TALKING ABOUT TALKING ABOUT 'FEUDALISM'

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The published reports of academic conferences bear an uncertain relationship to the events which they record. If the Conference goes well it is the proceedings as such, the active face to face discussion and debate, which matter for the participants; the conference is remembered as a unity; the individual papers seem secondary and are quickly forgotten.

But published symposia have quite a different value. The contributed papers (as revised) exist as isolates to be consulted, one at a time, without reference to the context with which they were originally associated. Should I therefore address myself to my fellow conferees or to the outside reader who was not in at the start?

My own role was dual. I contributed an opening paper about Hydraulic Society which got things started though subsequently we never returned to my opening theme. I was also a general 'discussant' and had the special task of producing an off-the-cuff summing up at the end. What follows is a mixture of these two disparate types of contribution but I will give them in reverse order. I will start with a sort of summing up and then give a version of my original paper.

Most certainly the Conference as a whole did 'go well'. In response to active editorial encouragement from Mukherjee and his colleagues the paper readers were unusually obedient to the standard instruction that scripts should be available for advance circulation. This had a very beneficial effect on the quality of the verbal discussion.

The prime purpose of the Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture is to build bridges across the demarcation lines which isolate individual Faculties and Departments. The liveliness of the debate showed that that objective had been

achieved. The members of the Association should be well satisfied with their endeavours. But not surprisingly other demarcation lines came to the surface.

Since the Conference had been designed to pivot around the question of just how far the European historical category 'Feudalism' and the 'Ur-Marxist' category 'The Asiatic Mode of Production' fit in with the concerns of contemporary historians of 'pre-colonial' Asia, it was predictable that there would be major divisions of opinion between 'empiricists' and 'ideologists' and between 'Marxists' and 'non-Marxists'. The line of battle was not drawn up on Faculty or Departmental lines; indeed many of the participants took up a dissident stance somewhere in the middle ground, sniping away happily at both sides; but doctrinal fundamentals of this kind did lead to a good deal of misunderstanding.

It was also predictable that we should not arrive at specifiable 'conclusions'. At an empirical level the documentation just didn't add up. The conference was presented with a string of thumbnail accounts of the social and political structures of a rag-bag of pre-industrial Asian societies, large and small, ancient and modern, together with a rag-bag of disputable generalisations about the actualities and ideologies of social and political structures in parts of rural Western Europe between the 6th and 14th Centuries A.D. Most of the latter group of papers purported to be about 'European Feudalism' but there was clearly no general consensus as to what the term feudalism should be held to mean. So the question of whether the Asian examples were similar or dissimilar to the European model came to depend upon arbitrary decisions about definition. If it were not for the fact that 'feudalism' and its Asian vernacular equivalents have acquired the loaded value of political slogans no one could reasonably have expected that the total congeries of case histories would throw up anything of general as distinct from particular interest.

Moreover the fact that the word 'feudalism' appeared in the title of the conference distorted parts of our discussion in other ways. Each of us had his or her private definition of what the word means and the commentator who complained that whatever might be the merits or limitations of Philip Barker's paper about the politics of primogeniture 'it had nothing to do with feudalism' was doubtless perfectly justified in terms of his own verbal usage. But if, as some of us had supposed, our *ultimate* empirical concern was with the factors that are necessary for, or conducive to, the transition from pre-industrial to industrial social organisation then the possibility of capital accumulation either in land or any other form of assets must be a key factor. And here the rules of inheritance and patterns of marriage alliance are absolutely central, regardless of whether the enveloping society is properly described as 'feudal' or not.

Our discussions of the role of ideology were rather better focussed though an early suggestion from myself that since Marxist

categories are components in a dialectical argument they ought to be viewed in paired opposition: feudalism *versus* capitalism, feudalism *versus* slavery, was ignored, as also was Bruce Kapferer's repeated suggestion that Weberian theory was at least as relevant for our discussions as are Marx's scrappy notes about pre-capitalist modes of production.

Let me pick up that theme again. One reason why debates among Marxists are so confused is that, for political reasons, the full corpus of Marx's writings did not become available until long after his death. Similarly, admirers of Max Weber tend to forget that most of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* was still unpublished at the time of his death and that, apart from *The Protestant Ethic*, most of the Weberian corpus which we now possess is a reconstruction by his various editors. The name of Karl Marx does not appear very often in the Weberian corpus and one needs to delve quite deep to appreciate that for much of the time Weber was engaged in a debate with Marx's ghost.

But just as arguments about the canonical status of the *Grundrisse* and of "The Asiatic Mode of Production" need not deter us from learning from Marx, so also the criticisms of the historical empiricists need not deter us from reading Weber.

So let me remind you of certain bits of the story. Horrified by the empirical realities of the mid-19th Century Lancashire textile industry, to which he had been introduced by Engels, Marx tended to see the alienation from his society of the 'free' individual wage-earning labourer as lying at the very core of "the Capitalist Mode of Production" for it was only if labourers were competing as individuals in a 'free' labour market that the entrepreneur industrialist would be able to force wages down to the level of bare subsistence and rip off the surplus for himself.

This is 'vulgar Marxism' and there is more to the story than that, but Marx's concern with *feudalism* was essentially negative. Feudalism was a state of society in which labour was *not* free in the market economy sense but in which the seed of such a 'free market economy' were already embedded. Historiography was still in its infancy. Marx's 'feudalism' was a very hypothetical system.

Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the earliest version of which appeared in the form of two articles published in 1904/5, does not mention Marx, yet, in part, it is clearly a response to Marx's argument about the origins of the free labour market. Weber suggested that we should not look for these origins in the decay of a (largely imaginary) feudal order but in the historical circumstances of the 16th/17th Century efflorescence of the Calvinist ethic.

This inexplicit dialectical response of Weber to Marx was not unlike the dialectic of our Sydney conference. In effect Weber attacked Marx for his ill informed empiricism and his failure to recognise that ideology can be a driving force in social development.

And I too feel that Marx, despite his Hegelian background, was far too committed to positivist assumptions. The determinist laws of historical development were to be discovered in the structure of physical relationships between labourers and land rather than in the metaphysical relationships posited by a particular religious context.

But in our conference the argument went the other way. By and large it was the Marxists (and near Marxists) who attacked the non-Marxists for their aimless descriptive empiricism while at the same time proclaiming the importance of ideological categories (borrowed in this case from the language of European Marxism) for understanding contemporary developments in the Asiatic political arena. I find this inversion curious and perhaps ironic!

But let me get back to Max Weber and Bruce Kapferer's intervention about ideal types.

Ideal type models need to be unambiguous and should be presented as sets of contrasted categories.

That said, we need to distinguish between models which are introduced by the social historian, anthropologist, or what have you, to clarify his/her own thinking and models which the analyst perceives to be operating as a conscious ideology in the field under observation. Both varieties of model are present in Weber's writings and this was true also of the contributed papers of our conference. Weber's 'rational bureaucracy', which derives its legitimacy from above, is an example of the former; Michael Roberts' 'Aśokan persona' is an example of the latter. One of the more illuminating facts to emerge from our discussions was that in several parts of contemporary Asia a local 'folk model', now *described* as 'feudalism' by local Marxists but not in reality in the least like European feudalism in its conventional Marxist sense, operates as a primary driving force in contemporary politics.

This process by which the *language* of Marxism is used to force very un-European political facts into the mould of a quite fictitious Marxist ideal type ['European Feudalism'] provides much food for thought both for the historian and for the anthropologist. I can speak only for the latter.

The first dogma of social anthropology is that cultural systems are enormously diverse. The first dogma of orthodox Marxism is just the reverse.

Tacitly the general title of our symposium seemed to accept the Marxist proposition that human society evolved through a very limited sequence of stages in unilinear progression and that the stage immediately preceding world wide 'Capitalism' is an equally world wide phenomenon 'Feudalism'.

As an anthropologist I cannot accept any such thesis. There have been hundreds, perhaps thousands, of quite different social and political structures which deserve the title 'pre-industrial

society'. If this diversity is squeezed into a single category 'Feudalism', the category becomes redundant. It loses all connection with the historical feudalism of Mediaeval Europe (insofar as there was any such unitary system). The many 'feudalisms' thus specified have nothing in common except that they are pre-industrial.

The second dogma of social anthropology is that social phenomena take on meaning only when viewed in context. This poses difficulties when social anthropologists endeavour to enter into debate with historians because the data of history, - mainly documents and archaeological residues-, always lack their original context.

The symposium contributions provided an excellent example of what I mean. The specialists in Western European history had all read the same documents. They made radically different guesses about the contexts from which these documents had emerged. As a result they arrived at radically different conclusions as to how the documents should be interpreted. In the process the starting point of the discussion, the concept of 'feudalism' as a universal, tended to disappear.

Several of the original papers, e.g. those by John Ward, Soumyen Mukherjee and Craig Reynolds, faced up to these difficulties which present us with a paradox. On the one hand it is clear that *in empirical terms* the traditional model of Western Feudalism is a figment of the imagination created by Mediaeval Lawyers and post-17th century historians. On the other hand, while 'feudalism' may be a myth, Australia is surrounded by developing nations in which "Marxists are waging battles, most of the time successfully, against colonialism and feudalism"!

So what is the empirical content of the ideological figment against which real life Marxists wage their political battles? Does the expression 'colonialism and feudalism' signify anything more than a convenient verbal parallelism? Does 'feudalism' here mean anything at all other than 'pre-colonial' or 'pre-industrial'?

It is from this point of view that my own opening paper may be considered to have had some relevance to our later discussions.

My contribution was not, like most of the others, a critique of some version (either Marxist or non-Marxist) of the concept of 'feudalism' but it was (in an indirect and round about fashion) a critique of another closely related, but dialectically opposed Marxist category 'The Asiatic Mode of Production'.

As Mukherjee shows, the intellectual debate about the nature of feudalism developed in parallel with a complementary debate about whether centralised government was a road to greater freedom or a vehicle to exploitative despotism.

In Marxist argument, despotism is associated with The Asiatic Mode of Production and, particularly in Wittfogel's anti-Marxist exegesis, with something called Hydraulic Society.

In Marx's own set of categories the Asiatic Mode of Production differed from his other ideal type models of pre-Capitalist modes in that it did not contain fundamental internal contradictions. Consequently, it was not self-destructive. It therefore fits badly with any historicist scheme which assumes a deterministic 'law' of inevitable evolution towards either Capitalism or the socialist utopia which was destined to emerge from Marxist/Leninist type revolutions.

I will go on from there.

As must already be apparent, I am highly sceptical about the utility of all grand scale categories. The Committed Marxist can no doubt manage to fit almost every conceivable type of social system into one or other of a set of five boxes labelled: 'primitive communism', 'slavery', 'feudalism', 'capitalism', 'Asiatic mode of production' but at the end of the day the empirical systems that will have found their way into any single box will turn out to have very little in common.

However, in present circumstances I cannot avoid using the term 'feudalism' so I must explain how I am using it.

The English edition of Marc Bloch's major synthesis, *Feudal Society*, has a Foreword by the late Munia Postan which, in effect, warns us to be cautious. Postan notes that the main tradition in European writing about Feudalism has been to equate it with the mediaeval Latin concept of *feudum*. That would imply that the beginning and end of Feudalism is in the service of a knight to his overlord and that the whole framework is strictly military. Postan notes that Bloch goes far beyond such limitation. It is clear that, up to a point, Postan approves of Bloch's expanded usage but at the same time he emphasises the difficulties that this entails. For if Feudalism is not restricted to military relationships how is it to be limited at all? What is NOT Feudalism?

Towards the end of Volume 2 Bloch makes his case for the Marxist thesis that Feudalism was a 'stage' in the development of pre-industrial society which was of world-wide occurrence. As Postan noted, Feudalism is made to embrace most of the significant features of mediaeval European society. But if there is a direct equation by which 'Feudal Society = European Mediaeval Society', then those, who follow Bloch, in holding that the category Feudalism can be usefully applied to pre-industrial Asiatic social systems, ought to be explicit as to how far they are also asserting that Mediaeval European Society and Mediaeval Asiatic Society were identical. For if they were not identical but only similar 'in certain respects', where do the crucial differences lie? Here is the passage in question:

> [Bloch is specifying the characteristics of Feudalism as he understands it]. "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 - such then seem to be the fundamental features of European feudalism. Like all the phenomena revealed by that science of eternal change which is history, the social structure thus characterized certainly bore the peculiar stamp of an age and an environment. Yet just as the matrilineal or agnatic clan or even certain types of economic enterprise are found in much the same forms in very different societies, it is by no means impossible that societies different from our own should have passed through a phase closely resembling that which has just been defined. If so, it is legitimate to call them feudal during that phase. [Bloch (1961: II: 446)]

As can be seen everything really turns on just what is meant by saying that a particular type of social institution, which Bloch here exemplifies by 'the matrilineal or agnatic clan' has the *same form* in very *different* societies. What is meant by 'the same'? What is meant by 'different'?

It is a fact of history that Marx himself, at any rate during his early period, held, that the Asiatic States had not conformed to his simplistic evolutionary scheme. Feudalism had NOT been a stage in their development. The Asiatic Mode of Production was different. However, the later Marxists, for complex political reasons, have mostly rejected this distinction, so that pre-Industrial India, China, Sri Lanka and the rest are regularly described as 'feudal'. Wittfogel on the other hand defended Marx's early distinction and supplemented it by asserting that there is a specific link between the Asiatic Mode of Production and large scale irrigation, and that this results in a despotic centralised state rather than the fragmented decentralisation that Bloch asserted to be one of the characteristics of European feudalism.

Although this theoretical argument about universals is somewhere in the background of what I am going to say it is not at all central to my argument. I am interested in the facts on the ground. Where the historians cite documents as evidence I shall give you thumb-nail ethnographic descriptions of systems of irrigation which I have observed in operation at first hand.

I am interested in how socio-economic systems work at a very small scale local level. It is the differences between one localised cultural system and another which I find remarkable rather than any overall similarity.

Those who are happy to apply the term Feudalism to pre-industrial Asiatic societies mostly fasten on the criterion of service tenure of land. Likewise those who want to draw a

clear cut distinction between Capitalist and pre-Capitalist modes of production are likely to make wage labour a critical hallmark of Capitalism.

Now it is certainly true that approximate analogues of Mediaeval European feudal service tenure of land can be found in many parts of the world. It is also true that, in terms of real time chronology, straight forward wage labour developed rather late. So if we use these two isolated factors to define (i) Feudalism and (ii) Capitalism then Feudalism was antecedent to Capitalism though there is no necessary causal relationship between the two modes of social organisation and anyway Capitalism, as we *now* understand it, is *not* specified by the single criterion of wage labour. Moreover even if service tenure is a necessary feature of any system that is to be labelled 'Feudalism' we need to recognise that there are many different kinds of service tenure. Some of them are to be encountered in industrial as well as pre-industrial society and they may relate to tenures of other kinds besides the tenure of land. The offices held by clergymen of the Church of England and by the Fellows of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges are cases in point. 'Relics of Feudalism' no doubt, but such people are living in the 20th Century and the capitalist tax authorities treat them as such.

But if the borderline between Feudalism and Capitalism is indistinct where should the even vaguer concept of Hydraulic Society be fitted in?

The organised cultivation of crops and the aggregation of population into permanent settlements seems to have got going somewhere between 10 and 12,000 years ago. We do not know why. The changeover from a hunter-gatherer economy to a horticultural economy was not, in any obvious way, a marker of human progress. From a dietary and health point of view this much vaunted Neolithic Revolution must have lead to a decline of living standards not an improvement. The nutritional rewards per man-hour of labour would have been reduced. Perhaps rising population and shortage of game provided the motivating force.

The archaeologists have now demonstrated that drainage and irrigation were associated with some of the very earliest forms of horticulture. This is an important point. Modern Europeans, Americans and Australians live in conditions where water supplies are normally reasonably adequate; neither grossly in excess nor grossly deficient. Where there is a worry it is usually because there is too much water rather than too little. Irrigation, where it is used at all, is a sophisticated specialisation, an addition to dry agriculture which is the norm. In the tropics things developed just the other way round: dry agriculture was a specialised development from wet agriculture and the techniques of irrigation were not really distinguishable from techniques of drainage; drainage came first.

The development of rice cultivation technology in South-East

Asia provides an example. The sequence of development was almost certainly: (i) the cultivation of some variety of wild rice in undrained swamps; (ii) the cultivation of diverse varieties of domesticated rice in natural swampland which was both drained and irrigated; (iii) the cultivation of dry hill rice by slash and burn techniques, the dry rice varieties being mutants of wet varieties; (iv) the cultivation of wet rice in artificially constructed terraces fed by a full scale artificial irrigation system. Many different versions of all these alternatives are still in use.

Certainly we need to distinguish the technology of flood plain agriculture from terraced agriculture, and fixed agriculture from shifting (slash and burn) agriculture, and wet cultivation from dry cultivation, and so on, but it is an error to suppose that, in situations of modest population density, any particular mode of agriculture is always more efficient than any other. The different techniques are not associated with an evolutionary sequence of distinct types of social organisation and if we are concerned at all with the empirical facts which underlie Marxist rhetoric this diversity of possibilities must surely be important.

Nearly all the present day indigenous peoples of South East Asia practice several different forms of farming whenever they have the land and water resources to do so. Some of the 'most primitive' peoples (as conventionally recognised by non-anthropologists) - such as the head-hunting Ifugao in the Philippines - are among the most efficient irrigation experts in the world. The precipitous hillsides of the country in which they live have been carved into vast areas of irrigated terracing which constitute, to use Wittfogel's phrase, 'a mammoth hydraulic construction', but the form of Ifugao social organisation bears no relationship whatsoever to Wittfogel's fable of Oriental Despotism. Indeed these people are notable for the aggressive independence of each individual farming homestead. Needless to say Wittfogel ignored their existence though the irrigation system in question was well known long before Wittfogel wrote his book.

For my present purposes the distinctive feature of Feudalism is service tenure in land. Lordship over land is ordered in a hierarchy. The actual worker of the land is not paid wages but pays 'rent' in the form of various kinds of service and/or products in kind to an overlord who in turn holds his lordship in fief to an overlord on similar terms. Characteristically there is no direct link between the King at the summit of the pyramid and the farmer at the bottom. It is also characteristic that there are no bureaucrats or military personel who stand outside the hierarchy of lordship under the direct control of the centre. No actual system ever worked like that but the model will suffice for present purposes.

My model for Oriental Despotism is classical China rather than classical India. The King at the centre has absolute

untrammelled authority in all respects. The King exercises coercion by the use of military forces which are under direct control of the centre. The system is financed by direct taxation on the holders of the land. The system is administered by an élite, literate, bureaucracy which owes responsibility directly to the centre and not to any local political overlord. Here again I am fully aware that no actual system ever worked quite like that. I have simply provided you with two contrasted models, Feudalism and Oriental Despotism, considered as ideal types.

Hydraulic Society is Wittfogel's term. It seems to have been developed from a simplistic interpretation of what was known about the major early urban civilisations in the middle of the last century.

It was then widely believed that sophisticated civilisation had begun in a variety of rather similar but, at first sight, rather improbable terrains: flat arid plains which could only yield crops if they were irrigated. The stock examples were the Nile valley, the Tigris-Euphrates valley, the Yellow River in Northern China, the Indus Valley in what is now Pakistan. Wittfogel's thesis was that the irrigation systems concerned would only be workable if they were centrally controlled. He assumed that centralised control of the irrigation system would automatically result in centralised control of the political system as well. To quote Wittfogel:

> "As manager of hydraulic and other mammoth constructions, the hydraulic state prevents the non-governmental forces of society from crystallizing into independent bodies strong enough to counterbalance and control the political machine." [Wittfogel (1957: 49)]

It seems logical. But does the formula square with the empirical evidence? What could rate as a fair test of such a proposition? How big does a 'mammoth construction' have to be before the principle begins to operate?

The first extensive irrigation system which I encountered on the ground was in Szechwan in West China. It seemed to have most of the ingredients of the Wittfogel formula and was certainly an engineering marvel. In the remote geological past the central part of Szechwan Province was a sort of lunar crater. It is now a fertile plain about 100 miles by 80 miles with a ring of steep mountains all round the edge. A perceptive European visitor at the end of the last century described it as: "the richest plain in China, and possibly in the world.... It produces three and even four crops a year" (Bishop [1899: 343]). The elaborate network of canals and water channels which criss-cross the area, sometimes overlapping each other like the roadways in a motorway intersection are almost entirely man-made. Most of them have been in existence for well over two thousand years.

The irrigation system starts in the north-west corner of the plain at Kuan Hsien and is supposed to have been constructed

by Li Ping, a prefect in the ancient kingdom of Shu, and his son, known to tradition as 'the second gentleman'. The essence of the system is that the Min river, a substantial tributary to the Yangtze, is diverted each March so as to feed into the main channels of the irrigation network. Each November the river is switched back again to its normal course. When the water dries out, the silt, which is about six feet deep, is dug from the main channels and spread over the land. The correct level at which to dig out the silt is marked by iron stakes sunk into the bed of the stream.

Carved in the rock above the switching point at Kuan Hsien is a motto which in translation reads: "Dig the ditches deep; keep the banks low". Provided everyone adheres to this rule all the levels will be correct and there will be no flooding. I am not sure how things are working now, but in the days of the Empire there was a special bureaucracy responsible for the water works in charge of a Prefect of the Waterways (Shui Li Fu). This system was still operating unscathed in 1933 though all other aspects of Szechwanese politics were in chaos.

Clearly the Shui Li Fu was a man of great influence to whom the politicians paid respect. But there does not seem to have been any period during the past 2000 years when he assumed the political role which Wittfogel's theory seems to require. The Prefect remained a bureaucrat; he did not become a despot in his own person. Since the literature concerning this massive Szechwanese system is extensive and easily accessible I find it very strange that, so far as I can discover, it is never mentioned by Wittfogel at all. If such a thing as an 'hydraulic society' has ever existed anywhere as a special form of socio-technical organisation it surely ought to be found in an environment such as this.

All the rice growing areas of China, and that means most of the more southerly parts of that vast country, are dependent upon a combination of drainage and irrigation but usually the unit of control is much smaller than in the central Szechwan case. A common pattern is that the whole of a substantial valley, which originally provided the run-off feeding a single natural stream, is laid out in gently falling terraced fields from top to bottom. The original terracing was probably cumulative over a long period but it represents in total the investment of a huge expenditure of human labour and even the annual repairs to the terrace banks may call for complex coordinated labour organisation. In such circumstances it seems logical to suppose that some form of centralised management would be essential if those who work the lower fields are not to suffer damage either by water shortage or water excess because of the mal-functioning of sluices higher up. But coordination of effort does not imply despotic rule; various kinds of cooperative are also possible. There does not seem to have been any standard pattern in the way such systems were worked.

In pre-communist China the ultimate owners of the land were very often absentee 'gentry' landlords living in cities. Such landlords were parasitic and investment in land improvement does not seem to have been a normal pattern. The rent extracted from the tenant farmers varied from year to year and was pushed to extortionate limits. Officialdom levied tax on the landlords rather than the tenants; in return the lanlords could call on the support of the police to obtain payment of rent.

Management was left to the local farmers. We know that in some areas the farmer households of a single village community would normally all have the same surname. In such cases irrigation control was organised on a lineage basis and enforced by the use of religious sanctions derived from the ancestor cult. But elsewhere the irrigation system seems to have been run by cooperatives organised through associations of local farmers without the backing of kinship ties and religious sanctions. Different versions of such cooperatives for different parts of China have been described by Fei and Kulp. Fei for the Yangtze delta; Kulp for a locality near Swatow.

Fei's account provides a variation of the share and share alike labour organisation which is widespread throughout South and South East Asia. Some of the key details of the system he describes are as follows:

1) This is an area where the farm land is above the level of the local river levels so that water has to be pumped to a higher level before it runs over the fields.

2) Fei describes the operation of a field area which in 1935 provided employment for about 50 labourers: "The common trench opens on to the stream at the north margin. At the opening there are fifteen pumping spots. Each pump requires three workers. The amount of labour contributed by each household is proportional to the land holding of that household.... The households of the community are organised into fifteen teams corresponding to the fifteen pumps. Each year one household in each group is responsible for providing and maintaining the pumping machinery for that group and for providing a group manager. This function rotaates by turn each year from one household to the next. One of the 15 group managers is appointed chief manager and he has the crucial authority to order the starting or stopping of pumping". Fei implies that this office also rotates but I suspect this was a mistake. "When the chief manager has given his orders for the day the individual pump managers go around their group of households and summon their laborers by beating a gong. If any one of the three individuals thus scheduled for duty does not turn up within half an hour the other two could go along to the local village shop and order a supply of wine and fancy food which would be charged to the defaulter's account. If the manager has failed to summon the defaulter in proper manner the manager can be treated likewise". [Fei (1930: Ch. 10)]

This is all tiny scale stuff, but Fei implies that there was no higher level hierarchy. The 'system as a whole' was made up of a very large number of such miniature cooperatives each acting on its own. Indeed because of the very small size of even the largest farm unit excessive centralisation would have been counter-productive.

3) The system of work sharing by households which Fei described was operated in an irrigated plain and the crop was wet rice grown in permanent paddy fields, yet it is strikingly similar to one which I observed in the Kachin hills in Northern Burma where it was used to organise labour in dry hillside, slash and burn cultivation. Here then is a specific case in which the type of crop and the associated technology of farming is quite *unrelated* to the pattern of labour organisation. The system as such has no special links with irrigation: it is appropriate to any kind of work which needs to be allocated in terms of proportional shares. I will come back to this point presently when I discuss the *rajakariya* system which I observed in Sri Lanka. It is also worth noting that the economy of Fei's village was not based on a monoculture. The prosperity of the villagers derived from their silk worms and mulberry trees.

You should notice that, as yet, we have not encountered anything that could reasonably be labelled 'Feudalism'. The tenant farmers of pre-communist China paid rent-cum-tax in cash and in kind to their superior landlords; farmers who owned their land paid tax direct; they were not tied to any individual superior by any species of 'service tenure'. Whatever might be the practical difficulties there were no legal constraints which prevented a tenant from moving elsewhere.

But you should also notice that the Szechwan system which I first described entailed the diversion and rediversion of a substantial river, an operation which would have been quite impossible without the intervention of an official who could organise a corvée labour force of some thousands of men to do the switching. This fits Wittfogel's model. By contrast Fei's localised system needed managerial control only at the local village level. Wittfogel would presumably have argued that, although the system described by Fei was critically dependent upon hydraulic engineering, the scale of operations was too small to justify the title 'Hydraulic Society'. Yet the total population involved in the 1930s in the network of rice growing units throughout the Yangste delta area was many millions. So how small is small? How large is large?

The next species of irrigation system which I observed at first hand was in an altogether more 'primitive' context among the Yami of Botel Tobago, a small island off Taiwan. These people were primarily fishermen but they cultivated taro and sweet potatoes. The sweet potatoes were cultivated by shifting cultivation techniques; the taro was grown in small fixed fields which were supplied with water by an irrigation system of quite unexpected sophistication. Unfortunately I did not discover how the main

irrigation channels, which in some cases ran for half a mile or so, were managed. But I learned enough about the social organisation to be sure that the Yami did not allocate any special authority to the irrigation manager or indeed to anyone else. This provides evidence that the huge irrigation systems of the Ifugao of Luzon, which are associated with a rather similar, notably individualistic, form of social organisation, are not just a unique exception to a general rule. Complex irrigation works requiring coordinated control *can* work without anything resembling a centralised bureaucracy let alone a centralised despotism provided always that the system of operation does not call for the assembly and control of a massive labour force all working simultaneously on the same job. Wittfogel's apparent assumption that large scale labour teams are an essential feature of any large scale irrigation system is a mistake.

Burma, my next range of ethnographic experience, provides another set of variations.

At the one extreme there were substantial parts of the central dry zone where agriculture was hardly possibly without the aid of major irrigation works which were originally constructed and later maintained by the King.

It bears on my argument that (i) the system of government which prevailed under the Burmese kings was fragmented and had a number of features which parallel those of 'classic' European Feudalism including the extensive use of marriage alliances to support ties of fealty between members of a baronial hierarchy; (ii) that some of the Burmese evidence seems to support Wittfogel's thesis that control over irrigation leads to political despotism.

This is paradoxical since in Wittfogel's scheme Hydraulic Society and Feudalism are directly antithetical. It seems to me that if we stick to the empirical evidence and avoid argument about grand scale 'stages of development' then there were parts of pre-British Burma which were *both* Feudal *and* Hydraulic!

The following authoritative extract comes from Scott, writing around 1900:

> "Until the reign of King Thibaw (that is the last King of independent Burma) the irrigation weirs and canals were carefully maintained. In old days, in districts such as Kyaukse, the rules were very strict. If a breach occurred and loss of revenue resulted, a sentence of death could be passed on the *Wun* (governor) of the district. The *Wun* therefore naturally arrogated to himself powers of life and death over the *se-gyis* and the *kan-oks*, the men in charge of the weirs, canals and reservoirs. The *se-gyis* in turn apparently were not interfered with if they killed villagers who shirked working upon the irrigation works when called upon to do so".
>
> [Scott and Hardiman (1900: I (ii): 341)]

During the early years of the present century, when the British

were running Burma as a colonial dependency, they expanded the central Government's interest in irrigation management in all directions. At one time the Government was responsible for well over 500 miles of irrigation channels and large numbers of reservoirs and weirs. The economic and political weaknesses of the present Burmese regime are associated with an ineffective maintenance of these major irrigation works.

Here then is an example of Wittfogel's model of 'mammoth hydraulic constructions' linked to 'despotism'.

But in addition to the centrally controlled 'major works' there were many small scale pumping systems organised by local communities on principles similar to those described by Fei for the Yangtze delta area.

Some of the central dry zone irrigation canals are ancient but they do not have any of the complexity that I noted earlier for the Szechwan system in China. Nor has there been any long term continuity.

The political regimes of Burma have been quite exceptionally unstable ever since the 13th Century when serious history begins. During most of this period the area of the map which we now know as Burma was a loose federation of petty principalities (*mong*), each ruled over by either a Shan Prince or a Governor appointed by the King. In almost every case the principality had at its heart a substantial area of irrigated paddy-land. I do not have any information about the extent to which the local princes took a managerial interest in the maintenance of the irrigation works but it is clear that the wealth of the best managed and most influential principalities derived from resources other than paddy cultivation. This seems to turn Wittfogel back to front.

Wittfogel argued that the necessity for centralised control of major irrigation works would ensure centralised despotic government authority. Empirically there is no such necessity. Paddy land for wet rice cultivation provides the basic food supply and without an area of such land there can be no focus of political authority at all. But rice is not a scarce commodity. Control of paddy cultivation does not create a monopoly. It is rather that when there is a powerful political regime in control it can extend the irrigation system and the associated paddy cultivation and this will strengthen its economic base which permits the deployment of labour on other more profitable activities.

If the regime is weak, irrigation will be neglected and the economic problems of the regime will be enhanced but total disaster need not necessarily ensue because the local population can then turn to alternative forms of agricultural production which are always adequate for subsistence purposes. The point I would emphasise is that the prosperous area of pre-colonial Burma had a trading economy rather than a monoculture economy.

So finally to Sri Lanka. For the ill-informed, classical Sri Lanka, which 'flourished' rather erratically from the 3rd Century

B.C. to the 13th Century A.D., might appear to have had many of the classical characteristics of an Oriental Despotism based on hydraulic control, so again it seems surprising that Wittfogel himself never considered this apparently well documented case.

What is classical about the situation is that although about half of Sri Lanka is a wet zone where the development of agriculture might seem to be very easy, Sri Lankan civilisation in fact developed in the North Central dry zone where all cultivation is impossible without the aid of irrigation. Why?

The Sri Lankan kings of the great period were the sponsors of a great variety of stupendous engineering works directly associated with irrigation. Huge reservoirs contained behind vast man-made retaining walls; sluice works of titanic dimensions; major water ways of marvellous accuracy. The longest is 55 miles in length and has an accurate fall of six inches per mile throughout. In the period since 1948 the post-colonial governments of Sri Lanka have devoted immense sums to the redevelopment of this part of the country. Whether this was a rational thing to do from an economic point of view is a moot point. The motivation was political; an appeal to the glories of the historical past.

World experts were called in to plan these 'new' irrigation works. In nearly every case the engineers concerned found that their best solution to the problems presented was simply to reconstruct one or other of the major works of antiquity. As engineers the ancient Sinhalese were superb. But where does Oriental Despotism come in?

At the present time all agriculture in the North Central province requires irrigation works of one sort or another and ever since the middle of the last century the Government has had a hand in the management of irrigation right down to village level. But most of the villages concerned either have a separate tank (reservoir) or are grouped in a chain with just two or three other small villages. Except in the case of the recently developed agricultural colonies, which are the artificial products of Central Government planning, there are only a minority of settlements which can draw water from one of the major engineering constructions to which I have referred. This was also the case in the past.

It would seem that in classical times most of the really major irrigation works were originally designed as works of conspicuous consumption rather than for their strict utility. Their main role was to provide fresh water lakes and pleasure gardens for the vicinity of the capital cities of Anuradhapura and Pollonaruwa. Some of the water channels would have been useful for transport purposes. Their irrigation role was certainly not negligible but the villages had alternative sources of supply. The major works would have improved the reliability of the water supply but they were not usually essential.

In the chronicles of praise that were addressed to past kings

the creation of huge tanks is put on a par with the erection of temples as a source of merit-earning, but, as far as I know, we have no satisfactory evidence about how the major irrigation works were managed in classical times. Their construction was probably cumulative over long periods of time but even so must have called for the coercive control of a large labour force every dry season. So there must have been a government bureaucracy of some sort controlling the *construction* of major works. But *maintenance* is another matter. Maintenance of irrigation works was one, but only one, of a variety of feudal type service tenures covered by the term *rajakariya* ('king's work').

During the pre-colonial era *rajakariya* was, in general, a duty associated with the service tenure of land and linked to a wide variety of elaborately differentiated caste duties. The obligatory element of most (but not all) of these duties was formally abolished by the British in 1832. The obligations in question have analogies in the records of European feudalism but I now consider that it is misleading to describe this Sri Lankan system as feudal.

The circumstances of the 1832 reform were that during the 18th Century the Dutch colonial authorities had converted caste obligations into a corvée duty arbitrarily imposed by the State. In 1801 the British had proposed to replace the service tenure of land by a Grain Tax. In practice they imposed the Grain Tax but their caste based corvée demands became even more onerous. The 1832 legislation was supposed to eliminate these abuses.

But what is relevant for my present purposes is that although the various unpaid caste services, such as forced labour in the cinnamon plantations, were abolished, one form of *rajakariya* survived and was still being legally enforced in the 1950s. This was a duty falling on every householder in a paddy farming village to give his proper share of labour to the annual repair and maintenance of the village tank and its sluices. By proper share was meant "in proportion to the amount of water that each shareholder would use". This applied to all tanks, not just major tanks linked to the centralised system.

The land irrigated by the tank was precisely marked out into shares and sub-shares (*pangu*) the extent of which was exactly known and measured. The water flowing on to each such share of land was also precisely measured and each householder was responsible for a sector of the tank retaining wall which was precisely proportional in length to the 'share' of land which he owned. In pre-Colonial days all the service duties covered by the term *rajakariya* seem to have had this same characteristic. The obligation imposed on the householder was proportional to the amount of water he was entitled to extract from the tank for irrigation purposes. Furthermore during the pre-colonial era the caste services involved were not, in most cases, due to the State as such but to a local district overlord. This comes close to Feudalism in the European sense. Michael Roberts rejects

the terminology. I am not now prepared to defend it.

Until the British introduced a more centralised system in 1855 responsibility for seeing that the tanks were properly maintained and managed seems to have lain with village elders rather than outside government officials. Of course things may have been different in more ancient times, but I see no reason to suppose that they were. In the feudal hierarchy, [and I call it 'feudal' simply for want of any better term] service obligations were not imposed on particular individuals but on particular villages. The fiefdom included both the land and the people living on it. There was a presumption that all members of any one village would be of the same caste. It was then up to the villagers themselves to decide just how particular caste duties were to be allocated as between individual householders. The late Roman *coloni* described in John Pryor's symposium contribution were perhaps similar though certainly not identical.

We do not really know how the classical Sinhalese kingdom worked. The documents that have come down to us are mostly propaganda originating from priestly sources. The record provided by the 17th Century English sea-captain Robert Knox is unreliable for other reasons. By that time the political centre of gravity of independent Sri Lanka had moved to Kandy which is outside the dry zone. For what it is worth the regime that Knox describes is feudal rather than centralised though the King is certainly represented as a despotic tyrant. His construction of waterways and pleasure gardens is presented as evidence for that tyranny.

But Knox wrote with European models in mind. By that time Sri Lanka was certainly not an Hydraulic Society in Wittfogel's sense. My own view is that Wittfogel's model could never have fitted the facts on the ground at all closely, though the arithmetical precision of the labour sharing conventions, even at village level, suggests that at some stage a centralised bureaucracy must have been involved right down to the grass roots of the production process.

And that perhaps is the central point of my present argument. In Wittfogel the concepts of Oriental Despotism and Hydraulic Society are directly associated and by that token the concepts of Feudalism and Hydraulic Society are fundamentally distinct. But in the empirical cases which I have considered this distinction hardly seems to make any sense.

The concept of Hydraulic Society, considered as an ideal type, seems to presuppose a system of monoculture. It is assumed that all production is dependent on irrigated agriculture: all irrigated agriculture is dependent on a centrally controlled unified system of irrigation. But in empirical situations, even where large scale, State controlled, irrigation systems exist, they represent only one of several alternative modes of agricultural production.

Contrary to Wittfogel's theory, State control of the water supply does not ordinarily provide the associated bureaucracy

with an unchallengable source of political power. In any case the work force which maintains the irrigation system is not a private army whose members are at the beck and call of the manager turned despot. On the contrary, except in special situations, the day to day management and maintenance of these systems is in the hands of local farmers and they allocate the labour obligations involved among themselves on some kind of cooperative fair shares basis. There is not much to choose between the exploitation which such local farmers will suffer in a centralised bureaucratic despotism and that which derives from a hierarchy of subsidiary 'feudal' barons.

In my conference presentation I concluded my opening address with the following three generalisations. Eight months later, after due reflection, they still seem to be worth making:

(i) If we use Feudalism as Bloch used it to mean no more and no less than Mediaeval Western European Society considered as a totality then the term Feudalism is redundant and we cannot compare European Feudalism with Asiatic Feudalism.

(ii) Western Mediaeval Society had many components and some of these components had their analogies in Asiatic societies. Cross-cultural comparison between 'aspects' of European Feudalism and 'aspects' of Asian societies may then prove illuminating.

(iii) Hydraulic engineering was a feature of many pre-colonial Asiatic societies. *Some* features of some of these 'hydraulic societies' had close analogies in some Western European Mediaeval societies. If we use such features as markers of 'Feudalism' then the distinction between feudalism and hydraulic society becomes blurred. That does not matter. But you need to be clear in your own minds as to whether you are discussing empirical facts, or models in the mind, or simply political slogans.

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