last part of the 14th century. The immense majority of the population consisted then, and to a still larger extent, in the fifteenth century, of free peasant proprietors, whatever was the feudal title under which their right of property was hidden."¹¹ The emancipation of the English peasantry released the material base of the feudal mode of production, the village economy, from the prerogatives of lordship, allowing it to develop according to its own internal propensities.¹² The preconditions of capitalist accumulation, Marx argues, were established by this economy of relatively unfettered commodity production.¹³

Two decisive events, Marx contends, marked the genesis of capitalism. The first comprised the abolition of all types of personal dependence – that is, of serfdom. The emancipation of the ordinary producer fulfilled an essential prerequisite of capitalist exploitation: If the individual is to sell his labor power as a commodity, explains Marx, "he must have it at his disposal, must be the untrammelled owner of his capacity for labour, i.e., of his person."¹⁴ Since the direct producers retained control over their means of production, however, fulfillment of this condition alone ensured that they were required to exchange only the products of their labor, not their labor power itself. Consequently, the second essential prerequisite of capitalist production is "that the labourer, instead of being in the position to sell commodities in which his labour is incorporated, must be obliged to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power, which exists only in his living self."¹⁵ The realization of this second condition is the "original sin" of capital, its "so-called primitive accumulation."¹⁶ "The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis of the whole process."¹⁷

Cohen maintains that Marx's explanation of the advent of capitalism accords in its essentials with the technological reading of history.¹⁸ On this reading, capitalist class relations emerged when and because they were best suited to promote, and therefore necessary for, optimal productive development. The focus of Cohen's interpretation is Part VIII of Volume 1 of *Capital*. He confines his discussion exclusively to Marx's account of the change from petty proprietorship to capitalism, omitting a discussion of the change from serfdom to widespread small holding. To be sure, as Cohen points out, Marx's narrative of the formation of capitalist class relations begins with the economy of small

agrarian producers. But Marx does not, as Cohen claims he does, explain the internal dynamic and dissolution of this economy in terms of the development of productive capacities it was incompetent to realize. Quite the contrary, Marx explains the transition from petty proprietorship to capitalist private property by referring it back to the transition from serfdom to widespread small holding. “The economic structure of capitalistic society,” he writes, “has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former.”¹⁹

Marx examines the resolution of feudal class struggle in Volume 3 of *Capital*.²⁰ Viewed from the perspective of Volume 3, an interpretation of Part VIII of Volume 1 emerges that belies Cohen’s reading of it. On this interpretation, the advent of capitalist class relations was the unintended by-product of feudal processes of class struggle. This is the thesis that guides Brenner’s studies of early modern Europe. He argues, and claims that Marx argues, that the abolition of serfdom was the result of successful peasant-class struggle against feudal lordship. By the fifteenth century, peasant communities in England had effectively put an end to the lords’ capacity to extract an economic surplus in the form of feudal rents. Unable to maintain or reinstate the institution of serfdom, the landlords responded to their predicament by abandoning customary in favor of economic rents on their lands, in effect carrying out “the so-called primitive accumulation” by stripping the peasants of the traditional guarantees to their holdings, reducing them to commercial tenants or agricultural wage laborers. The result was the distinctive development of agrarian capitalism in England, with its characteristic three-tiered relation among a large landlord, typically an aristocrat, a capitalist tenant farmer, who made the main economic contribution, and dispossessed peasants now relegated to proletarian status.

The lacuna in this story lies in its failure to explain the shifting fortunes of the contending classes.²¹ Brenner argues that the English lords failed to maintain or restore their traditional prerogatives in the face of fierce peasant resistance at the close of the Middle Ages, and yet succeeded in evicting the peasants from the soil in the early modern period.²² He admits, however, that he does not have a good answer to the question why feudal class struggle in England produced this outcome. Indeed, Brenner points out that the very strength of peasant communities necessary to cripple the feudal regime would have precluded the expropriation of the cultivators from the land. In his view, however, small peasant proprietorship is incapable of engendering economic develop-

ment.²³ Brenner concludes, rather cautiously, “that pre-capitalist economies have an internal logic and solidity which should not be underestimated,” and “that capitalist development is perhaps an historically more limited, surprising and peculiar phenomenon than is often appreciated.”²⁴

Why were peasant communities sufficiently cohesive to put an end to serfdom but subsequently unable to retain control over their lands against the aristocratic counter-offensive? The answer lies in an examination of the dynamics of class formation and disintegration within the peasantry. Interpretations of Marx’s historical assessment of the pre-modern peasantry typically focus on its negative aspect: the peasants’ main contribution to the rise of capitalism was to get expropriated from the land.²⁵ Brenner shares this perspective.²⁶ What has been generally missed is Marx’s assessment of the peasantry’s crucial role in making a positive contribution to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Indeed, Marx’s historical analyses contradict widely received accounts of them, accounts that have come to inform some of the central tenets of the prevailing orthodoxy in peasant studies.²⁷ I argue that Marx’s understanding of the course of peasant class struggles underlying the transition from serfdom to widespread peasant proprietorship provides the key to an explanation of the genesis of capitalism in terms of the internal logic of class conflict.

The feudal crisis complex

Elster has argued that Marx offers no hint of a dynamic mechanism internal to the feudal relations of production to explain their impact on economic development or the evolution of feudal class relations.²⁸ This is surely an exaggeration. Outside of his analysis of capitalist production, Marx’s most significant and distinctive historical contribution has been his conception of feudal class relations and their economic impact.²⁹ This conception has proven remarkably fruitful in guiding contemporary historical research of the feudal economy.

The distinguishing characteristic of the feudal relations of production arises from the fact that the economy is effectively under peasant control. Unlike the slave or the modern wage-laborer, who work under alien conditions of production, “the direct producer ... is to be found here in possession of his own means of production, the necessary material labour conditions required for the realisation of his labour and

the production of his means of subsistence.”³⁰ Medieval peasant villagers were quite capable of reproducing their economy without the intervention of any ruling class. Surplus labor was therefore extracted from them “by other than economic pressure” – that is, by juridical-political means ultimately sanctioned by military force. Accordingly, the property system took the form of “a direct relation of lordship and servitude, so that the direct producer is not free.”³¹ The lord was empowered to command the labor of the peasants by virtue of his superior authority to make binding decisions regarding the disposition of their persons and lands. This relationship specified the characteristic form of labor power in the feudal mode of production – serfdom. The term is plagued by controversy, but it is sufficient for our purposes to adopt Marx’s own definition: a “condition of personal dependence ... a lack of personal freedom, no matter to what extent, and being tied to the soil as its accessory, bondage in the true sense of the word.”³²

The economic activities of lords and peasants were determined by the need to reproduce their conditions of existence. The strategies they adopted were a function of the prevailing mechanisms of surplus extraction. Specifically, the lords were obliged to protect their power to extract rents, both from rivals within their own class and from the peasants. They were therefore required to use the lion’s share of the surplus they extracted to preserve and improve the existent means to extract additional surplus. Although the lords did make limited productive investments, participating in large land reclamation projects, their main outlays were political – chiefly for war and largesse.³³ The reasons for this pattern of investment are not difficult to discern: they were intended to buttress the extra-economic power that maintained their position as lords. Their economic impact was equally clear: they failed to provide “any significant feedback in the form of investment which would increase production.”³⁴

Marx located the main impetus of medieval economic development within the class of immediate producers.³⁵ The peasants organized their own material life, providing for themselves with means of production they possessed and worked on their own account. Within the harsh constraints of the feudal regime, they were thus afforded an incentive to increase the surplus at their disposal by raising the productive capacity of the domestic economy. The success of peasant class struggle determined the amount of economic surplus retained by the household and thus, writes Marx, “to what extent the direct producer shall be enabled to improve his own condition.”³⁶

Take it, for instance, that the enforced labour for the landlord originally amounted to two days per week. These two days of enforced labour per week are thereby fixed.... But the productivity of the remaining days of the week, which are at the disposal of the direct producer himself, is a variable magnitude, which must develop in the course of his experience.... The possibility is here presented for definite economic development taking place.³⁷

The heavy plough and the improved harnessing techniques necessary to draw it; the larger fields appropriate to the new ploughing techniques; the two- and three-field system of crop rotation; cropping changes such as the substitution of wheat for rye as the primary winter crop – these striking innovations in medieval agricultural technology and land management were pioneered by the peasantry.³⁸ Peasants also provided the supply of colonizers in the movement of land reclamation from forest, waste, and marsh that represented the main feudal advance in agricultural output. Feudalism's productive potential thus improved to the extent that the balance of class forces tilted in favor of the peasants, giving them a greater scope to determine the allocation of the society's productive resources.

This account of the basic cause of feudal economic growth turns the orthodox reading of Marx's theory upside down. In Cohen's interpretation, "the class which rules through a period, or emerges triumphant from epochal conflict does so because it is best suited, most able and disposed, to preside over the development of the productive forces at the time."³⁹ But in Marx's view, it is the class of subordinate producers, the peasantry, that was primarily responsible for the material progress witnessed in medieval Europe. On the whole, the lords did not either directly or indirectly encourage it. Quite the contrary, their economic strategies systematically impaired the optimal use and development of the existing productive forces.⁴⁰

The fundamental contradiction of the feudal relations of production lay in the cleavage between the nobility's monopoly of political and military power and the peasantry's role in organizing the economy.⁴¹ The lords' minimal entrepreneurial function meant that they could not readily augment their incomes by increasing the economy's productive capacity. As we have seen, they were obliged to use the surplus at their disposal to maintain the military-political mechanisms that constituted the foundation of their class power. Accordingly, their typical expenditures ensured that they extracted from the village economy more wealth than they restored to it in the form of productive investments.

What was rational for the lords, given their position in the class structure, was ultimately irrational for the feudal economy as a whole.

The economic impact of feudal rents was primarily disruptive, and the lords' distance from the economy afforded them little incentive to gauge the effects of their levies on the peasant holdings. As Marx noted, rents had to be treated as an obligatory prior expense that wholly determined the share of the surplus retained by the village economy.⁴² Rents were inescapable and sometimes arbitrary; they could not be adjusted to suit the tenants' changing circumstances. Rent increases not only depressed the peasantry's economic situation but also diminished the funds necessary to reproduce feudalism's material base. Feudal rent, wrote Marx, "may assume dimensions which seriously imperil reproduction of the conditions of labour, the means of production themselves, rendering the expansion of production more or less impossible...."⁴³

The impact of the lords' exactions on the limited productive potential of the peasant economy signalled the end of feudal development. The prevailing mechanisms of surplus extraction contained their own internal barrier, reached when they crippled the capacity of the peasant economy to reproduce material life. Sometime during the opening decades of the fourteenth century, the lords' exactions crossed the limits of economic safety, producing a general exhaustion of the soil. The result was a massive crisis which convulsed European society: the medieval economy entered upon a precipitous decline, taking the form of repeated harvest failures and demographic collapse.⁴⁴

The nature of the feudal crisis complex is plainly incompatible with the account of crises given by orthodox historical materialism. In the orthodox view, grounded in the thesis that there is an autonomous tendency for the forces of production to develop, "it is possible to speak of a contradiction between the forces and the relations of production, but not between classes."⁴⁵ A contradiction obtains when a society's class relations fetter the optimal use and development of its productive capacity, "when prospects opened by its productive forces are closed by its productive relations."⁴⁶ The collision between the developing forces and the increasingly restrictive relations is ultimately resolved in favor of the forces, by a qualitative change in the relations.

A class analysis of the dynamics of social crises, in contrast, locates economic contradictions within the class system itself. Antagonistic

imperatives inherent in the mode of exploitation require members of the dominant class to reproduce their class power by means of economic strategies that at the same time cause their self-destruction. Specifically, a contradiction obtains when the process of surplus extraction undermines the base from which surplus is drawn.⁴⁷ What is threatened (or fettered) is not the prospect of continued productive development but the prospect of continued exploitation. The crisis in the relationships between the contending classes occasions an economic paralysis. We have seen that the feudal crisis complex assumed the form of a dramatic contraction of the productive forces within the prevailing relations of production. The general feudal crisis provides no evidence of a link between the level of productive development and the rise of a new class system, such as would be required to show that capitalism emerged when and because it encouraged optimal productive growth.⁴⁸ Quite the contrary, endogenously caused changes in class relations determined the possibilities for epochal historical change.

The peasant economy: Nursery school for capitalist tenants

The general feudal crisis unleashed a desperate rent struggle as lords and peasants sought to protect their conditions of existence in the face of a rapidly contracting economic base. Aristocratic attempts to restore feudal controls over the cultivators were met by violent peasant resistance organized village by village and built upon the long years of experience of conflict against the lords.⁴⁹ The crisis itself was the product – unintended and unwanted – of structural imperatives inherent in the feudal mode of exploitation. The resolution of the crisis, however, was determined by the active intervention of the contending classes, in which their different capacities for struggle were forced to the forefront.⁵⁰ Throughout Western Europe, the peasantry succeeded in loosening the grip of aristocratic rule. The medieval peasants' talent for organization and collective action is well known to historians. Western Europe is particular was densely populated by an "old" peasantry. The collective life of peasants was deeply rooted: they "had had many centuries to evolve institutions, common practices and a consciousness of their own interest."⁵¹ Not only were peasant villages older than the ruling aristocracy, but given the tendency of noble families to die out or to be replaced by conquest, peasant communities had a more continuous life and were more deeply entrenched. They thus developed the requisite solidarity and strength to resist aristocratic encroachments.

The economic emancipation of the peasantry developed earliest and furthest in England, where peasant class struggle irreparably crippled the extra-economic mechanisms whereby the lords had extracted a surplus from the village economy.⁵² The direct producers destroyed their dependent position, giving rise to an economy of relatively untrammelled petty commodity production. Landlords experienced a pronounced fall in income, reaching its nadir in the mid-fifteenth century. Successful peasant resistance in the context of the acute labor shortage occasioned by the demographic collapse forced landlords to wind up their demesnes, leasing its lands chiefly to peasants, and to remove virtually all feudal controls on peasant agriculture. Depopulation and the peasants' liberty to move and to buy, sell, or let land contributed to a dramatic increase in the volume of land transfers. The majority of peasant families acquired sufficient land on which they could get a living by their work; relatively fewer families depended on regular employment for wages. Not only did the size of peasant holdings generally increase, but cultivators made significant advances in obtaining more secure tenures. The direct producers thus made substantial gains in their material conditions of life.⁵³ "Only in the period of the decline and fall of the feudal system," writes Marx, "but where it still struggles internally – as in England in the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth centuries – is there a golden age for labour in the process of becoming emancipated."⁵⁴

The emergence of an economy of relatively free peasant proprietorship, Marx contends, created the necessary preconditions for the genesis of capitalist accumulation.⁵⁵ Marx's analysis sharply challenges some of the central tenets of the current orthodoxy in peasant studies, tenets often (mis)attributed to Marx's own works. Marx is typically portrayed as an implacable foe of the peasants, dismissing them as rural barbarians irrationally hostile to capitalist development. Hence "peasants were most interesting for Marx when they were ceasing to exist as such," appearing in his writings as the object or fodder of history.⁵⁶ A prevailing body of contemporary scholarship has endorsed the thesis that peasant communities form an insuperable barrier to economic modernization. In this view, peasant villages defend communal rights against the consolidation of private property, and the small-scale and self-sufficiency of peasant farming retards productive development.⁵⁷

Marx's actual judgments on the peasantry – less axiomatic, more historical – sought to trace the variable roles played by different forms of peasant action in different historical contexts. Thus Marx draws a

sharp distinction between the pre-modern and the modern peasantry. In the context of a capitalist country such as nineteenth-century France, he maintains, the continued predominance of peasant ownership acts as a major brake on the economy, although even here Marx recommended against any ritual excommunication of the peasantry as a reactionary mass.⁵⁸ By contrast, Marx underscored the pre-modern peasantry's contribution to the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

The thesis that the peasantry resisted capitalist farming as a fundamental threat to collective village rights telescopes long-term developments, neglecting crucial stages in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Marx draws a clear distinction between the private property of small producers, founded upon their own labor, and capitalist private property, resting upon the exploitation of the labor of others. Capitalist property, he argues, is "not only ... the direct antithesis of the former, but absolutely grows on its tomb only."⁵⁹ Accordingly, Marx characterized the genesis of capitalism in the countries of Western Europe as a process whereby "one form of private property is transformed into another form of private property."⁶⁰

Marx attributes the origins of individual property to the cottage economy of peasants and artisans that emerged from the dissolution of feudal lordship. Indeed, he contends that free peasant proprietorship was principally responsible for the development of modern human beings. The genesis of individualism is a special legacy of successful peasant struggles and should not be exclusively attributed to the bourgeoisie:

The private property of the labourer in his means of production is the foundation of petty industry, whether agricultural, manufacturing, or both; petty industry, again, is an essential condition for the development of social production and of the free individuality of the labourer himself. Of course, this petty mode of production exists also under slavery, serfdom and other states of dependence. But it flourishes, it lets loose its whole energy, it attains its classical form, only where the labourer is the private owner of his own means of labour set in action by himself: the peasant of the land which he cultivates, the artisan of the tool which he handles as a virtuoso.⁶¹

Because of the medieval peasantry's illiteracy and inarticulateness, modern historians have had to piece "together the fundamentals of peasant ideology from fragmentary expressions of opinion, or from demands made from time to time, or from formulations of accepted custom."⁶² What we do know of the medieval peasants' culture suggests that its "primary feature... was a deeply rooted sense of family property

rights in the peasant holding, and the various appurtenances which made it a viable economic unit – such as claims for common pasture and other customary usages. With this naturally went the conviction that the family's right in the holding was hereditary."⁶³ Economic independence and self-sufficiency were essential strains in this world-view. In the aftermath of their striking success, especially after the 1380s, in crippling the manorial regime, the aspirations of English peasants became part of a general cultural ideal: Hilton observes "that the concept of the freeman, owing no obligation, not even deference, to an overlord, is one the most important legacies of medieval peasants to the modern world."⁶⁴

The view that peasant cultivation blocked economic innovation is challenged by Marx's own historical studies and by contemporary historians of agricultural development in Europe. Recent research has largely undermined Postan's claim that the prosperity of the peasantry in the fifteenth century coincided with a period of economic decline.⁶⁵ Equally questionable is Brenner's thesis that peasant cultivation is incapable of providing an adequate foundation for productive development.⁶⁶ Marx's argument is that the triumph of the peasantry as a class led to the economic florescence of peasant agriculture, creating the basis for a revolution in agricultural production.⁶⁷ By the mid-fifteenth century, the newly independent peasants were able to retain a major portion of their surplus on their holdings and employ it more freely, unencumbered by disruptive feudal exactions. Enterprising cultivators introduced a greater degree of economic rationality into their agricultural practices, experimenting with new forms of land usage and cropping patterns, and used the flexibility of their new circumstances to contribute to the growing market. Improvements in agricultural buildings on peasant holdings, widespread dissemination of animals throughout the village, the shift in emphasis from arable cultivation to pasture, the increasing pace of peasant enclosures, the development of rural industry, and the rising tempo of retail trade at the village level – all point to the growing dynamism of the peasant economy.⁶⁸ The prosperity of England relative to France was already noted by contemporaries such as Sir John Fortescue, whose *De Laudibus Legum Angliae* (1468–1471) Marx refers to in *Capital*.⁶⁹

The growing prosperity of the peasant village was, however, only the first consequence of its emancipation from feudal rule. The second, already evident in the sixteenth century, was the growing differentiation within its ranks.⁷⁰ The peasantry's success in crippling the feudal

regime was its last act as a cohesive social class. The peasant community had never been an idyll of cooperation. Economic conflict, particularly between wealthier and poorer peasants, was not uncommon. To be sure, conflicts within the village were always sharply circumscribed by the conflict between the village and the lords. Against the nobility, their common antagonist, they maintained their unity; in other respects, large and small holders were increasingly divided.⁷¹ Moreover, the peasants' achievement in securing the conditions of free tenure contributed to growing land transfers, disrupting the ancient tenemental arrangements that had given peasant villages their internal solidity and resilience. Thus, if their cohesion made successful struggle against the lords possible, their very success against the lords destroyed the rationale for concerted action, spelling the end of village solidarity.

These interrelated developments – the growing prosperity of the peasant economy and the subsequent economic differentiation among cultivators – formed the prelude to a revolution in agricultural class relations. The more prosperous peasants, Marx writes,

gradually acquire the possibility of accumulating a certain amount of wealth and themselves [become] transformed into future capitalists. The old self-employed possessors of land themselves thus give rise to a nursery school for capitalist tenants, whose development is conditioned by the general development of capitalist production beyond the bounds of the country-side. This class shoots up very rapidly when particularly favourable circumstances come to its aid, as in England in the 16th century, where the then progressive depreciation of money enriched them under the customary long leases at the expense of the landlords.⁷²

But if the peasants' cottage economy provided the nursery school of capitalist farmers, it was simultaneously the death bed of the peasantry as a class. The vital social element in these developments was the yeomanry, a group of substantial holders shading off toward the poorer husbandmen below and the lesser gentry above them.⁷³ They had both sufficient resources and the will to break away from inherited agricultural routines and introduce new ways of organizing the land. The yeomen were the initial force behind the enclosures. They amalgamated scattered land parcels by appropriating, very often illegally, lapsed holdings, by nibbling away at wastes, commons, and not infrequently neighboring fields, including those of inattentive lords. These well-to-do cultivators especially were released from the imperative to preserve village unity to press the struggle against the lords once the feudal regime was wrecked beyond repair. "Rich peasant families," writes

Hilton, “now graziers and demesne farmers holding largely by leasehold tenure, no longer stood as mediators between the lords and the communities of customary tenants. They were no longer potential leaders in the resistance.”⁷⁴

The genesis of capitalist class relations

The processes of peasant class formation and disintegration created the conditions under which the primitive accumulation of capital became both necessary and possible. English lords were obliged to search for new methods of organizing land and labor to recoup their incomes because the previous mode of exploitation had virtually collapsed. The option of appropriating an economic surplus by reasserting feudal controls over the peasantry was closed off to them. There was no question of restoring the dependent status of the peasantry; villeinage had melted away. But if the landowners were required to devise wholly new economic strategies, the concomitant emancipation and dissolution of the peasant community made available a promising alternative. First, the peasants’ impaired capacity for class struggle facilitated their eviction from the soil. Hilton explains:

English peasant communities in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had been capable of great resistance, even successful resistance, to attacks on their conditions by the landlords. If they allowed themselves to be evicted in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it was because economic and social changes had destroyed the cohesion that had been their strength in the past.⁷⁵

Second, the dynamism engendered by the economy of petty commodity production showed the lords the profits that adoption of the new methods of farming could bring, and provided them with both the material means and the agents to reorganize agricultural production. The greater landowners supplied the land on which the husbandry practices pioneered by the yeomanry could be introduced on a larger scale; and the process of economic differentiation within the ranks of the peasants supplied the lords with tenants capable of efficient farm management. Most farmers employed wage labor. The elements thus set free by the dissolution of feudal society recomposed themselves in the form of an emerging symbiotic relationship between aristocratic landlords and capitalist tenants, providing the nucleus of the nascent ruling class.

The logic of the new class system required the members of the dominant class to adopt strategies for optimizing surplus appropriation that consisted primarily in productive investments. On the one hand, the market in tenants created by the introduction of purely commercial relationships between landlords and farmers produced a situation in which all but the most efficient farmers went under. On the other hand, competition among landlords for tenants ensured that they could not simply “squeeze” the farmers, threatening the funds available for improvement and hindering progressive husbandry. The resulting pattern of investment allowed England to overcome the “crises of subsistence” which plagued pre-capitalist economies.⁷⁶

The agricultural revolution and the differentiation of the rural producers encouraged the “proto-industrialization” of the countryside, led by the development of textile manufacturing.⁷⁷ Increasing rural productivity made possible a steady transfer of productive resources from agriculture to industry. Merchant capitalists seeking to escape the confines of the urban guilds found in the countryside a ready source of underemployed labor in peasants with little or no land. For their part, small cottagers whose domestic crafts had always provided a subsidiary source of income found in outwork for the merchant a last refuge against utter proletarianization.

The changing configuration of ownership relations in the countryside transformed the economic and political physiognomy of the English aristocracy. This is not to say that the transition to capitalism occasioned any major redistribution of land from one class to another. But if the land did not change hands, the *terms* on which individuals held it were fundamentally altered: the eighteenth-century Whig oligarchy – in the main, the descendants of England’s natural rulers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – was no longer a class of feudal lords but rather of capitalist landowners.⁷⁸ The landed aristocracy did not, to be sure, make the transition to capitalist farming all at once; nor did all of them succeed in adapting to the new social configuration. Aristocrats who insisted on maintaining traditional levels of conspicuous consumption were usually forced to sell their lands or to seek royal favor to do so; many ended in ruin. The majority, however, managed to balance their budgets, then took to rigorous exploitation of what was left in the new manner, thus recovering their fortunes.

The process of consolidating the new economic order required the ascending class to complete the destruction of the traditional regime,

anchored in the institution of the Crown. Clearly, if private property was to do the whole task of allocating labor power and its product, then all productive resources, including labor power, had to be compelled to assume the new property form. Accordingly, the transformation of the ruling class manifested itself in a struggle to secure the dominance of a wholly new form of property in the means of production.

This is the economic meaning of the English Civil War: its special accomplishment was to replace the political and juridical conditions of feudal exploitation with conditions facilitating capitalist exploitation. Parliamentary leaders converted all lands that were formerly held of the king by feudal tenure into absolute ownership. Feudal rights, however, were abolished upwards only, not downwards: “the landed proprietors,” Marx writes, “abolished the feudal tenure of land, i.e., they got rid of all its obligations to the state, ‘indemnified’ the State by taxes on the peasantry and the rest of the mass of the people, [and] vindicated for themselves the rights of modern private property in estates to which they had only a feudal title.”⁷⁹ Both King and Parliament had fitfully sought to stem enclosures prior to the Civil War. Enclosure had been pushed forward mainly by “individual acts of violence against which legislation, for a hundred and fifty years, fought in vain.”⁸⁰ After 1660, no government seriously attempted to check them. Whatever was restored at the Restoration, it is surely significant that feudal tenures and restraints upon the enclosure of land were not.⁸¹ Enclosures were now arranged by the government itself. The peasantry lost all attempts to secure property rights in holdings “to which [they] had the same feudal right as the lord.”⁸² By the eighteenth century, the enclosure movement in England experienced a veritable boom, reaching its climax during the Napoleonic Wars. “The rise of a landless proletariat was a long-drawn-out process,” comments Hill, “but henceforth it was an inevitable one.”⁸³

The logic of epochal change

Cohen’s challenge to a version of historical materialism that assigns causal primacy to class struggle is to give an “answer to the question why class wars (as opposed to battles) are settled one way rather than another” without appealing to the development of the productive forces.⁸⁴ Our reading of Marx’s historical account of the genesis of capitalist class relations in England suggests an answer to this question.

The transition from feudalism to capitalism was the outcome of two qualitatively different types of class struggle. An introduction to the nature of this distinction and its implications for historical materialism is provided by the opening paragraphs of the *Communist Manifesto*:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.⁸⁵

This catalogue of class conflicts curiously omits the struggle between the aristocracy and the nascent capitalist class. The reason for this is that there is a fundamental difference between the nature of the class relationships characterized as “oppressor and oppressed” and the nature of the conflict that gave rise to capitalist class relations.⁸⁶ On the one hand, the antagonism distinguishing Marx’s catalogue of class conflicts – for example, lord and serf – arises out of a nexus of exploitation between an appropriating and a producing class. The contending classes clash over the distribution of surplus produced by a given economy. On the other hand, the antagonism between the nobility and the nascent capitalist class represents a struggle between irreconcilable appropriating classes. The conflict here turns on the *mode of exploitation* whereby surplus is appropriated. These two forms of class conflict comprise very different ways in which the contending classes are defined and in turn define themselves in relation to each other, pointing toward widely divergent social outcomes. In Marx’s terms, class conflict within a mode of production typically ends not in “a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large,” but rather “in the common ruin of the contending classes.”⁸⁷ Only the clash between dominant classes culminates in the rise of a wholly new society and economy.

Marx’s study of the economy of small peasant producers is an account of the period between the resolution of feudal class conflict and the formation of capitalist class relations. Imperatives inherent in the class relationship between lords and serfs provided a cogent explanation of feudalism’s characteristic evolution and internal contradiction. The feudal crisis complex, we have seen, assumed the form of a substantial contraction in the economic conditions of social existence of late medieval Europe. No mechanism is in evidence linking the existing level of material progress to the emergence of a new ruling class.

Indeed, no class with the capacity and interest to revolutionize society emerged from the internal dynamic of feudal class struggle or the structural interstices of feudal society. The peasantry put an end to the lords' capacity to reproduce themselves as lords; but peasant class struggle proved quite inadequate to raise the peasantry to a position of dominance. Needless to say, a capitalist class ultimately emerged from the disintegration of feudal society. But this class emerged only after feudalism had been long on the wane.⁸⁸ The nascent capitalist class was not called into existence by feudalism's internal dynamic; nor did its ascendance occasion feudalism's decline. The feudal regime disintegrated from within: only its prior dissolution "set free the elements" that came to form the capitalist regime.

The victory of the peasantry as a class encouraged a certain development of the productive forces. This is not to say that the peasantry emerged triumphant when and because it facilitated productive development. Peasants had provided the main impetus of economic growth throughout the medieval period; aristocratic rule systematically blocked productive development. The success of peasant class struggle following the general feudal crisis was a result of their superior capacity for concerted action relative to that of the lords. Peasant communities in Western Europe were older and more deeply entrenched than the aristocracy, affording them the requisite solidarity and strength to resist feudal encroachments.

The abolition of dependent cultivation revealed the limits of peasant solidarity. This is one of the most significant conclusions yielded by Marx's study of the transition from serfdom to small holding: there is no necessary dynamic impelling the type of class struggle grounded in the relationship of exploitation toward social revolution. Here is the main reason why peasant communities, so successful in impairing the feudal regime in the aftermath of the general crisis, were nevertheless virtually incapable of resisting the expropriation of peasant cultivators after the sixteenth century. Marx rightly claimed that individuals are led and accustomed to organize as a class by the experience of common conditions of exploitation. But, just as importantly, their collective identity is circumscribed by the imperatives of class struggle.⁸⁹ Their very success therefore spells the end of the need to act in concert and the class begins to dissolve. If the English peasants constituted themselves as a successful class against the lords, their triumph made manifest the limits of their cohesion as a class. The rationale for concerted peasant action disappeared with the defeat of the aristocracy.

The emancipation of an exploited class, then, does not necessarily entail the formation of a wholly new society. Rather, its emancipation normally results in the dissolution of the contending classes. Far from vitiating Marx's class analysis, this historical outcome argues for a more tenable reconstruction of class and class struggle. For Marx argues that class is a relationship in which individuals discover the identity of their collective interests only in the process of engaging in struggles against other individuals whose interests are antagonistic to theirs.⁹⁰ This notion implies that when the nexus of exploitation is broken as a result of the triumph of the oppressed class, the basis of class cohesion withers and the class begins to fall apart.

The class conflict within a mode of exploitation contrasts sharply with that characteristic of the clash between modes of exploitation. If peasant class struggle was circumscribed by the need to destroy the feudal regime, the emergent capitalist landowners replaced it with the regime of private property, successfully reconstituting themselves as an alternative ruling class. The emancipation of the peasantry as a class made it necessary for the lords to find new ways of extracting a surplus; the subsequent disintegration of the peasantry made it possible. The class identity of the individuals who came to form the new ruling class was determined by their relationship to a wholly new type of property in the means of production. If the capitalist landowners formed a subordinate class within the waning ancien regime, it was in the sense that feudal property arrangements militated against the consolidation of the new property form. The aim and end of the contending classes, in terms of which they came to define themselves as classes, had its source in the interest of nascent capitalist landlords to complete the destruction of the ancien regime, and the social forces arrayed around the monarchy to restore and preserve it. Consequently, increasing number of landlords came to experience their oppression, however vaguely, not in terms of the surplus extracted from them, but rather in terms of the real possibility of constructing an alternative society.⁹¹

Capitalist class relations established a close if imperfect correlation between the mode of surplus extraction and the requirements of material progress. The triumph of capitalist production, however, was the result of class struggles that occurred both prior to and quite independently of the development of the productive forces. The history of class struggle explains both the surface relief of society and its long-term patterns of economic development.

Notes

1. G. A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.
2. See in particular Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," and "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," in *The Brenner Debate, Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Compare Robert Brenner, "The Social Basis of Economic Development," with G. A. Cohen, "Forces and Relations of Production," both in *Analytical Marxism*, ed. John Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See also Joshua Cohen, "Review of *Karl Marx's Theory of History*," *The Journal of Philosophy* 5 (May 1982): 253–273, and G. A. Cohen's reply in *History, Labour, and Freedom*, 85–106; John Roemer, *Free to Lose* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 108–124.
3. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, 14. See also Roemer, *Free to Lose*, 114–16.
4. G. A. Cohen, "Reply to Four Critics," in *Analyse & Kritik* 5 (1983): 207.
5. See Richard Miller, *Analyzing Marx* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 237; Alan Carling, "Liberty, Equality, Community," *New Left Review* 171 (September/October 1988): 95. Cohen maintains that the transition to capitalism provides the best example of his defense of Marx's theory. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 169–170, 175–180.
6. Marx himself came to question the extent to which lessons drawn from the English historical experience were generalizable. Compare Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels, 3 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, n.d.) 1: 19 and 669–670, with Karl Marx, Letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, November 1877, in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 135–136. See the discussions by Haruki Wada, "Marx and Revolutionary Russia," 48–49, 57–60, and Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan, "Late Marx: Continuity, Contradiction and Learning," 77–80, both in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Teodor Shanin.
7. Habermas provides an excellent discussion of Marx's oscillation between these two principles of causality. *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 25–63. See also Brenner, "The Social Basis of Economic Development," 40–47; Robert Brenner, "Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism," in *The First Modern Society*, ed. A. L. Beier et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 272–95; Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 33–35; Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 238, 272, 284–285, 318; Claudio J. Katz, *From Feudalism to Capitalism: Marxian Theories of Class Struggle and Social Change* (Westport, Ct. Greenwood Press, 1989), 1–47. Attempts to reconcile these two versions of historical materialism, typically by way of an appeal to a dialectical interplay between productive development and class struggle, have been largely unsuccessful because two fundamentally different explanations of historical change are being brought into play. This is a logical and not a dialectical contradiction.
8. "Reconstruction," writes Habermas, "signifies taking a theory apart and putting it back together again in a new form in order to attain more fully the goal it has set for itself. This is the normal way ... of dealing with a theory that needs revision in many

respects but whose potential for stimulation has still not been exhausted." *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 95.

9. E. J. Hobsbawm, Introduction to Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 20–27.
10. Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: NLB, 1980), 66. Surely one of the most telling objections to Cohen's interpretation of Marx is that its "distinctive ideas ... have not been put to work, to any significant extent, in any reasonably successful detailed study of any major historical question by an investigator sympathetic to Marx." Miller, *Analyzing Marx*, 264. See also Rodney Hilton, "Feudalism in Europe: Problems for Historical Materialists," in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, ed. Rodney Hilton (London: NLB, 1990), 1–11.
11. Marx, *Capital* 1: 671; also pp. 672, 676.
12. Marx, *Capital* 3: 806. See also *Capital* 1: 316, n. 3; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 510.
13. Marx, *Capital* 1: 694–695, 713; *Capital* 3: 798–800, 807.
14. Marx, *Capital* 1: 165.
15. Marx, *Capital* 1: 165.
16. Marx, *Capital* 1: 667.
17. Marx, *Capital* 1: 669. See also Marx, *Grundrisse*, 471, 489–490, 497–498, 505–514.
18. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, 175–180.
19. Marx, *Capital* 1: 668. See also Marx, *Grundrisse*, 506–509.
20. Marx, *Capital* 3: 796–802.
21. Among Brenner's critics, only William H. Hagen has noted this lacuna in his argument. See William H. Hagen, "Capitalism and the Countryside in Early Modern Europe: Interpretations, Models, Debates," *Agricultural History* 1 (1988): 41–42.
22. Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," 291–296.
23. Brenner, "Social Basis of Economic Development," 49–52; "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," 306–311.
24. Brenner, "Social Basis of Economic Development," 53.
25. See, e.g., Michael Duggett, "Marx on Peasants," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 2 (January 1975): 159–182; Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 37–44; David Mitrany, *Marx Against the Peasant* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 31–75. For a more balanced reading, see Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, 4 vols. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977–90) 2: 317–452. Teodor Shanin subscribes to the prevailing view that Marx's *Grundrisse* and *Capital* treat the peasantry as fodder for history. He argues, however, that Marx came to abandon this conception in the last decade of his life when he turned his attention to Russia and the Russian peasant commune. See Teodor Shanin, "Late Marx: Gods and Craftsmen," in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Shanin, 3–39. The argument of this article suggests that no sharp break occurred between Marx's "mature" and "later" years. As I argue later in the article, his historical judgments typically sought to trace the variable roles of peasants in different historical contexts. See also Claudio J. Katz, "Marx on the Peasantry: Class in Itself or Class in Struggle?" *The Review of Politics* 54 (Winter 1992): 50–71. Sayer and Corrigan have stressed both the distinctiveness and importance of the "later Marx" as well as the significant continuities in his thinking between *Capital* and his last years. See Sayer and Corrigan, "Late Marx: Continuity, Contradiction and Learning," 77–94.

26. See the perceptive critiques by Patricia Croot and David Parker, "Agrarian Class Structure and the Development of Capitalism: France and England Compared," 79–90, and J. P. Cooper, "In Search of Agrarian Capitalism," 144–148, 188, both in *The Brenner Debate*, ed. Aston and Philpin. See also Robert H. Bates, "Lessons from History, or the Perfidy of English Exceptionalism and the Significance of Historical France," *World Politics* 40 (1988): 507–509. Peter Kriedte shares Brenner's Marxian orientation, despite some disagreements, adhering to the view that the agricultural revolution in England awaited the prior elimination of the peasantry. Peter Kriedte, *Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 23–24, 74–75. See also Hagen, "Capitalism and the Countryside in Early Modern Europe," 17–18, 30.
27. For a critical review of this orthodoxy, see Bates, "Lessons From History," 499–516.
28. *Making Sense of Marx*, 278.
29. Miller, *Analyzing Marx*, 198.
30. Marx, *Capital* 3: 790.
31. Marx, *Capital* 3: 790–791.
32. Marx, *Capital* 3: 791.
33. Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53–55, 89–91 (for a discussion of aristocratic household expenditures, see ch. 3). See also M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 103; M. M. Postan and John Hatcher, "Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society," in *The Brenner Debate*, ed. Aston and Philpin, 77–78; R. H. Hilton, "A Crisis of Feudalism" in *The Brenner Debate*, ed. Aston and Philpin, 130–131; Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," 238–242; Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: NLB, 1974), 31–32.
34. Hilton, "A Crisis of Feudalism," 131. See Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," 233.
35. Marx, *Capital* 3: 794–796. See also Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: NLB, 1974), 185–188.
36. Marx, *Capital* 3: 793.
37. Marx, *Capital* 3: 794. To be sure, the peasantry's contribution to productive development should not be overemphasized. Peasant production, Marx argued, imposed its own limits on economic growth; *Capital* 3: 807–808, 810. Moreover, medieval economic development as a whole involved expanding output, primarily by reclaiming uncultivated land, rather than increasing productivity. See Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, 188–190; Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 41–44.
38. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 44–57.
39. Cohen, *History, Labour and Freedom*, 15.
40. Cohen's thesis that pre-capitalist class rule, despite the obstacles it posed to productive development, was best suited to promote material progress given the level of material development at the time, is widely contradicted by economic historians. Contrast Cohen's defense of this thesis, in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, 169–171 and *History, Labour and Freedom*, 103–105, with the conclusions of Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 41–44, 102–104; Hilton, "A Crisis of Feudalism," 130–131; Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development," 31–34, and "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," 232–238; Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, 7.

41. Hilton, "A Crisis of Feudalism," 26–27.
42. Marx, *Capital* 3: 790, 792–793, 795. Postan has estimated that the average proportion of the gross output of the typical peasant's holding levied by feudal exactions in England "was frequently near or above the 50 percent mark." Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 125.
43. Marx, *Capital* 3: 796.
44. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 57–72; Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," 264–272; Hilton, "A Crisis of Feudalism," 121–122, 128, 131–132; Rodney Hilton, "Was There a General Crisis of Feudalism?" in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, ed. Hilton, 166–172; Anderson, *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism*, 197–204; David Levine, *Reproducing Families* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 16–18, 24–25, 31–33. The death toll was given a frightening impetus by the Black Death that swept Europe in mid-century, but historians agree that the onset of the crisis predates the plague. Although there is general agreement on the outward course of the crisis – ecological imbalance giving way to demographic exhaustion – historians disagree on its internal causes. Postan assigns explanatory primacy to demographic patterns whereas the Marxist historians (Brenner, Hilton, Anderson) award primacy to class relations. Levine's work is part of an attempt to reconcile Marxian and demographic explanations of socioeconomic development. An assessment of the debate between the demographic and the Marxian interpretations of feudal development, which occupies a large part of *The Brenner Debate*, is outside the scope of this article.
45. Goran Therborn, *Science, Class and Society* (London: NLB, 1976), 396. See also G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1981), 49–50.
46. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, 297. See also Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, 109–123.
47. Compare with Marx's explanation of the capitalist dynamic that gives rise to a secular tendency for the rate of profit to fall. The imperatives of capitalist surplus appropriation require capitalists to substitute living labor by dead labor (machinery), narrowing the base from which surplus-value is appropriated; the imperatives of feudal surplus appropriation require lords to wrest from the economy more surplus than they return to it in the form of productive investments, eventually robbing the soil of its fertility. Compare *Capital* 1: 229 with 383–384.
48. For a discussion of the need to specify such a link between the level of development of the productive forces and the rise of new relations of production, see Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, 11–14, 17, and the exchange between Jon Elster and G. A. Cohen in *Theory and Society* 11 (1982): 453–495. See also Brenner, "The Social Basis of Economic Development," pp. 46–48, n. 13.
49. Rodney Hilton has provided an excellent analysis of late medieval peasant class struggles in *Bond Men Made Free* (London: Methuen, 1973). See also Christopher Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 275–281.
50. See Anderson, *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism*, 198, n. 3.
51. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 29. See also Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," 277–278.
52. Marx, *Capital* 1: 671, 672, 694. On the erosion of the lords' coercive powers and the consequent changes in landlords' and peasants' material circumstances in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see: Rodney Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, sec. ed. (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 33–44; Dyer,

- Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society*, 264–275, 287–297, 301–305; Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, 41–48, 141–143, 146–150, 158–160, 181–182; Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 105–109, 139–141, 151–154; Levine, *Reproducing Families*, 31–37; Anderson, *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism*, 204–209; Rodney Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 39–40.
53. The other side of this outcome is the relative success of the medieval ruling class in regrouping itself around the emerging absolutist state. Despite its gains in restoring the authority of the Crown, the Tudor revolution failed to secure the essential ingredients of absolutist power – money, bureaucracy, army. Thus, in contrast to its English counterpart, the French peasantry secured the tenancy of their holdings only within the framework of the absolutist state. The reimposition of “centralized feudal rent” by the monarchy ensured that the kingdom remained “this side” of the great transformation until the late eighteenth century. “The real crime of the French monarchy,” write Croot and Parker, “was not that it bolstered peasant ownership but that (together with the church, seigneurs and landowners) it depressed it so brutally. The consequence was that the countryside lost its most dynamic force – a class of truly independent peasants.” Croot and Parker, “France and England Compared,” 88–89.
 54. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 510. “Golden Age” is also the term Postan uses to describe the economic condition of the peasantry at the close of the Middle Ages. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 142. Levine describes this period as “the indian summer of peasant society.” Levine, *Reproducing Families*, 35.
 55. A discussion of the role of this economy of small producers in the transition to capitalism played a central part in the Dobb-Sweezy controversy of the 1950s. See Maurice Dobb et al., *The Transition From Feudalism to Capitalism*, introduction by Rodney Hilton (London: NLB, 1976).
 56. Duggett, “Marx on Peasants,” 161. See above, n. 25.
 57. See Bates, “Lessons from History,” 500–510.
 58. For an analysis of Marx’s historical assessment of the French peasantry, see Katz, “Marx on the Peasantry,” 50–71.
 59. Marx, *Capital 1*: 716. See also Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols. projected (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975–) 6: 498–500 (hereafter cited as CW).
 60. Marx, “Reply to Vera Zasulich,” 8 March 1881, in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Shanin, 124.
 61. Marx, *Capital 1*: 713. See also *Capital 1*: 672; *Capital 3*: 807. In light of these passages, it is difficult to accredit Macfarlane’s contention in *Origins of English Individualism*, 39–43, 195–197, that, in Marx’s view, modern individualism emerged in opposition to the peasant economy.
 62. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 38.
 63. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 38 (see also p. 40). See M. M. Postan, “Medieval Agrarian Society in Its Prime: England,” in M. M. Postan, editor, *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 1: 626; Levine, *Reproducing Families*, 26, 36–37.
 64. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 235.
 65. Compare Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 142, with Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society*, 316, 339.
 66. See Croot and Parker, “France and England Compared,” 79–90; Hilton, “A Crisis

- of Feudalism," 133–134; Levine, *Reproducing Families*, 39–40, 44–49; Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, 143–145, 271–273, 276–277; Bates, "Lessons From History," 507–510; Jack Goldstone, "Regional Ecology and Agrarian Development in England and France," *Politics and Society* 16 (September 1988): 301–302, 306, 310–316.
67. Marx, *Capital* 1: 671–672, 713; *Capital* 3: 798–800, 806–807; Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, CW 11: 189–190.
68. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society*, 316–354.
69. Sir John Fortescue, *De Laudibus Legum Angliae*, ed. and trans. S. B. Chrimes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949), 67–71, 81–85, 87–89. See also Marx, *Capital* 1: 672; Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, 271–273.
70. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society*, 310–315, 366–372; Levine, *Reproducing Families*, 25–26, 38–55.
71. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 32–35; see also Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*, 51.
72. Marx, *Capital* 3: 799. See also *Capital* 1: 694–695.
73. In the view of Croot and Parker, "The most striking contrast between the agrarian structures of [England and France] during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [was] the lack of any equivalent in France to the celebrated class of English yeomanry, which was itself the product of a process of differentiation within the ranks of the peasantry, a process not experienced by their French counterparts;" in "France and England Compared," 85. See also Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society*, 331–337, 368–370; Levine, *Reproducing Families*, 38–40; Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 11; Marx, *Capital* 1: 676.
74. Hilton, "A Crisis of Feudalism," 135.
75. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*, 173; see also "A Crisis of Feudalism," 135.
76. See E. L. Jones, "Editor's Introduction," to *Agriculture and Economic Growth in England, 1650–1815* (London: Methuen, 1967).
77. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 510; *Capital* 1: 697–701; *Capital* 3: 785–786. Levine provides an excellent analysis of the nexus among rural proletarianization, the agricultural revolution, the development of manufacturing in the countryside, and population growth. See Levine, *Reproducing Families*, esp., 131–137. The notion of "proto-industrialization" is the hallmark of Kriedte's explanation of the transition to capitalism, in *Peasant, Landlords, and Merchant Capitalists*.
78. This is the conclusion of Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). See also Brenner's interpretation of Lawrence Stone's *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, in "Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism," 297–303; Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 146–149; Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 72–77.
79. Marx, *Capital* 1: 676. See also Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*, 146–147; Corrigan and Sayer, *The Great Arch*, 82–83.
80. Marx, *Capital* 1: 677.
81. Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution, 1529–1642* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 72.
82. Marx, *Capital* 1: 672.
83. Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714*, second edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 162.

84. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, 15.
85. Marx and Engels, *CW* 6: 482.
86. See Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973), 85–86, 91–92; Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 373.
87. For Marx, the “common ruin of the contending classes” referred to the disintegration of the Roman Empire. See Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution 1*: 466. Provided that appropriate consideration is given to the different circumstances of medieval Europe, this same conception provides an apt characterization of the disintegration of feudal society.
88. See Marx, *Capital* 1: 669.
89. See Marx, *The German Ideology*, *CW* 5: 76–77, 78, 80.
90. This definition of class is succinctly articulated by E. P. Thompson. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 9–11, and “Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?” *Social History* 3 (May 1978): 146–150.
91. Cf. Giddens, *Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, 116. On the historical significance of the changing cultural self-understanding of the early modern English aristocracy, see Corrigan and Sayer, *The Great Arch*, 72–86.