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## Robert Brenner on political accumulation and the transition to capitalism

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### Abstract

This paper is an immanent critique of Robert Brenner's writings on the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The concept "immanent" is defined as a logic of implication, according to which a text or theory is evaluated within the terms that it sets for itself, to determine whether its objectives and assumptions are true in the way they are said to be true. Using this method of critique, the paper shows how Brenner's concept of "political accumulation" undermines his own initial claim that the balance of class forces between lords and peasants determined the long-term trends of preindustrial Europe, in that this concept points toward intralord struggles dominated by military interests. The paper also discusses why Brenner's account of France's tax/office state seriously weakens his postulate that "surplus extracting relations" were the "fundamental" relation of feudalism, on the grounds that office-holding reflected an unequal distribution of property based upon status. Finally, the paper draws out the theoretical implications of these contradictory instances, to delineate ways in which Brenner's basic theory may be sublated within a more comprehensive account. © 2001 URPE. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Robert Brenner's extended essay, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe" (1976), including the whole debate it generated in the same pages of *Past and Present*, subsequently republished in book form as *The Brenner Debate* (Aston & Philpin, 1987), may no longer seem palpable to contemporary scholars. Too many rounds, too many challenges by too many illustrious scholars have seemingly saturated the issue.<sup>1</sup> To offer yet another view may seem imprudent if not redundant. Here I argue that it is possible to read Brenner's work anew using an *immanent* method of critique. By immanent I mean a logic of implication in which a text or theory is examined from within, in terms of the goals it sets for itself, to determine whether its objectives and assumptions are true in the manner in which they are claimed to be true. Instead of imposing irrelevant or external criteria of evaluation on a text, this critique allows the text to have its own way, revealing the ways in which the text fails to live up to its own standards.<sup>2</sup> Below I show how Brenner's concept of "political accumulation" undermines his own initial premise that the balance of class forces between lords and peasants determined the long-term trends of preindustrial Europe, in that this concept points toward intralord struggles in which questions of military conquest and territorial expansion predominated. I also discuss why Brenner's account of France's tax/office state seriously weakens his postulate that "surplus extracting relations" were the "fundamental" relation of feudalism, on the grounds that office-holding reflected an unequal distribution of property based upon *status*.

If Marxists like Ellen Wood (1999) have praised Brenner's work on the transition to capitalism as a compelling, truly masterful demonstration of the *primacy* of class struggles, others have been less impressed, arguing that the "essentials of Robert Brenner's argument have been put forward many times before" (Postan and Hatcher, 1988: 64). This is partly true. Brenner's thesis is much indebted to E. A. Kosminsky (1956), R. H. Tawney (1912), Maurice Dobb (1968), and Rodney Hilton (1969). But this should not diminish his accomplishment, which was to construct a purer, methodic version of the class struggle perspective by eliminating (or at least trying to) every remaining economistic assumption in the existing Marxist account, concentrating only on the "social property systems" and the political strength of classes. His major essays do exhibit a quality lacking in other Marxist contributors to this debate: an integrated argument depicting exactly how the relevant variables are causally connected, moving rigorously from the initial premises to the conclusion.

Not that Brenner is responsible only for a lucidly written, well-organized thesis. I believe he makes an original contribution to the debate insofar as he reconceptualizes the "laws of motion" of feudalism in terms of the concept of "political accumulation." The difficulty is that this concept works against Brenner's own initial identification of the lord-peasant relation as the primary source of feudal dynamics. The concept of political accumulation is about *intrafeudal military* conflicts, not about class struggles over rent. Military expansion and the self-organization of elites against rival elites are at the heart of Brenner's explanation. We, immanent critics of Brenner, thus face a major challenge: to explain the ways in which his account, despite its systematic presentation, has a tendency to move outward beyond its home domain.

It is not easy to bring about in Brenner, while yielding to his own claims, a shift of position

with respect to his initial premises, for he is quite aware of the theoretical problems entailed in introducing auxiliary hypotheses in an *ad hoc* manner to cover facts which the theory cannot explain. He certainly does not bring in the concept of political accumulation as an auxiliary/external factor, but tries to integrate it into the generic concept of feudalism. And there is some justification for his doing this, since the very reproduction of the landlord classes depended upon “political” or extraeconomic coercion. The problem, as we will soon see, is that political accumulation refers not only to the juridical/political force necessary to extract surplus, but also to a “generalized tendency” to intralordly competition and warfare. Brenner, of course, sees no difficulty in blending these two meanings. Both coercion against the peasantry and warfare among lords, he estimates, were integral to the feudal system of surplus extraction. Indeed, the very fact that feudal exploitation was “political” tended to impose upon landlords “an extraeconomic dynamic,” not only “to maintain a dominant position vis-a-vis the peasantry,” but also “to protect themselves vis-a-vis one another” (1982/1987: 232). Warfare itself is thus integrated into the very meaning of feudalism, as a key characteristic of the lord-peasant relationship.

My task is to disclose how Brenner’s analysis of political accumulation, of how feudal lords protected and expanded their territories, really goes beyond the *internal* concept of feudalism defined as a class relation. Brenner’s original and insightful introduction of the concept of political accumulation is not an innocent addition to the debate; it is, I think, an attempt to cope with the troubling fact that external warfare was an endemic feature of feudal society, in contrast to peasant revolts which, if not less frequent, were less demanding in terms of military build up. His integration of this concept into the Marxist definition of feudalism seeks to interiorize and homogenize a major aspect of medieval life—war—which, because it is external yet crucial, threatens the sovereign claims of historical materialism. But the end results of this effort are that intralordly competition and warfare, as opposed to peasant-landlord struggles, are turned into the prime mover of feudalism.

This strategy of absorbing exogenous factors is at the heart of Brenner’s critique of the demographic and commercialization models. His study of feudalism is one which seeks to subsume under the logic of class struggles not only military but all political, economic, and demographic factors. This, of course, is all done in the name of a holistic, rich, sophisticated Marxism, against economism. Yet, behind this broadening of feudalism lies the singular, imperial goal of turning the relations of production into the self-defining moment of the whole historical process, the unifying point around which the content and effectivity of other major factors (markets, population, war) are conceived.

In this paper, then, I want to develop the contradiction between the explicit statement and implicit performance of Brenner’s texts, between what they promise and what they actually achieve. But the aim of this reading is not purely negative. I also draw out the theoretical *implications* of these anomalous instances to show how the implicit ideas embedded in his account can be explicated and made explicit in such a way that his basic theory is both negated and elevated into a more comprehensive account. Rather than dismissing the implicit accomplishments of the theory as inconsistent, I ask “*what do they presuppose?*” Thus, I try to supersede Brenner’s class reductionism by demonstrating how his own concept of political accumulation cannot be maintained without adopting a broader Weberian conception of feudalism in which relations of *vassalage* are seen as critical. Similarly I demonstrate how

Brenner's account of the French office-holding nobility presupposes a concept of *status exploitation*.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The demographic model

In his exemplary essay, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development," published in 1976,<sup>4</sup> Brenner is abundantly clear what his conception of class structure entails:

the inherently conflictive relations of property—always guaranteed directly or indirectly, in the last analysis, by force—by which an unpaid-for part of the product is extracted from the direct producers by a class of nonproducers. . . It is around the property or surplus-extraction relationship that one defines the fundamental classes in a society—the class(es) of direct producers on the one hand and the surplus-extracting, or ruling, class(es) on the other (1976: 11).

The conceptual starting point of Brenner's critique of the demographic and commercialization models is the relation between producers and nonproducers. This relation, once established, tends to set specific long-term patterns on a society's overall economic and demographic development.

[I]t is the structure of class relations, of class power, which will determine the manner and degree to which particular demographic and commercial changes will affect long-term trends in the distribution of income and economic growth and not vice-versa (1976: 11).

The claim is not that demographic and commercial factors lack historical influence. It is that the balance of power between lord and peasant will shape the *effects* population and trade will have on the distribution of income and economic growth. In other words, the effects of population and trade changes depend not on these two factors themselves, but on the existing relations of production.

Brenner attempts to substantiate this claim by showing that *similar* demographic and commercial trends in different places in Europe were associated with *different* long-term patterns of development, and, conversely, by showing that *different* class structures were associated with *unequal* paths of growth. That is, he tries to prove these two models wrong by indicating how the same demographic and commercial circumstances did not produce the same results in different places. On the other hand, he argues that the class struggle view is correct by showing that different balances of class power produced different economic paths.

His first move is to criticize what he takes to be the dominant paradigm in the economic historiography of medieval and early modern Europe, namely, the Malthusian models of M.M. Postan and Le Roy Ladurie. The logic of this model is straightforward.<sup>5</sup> Population tends to outrun food production; thus agrarian societies have a natural tendency to cyclical crises. Once population growth surpasses the means of subsistence, its rate gradually diminishes and eventually turns into a progressive decline. Preindustrial Europe is thus seen as living within a homeostatic regime of demographic checks and balances, a tendency which acts as the prime mover of feudal development and income distribution. The entire epoch from 1050 to 1800 is in fact divided into two major demographic periods, both dominated by a two-phase cycle of growth and decline: i) a phase of growth from the twelfth to the

thirteenth century, followed by a phase of decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; ii) followed by another two-phase cycle of prosperity during the “long sixteenth century,” and of impoverishment in the seventeenth century. During both these two periods, the phase of rising population ultimately causes economic growth to decline as the law of diminishing returns comes into effect. Productivity per head decreases, leading to rising food prices, declining real wages, and, finally, to famine and starvation. Once the phase of declining population begins, there is a reversal of most of these indices.

These cycles are said to determine the patterns of income distribution between lord and peasant. As population rises beyond the supply of land, peasants are forced to accept a lowering of their personal/tenurial status, whereas as population drops, lords are forced to accept lower rents, or peasants are able to negotiate better terms. What Brenner questions is the idea that these cycles *themselves* set the patterns of income distribution and economic growth of feudal Europe, that is, the assumption that the “structure of class relations” was “naturally” conditioned by demographic changes.

A comparative analysis of the effects of these cycles in different areas in Europe can easily impart the inadequacy of this Malthusian model—or so Brenner intends to argue. On the fourteenth century demographic collapse, the so-called Black Death, he observes that, while in England the peasants were able to resist efforts by lords to maintain their falling incomes, in Eastern Europe the seigneurial reaction was successful (1976: 34). Thus, although demographic conditions were similar in England and Eastern Europe, in England the population decline led to the end of serfdom, yet in Eastern Europe it led to its reimposition. He similarly notes that during the period of increasing population in the thirteenth century, there were parts of France where the peasants’ economic position did not deteriorate, but in fact improved, to the point that some were able to secure nearly full property rights (1976: 21). In other words, French peasants managed to raise their status although the land/labor ratio was not in their favor.

Accordingly, the land/labor ratio could not have dictated the pattern of income distribution which emerged in Europe after the Black Death. It was, rather, the *prevailing* system of property relations and balance of class forces which determined the *effects* demographic movements had on *that* system. While there were long-term tendencies to declining productivity, the social consequences of such tendencies were bound up to the existing property relations, that is, the relative levels of internal solidarity, self-consciousness, and political resources of the peasants and the lords (1976: 36). Brenner reasons that lords in the western part of Germany failed in their attempts to impose strict controls over the peasantry because the latter were well organized around the village community, which served to protect their traditional rights, but in the east peasants were less organized, so they succumbed to feudal pressures.

Brenner acknowledges that, as land became scarce relative to population, the power of the lords increased, “but only if the lord had successfully established his right to charge more than the fixed rent,” as long as the peasants were already unfree and held villein tenure (1976: 22). Having the status of a free tenant meant precisely that one could not be exposed to arbitrary rents, or be forced to pay additional rents above the fixed customary rents. Thus the peasants’ ability to bargain improved when labor was scarce only if the peasant had the

wherewithal to maintain and extend his or her rights, or when the lord could not prove that his tenant was unfree.

The severe limitations of this paradigm are most evident, Brenner claims, when it comes to the second period between 1500 and 1750. In this instance, “what is left unexplained is not merely the question of income distribution but the whole problem of dramatically contrasting trends of economic development”; the fact that, as population increased in sixteenth century France, there was fragmentation of holdings and declining productivity, whereas in England there was a transition toward agrarian capitalism. Here the Malthusian model fails to explain why France experienced the second phase of the demographic cycle, during the second period, while England somehow escaped it.

### 3. Political accumulation and the “unique” rise of capitalism in England

It is in his long—more than a hundred pages—essay, “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism” (1982), that Brenner most clearly elaborates upon the concept of “political accumulation” to explain England’s deviation in the second period from the traditional Malthusian cycles. The roots of England’s unique transition to capitalism, he argues, lie hidden in the nature of her medieval *lordship*. The Norman Conquest (1066) led to the creation of a rather unusual form of *centralized* feudalism in England.<sup>6</sup> The Norman warriors were a highly cohesive class with a high level of solidarity. Consequently, when they invaded England, and when the English monarchy began to grow later in the thirteenth century, the monarchy did not do so over and against the lords, but as an expression of their unity and common will. From the beginning the lords were effectively united around the king, and participated in all levels of government. This was a monarchy which protected the property of the lords and recognized their right over the peasants’ person, and restricted freemen from having access to the king’s court. Thus, even though the monarchy expanded, lords retained their private jurisdictional powers at the local level. This, according to Brenner, gave English lords “an indispensable lever” to raise dues arbitrarily on customary lands, making them the most effective “political accumulators” of Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

While it is true that population was increasing through this period (the first phase of the first period), increasing the demand for land by peasants, it was this political cohesion which allowed lords to exploit the favorable demographic conditions (1982: 252). Brenner observes that, even when population began to fall in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, lords were able to maintain their rents, in some areas, against peasant resistance well into the 1380s. It was only in the early fifteenth century that the seigneurial reaction really failed, and the crisis of falling noble revenues began. Lords tried to prevent this crisis by such means as retaking the peasants’ land and releasing it, expanding their demesnes (or their own direct lands), forcing peasants to pay fees for permission to move, or simply by exacting higher rents. But the peasants were successful in resisting this seigneurial reaction through revolt and flight, and by the early fifteenth century they managed to end servile obligations, securing “almost complete” freehold status. As a result, feudal lords saw their rents decline relatively as well as absolutely.

Once serfdom ended they could no longer impose arbitrary rents, but were under pressure



to find alternative ways of maintaining their revenue. One way was warfare, to bring about a redistribution of lordly incomes, but there was a limit as to how much such a zero-sum strategy could increase their revenue. In the long run, Brenner argues, they were forced “to seek novel ways out of their revenue crisis.” One key method was to use their “remaining” feudal powers “to further what in the end turn out to be capitalist development” (1982: 293). So, although they had failed to push rents up in their seigniorial offensive of the fourteenth century, they were able in the sixteenth century, by virtue of their “remaining” private manorial powers, to use coercion, law, and “fines” to expropriate the peasants and reduce them to market dependence.

It is true that, with the end of serfdom, the peasants had gained copyhold status (rights of inheritance plus fixed rents), “but the security of copyhold was only one of a whole series of factors. . . it needs to be evaluated within a broader context” (1982: 294). For one, lords still kept hold of their demesnes. With the demographic downturn of the fourteenth century, they had been able to appropriate large tracts of former customary peasant holdings which had been left empty. Moreover, about one-third of the land was still held in villein tenure and was subject to arbitrary rents. Now, as far as the land held in copyhold is concerned, Brenner says that not all of it was free from arbitrary fines; lords continued to have some of their private juridical powers. Although they were not able to return to serfdom, they had the ability to prevent full proprietary rights to tenants and relegate them to the status of mere leaseholders, that is, holders on a lease of the lords’ own land. In particular, says Brenner, a “loophole” remained open which allowed lords to undermine the freehold-tending claims of the customary tenants. This loophole consisted “of the right to charge fines at will” whenever peasant land was sold or inherited, fines which “in the long run” were “substituted for competitive commercial rents” (1976: 47). Customary lands were thus eliminated and turned into leaseholds with short leases set according to supply and demand.

Peasants resisted such impositions throughout the fifteenth and into the sixteenth centuries. They struggled “hard for full and essentially freehold control over their customary tenements, and were not far from achieving it” (1976: 46). But they failed. Had this resistance been successful, Brenner intimates, it might have “stalled capitalism,” as it would have ensured small peasant holdings, which have a tendency to be self-sufficient. But as they were defeated, by the end of the seventeenth century landlords had gained control of 70 to 75% of the land. “With the peasants’ failure to establish freehold control, the landlords were able to engross, consolidate and enclose, to create large farms and to lease them to capitalist tenants” (1976: 49).

The crisis of falling feudal incomes was thus resolved through the establishment of competitive leases. The “unintended consequence” of the introduction of these leases was capitalism. Once these leases spread, peasants were forced to behave in capitalistic ways, according to the logic of market competition. Capitalism was thus “*the legacy of the position the lords had established and maintained throughout the medieval period on the basis of their precocious self-centralization*” (1982: 293, my italics). The agents of the transition were not the urban bourgeoisie, nor the peasants, but the “precocious” English lords which had never lost their private feudal powers despite the growth of a centralized monarchy.

Anyone who enjoys sweeping explanations has to admire the concerted unity and rigor of this one. But if broad-brush treatments have the virtue of generating exciting debates,

including new lines of research, they invariably fall under the weight of too many unanswered questions, too many claims lacking empirical details. While analyzing the verdict of recent research is beyond the scope of this paper, some key difficulties in Brenner's thesis may be noted. For one, it is not clear whether the seigneurial crisis of the fourteenth century was a result of increasing spending by lords, or of the reduced exploitability of the peasants. If the former, why were lords in need of extra revenue? Why were their expenses growing? If the latter, why was the best organized ruling class in Europe, with its own "precocious" jurisdictional powers, unable to defeat peasant resistance in the fourteenth century, but able to do so in the sixteenth century when they (lords) were even less well organized against an even stronger copyholding peasantry? Or why did lords decide to adopt a capitalist course of action (enclosures) in the sixteenth century, but one of political accumulation after the Black Death? Is the reason to be found in the greater degree of commercialization in sixteenth century England, with the growing export market for woolen cloth? Or did the very acquisition of copyhold status by peasants in the fifteenth century cultivate a land market as the more prosperous peasants (including freeholders) converted their arable strips into consolidated farms by engrossing, that is, buying or leasing pieces of land? Yes, according to the existing historical record, English landowners were able to erode peasant property rights and enclose their lands in earnest only in the seventeenth century *after* the village community had been weakened as a result of peasant accumulation and differentiation in the two preceding centuries (Mooers, 1991). In the sixteenth century only an additional 2% of the land was enclosed, as compared to an additional 24% in the seventeenth century (Wordie, 1983). The number of landless peasants, due to eviction by landlords, rose only later in the seventeenth century, from 11% in 1545–49 to 40% in 1620–40 (Lachmann, 1985: 370–1). The area of Leicestershire, a case of relatively high enclosures early on, saw no more than 10% of its land enclosed between 1450–1607. It was in the period between 1608–1729 that a dramatic increase, up to 52%, occurred (Kriedte, 1983: 23). Before this era of enclosure, freeholders and copyholders consolidated their arable strips into large farms, not by enclosing, but by engrossing, that is, by putting together smaller pieces of land. Indeed, as Keith Wrightson has observed, in some areas of England, engrossing was a more significant phenomenon in the ruin of the small family holding than enclosure and eviction by landlords (1990: 137–38). Nicky Gregson (1989) too, in his study of the region of northeast Cumbria for the period 1600–1830, has noted, against Tawney and Brenner, that rack-renting was not always an important factor in the introduction of capitalist agrarian relations, but that other methods, such as demesne leasing (by prosperous peasant farmers) and conversion of the commons and the wastelands into leaseholds, were quite significant.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Political accumulation and the failed transition to capitalism in France**

So much for this brief empirical critique; this paper aims primarily at revealing the degree to which Brenner's historical investigation of the "laws of motion" of feudalism has little to do with relations of production and mostly with intraruling class struggles.<sup>8</sup> However, before we begin to do so, let us look also at Brenner's account of France's failure to make the



transition to capitalism. As in the case of England, French development during the second period is explained in terms of the political organization of the lords. The French pattern, however, was rather different, for unlike their English counterparts, French lords were immersed in conflicting jurisdictions. Feudal power was located around each separate lord, around the overlord and his castle. It was a divided ruling class in continual competition. Gradually, however, from the thirteenth century onwards, and in further contrast to England, there emerged a centralized monarchical authority over and against, and in competition with, local lords, a monarchy which excluded local lords from the king's household and administration, making it easier for French peasants during the mid-thirteenth century crisis to resist attempts by local lords to extend the seigneurial *taille* in response to falling incomes. Indeed the monarchy recognized peasant complaints against arbitrary levies, and guaranteed peasant hereditability. The rise of a central state in France thus facilitated the rise of a free peasantry.

But this absolutist state did not act as a benefactor of the peasantry. The state protected the peasantry against feudal exploitation merely to secure for itself a source of military taxes. However, although the state had defeated local lords, the “long term result” was that French lords emerged a stronger class, as they joined the state by monopolizing its offices starting in the early fourteenth century. So, although peasants had won hereditary tenure and were able to keep these rights because the state protected them, French lords were able eventually to overcome the crisis of declining income by joining the state and living off the growth of centralized taxation (1982: 272).

This interrelationship between the state and peasants' property created in France a very different class structure from that of England. While in England the peasant revolts were directed against landlords, in France they were against the “crushing taxation of the absolutist state” (1976: 57). Now, according to Brenner, it was this consolidation of peasant proprietorships in France which blocked the development of capitalism there. The small holdings, together with the common fields and the heavy taxation, “discouraged” investment (1976: 29). Since peasant holdings tended to be small, peasant farming was “incapable of improvement” and subject to declining productivity, in contrast to the consolidated English farms, which allowed for major capital inputs (1976: 50; 1978: 126).

### 5. Three definitions of feudalism

As we saw earlier, Brenner's 1976 essay begins emphasizing that “surplus extraction relations” are the “fundamental” characteristic of feudalism. In his shorter article, “Feudalism,” published in the *New Palgrave Marxian Economics* (1987), there is a subtle change in this conception. This essay opens with the assertion that the “three main competing conceptualizations” of feudalism—the legal, the political, and the socio-economic—“are not only complementary but in fact integrally related to one another” (1987: 170–171). These three definitions include, first, feudalism as a “legal” (military) relationship between a vassal who takes an obligation to provide military services to an overlord, who in exchange takes an obligation to provide protection and maintenance in the form of a fief to the vassal. Second, it includes the definition of feudalism as a form of political rule or government, in

which no one has a monopoly of power, but where power is privately located within the domain of each vassal. Third, of course, is the classic Marxist definition as a property relation between lords and peasants, in which extraeconomic coercion is used by lords to appropriate a surplus from economically independent peasants.

Brenner says that these three definitions, one which includes his own 1976 definition, are not only complementary but integrally related. He, apparently, is now calling for a broader definition of feudalism. But if one looks carefully at this new “integrally related” definition, it becomes clear that the third definition, the Marxist one, sublates the other two as the unifying reference point of the others. Thus, the way Brenner accommodates the legal (really military) definition is by arguing that the ability of lords to coerce and exploit peasants depended upon their ties to an overlord or to other vassals. Similarly, he reduces the second to the third definition by arguing that the localized governments created by the lords were intended as “instruments for extracting, redistributing and consuming the wealth upon which this class depended for their maintenance and reproduction” (1987: 171). The second definition is defined within the context of the third, as a derivative relation.

A real “complementary” relation, however, would be one in which the three definitions *together* explained the actual dynamic of feudalism, each in its own way accounting for one or some aspect of feudalism. But in Brenner the class-based definition controls the other two; logically and ontologically it holds the dominant role. Why, then, insist upon a “complementary” or “integrally related” definition? This is, I think, an implicit recognition by Brenner that one cannot discuss political accumulation without falling back on some supplementary, non-Marxist conception of feudalism. His account of political accumulation goes well beyond a “class” centered analysis. Accordingly, Brenner has no choice but to neutralize the implications of this concept by enlarging his definition in such a way that the Marxist part stands for the *whole* meaning.

Brenner continually struggles to contain the implications of this concept, insisting that war was merely one of the means by which lords increased their revenue and power *vis a vis the peasantry*. The following argument can be reconstructed from his essays: to appropriate surplus the lords had to apply political-judicial coercion over the peasants; to increase that appropriation they needed to build up their means of coercion; building those means led to competition with other lords.

The very means of coercion maintained by every lord to ensure his reproduction (as a lord vis-a-vis the peasants constituted a threat to the other lords. The result was a generalized tendency to intralordly competition and conflict, and this made political accumulation a real necessity (1982: 238).

The more lords found themselves in competition and conflict among themselves, the more they had to build up their military equipment; the more the costs of competition and conquest, the more they “found themselves more or less obliged to try to increase their income” from conquered territories. The consequence of this was an endless cycle of “politico-military conflict” (1987: 176). They could not escape this cycle, since the possession and expansion of the “means of coercion” were “the indispensable requirements for their maintenance as members of the ruling class over and against the peasants” (1987: 176).

Does Brenner really want us to believe that lords developed their military weapons “merely to make sure of their surplus vis-a-vis the direct producers” (1978: 126)? Was the survival of the lords continually threatened by peasant revolts? Did such revolts call for extended military escalation and warfare among lords? Admittedly, to the extent that lords increased their rents to finance their wars, their relations with the peasants were exacerbated. But if rents were increased this was because the lords were directly involved in a struggle with other lords. Extraeconomic coercion against the direct producers was no doubt a necessary condition of the economic survival of the feudal ruling class. But so was the build up of weapons and warfare a necessary requirement of the lords’ continuing military survival against rival lords. If we want to understand the dynamic of political accumulation, it is not enough to claim that the lord-peasant relation was characterized by political-military coercion. We must also look at the relations of vassalage within the lords themselves. Below I draw out the (non-Marxist) theoretical implications of Brenner’s concept of political accumulation.

## 6. Relations of vassalage

European feudal society—in contrast to such Eastern empires as China, or the late Roman empire—where taxes by the state put a greater burden upon the peasantry than rents, was dominated by a landlord class with independent sources of power (Wickham, 1985). Understanding this requires a consideration of the turbulent historical context out of which European feudalism first emerged: the chaos and war, the roughness and irregularity of communications which followed the collapse of the Roman Imperial Order in the fifth century, a chaos which was to continue for centuries after, as Europeans faced one invasion after another by Arabs, Vikings, and Magyars (Bloch, 1961). Under these circumstances, it was extremely difficult to maintain or establish a unitary political system like that of Rome, where a large segment of the ruling class would be treated as holders of public offices, and subjected to some accountability or even dismissal by a central authority. The forms of rule, or the legal relation which could (and did) emerge in early medieval Europe, were *specifically private*, involving the commendation of a less powerful group (the vassal) to the protection of a superior, more powerful group (the lord), a relation which committed the lord to defend the vassal and the vassal to advance his aid and counsel to the lord, each recognizing the other as a companion, as a member of the same *class of independent warriors* (Critchley, 1978).

A fief—including the land’s population—was allotted by the lord to the vassal on the agreement that the vassal would use it to administer the services he owed the lord: to furnish himself with weapons, to provide a mounted warrior in the field, to attend the lord’s court or act as his counsel. In this way, the relationship entered into by these two groups implicated another economic relationship between a vassal (a lord) and peasants: a relation of production. Each vassal was expected to extract surplus from his peasants, defend them, as well as keep order.

The commendation and the grant of land also entailed a system of government wherein the

vassal would exercise over his fief certain political prerogatives: levying dues, declaring and enforcing the law, defending and overseeing the land, and so on. The lord would leave the vassal “immune” in the governance of the fief. Indeed this lord-vassal relation was to function as the basic component of a wider system of rule, by being reproduced and extended both upwards and downwards. Thus, the lord of a vassal might in turn become the vassal of a higher lord. This might be extended upwards until one would arrive at an overlord having the title of king, prince, or duke. This overlord would claim greater faculties of rule, beyond those allocated through the feudal relation proper, with reference to a territory. This is why the overlord was sometimes known as a “territorial ruler” (Poggi, 1978: 16–36).

Yet, with the exception of Norman England, where the king enjoyed authority as the ultimate ruler (overlord) of all lords and vassals in the realm, the lord-vassal relation moved mostly downwards. Even the immediate vassals of the overlord frequently fashioned from their own fiefs smaller ones for their retinue of warriors. This tendency for the system of rule to pass downwards toward the lower links made centralized rule increasingly difficult. Many instances can be cited of petty lords incorporating the powers of territorial overlords initially delegated to them, settling disputes independently of the overlords’ courts, and exploiting for their own personal interests prerogatives of rule over peasants. With time the fief came to be seen as the inalienable property of the vassal and thus inheritable (Anderson, 1974: 150–1; Poggi, 1978: 16–36). Now, both development downwards toward independence on the part of fiefholders, and upwards toward greater authority on the part of territorial overlords, led to numerous conflicts about boundaries and jurisdictional rights, disputes which could not be easily resolved by appeal to the courts of higher lords. Under these conditions, lords and vassals found themselves engaged in “private wars” to redress what they might perceive as violations of their “rights.” Wars have always been a major aspect of state-organized societies, but private wars, as a specific feature of this period, followed from the very nature of the lord-vassal relation.

Lords had to fight to protect themselves from the *territorial ambitions of other lords*. If any one lord declined to compete, while others strove to increase their holdings, he was in ever increasing danger of succumbing to them. If a neighboring lord acquired more land, the result would be increased economic and military resources in his hand, tipping the balance of power between him and his neighbors to his own disadvantage. Sooner or later his domain would be invaded. Feudalism, then, required political accumulation because the efficacy of the ruling class as overlords required the collecting and organizing of followers. As Brenner is well aware, “. . . to gain and retain the loyalty of their followers the overlords had to feed and equip them and, in the long run, competitively reward them” (1987: 176–77). To maintain their status as overlords they had to provide grants of land, which meant development of more weapons and improved military organization and competition.

As indicated earlier, Brenner does recognize the importance of this military relation and localized form of government. If I may cite another passage where he explicitly states

that those historians who have insisted upon a narrowly “political” definition of feudalism as a “form of government” and who have, in turn, focused upon the broad range of relationships of obligation and exchange which were constructed to bind man to man in feudal society (not only the relations of vassalage strictly speaking, but also the more loosely defined associa-

tions structured by patronage, clientage and family) have grasped an essential driving force of the system (1982: 240).

The problem is that he refuses to *theorize* this “driving force” on its own terms the way he does the lord-peasant relation. If these three relations (class, military, and political) were “integrally related,” why does one relation receive a direct analysis on its own terms, whereas the others are completely subsumed by it? If Brenner wants to acknowledge these relations as “complementary,” then he should do so in terms of their own logics—which is not to say he should accept them exactly as they are defined in the hands of legal and military historians. It is to say, simply, that he should own up theoretically to his own claim that what made the English ruling class the most effective political accumulator was the specific nature of its relations of vassalage.<sup>9</sup>

## 7. The centralization of feudalism

What about Brenner’s account of state-building in France? Again, state-building is conceived as a form of political accumulation. The success of the French landlord classes is explained in terms of their organization; state building is seen as a means of achieving greater centralization of resources for military competition (1982: 240). Brenner does say that this process was intensified to the extent that peasants resisted feudal exploitation. Yet the accent of his argument is on the growing needs of lords for conspicuous consumption and for expensive military supplies. This argument does not come in a forthright manner, however. As a Marxist, he equivocates between what historical materialism requires and what the facts suggest, between saying that the centralization of French feudalism was aimed at securing the lord’s position against threats from peasants, or at expanding the overlord’s position against other lords. Most preferably he wants to have it both ways. But the implication of his actual account is that the dynamic came primarily from the latter conflict, and that French centralization involved directly the strengthening of territorial overlords against their vassals, including the absorption of weaker fiefs into larger territories.

Already by the beginning of the thirteenth century, Brenner observes, the monarchical power of France had become a significant force over and against local lords. France was still feudal in the sense that powerful vassals continued to own important elements of public power as hereditary and private property. It was in the fifteenth century that the balance of power tipped in favor of monarchical centralization. One may, of course, see this process as just a new form of class exploitation imposed by the feudal ruling class upon a rebellious peasantry (Anderson, 1974). It seems to me, however, that the concept of political accumulation implicates the view that kings built state structures—centralized taxation—to support their growing military expenditures against local (and external) lords. If *theoretically* Brenner wants to trace the roots of political accumulation to the structural dynamics of feudalism, *empirically* his account follows a Weberian analysis of absolutism, as a process by which the monarchy centralized the means of war, within a clearly bounded territory, under the pressure of interstate competition (as argued by such “neo-Weberians” as Tilly, 1992; Giddens, 1987; Mann, 1992).

## 8. From relations of production to status exploitation

In the case of absolutist France, one wonders even more whether the relationship here between the state and the peasantry over taxation can be considered as a relation of production. Brenner holds that the French monarchy was itself a “class-like” instrument of surplus extraction in the form of tax instead of rent. Such state was simply a competitor against the local nobility for a share of the surplus. It remained “feudal” because it also appropriated its revenue from the peasantry through extraeconomic means, and because a portion of this surplus in the end came back to the nobles through the lucrative state-offices.

Yet, it seems to me that if Brenner’s account of France’s tax/office state is to make any sense, he must modify or reject his initial postulate of surplus extracting relations as the “fundamental” relation of feudalism, and seek some other concept of exploitation by the nobility. One cannot continue to argue that, because the offices rested upon the prior extraction of surplus through taxes, they were just another variant of feudal exploitation. Here one may refer to E.O. Wright’s book, *Classes* (1987), where he attempts, on the basis of John Roemer’s innovative writings, to redefine the concept of exploitation in terms of control over various types of productive assets, as the capacity of asset holders to prevent or divest others of equal access to those assets. Different types of assets designate different forms of exploitation and class systems. Roemer, Wright tells us, identifies the following four types of assets: labor power, means of production, skills, and organizational assets. Ownership of assets in people (or their labor services) constitute the basis of feudal exploitation; ownership over the means of production corresponds to the exploitation of wage-labor by capital; control over organization assets corresponds to statist societies ruled by managers/bureaucrats; and control over skills or “credentials” corresponds to the socialist exploitation of unskilled workers by experts (1987: 71–98).

While this typology is a useful step in understanding the differential position of noble office holders, I would not define exploitation by this nobility as based either on the ownership of labor services or organizational assets. I would say it was a type of exploitation based on status. Initially, as just indicated, Roemer had conceived socialist exploitation in terms of the differential ownership of skills, but he then introduced the notion of status exploitation, because the socialist ruling class did not seem to be a class of experts. Status exploitation, he concluded, was a more satisfactory term in that the extra remuneration of the ruling class as party officers did not appear to be based simply on their ownership of those skills necessary to carry their administrative functions, but on their position and status within the bureaucracy of the Communist Party (Wright, 1986: 120).

Wright, however, is unhappy with this revision, arguing that this concept of status is “unsatisfactory theoretically since it breaks down decisively with the logic of the rest of his [Roemer’s] analysis of exploitation. In each of the other cases exploitation is rooted in property relations to the forces of production. Each of the other forms of exploitation is ‘materialist’. . . . ‘Status’ exploitation [however] has no necessary relationship to production at all” (1986: 120). Wright is convinced that inequality in the distribution of organizational assets explains better the basis for exploitation in actually existing socialist societies. By organizational assets he means specifically control over the technical division of labor by a group of bureaucrats.



I question, however, whether this criticism captures the spirit of Roemer's "property relations" interpretation of exploitation. Unlike the classical Marxist view which traces exploitation to the coercive relations imposed at the point of production, Roemer locates the source of exploitation in the differential, *and unfair*, distribution of productive property (Reiman, 1987). Exploitation occurs only when the extraction of surplus is based on an *unjust distribution of assets*. It is this *normative*, not materialist, element which lies at the heart of Roemer's otherwise fairly technical theory. Keeping this in mind (and leaving aside the question of socialist exploitation), I do think the concept status exploitation allows us a more accurate understanding of the way nobles were able to win a greater share of the surplus which the absolutist state, through increased taxation, had centralized.<sup>10</sup>

The French nobility was unquestionably a class owning important productive assets like land, real estate, shares, and venal offices. But so was this class a juridically defined order able to maximize its rewards and opportunities within the structures of the absolutist state by restricting access to the most lucrative offices of the monarchy "to a limited circle of eligibles."<sup>11</sup> Of course, starting with the reign of Francois (1515–47), until the end of the eighteenth century, offices were sold in large numbers to anyone with the right amount of money, as a new form of revenue for the ever growing administrative/military expenses of the monarchy (Briggs, 1977). By selling offices to the bourgeoisie the crown secured the support of this class in its struggle against the localist tendencies of the old fighting nobility. The point remains, however, that these offices did confer noble status, and while they had been created by the monarchy, the nobility gradually came to see these offices as a form of hereditary property associated with all sorts of immunities and prerogatives, including exemption from taxation and the right to register edicts of the king before they could become law (Moore, 1966; Anderson, 1974). Besides, noble status continued to give a head start over the spoils of office, and the acquisition of such status was essential to any hope for advancement within the state hierarchy. This is precisely why the eighteenth century bourgeoisie, that is, merchants, non-noble lawyers, professionals with skills, and shopkeepers, all wanted a career open to talent within the state, because they felt increasingly frustrated by the privileged, unjust status of this office-holding nobility. They wanted a new principle of social mobility in which offices would be given as a reward of ability and property, rather than privilege of birth. They knew they would be better off in such a society. And 1789 accomplished just that, as it gave way to an individualistic society in which every citizen had equal rights "to all public dignities, offices and employment, according to their capacity, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents" (as stipulated in *The Declaration*, clause VI).

## 9. Conclusion

The contention of this paper is not that Brenner overestimated the centrality of class. It is that, while the *theoretical starting point* of Brenner's analysis of the origins of capitalism is the lord-peasant relation, the actual content of his analysis on feudal society relates to the dynamic of intralordly relations. Lord-peasant struggles may have been "endemic" during the fourteenth century crisis, as Brenner tells us, but once this fact is noted, the overall

emphasis is on “intrafeudal warfare.” In this respect, his Marxist definition of feudalism—in its original form—loses its privileged theoretical position, and is shown to be seriously incomplete. This immanent critique is all the more revealing as Brenner’s contribution to the transition debate has been precisely about the need to develop a more sustained and consistent Marxist explanation based on the *internal* dynamic of feudal class relations, freed from *external* factors like demographic growth, market relations, or military conflicts. He even criticized Maurice Dobb’s class-based critique of Paul Sweezy’s “exchange relations” perspective as insufficiently Marxist, praising Dobb’s rejection of the idea that the commutation of labor services in the fourteenth century was a natural consequence of the growing dependency of the nobility upon the market, yet criticizing him for relying on the economic-demographic argument that lords were able to dictate the end of serfdom (or commutation of labor services) depending on the supply and demand of labor and land (1978). Brenner never wavers on his claim that the dynamic of serfdom, of servile relations, can be explained only through the action of those relations themselves. “Serfdom,” as he puts it, “was a relation of power which could be reversed, as it were, only in its own terms, through a change in the balance of class forces” (1976: 27).

Why are class relations explainable “in their own terms” whereas exchange relations, demographic changes, or warfare is not? Simply, Brenner assumes that class relations are the very context within which all other “external” factors acquire their historicity, that demographic and economic patterns can be understood “only in connection with specific, historically developed systems of social-property relations and given balances of class forces” (1982: 213). Only within this context can their historical effects be ascertained. Outside this “connection” they are an empty abstraction lacking historical meaning. Brenner thus criticizes M.M. Postan’s evaluation of population changes as “abstract,” because one cannot “meaningfully” consider such changes away from class relations (1976: 15). Relations of production, on the other hand, are themselves historical, with a dynamic of their own, “not shaped by or alterable in terms of changes in demographic or commercial trends” (1976: 12). In this sense, Brenner projects class relations into a realm beyond signification, into a higher, pure reality requiring no “external” explanation. Yet, our immanent reading of Brenner has shown he could not sustain the “internal” primacy of class relations without incorporating into these relations the “external” military relations of lords as primary. Is this an inescapable dialectic which every foundational theory faces: no matter how complex or rigorous, it can never give a full account of itself; by itself, it will always—to borrow Adorno’s expression—leave a “reminder,” antinomies which disrupt any presumption of achieved identity (Adorno, 1973)?

## Notes

1. The Brenner debate may be seen as a follow-up to the Maurice Dobb-Paul Sweezy exchange on the transition to capitalism published in the journal *Science & Society* in the early 1950s, which also involved other participants; see Rodney Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (1976) for a collection of these contributions. Other articles/books discussing Brenner, in addition to the collection edited by

- Aston and Philpin, are: Albritton (1993); Carling (1991); Hopcroft (1994); Hoyle (1990); Lachman (1985); Katz (1993); Mooers (1991); Wright, Levine, Elliot (1992).
2. This paper is part of my unpublished Ph.D dissertation, “All Contraries Confounded: Historical Materialism and the Transition-to-Capitalism Debate,” which is an internal, textual examination of this Marxist debate. For a revised version of a chapter of this dissertation see Duchesne (1996, 2000).
  3. The immanent method of critique is analogous to Hegel’s dialectic. Dialectics, as portrayed in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806), is a process of testing an argument against itself, showing the ways in which it contains the seeds of its own transformation—a method later adopted by Marx against Hegel himself. See, for example, the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, where Marx discloses the contradictions between Hegel’s theory of law and empirical reality. Even more explicit is Marx’s essay, “On the Jewish Question,” where he starts his critique with the universal values of bourgeois society itself, and follows through the implications of these ideals to show how this society cannot fulfill its own proclaimed principles. The Frankfurt School, notably Max Horkheimer (1982) and Theodore Adorno (1993) also employed this type of criticism. And, as I learned recently, so does Jurgen Habermas throughout his writings. He distinctly writes of “my immanent critique of Popper’s view” (Habermas, 1976: 199), where he shows how Popper’s own “critical rationalism” falls outside its presumed scientific conception of knowledge as it relies on certain hermeneutic insights. Habermas’s *Logic of the Social Sciences* is all about demonstrating how the empirical-analytical, symbolic interactionist, and hermeneutical approaches each transcend the ambiguities and tensions of the preceding approaches. This is the way he goes about constructing his comprehensive theory of society.
  4. The date for each citation of Brenner in the text of this paper will be according to the original date of publication of the essays. The bibliography will include the date of the edition I am using as well.
  5. Besides Brenner, my explanation of this model draws on Grigg (1980); Postan (1976); Kriedte (1983).
  6. This has been noted by others (see Bloch, 1961: 270–74).
  7. Croot and Parker (in Aston & Philpin, 1988) may also be consulted as another source stressing the role of the (English) peasant in the rise of capitalism—a view which, I might add, has been carefully advanced by the Marxist Rodney Hilton (1969, 1990). Another persuasive argument is R.W. Hoyle’s (1990) positive assessment of the copyholder’s position relative to the Crown, and his claim that Parliament, as regards enclosure in the sixteenth century, did not act against peasant proprietors but, on many occasions, against the interest of landlords.
  8. My dissertation, “All Contraries Confounded,” includes as well a detailed textual demonstration of how Brenner, despite his vehement opposition to what he calls “neo-Smithian” Marxism, does not overcome the market relations perspective, but is forced to acknowledge (implicitly) the role of peasant accumulation. This is followed by an immanent critique of Hilton’s own peasant road to capitalism.
  9. Callinicos (1995) is one commentator who has understood just how central Brenner’s concept of political accumulation is to his whole thesis. But in stark contrast to my

position, he sees this concept as an adequate way to integrate warfare into historical materialism. If under capitalism we have a competitive struggle within the capitalist class itself to maximize the portion of total surplus value, under feudalism we had military competition within the landlord class to maximize the share of the peasants' total output. Warfare, then, is "not an autonomous process of military competition but rather. . . a consequence of the nature of feudal relations of production," in that seizing land and the peasants' output on it was simply the way lords managed to augment their class power (122–125).

10. Wright's own writings on class are well suited to an immanent critique. In his early work, *Class Structure and Income Determination* (1979), he sought to elaborate a class scheme that would cover the complex divisions within contemporary capitalist societies by adding the concept of "authority" to Marx's means of production. But, as critics were to remind him, this concept of authority was hardly materialist. It was for this reason that he decided, later in his *Classes* (1985), to redefine his concept of classes. Yet, while empirically the Roemerian formulation of ownership of types of assets made more sense than the former formulation, it took Wright even further away from the old materialist-Marxist definition, since there are no clear relations of production involved in the ownership of such assets as organizational positions and credentials. In what sense are these assets material? How does one extract surplus labor through the ownership of these assets? Obviously one can speak of exploitation here only insofar as such assets were unequally distributed and formed the basis for differential earnings.
11. This fitting phrase comes from Max Weber whose concept of "social closure" has certain parallels with Roemer's concept of status exploitation (Parkin, 1979).

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