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The Origin of Capitalism in England, 1400–1600

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# The Origin of Capitalism in England, 1400–1600

*By*

Spencer Dimmock



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## Introduction

If capitalism is defined as an economic system in which businesses produce to sell on the market either domestically or overseas, then capitalism has always existed if in less efficient forms. If this definition is accepted, both the pre-history and the history of capitalism would amount to the history of commerce and commercialisation – that is, the recounting of increasing efficiencies in production and exchange through technological innovation, related changes in the organisation of production and distribution, and the geographical expansion or globalisation of trade. The question therefore of capitalist *origins*, the subject of this book, would be beside the point.<sup>1</sup>

This book begins with the premise that rather than simply an economic system, capitalism is a specific historical form of social system or *society* with its own specific economic logic, *fundamentally* distinct from earlier historical forms of society – and indeed from non-capitalist societies in different parts of the world today. This is because, like all other historical forms of society, capitalism has a unique structure of class relations, and it is this structure which determines its specific economic system and therefore specific patterns of economic development. In other words, it is the struggle to make a living by opposed interests within the established structure of class relations that determines the nature of economic development (or non-development). Capitalism and other historical forms of society are therefore necessarily defined in *political* terms. For example, capitalism is the only form of society in history in which the majority of people and their families are entirely dependent on others for waged employment in order to survive. It is in that dependency, and the consequent imbalances in power in the work-place, that there lurks the political relationship. This contrasts with other *non*-capitalist forms of society, such as feudalism and absolutism in medieval and early modern Europe and Asia, in which the majority of people and families held land, were largely self-subsistent in food that they produced themselves, and had therefore to be coerced by more directly political means by lords, monarchs and emperors into paying various forms of rent and taxation. And it contrasts with slavery in ancient and early medieval Europe, and New World societies such as North America between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, in which large sections of the population were neither wholly self-subsistent nor free to seek waged employment, but coerced by political means into forming part of the constant capital of their masters' production process and bought and sold

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1 For example, a recent self-styled 'definitive' history of capitalism traces the 'rise of capitalism' from ancient Babylon and the first known traders: Neal and Williamson, 2014.

like other investments.<sup>2</sup> It follows therefore that any historical account of economic growth, development and transformation will have to firmly integrate these fundamental political relationships at the centre of the analysis.

This book is about how the capitalist form developed out of the feudal form in England. It is about how the majority of people in England came to no longer work the land for a living, having done so for thousands of years, and were forced instead to seek employment either from farmers or in industry and service; in other words, how the lives of the majority of people changed from subsistence farming in which they had a permanent means of supplying at least their basic needs, to one in which they were dependent on others for employment in order to supply those needs. A fundamentally similar process is going on today elsewhere in the world, the most obvious example of which is China. Millions of people are being rapidly uprooted from their subsistence plots and communities in the countryside, and are migrating to the vast new cities that are being built in preparation for them. The Chinese Communist Party that is directing these changes had a blueprint of already existing capitalism which it has applied, but there was of course no such blueprint for the English; these fundamental changes in England were the unintentional result of pragmatic adaptations implemented blindly.

This book is comprised of both an intervention in a long-standing debate and the presentation of original research on the origin of capitalism in England. England is particularly significant in this debate because while forms of capitalist production developed in the medieval urban centres of Italy and Flanders, and it is arguable that capitalist social-property relations developed in the northern Netherlands from the fifteenth century, England was the first country in which a transition from feudalism to capitalism was sustained from the fifteenth century through to modern industrialisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As such England's capitalist origins have often been treated as a model with which to compare and understand origins and transitions to capitalism in other countries, past and present. In fact, England's transition to capitalism appears in stark contrast to the rest of Europe in the medieval and early modern periods, including those countries such as Italy, Germany, France and parts of the Low Countries which were more advanced in terms of trade and urbanisation in the medieval period and beyond. These countries only underwent a transition to capitalism after fully-fledged agrarian capitalism had already developed in England and it was developing its Industrial

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<sup>2</sup> See Post 2011 for a brilliant recent discussion on the fundamental characteristics of slavery and the obstacle it posed to capitalist expansion in North America in the mid-nineteenth century.

Revolution. Because of the central place England often has within the debate, it is very important to be clear about the nature of the transition in that country. Yet recent contributions to the long-standing debate by historians have served to confuse rather than to illuminate.<sup>3</sup> One of the aims of this book is to subject these recent contributions to a detailed critique and to promote a consensus on the nature of the origin of capitalism in England, not only among professional historians and social scientists, but for the benefit of anyone wanting to know more about the fundamental aspects of the society in which they live and desiring to put themselves in a better position to reflect upon its past and future.

The phrases 'the origin of capitalism' and 'the transition to capitalism' are often used interchangeably. The focus of this book is on the 'origin' because it wishes to place emphasis on a period of historic rupture, the key stage marking the beginning of the transition from a non-capitalist to a capitalist society without necessarily referring to a completed transition. If it is recognised that capitalism had a beginning, and that it is not simply a term that describes a higher form of 'commercial society' that has existed since ancient times, it should be concluded that capitalism is another specific form of society with a beginning and an end like all other previous specific forms.<sup>4</sup> If this conclusion is drawn, discussions about the future of capitalism can be informed by knowledge of how such permanent historic ruptures occur, right down to the names and motivations of individuals and classes who created or attempted to resist them.

The discussions in the following chapters cover a historical trajectory from the Viking invasions of the late Anglo-Saxon period to the parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The argument of this book however is that capitalism in England both originated and became prominent in the two centuries between 1400 and 1600; in other words, its origins were largely late medieval. The decades around 1400 witnessed the widespread transference across the whole of England of the feudal lords' home farms or 'demesnes' to the wealthier peasantry. This was an unprecedented development. Following the 'English Rising', or 'Peasants' Revolt', of 1381, the decline of serfdom and therefore the decline of a major source of their livelihoods and of important controls over the peasantry, lords sought new ways to maintain the level of income to which they were accustomed and which enabled them to reproduce themselves as lords. These farms represented

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<sup>3</sup> Rigby 1995, Whittle 2000, Hatcher and Bailey 2001, French and Hoyle 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion in Wood 2002, pp. 1–8, and more recently and succinctly in her 'Foreword' in Post 2011.

approximately twenty to thirty percent of the best land in the country. They were leased and the new leaseholders were compelled to produce competitively for the market upon taking up the leases; previously their production strategies had been fundamentally geared to subsistence. Linked to this earlier development, the progressive uprooting of the English peasantry from the middle third of the fifteenth century was driven fundamentally by the mutual interests of lords and their farmers, and in many places a social transformation had taken place by the 1530s. As a result, England's economic and demographic patterns were by this time diverging from those on the continent. In the decades around 1600 the generation of large capitalised farms out of fragmented peasant-organised, subsistence-based production had proceeded to such an extent, albeit unevenly across the country, that they were by then the typical feature of English agrarian society. The political and economic interests of large farmers who were powerful locally, a commercial aristocracy and a centralised state government had by 1600 become firmly committed to the future of the new system.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I is comprised of a series of discussions that amount to a defence of the work of Robert Brenner. It is my contention that Robert Brenner has produced the most convincing thesis yet on the fundamental characteristics of feudal and capitalist societies, and on how capitalism developed from feudalism. In the earlier 'Brenner Debate' on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Guy Bois described Brenner's approach as 'political Marxism' because in his explanation of historical development Brenner prioritises specific class structures rather than specific economic systems.<sup>5</sup> The label has stuck ever since and, although inadequate, it does usefully distinguish his approach from other forms of Marxism. Brenner defines specific societies such as feudalism and capitalism by their structure of class relations and the specific way in which the surplus product or surplus labour is extracted from the producer by the non-producer – that is, from peasants by feudal lords in feudalism, and from wage workers by capitalist entrepreneurs in capitalism. In sharp contrast to orthodox Marxist approaches, Brenner does not confine his application of class, or what he terms 'social-property relations', to the vertical class relationship or surplus-extraction relationship between lords and peasants or between wage workers and capitalists. For Brenner the rivalry and competition amongst lords and between states in feudalism, and

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5 Bois 1985, pp. 115–16. Bois's criticisms were in fact far harsher than this summary suggests. He accused Brenner of abstracting class struggle from the feudal economic system in an ideological and voluntarist fashion. Brenner's orthodox Marxist and non-Marxist critics have deployed this criticism ever since and I address it in Chapter Two below.

amongst capitalist entrepreneurs and between states in capitalism, is at least as important a factor in determining historical change. Brenner's approach provides for an immensely rich understanding of these societies, their peculiar patterns of development and their susceptibility to crises. Routinely hived-off disciplines such as social, economic and political history, are necessarily and genuinely integrated. For example, with regard to feudalism, the development of political and judicial institutions, the fragmentation or consolidation of sovereign authority, warfare and the accumulation of territory on a national or international basis, all had an impact on relationships between lords and peasants and on the nature of production at the level of the manor, and the latter had a simultaneous impact on the former. A broad core of human life is apparent here as the analysis takes account of the choices that people have to make in order to reproduce themselves within their own families, communities and social classes, with all of the economic and political decision-making this entails within particular historical contexts. The misreading of Brenner's thesis by historians and social scientists of all political colours – his application of class as social-property relations in particular – has meant the potential of his approach for a richer and more integrated view of medieval and early modern society has been foreclosed, and this has led to decades of wasted time in the understanding of transitions to capitalism.

Hence Part I of this book is a detailed engagement with Brenner's work on the transition in England, in which I respond to his critics. It begins with an outline and statement of what Brenner's thesis actually is. In my experience of working in academies, English historians and students find the debate on the transition and Brenner's style rather daunting. Because of the complexity of the task that Brenner set himself, namely the comparative economic trajectories of countries in Europe in the medieval and early modern periods, he writes in a deliberately systematic way in order to be as theoretically rigorous as possible and to avoid contradiction and misinterpretation. This strategy has not always been fruitful, so in Chapter One I spell out aspects of the thesis that have caused problems for historians in the past.

My defence of Brenner in subsequent chapters is both theoretical and historical in nature, and incorporates the findings of recent empirical studies. Chapter Two discusses critiques of Brenner's use of class or social-property relations as a prime mover or first cause of economic and social change. While the commercialisation thesis in its various forms, or the 'rise-of-the market' approach adopted from Adam Smith, generally holds sway among economic historians, there has been a distinct turn among English non-Marxist economic and social historians to pluralist approaches which do not privilege any factor (class, population or commercialisation). Others have their own unique

theories, as we shall see. In Chapter Three I examine the fundamental differences between feudal and capitalist societies. I address doubts about whether these societies are as fundamentally distinct from each other as Brenner insists. Brenner defines feudalism by the *political* or extra-economic extraction of the surpluses produced by landholding peasants, and he defines capitalism by the *economic* extraction of the surpluses produced by wage workers. In capitalism direct political controls through imposed forms of serfdom (unpaid services and numerous other fines, monopolies and restrictions) are not necessary to secure the means to exploit workers because workers are forced to sell their labour power on the market as a means to secure employment. Historians point out however that, given that half of the English peasantry by the end of the thirteenth century were freeholders and not serfs, Brenner's thesis of political or extra-economic extraction in feudalism would appear, on the face of it, to be inadequate. Nevertheless I aim to demonstrate that as long as the peasantry – free and unfree – remained subjected to the manorial regime there was always the potential for lords to impose new demands on peasants that were characteristic of serfdom. Free and unfree peasants were also neighbours and interrelated by marriage, and so disabilities for the latter substantially affected the former. In Chapter Four I discuss endogenous and exogenous causes of 'the crisis of feudalism' in Europe between the late thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth century, and the role of this crisis in subsequent developments, whether these developments turned out to be in a capitalist direction or otherwise. Chapter Five examines the nature of the security of property in England during the transition. We are often informed by economists and economic historians that capitalism requires a stable, secure environment to encourage entrepreneurs to take risks and invest in long-term projects. So was the origin of capitalism facilitated and characterised by a new era of secure property in the fifteenth century? Or did it feed on new tenurial insecurities following the decline of serfdom? Chapter Six aims to identify which social agents were responsible for generating capitalism's origins. Was capitalism generated from below by the initiatives and rebellions of peasants? Or, alternatively, was it a top-down imposition by lords or seigneurial authority? Were peasant struggles against their lords therefore motivated by a desire for capitalism, or were peasant communities generally anti-capitalist in outlook and behaviour? Chapter Seven is a detailed periodisation of the transition in medieval and early modern England, with a particular focus on the chronology of the expropriation of the English peasantry from the land. Identification of the key period of expropriation can help us explain the causes of the historic rupture in feudalism and the *qualitative* transformation from feudalism to capitalism. I aim to demonstrate that it is the 'long fifteenth century' – a period

of relative commercial and demographic downturn – which is the most significant for these epochal changes. Finally, in Chapter Eight, I address recent orthodox Marxist critiques of Brenner in order to illuminate major differences in Marxist approaches to the origin of capitalism. This is particularly important, and I have given it extensive treatment, because Brenner's distinctive 'political Marxist' approach is usually misinterpreted by non-Marxist historians because they read it through the prism of orthodox Marxism. These recent orthodox Marxist critiques are particularly prone to severe misreadings of Brenner's thesis. Their foundation is a political project geared towards a socialist revolutionary 'event', and this colours their approach to history and theory. As a result they repeat the tendency to teleology, technological determinism and a simplified approach to class that hampered the earlier twentieth-century tradition. It is my hope that once these two very distinctive approaches are more readily recognised, historians and social scientists both within and outside of the Marxist tradition will read Brenner on his own terms.

Part Two is a detailed case study based upon original research on the origin of capitalism in a region of Kent in south-east England c. 1400–1600.<sup>6</sup> The survival of evidence for this rural, small-town society and its region between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries is remarkable. Indeed, evidence of this quality survives for much of medieval Kent, and yet this county has been largely ignored by medieval economic historians, and has found little place among the empirical findings usually marshalled in contributions to the debate on the transition in England. When Kent is mentioned in the context of the debate, such as in a discussion on the chronology of enclosure of peasant land into large farms, it is usually assumed that no transition was really necessary there: the land was already enclosed during the medieval period, albeit into small peasant subsistence holdings, and it had strong commercial links with London and the continent. One need only introduce the Black Death and a free land market and capitalism was sure to follow. It will hopefully become clear from this study that this assumption has been entirely misplaced.

The chapters in Part II are mostly assembled in chronological order. The evidence is interrogated largely in the light of questions thrown up in Part I. I aim to demonstrate in Chapter Nine that Lydd, a parish containing a small market town and several manors, was densely populated, and it was a community (or set of interlinked communities) with long-established political institutions in the first half of the fifteenth century. There was no indication of the enforced

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<sup>6</sup> This section began as my doctoral thesis on the origin of capitalism: Dimmock 1998. Some of its findings have already been aired briefly in short essays and reviews: Dimmock 2001; Dimmock 2007a; Dimmock 2007b.

engrossment and progressive uprooting of the peasants, artisans, fishermen and petty traders from their holdings that was to come in the second half of the century. Chapter Ten examines the motives and methods of those responsible for engrossment and enclosure in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Chapter Eleven reconstructs the form of society that had emerged by c. 1530 as the direct result of these momentous developments, and it assesses the extent to which agrarian capitalism had already emerged by then. Chapter Twelve traces the continuity of the expropriation of peasant land and commons in the second half of the sixteenth century. It addresses the thesis that there was a hiatus in the enclosure movement between 1530 and 1580, and assesses the extent to which state protection of peasant property was successful in this period. Chapter Thirteen looks at attempts to legitimise the authority that emerged from the social transformation in Lydd by 1530. I argue that an economic crisis in the 1520s and increasing threats posed to coastal communities in Kent by Henry VIII's wars led to attempts by the new capitalist farming interests, in conjunction with the centralising Tudor state, to seek to close the widening cracks in social relations with appeals to national unity and common purpose in the form of an unprecedented four-day festival and drama of St. George held at Lydd in 1533. All quotations from original sources have been translated from the medieval Latin and from fifteenth and sixteenth-century English into modern English.

This book is dedicated to Robert Brenner and to Christopher Dyer. Their perspectives on the transition to capitalism in England are not always in agreement, but while studying this topic I have found that a dialogue between the rigorous theoretical analysis of the former and the detailed problem-orientated empirical studies of the latter has been a fruitful approach. I wish to acknowledge and thank Ralph Griffiths and Louise Miskell of the College of Arts and Humanities at Swansea University for allowing me to use the University's research facilities as an honorary research fellow. I also wish to thank Marie Bevan for helping me with library materials, Charles Post for his useful comments on an earlier draft of this book, and David Broder, Danny Hayward and Rosanna Woensdregt for their friendly help in seeing the final draft through to production.



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PART ONE

*A Defence of Robert Brenner*

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## Robert Brenner's Thesis on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism

The purpose of Robert Brenner's work on the transition from feudalism to capitalism has been to answer two important questions posed by earlier seminal theories on demographic cycles and on economic development in medieval and early modern Europe. They are, first: given the impressive growth of towns and trade between roughly 1050 and 1750, why was most of the European economy characterised not by capitalist development but by demographically-driven cycles that were marked by falling labour productivity in agriculture? Second: why was it that in the late medieval and early modern period a few countries and regions, namely England and the northern Netherlands, achieved a breakthrough to self-sustaining growth in the face of these same demographic patterns and the same economic (and cultural) context? In other words, why during this period did economic development in these rather small polities take the form of a transition from feudalism to capitalism while in the rest of Europe it did not? Why, indeed, was the transition to capitalism the *exception*? The brief answer for Brenner lies in the different structures of novel feudal class (or social-property) relationships that were established in different regions of medieval Europe, particularly in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the consequent changing balances of class forces – of class power – in the following centuries. A longer answer will be given shortly, but first it is necessary to outline those theories to which Brenner objects in order to illuminate the distinctiveness of his own thesis.

### i Ahistorical Perspectives

Brenner's critics have charged him with displaying either a wilful ignorance of demographic causation, or with being dismissive of the role of population in determining historical change. Yet it will become clear that Brenner recognises the importance of the demographic model derived from Malthus and Ricardo and applied in more recent times to medieval and early modern Europe by historians such as Michael Postan and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. These historians identified a relationship between demographic cycles – that is, long-term patterns of rising and falling population, with key periods of growth and

decline in economic development, and with changing patterns of income distribution across Europe between 1100 and 1750. Rising population between 1100 and 1300 led to rising rents, falling wages, the severe fragmentation of peasant holdings and declining labour productivity due to overpopulation on a finite resource: the land. The Malthusian 'check' to this crisis in the fourteenth century, which took the form of famine and plague, caused a massive decline in population and set in train the reverse experience of declining rents, increased wages and increases in the size of land holdings. Then from the mid-to-late fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century, rising population led to the same trend experienced between 1100 and 1300 and with similar consequences.

This Malthusian theory, as applied to medieval and early modern Europe, identifies important materialist foundations to economic and social change, and key historical trends, which Brenner incorporates into his thesis and analysis. But for him it is ultimately ahistorical because it seeks to apply a transhistorical model of demographic fluctuation to the *whole* of Europe between 1000 and 1750. Certain societies, for reasons relating to their changing social-property structures, were generating their own divergent demographic patterns from the fifteenth century and these patterns are not accounted for by the Malthusian model. Different economic outcomes were experienced in different regions while subject to the same demographic trends. Brenner pointed out that the model cannot therefore in itself *explain* the historical trends it has identified, and this is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that it cannot account for why these trends held for most of Europe but not for England and the northern Netherlands. Additionally the Malthusian 'check', according to the theory, should have brought the population back into a more favourable relationship with the available resources following the famine and plagues of the early and middle decades of the fourteenth century, and should have immediately led to a new 'up-phase' of demographic and related economic expansion. But this new 'up-phase' had to wait a century until about 1450 in continental Europe – much longer in England. Brenner argues that the reason for this was 'because the operation of the feudal economy encompassed a balancing not merely of peasants' requirements for subsistence with the potential output of medieval agriculture, but of lords' requirements for "political accumulation" with peasants' potential surplus'. So the drastic decline in the numbers of peasants meant a *potentially* similar decline in income for the lords from rents and dues. However, the *actual* extent of the decline in lordly incomes was dependent upon whether lords had the capacity to extract more from the surviving peasants or the power to take property from other lords in order to compensate. Both scenarios were likely to lead to the disruption of production and further demographic decline rather than a return to a population and resources

equilibrium.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the outcome of the 'Malthusian crisis' in the fourteenth century was determined by the established structure of class relations rather than a homeostatic mechanism balancing populations with resources. Moreover, the population ceiling itself in medieval Europe, rather than simply being established by the available resources and technology, was determined by the surplus extraction relationship between peasants and lords. The greater the capacity lords had to own property and to extract the peasants' surplus product, the more peasants' consumption and ability to develop the productive forces was reduced. Hence the appearance of overpopulation occurred at different densities in different regions because the number of peasants able to survive on a particular allocation of resources varied with income and the related ability to develop or apply existing technology.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1970s, the demographic model has fallen out of favour among historians, and the most prominent current theories of economic development are derived largely from particular interpretations of the work of the eighteenth-century economist Adam Smith. Put crudely, they view economic development, where it was not held back by political barriers, as largely *driven* by the rise of the market and trade. Commercialisation leads to the division of labour and more efficient methods of production and productive organisation. The key to this broader development is the assumed natural propensity of people in all historical societies to seek to maximise the gains from trade: they do so by specialising their production in response to changing commodity prices, and in competition with others they accumulate surpluses and systematically invest in innovations in order to increase productivity. For Brenner this theory accounts for modern capitalist economic growth given certain prior conditions, but it cannot account for economic growth either before or during the feudal period in medieval Western Europe. Most importantly for our purposes it cannot account for the origin of the transition from feudalism to capitalism or for the origin of the transition to the conditions in which the causes of modern growth are seen to occur. So for Brenner the Smithian model is also transhistorical, and therefore ahistorical because it assumes the presence of specific economic laws and capitalist mentalities operating in a generalised way in all periods of history. Brenner is also critical of the more recent manifestations of this theory, the authors of which neglect the important findings of the demographic model. Indeed the demographic model grew out of a critique of the original unilineal 'rise of the market' model which assumed that commercial development automatically led to the decline of serfdom through

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1 Brenner 1985b, pp. 223–4; Brenner 2001, p. 288.

2 Brenner 1985b, p. 223.

the change from labour rents to money rents, and a concurrent breakthrough to modern growth through the progressive commercialisation of agriculture. And yet Michael Postan had long demonstrated that commercialisation in late medieval and early modern Europe often led to *tighter* feudal controls on peasants and the *strengthening* of feudalism, rather than modern economic growth. Clearly the processes of commercialisation and urbanisation could lead to an intensification of serfdom rather than its decline as lords sought to control labour in market areas in order to ensure the supply of food to feed cities (such as Paris) or where increasingly commercialised large-scale production of grain was developed for export in response to demand from the growing world market (such as in eastern Europe).<sup>3</sup>

Brenner has been equally critical of the orthodox Marxist theory of economic and social change which he argues is derived from Marx's work of the pre-*Grundrisse* period. Brenner argues that Marx in this period was strongly influenced by Adam Smith, and that his famous statements in the *Communist Manifesto*, *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy* provide ample licence for an all-encompassing transhistorical, ahistorical theory of economic change.<sup>4</sup> Applications of this theory claim to account for the transition from feudalism to capitalism as well as for a potential transition from capitalism to socialism. The key assumption is that that there is a tendency in *all* historical societies for the productive forces (that is, techniques of production, trade and markets and the organisation of the labour process) to improve the productivity of labour and therefore generate economic growth. As a result of the development of the productive forces, class structures are formed and are eventually transformed from below so that a new revolutionary class with a greater capacity to benefit from these changes appears, and a new society or mode of production based upon a new class structure emerges out of the conflict against the remnants of the old. Again as with the above critique of recent non-Marxist applications of Adam Smith, Brenner argues that the inherent tendency for the productive forces to develop holds well for economic development within capitalism – and no doubt he would agree that it provides a framework for understanding the potential for a transition out of capitalism. This is because it is *only* in capitalist societies with capitalist social-property

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3 Brenner 1985a, p. 25.

4 As we shall see in Chapter Eight, Marx maintained his transhistorical theory into his mature work, and this led to contradictions with his developing theory on the specificity of class relations in particular societies and the specific laws of motion determined by them.

relations that there is an inherent drive to improve the productivity of labour by developing the productive forces:

only under such a structure of social-property relations, are the economic actors not only left free to act as they deem best, but also – and most fundamental – rendered dependent upon the market for their inputs, thus subject to competition in production to survive, and therefore compelled on pain of extinction to seek systematically to maximise exchange value through specialisation, accumulation, and innovation, and moving from line to line to meet changing demand, meanwhile subordinating all other goals to exchange value maximisation.<sup>5</sup>

As Brenner has aimed to demonstrate, this subjection to competition in production in order to survive as a result of market dependency does not exist in feudal and in non-capitalist societies generally past and present. In feudal Europe the development of the productive forces was fundamentally based upon peasant possession of land and only partial market dependence due to necessarily limited market integration. In feudalism, both peasants and lords are shielded from the implications of full market dependency and are therefore also shielded from the need to systematically improve labour productivity in order to cut costs. Having said this, a constant increase in technology beyond the level available in feudal societies, even before 1300, was not necessary for the transition to capitalism. For Brenner the fundamental origin of the transition in England took root in the demographic and economic ‘down-phase’ of the fifteenth century, a time when for the most part the productive forces were relatively stagnant. Social and economic remodelling conducive to capitalist development took place in *this* context, not in one of technological advance.<sup>6</sup> Factors other than new technology in the development of the productive forces were behind the transition to capitalism in its early stages. What historians of agrarian revolution sometimes regard as new agricultural techniques introduced in the early modern period had in fact long been available in the medieval period. However, Brenner argues that for reasons specific to feudal social-property relations they were neither widely nor systematically applied to the key purpose of improving labour productivity.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Brenner 2001, p. 278.

<sup>6</sup> Brenner 1986, pp. 46–7, n. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Brenner 1985a, pp. 32–3; Brenner 1985b, p. 233.

## ii Historical Materialism and Social-Property Relations

Brenner's account is influenced by Marx's mature works, *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Brenner argues that in these works Marx rethought his earlier Smithian assumption of the primacy of the productive forces in economic development. Marx now placed much greater emphasis on the specificity of social relations and economic patterns in particular societies, namely feudalism and capitalism, and on what he called their internal logic and 'solidity'. Marx now argued that in pre-capitalist societies like feudalism the immediate goal of peasants and artisans was subsistence rather than to increase wealth, and to reproduce themselves in their communities. For peasants, this was made especially difficult because lords aimed to reproduce themselves, and their own communities, largely at the peasants' expense. Attempts to specialise on a permanent basis in order to profit from market opportunities would lead to market dependence, and peasants viewed this strategy as too risky. Marx also now rejected the Smithian idea of primitive accumulation which assumed that the investment of accumulated wealth from trade was the fundamental precondition for generating capitalist economic development and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Rather than accumulated wealth from trade dissolving feudal relations, for Marx this 'so-called primitive accumulation' could only be the process by which the peasantry were divorced from the land.<sup>8</sup>

For Brenner it is the acknowledgement of the specificity of these patterns in different societies that is at the heart of historical materialism, and one cannot over-stress this point in a defence of his work. In a recent paper Brenner argued that historical materialist theory and history offer a means to resolve and transcend problems in the ahistorical materialist perspectives, whether Marxist or non-Marxist. There is no such thing as a transhistorical economic rationality. Every historically evolved mode of production and society, whether feudal or capitalist, has its own micro-economics. In Brenner's words, 'the specific form of socio-economic behaviour that individuals and families will find to make sense and will choose will depend on the society-wide network of social relationships – society-wide constraints and opportunities – in which they find themselves'.<sup>9</sup> Crucially for Brenner, what determines these individual and family choices and behaviour is what Marx called a society's relations of production, and what Brenner calls social-property relations or a society's macro-structure. It is central to the aim of this chapter to understand what Brenner means by social-property relations, and what he has also

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8 Brenner 1989, pp. 285–8.

9 Brenner 2007, pp. 57–8.



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