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The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe

ELIZABETH A. R. BROWN

AT A RECENT CONFERENCE Thomas N. Bisson introduced his paper "Institutional Structures of the Medieval Peace" by cautioning his audience that in his discussion of peace movements, peace associations, and peace institutions in southern France and Spain he would not attempt to relate his findings to "feudalism."[1] His approach was descriptive—and thoroughly enlightening—and no further reference to any ism occurred until the question period. Then, bestowing the double-edged praise that is his hallmark, Professor John F. Benton asked how historians could have managed to overlook for so long such abundant evidence that would necessitate the revision of numerous lectures on medieval society. Responding to this remark, Professor Bisson again alluded to the eventual necessity of evaluating his conclusions with reference to the general topic of feudalism, but time prevented him from elaborating. It occurred to me as this interchange was taking place that the failure of historians to take account of the data used by Bisson may well have resulted from their concentration on feudalism—as model or Ideal Type—and their consequent tendency to disregard or dismiss documents not easily assimilable into that frame of reference.

Whatever their relevance to the subject of Professor Bisson's paper, feelings of uneasiness concerning the term "feudalism" are not uniquely mine. Historians have for years harbored doubts about the term "feudalism" and the phrase "feudal system," which has often been used as a synonym for it. One of the first, and certainly one of the wittiest and most eloquent,

An earlier version of this article was presented to a meeting of the Columbia University Seminar on Medieval Studies, May 8, 1973. I am grateful to the members of the seminar for their questions and suggestions. For their advice and counsel I would also like to express my thanks to Professor Fredric Cheyette of Amherst College, Professor John Bell Henneman of the University of Iowa, Professor Joshua Prawer of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Professor Thomas N. Bisson of the University of California at Berkeley, Professor John F. Benton of the California Institute of Technology, Professors Edwin Burrows, Philip Dawson, Charlton Lewis, and Hyman Sardy of Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, Barbara W. Tuchman, and finally the members of the History Club and my students at Brooklyn College.

[1] Thomas N. Bisson, "Institutional Structures of the Medieval Peace," a paper presented to a colloquium held at Princeton University on March 31, 1973.

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to comment on the problem was Frederic William Maitland. In lectures on English constitutional history prepared in 1887 and 1888 he wrote:

> 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. . . . 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.[2]

Thanks to J. G. A. Pocock, it is now known that Henry Spelman, a learned English antiquarian of the seventeenth century, used neither the term "feudal system" nor the word "feudalism," but this does not detract from the validity or the importance of Maitland's observations. Following in the steps of the Scottish legal scholar Sir Thomas Craig, Spelman held that the social and political relationships of medieval England had been uniform and systematic enough to be described adequately as regulated by a " 'feudal law' [which] was an hierarchical system imposed from above as a matter of state policy." The work of Craig and Spelman had its virtues, for they were the first British historians to attempt to relate British institutions to continental developments. Both, however, relied for their knowledge of continental institutions on Cujas's and Hotman's sixteenth-century editions of the twelfth-century Lombard *Libri Feudorum,* which gave, to paraphrase Pocock, a precise and detailed "definition of the *feudum* whereby it could be recognized in any part of Europe," or, as he says, "a systematic exposition of the principles of tenure, forfeiture and inheritance." These criteria Craig and Spelman employed to classify the evidence from Scottish and English sources, and their simplification and regimentation of phenomena notably offset the advantages to historical thought of their demonstration that the development of England and Scotland could be understood only in the context of the European experience.[3]

Given these beginnings, it is no wonder that eighteenth-century British writers began to accept the concept of a uniform feudal government and to concentrate on the system, the construct, instead of investigating the various social and political relationships found in medieval Europe. "They were," Pocock observes, "making an 'ism' of [feudalism]; they were reflecting on its essence and nature and endeavoring to fit it into a pattern of general ideas."[4] In so doing they resembled Boulainvilliers and Montesquieu, who

[2] Frederic William Maitland, *The Constitutional History of England,* ed. H. A. L. Fisher (Cambridge, 1908), 142. See also Fisher's introduction to this edition, p. v.

[3] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1957), 70 n.2, 93–94, 249, 79–80, 97–99, 70–79, 72, 84, 99, 103, 102. Pocock perhaps exaggerates these advantages (p. 102) because of the strength of his admiration for the boldness and imagination with which Craig and Spelman challenged the distortedly insular approach taken by Coke and the common lawyers. It seems clear, furthermore, that Pocock himself does not question the validity or the usefulness of the term "feudalism."

[4] *Ibid.,* 249; see also Robert Boutruche, *Seigneurie et féodalité: Le premier âge des liens d'homme à homme* (Paris, 1959), 15 nn.16–17, 16 n.20.

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wrote of *féodalité* and *lois féodales* as distinguishing a state of society, thus, incidentally, expanding the concept to include a far wider range of phenomena than it had for legal scholars.[5] The writers of the eighteenth century, like those of later times, assigned different meanings to the term *féodalité*, or, in English, "feodality." Some used it to designate a system of government, some to refer to conditions that developed as public power disappeared. By 1800 the construct had been launched and the expression "feudal system" devised; by the mid-nineteenth century the word "feudalism" was in use. The way was prepared for future scholars to study feudalism—whatever it was conceived to be—scientifically and for others to employ the ism to refer, abusively, to those selected elements of the past that were to be overthrown, abolished, or inexorably superseded.[6]

SINCE THE MIDDLE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY the concepts of feudalism and the feudal system have dominated the study of the medieval past. The appeal of these words, which provide a short, easy means of referring to the European social and political situation over an enormous stretch of time, has proved virtually impossible to resist, for they pander to the human desire to grasp—or to think one is grasping—a subject known or suspected to be complex by applying to it a simple label simplistically defined. The great authority of these terms has radically influenced the way in which the history of the Middle Ages has been conceptualized and investigated, encouraging concentration on oversimplified models that are applied as standards and stimulating investigation of similarities and differences, norms and deviations. As a result scholars have disregarded or paid insufficient attention to recalcitrant data that their models do not prepare them to expect.

But let us return to Maitland. Implicit in his assessment of Spelman and the feudal system is a clear objection to applying the label "feudal system" to medieval England, presumably because of a belief that England never underwent a systematization of social and political life—or, as Maitland puts it, never experienced "the development of what can properly be called a feudal system." Less evident, perhaps, is a hesitancy about the propriety of using the phrase "feudal system" at all. That Maitland questioned the wisdom of applying it to conditions of medieval society is hard to dispute, however, for in his lectures he remarks,

The phrase [feudal system] has thus become for us so large and vague that it is quite possible to maintain that of all countries England was the most, or for the

[5] Boutruche, *Seigneurie et féodalité*, 13–14; Marc Bloch, *La Société féodale* (Paris, 1949), 1: 1-3. The English edition, with a foreword by M. M. Postan, was translated by L. A. Manyon and is entitled *Feudal Society* (Chicago, 1961); the corresponding pages are xvi–xviii.

[6] Boutruche, *Seigneurie et féodalité*, 16, 18–23. See also the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "feudal," "feudalism," and "feudality."

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matter of that the least, feudalized; that William the Conqueror introduced, or for the matter of that suppressed, the feudal system.[7]

Still, having bemoaned the terminological situation, Maitland proceeds to use the term "feudalism," equated by him with "feudal system."[8] He announces that "the feudalism of France differs radically from the feudalism of England, that the feudalism of the thirteenth is very different from that of the eleventh century." He then goes on to give his own definition of feudalism, emphasizing ties of vassalage, fiefs, service in arms owed the lord, and private administration of justice. Using this definition, he discusses the question of the progress toward such an organization that England had been making before the Norman Conquest, and he concludes, "Speaking generally then, that ideal feudalism of which we have spoken, an ideal which was pretty completely realized in France during the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, was never realized in England." Here, he says, "the force of feudalism [was] limited and checked by other ideas."[9]

As these statements show, Maitland's tolerance for unresolved contradictions was high, and other historians have demonstrated a similarly striking capacity for living with inconsistency. Although they attack the term "feudalism," they are still unwilling and perhaps unable—whether from habit, inertia, or simple inattention—to jettison the word. Consider H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles. In a book published in 1963 they denounce "feudal" and "feudalism" as "the most regrettable coinages ever put into circulation to debase the language of historians." "We would, if we could," they declare, "avoid using them, for they have been given so many and such imprecise meanings." They confess, however—without apology or explanation—that they cannot "rid [themselves] of the words and must live with them" and therefore proclaim their determination to "endeavor, when [they use] them, to do so without ambiguity." They evidently have some sense of attachment, however grudging, to the terms, and their feelings are reflected in their insistence that "if the concept and the term are to be in the least useful"—thus implying that they can be—"there must be precise definition." Such definition they do not, unfortunately, offer. Nonetheless they doggedly persist in using the words, and they spend a large portion of their book dealing with their "thesis of the relative unimportance of any

[7] Maitland, *Constitutional History*, 161, 143. See also Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I* (2d ed., introd. S. F. C. Milsom; Cambridge, 1968), 1: 66–67; and Frederic William Maitland, *Collected Papers*, ed. H. A. L. Fisher (Cambridge, 1911), 1: 489.

[8] Maitland does not subject the word "feudalism" to the same critical scrutiny he applies to the phrase "feudal system," and he is far less wary of using the former than the latter. At one point in his lectures he seems to be distinguishing between the two—"we do not hear of a feudal system until long after feudalism has ceased to exist"—but he also uses them as equivalents. In his conclusion he indicates that he considers "the development of . . . a feudal system" the same as the realization of "ideal feudalism." *Constitutional History*, 141–43, 161–63.

[9] *Ibid.*, 143–64.

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element of 'feudalism' in post-Conquest England" and of "the essential continuity of English institutions."[10]

Such an approach logically requires isolating those elements that can properly be called feudal from those that cannot. Since Richardson and Sayles never explicitly objectify the enemy, however, their readers are left to deduce from their arguments just what phenomena they consider essential components of feudalism. Homage, " 'feudal' incidents," honors and honorial courts, knightly service connected with fiefs, and the use of military tenures for military purposes are all linked in one way or another with feudalism, although Richardson and Sayles clearly suggest that, unless found in their Franco-Norman forms, these elements should not be considered truly feudal. Thus the authors attempt to validate their hypothesis by showing either that these or similar institutions existed in England before 1066—and hence are to be classified as Old English and therefore not Norman feudal—or that they had no real importance after that date.[11] In the end, coming to grips with the problem of definition, they abruptly abandon their previous criteria. So that they can pronounce England safely nonfeudal and therefore non-French, they fall back on what they call "the classical theory of feudalism," described as the idea of lordship diminished by fragmentation or of "sovereignty . . . divided between the king and his feudataries," neither of which was ever found in England. They warn that feudalism should not be defined simply in terms of tenure, since if it is it will be found everywhere.[12]

As their lengthy discussion and conclusion make clear, Richardson and Sayles were never fully convinced, despite their initial volleys, that feudalism was in fact no "more than an arbitrary pattern imposed by modern writers upon men long dead and events long past." Although they end their analysis by remarking of the word "feudal" that "an adjective so ambiguous and so misleading is best avoided," their repeated use of the term belies their alleged distaste.[13]

IF NUMEROUS ARGUMENTS in defense of feudalism have been advanced, "utility" and "indispensability" are the chief rallying cries of the term's defenders. Let us turn first to the criterion of utility.

In the introduction to his classic study *Feudalism,* F. L. Ganshof states that he intends his book to facilitate the work of students of medieval society. In analyzing and describing feudal institutions he says he has "endeavored to bring out as clearly as possible their essential features, since, once these

[10] H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles, *The Governance of Mediaeval England from the Conquest to Magna Carta* (Edinburgh, 1963), 30, 92, 117–18, 30–31, 105, 116.

[11] *Ibid.,* 36–38, 77, 99, 105–12, 115; see also 85–91, 147, and the comments on p. 116: "The Normans were already familiar with much that they found in England, but we are not thereby warranted in terming those familiar things 'feudal' or in asserting that England was already 'feudal.' "

[12] *Ibid.,* 117–18.

[13] *Ibid.,* 92, 118.

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are grasped, it is easy for the student to disentangle the elements that can properly be described as feudal in the institutions of the period or country with which he is primarily concerned."[14] Helping the scholar as well as the student to evaluate, analyze, and categorize the past is also important to Michael Postan, and in his foreword to the English edition of Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* he argues that the usefulness of "generalized concepts" such as feudalism lies in their ability to "help us to distinguish one historical situation from another and to align similar situations in different countries and even in different periods." For Postan greater complexity apparently means greater utility, and he prefers Bloch's definition of feudalism, which embraces "most of the significant features of medieval society," to "constitutional and legal concepts of feudalism" centering on "military service" and "contractual principles." These latter concepts, he feels, may have some virtue as pedagogical devices, to promote "intellectual discipline," and to serve as "an antidote to the journalistic levities of modern historiography." Still, they cannot validly be considered "an intellectual tool, to be used in the study of society."[15]

If Postan draws a rather unsettling distinction between pedagogy on the one hand and research and sound intellectual endeavor on the other, it is clear that he is not alone in considering appropriate for the student what is decried for the scholar. This "track" approach to feudalism is widespread, even though those who espouse it may differ concerning what should be taught at different levels. Postan envisions progression from a partial to a more complex model, always retaining the term "feudalism" to denote the model. Others, expressing fundamental objections to the misleading impression of simplicity and system they believe inevitably associated with isms, still argue that authors of basic textbooks—as opposed to advanced studies—would be lost without the concept of feudalism. This rather inconsistent attitude apparently springs from two convictions: first, that beginning students are incapable of dealing with complex and diverse development and must for their own good be presented with an artificially regular schema; and second, that the term "feudalism" somehow helps these students by serving as a handy, familiar tag to which to attach consciously oversimplified generalizations. Later, as graduate students, they are presumably to be introduced to qualifications and complications, and finally, as scholars and initiates into the mysteries of the trade, they are to be encouraged to discard the offending ism for purposes of research, if not for purposes of teaching their own beginning students. Charles T. Wood, although not explicitly endorsing the use of the term "feudalism," writes that "the feudal pyramid . . . makes for clear diagrams, and schoolboys have to begin somewhere."

[14] F. L. Ganshof, *Feudalism,* foreword F. M. Stenton, tr. Philip Grierson (London, 1952), xviii; see also 151.

[15] Postan, foreword to Bloch, *Feudal Society,* xiv, xiii.

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Still, he admits, "where they do begin is rather far removed from reality."[16]

Postan, and presumably Ganshof, feels that employing the construct has the virtue of enabling scholars to distinguish likenesses among different times and areas. Similarly John Le Patourel advocates formulating a definition of feudalism that could be used "as a measuring-rod,"[17] and such a standard could presumably be relied on not only, as he wants, to clarify "the old argument" over the introduction of feudalism into England but also, as Postan argues, to advance the work of those concerned with comparing developments in different countries.

If feudalism is praised as a teaching device and as a means of understanding societies, it is also said to be "indispensable," and that for a number of reasons. Marc Bloch maintains that scientists cannot function without abstractions and that since historians are scientists, they also require abstractions. The specific abstractions "feudal" and "feudalism" are defended on the grounds that, however awkward and inappropriate in terms of their original connotations these words and others like them may be, the historian is in this respect no worse off than the scientist, who must also make do with inconvenient and unsuitable terminology.[18] Michael Postan goes beyond Bloch to declare that "without generalized terms representing entire groups of phenomena not only history but all intelligent discourse would be impossible," and he maintains that no difference exists between such a word as "feudalism" and other general terms like "war" and "agriculture."[19] Equally positively, if less aggressively, Fredric Cheyette has insisted that the term "feudalism" cannot "simply be discarded—the verbal detours one would have to make to replace it would be strained as well as disingenuous."[20] Otto Hintze argues that the concept is indispensable not only for reasons of practicality and convenience but also because of the deficiencies of the processes of human thought, assumed to be incapable of comprehending the complexities of the real world. Hintze asserts that since "it is impossible to grasp the complicated circumstances of historical life, so laden with unique occurrences, in a few universal and unambiguous concepts—as is

[16] Wood's own description of medieval society deals with human beings rather than schemas, but he occasionally uses the terms "feudal" and "feudalism," which are not defined. *The Quest for Eternity: Medieval Manners and Morals* (New York, 1971), 28, 55–56, 177. Wood's index (p. 227) shows that he has not discarded the term "feudalism," which he seems to see as closely linked with vassalage.

[17] John Le Patourel, review of Richardson and Sayles, *Governance of Mediaeval England,* in *English Historical Review,* 80 (1965): 117 n.1; and see also Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization,* ed. Talcott Parsons, tr. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York, 1947), 329.

[18] Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien* (Paris, 1949), 86–87. The corresponding pages in the English edition—*The Historian's Craft,* ed. Lucien Febvre, tr. Peter Putnam (New York, 1953)—are 169–71.

[19] Postan, foreword to Bloch, *Feudal Society,* xiv.

[20] Fredric L. Cheyette, "Some Notations on Mr. Hollister's 'Irony,'" *Journal of British Studies,* 5 (1965): 4; see also Cheyette, ed., *Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe: Selected Readings* (New York, 1968), 2–3.

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done in the natural sciences," historians must use "intuitive abstractions" and create "Ideal Types, and such types indeed underlie our scholarly terminology."[21]

Even its most eloquent advocates readily acknowledge the difficulties associated with the use of the term "feudalism." Marc Bloch, for one, states that "nearly every historian understands the word as he pleases," and "even if we do define, it is usually every man for himself." He admits that the word is charged with emotional overtones[22] and is in fact "very ill-chosen,"[23] and he acknowledges that, in general, abstractions which are "ill-chosen or too mechanically applied" should be avoided.[24] He goes so far as to declare that the word "capitalism" has lost its usefulness because it has become burdened with ambiguities and because it is "carelessly applied to the most diverse civilizations," so that, as a result, "it almost inevitably results in concealing their original features."[25] Even Postan, whose loyalty to Bloch exceeds Bloch's sense of commitment to his own ideas, grants that comprehensive terms like "feudalism" "over-simplify the reality they purport to epitomize," and he confesses that

> in some contexts the practice of giving general names to whole epochs can even be dangerous, [luring] its practitioners into the worst pitfalls of the nominalist fallacy, and [encouraging] them to endow their terms with real existence, to derive features of an epoch from the etymology of the word used to describe it or to construct edifices of historical argument out of mere semantic conceits.[26]

THE VARIETY OF EXISTING DEFINITIONS of the term and the general unwillingness of any historian to accept any other historian's characterization of feudalism constitute a prime source of confusion. The best definition would doubtless be, as Cheyette suggests, one that helped "to make the body of evidence on medieval institutions coherent," but he himself has not found or formulated any definition to accomplish this purpose.[27] In the absence of consensus, the play with meanings has flourished and still continues.

[21] Otto Hintze, "Wesen und Verbreitung des Feudalismus" (1929), in Hintze, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, ed. Gerhard Oestreich, 1 (2d ed.; Göttingen, 1962): 85; for an English translation of the article, entitled "The Nature of Feudalism," see Cheyette, *Lordship and Community*, 22–31. See, too, the comments of Michael Lane and particularly the enlightening passage quoted from Max Weber, in which Weber describes how ideal types are formulated. *Introduction to Structuralism* (New York, 1970), 25–26.

[22] Bloch, *Apologie*, 89, 87 (*Historian's Craft*, 176, 171).

[23] "Un mot fort mal choisi." Bloch, *Société féodale*, 1: 3 (*Feudal Society*, xviii).

[24] Bloch, *Apologie*, 88 (*Historian's Craft*, 173). Bloch comments that the feudalisms which scholars have located in different parts of the world "bear scarcely any resemblance to each other." *Apologie*, 89 (*Historian's Craft*, 175–76).

[25] *Ibid.*, 88 (*Historian's Craft*, 174). For a fuller, if less extreme, analysis of the similar problems posed by using the terms capitalism and feudalism, see the review of J. Q. C. Mackrell, *The Attack on 'Feudalism' in 18th Century France* (London, 1973), in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Feb. 15, 1974, p. 160.

[26] Postan, foreword to Bloch, *Feudal Society*, xiv.

[27] Cheyette, "Some Notations on Mr. Hollister's 'Irony,'" 4, 12; see also 5–6, where he states that the usefulness of the term (he may in fact mean of the definition) "is determined by how it helps to order the evidence."

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The sweeping perspective adopted by Marc Bloch produced a definition of European feudalism—equated by Bloch with feudal society and, in the translation of his book, with feudal system[28]—that in effect summarizes the topics treated in the central section of his *La Société féodale*. It encompasses a wide range of aspects of medieval life:

> A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of a salary, which was out of the question; the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man and, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage; fragmentation of authority—leading inevitably to disorder; and, in the midst of all this, the survival of other forms of association, family and State, of which the latter, during the second feudal age, was to acquire renewed strength.[29]

Some historians have accepted this inclusive list as a definition of feudalism, but others would prefer to link it only with feudal society, which they feel can and should be distinguished from a more narrowly conceived feudalism, in which the fief is accorded greater prominence than Bloch gives it.[30] Ganshof, for one, believes that in the Middle Ages "the fief, if not the cornerstone, was at least the most important element in the graded system of rights over land which this type of society involved." The definition of feudalism he prefers—"the narrow, technical, legal sense of the word"—concentrates on service and maintenance and emphasizes the fief, while it excludes entirely the private exercise of public justice and jurisdiction. For Ganshof feudalism is envisaged as

> a body of institutions creating and regulating the obligations of obedience and service—mainly military service—on the part of a free man (the vassal) towards another free man (the lord), and the obligations of protection and maintenance on the part of the lord with regard to his vassal. The obligation of maintenance had usually as one of its effects the grant by the lord to his vassal of a unit of real property known as a fief.

[28] Bloch, *Société féodale*, 2: 244–49 (*Feudal Society*, 443–45). In the translation (p. 443) "the feudal system" replaces Bloch's "le régime féodal" (2: 245). Similarly, Bloch's "les féodalités d'importation" (1: 289–92) become in translation "the imported feudal systems" (pp. 187–89). Both Ganshof and David Herlihy have indicated—misleadingly it seems to me—that Bloch perceived a fundamental difference between feudalism and feudal society. Ganshof, *Feudalism*, xvi; David Herlihy, ed., *The History of Feudalism* (New York, 1970), xix.

[29] Bloch, *Société féodale*, 249–50 (*Feudal Society*, 446).

[30] Herlihy, *History of Feudalism*, xix; Ganshof, *Feudalism*, xv. Ganshof's description of feudalism as a form of society on the same page diverges at many points from Bloch's: "a development pushed to extremes of the element of personal dependence in society, with a specialized military class occupying the higher levels in the social scale; an extreme subdivision of the rights of real property; a graded system of rights over land created by this subdivision and corresponding in broad outline to the grades of personal dependence just referred to; and a dispersal of political authority amongst a hierarchy of persons who exercise in their own interest powers normally attributed to the State and which are often, in fact, derived from its break-up." Here there is no mention of peasantry or family; here the state is mentioned only by virtue of its dissolution (although see also pp. 141–51 for a lengthy discussion of feudalism and the state); here there is a stress on landed rights and property missing in Bloch's definition.

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Although Ganshof admits that "powers of jurisdiction [in particular what one normally calls feudal jurisdiction] were . . . very closely bound up with feudal relationships," he states firmly that "there was nothing in the relationships of feudalism . . . which required that a vassal receiving investiture of a fief should necessarily have the profits of jurisdiction within it, nor even that he should exercise such jurisdiction."[31]

Ganshof may have his followers, particularly among historians of the Normans and the English.[32] On the other hand, many scholars insist that the private exercise of public governmental authority—an element rejected by Ganshof—is the single essential component in any definition of feudalism. Several years ago Joseph R. Strayer adopted this position when he advocated a definition focusing on jurisdiction and omitting most of the other factors contained in the definitions just examined. "To obtain a usable concept of feudalism," Strayer argued, "we must eliminate extraneous factors and aspects which are common to many types of society." Having lopped off aristocracy, "the great estate worked by dependent or servile labor," "the relationship between lord and man," and "the system of dependent land tenures," he concluded that it is "only when rights of government (not mere political influence) are attached to lordship and fiefs that we can speak of fully developed feudalism in Western Europe."[33] Subsequently Strayer

[31] Ganshof, *Feudalism,* xvi–xvii, 143, 141.

[32] Similar to but narrower than Ganshof's is the definition of feudalism offered by D. C. Douglas. Since Douglas's works deal primarily with Normandy and the Norman conquests it is understandable that, like Ganshof, he should not consider the disintegration of central control a basic element. For Douglas two ideas are important: "the principle that the amount of service owed should be clearly determined before the grant of the fief" and "the notion of liege-homage." *The Norman Achievement, 1050–1100* (Berkeley, 1969), 177; see also 179. Douglas also emphasizes the idea of contractual military service, isolating this as the core of the "Norman feudal custom," which, he says, William the Conqueror interpreted "in a sense advantageous to himself" when he "[suddenly introduced] military feudalism into England." *William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact upon England* (Berkeley, 1964), 100, 101, 103, 283. See also Cheyette, who counsels historians to "consider feudalism a *technique,* rather than an *institution,* . . . a technique involving above all a relation of personal dependence and service normally sealed by the grant of a dependent tenure or some other form of material support, and confined to that group of professional warriors who in time become the nobility, the *miles* [*sic*], the *domini*—a technique used to achieve certain purposes in certain places at certain times." "Some Notations on Mr. Hollister's 'Irony,'" 12.

[33] Joseph R. Strayer, "Feudalism in Western Europe," in Rushton Coulborn, ed., *Feudalism in History* (Princeton, 1956), 16, reprinted in Cheyette, *Lordship and Community,* 13. A similar definition appears in a lecture presented by Strayer in 1963 and published four years later as "The Two Levels of Feudalism," in Robert S. Hoyt, ed., *Life and Thought in the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 1967), 52–53, reprinted in Joseph R. Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft and the Perspectives of History: Essays by Joseph R. Strayer,* ed. John F. Benton and Thomas N. Bisson (Princeton, 1971), 63–65. In this essay Strayer maintains that a broader definition, referring to economic and social conditions, "in fact defined nothing," and he asserts that "the narrow, military definition of feudalism" ("a way of raising an army of heavy-armed cavalrymen by uniting the two institutions of vassalage and the fief"), while laudably precise, is "too limited" to be useful, since, if defined in this way, feudalism "would have little historical significance." In Hoyt, *Life and Thought,* 52–53 (in Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft,* 64–65). See also Strayer's comments in *Feudalism* (Princeton, 1965), 13–14. This point of view was again expressed, in modified form, in an essay Strayer published in 1968: "The Tokugawa Period and Japanese Feudalism," in John W. Hall and Marius B. Jansen, eds., *Studies in the Institutional History of Modern Japan* (Princeton, 1968), 3, reprinted in Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft,* 90. In this

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decided that this definition was defective,[34] and in 1965 he advanced one that included a military as well as a political element. Then he presented as "the basic characteristics of feudalism in Western Europe . . . a fragmentation of political authority, public power in private hands, and a military system in which an essential part of the armed forces is secured through private contracts." Thus feudalism was seen not only as "a method of government" but also as "a way of securing the forces necessary to preserve that method of government." It seems clear, however, that Strayer still considered the jurisdictional element fundamental, for in concluding his discussion he wrote that "a drive for political power by the aristocracy led to the rise of feudalism."[35]

Other approaches to the problem of defining feudalism have been taken. In 1953 Georges Duby stated a bit hesitantly that "what one refers to as feudalism" (*ce qu'on appelle la féodalité*) should be understood to have two aspects, the political—involving the dissolution of sovereignty—and the economic—the constitution of a coherent network of dependencies embracing all lands and through them their holders.[36] Thus he created a bridge

essay Strayer states that "in political terms, feudalism is marked by a fragmentation of political authority, private possession of public rights, and a ruling class composed (at least originally) of military leaders and their followers." Note that this definition, explicitly couched "in political terms," does not exclude the possibility of formulating other definitions phrased in different terms.

[34] This modification resulted from a reorientation of approach that occurred in 1962 and 1963, when Strayer established his concept of two levels of feudalism. In reviewing Marie Fauroux's *Recueil des actes des ducs de Normandie, 911–1066* (Caen, 1961), Strayer commented that "many scholars have failed to see that there were really two feudalisms—the feudalism of the armed retainer or knight, and the feudalism of the counts and other great lords who were practically independent rulers of their districts. The two feudalisms began at different times and under different circumstances, and it was a long time before they were fully meshed together." In *Speculum,* 37 (1962): 608. Although Strayer did not explicitly define feudalism, his discussion revealed that "Norman feudalism of the classic type" required the holding of "land in return for a definite quota of military service." "Knights and other vassals" were important not only "for military purposes" but also as "part of the governing group," whose aid and counsel the duke needed to rule effectively, and who possessed local administrative authority (pp. 608–09). It is hard to reconcile this analysis with a definition of feudalism that emphasizes the disintegration of central authority and the consequent distribution of political power among numerous members of a ruling group, and in 1963 Strayer acknowledged that in Normandy political fragmentation—an essential element of the political definition of feudalism he described in the same essay as the original and "best" definition—was tardy and incomplete. "Two Levels of Feudalism," in Hoyt, *Life and Thought,* 51–52, see also 63–65 (in Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft,* 63, see also 74–75). In addition see Strayer, *Feudalism,* 39. Even outside Normandy it was not until the eleventh century—and then not consistently and regularly—that the lower as well as the higher social and military orders distinguished by Strayer can be said to have exercised independent political power. With the inadequacy of the political definition of feudalism exposed, it must have become evident that some additional element or elements would have to be added to produce a satisfactory definition of the term.

[35] Strayer, *Feudalism,* 13, 74. Note, too, that in "The Tokugawa Period," published in 1968, Strayer still laid heavy emphasis on the political aspect of feudalism.

[36] Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris, 1953), 643, the corresponding page in the reprint (Paris, 1971) is 481. Duby's evasive approach to the word *féodalité* reappears in his book *Guerriers et paysans, VIIe–XIIe siècle: Premier essor de l'économie européenne* (Paris, 1973). Here he uses terms reminiscent of those he employed in 1953 as he refers to "ce que les historiens ont coutume d'appeler la féodalité" (p. 179). Calling it "un mouvement de très grande amplitude," he does not define it precisely and explicitly, although he says that it was characterized by "la décomposition de l'autorité

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of sorts, reconciling the definitions of Strayer and Ganshof. Later, however, Duby turned from government and land to mentalities, and in 1958 he suggested that feudalism might best be considered

> a psychological complex formed in the small world of warriors who little by little became nobles. A consciousness of the superiority of a status characterized by military specialization, one that presupposes respect for certain moral precepts, the practice of certain virtues; the associated idea that social relations are organized as a function of companionship in combat; notions of homage, of personal dependence, now in the foreground, replacing all previous forms of political association.[37]

Definitions of feudalism abound, and student and scholar have available to them broad ones that lump together numerous facets of medieval society and narrow ones that center on carefully chosen aspects of that society—tenurial, political, military, and psychical. The possibilities for bewilderment and dispute are dizzying, particularly since a single author's interpretation of the term can undergo marked shifts.

Another difficulty posed by feudalism and its system is the fact that those employing the terms, in whatever sense they use them, are constantly found qualifying and limiting the extent to which they believe them applicable to any particular time and locality in medieval Europe. Marc Bloch writes,

> In the area of Western civilization the map of feudalism reveals some large blank spaces—the Scandinavian peninsula, Frisia, Ireland. Perhaps it is more important still to note that feudal Europe was not all feudalized in the same degree or according to the same rhythm and, above all, that it was nowhere feudalized completely.

Nostalgically, and with regret only a confirmed Platonist could harbor, he concludes, "No doubt it is the fate of every system of human institutions never to be more than imperfectly realized."[38]

While Robert S. Hoyt could write of the growth and development of feudalism and could state that by the mid-eleventh century "an essentially feudal society had emerged throughout western continental Europe," he felt obliged, first, to deny that there was a " 'feudal system' common to all Europe," and second, to assert that "there were endless diversity and variety."[39] In the introduction to *Feudalism* Ganshof notes that he proposes

monarchique" and coincided with the development of a new sort of warfare and the establishment of a new conception of peace; he discusses "un système économique que l'on peut, en simplifiant, appeler féodal"; he concludes that "au plan de l'économie, la féodalité n'est pas seulement la hiérarchie des conditions sociales qu'entend représenter le schéma des trois ordres [elsewhere described as le clergé, les spécialistes de la guerre, et les travailleurs"], c'est aussi—et d'abord sans doute—l'institution seigneuriale" (pp. 179, 184, 185, 187, 191). Thus, on the economic plane, Duby substitutes the development of the lordship for the coherent network of dependencies that he stressed in 1953.

[37] Georges Duby, "La Féodalité? Une mentalité médiévale," *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations,* 13 (1958): 766. See also the comments of J. M. Wallace-Hadrill in a review of Bloch's *Feudal Society,* in *English Historical Review,* 78 (1963): 117.

[38] Bloch, *Société féodale,* 2: 248, 249 (*Feudal Society,* 445).

[39] Robert S. Hoyt, *Europe in the Middle Ages* (2d ed.; New York, 1966), 190–96, 185.

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to study feudalism mainly as it existed in France, in the kingdom of Burgundy-Arles and in Germany, since in these countries its characteristics were essentially the same, and to concentrate on the regions lying between the Loire and the Rhine, which were the heart of the Carolingian state and the original home of feudalism. Further afield, in the south of France and in Germany beyond the Rhine, the institutions that grew up are often far from typical of feudalism as a whole.[40]

In his foreword to the book, F. M. Stenton praises Ganshof's self-imposed limitations and suggests that they result from a realization "that social arrangements, arising from the instinctive search for a tolerable life, vary indefinitely with varieties of time and circumstance." While it is easy to agree with Stenton that students should be disabused of the idea that "an ideal type of social order" dominated Western Europe, it comes as something of a shock to find him readily accepting the doctrine that in the huge area on which Ganshof focuses a single "classical feudalism" was to be found.[41] The expectation of infinite variety in social arrangements seemingly ends for Stenton at the Loire and the Rhine, a good safe distance from the Thames.

The variety of definitions of feudalism and the limitations imposed on their relevance are confusing. Equally disconcerting is the pervasive tendency on the part of those who use the word to personify, reify, and to coin two words, occasionally "bacterialize," and even "lunarize" the abstraction. How often does one read that feudalism, like a virus, spread from one area to another, or that, later on, it slowly waned. In a single study feudalism is assigned a dazzling array of roles. It is found giving birth, being extremely virile, having vitality, being strong, knowing a long tradition, being successfully transplanted, surviving, being replaced, teetering, being routed, declining and falling, and finally dead and in its grave. Another author sees it destroying the Frankish Empire and making a clean sweep of outmoded institutions. For another it makes onslaughts on the power of the kings of France and England; "les forces féodaux" end the confusion of spiritual and temporal authorities. Still another work reassuringly attributes a home to feudalism, which is said to have exercised, rather adventurously, "paralyzing action" over "many forms of royal activity," and, more decorously, to have been "introduced into England in its French form" by the duke of Normandy.[42] In concluding *Seigneurie et féodalité* Boutruche in fact triumphantly proclaims it madness to consider feudalism an abstraction. "In

[40] Ganshof, *Feudalism,* xvii.

[41] Stenton, foreword to *ibid.,* vii–viii.

[42] See Bryce D. Lyon, *From Fief to Indenture: The Transition from Feudal to Non-Feudal Contract in Western Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 272–73; Georges Duby, *Adolescence de la Chrétienté occidentale, 980–1140* (Geneva, 1967), 61, 83. The corresponding pages in the English edition—translated by Stuart Gilbert and entitled *The Making of the Christian West, 980–1140* (Geneva, 1967)—are 61, 83. See also Bloch, *Feudal Society,* 59, 142, 443, where the statements found in *Société féodale,* 1: 95, 221 and 2: 245, are sometimes given a rather free interpretation. Finally, see Ganshof, *Feudalism,* xvii, 54, 59, 61.

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actuality, it is a person. . . . Feudalism is medieval. . . . It is the daughter of the West."[43]

Another problem is the inclination to employ the idea of fully developed, classical, or perfectly formed feudalism as a standard by which to rank and measure areas or societies. Territories are regularly divided into categories: some highly or thoroughly feudalized; others never, gradually, or only partly feudalized.[44] Non-European countries are evaluated in this manner, and the standard has often been applied to Japanese modes of social and political organization.[45] Such assessments can also be made of institutions. The Church in Norman Italy, for instance, has been judged "never feudalized to the same extent as . . . the Church in Norman England."[46]

These examples all involve inanimate phenomena, geographical or institutional, but it is also possible to attribute to an individual or a group the aim of achieving complete feudalization or of introducing an articulated feudal system and then judge the person or group a success or failure in achieving this hypothesized objective. The precise nature of the goal would naturally depend on how the historian making the attribution defined feudalism or feudal system, but such assessments immediately imply that the person or group in question consciously planned and then attempted to implement a system based primarily on the granting of fiefs but also involving the establishment of a graded hierarchy of status and command and the delegation of sovereign power. D. C. Douglas transposes feudalism from the realm of the abstract into a concretely human framework when he says that in England William the Conqueror "was concerned to establish a completed feudal organization by means of administrative acts" and when he indicates that the conquest of England enabled William to realize the "feudal organization in Normandy." Before 1066, Douglas says, the Normans were "as yet unorganized in any rigid feudal scheme," the feudal structure "had not yet been fully formed," "the structure of Norman society had [not] as yet been made to conform to an ordered feudal plan."[47] A

[43] "La féodalité est présentée parfois comme une abstraction. Folie! En vérité, c'est une personne. . . . La féodalité est médiévale. . . . Elle est fille de l'Occident." Boutruche, *Seigneurie et féodalité,* 297.

[44] Lyon, *From Fief to Indenture,* 23–24; Joseph R. Strayer, "The Development of Feudal Institutions," in Marshall Clagett, Gaines Post, and Robert Reynolds, eds., *Twelfth-Century Europe and the Foundations of Modern Society* (Madison, 1961), 79, reprinted in Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft,* 78–79.

[45] Bloch, *Société féodale,* 2: 250–52 (*Feudal Society,* 446–47); Strayer, "The Tokugawa Period." For hesitations expressed by Ganshof and by Bloch himself concerning the validity of this approach, see Ganshof, *Feudalism,* xv–xvi; Bloch, *Société féodale,* 2: 242 (*Feudal Society,* 441), and *Apologie,* 89 (*Historian's Craft,* 175–76).

[46] Douglas, *Norman Achievement,* 176.

[47] Douglas, *William the Conqueror,* 281, 98, 283, 96, 104; see also note 32 above. See the more convincing analysis presented by Strayer in his review of Fauroux's *Recueil des actes,* 609–10. Like Douglas, however, Strayer concludes that although "Norman feudalism of the classic type was not fully developed until the second half of the eleventh century . . . it was William the Conqueror, more than any other ruler, who gave it definitive form." Note the warnings given by Richardson and Sayles against assuming that William had any "grand designs or well devised plans." *Governance of Mediaeval England,* 71. For a clearly integrated account

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similar transformation of abstract model into consciously held goal occurs as Christopher Brooke asserts that "only in the Norman and the crusading states, colonized in great measure from the homeland of French feudalism, did one find any attempt to live up to a conception of feudalism as coherent as that of northern France."[48]

APPRAISING IN TERMS OF AN IDEAL STANDARD need not involve making value judgments, but such assessments are ordinarily expressed in value-loaded terms. To say that a person or a group is attempting to live up to or realize a standard certainly suggests virtuous dedication on the part of the people in question. To declare that a country which is not feudalized is lagging behind is to indicate that the area is in some sense backward. Even more evidently evaluative are such expressions as decayed, decadent, and bastard feudalism, all of them implying a society's failure or inability to maintain pure principles that were once upheld.[49] One is occasionally struck by a rather sentimental regret that the societies, individuals, and groups which might have been encouraged by high marks to persevere or shamed by low ones into exerting an additional push are unable to benefit from them. Even if formulated in value-free terms, analyses of societies on the basis of their conformity to or deviation from a norm offer little insight into the societies themselves, however much the process of comparison may stimulate and challenge the ingenuity of historians. To produce helpful insights, comparative history must involve the examination of the widest possible range of elements, not those idiosyncratically dubbed essential by the historians devising the standard to be applied.

Asserting that individual rulers actively and consciously aimed at establishing feudalism and judging them in terms of this aim is, at another level, equally misconceived and misleading. That William the Conqueror, the Normans, and the Crusaders wanted to establish control within the areas they conquered as effectively as circumstances permitted is, I think, unquestionable; that they used and molded the institutional forms and arrangements with which they were familiar and which were available to them is equally undeniable. To suggest, however, that they operated on the basis of a definite, preconceived scheme focused primarily on the fief, and to measure their accomplishments by such a standard, is to give a distorted, simplistic picture of their actions and policies, projecting into the minds of people who dealt creatively and flexibly with numerous options and who

of William's accomplishments—which only once mentions the adjective "feudal"—see D. C. Douglas, "William the Conqueror: Duke and King," in Dorothy Whitelock, D. C. Douglas, C. H. Lemmon, and Frank Barlow, *The Norman Conquest: Its Setting and Impact* (London, 1966), 45–76; see p. 65 for "feudal."

[48] Christopher Brooke, *Europe in the Central Middle Ages, 962–1154* (New York [1963]), 100.

[49] See the comments of K. B. McFarlane, "'Bastard Feudalism,'" *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 20 (1943–45): 161–62.

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manipulated a variety of institutional devices to achieve their purposes a degree of calculation, narrowness of vision, and rigidity that the surviving evidence does not suggest characterized them and in which even a contemporary management specialist might have difficulty believing.

What of the other virtues attributed to feudalism as a means of comprehending medieval social and political life? As far as pedagogy is concerned, students should certainly be spared an approach that inevitably gives an unwarranted impression of unity and systematization and unduly emphasizes, owing to the etymology of the word, the significance of the fief. Even if historians agreed to define feudalism as feudal society and included within its scope all facets of social and political development, the practical problem would remain. There are other, more basic, disadvantages. To advocate teaching what is acknowledged to be deceptive and what must later be untaught reflects an unsettling attitude of condescension toward younger students. Furthermore, not only does such a procedure waste the time of teacher and student, but its supporters apparently disregard the difficulty of, as a student of mine puts it, " 'erasing' an erroneous concept or fact from the mind of a child who has been taught it, mistakenly or intentionally, at a lower school level." This student, Marie Heinbach, who teaches social studies in a New York junior high school, goes on to point out that "the difficulty becomes almost insurmountable when the amazing retentive powers of a young and impressionable child are considered. In addition, as the amount of time between the learning and unlearning of a concept increases, it becomes nearly impossible totally to correct the misconceptions that a student may have."[50] Experts who knowingly mislead their students appear to be unsure of their own ability to present a simplified account of the conclusions concerning medieval society that historians have now reached. Those of their students who do not progress beyond the introductory stage are denied the knowledge that most medieval historians study the actions and interrelationships of human beings rather than concentrating on the formulation and refinement of definitions of abstractions. Such students are never exposed to the problems of social and family structure and their corresponding etiquettes or to the problems of territorial loyalties and group attachments that historians are now examining. Presented with an abstract model and sternly cautioned against assuming its general relevance and applicability, only the staunchest will be motivated to pursue the individuals and groups lurking behind and beyond the ism.

For scholars the approach has equally little use. Applying an artificially fabricated standard in which certain components are divorced from the context in which they existed is essentially sterile. And those who investigate the workings of medieval society run the risk of having their vision narrowed, their perspective anachronistically skewed, and their receptivity

[50] This statement was made in an examination submitted on March 27, 1974.

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to divergent data consequently blunted unless they firmly divorce themselves from the preconceptions and sets associated with the oversimplified models and abstractions with which they have been indoctrinated and which they themselves pass on to their students.

What of the indispensability of feudalism? Here a distinction must be made. While the creation of intuitive abstractions and simple Ideal Types can indeed be explained by invoking the infinite and confusing variety of human experience, it is quite another matter to suggest that the procedure is obligatory, necessary, or laudable. Alternative modes of classifying and describing exist and can be used. Again, attempting to justify the formulation and use of such models and abstractions by maintaining that scholarly and scientific terminology and common usage assume their existence is patently circular, avoiding as this argument does the obvious fact that scholarly terminology can be revised and common usage clarified. Far more appropriate to express regret and to apologize for measures attributable to the weaknesses and defects of human modes of expression and perception. Historians and social scientists can, like natural scientists, devise multifactor, heuristic models that encompass and account for the available evidence, are reformulated to include newly discovered data, and are not misleadingly labeled so as to suggest either system and conscious organization where none existed or the predominant importance of one element in a situation in which many elements are known to have been significant.[51] Such multifactor models and descriptive, narrative accounts, which emphasize complexity and the unique, can convincingly be said to encourage fuller, less distorted, and hence more acceptable understanding of the past than any "one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view."[52]

The contention that such general terms as "feudalism" are essential for intelligent discourse is also debatable, and those who advance this defense reveal their own discomfiture when they invoke other commonly used abstractions, such as "war" and "agriculture," to serve as buttressing middle elements. Intelligent discourse devoid of general abstract terms is, the argument runs, inconceivable. All abstractions—feudalism, war, agriculture—are similar in nature. Therefore the isms are indispensable if intelligent discourse is to occur. This chain of reasoning is, however, flawed in its second step, for there is an evident difference between, on the one hand, those collective descriptive abstractions arrived at by isolating common features of different phenomena similar enough to permit the use and assure the acceptance of single words to denote them, and, on the other

[51] See, for the natural sciences, N. R. Hanson, *Observation and Explanation: A Guide to Philosophy of Science* (New York, 1971), 77–84; T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* vol. 2, no. 2 of the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (2d ed.; Chicago, 1970), 100–02; George Gamow, *Thirty Years That Shook Physics: The Story of Quantum Theory* (Garden City, 1966), 155; and James D. Watson, *The Double Helix* (New York, 1969), 18, 38, 47, 49, 61, 83, 123.

[52] Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, 1949), 90, quoted and discussed in Lane, *Introduction to Structuralism,* 25.

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hand, those abstract analytic constructs formulated and defined as a shorthand means of designating the characteristics that the observers consider essential to various time periods, modes of organization, movements, and doctrines. To a degree to which the first type is not, the second sort of general term is inevitably and often intentionally affected by the theories and assumptions of the formulators and users. Disagreements over the exact meaning of "war" or "agriculture" do occur, but they can ordinarily be resolved by introducing greater precision and clarity into the definitions of the terms, whose core signification is not generally contested. In distinction, infinite disagreement about the meanings of the isms is possible and perhaps inevitable, since the terms were not devised to designate the basic elements of fundamentally similar classes of phenomena but rather to refer to selected elements of complex phenomena, the choice of which inevitably involves the idiosyncratic value judgments of the terms' inventors and employers. Thus, however easy it is to say what the words "fief," "capital," and "merchant" mean, it is another thing entirely to seek consensus on the definitions of "feudalism," "capitalism," and "mercantilism," precisely because of the subjective nature of the definitions of these words. To raise the level of discourse and make it truly intelligent, there should be general agreement to consider the isms no more than the artificialities they are.

DIRECT EXPRESSIONS OF DISCONTENT with the term "feudalism" have increased in number and strength over the past two decades. From time to time there has seemed reason to hope that, with a resounding whoop, historians would join together, following the example of the National Assembly, to annihilate the feudal regime and, with the good members of the Legion of Honor, agree "to combat . . . any enterprise tending to reestablish it."[53] At least partly responsible for the mounting volume of protest is the reorientation of perspective that took place in 1953 with the publication of two remarkable books, one French and one English, both dealing with the political and social life of Western Europe in the tenth through the twelfth centuries, both concerned with individuals rather than abstractions, and both avoiding the medieval isms.

Of these books the purest—in that it does not, as far as I can tell, contain the word "feudalism"—is Richard W. Southern's study, *The Making of the Middle Ages*. In a section devoted to "The Bonds of Society" Southern presents an illuminating introduction to the political life of the eleventh and twelfth centuries by concentrating on a single, "unusually instructive" example of "what happened where the control exercised by the past was least effective, and where the disturbing elements of trade, large

[53] Bloch, *Société féodale*, 1: 2–3 (*Feudal Society*, xvii); see also Boutruche, *Seigneurie et féodalité*, 20–21.

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towns and active commercial oligarchies were not conspicuous." Discussing the emergence of the county of Anjou, Southern uses such abstract terms as "the disintegration of authority" and "the shaping of a new political order." He writes, generally, of "an age of serious, expansive wars waged by well-organized and strongly fortified territorial lords." The term "feudal" is sometimes used in a general sense, in contexts in which it clearly implies more than connection or involvement with the fief. When the term is given this broader meaning, however, it seems to be so used out of force of habit rather than from any conscious conviction that it is the most appropriate and meaningful word to be found. "The art of feudal government" and "the early feudal age," neither phrase explicitly defined by Southern, are reminiscent of Bloch's *La Société féodale,* a book Southern recommends, and they strike a jarring note of vagueness and imprecision in a discussion otherwise notable for its concreteness. On the few other occasions when Southern employs the term "feudal" in this general way, alternative expressions that he devises to describe the phenomena in question are strikingly more informative. "Knightly" is one of these alternative terms, and, on a more extended scale, "the straightforward feudal-contract view of society" is far less subtle and suggestive than his evocative description of an "imagination . . . circumscribed by the ties of lordship and vassalage, by the recollection of fiefs and honours and well-known shrines, by the sacred bond of comradeship."[54]

Only a small portion of Southern's book is devoted to social and political ties and the exercise of governmental power, but Georges Duby, in his study of the Mâconnais in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, dedicates an entire volume to these subjects. Hence it is all the more noteworthy that in his index, as in Southern's, there is no reference to *féodalité,* although the index does list the indisputably acceptable terms *feudataire, fidèle, fidélité,* and *fief,* which are derived from and accurately reflect the terminology and usage of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[55] Duby's avoidance of the term *féodalité* is consistent with his avowed purpose in writing his book. In his preface he announces that he is studying a small province in order to approach human beings directly, without isolating them from their milieu.[56] This he does, describing first the state of society in the Mâconnais at the end of the tenth century, then the period of independent castellanies from

[54] Richard W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, 1953), 90–91, 80–81, 87, 86, 262, 55, 241. When Southern mentions "the straightforward feudal-contract view of society," he associates the term "feudatory" with the "holding [of] land in return for military service" (p. 55); see also p. 56 for a reference to "the formula of feudal government" and p. 242 for "feudal custom" and "feudal etiquette"; for "knightly ideal" see p. 241; see also pp. 55, 243.

[55] Duby, *Société aux XIe et XIIe siècles,* 666 (reprint, 501).

[56] "J'ai volontairement conduit mes recherches dans le cadre étroit d'une petite province. La méthode des monographies régionales permet en effet d'approcher directement les hommes sans les isoler de leur milieu." *Ibid.,* ix (reprint, 7). In his conclusion, Duby again describes his approach: "Pour approcher de plus près les hommes, nous avons concentré notre attention sur une toute petite région" (p. 644 [reprint, 482]).

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980 to 1160, and finally the movement between 1160 and 1240 from castellany to principality. His conclusions are significant, first because of the wealth of data on which they are founded but even more because the Mâconnais lies within—if at the southern extreme of—the area between the Loire and the Rhine where countless scholars have seen "classical feudalism" emerging, and also because its history does not exemplify the characteristics associated with this development.

Stressing the survival of comital power and superiority until the end of the tenth century, Duby shows that among the higher ranks of society the ties of fidelity linking those agreeing to some sort of mutual support were vague and imprecise, like family ties, and can best be described as confirming a relationship of *amicitia*. As the count's power declined and as that of the castellans increased, bonds of dependence among the higher classes became more important, and grants of land were used to solidify the ties until by 1075 land outweighed loyalty as their determinant. Obligations were still indefinite, however, and military service was not a significant component. Between men of unequal status, dependent relationships were closer, but the strength and meaning of these ties were limited by the small value of the fiefs that lords gave their followers, who generally possessed large allodial holdings, and by the multiplicity of the ties. According to Duby, "feudal institutions"—by which he apparently means not only fiefs but also homage and vassalage—had only superficial importance. They constituted a sort of superstructure that formalized without affecting pre-existing relationships.

> Feudal institutions were adapted to the previous structure of the higher class without significantly modifying it. Between great lords or knights, homage is a simple guarantee, an agreement not to harm; between a small noble and a powerful one, it is a true dedication, an agreement to serve. Vassalage and the fief, customary practices born in private usage, organized the relations that unequal division of wealth and power had already determined; they created no additional ones. In eleventh-century Mâconnais, there was no pyramid of vassals, there was no feudal system.[57]

Duby concludes that for the higher classes "feudalism was a step toward anarchy," but by this he evidently means not that any ill-conceived and abortive attempt had been made to create harmony by introducing homage, vassalage, and the fief, but that the links ordered by these institutions were not strong or meaningful enough to serve as effective restraints. These were instead provided by the teachings and intervention of the Church, by family bonds, and by a variety of oaths. Thus, "although violent and disturbed, the world of lords was not anarchic."[58] In this period the nobility exercised

[57] *Ibid.*, 94–116, 140–41, 172, 177–85, 194–95, see also 185–93, 291 (reprint, 93–108, 124–25, 149, 153–58, 164–65, see also 158–64, 235–36).

[58] *Ibid.*, 204 (reprint, 170). For a full discussion of these restraints see pp. 196–204 (reprint, 165–70).

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for their own benefit governmental powers over the lower classes, but their actual control over land did not increase.[59]

In the late twelfth and early thirteenth century the economy of the Mâconnais was transformed, and the king of France, long absent from the area, reappeared there. Economic pressures and royal policy produced a proliferation of ties of dependence and a marked decrease in allodial holdings; concomitantly, services may have become more definite and heavier. As far as justice was concerned, "the peace of the prince replaced the peace of God," and judicial procedures developed in the eleventh century were regularized and made more effective.[60]

Duby occasionally uses the word *féodalité,* but the term has no central significance in his book, thanks to his determination to focus on individuals and their actions. In his general conclusion he relates his findings to his own definition of feudalism, which, as has been seen, involves the disintegration of central authority and the development of an inclusive web of dependencies. In the Mâconnais, he reminds his readers, these two characteristics appeared successively rather than simultaneously, since in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when most lands were freely held, jurisdictional powers were in the hands of private lords, and in the thirteenth century, when most lands were involved with dependent relationships, sovereignty reappeared in the persons of kings and princes.[61] Duby refuses to comment on the districts outside the Mâconnais, and he calls for additional local studies. Nonetheless he notes that "the society of the Mâconnais did not evolve in isolation." Pointing out that the Mâconnais was "a province of feudalism with marked individual characteristics,"[62] he implicitly suggests that other areas lying within the fabled heartland of feudalism were equally distinctive.

Duby does not openly attack the use of the concept of feudalism, nor does he denounce the idea that institutions in the Loire-Rhine region were similar enough to be described as a single phenomenon. Still, his conclusions demonstrate the futility of generalizations that are not based on the study of successive generations of human beings inhabiting a restricted area. They also suggest the inappropriateness of descriptive terms that fail to convey a sense of the variety of experience and development to be found throughout Western Europe between the tenth and the late twelfth centuries. When I once asked Monsieur Duby what difference there was between his book on the Mâconnais and Ganshof's study of feudalism, he

[59] *Ibid.,* 329–30 (reprint, 261–62). For the close connection Duby now posits between the development of the ideology of the peace of God and "les premiers phases de la féodalisation," see note 36 above and Duby, *Guerriers et paysans,* 185.

[60] Duby, *Société aux XIe et XIIe siècles,* 473–569, 571 (reprint, 361–427, 429).

[61] Using Bloch's periodization, Duby concludes that only in this sense could there be said to have been "two feudal ages." The second age—a time of fiefs, censives, and feudal principalities—contrasted with the earlier age of independent castellanies, and Duby believes that it began no earlier than 1160 and that it ended in 1240. *Ibid.,* 642–43 (reprint, 481–82).

[62] *Ibid.,* 644 (reprint, 482).

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replied with a modest shrug of the shoulders, "Toute la différence du monde, Madame." His own book is a testimony to his conviction that understanding the workings of medieval society necessarily involves exploring the intricate complexities of life rather than elaborating definitions and formulas designed to minimize, simplify, and, in the last analysis, obscure these complexities.[63]

SOUTHERN AND DUBY had their predecessors—historians who probed beyond or disregarded the construct feudalism and who concentrated on analyzing and describing the many different ties and modes of dependency binding human beings to one another. Unquestionably, the work of Duby and Southern has acted as an additional, powerful stimulus, prompting more scholars to study the actual functioning of society in different areas. In general, however, and certainly in works directed at a popular rather than a scholarly audience, the situation remains much the same as it has been, and there is virtually universal resistance and opposition to abandoning the term "feudalism" and to confining the word "feudal" to its narrow sense—"relating to fiefs." The reservations regarding the use of the generalized constructs implicit in the books of Southern and Duby have not yet had the widespread effect that might have been hoped.

Exceptions do, of course, exist. In the books he has published since 1953 Southern has consistently employed his brilliant descriptive techniques and has assiduously avoided the term "feudalism."[64] R. H. C. Davis is now following a similar path, having apparently undergone something of a conversion. In the history of medieval Europe that he wrote in 1957 the word "feudalism" occasionally appears. England after William's conquest is called "the best and simplest example of a feudal monarchy." The index refers readers wishing to learn about "fully-developed feudalism" to pages Davis evidently considers relevant to this subject. How refreshing, then, to turn to an article

[63] See, however, his more restrained comments in "La Féodalité?" 765–66. Duby recommended Ganshof's study of feudalism as a guide and reference work but suggested that the very clarity, simplicity, and Cartesian rigor which are among its chief virtues may give the reader a false impression of order and regularity.

[64] See his book *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 1970). Under the circumstances it is not difficult to forgive him for translating the word *homo,* which literally means no more than "man," as "vassal" in his edition of the *Vita Anselmi: The Life of St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, by Eadmer* (Edinburgh, 1962), 111. Southern recently told me that he thinks "deplorable" not only the term "feudalism" but also the words "humanism" and "scholasticism." He said that he had never knowingly used the word "feudalism" to refer to actual conditions in the Middle Ages. He offered, however, a tentative and qualified defense of the word in *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford, 1970), 29. Southern's work suggests that he thinks the words "humanism" and "scholasticism" may have some practical value, however defective he may judge them on a theoretical plane. Medieval humanism is the central subject of his collected essays, and in a lecture, "The Origins of Universities in the Middle Ages," given at Philadelphia on April 8, 1974, Southern emphasized the importance of "scholasticism" and "scholastic" thought, calling the universities "the power house of scholasticism." In his conclusion, however, he warned that "European scholastic development" should be envisioned not as a single whole but as marked by diversity and variety.

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on the Norman Conquest written ten years later and to find there a convincing analysis of William's accomplishments that contains no reference to the ism or its associated forms.[65]

Southern and Davis are unfortunately in a minority. Far more numerous are the scholars who, while attacking the concept feudalism, still use the term and even encourage its propagation by suggesting new and better definitions. The contradictions in the work of Richardson and Sayles have already been discussed. Fully as puzzling is the case of Duby himself. Having implicitly questioned the aptness of the term in his study of the Mâconnais, he proceeded in 1958 not only to employ it but also, as has been seen, to advance an alternative definition, unusual and idiosyncratic, which he appears subsequently to have rejected. In a still later work, directed at a less scholarly audience, Duby employs the term *féodal* which, while undefined, clearly refers to something more general than the fief. It is found modifying such nouns as *éparpillement, forces, cours, princes,* and *seigneur;* a section of the book is entitled "Les féodaux," and the construct feudalism is several times personified.[66] A popular work published in 1973 shows that Duby's dedication to and reliance on the term have, in recent years, simply increased. He repeatedly refers to *féodalité* and uses the adjective *féodal* in a vague, indefinite way, and he goes so far as to designate the period from the mid-eleventh to the late twelfth century "les temps féodaux."[67] Saying that feudalism was characterized by the disintegration of monarchical authority and associating it with the institutions of the *seigneurie,* Duby presents feudalism as being implanted and established; he refers to feudalization, a feudal epoch, feudal society, feudal Europe, feudal peace, feudal structures, and a feudal economy and economic system.[68]

Striking inconsistencies appear in Christopher Brooke's five-page discus-

[65] R. H. C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe from Constantine to Saint Louis* (London, 1957), s.v. "feudalism" in the index, and see also p. 127, where he enclosed the term "feudalism" in quotation marks; and see pp. 295, 414. Davis, "The Norman Conquest," *History,* 51 (1966): 279–86, reprinted in C. W. Hollister, ed., *The Impact of the Norman Conquest* (New York, 1969), 123–33.

[66] Duby, *Adolescence de la Chrétiente occidentale,* 60–61, 84. The translation of this book exaggerates these tendencies: see the corresponding pages, *Making of the Christian West,* 61–62, 83–84, and note that the section Duby entitled "Les féodaux" is called "Feudalism" in the translation. In *L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1962), Duby may refer to "la seigneurie des temps féodaux" (p. 379), but he generally avoids the term, and *féodalité* is not listed in the index. Note, however, that in the translation of the book published in 1968, "temps féodaux" becomes "the feudal period," and "rente seigneuriale" is transformed into "feudal rent." *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West,* tr. Cynthia Postan (London, 1968), 171, 232–59.

[67] Duby, *Guerriers et paysans,* 179–204, and see note 36 above.

[68] See also *ibid.,* 194 ("l'implantation de la féodalité"), 262 ("l'établissement de la féodalité"), 184 ("l'établissement des structures féodales"), 185 ("la féodalisation"), 278 ("l'époque féodale"), 192 ("la société féodale"), 201 ("l'Europe féodale"), 300 ("la paix féodale"), 184 ("les structures féodales"), 189 ("l'économie féodale"), 187 ("un système économique que l'on peut, en simplifiant, appeler féodal"). It is heartening to note that the review of Duby's *Guerriers et paysans* in the *Times Literary Supplement* does not contain the words "feudal" or "feudalism." Aug. 17, 1973, pp. 941–42.

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sion of barons and knights in a book he published in 1963. Having begun by declaring that "few historical labels are more ambiguous than 'feudal' " and by proclaiming that he would therefore "use it as little as possible," having then warned that "it is doubtful whether [strict feudalism] ever existed outside the imaginations of historians," he proceeds, without defining the term "feudal," to use it, imprecisely and ambiguously, in writing of "the feudal bond," "feudal conceptions," "the feudal contract," "the feudal oath," and "feudal and quasi-feudal institutions." He also refers to "highly developed" feudalism, "classical feudalism," "French feudalism," and "strict feudalism." Finally he both reifies feudalism and uses the phrase "coherent feudalism" to designate a consciously formulated and adopted set of goals and principles.[69]

THE HESITANCIES, CONTRADICTIONS, AND INCONSISTENCIES that have been reviewed—and that are wholly typical of statements found in the books on medieval society published in the past twenty years—clearly demonstrate how necessary it is to reassess the value of the words "feudal" and "feudalism." It must be admitted that there is little possibility of ridding the historical vocabulary of them, adopted as they have been by the scholarly community in general and by the economists in particular. The terms exist. They have been and probably will be used for many years. As words students know if they know nothing else about the Middle Ages, they cannot be avoided. But confrontation need not mean capitulation, for it is perfectly possible to instruct students at all levels to use "feudal" only with specific reference to fiefs and to teach them what feudalism is, always has been, and always will be—a construct devised in the seventeenth century and then and subsequently used by lawyers, scholars, teachers, and polemicists to refer to phenomena, generally associated more or less closely with the Middle Ages, but always and inevitably phenomena selected by the person employing the term and reflecting that particular viewer's biases, values, and orientations. Illustrations of the many meanings attached to "feudal" and "feudalism" can be given, and students with a flair for historiography can be encouraged to explore the eccentricities of usage associated with the terms.

Other students will be directed to the study of medieval society and politics, and they and their instructors will be faced with the necessity and challenge of finding an adequate means of describing the elements historians have investigated and should explore and the positive conclusions that have been reached.[70] Throughout, the terminology and word usage of those who

[69] Brooke, *Europe in the Central Middle Ages*, 95–96, 99–100. Brooke writes that "in its origin feudalism provided for the recruitment of vitally needed cavalry troops" (p. 100). See also pp. 1076–77 above. Note, too, that having just questioned the validity of the idea of "strict feudalism," Brooke scrupulously encloses "feudal" in quotation marks when he refers to "' feudal' means" of raising troops (p. 100).

[70] See Joseph R. Strayer, "The Future of Medieval History," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 2 (1971): 182. Only since the appearance in 1968 of Fredric Cheyette's invaluable collec-

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lived in the Middle Ages must be emphasized, and attention must be paid to the shifting meanings of key words, as well as to the gulf between actual practice and the formal, stylized records that have survived. Some elements will be pointed to as constants of general importance: the slowness and difficulty of communication, the general insecurity, the sluggish rate of technological change, and the reverence for tradition. The varying effects and significance of terrain, warfare, and violence must be emphasized. Stress must also be given to the resultant regional and diachronic variations in forms of government, modes of military organization, social and family structure, social mobility, the relationship between social class and function, styles of agricultural exploitation and commercial activity, and urban growth. Attention must be called to the different social and political relationships in which human beings were involved, to the ceremonies through which these relationships were fixed and manifested, and to the varying sorts of ties that superficially similar ceremonies could be used to create: bonds of obligation, fidelity, and support between sovereigns and their subjects, created and confirmed by oaths, pledges, and services; ties of loyalty, solidarity, and mutual assistance among people of similar and different social classes, formalized in communes, confraternities, gilds, leagues, and alliances, constituted through mutual undertakings that were sometimes left vague and sometimes clearly defined, solidified through privileges granted to and demanded by these groups; religious ties binding members of local congregations, regional churches, and similar faiths; ties of dependence forged between individuals or inherited from the past, sometimes involving friendship, sometimes service, sometimes protection, reinforced by gestures and oaths, resulting in benefits—material, monetary, territorial, social—to one or both parties; family bonds, revealed and consolidated in testamentary provisions, marriages, special festivities, and feuds and vendettas. The written and unwritten rules governing these ties and relationships must be considered, as must the ways in which and the different degrees to which these principles were systematized and enforced.

But to be properly understood, these elements must be observed as they developed, interacted, and changed, and thus the importance of presenting searching and detailed descriptions of areas characterized by different forms of governmental and social structure and organization and by different modes of development. Regions where strong monarchies developed and survived must be given as extensive consideration as areas where they disappeared, so that any given region—the Empire, England, Italy, Normandy, the Ile-de-France, the Mâconnais—will be considered neither abnormal nor typical but will be viewed as an instance of the varying ways human beings responded to similar and dissimilar circumstances, whose

tion of translated essays, *Lordship and Community,* has it been practically possible to direct beginning students to the recent literature in which this perspective on medieval society is reflected.

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impact was conditioned by the total pasts of the people they affected. Those who are introduced to the study of medieval social and political life in this way will be far less likely than those presented with definitions and monistically oriented models to be misled about the conditions of existence in the Middle Ages. They will find it difficult to contrive and parrot simplistic and inaccurate generalizations about medieval Europe, and they may be challenged to inquire into subjects and areas as yet uninvestigated and to seek solutions to problems as yet unanswered.

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 terms 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.

Despite the examples set by Southern and Duby some twenty years ago and followed in the interim by some scholars, historians have been generally loath to restrict the term "feudal" and discard the term "feudalism," particularly in dealing with general rather than specialized audiences. Feudalism's reign has continued virtually unchallenged, with ambivalence characterizing the attitudes of most historians toward the subject. The situation, however, can and should change. The arguments advanced to defend using the terms as they have been used in the past are weak, based as they are on vaguely articulated assumptions concerning the concept's utility as a verbal and intellectual tool, as a teaching device, or as a mode of evaluation—none of which is convincingly established. Similarly unsatisfactory are justifications founded on hypothesized requirements: the historian's need, as scientist, for abstractions like feudalism; the basic demands of discourse; or necessities created by the fundamental and seemingly insurmountable limitations of the human mind. Preferable alternative perspectives and terms exist, and there seems no reason to delay channeling all available energies to the study of human beings who lived in the past, thus putting an end to the elaboration of arid definitions and the construction of simplistic models. The tyrant feudalism must be declared once and for all deposed and its influence over students of the Middle Ages finally ended. Perhaps in its downfall it will carry with it those other obdurate isms—manorial, scholastic, and human—that have dominated for far too long the investigation of medieval life and thought.

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