

**THE IDEA OF FEUDALISM:  
FROM THE PHILOSOPHES TO KARL MARX**

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The title of this conference - 'Feudalism: a comparative study in social and political structures of pre-industrial societies', emphasises the inter-disciplinary approach of our Association. We wish to break down artificial barriers and constraints put upon us by the very organisation of our universities. There are here historians, political scientists, anthropologists, linguists, literary critics and philosophers.

It is not the aim of this conference to arrive at a precise definition of the term feudalism. In my time I have organised many inter-disciplinary seminars and conferences and five collections of research papers have been published by me around such concepts as 'nationalism' or 'elite' which were not defined too tightly. The result was that we had many interesting papers but not necessarily tightly organised books. None of these concepts should be too closely defined, else we might miss out on some good papers which would not come close to our definition. On the other hand if we define the term too loosely we get lost. The problem of broad categories is that they become catch-all phrases often used by the uninformed to hide their ignorance. Clearly, we need some feasible but workable definition of feudalism. Years ago Owen Lattimore warned us about this: "Too loose a classification yokes the noun 'feudalism' with so many adjectives, 'nomadic', 'bureaucratic', 'centralised', 'patriarchal', etc. - that feudalism itself is in danger of being drained of meaning. Too tight a classification on the other hand tends to restrict 'feudalism' eventually to some one region or period."<sup>1</sup>

Let us first examine some of these frustrating efforts to arrive at a workable definition.

A conference that was held nearly 35 years ago at Princeton recognised that "feudalism is an abstraction derived from some

of the facts of early European history" and that the concept described a general category of institution rather than one specific form of government. The aim of that conference was not to produce a new definition of feudalism but to see if the study of feudalism would throw light on the question of uniformities in history. Nonetheless Rushton Coulburn, the editor of the volume which came out of this conference, provided a list of characteristics which he thought would be a "provisional description" to help to study "the question of uniformities in history". According to Coulburn "feudalism is primarily a method of government, not an economic or a social system, though it obviously modifies and is modified by the social and economic environment. It is a method of government in which the essential relation is not that between ruler and subject, nor state and citizen, but between lord and vassal."<sup>2</sup>

Nobody can fail to admire the gallant effort of the editor (particularly in the last part of the book where he tries to weave together diverse threads into one single pattern) but the results of the special studies on China, India, etc. were negative. Consider Derk Bodde's paper on China. Having given us an interesting account of various types of Chinese political structures, Bodde concludes that the period of disunity in Chinese history was not a 'feudal' period as defined by Coulburn.<sup>3</sup> Daniel Thorner reaches much the same conclusion about Rajasthan in India.<sup>4</sup> We must however note that Japan is an exception to this rule. Coulburn's definition is applicable to the Japanese situation. John Hall however, had suggested that a study of feudalism could be carried out entirely in Japanese idioms and within the confines of Japanese historical experience.<sup>5</sup> What is clear is that every definition of feudalism has limited application.

In 1968 Cheyette produced another collection of essays on medieval Europe, *Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe*. The editor was aware of the political problems that were attached to the use of the concept 'feudalism'. I think that Cheyette also recognised the ideological overtones of the concept:

"Feudalism is really a 'concept-theory'; when a historian defines it, he may bring into play directly or by implication a theory about what were the essential elements in the structure of medieval society, a theory about the causes of medieval social structure, a theory about the stages of European or universal social development, a general theory of historical causation, or several or all of these."<sup>6</sup>

It is rather unfortunate that Cheyette, having touched on this interesting theme moved away from it and concentrated on empirical studies. He agreed with Coulburn and Strayer's definition that 'feudalism' is primarily a method of government and he suggested that 'models' or ideal-typical constructs should be used only as "bench marks, as imaginative patterns to help empirical research uncover new relationships, new connections."<sup>7</sup>

There are historians, who, exasperated by the conflicts related to the use of the term, suggest that "disagreement might be reduced if words like 'feudalism', now less a term of convenience than a cover of ignorance, were expunged from the historical vocabulary."<sup>8</sup>

A more systematic attack on the 'construct' has been made by Elizabeth A.R. Brown. She finds that from the eighteenth century the use of the concept of feudalism has hindered our understanding of medieval Europe and most historians recognise this.

"The unhappiness of historians with the terms 'feudal' and 'feudalism' is, thus, understandable. Far less comprehensible is their willingness to tolerate for so long a situation often deplored. Countless different, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of the terms exist, and any and all of these definitions are hedged around with qualifications. Using the term seems to lead almost inevitably to treating the ism or its system as a sentient, autonomous agent, to assuming that medieval people - or at least the most perspicacious of them - knew what feudalism was and struggled to achieve it, and to evaluating and ranking societies, areas, and institutions in terms of their approximation to or deviation from an oversimplified Ideal Type."<sup>9</sup>

She concluded with an emotional appeal: "The tyrant feudalism must be declared once and for all deposed and its influence over students of the middle ages finally ended."

I do not intend to refute Elizabeth A.R. Brown's thesis in detail here and now. But it is important to recognise that I do not have much sympathy for Professor Brown's views. The 'concept of feudalism', far from being a constraint on research, has stimulated discussion on the nature and functions of pre-capitalist and pre-industrial societies throughout the world. I think what Bloch wrote forty-three years ago is still valid:

"In the usage of the present day, 'feudalism' and 'feudal society' cover a whole complex of ideas in which the fief properly so called no longer occupies the foreground. Provided that he treats these expressions merely as labels sanctioned by modern usage for something which he has still to define, the historian may use them without compunction. In this he is like the physicist who, in disregard for Greek, persists in calling 'atom' something which he spends his time in dividing."<sup>10</sup>

The empiricists are preoccupied with particulars. They do not recognise the universal significance of research. They profess their research work to be a purely scientific pursuit. I feel that such researches have very limited value and they are politically motivated. I do not have to quote from Karl Marx or Mao Tse Tung to prove this point. In 1938 when the 'National' government

in Britain had betrayed three nations, Abyssinia, Spain and Czechoslovakia, R.G. Collingwood wrote:

"I know now that the minute philosophers of my youth, for all their profession of a purely scientific detachment from practical affairs, were the propagandists of coming fascism."<sup>11</sup>

Hence, unlike Brown, I am willing to praise those who attempt in their researches on pre-industrial societies to use the concept of 'feudalism'.

This does not however mean that we should not examine the etymological origins of the term. We must try to find out who used the term first, where it was used, in what context and with what audience in mind. This I believe can clear the confusion about the use of the term. What follows now is a short history of the origin and development of the idea of feudalism. Much of the story is already familiar. The historians who have been interested in the development of the idea of feudalism have only looked at it from one angle. Historians of Europe have taken it for granted that the 18th century debate on feudalism was exclusively concerned with Europe of the middle ages. On the other hand the historians of Asia, Africa and Pre-Columbian America have tended to reduce the idea of feudalism to a fixed meaning, an ideal type. They try to apply the model outside Europe. Both look at the development of the idea of feudalism and feudal society as an exclusively European experience. I feel they are both wrong. I hope to establish that:

- (a) from the beginning there was a confusion: feudalism was both a form of government characterised by rule of the few and a socio-economic system;
- (b) Asia, particularly India and China, had always been an important part in the debate on the nature of feudalism;
- (c) the discussions on feudalism had always been a part of a larger political debate on the role of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, and
- (d) the words 'feudal' and 'feudalism' were used not only as sociological categories but also as derogatory terms describing something old and obsolete. In other words, these terms were never without some emotive force.

From the very beginning the term 'feudalism' (or more correctly, *féodalité* in French) was used in association with such terms as 'fief' and 'vassalage'. It was first widely used by the feudists or lawyers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Then it was taken over by the historians and political theorists, first to describe a form of government and then to depict a stage of human civilisation or a stage of social development.

It is in the age of Absolutism that European historians (particularly in France) started to inquire into the origins of 'feudalism' and political thinkers sought to define the character of the European state. It is important to remember that the terms

'despotism' and 'feudalism' appear in the political vocabulary about the same time. This was the direct result of the discontent amongst the nobility during the absolutist rule of Louis XIV.<sup>12</sup>

European political thinkers had a long tradition of seeking to define the character of their own world by contrasting it with that of the 'Orient'. (This is nearly as old as Aristotle.) It is however, in the late seventeenth century that European political thinkers and historians entered into a fierce debate on the origins of feudalism and the nature of despotism. Modern historical inquiries and orientalism developed simultaneously. History, from the sixteenth century was a comparative science. To understand the origins and nature of feudalism, the role of monarchy and the nature of private property in Europe, one had to compare and contrast them with those of the Orient.<sup>13</sup> Bodin, for instance suggested:

"The king of the Turks is called the grand seigneur, not because of the size of his realm, for that of the King of Spain is ten times larger, but because he is complete master of its persons and property."<sup>14</sup>

In contrast no European monarch was ever a complete master of his subjects and their property.

The debate on the origins and nature of feudalism and oriental despotism was part of a larger political controversy. In France, it was between the monarchists and the supporters of the nobility and later the Third Estate and the nobility; in England, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the controversy was between the supporters of parliamentary reform and their adversaries.

The word *féodalité* can be traced back to 1515,<sup>15</sup> but it was Boulainvilliers who first gave feudalism its historical meaning. He has had bad press for nearly three centuries, for his faith in astrology and for his praise for feudalism. Voltaire, however, recognised Boulainvilliers' importance. To Voltaire he was "most learned in history and most fitted to write that of France, had he not been too imbued with a theory" (*trop systématique*).<sup>16</sup> It was Boulainvilliers' theories which forced the historians of the Enlightenment to consider feudalism.

Boulainvilliers' aim was to prove that the true nobility was historically superior to the rest of the nation by its racial descent and traditional lifestyle. He also wanted to show that the crown's curtailment of the nobility's rights was a violation of an ancient Frankish constitution. In the preface to his *Etat de la France*, Boulainvilliers attacked the 'intendances', claiming that they were innovations, perilous to king and nation:

"Then I call to my aid the example of past centuries ... because it would be blindness to expel from the regime of a Monarchy, the methods by which it has been maintained throughout thirteen centuries, in order to substitute new ones which are no more to be recommended, to facilitate a despotic power more suitable to the spirit of Oriental

peoples such as the Persians and the Turks, than to our Constitution."<sup>17</sup>

The feudal law was the accepted principle of government; it was accepted by the kings and peoples, if not by formal deliberation, at least by public custom. The nobility could not renounce their rights in favour of the king. The Franks who invaded France were a free and equal people; their leader, Clovis was an elected commander of a free army. The conquered lands and peoples were divided amongst the conquering Franks who formed the nobility. Gauls were slaves of the Franks, not subjects of the king, "for the right of lordship and domination over men belonged entirely to the owners of the Lands they inhabited."<sup>18</sup> So Boulainvilliers attacked the Third Estate for their attempt to present themselves as subjects of the king, for it was contrary to the rights of owners and against the fundamental law of government. Feudalism, by which Boulainvilliers meant the parcelling out of sovereignty - fragmentation of government - was a guarantee against despotism and it protected liberty and property. Charlemagne, that great political sage, favoured feudalism, "the Masterpiece of the Human Spirit."<sup>19</sup> Feudalism and Christian ethics went together:

"our very Christian Princes abhor, as sincerely as we could wish, the maxims of Mohammedanism and the barbarous Law of the East, which has annihilated the property of goods."<sup>20</sup>

Boulainvilliers' ideas had a hostile reception in France. Abbé Dubos, in his *Histoire critique de l'établissement de la monarchie française dans les Gaules*, set forth the royalist thesis. He was perhaps the most articulate historian of his time. He had a clear goal, which was to vindicate the rights of the crown, and an impressive mastery of his sources. Montesquieu might have been unkind to him,<sup>21</sup> but Dubos was the most influential French historian of his time.

Dubos tried to prove that the Franks did not conquer the Gauls. They were faithful allies of Rome and had entered France with Rome's consent. They did not treat the Gauls unduly harshly. As a small minority, the Franks, Dubos argued, had to treat the Gallo-Romans with consideration. By this he implied that Frankish warriors had no domination over the Gauls, at least not in the way Boulainvilliers had proposed.<sup>22</sup>

He also set out to prove that the rights of the sovereign had preceded those of the nobles. The king was responsible for the execution of the landed settlement within the boundaries of the Roman Empire. The French kings were under no obligation to leave the *seigneurs* in undisturbed possession of the rights over their fiefs. In fact the great kings of the Capetian dynasty, Dubos thought, had every right to reclaim their authority from those who had usurped it.<sup>23</sup> It is no wonder that the royal Censor of the eighteenth century found Dubos' work "extremely useful and

even necessary".<sup>24</sup>

The ensuing debate that lasted till the end of the century reproduced either the 'Germanic theory' of Boulainvilliers or the 'Roman thesis' of Dubos or various combinations of both. In Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, the author of the article on 'Fief' used Boulainvilliers; according to M. le Chevalier de Jaucourt, the fiefs were held from the nation, not from the king. Fiefs led to the extinction of the ancient government and the formation of feudal government:

"What a difference between the Goths and the Tartars! The latter, overthrowing the Greek empire, established despotism and servitude in the conquered countries; the Goths, conquering the Roman empire, founded everywhere monarchy and liberty."<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, many supporters of the Third Estate used Dubos and the monarchists' arguments against the nobility. Men like Emmanuel Sièyes, who wrote a famous pamphlet, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?*, who helped to 'abolish' feudalism by decrees on 11 August 1789, and who called the nobility 'the plenipotentiaries of feudalism' were influenced by Dubos.<sup>26</sup> The monarchists and the supporters of the Third Estate both attacked the nobility and feudalism; feudal society was depicted in the most unflattering terms, 'feudal' was the equivalent of 'gothic', and implied 'darkness' and 'anarchy'. The arguments against feudalism were charged with emotion. Carcassonne had already summarised for us this important debate on feudalism and the constitution in eighteenth-century France.<sup>27</sup> And there were others who have followed him.<sup>28</sup> We need not repeat the story here.

It may be that Montesquieu incorporated his discussion on the origins of feudalism only after he had completed his *De l'Esprit des Lois*.<sup>29</sup> But his discussion on the origins of feudalism was an integral part of his arguments on the three types of states, republic, monarchy and despotism, and Montesquieu's views on feudalism and despotism attracted fierce controversy.

Montesquieu agreed with Boulainvilliers that feudalism resulted from the Germanic invasions of Europe. Germans had vassals but no landed fiefs. The fiefs were their horses, meals, etc. Montesquieu thought that Boulainvilliers was attacking the Third Estate, while Dubos the nobility; a balance was necessary. He claimed that not all Gauls were enslaved by the Frankish conquest, but servitude spread later due to feudal laws and wars. Montesquieu, however, thought that feudalism was a unique development, it occurred once and only in Europe. Being an aristocrat he sympathised with Boulainvilliers, but he did not idealise feudal society. To Montesquieu the most essential characteristic of feudalism was the dismembering of public power, parcelling out of sovereignty to small and still smaller local authorities, and hence fragmentation of government. This he thought was a recipe for anarchy. He praised the monarchy for

restoring order. However, the monarch must be kept within the law by intermediary bodies - nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, else he can become a despot.<sup>30</sup>

Montesquieu played an important role in the development of the other concept, mentioned above - despotism. His feelings towards despotism can be traced in his early works, but it was in his *Spirit of the Laws* that despotism became a well organised concept. For Montesquieu despotism was wholly bad. The three types of states that he recognised, republic, monarchy and despotism, each followed a particular principle which activated them. The principle of the republic was virtue, that of monarchy was honour, and that of despotism was fear. Under despotism the ruler managed the affairs of state not according to fixed and accepted laws but according to his caprice. The object of the state was the pleasure of the prince, who treats his subjects as his slaves and all land his personal property. The examples of despotism were invariably from Asia. This was, Montesquieu thought, due to the climatic condition in those parts of the world. In Asia men were indolent, speculative and had no desire to resist absolute rule. Asia was despotic, having never experienced feudalism. There was no fragmentation of government in Asia.<sup>31</sup>

Montesquieu was supported by others. In 1762 Boulanger published an essay as an 'introduction and key' to the *Spirit of the Laws*. Boulanger suggested that despotism in Asia was not only due to the climatic conditions in those countries but also due to religious faith:

"Despotism ... has established itself through man's desire to model the government of the universe as it is reigned over by the Supreme Being; magnificent but fatal project."<sup>32</sup>

This view of oriental despotism and feudalism in Europe did not go unchallenged. Voltaire, a man of reason, who had firm faith in the importance of private property and admired Asian civilisations, could not agree that Asia was ruled by tyrannical despots and had never experienced private property. Like Helvetius, Voltaire thought the only difference between governments was between the good and the bad. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* Voltaire satirised Montesquieu's views on the principles of states and despotism.<sup>33</sup> He made more serious criticisms in his *Fragments on India*.<sup>34</sup> He did not disagree with Montesquieu's history but interpreted it differently - as amoral violence. Nor did Voltaire think that 'feudalism' was an 'event':

"One cannot understand how the author of *The Spirit of the Laws* could say that feudalism is an event which happened once on this earth and which will perhaps never happen again. Feudalism is not an event, it is a very ancient form of government, which exists in three quarters of our hemisphere with different administrations. The Grand Moghul is like the German Emperor. The Soubadars are the Princes of the Empire."<sup>35</sup>



This kind of comparison between the European nobility and the Indian aristocracy was not entirely new for it had already been made by Hawkins, a seventeenth-century English traveller and by the Jesuits. But Voltaire claimed that India had experienced private property in land and the Indian courts of justice followed established procedures. He relied more on Scrafton than on Bernier and Roe. Montesquieu relied on Bernier and Roe, but the latter were dazzled by Mughal splendour and misunderstood the Indian system. These writers imagined that the Grand Mughal was the owner of all lands:

"because that Sultan gave away fiefs for life. It is just the same as saying that the Grand master of Malta is the proprietor of all the Commanderships to which he nominates followers in Europe; it is the same as saying that the Kings of France and Spain are the owners of all the lands they govern, and that all the ecclesiastical benefices are theirs."<sup>37</sup>

The Physiocrats, in direct contradiction to the traditional view, proclaimed that despotism as known in the East was an agreeable form of government. Quesnay regarded despotism as the only true form of government based on natural laws. The Physiocrats used the term 'despotism' to mean a total disengagement of government from economic laws and the absolute respect by the ruler for the objective laws naturally governing society. They shared with Voltaire his enthusiasm for China, which appeared to them as the only example of their ideal despotism. Mirabeau might have disliked their polygamy and indirect system of taxes, but China was considered as the striking demonstration of the truth of Physiocratic principles. Legal despotism of the Chinese type was as rationally necessary as were the theorems of Euclid.<sup>38</sup>

Across the channel the idea of feudalism developed during the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1888 F.W. Maitland suggested that it was Henry Spelman who was the father of feudalism:

"Now were an examiner to ask, who introduced the feudal system into England?, one very good answer, if properly explained, would be Henry Spelman, and if there followed the question, what was the feudal system? a good answer to that would be, an early essay in comparative jurisprudence ... and if my examiner went on with his questions and asked me, when did the feudal system attain its most perfect development? I should answer, about the middle of the last century."<sup>39</sup>

J.G.A. Pocock has shown that neither Spelman nor his Scottish predecessor Sir Thomas Craig used such terms as 'feudalism' or 'feudal system' but they talked about 'feudal law' - "an hierarchical system imposed from above as a matter of state policy." But Maitland was right, it was during the eighteenth century that the British authors began to accept the idea of 'feudal system' based on the legal works of Craig and Spelman. As Pocock said,

"they were reflecting on its essence and nature and endeavouring to fit it into a pattern of general ideas."<sup>40</sup>

William Guthrie in his *A General History of England* distinguished between 'feudal tenure', introduced after the Germanic invasions and 'feudal law' which implied a system of duties and obligations.<sup>41</sup> William Blackstone also saw feudalism as a Germanic system for the domination of conquered peoples. He however took a legalistic view that "crown ownership was the great fundamental maxim of all feudal tenure."<sup>42</sup> Adam Ferguson and David Hume generally agree with Guthrie and Blackstone.<sup>43</sup>

The Scottish writers and reformers of the mid-eighteenth century saw the problems of their country, as Hobsbawm has pointed out, "as one of transition from feudalism to capitalism".<sup>44</sup> Indeed, they probably formed the earliest and one of the rare examples of a middle class which saw its objectives and historic function in these precise terms:

"For it would seem that the very term 'feudal system' and later 'feudalism', as a description of an entire socio-economic as well as legal and political order of society, were invented by Scottish intellectuals in the course of these discussions."<sup>45</sup>

Adam Smith used the concept as early as 1763 in his *Lectures on Justice*. John Millar in 1790s worked out a theory of feudalism: an interconnection between the system of property, and the system of government and the struggle between commerce and feudalism.<sup>46</sup>

It would seem that despite their professed dislike of the "seventeenth-century antiquarian" the English and Scottish historians of the eighteenth century were profoundly influenced by the jurists of the earlier century. These eighteenth-century historians and lawyers felt bound to their past by the law under which they lived; hence their study of history and their study of law depended on one another. The feudal system was a legal as well as an historical concept. It was also closely linked with the other concept, despotism, particularly in the works of Adam Ferguson and William Robertson.<sup>47</sup>

There was another radical tradition which looked at English history as a history of continued struggle on the part of the English people to free Anglo-Saxon institutions from "the Norman yoke".<sup>48</sup> Some of the radicals associated "the Norman yoke" with feudalism and the arguments in favour of parliamentary reform soon turned into a diatribe against the "feudal system". Sir William Jones, the orientalist and a radical Whig suggested:

"there has been a continued war in the constitution of England between two jarring principles: the evil principle of the feudal system with his dark auxiliaries, ignorance and false philosophy; and the good principle of increasing commerce, with her liberal allies, true learning and sound reason."<sup>49</sup>

There was nothing new in Jones' detecting two struggling forces

in history. But what was new was the notion that the two jarring principles were connected with two systems of property and government - feudal and commercial. Here he was presupposing some of Millar's ideas.<sup>50</sup> The 'feudal system' which was only scotched by the Revolution (1688) must be killed:

"If we find that this demon (the feudal system), was himself in process of time subdued, as he certainly was by the extension of commerce under Elizabeth, and the enlarged conceptions which extended commerce always produces, by the revival of learning which dispelled the darkness of Gothick ignorance and by the great transactions of the last century, when the true theory and genuine principles of freedom were unfolded and illustrated, we shall not hesitate to pronounce that by the spirit of our constitution all Englishmen having property of any kind or quantity are entitled to votes in chusing Parliamentary delegates."<sup>51</sup>

In England, as it was in France, the debate on the feudal system or feudalism was closely associated with the political debate for reforms. It is also interesting to note that it was Edmund Burke who first introduced the French word *féodalité* into the English language, which was later, in 1817, changed to feudalism. The term *féodalité* was introduced in his famous *Reflections on the French Revolution*.<sup>52</sup>

Asia, more particularly India, was also part of this debate. In 1773 Jones had agreed with Voltaire that "the ancient system of government which prevailed in India was perfectly feudal".<sup>53</sup> In India he wanted to be a Justinian, a compiler of Indian traditional personal laws - Hindu and Muslim. Jones suggested that India has always experienced private property in land:

"Our nation, in the name of the King, has twenty-three million black subjects in these two provinces, but nine-tenths of their property are taken from them and it has even been publicly insisted that they have no landed property at all; if my Digest of Indian law should give stability to their property, real and personal, all security to their person, it will be the greatest benefit they ever received from us."<sup>54</sup>

He however believed that the idea of liberty as he preached in England should not be exported to India. "Gentoo" cannot be ruled by the maxims of the Athenians. Indians flourished in arts and literature but failed to produce a good system of government. Legal absolutism, which the Physiocrats professed, was supported by Jones. It would seem that there was some truth in the complaint that was made by Anquetil Duperron that the concept of despotism was devised by the Europeans to justify their oppressive rule in Asia.<sup>55</sup>

It is already clear that the concept of feudalism was rather confused: it was a system of government (fragmentation of sovereignty), a socio-economic order and a term of abuse. It

was not clear to the eighteenth-century writers where the ownership of land rested, in the King or in the landholders. Both Voltaire and Jones believed that the ancient system in India was feudal, yet they also believed that India had experienced private property in land. Jones, it seems, rode two horses, feudalism and legal absolutism. James Mill was quick to detect this. In his effort to prove that India had no idea of private property Mill used Jones' translation of Manu VIII.39. Mill however, to suit his own theory, rearranged the relevant passage on the ownership of land:

"I have substituted the word 'supreme' for the word 'paramount' used by Sir William Jones, for the word relates to the feudal institutions of Europe and is calculated to convey erroneous ideas."<sup>56</sup>

The development of the idea of feudalism in Germany is interesting, but I can add very little to what Otto Brunner has said on the subject.<sup>57</sup> John Pryor and Michael Bennett touch on Marx in this conference. I would like you to recognise that the idea of feudalism developed in the writings of Marx and Engels through four decades. Feudalism was one of six modes of production which preceded the development of capitalism - Primitive Communism, Asiatic, Slave owning, Slavonic, Germanic and Feudal. The original explanation was given in 1845 in the *German Ideology*. It was clearly mentioned in the *Manifesto of 1848*, in the *Formen* and received further consideration in the *Capital* and in Engels' later works, particularly his *Origins of the Family*, etc. Asia played a central role in this debate.

This paper has turned out to be an exercise in intellectual history. I have been less interested in the validity of the arguments on the nature of pre-modern and pre-industrial societies than I have been in the argument itself. What fascinates me most is the fact that such a concept should exercise the minds of some of the finest intellectuals of modern Europe. Both history and orientalism were part of the same discourse, which has as its aim to develop a systematic form of knowledge to understand social orders past and present, home and abroad, and eventually to control or at least to shape them. Hence it was highly political. If we were to follow Giambattista Vico, perhaps the real father of modern Structuralism, then we should recognise that man constructs myths, social institutions, virtually the whole world as he perceives it and in so doing he constructs himself. Hence the study of history is ultimately the interpretation of myths.<sup>58</sup>

It may be that 'feudalism' was a myth, invented by the *Philosophes* of the Enlightenment, but we still need to understand that 'feudalism' and 'despotism' were part of their own reality. If history is not a mere antiquarian hobby, then we need the model of feudalism. In Australia we are surrounded by developing nations, where Marxists are waging battles, most of the time successfully, against "colonialism" and "feudalism". It is important that we should know why.

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#### NOTES

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4. D. Thorner, in Coulburn, *op.cit.*, p. 150.
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7. *Ibid.*
8. Dunham, *Speculum* 33 (1958) p. 304 as quoted in Cheyette, *op.cit.*, p. 2.
9. Elizabeth A.R. Brown, 'The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe', *The American Historical Review*. vol. 79, No. 4, 1974, p. 1088.
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