

# **PAPERS ON CAPITALISM DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING**

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Maurice Dobb

COLLECTED WORKS OF  
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**MAURICE DOBB**

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# Contents

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1	Some problems in the history of capitalism	page 1
1	1 Transition from feudalism to capitalism	2
2	2 Prelude to the Industrial Revolution	17
3	3 Some features of capitalism since the First World War	34
2	2 Some aspects of economic development	49
1	1 Economic development and its momentum under capitalism	50
2	2 Some problems of industrialisation in agricultural countries	71
3	3 Some reflections on the theory of investment planning and economic growth	89
4	4 The question of 'Investment-priority for heavy industry'	107
5	5 Planning and Soviet economy: eight articles	125
1	1 The discussions of the 'twenties on planning and economic growth	126
2	2 The revival of theoretical discussion among Soviet economists	140
3	3 A comment on the discussion about price-policy	164
4	4 Soviet price-policy: a review	179
5	5 Some further comments on the discussion about socialist price-policy	191
6	6 Soviet transport: a review	208
7	7 Notes on recent economic discussion	215
8	8 Kantorovitch on optimal planning and prices	229
6	6 Introduction to an Italian edition of <i>Capital</i>	249
	Index	267

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The present collection, with the exception of the two Delhi lectures, consists of pieces written within the past ten years. In a collection of this kind from a variety of sources some repetition can scarcely be avoided. Rightly or wrongly it has been thought better on the whole to preserve the sequence of the original than to start omitting passages and abbreviating. Acknowledgment is made at the head of each chapter for permission to reprint. It should, perhaps, be explained that the publishers of *Soviet Studies* are Messrs Basil Blackwell of Oxford, and that publications of Polish Scientific Publishers (P.W.N.) are sold in this country by arrangement with the Pergamon Press.

M.D.

*December 1966*

# One

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## Some problems in the history of capitalism: three lectures

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# One

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## Transition from feudalism to capitalism

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The question of what was the nature and what were the moving forces of the decline of Feudalism as an economic system, and what connection had this decline with the birth of modern Capitalism, is not entirely without interest, I think, for many underdeveloped countries today. However, it is in the context, rather, of historical interpretation that I want to deal with this question here. For historical interpretation, at any rate for one that attaches primary importance to distinctive modes of production in defining stages in the historical process, a true understanding of this crucial transition is, I believe, essential. Moreover, without it much in our definition of Capitalism as a mode of production, as well as of its origins, must inevitably remain blurred and unclear.

I should perhaps explain that when I talk about Feudalism, I am not referring to this as a juridical form or set of legal relations; I am speaking of it primarily as a socio-economic system. But in looking at it in this light, I do not wish to identify it with Schmoller's 'natural economy', even if it be true that trade and money-dealings (certainly long-distance trade) occupied a smaller place in this type of economy than in others, both preceding and succeeding it. I refer to it as a system under which economic status and authority were associated with land-tenure, and the direct producer (who was himself the holder of some land) was under obligation based on law or customary right to devote a certain quota of his labour or his produce to the benefit of his feudal superior. Regarded in this way, as a system of socio-economic relations, it is almost identical with what we generally mean by serfdom; provided that we do not confine the latter to the performance of direct labour services (on the lord's estate or in his household) but include in it the provision of tribute or feudal rent in produce or even in a money-form. Using Marc Bloch's phrase, it implies the existence

of 'a subject peasantry': he goes on to say, 'the feudal system meant the rigorous economic subjection of a host of humble folk to a few powerful men . . . the land itself (being) valued because it enabled a lord to provide himself with "men"'. To which Bloch added: 'whatever the source of the noble's income, he always lived on the labour of other men'. Summing it up we can say that the differentiating feature of this type of exploitation is accordingly that the sanction behind it, whereby it is enforced and perpetuated, is so-called 'extra-economic compulsion' in some form.

As I see it, there are two central problems connected with the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism—from a system of production resting on serf-labour or 'a subject peasantry' to one based on hired wage-labour. These two problems correspond to two phases in the transition, an earlier phase and a later one. Firstly there is the question as to what historical motive-force it was that brought about the disintegration of the feudal system of exploitation, generating a virtual crisis of feudal society at the end of the mediaeval period in Western Europe; certainly in England, in the fifteenth century, and more widely also in France and Germany (*vide* Marc Bloch's 'crise des fortunes seigneuriales'). I would add that this question has to be answered, not only with reference to the unevenness of the process and to differences in the chronological sequence as between different regions, but also in close relation to the so-called 'second serfdom'—the reinforcement and extension of serfdom, including the imposition of a servile relationship on previously free cultivators, which occurred in parts of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Secondly, there is the question as to the process whereby from this disintegration of Feudalism bourgeois or capitalist methods of production, based on wage-labour, arose. Did these new social relations of production spring up directly from the soil of feudal society, their appearance hastening the decline of the old system and directly supplanting it? Or was the process of burgeoning of Capitalism more complex and more long-drawn-out in time than this?

In considering these questions I must inevitably draw upon English experience since this is what I best know. This limitation has serious disadvantages, as I am well aware. But it has at least one advantage: in that England has always been treated, rightly or

wrongly, as the classic case of the rise of Capitalism; and as a result of the Norman Conquest the Feudal System had previously been imposed on England in its most complete form. In connection with the second of the two questions that I have just emphasised, it is to be noted that in this 'classic' English case two whole centuries elapsed between the decline of labour services on the lord's estate as the main form of servile obligation (labour-rent as Marx called it) and the Bourgeois Revolution, and a further century and a half elapsed between the Bourgeois Revolution of the seventeenth century and the coming of the so-called 'Industrial Revolution' with power-machinery and factory production. Any answer we give to our second question must take full account of this elongation of the process of transition: must explain why there was so long an interval between the decline of Feudalism and the full maturing of Capitalism. If it were true that 'more or less complete forms of the capitalist order ripened in the womb of feudal society'<sup>1</sup> this long interval would be hard to explain.

The explanation of the decline of Feudalism with which we are commonly confronted (sometimes among 'Marxist' writers) is that a system rooted in so-called 'natural economy' was undermined, weakened and finally destroyed by the growth of trade and money dealings, which caused labour services to be commuted to a money-rent and encouraged commodity production for a wide market. We find, indeed, this antithesis between 'natural economy' and 'money economy', and the dissolvent influence of the latter upon the former, in the work of Gustav Schmoller and his school. Pirenne was to elaborate this into the view that it was the revival of long-distance trade from the twelfth century onwards, as a result of the revival of Mediterranean trade, that broke down the self-sufficient manorial economy of feudal Europe. The spread of commerce encouraged the demand among the aristocracy for imported luxuries; merchant caravans, forming permanent settlements at key points, stimulated a revival of town life and market exchange; feudal estates themselves were encouraged by the proximity of markets and of a thriving exchange to produce a surplus for sale outside the locality (whether a surplus of rural produce or of handicrafts), and feudal lords themselves became

<sup>1</sup> As was stated in the Soviet textbook on *Political Economy*, 2nd ed., p. 59.