

THE END OF HISTORY?

XII: MARXISM AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Stephen Rigby argues that Marxist analysis has had an underrated role in the social and economic interpretation of the medieval world.

Of Marx's intellectual legacy, his politics, based on the conception of the proletariat as a revolutionary class, now seems mere wishful thinking; his economics, premised on the labour theory of value, is rejected by all but a handful of fundamentalists; his philosophy of dialectical materialism is merely an intellectual museum-piece. What remains of interest from Marx and Engels' work is their social and historical theory: historical materialism. Marx may have wanted to change the world, rather than simply to interpret it in a new way but, in practice, Marxism has actually been rather more successful at comprehending the world than at transforming it. Marx deserves more to be remembered for his social science than for his scientific socialism.

Classical historical materialism, as formulated by Marx and Engels and more recently defended by G.A.

St Martin and the beggar – a 14th-century ivory. Charity to the poor was a prescribed part of medieval society but *noblesse oblige* involved recognition of a fixed hierarchical order.



Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (OUP, 1978), consists of two main claims. Firstly, the nature of society's 'relations of production' (its forms of property and class relations) corresponds to the level of development of its 'productive forces' (its technology, science, technical division of labour and so on). This claim is epitomised by Marx's saying that 'the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist'. Marx argued that society's productive forces have an inherent tendency to develop and that, as a result,

its relations of production periodically become fetters on society's productive progress, fetters which have to be cast aside through social revolution, such as the bourgeois revolutions which overthrew feudalism.

Marx's second major claim is that if the relations of production are determined by the level reached by the productive forces then, in turn, these relations of production constitute the foundation or 'economic base' for society's political, legal and ideological 'superstructure'. Through the state, the economically dominant class becomes the politically dominant force in society, through its ideology the propertied class seeks to justify and perpetuate its rule.

There is no more remarkable testimony to the intellectual vitality of 'Marxist' writing about the Middle Ages than the fact that much of its energy has been spent in undermining, explicitly or implicitly, much of Marx's own theory. The claim that history is given a coherence by a *universal* tendency for the productive forces to expand is put in doubt by Marx's own emphasis, developed by Witold Kula's magisterial *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System* (Verso, 1976), that each epoch of class relations (feudalism, capitalism etc.) has its own historically specific laws of development.

Far from emphasising an inherent

Church ruins at Antingham, Norfolk – one of the deserted villages that illustrates the pattern of change and decline in medieval society.



tendency for the productive forces to advance, Marxist accounts of the medieval economy, such as that of Robert Brenner, have emphasised the obstacles which feudal social relations put in the way of productive development, obstacles which lay behind the economic and demographic crisis of the fourteenth century.

Thus, as Perry Anderson put it in his *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism* (Verso, 1974), 'the relations of production generally change prior to the forces of production in the epoch of transition and not vice versa'. As Isaac Joshua argues in his *La Face Cachée du Moyen Age* (La Breche, 1988), it is social change which precedes and controls change in the productive forces. What does remain of Marx's theory is the conception of economic and social crisis arising from the clash between productive forces and social relations. This insistence on the determining role of property relations can be seen in Chris Dyer's *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (CUP, 1989), where the emphasis is not just on the interaction of land and people, as in the Malthusian orthodoxy, but also on the structured social inequalities which influenced patterns of consumption and demand.

If an inherent tendency for the productive forces to develop was not the prime mover of development within medieval society, then what social contradiction *did* generate structural change? For many Marxists, the answer is to be found in class conflict over the level of rent and the extent of manorial restrictions, a conflict which is seen as inherent in the landlord-peasant relationship. Whereas many medievalists, particularly those of the 'Toronto School', have minimised the extent of such tensions, writers such as Dyer, Zvi Razi, John E. Martin and Rodney Hilton (see the latter's *Bond Men Made Free*, 1973) have argued that the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was no bolt from the blue, but should rather be seen in the context of generations of more local and piecemeal struggles between lords and peasants.

Whilst Malthusian historians explain medieval social change in terms of the fluctuations of population, Robert Brenner has argued that it is class struggle which determines which paths of economic and social development are opened up or closed off. The English population decline of the period after the Black Death did not, therefore, necessarily have to result in the end of villeinage but could have led to the intensification of manorialism, as did a similar decline in seventeenth-century Bohemia. It was class struggle which

determined whether it was the landlords' or the peasants' logic which prevailed in an age of population shortage (see T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, *The Brenner Debate*, CUP, 1985).

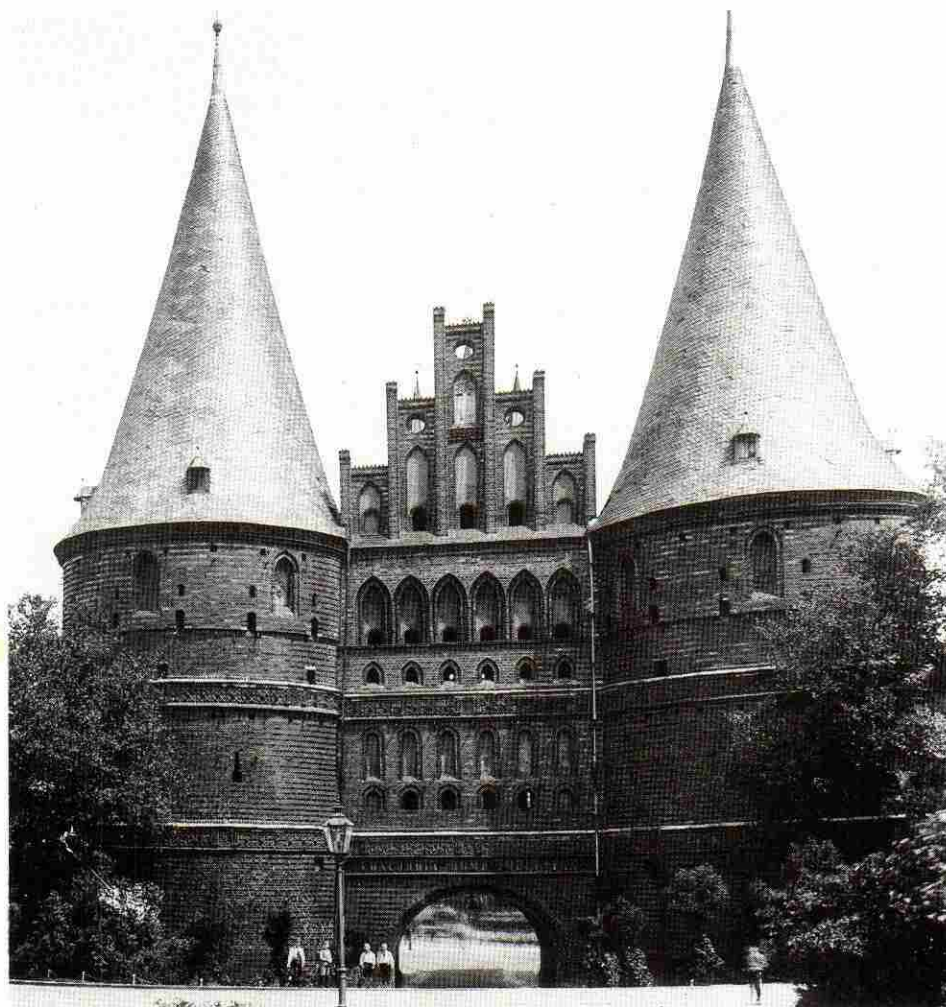
If Marx's claims for the social primacy of the productive forces have been rejected by Marxists themselves, how useful is his conception of society as consisting of an 'economic base' with a 'political and ideological superstructure'? Here any assessment must be far more provisional. An initial problem is that the Marxist tradition itself has consistently emphasised that feudal social relations did not take the form of a strict 'economic' exchange, as does that between employer and employee under capitalism. Rather, the landlords' access to rent (whether paid in the form of money, labour-services or in kind) depended upon the political and legal powers enshrined in the manor (see E.A. Kosminsky's classic *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, 1956).

But if politics and the law form a part of society's economic base, if base and superstructure 'interpenetrate', how

can the base determine the superstructure? After all, if base and superstructure cannot be separated or distinguished, it is illegitimate to derive one from the other. The only solution to this problem is that proposed by Maurice Godelier (see his *The Mental and the Material*, Verso, 1986) who has reformulated historical materialism not as a claim for the primacy of some narrowly defined 'economic' sphere but rather for the primacy of the relations of production in their broadest sense, including their political, legal and ideological constituents.

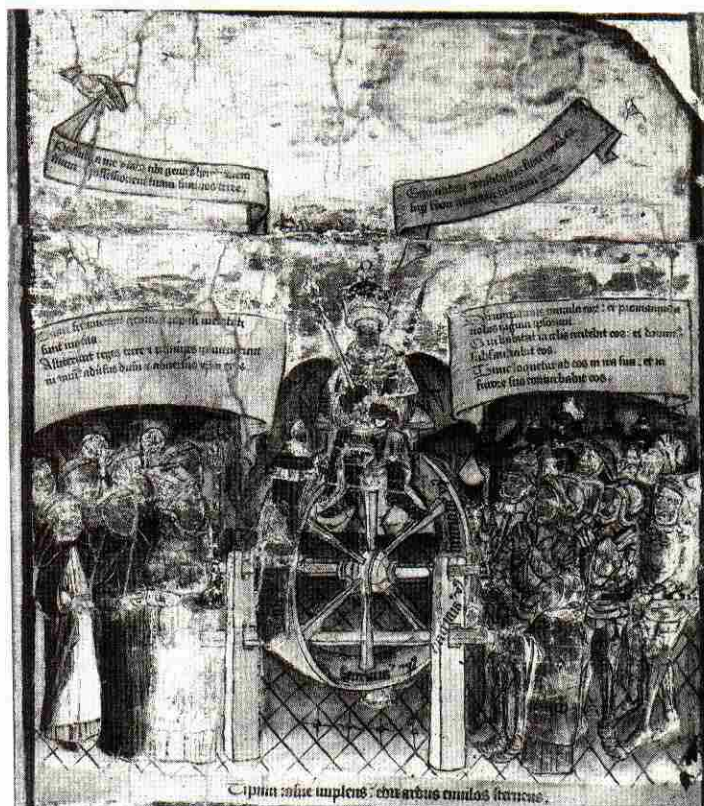
However, even if we accept Godelier's revision of Marx's claim, difficulties remain. If only social relations were active and historically determining, whilst politics and ideas were passive, it would be fair to privilege the former as the 'base' and to see the latter as merely a 'superstructure'. Historical materialists have, however, frequently emphasised that this is *not* the case and that the superstructure itself has an active historical role. For example, Brenner's account of the rise of French absolutism, which he traces back to the

The Holsten gate (1466-78) at Lübeck, one of the north German towns making up the federation of the Hanseatic League – a trading bloc which gives the lie to a view of the Middle Ages as a tale solely of knights and peasants.





Peasants revolt; the death of Etienne Marcel at the hands of royal troops – marked the failure of the 1358 Jacquerie in France which threatened to combine rural uprisings with an urban insurrection.



The wheel of fortune (seen here in the 15th-century *Chronicles of Edward IV*) was a commonplace of medieval thought which could carry egalitarian undertones that belied a social 'great chain of being'.

medieval period, argues that the absolutist state 'expressed' a transformed version of feudal social relations in which the peasantry enjoyed freedom and a security of tenure, whilst remaining open to the taxation which supported absolutist rule. Yet Brenner also argues that absolutism and a free peasantry developed in a 'mutual dependence' upon each other since if the state was founded on the existence of a free peasantry, this freedom was in turn partly the product of the state's own actions.

But in this case, why claim a primacy either for politics or for social relations? Why not, like Weberian writers such as Michael Mann, reject any necessary primacy either for economics, politics or ideology? Nevertheless, despite such problems, the Marxist theory of the state does function as a much-needed reminder of the social context and constraints upon medieval political life. When the social history of the medieval state eventually comes to be written, Marxism will necessarily be a central influence upon it.

Much the same can be said of the realm of ideas and social consciousness where the Marxist insistence that ideology is an 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' might have acted as a warning to those modern writers for whom the doctrine of the 'three estates' pro-

vides us with a rough approximation of medieval social reality. Georges Duby, though no Marxist himself, was far nearer to the Marxist tradition in presenting the three estates theory, which divided society into an interdependent hierarchy of those who fight, those who work and those who pray, as a doctrine which was used to justify the social position of threatened or emergent social groups.

In other areas of medieval history, the influence of Marxism is only just beginning to be felt. In urban history, it is Hilton's work which has opened up the role of the small town in feudal society (see his *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, Verso, 1990). In women's history, Chris Middleton has attempted to integrate Marxist and feminist approaches to medieval patriarchy (see *Sociological Review* 29, 1981). In the field of cultural history, books by Marxist-influenced writers such as Sheila Delany, Peggy Knapp, David Aers and Stephen Knight have begun to explore the social context of medieval literature. Finally, whilst Marxists have traditionally devoted most of their attention to the later Middle Ages and the origins of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Chris Wickham has explored 'the other transition', from antiquity to feudalism.

It is often claimed that although Marxism offers a useful analysis of nine-

teenth-century industrial capitalism, it has little of value to contribute to the study of pre-industrial society. Yet, through the works of historians such as Kosminsky, Hilton, Dyer, Razi, Brenner and Wickham, Marxism has had an influence on the study of medieval society far beyond the ranks of those who would consider themselves to be Marxists in any political sense.

Given the vitality of the historical materialist tradition in medieval history and the stature of many of its practitioners, Marxists are unlikely to feel that the fall of Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe undermines their historical methodology. If we wish to challenge E.A. Kosminsky's account of feudal rent in the thirteenth century then we must do so, as we would any other hypothesis, on the grounds of its logic and use of evidence, rather than on the political affiliations of its author.

To ask whether Marxism is right or wrong is futile. The key issue is rather, which aspects of Marx's contradictory legacy remain useful to the practice of those historians who are not themselves Marxists? Even those who reject Marxism are still compelled to debate with it: it is more fruitful to engage with a great thinker who is wrong, than with a nonentity who is right.

Stephen Rigby is Lecturer in Medieval History at Manchester University.

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