

European feudalism

Merchants from the great Islamic cities such as Cairo and Cordoba travelled widely 1,000 years ago.⁸⁷ Any who made their way to the royal courts of northern Europe must have been shaken by the conditions they found.

The land was divided between warring baronies, often separated from each other by dense woodlands or marshes. Each was a virtually self contained economy, its people depending almost entirely on what was produced on its lands. For the peasants this meant a diet dominated by bread and gruel, and clothing spun and woven in their own homes out of rough wool or flax. It also meant devoting at least two fifths of their energies to unpaid work for the lord, either in the form of labour or goods in kind. As serfs, the peasants did not have the freedom to leave either the land or the lord.

The living standard of the lordly family was much higher, yet it too was restricted to what the peasants could produce. The lords' castles were crude, built of wood and surrounded by wood and mud palisades, ill protected against the elements. Their clothing, much more abundant than the peasants', was hardly any smoother on the skin, and the lords were rarely more cultured. They needed expertise in horseriding and the use of weapons to hold their lands against other lords and to punish recalcitrant peasants; they did not need to be able to read and write, and most did not bother to learn. When the lords with larger estates wanted to keep written records, they turned to the small social group which had preserved the knowledge of reading and writing—the thin layer of literate monks and clergy.

There were a few products—salt, iron for plough tips, knives and the lords' weapons—which came from traders. But these were very different from the wealthy merchant classes of the eastern civilisations, being akin to bagmen or tinkers as they tramped through forest paths and along barely recognisable mud-caked roads.

There were few towns, and 'entire countries, like England and

almost all the Germanic lands, were entirely without towns'.⁸⁸ The towns that did exist were little more than administrative centres for the bigger barons or religious establishments, and were made up of a few houses clustered around a castle, monastery or large church.

Yet this most backward extremity of the great Eurasian continent was eventually to become the birthplace of a new civilisation which would overwhelm all the rest.

There have been all sorts of explanations for this transformation, ranging from the wondrous, through the absurd, to the obscene. Some ascribe it to the 'Judeo-Christian' tradition, although the Christian side of this certainly did not show any merits during the last years of the Roman Empire, the Dark Ages in Europe or the stagnation of Byzantium. Others ascribe it to the climate which allegedly encourages 'work' and 'enterprise',⁸⁹ which makes one wonder how the first great civilisations were able to flourish. The obscene attempt to explain it in terms of the alleged 'racial' superiority of the Europeans falls at the first hurdle given that they were backward for so long. Another line of thinking ascribes the rise of Europe to 'contingent' factors—in other words, it was an accident. There was the fortuitous emergence of a series of great men, according to traditional mainstream history; there was the lucky rise of Calvinism and the 'Protestant ethic', according to followers of the German sociologist Max Weber; there was the chance outcome of clashes between peasants and lords in 15th century England which left neither victorious, according to some North American academics.⁹⁰

The backward go forward

All these accounts miss an obvious point. Europe's very backwardness encouraged people to adopt new ways of wresting a livelihood from elsewhere. Slowly, over many centuries, they began to apply techniques already known in China, India, Egypt, Mesopotamia and southern Spain. There was a corresponding slow but cumulative change in the social relations of society as a whole, just as there had been in Sung China or the Abbasid caliphate. But this time it happened without the enormous dead weight of an old imperial superstructure to smother continued advance. The very backwardness of Europe allowed it to leapfrog over the great empires.

Economic and technical advance was not automatic or unhampered. Again and again old structures hindered, obstructed and sometimes crushed new ways. As elsewhere, there were great revolts which were crushed, and movements which promised a new society and ended up reproducing the old. Fertile areas were turned into barren wastes and prosperous cities ended up as desolate ruins. There were horrific and pointless wars, barbaric torture and mass enslavement. Yet in the end a new organisation of production and society emerged very different to anything before in history.

The first changes were in cultivation. Those who lived off the land during the Dark Ages may have been illiterate, superstitious and ignorant of the wider world. But they knew where their livelihood came from and were prepared, slowly, to embrace new methods of cultivation that enabled them more easily to fill their bellies if they got the chance. In the 6th century a new design of plough, 'the heavy wheeled plough' capable of coping with heavy but fertile soil, appeared among the Slav people of eastern Europe and spread westwards over the next 300 years.⁹¹ With it came new methods of grazing, which used cattle dung to fertilise the land. Together they allowed a peasant family to increase its crop yield by 50 percent in 'an agrarian pattern which produced more meat, dairy produce, hides and wool than ever before, but at the same time improved the harvest of grain'.⁹² One economic historian claims, 'It proved to be the most productive agrarian method, in relation to manpower, that the world had ever seen'.⁹³

There were still more new techniques in the centuries which followed, such as the adoption of the central Asian method of harnessing horses—which allowed them to replace the much slower oxen in ploughing—and the use of beans and other legumes to replenish the soil. According to the noted French historian of the medieval peasantry, Georges Duby, the cumulative effect of these innovations was to double grain yields by the 12th century.⁹⁴

Such changes took place slowly. Sylvia Thrupp has suggested that 'the best medieval rates of general economic growth... would come to perhaps half of one percent'.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, over 300 or 400 years this amounted to a transformation of economic life.

Such advance depended to a very large extent on the ingenuity of the peasant producers. But it also required something else—that the feudal lords allowed a portion of the surplus to go into agricultural improvement rather than looting it all. The barons were crude and rapacious men. They

had acquired and held their land by force. Their wealth depended on direct compulsion rather than buying and selling, and they wasted much of it on luxuries and warfare. But they still lived on their estates; they were not a class of absentee owners like those of late republican Rome or the final years of Abbasid power. Even the most stupid could grasp that they would have no more to live on and fight with if they stole so much from the peasants that next year's crops were not sown. As the German economic historian Kriedte has pointed out, 'The lord had to preserve the peasant holding at all costs,' and 'therefore...to assist peasants in emergencies which arose from harvest failures and other causes'.⁹⁶ Providing the peasants with improved ploughs meant a bigger surplus for luxury consumption and warfare, and some lords 'put farming tools made of iron, especially the ploughs, under their protection'.⁹⁷ Individual feudal lords organised and financed the clearing of new lands throughout the feudal period. They were the driving force in the spread of the first and, for a long time, the most important form of mechanisation, the water mill.

Like other ruling classes, the feudal lords were concerned above all with exploitation. They would use unpaid peasant labour to build a mill, force the peasants to grind their corn in it—and charge them for doing so. But for a certain period of history, their concern with increasing the level of exploitation also led some of them to encourage advances in the means of production.

The feudal ruling class did not consist solely of warrior barons. Many of the great landholdings were in the hands of religious institutions—abbeys and monasteries: 'In wealth, power and aptitude for command...abbots, bishops and archbishops...were the equals of the great military barons... Immense fortunes were amassed by monastic communities or prelates'.⁹⁸ On occasions the literacy of monks was used to gain access to writings on technology from Greece and Rome and from the Byzantine and Arabic empires: 'If one is looking for the earliest mills, water mills or windmills, or for progress in farming techniques, one often sees the religious orders in the vanguard'.⁹⁹

The full adoption of new techniques involved a change in relations between lords (whether warrior or religious) and cultivators. The great landholders finally had to abandon the wasteful Roman practice of slave labour—a practice that lingered on as late as the 10th century. Then they began to discover advantages in 'serfdom', in parcelling out land to peasant households in return for a share of the produce.

The serfs had an incentive for working as hard as they could and employing new techniques on their holdings. As total output rose, the lords' incomes also rose, especially as they used their military might to force previously free peasants into serfdom. What Bois calls 'the transformation of the year 1000' spelt the final end of agricultural slavery—and the final establishment of feudal serfdom as a more dynamic mode of production than the old Roman system.¹⁰⁰

The importance of what happened in the countryside between about 1000 and 1300 is all too easily underrated by those of us for whom food is something we buy from supermarkets. A doubling of the amount of food produced by each peasant household transformed the possibilities for human life across Europe. Whoever controlled the extra food could exchange it for the goods carried by the travelling traders or produced by the artisans.

Crudely, grain could be changed into silk for the lord's family, iron for his weapons, furnishing for his castle, wine and spices to complement his meal. It could also be turned into means that would further increase the productivity of the peasant cultivators—wooden ploughs with iron tips, knives, sickles, and, in some cases, horses with bridles, bits and iron shoes.

By supplying such things at regular markets the humble bagman could transform himself into a respectable trader, and the respectable trader into a wealthy merchant. Towns began to revive as craftsmen and traders settled in them, erecting shops and workshops around the castles and churches. Trading networks grew up which tied formerly isolated villages together around expanding towns and influenced the way of life in a wide area.¹⁰¹ To obtain money to buy luxuries and arms, lords would encourage serfs to produce cash crops and substitute money rents for labour services or goods in kind. Some found an extra source of income from the dues they could charge traders for allowing markets on their land.

Life in the towns was very different from life in the countryside. The traders and artisans were free individuals not directly under the power of any lord. There was a German saying, 'Town air makes you free.' The urban classes were increasingly loath to accept the prerogatives of the lordly class. Traders and artisans who needed extra labour would welcome serfs who had fled bondage on nearby estates. And as the towns grew in size and wealth they acquired the means to defend their independence and freedom, building walls and arming urban militias.

The civilisation of the 13th century

In time, every aspect of society changed. The classic account of European feudalism by the French historian Marc Bloch goes so far as to speak of a 'second feudal age', in which relations between the feudal lords themselves underwent a transformation. Kings became more influential. They were able to formalise their power at the top of hierarchies of feudal lords. By granting various towns internal self government they could use them as a counterweight to the barons. And they tried to set up national networks of courts where their officials rather than the barons administered 'justice'—although the barons usually managed to remain all-powerful in matters affecting their own estates.

Intellectual life was also transformed. The traders needed to keep accounts and written records of contracts in a way which the feudal lords of the earlier period had not. They also wanted formal, written laws rather than the ad hoc judgments handed down in the villages by the lords. Some took the effort to learn to read and write, and did so in the local idioms they spoke. Literacy was no longer confined to the monasteries and Latin ceased to be the only written language. Learning moved from the monasteries to new universities established in cities like Paris, Oxford and Prague, and scholars could now earn a livelihood away from the direct control of church authorities by teaching for money. They showed a new interest in the serious study of non-religious works of the Greek and Roman world, travelling to Sicily, Moorish Spain or even Syria to gain access to them through Arabic translations.¹⁰² They began to dispute with each other over the merits of Plato and Aristotle, and of the Islamic Aristotelian, Averroës.

Medieval thought is often associated with 'scholasticism'—disputation for its own sake, based upon hair-splitting references to texts. But the first phase of the new thought was far from scholastic in this sense. It involved using the long forgotten texts to try to generate new ideas. Thus Abelard, who dominated the intellectual life of the University of Paris in the early 12th century, insisted, 'The man of understanding is he who has the ability to grasp and ponder the hidden causes of things. By hidden causes we mean those from which things originate, and these are to be investigated more by reason than by sensory experience'.¹⁰³ He was attacked by the mystic St Bernard of Clairvaux for holding 'himself able by human reason

alone to comprehend God altogether'.¹⁰⁴

Reliance on reason did not mean that the new scholarship had to be remote from practical activity. It was the scholar Roger Bacon who wrote down the formula for gunpowder for the first time in the west, and explored ways of using mirrors and lenses for magnification. It was another scholar, Peter of Maricourt, who investigated magnetic properties and devised machines based on them.¹⁰⁵

With the scholarly translations came information on the techniques discovered more than 1,000 years previously in Greece, Rome or Alexandria, and on the techniques which the Islamic societies of the eastern Mediterranean and central Asia had acquired from China. These added to the improvements which local millwrights, blacksmiths and builders were already making to tools and equipment and resulted in 'a passion for mechanisation of industry such as no culture had known'.¹⁰⁶

Water mills began to provide the motion for bellows for blacksmiths' hammers, and for 'fulling' (beating cloth to finish it). The crank and the compound crank turned up-down motion into rotary motion (and visa versa), and the flywheel kept rotation at an even speed. The spinning wheel and the compass arrived from the Far East in the 12th century, and the rudder replaced the steering oar in the 13th, enormously increasing the reliability of sea transport. The discovery of the eyeglass meant declining eyesight no longer ended the careers of clerks and scholars. The horse stirrup, advances in armour-making, the crossbow, the stonethrower, and then gunpowder and the cannon (first used in 1320), transformed warfare. And the humble wheelbarrow, almost unnoticed, altered the character of much back-breaking work on the land.

Such technical advance underlay the full flourishing of medieval society and culture in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. By this time 'communes', self governing city states, dominated the political landscape of northern Italy and Flanders.¹⁰⁷ Writers such as Boccaccio, Chaucer and, above all, Dante made a name for themselves by producing a secular literature written in their local idiom—and, in the process, gave it the prestige to begin its transition into a 'national' language. And towering above the medieval towns were those monuments to its culture, the great cathedrals. These were works of construction and art inconceivable without the agricultural, technical and ideological changes of the previous centuries.

The crisis of the 14th century

The period of economic growth and technical advance was not to last. For it occurred in a society dominated by a class of feudal lords whose way of life still centred around luxury consumption, preparation for war and notions of military honour, and over time this became a drain on, rather than a spur to, advance. Typically, medieval legend celebrated as 'good kings' those like Richard the Lionheart or 'Saint' Louis IX of France who spent vast sums on leading rampaging bands of brigands across Europe and Asia Minor to try and displace the Muslims from Palestine in the 'Crusades'. Just as wasteful, and ruinous to the lands they passed through, were the wars waged by Norman kings as they attempted to subdue Scotland, Wales and much of France and Ireland as well as England, or the wars waged in 13th century Italy between German 'Holy Roman' emperors and French kings allied with the pope.¹⁰⁸ At most, 1 or 2 percent of revenues went into new investment.¹⁰⁹

The lords grew ever more remote from the practicalities of producing the wealth they consumed. The descendants of the warriors in rough fortresses resided in elaborate castles, cloaked themselves in silk and engaged in expensive courtly and knightly rituals which asserted their superiority over other social groups. They regarded themselves as a caste apart from everybody else, with hereditary legal rights sanctioned by sacred religious ceremonies. Within this caste an elaborate gradation of ranks separated the great aristocrats from the ordinary knights who were legally dependent on them. But all its layers were increasingly disdainful of anyone involved in actually creating wealth—whether wealthy merchants, humble artisans or impoverished peasants.

The popes, abbots and bishops were part of this ruling class and shared its attitudes, but had distinct interests of their own. In the late 11th century a series of 'reforming' popes had aspired to centralise the network of abbeys and bishoprics so as to impose a near-theocratic structure on the whole of Europe. One product of this was that the church attempted to establish peace between rival lords and make itself the dominant influence in society. Another was the utter waste and devastation of the Crusades. The popes used the call to 'free' Jerusalem from the 'infidel' Muslims (who had never stopped Christian pilgrimages), and the prospect of loot, to persuade kings, lords and

knights to join massive armies under papal jurisdiction. It did not worry them that the exploits of these armies included the wanton sacking of cities, the slaughter of women and children, rape, pillage, pogroms of Jews, Muslims and non-Catholic Christians, and the conquest and pillage of Constantinople in 1204.¹¹⁰ The wars between the popes (allied with the French king) and the emperors which devastated Italy in the 13th century were another product of papal ambition.

The popes, bishops and abbots also devoted themselves to upholding the wider values they shared in common with the lords. The cathedrals, the greatest artistic creations of the period, were also the greatest symbol of the power of the ruling class, emphasising the God-ordained character of society, with heavenly hierarchies of angels, saints and humans corresponding to earthly hierarchies of kings, lords, abbots, bishops, knights and commoners.

The hold of the church over the minds of the masses depended on the superstitions and magical beliefs in holy relics and miracles which flourished in a society where life was often short and almost always insecure. This led the church leaders to fear the new ideas spreading in the cities. The faith in reason of people like Abelard and Bacon could undermine the hold of superstition, while the wandering monks who preached a gospel of poverty and humility could encourage the 'heretical' belief that the 'holy poor' were entitled to wage war on the 'corrupt rich'. The church increasingly clamped down on new ideas. It gave official recognition to moderate Franciscans but persecuted the 'extremist' *fratelli*. Then in 1277 it tried to ban 219 'execrable errors' (some of which were held by the great apologist for late medieval Christianity, Thomas Aquinas) from the teaching of scholars. Roger Bacon seems to have been held under house arrest, and the followers of Averroës were forced to leave Paris for Padua. Finally, in the course of the 14th century, the Inquisition came into existence and, with it, the burning of people for heresy. In the new atmosphere scholars began to keep clear of 'dangerous discussions'. After Thomas Aquinas recast Christian theology on the basis of Aristotle's ideas—in the process justifying the hierarchy of aristocrats, knights, merchants, artisans and peasants—medieval thought entered its truly scholastic, sterile phase in which there was no questioning of the basics of church dogma or of the notions of the physical world that went with it.

By the year 1300 there was a vast contradiction at the heart of

European society. Material and cultural life had reached a peak which bore comparison with that of the high point of Roman civilisation. It looked as if society was going forward, escaping, albeit slowly, from poverty, insecurity and superstition. Yet the top of society was increasingly freezing up, as the lords made the barriers separating them from other classes ever more rigid, as the church clamped down on dissent and rational thought, and as ever greater amounts of the surplus were used for luxuries, warfare and ritual.

The contradiction came to a head as famines spread across much of Europe and plague came in their wake, its virulence increased by the widespread malnutrition. Half the population was wiped out, vast numbers of villages were abandoned, and millions of hectares of cultivated land went to waste in the great crisis of the 14th century. As Guy Bois tells, 'For more than a century...the greater part of the continent...suffered a massive decline in population and a regression in productive capacity. In scope and duration the phenomenon had no known historical precedent. It took place in an atmosphere of catastrophe: ceaseless epidemics, endemic war and its train of destruction, spiritual disarray, social and political disturbances'.¹¹¹

As with the crises which plunged previous civilisations into 'Dark Ages', there have been attempts to explain what happened in terms of natural causes. Some historians blame a supposed cooling of Europe's climate. But this does not explain why people could not adjust over the decades, turning to new and more hardy crops—for instance, planting barley where they had once grown wheat, and wheat where they had once grown vines. Others claim population growth used up all the land open to cultivation. But it seems unlikely that all waste land had, in fact, been used and, in any case, it does not explain why crop yields stopped rising as they had in previous centuries.

The real cause of the crisis lay in the increasing burden on society of sustaining the lifestyle of the feudal ruling class. On the one hand, as Georges Duby notes, 'In the most advanced countries...the grain-centred system of husbandry began to be unsettled by the requirement of the gradual rise in aristocratic and urban living standards' and increasing demand for luxury products.¹¹² On the other, there was little new investment on technical improvement. As Rodney Hilton reports, 'The social structure and the habits of the landed nobility did not permit accumulation for investment for production'.¹¹³

Class struggles and millenial movements

The sheer scale of the crisis led to convulsions right across society. Even the ruling class faced difficulties. There was a 'crisis of seigneurial incomes'¹¹⁴ brought on first by the problems of extracting the surplus from a starving peasantry, and then by the acute shortage of agricultural labour caused by the death toll from famine and plague. The lords turned even more readily than in the past to wars against each other—as in the seemingly endless 'Hundred Years War' between English and French monarchs. They also tried to replenish their revenues by taking more from the classes below them, the peasants and the burghers. Economic crisis bred bitter class struggles.

Battles between lords and peasants were not something new. Resistance to enserfment had led, for instance, to a great rising in 10th century northern France. As a later poem tells:

The villeins and the peasants...
Held several parliaments.
They spread out this command:
He who is higher, he is the enemy...
And several of them made an oath
That they would never agree
To have lord or master.¹¹⁵

Once feudalism was fully established peasants found it more difficult to challenge a lord directly. He was armed in a way they were not, they relied on him to provide certain tools and to feed them in years when the crop failed, and his power was backed by the teachings of the church. But they could still put up resistance if his demands exceeded the customary level. They gained some strength from far outnumbering the lord and his retainers on each individual estate and from the ties that came from generations of living and intermarrying in the same villages.

In many areas the bitterness flared up as never before. In 1325 the free peasants of western Flanders took up arms, refusing to pay tithes to the church or dues to the feudal lords. They were not defeated until the King of France intervened in 1328. In 1358 a great *jacquerie*—rural uprising—in the Seine valley of northern France led to attacks on nobles and the burning of chateaux. In June 1381 the English 'Peasants' Revolt' briefly gave control of London to rural insurgents led

by Wat Tyler (who were hanged after they made the mistake of trusting the king). The rebellion saw the whole peasantry begin to unite to demand its freedom from the feudal lords: 'The abolition of bondage and serfdom was the first of the articles of the peasant programme'.¹¹⁶ John Ball, the popular ex-priest who helped inspire the revolt, preached an unashamed attack on noble privilege: 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?'

Sections of the urban population gave their support to the Flanders peasants in 1320 and to the English revolt of 1381. It was town-folk who opened the gates of London to the peasants, and the London poor joined the insurgent throng. But the 14th century also saw widespread urban revolts against the old order.

Some represented a continuation of previous struggles by the citizens of towns to establish their independence from local lords. There were repeated struggles of this kind in Flanders. In Paris in the late 1350s some of the richer burghers took advantage of the opportunity offered by the king's imprisonment by the English to seize control of the city. Etienne Marcel, a member of a wealthy merchant family, led 3,000 artisans into the royal palace and forced the king's heir, the Dauphin, briefly to wear the colours of revolt. In Florence in northern Italy revolt went a stage further in 1378 when the mass of ordinary artisans in the woollen trades, the *ciompi*, turned against the heads of its ruling merchant guilds and took effective control of the city for two months.¹¹⁷

Such direct displays of class militancy were not the only way people responded to the devastation of their lives. There was a long history of millenaral movements in medieval Europe, which combined popular bitterness against the rich with the religious expectation of the Second Coming of Christ and, often, hatred of outsiders. The official Crusades of the popes prompted unofficial Crusades of the masses—the 'People's', 'Children's' and 'Shepherds' Crusades. Heretic preachers gained enormous support by proclaiming themselves the successors to Jesus. Typically, masses of people would march from town to town, looting and gathering popular support. They would direct their bitterness not against the feudal ruling class as such, but against corrupt priests and, especially, Jews. These were an easy target. They were the only non-Christian group in a society where Christianity was the all-pervasive religion; excluded from agriculture by the attitude of the church, they were forced to play a

role as merchants and moneylenders on the margins of medieval society; and they lacked the power of the really wealthy classes to defend themselves. Jews would be given a choice between immediate conversion to Christianity and instant death. But the crowds would also drag priests through the streets and loot their churches.

The crisis sparked off a succession of such confused quasi-religious movements. In 1309 in Flanders and northern France:

Armed columns appeared, consisting of miserably poor artisans and labourers with an admixture of nobles who had squandered their wealth. These people begged and pillaged their way through the country, killing Jews but also storming...castles... In the end they attacked the castle of the Duke of Brabant...who three years before had routed an army of insurgent clothworkers and, it is said, buried its leaders alive.¹¹⁸

In 1520 columns of the poor and dispossessed were again on the move, led by an unfrocked priest, a heretic monk and prophets who proclaimed that much bloodshed would herald the dawning of a new age. They stormed the prison in Paris and broke into the Chatelet Palace before going on to Toulouse and Bordeaux. As they marched, they killed Jews.¹¹⁹ But they also denounced priests as 'false shepherds who rob their herds, and began to talk about expropriating the property of the monasteries'. The pope, resident in Avignon, sent an armed force against them, hanging the participants 20 or 30 at a time.¹²⁰

The panic during the Black Death of the late 1340s led to a further outbreak of religious hysteria—the *flagellants*. Encouraged by a papal statement, bands of men up to 500 strong, dressed in identical robes and singing hymns, would march to a town, where they would form a circle and set about beating their own backs rhythmically with iron spikes embedded in leather belts until they were covered with bleeding wounds. They believed that by imitating the pain Christ had endured on the cross they were purging themselves of the sins which had brought the world to its present state and ensuring their own passage to paradise. Their religious ecstasy was combined with what today would be called a 'moral panic'—their belief that some conspiracy must lie behind the sudden appearance of the Black Death. They massacred the Jews, who were accused of spreading the plague by poisoning wells—although, of course, Jews were as badly hit by the plague as Christians. But they also attacked priests

and talked of seizing the wealth of the church, prompting the pope to denounce them in a 'bull', and various secular authorities to hang and behead those who did not obey it.¹²¹

The beginning of the 15th century saw a different sort of religious movement arise in Bohemia,¹²² which contained some of the characteristics of the earlier urban revolts in Flanders, France and Italy, but which was also a rehearsal for the great Protestant Reformation 100 years later. The region had undergone rapid economic development. It contained the richest silver mine in Europe and the most important seat of learning in the (German) Holy Roman Empire. But much of the wealth was in the hands of the church, which owned fully one half of the land. This caused enormous resentment, not just among the poorer classes of town and country but even among many of the knights who spoke Czech rather than German.

The resentment found expression in massive support for the views of Jan Hus, a preacher and professor at the university who agitated forcefully against the corruption of the church and the claim of the pope to be the sole interpreter of God's wishes. Hus even had some backing from the Bohemian king, Wenceslas. When the emperor, at the behest of the pope, burnt Hus at the stake in 1415, virtually the entire Czech population of Bohemia rose in revolt, taking control of the church and its property into local hands.

The king turned against the movement, and the nobles and the rich merchants became increasingly worried by the peasants' tendency to reject exploitation by anyone, not just the church. Artisans belonging to the radical 'Taborite' wing of the movement controlled Prague for four months before being removed by the merchants who hoped to conciliate the pope and the emperor. There was a decade of war as the emperor and pope fought to crush the Bohemian revolt. Repeated vacillations by the Czech nobility and the Prague burghers pushed the rank and file of the Taborites to look to radical ideas, with egalitarian slogans like, 'All shall live together as brothers; none shall be subject to another', 'The Lord shall reign and the Kingdom shall be handed over to people of the earth', and, 'All lords, nobles and knights shall be cut down and exterminated in the forests like outlaws'.¹²³ It was not until May 1434 that a noble army of 25,000 defeated the Taborite force—aided by the desertion of one of its generals. No fewer than 13,000 of the Taborites were killed.

Flanders, northern Italy, northern France, Britain, Bohemia—the

crisis of feudalism led to a series of great rebellions. Yet the power of the feudal lords remained intact. No class emerged capable of uniting the rest of society behind it in an onslaught on the system.

For centuries the burghers of the towns had resisted the power of the lords. But the ruling councils of the towns tended to be oligarchies, dominated by great merchants who were rarely more than half-opposed to the feudal lords. Living within the feudal system, they tended to accept much of its ideology. Their ambition much of the time was not to beat the feudal lords but to join them—to turn the wealth they had obtained from trade into the seemingly more permanent wealth that consisted in owning land, complete with serfs to till it. At every great turning point, they would at best vacillate and try to conciliate the lords, and at worst they would join them in attacking the masses. What happened in northern Italy was characteristic. This was probably the most economically advanced part of Europe at the beginning of the 14th century and the region least damaged by the crisis. A merchant family, the Medicis, came to dominate its most important city, Florence, with its vast cloth trade. But they used their power in the 15th century not to break feudalism apart, but to establish themselves as key players in the manoeuvres of lordly and princely families, and in doing so ensured the continual fragmentation of the area into warring statelets and eventual economic decay.¹²⁴

The artisans of the towns could be more radical. Many were only a generation or two away from serfdom themselves, and, like the surrounding peasantry, they faced starvation when the harvest failed. There are repeated examples of them clashing with the town oligarchies, and, on occasion, throwing in their lot with rural uprisings. Yet they were not a homogeneous group. Some were relatively prosperous, running their own workshops using family labour and perhaps a couple of paid employees ('journeymen') and apprentices. Others were much poorer, and terrified of being forced down into the destitute masses from the countryside who scabbled for whatever casual work was available. That is why as well as the artisan movements which allied the towns with revolts in the countryside, there were others which joined the rich merchants. It is also why there was support from sections of the urban masses for the religious frenzy of the 'People's Crusades' and the *flagellants*.

Finally, there were the peasants. Peasant risings could shake society,

but the peasants themselves—illiterate, scattered across the countryside, each concerned with their own village and their own land—could not conceive of any realistic programme for reconstituting society. Such a programme would have had to combine a revolutionary attack on the power of the lords with schemes for using technical development in the towns to enhance agricultural output in the countryside. Economic development had not yet gone far enough to fashion a class, in the city or the countryside, capable of presenting such a programme in however confused a manner.

There already existed the embryos which would one day grow to create such a class. In some towns there were merchants and craftsmen interested in technical innovation and productive investment. In some regions of the countryside there were better off peasants with notions of becoming more prosperous by throwing off the burden of lordly exploitation and tilling the land more productively. But a promising embryo was not the same as a class capable of bringing to an end a crisis which was causing devastation to society at large.

The birth of market feudalism

The crisis of European feudalism was, however, different in one very important respect from the crisis that had hit ancient Rome, Sung China or the Arab empires of the Middle East. Recovery occurred much more quickly.

There was economic recovery and a renewal of population growth by the middle of the 15th century.¹²⁵ There was also a rise in living standards among the survivors of the famine and plagues, since although the smaller population could only till a smaller area of land, it tended to be the most fertile land. Food output fell by much less than the number of people to be fed. What is more, the importance of some towns actually increased. Part of the rural population, especially the lords, had become too dependent on the goods produced in the towns for society to revert to a system of production on virtually self contained estates. As their demand for goods grew, so did their desire for cash, which they could only get by selling a growing proportion of rural output. Market networks continued to penetrate the countryside, linking each village and household to the traders of the towns.

The growth of market networks slowly but surely changed feudal society. A few of the merchants became rich from the international trade in luxuries which brought products from India, south east Asia and China to Europe.¹²⁶ Their wealth could be sufficient for them to act as bankers to kings and emperors, financing wars and reaping political as well as economic rewards. Even those who could not aspire to such heights could dominate the political life of their own towns, making them vital allies for kings trying to expand their power.

The kings, in turn, began to see their futures not simply in fighting each other or marrying into each other's families for land, but also in terms of gaining some of the profits from trade. Portuguese monarchs encouraged merchants to use ships built with the most modern techniques to find a way round Africa to the riches of Asia, and the 'Catholic monarchs' of Spain financed Columbus's voyage west across the Atlantic.

The mass of lesser traders were still little more than shopkeepers. But with luck they could expand their influence and wealth by finding niches in feudal society and slowly widening them. The butcher might be a humble fellow, but he was in a position to provide cash inducements to local peasants to specialise in certain sorts of livestock—that is, to begin to exercise a degree of control over the farming economy. By the 15th century 'every town had its butchers, all of them prosperous, the new men of the pastoral economy and its masters'.¹²⁷

The urban traders often influenced life in the countryside in another way, by encouraging less prosperous peasants to take up industrial crafts in the countryside, away from the controls of the urban guilds. There was the growth of a 'putting-out' system. The merchant would provide the raw materials to rural workers, who would transform them into finished products in their own homes, with little choice but to accept the price the merchant gave them.

How important such a change could be is shown by the case of the textile industry. In the mid-14th century 96 percent of England's most important export, wool, was turned into cloth abroad, mainly in the towns of Flanders. A century later 50 percent was exported already woven. The merchants had increased their profits by weakening the hold of the Flemish artisans. But they had also done something more. They had taken hold of some of the rural labour which had previously been subject to the feudal lord. The long term effect was to replace one form of exploitation by another. The direct robbery of the

products of peasant labour was replaced by a system in which individual workers voluntarily accepted less than the full value of their products in return for being supplied with raw materials or tools.

This was not fully capitalist production as we know it. Production in large workplaces directly under the control of an entrepreneur was confined to a very few industries, mainly mining. The putting-out system relied on people who could still regard themselves as their own bosses. But it was a step towards fully developed capitalism. The merchant had moved from simply buying and selling goods to worrying about their production, and the direct producers could no longer obtain a livelihood unless a portion of their output went to the merchant as profit.

What is more, both the merchant and the producer were increasingly subject to the dictates of markets over which they had no control. Dispersed rural producers lacked the power of the town guilds to limit output and control prices. They had no choice but to keep abreast of new cost-cutting techniques introduced by other producers. The feudal organisation of production was giving way to a quite different organisation, in which competition led to investment and investment intensified competition. For the moment, this only occurred in a few gaps within the old system. But it was like an acid, eating into and changing the world around it.

The changes also influenced the ways some of the lords behaved. They were desperate to increase their own supplies of cash, and there were two ways of doing so. One was to use their old feudal powers and deploy organised violence to strengthen serfdom, making the peasants provide additional forced labour on large estates. The serfs would provide their own subsistence at no cost to the lord, enabling him to sell the surplus at a handsome price to merchants.

The other approach was for the lords to lease chunks of their property for fixed rents and for long periods of time to the most efficient and go-ahead section of the peasantry, who would then get other peasants with little or no land to work for them. In effect, this involved the lord accepting the full implications of the developing market system and opting to get his income as rent from lands farmed in a capitalist manner.

Those regions most tightly covered with networks of towns made some sort of move towards capitalist agriculture, while elsewhere the shift was to enhanced serfdom. Over a 300 year period England, the

Netherlands, parts of France and western Germany, and Bohemia moved in one direction, while eastern Europe and southern Italy moved in the other. But neither transformation took place instantaneously and without complications. Different lords moved at different speeds, and the whole process became intertwined with other changes. Some kings sought to extend their powers with the aid of the urban rich and encountered resistance from the great lords. Kings fought dynastic conflicts with each other. New ways of looking at the world encouraged by urbanisation clashed with old ways associated with the feudal order and embodied in the teachings of the church. Peasants rose up against lords—class struggles between rich and poor erupted in the cities.

The issue was not resolved anywhere until after more than a century of wars, revolutions and ideological turmoil—and until after another great period of economic crisis leading to famine and plague.