
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Dynamics of Labour and the Overcoming of Feudalism: Internal Contradictions and Socioeconomic Transformations

Ricardo da Costa Nunes

Ministry of Finance, Brasília, Brazil

Corresponding Author: Ricardo da Costa Nunes, **E-mail:** rcrdnns11@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the transformations within the feudal system in Western Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries, focusing on the interplay of economic, social, and political dynamics. It highlights the decline of personal obligations and the shift from in-kind rents to monetary rents, driven by increasing peasant autonomy and the monetisation of the economy. Economic shifts, such as monetisation, reshaped feudal relations and set the stage for new modes of production. These changes destabilised the feudal order as inflation eroded the value of fixed tributes, leading to the fragmentation of the seigneurial domain. The rise of urban centres and market expansion accentuated internal contradictions, particularly between the productive forces (the tools, skills, and knowledge used in production) and production relations (the social relationships people enter into during the production process). These contradictions paved the way for the dissolution of feudal structures. Drawing on a Marxist perspective, this study underscores the centrality of class tensions and systemic contradictions in the transition towards a capitalist economy grounded in labour mobility and private property.

| KEYWORDS

Feudalism, monetary rents, serfdom, land redistribution, economic transformation, Marxist analysis.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 January 2025

PUBLISHED: 19 January 2025

DOI: 10.32996/pjpsh.2025.5.1.1

1. Introduction

The decline of the Roman Empire marked a pivotal moment in European history, transitioning from a predominantly slave-based socio-economic structure to the emergence of feudalism. This transition reflected profound changes in production relations, power dynamics, and land ownership. Feudalism, the dominant medieval European system, was characterised by its agrarian economy, decentralised political authority, and a rigid social hierarchy that tied peasants to the land they cultivated. Over time, however, the feudal system underwent significant transformations driven by demographic pressures, economic shifts, and the growing monetisation of society.

These shifts were especially pronounced during the 12th and 13th centuries, marked by profound economic and social reorganisation. Labour obligations such as *corvées* began to decline, giving way to monetary rents, while the monetisation of the economy reshaped the relationships between peasants and lords. This period also saw the fragmentation of the seigneurial domain as the perception of feudal rights shifted from a legitimate system of governance to a parasitic structure.

This study examines labour dynamics and the evolution of feudal production relations during this transformative period. It focuses on how these changes affected peasants and lords, highlighting the internal contradictions destabilising feudal structures. By analysing these transitions, this research sheds light on the complex economic and social forces that paved the way for the decline of feudalism and the emergence of centralised and monetised economic systems.

This work's analysis of the feudal system's transformations is grounded in a Marxist perspective. It emphasises the interplay between productive forces and relations of production as the driving force of historical change. This framework provides a lens to understand feudalism's decline as a process rooted in internal contradictions, exacerbated by external pressures such as urbanisation and monetisation.

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This study is organised into five sections. Following this introduction, the second section establishes the theoretical framework, grounded in a Marxist perspective, to analyse the transition from the Roman slave-based system to feudalism. The third section examines the evolution of labour relations, focusing on the decline of *corvées* and the rise of monetary rents. The fourth section explores the processes of urbanisation and monetisation, highlighting their disruptive effects on feudal structures. The fifth and final section addresses the decline of the feudal system, emphasising the internal contradictions and external pressures that paved the way for capitalist production. Together, these sections provide a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic transformations that marked the decline of feudalism in medieval Europe.

2. Theoretical Framework

From a Marxist perspective, the fall of the Roman Empire marked a rupture in the mode of production, where the collapse of slave-based institutions paved the way for the emergence of feudalism (Marx & Engels, 1975). This transition laid the groundwork for decentralised power and new forms of labour exploitation, with serfs replacing enslaved people as the main productive force (Anderson, 1974). According to Hilton (1974), the interaction between rural areas and urban centres was important in fragmenting the large seigneurial estates, while the rising bourgeoisie consolidated new forms of social and economic organisation. As Jacques Le Goff (1992) highlighted, the growth of cities and the monetisation of the economy catalysed the decline of traditional feudal structures. These economic shifts transformed the role of peasant labour, fostering greater mobility and establishing new dynamics between rural and urban areas.

During the Late Roman Empire, colonists served as precursors to medieval serfs. However, not all serfs descended from the colony. Serfdom emerged from various social sources, including formerly enslaved people, populations subdued during barbarian invasions and colonists. This diversity highlights the complexity of the transition from a slave-based system to feudalism.

The predominant form of labour was servile, with serfs inseparable from the land they cultivated. Slavery also persisted, although it was in clear decline due to religious, military, and financial difficulties in acquiring new slaves. Additionally, it was considered less economically advantageous, as lords had to bear the maintenance costs of slaves even when they became unproductive (Drescher, 1977; Phillips, 2017).

The barbarian tribes that occupied the Roman Empire re-established free peasantries, while the collapse of Roman structures and subsequent invasions revitalised older forms of agrarian organisation. These social transformations also contributed to the developing new hierarchies of power, which began consolidating during the feudal period.

As highlighted by Weber (1905), the formation of estates during the feudal era reflected not only economic transformations but also cultural and religious changes. These estates, often exceeding 1,000 hectares, were predominantly owned by prominent nobles, monarchs, and the Church. The Church's holdings were exceptionally stable due to the indivisibility of clerical estates under celibacy laws.

In addition to their economic function, ecclesiastical estates benefitted from the stability provided by clerical celibacy, which prevented the fragmentation of properties. This characteristic made the Church one of the largest and most influential landowners of the time, consolidating its wealth and its central role in the feudal social hierarchy. These economic structures reinforced the perpetuation of social hierarchies, where the labour of serfs sustained not only agricultural production but also the political and cultural power of both the Church and the nobility.

Structurally, feudal estates were divided into two main segments:

- **Seigneurial Reserve:** Cultivated directly by the lord, this portion accounted for 25% to 50% of the estate's land and included castles, workshops, barns, meadows, and forests.
- **Manorial lands** refer to smaller plots allocated to peasants in exchange for labour services or produce. Peasant households typically subsisted on this land, which included a house, garden, and approximately 15 hectares of arable fields.

The reliance on serf labour tied to the land was central to sustaining these estates. This labour system shaped not only economic output but also reinforced the social hierarchies of the feudal period, particularly benefitting the Church and the nobility.

The feudal workforce primarily consisted of serfs, whose attachment to the land was vital for sustaining estates, particularly those owned by the Church and the nobility. Slavery persisted in a diminished capacity, constrained by economic inefficiency and acquisition challenges, while wage labour played a marginal role in the feudal economy. As Bloch (1961) notes, wage labour was primarily confined to the cultivation of the seigneurial reserve and had a limited impact on overall agricultural productivity, a trend further confirmed by Doehaerd (1971).

The feudal hierarchy of land rights was intricately linked to a complex political organisation involving monarchs, suzerains, and vassals. Monarchs acted as feudal overlords to their vassals, bound by reciprocal ties of loyalty rather than serving as supreme sovereigns above all subjects. A suzerain wielded authority primarily within their own domain and, beyond it, often held only a ceremonial role. The suzerain's property rights were also relative, as they were vested by a higher-ranking noble to whom they owed military service.

Peasants who occupied and cultivated the land lacked ownership rights. This hierarchical structure extended to the lowest levels, leaving cultivators without secure tenure over the soil they worked. The Church, meanwhile, operated as an autonomous institution within this feudal framework, holding vast and indivisible estates under the celibacy laws that ensured their continuity.

Relentless warfare disrupted the feudal structure, severely impacting free peasantries through land confiscations, the burdens of military service, and recurring destruction, collectively undermining agricultural practices' sustainability.

Serfdom, emerging either as a replacement for slavery or through the widespread subjugation of peasants to local lords, became a cornerstone of the feudal system. Its manifestations were varied, extending beyond the confines of conventional feudal relationships. This diversity reflects the feudal mode of production, primarily subsistence-oriented and characterised by the absence of labour and its products as commodities. In feudalism, neither work nor its output functioned as tradable goods, distinguishing the system from later economic structures. Freehold property began to decline, consolidating the legal principle that "*no land without a lord*," as highlighted by Vivier in his analysis of feudal structures (Vivier, 1998, p. 44). This process, paradoxically, tended to legally crystallise the feudal system at a time when historical developments were already pointing to the dissolution of its economic and social foundations.

Relentless warfare persistently eroded the feudal structure, devastating free peasantries through land confiscations, recurring destruction, and the burdens of military service. This continuous conflict ultimately undermined sustainable agricultural practices, rendering the livelihoods of free peasants increasingly unviable.

Serfdom arose from the spontaneous convergence of varied personal statuses under the pressure of social realities and dominant classes, which tended towards a progressively uniform situation. In this sense, the law merely crystallised pre-existing relationships, reflecting dominant social and economic structures rather than creating them.

During feudal society's declining period, economic conditions could indeed favour an evolution from serfdom to liberty, but this was not a universal phenomenon. Therefore, one should not assume a continuous and linear evolution from ancient slavery to serfdom and freedom. The disappearance of serfdom was tied to the intensity of class struggles, as well as other internal contradictions that gave dynamism to the prevailing economic system. Freedman (1997) highlights that peasant movements often appropriated ideas of equality and liberty, expanding their demands beyond mere material conditions.

Alongside the evolution of serfdom, the organisation of village communities played a crucial role in peasant resistance and the construction of relative autonomy from seigniorial authority. Small peasant holdings could not have sustained themselves without common rights over forests and pasturelands—the formation of peasants into communities allowed for the relative emancipation of serfs as a class. Communal lands and unused allodial lands always represented a significant sector of peasant autonomy and resistance, with important consequences for agricultural productivity. As these areas were expected of many fiefs, achieving greater unity among them was impossible.

3. From In-kind Rents to Monetary Rents

The transition from in-kind rents to monetary rents marked a fundamental shift in the feudal economy of medieval Europe. This change reflected broader economic transformations driven by increasing trade, urbanisation, and the growing role of currency in rural and urban exchanges. By replacing traditional obligations such as *corvées*, monetary rents reshaped the relationships between lords and peasants, creating both opportunities and tensions within the feudal system.

This shift altered the feudal economy's foundational labour obligations. *Corvées* and *servitude*, which had ensured a steady surplus for the lords while restricting the autonomy of peasants, began to decline as monetary rents became prevalent. These changes gave peasants greater autonomy over their labour while introducing new economic pressures tied to market dynamics. Adopting monetary rents initially offered greater flexibility for lords but eventually led to vulnerabilities, such as income erosion due to inflation.

This section will explore how these changes altered economic relationships, paving the way for profound societal developments.

The decline of *corvées*, or mandatory labour services, marked a significant transformation in the feudal economy. By the 11th and 12th centuries, growing trade networks and expanding market economies created new opportunities for lords to monetise their revenues. Rather than relying on the inefficiencies of in-kind payments or labour services, many lords began to demand monetary rents from their peasants.

Several factors drove this shift. *Corvées*, while foundational to the feudal economy, were labour-intensive to manage and limited in flexibility. In contrast, monetary rents gave lords greater liquidity to purchase goods and services in an increasingly market-driven environment. This transition initially offered some relief for peasants, as they could focus on cultivating their own land and selling surplus produce. However, it also introduced new pressures as they became more dependent on market conditions to generate the necessary income to meet these demands.

The rise of monetary rents also altered the traditional relationships between lords and peasants. *Corvées* had tied peasants directly to their lords, reinforcing their dependency within the feudal hierarchy—this direct connection weakened with monetary rents, allowing some peasants greater mobility and autonomy. For lords, however, the shift was not without risks. Inflation and the erosion of fixed monetary rents in the face of rising prices often reduced their purchasing power, challenging the sustainability of their estates.

As these dynamics unfolded, the traditional feudal obligations that had defined rural society for centuries began to fragment, laying the groundwork for broader economic and social transformations.

The shift to monetary rents introduced significant economic pressures for the peasantry. While corvées and in-kind rents tied peasants directly to their lords, monetary rents required cash payments, forcing peasants to sell surplus produce or engage in market activities to generate income. This dependency on market conditions made peasants increasingly vulnerable to poor harvests, fluctuating prices, and localised famines.

These pressures were compounded by rising demands from lords, who sought to offset inflation and maintain their estates. Many lords imposed additional fees or monopolised resources, such as mills and ovens, further burdening the peasantry. In this context, the economic fragility of rural households often led to increased poverty and displacement.

In response to these challenges, peasants engaged in various forms of resistance. Passive resistance included delaying payments, manipulating records, or subtly evading obligations. More overt forms of resistance, such as collective uprisings, also emerged. For example, England's Peasants' Revolt of 1381 directly responded to escalating economic pressures, including increased taxation and labour demands.

These acts of resistance undermined individual lords' authority and highlighted the growing tensions within the feudal system. The lords' inability to control their peasants weakened the foundations of feudal obligations, paving the way for broader social and economic transformations.

The transition from in-kind rents to monetary rents profoundly affected the feudal system, reshaping economic and social relationships across medieval Europe. As monetary rents became more prevalent, the reliance on fixed cash payments exposed lords to inflation and economic instability. The devaluation of fixed rents and rising costs of maintaining estates forced many lords to lease their lands to wealthier peasants or urban investors, weakening their traditional authority.

Monetisation also disrupted the direct ties between lords and peasants. Unlike corvées, which reinforced dependency through labour obligations,

monetary rents allowed peasants greater mobility and autonomy. This newfound independence, however, came at a cost. Peasants became increasingly vulnerable to market fluctuations, poor harvests, and rising taxes, often leading to displacement and migration to urban centres.

The growth of towns and trade further accelerated these changes. Urban centres offered economic opportunities and relative freedom for peasants escaping feudal obligations. At the same time, the rise of a merchant class began to challenge the dominance of traditional land-based wealth, introducing new forms of economic organisation that undermined the feudal order. Thus, technical progress and the expansion of mercantile exchanges began to erode the traditional structure, heralding the emergence of new forms of economic organisation (Marx, 2000).

These shifts revealed the feudal system's structural limitations. The reliance on monetary rents destabilised the balance of power between lords and peasants. At the same time, the expansion of urban markets and proto-capitalist practices paved the way for the eventual decline of feudalism and the emergence of a more centralised and monetised economic system.

Although labour obligations such as corvées and servitude provided the backbone of the feudal economy, they also sowed the seeds of its decline. The increasing fragmentation of land and overexploitation of peasant labour created systemic pressures that undermined the system's sustainability. As the next section will explore, the transition from in-kind rents to monetary rents further destabilised the feudal order, setting the stage for broader socioeconomic transformations.

The shift from in-kind rents to monetary rents transformed the relationships between lords and peasants, weakening established bonds of dependency and introducing fresh economic challenges for both sides. As the next section will explore, these shifts reshaped economic relationships and laid the foundation for broader societal transformations.

4. Urbanisation and Monetisation

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5. The Decline of the Feudal System

By the 14th century, the feudal system began to show signs of strain. The inability to expand agricultural production to meet the needs of a growing population exposed the system's economic limits. Fragmentation of peasant holdings and overexploitation of marginal lands led to declining yields, exacerbating food shortages and rural poverty.

The expansion of towns provided an alternative for peasants seeking to escape feudal obligations. At the same time, it eroded the authority of lords and redirected labour into urban economies. Urban centres fostered the rise of the bourgeoisie, whose wealth from trade and commerce began to eclipse the traditional power of land-based elites.

This urban expansion weakened the feudal economy by redirecting labour and wealth into more dynamic and decentralised networks. The shift from labour obligations to monetary rents altered the feudal power dynamic, diminishing the lords' direct authority over their peasants and increasing reliance on market forces.

From a Marxist perspective, feudalism's collapse was rooted in its internal contradictions. The tension between peasants and lords, coupled with the disjunction between forces of production and relations of production, destabilised the system. The emergence of new social classes, particularly the bourgeoisie, highlighted feudalism's structural limitations and its inability to adapt to an increasingly dynamic economy.

The 1381 Peasants' Revolt in England exemplifies these tensions. Fuelled by rising taxes, oppressive labour laws, and declining living conditions, the revolt demonstrated the growing resistance to feudal authority and the shifting power dynamics in rural society.

As feudalism declined, the foundations of a new economic order began to emerge. The accumulation of capital in urban centres, the rise of merchant guilds, and the growing dependence on market-based transactions marked a pivotal shift towards a capitalist economic framework. The centralisation of state power further facilitated this shift, as monarchs replaced feudal hierarchies with centralised administrative systems, paving the way for the modern nation-state. As observed by Moore (2002), these changes created a new political and economic dynamic that, by weakening the personal bonds characteristic of feudalism, paved the way for the emergence of the modern state.

The decline of feudalism was a gradual yet transformative process. Rooted in its internal contradictions, it was accelerated by external pressures such as urbanisation, monetisation, and the rise of new social classes. These changes not only dismantled the feudal order but also laid the groundwork for the emergence of capitalism and modern economic systems.

6. Conclusion

The transformations within the feudal system between the 12th and 13th centuries illustrate the intricate interplay between economic, social, and political dynamics that shaped medieval European society. The gradual replacement of labour obligations (corvées) with monetary rents marked a pivotal shift toward greater peasant autonomy and the monetisation of the economy. However, this shift also weakened the sustainability of the seigneurial domain, as fixed monetary tributes failed to adapt to rising agricultural prices, undermining the economic stability of the lords. Simultaneously, the perception of feudal rights as parasitic and the redistribution of land into smaller, more autonomous peasant holdings further eroded the legitimacy of feudal structures.

These developments, while fostering incremental changes in production relations and economic organisation, exposed the feudal system's structural limits in adapting to evolving economic demands. Urbanisation and the rise of the merchant class intensified these tensions, introducing new forms of social and economic organisation that challenged the traditional feudal hierarchy. The interconnected trends of monetisation, urbanisation, and economic diversification destabilised the feudal order and laid the foundation for more centralised and monetised production systems.

From a Marxist perspective, these transformations reveal the centrality of internal contradictions between productive forces and relations of production in driving historical change. By exposing the inherent tensions within the feudal system, these changes paved the way for its dissolution and the emergence of a capitalist economy rooted in labour mobility and private property. This process underscores that the transition to capitalism was not an inevitable evolution but the outcome of continuous social and economic conflicts that reshaped the trajectory of European history.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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