

# **Feudalism: Comparative Studies**

# **Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture**

The aim of our Association is to bring together concerned scholars from Australia and overseas to discuss and publish on themes which transcend the usual academic disciplines and establish links between subject areas. We now live in a hysterical atmosphere of cold war and anti-intellectual tirade (both from the Establishment and from the Extreme Left). Our Association hopes to provide a forum for those who feel strongly about academic freedom, peace and intellectual achievement to air alternative views on society and culture.

This is the second volume of our series based on a conference held in March 1984. We hope to publish our third volume on 'Language and Ideology' (based on another conference held in July 1984) soon. It is most likely that our fourth volume will be on "The documentation and notation of Theatrical Performance". Our next conference is on the 'Cultural Construction of Race'. This will be held in August 1985. Like the material in this collection they are all on topics where the links between subject areas also between culture and social world have been obscured by the conservative institutions of cultural and social establishments.

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**Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, No. 2**

# **Feudalism: Comparative Studies**

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**Edited by Edmund Leach,  
S.N. Mukherjee & John Ward.**

**Published 1985  
by the Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture**

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**ISBN 0-949405-01-9  
ISSN 0812-6402**

**Printed by  
Pathfinder Press (Australia) Pty. Ltd., Sydney.**

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## PREFACE

This is a selection of papers submitted at a conference in March, 1984 at St. Andrew's College, University of Sydney. Some of us feel that a comparative study of 'feudalism' is relevant and academically useful. In Australia, we are surrounded by nations in which Marxists are waging battles against 'colonialism and feudalism'. It is still an important historical category.

The vitality of 'feudalism' as a category of historical description, classification and analysis is as remarkable today as it was, for example, in 1921 when Sydney Herbert wrote his *The Fall of Feudalism in France*,<sup>1</sup> or in 1890 when Fustel de Coulanges wrote his *Les Origines du Système Féodal*, or in 1884, when Frederick Engels wrote his 'The decline of feudalism and the rise of the Bourgeoisie'.<sup>2</sup> Two recent witnesses to this vitality may be cited by way of illustration. In his 'The Other Transition: from the Ancient World to Feudalism',<sup>3</sup> Chris Wickham hinges his interpretation of the transition from late antique to medieval times on the notion that when 'rent' predominates quantitatively over 'taxation' in surplus extraction, we have 'the feudal mode of production' ('landowning'); such 'feudalism...has nothing to do with military obligations, vassalage or the fief'.<sup>4</sup> The fact that 'feudalism' emerges thus as the end product of a massive process of tax evasion suggests the possible future relevance of the term in some modern western societies where tax evasion is becoming a phenomenon of general concern. Yet 'feudalism' emerged in the early middle ages only as the 'dominant' mode of production. It 'was already present in the Roman Empire as a subsidiary economic system long before the Germans came'<sup>5</sup> and even in the medieval period proper, subsidiary modes of production continued to coexist alongside the feudal mode. In the eastern half of the old Roman Empire, feudalism 'only perhaps in the twelfth century...really began to replace the tax-raising state as the dominant mode in Byzantine society'.<sup>6</sup> Wickham concludes by

reference to the term 'tributary mode of production' as a possible description of the tax-based 'ancient' mode. This term, given currency, it seems, by Samir Amin in 1973, is also taken up by the second witness to the vitality of the term 'feudalism' mentioned above, Eric Wolfe's *Europe and the People without History*<sup>7</sup> but as an umbrella term for both Marx's 'Asiatic' and his 'feudal' modes of production. Within this single tributary mode of production, writes Wolf, societies may 'tend toward centralization or fragmentation, or oscillate between these two poles'.<sup>8</sup> The fragmented mode is the feudal mode. Whether the reader of the present collection of essays will be attracted to these recent discussions or not, the continued relevance of the term 'feudalism' is inescapable.

The aim of the conference was not to arrive at a precise definition of the term 'feudalism' nor to make a definitive comparative study of pre-industrial societies in Europe and Asia. We generally agreed that feudalism is a useful concept for scholars who deal with problems of historical development in longer chronological and wider geographical perspectives.

The present volume is intended to enrich the discussion of the location of power in society, the nature of social arrangements, of dependency and discontent and of political structures, by continuing a focus on the implications of 'feudalism', as a sign, as an element within a discourse, and as an empirical reality. The contributions are by no means comprehensive or evenly spread, but it is the Editors' belief that the subject cannot and should not be confined within rigid frameworks. It is also their belief that within the present covers the reader will find much to stimulate thought and discussion, whatever his or her view of the utility of the term 'feudalism'. The Editors' own attitudes are well enough indicated in their contributions, which occupy the first sixty eight pages of the volume. Beyond that, the reader will find the varied results of our authors' reflections on the term 'feudalism' in relation to their own fields of research and interest. The result is, perhaps, surprisingly cohesive.

In his chapter 'The Historical Foundations of a Feudal Mode of Production' John Pryor shows with remarkable clarity how the essentials of the 'feudal' world - estates worked by a servile class whose surplus labour or product of labour was garnered by a land-owning class through virtually autonomous possession of economic, judicial and military power - were already present in late Roman times, both within the borders of the Empire and outside them. Pryor, who views the notion of a 'feudal mode of production' in Marx's writings as a useful historical fiction, sees both good and bad in the more or less inevitable emergence of 'feudal' characteristics in the later Roman Empire. Readers might not agree with Dr Pryor's equation of 'feudal' with 'medieval', but they will find in this chapter an essential starting point for any consideration of developed medieval 'feudalism'.



Taking 'feudalism' to imply the creation and dominance of a lineage oriented, primogeniture based class of knightly landlords, Phil Barker opens up some exciting vistas for those whose view of 'feudal order' has hitherto been restricted to fiefs and vassals and landlaw. He suggests how fundamental were the ramifications of the new feudal order of the central middle ages and how profoundly literature reflects a reordering of the sexes and the new social relationships of feudal society. This, one might suggest, is the path for the future historian of medieval feudalism to follow.

Nicholas Wright provides us with a vivid and valuable insight into the kinds of de facto lordships that provided protection and terror in the disturbed France of the 100 Years War. His remarks on the differences between English and French historiography of the 100 Years War will provoke interest, as will his notion that the warlordism of the 100 Years War is, in fact, a kind of historical regression to the conditions which gave birth to feudalism itself, in the 'First Feudal Age' of the ninth and tenth centuries (A.D.). His contention is that the 100 Years War saw a brief flowering of 'real', not 'bastard' feudalism.

Michael Bennett in his chapter elegantly bolsters the case for continued use of the term 'feudalism' in historical discourse, on the grounds that it 'has at least the merit of focusing attention on one of the key problems in human history, the origins of modern capitalist society...and has stimulated empirical research of a high order'. His exploration of the 'neo-Marxian model of pre-industrial Europe', particularly as it applies to the English experience, concludes with some fertile suggestions for new and broad cultural perspectives on the development of early European pre-industrial ('feudal') societies.

With Craig Reynolds' chapter we move into Asia. He examines 'feudalism' (in the Thai language) as a 'sign', as a 'metaphor' and as a 'discourse'. He shows that in Thailand the use of the modern Thai word, *śaktina*, in literature, in historical and political debate and in common parlance is part of a wider debate either to legitimize an authoritarian regime or to subvert it.

Colin Jeffcott's chapter serves two purposes. Firstly, it is a useful survey of the historiography of Chinese feudalism. Secondly, Jeffcott uses 'feudalism' as a tool ('serviceable and workmanlike') to analyse data from the Song period. The result of the latter exercise is negative. Nonetheless, it is important in this volume, for it highlights the significance of comparative studies.

Michael Pearson's chapter deals with the nature of the Mughal social and political structures. Pearson rejects attempts to squeeze Indian reality into ill-fitting theoretical straight-jackets: 'feudalism' or 'oriental despotism'. He however, uses theories based on non-Indian experiences, while he remains firmly grounded in the experience and culture of India. Mughal India was highly centralized, with the emperor in firm control of land and nobility.

But the emperor was no Oriental Despot. While the political structure was centralised at the peak, it was disaggregated at the base: 'a glittering array of nobles danced attendance on the emperor, but their shadow lay light on the rest of India'.

Ito and Reid examine the transition in Aceh in the seventeenth century from a pattern of autocratic states dominated by their commercial port-capitals to one of power diffused among chiefdoms or domains. They compare this transition with the European experience of the passage from Antiquity to Feudalism.

Christopher Kenna, in his wide ranging and thought-provoking essay explores the ideas and activities of a broad stratum of rural society: landlords, peasants, artisans and the itinerant poor in colonial India. His argument is particularly relevant for the 'criminal' part of the rural society, *thags* and *dakaits*. Their mode of behaviour, their deference to leaders and status, their use of martial symbols and their activities within a fragmented polity point to aspects of the feudal paradigm and recall Wright's paper on France.

The Editors regret that four other papers submitted at the conference could not be included in this volume. The final drafts of Michael Roberts and Vivienne Kondos reached us too late. Andrew Fraser withdrew his paper on Japan, and Soumyen Mukherjee's note on Ancient India was not ready for the press. Our apologies to these contributors, particularly to Vivienne Kondos who worked so hard on her very original paper.

Michael Roberts's paper is already published.<sup>9</sup> Readers will find it an interesting critique of Leach and Gunawardana.<sup>10</sup> Andrew Fraser's short paper examined the distinctive characteristics of the vassalage system in Japan. Mukherjee showed how polygamy and the subjugation of women were tied up in the system of homage and political alliance in India during the period of the Imperial Guptas. It was a critical reappraisal of the Kosambi-Sharma thesis on 'feudalism from above'. Kondos's paper was out of tune with other papers at the conference. Using Anderson's definition of feudalism, Manu and the Nepalese legal Code, she found an ideal example of 'Oriental Despotism' in Nepalese kingship. It is hoped that this thought-provoking paper will be published soon.

This collection of essays could not be published without the help of a number of persons involved. We thank all those who took part in the conference, particularly the contributors, the commentators and chairpersons. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Professor John M. Ward took a personal interest in the conference and provided financial assistance. We are grateful to the Department of History and to the secretaries, particularly Jaya Thuraisingam. Wendy Solomon, Sharon Davidson, Devaleena Ghosh, John Berwick and Antonina Gentile took over the running of the conference. Two of the Editors (S.N.M. and J.O.W.) are most grateful to Edmund Leach for his encouragement and the time he gave our volume. Finally, we thank Wilma Sharp,

whose word processor made this all possible.

E.R.L.  
S.N.M.  
J.O.W.

#### NOTES

1. Methuen.
2. Pages 460-71 of *Marx-Engels, Pre-Capitalist Socio-Economic Formations: a collection*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1979).
3. *Past and Present* 103 (1984) pp. 3-36.
4. Wickham p. 6.
5. Wickham p. 25.
6. Wickham p. 34.
7. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982, pp. 79ff.
8. Wolf p. 82.
9. 'Caste Feudalism' in Sri Lanka? A critique through the Aśokan persona and European contrasts', *Contributions to Indian Society*, 1984, Vol. 18, 2.
10. 'Hydraulic society in Ceylon', *Past and Present*, 1959, 15: 2-26. Cf. 'Irrigation and Hydraulic Society in Early or Medieval Ceylon', *Past and Present*, 1971, 53, 3-27.