

A Reconsideration of 'Crisis of Feudalism' of Late Medieval
England

Bangsun Ahn
Korea University

I.

The place of the fourteenth century in development has been even more hotly disputed than that of previous centuries. To a large extent, the timing of the onset of the decline of feudalism has been measured against one of three landmarks. First, classical medievalists consider the timing of commutation of labour services with reference to the Black Death of 1348-9. Secondly, Postan and those of the demographic school refer to a more generalized conception of demographic crisis which extends the onset of decline back to the famines of 1315-17. The crucial question is that of the chronology of population decline and of indicators for such changes. Thirdly, Marxist historians tend to emphasize the political role of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, even though they also recognize the importance of economic changes which preceded the revolt.

The view that the social system of late medieval western

Europe was undergoing a crisis had already been suggested in 1931 by Marc Bloch in his *Caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*. From 1949, when Edouard Perroy wrote '*Les crises du XIVe siècle*' in *Annales*, the usefulness of the concept as a means of explaining a stage in the history of that system became well established. Interpretations varied considerably. For some this seemed to be a crisis resulting from a maladjustment of the factors of production. A demographic collapse, followed by an agricultural depression characterized by low grain prices, had already been presented in 1935 by Wilhelm Abbel as the most fundamental element. That is, Wilhelm Abel was constructing a crisis frame work for the agrarian history of Central Europe characterized by the reappearance of a 'price scissors' of relatively low grain prices and relatively high prices for manufactured goods from the 13th into the 19th century. These lines of interpretation called attention to the interplay of long-and short-term fluctuations which rivalled the model of economic progress by stages of development; even their exaggerations were a fruitful stimulus to further refinement. It hardly needs saying that their influence has been very great.

One of the two leading advocates of the neo-Malthusian thesis, Abel and M.M.Postan, who are concerned essentially with the secular trend, Postan starts from the assumption

that the 'logical models' of classical economics are fully applicable to the medieval situation.

In his classic article of 1950 which set out his demographic model for medieval European economic development, Postan made sure to specify that he was concerned only with what he termed 'the economic base' of medieval society. He defined the 'economic base' as:

population and land settlement, technique of production and the general trends of economic activity: in short, all those economic facts which can be discussed without concentrating upon the working of legal and social institutions and upon the relations of class to class.

Postan argued that what made it 'possible and necessary to deal with this group of subjects together', and in abstraction from class relations, was that 'they have all recently been drawn into the discussion of general trends of economic activity, or to use the more fashionable term, the 'long term movements of social income'-- that is, long-term trends of income distribution and economic growth-- is whether it is at all admissible to abstract them from 'the workings of social and legal institutions'.

Postan, above all, searches for economic crisis factors

in 14th-15th century. Demographic growth, according to Postan, characterizes the 12th-13th centuries. It leads to the occupation of marginal lands and the increasing infertility of the soil: in short, a rising demand for a relatively inflexible supply of food and land; thus, rising food prices and rising rents. But the 14th-15th centuries witnessed a decline in population as a result of falling productivity, famine and plague. Ultimately, demographic catastrophe led to a drastic reversal of the man/land ratio. Postan thus argues, consistently enough, that this demographic change brought about precisely the opposite situation to that which had obtained in the 13th century.

Postan's circular argument essentially may be found in Abel. But, Abel regards 14th-15th century crisis as agrarian problem, while Postan regards as the long-term stagnation of the countryside and the town, agriculture and trade.

In some way, several historians in various ^ucountries working and writing almost simultaneously-- Abel in Germany, Schreiner in Norway, van Werverke in Belgium, Perroy in France, Postan in England--have divided the story of medieval economy as a whole into at least two corresponding phases: that of expansion culminating at the beginⁿing of the 14th century and that of contraction covering the greater part of the 14th and 15th centuries.

Hilton established 14th-15th century crisis as general crisis of feudal mode of production. Hilton describes that the stagnation of productivity during the last centuries of the middle ages, its inability to support the increasing cost of the non-productive expenditure of the ruling classes, were the fundamental reasons for the crisis of feudal society. According to Hilton, this stagnation was the consequence of the inability of the feudal economy to generate investment for technical improvement. Hilton also assigns to demographic and economic factors a great, even the leading, role in the historical process. So, not surprisingly such orthodox Soviet Marxists as Academician Skazkin bracket Hilton and Postan as two representatives of the 'economistic view of medieval history'.

The most serious challenge to the picture of late medieval economic developments outlined above is that of E. Kosminsky, who not only questions the thesis that Europe was overpopulated by the end of the thirteenth century but also minimizes the importance of the demographic decline that followed. Kosminsky describes the extent of changes in the English village in the 14th and 15th centuries; the crisis of feudalism in the 14th-15th centuries is characterized by numerous phenomena of decline-- the collapse of the demesne economy, possibly the slowing down of population growth and

even its temporary decline, the political disturbances, the baronial wars and so on, the temporary fall, or at any rate the slowing down of the growth of productive forces. Nevertheless, Kosminsky considers the late Middle Ages as a period of progress toward a capitalist mode of production characterized by the decline of serfdom, the conversion of labour services into money dues, the decomposition of 'feudal rent' and the onset of capitalist accumulation.

Kosminsky also considers between lords and peasants there is a sharpening of the incessant struggle for the surplus product. This long-drawn-out struggle, appearing in various guises, found its clearest expression in the rising of 1381, which gave a precise formulation of the peasant demands. Of course, growth of population does influence the development of society, does facilitate or retard the development of society, but it cannot be the chief force of development of society. Bourgeois historians are censured for substituting the superficial analysis of long-term economic trends based on the postulates of classical economics for the study of the objective laws of historical development. For that matter, Kosminsky concludes optimistically, the question of whether the 14th-15th centuries were a period of economic progress or economic decline in the history of Europe has little bearing on the problem of human progress.

The imputation of neglect of social factors, which was originally formulated by Kosminsky, reiterated by such reputable Marxist medievalists as M.A.Barg, S.D.Skazkin and R.Brenner.

II.

England is the first country to provide abundant material for the generalizations made by the classical political economists, and it exist in sufficient sources at the decline of late medieval England by especially Postan and Postan's school works. Postan in particular is depicted in the following manner.

The rapid growth of population of 11th and 13th century arises overpopulation. Overpopulation and pressure on the land worsened with the growth of feudal rent in the 13th century. This period of rapid rise in its turn changes, in about the 20s of the 14th century, into a long period of depression, marked by a general decline in economic activity, a shrinking of the market, a fall in the price of corn, a shortage of labour, a fall in rents and land values and a general decrease in the amount of land worked by labour services. Large-scale agricultural production decline, trade decreased. Drastically reduced in numbers, the agricultural

workers (and those in the towns too) received considerably higher wages than before, while the larger landowner's income decreased.

Hilton ascribes to the decline in population a great share in that process which he characterises as 'the gradual stagnation of a mode of production which had been pushed to the breaking point of its productive resources but which was technically unable to expand further'. But it seems that these points of view exaggerate the importance of the decline in population in the 14th and 15th centuries. It is very difficult to assess results, direct and indirect, of the decline in population, (1) because we have no reliable evidence on the chronology of that decline, when it began and when it ended, how strong and how significant it was; (2) other factors were at work as well as the fall in population. Almost everything which is ascribed to a falling population may equally well be explained by other causes.

Admitting the lack of direct demographic evidence, Postan suggests a number of indirect indications of a significant and prolonged decrease in the population in this period.

One of the most convincing indirect arguments is the increase in wages. From the Malthusian point of view, that the rate of wages is in inverse proportion to the absolute number of the working population, this increase can only be

explained by a significant decrease in the numbers of labourers. In an article Postan prints a table showing the increase in wages for 20-year periods from 1300 to 1479. His object is to show the movement of real wages. It is significant that the real wages of the agricultural worker hardly rise at all in the period when the decrease in the population was undoubted (1340-1379) but makes its greatest jump upwards (of 81%) in the period 1380-99.

But Kosminsky regards these figures to somewhat exaggerated. Moreover it must be realized that real wages were not only determined by the price of corn, which fell from the 1380s at a time when the prices of other products did not experience such a fall. Many circumstances influence the level of wages; not only the supply of labour but also the demand for it, and also the ability of labourers to stand up for their interests. The rise in wages after the 1320s may be explained by the growing demand for labourers resulting from the incipient collapse of the labour service system and the lords' attempts to replace unfree villein by hired labour on a more extensive scale. The high level of wages in the 15th century may be explained by the differentiation of the peasantry, by the emergence of a peasant upper stratum, needing hired labour, and also by the difference between the free landless labourers of the 15th century and the earlier

half servile small holder who received a part of his wages in kind, in the form of an allotment of land. Finally, some of the tenants were able to increase the extent of their holdings and to enter the higher ranks of tenants. Postan notes this development, ascribing it to the decrease in population. But another explanation might be the opportunity of increasing one's holding by leasing part of the demesne.

Undoubtedly the growth of population in England between the 11th and the beginning of the 14th century had a certain influence on the growth of towns and the development of the home market, with all the consequences which flow therefrom. Undoubtedly the temporary losses which the population suffered in the 14th century must have affected the disintegration of the feudal manor. The temporary fall in population may have influenced the collapse of demesne agriculture, may have hastened it or slowed it down. But it is not the fundamental cause.

First of all we must take account of all the effects of the class struggle of peasants against their lords. This struggle sometimes took the form of great revolts, but more often expressed itself in local outbreaks, and in the daily resistance of the peasants to the growing demands of their lords. This resistance found its clearest expression in the revolt of Wat Tyler, but it did not cease after it.

Another kind of opposition by peasants to exploitation was flight from the manor to the towns or to the sparsely populated parts of the country. It seems that Postan greatly underestimates the significance of this. The sources give many indications that the towns were continually being repopulated by fugitives from the villages. Peasant movements for a long time bore an elemental and sporadic, but clearly expressed, anti-feudal character.

But the peasants' demands could be fulfilled only because they corresponded to the whole course of social development of feudal England. Serf production had begun to hamper the productive forces of mediaeval society. The great historic struggle of the medieval peasantry for land and freedom against their oppressors was, objectively, directed towards freeing the productive forces from feudal fetters. Therein lies its great progressive significance.

In the 15th century the majority of the peasants became free, they had more land than before, their rights to the ownership of land were better safeguarded, they paid the feudal landowners lower rents, and at a fixed rate. But, this 'victory' of the peasantry was incomplete and temporary. The feudal structure was tottering to its fall, but it still remained predominant.

It was apparently the big peasants ('kulaks') who played

the leading role in supplying the market with agricultural produce, exploiting hired labourers from the peasants who had already been partly torn away from the land. The majority of such 'kulaks' were lessees of demesne land. From their midst arise the later capitalist farmers. In the 15th century they played an active role in the development of commercial sheep-farming and in the early stages of 'enclosure'.

In the English village of the 15th century there was the beginning of a new structure of class forces, anticipating the 'epoch of primary accumulation of capital'.

III.

These changes comprised the decline and fall of the labour service system, the collapse of the exploitation of the demesne and the disappearance of labour rent; the end of villeinage; the stabilization of money rents at a comparatively low level; a certain strengthening of the rights of the peasant to his holding (copyhold); the appearance of the preconditions for the capitalist transformation of the village.

In actual Postan and Postan school's work abounds in discussions of, among other things, the patrimonies, incomes and levies of the various social groups, and indeed they have

played a pioneering role in this area of research. The whole strength of this model derives from the fact that it is amply confirmed by detailed research: the importance of the demographic factor, the succession of long-term trends, the existence of ceilings of growth, and so on. But in the models that they have formulated, social and political considerations are in the end subordinated to the demographic element, to which they have assigned the determining role.

Postan or Postan school should not be criticized for giving too much importance to the demographic factor. They should on the contrary be criticized for stopping their process in mid-stream and for not integrating the demographic factor into the all-embracing whole that is the socio-economic system.

The crisis which occurred in the 14th and 15th centuries in the whole structure of the English feudal village bore a progressive character, since as a result of it a number of obstacles were removed which the feudal order had placed in the way of further development of the productive forces of English society. The crisis did not yet involve the breaking up of the feudal system, which occurred much later, at the time of the bourgeois revolution. It cannot even be called the beginning of 'the epoch of primary accumulation of capital', for its prerequisites were only just emerging. The

crisis of the 14th-15th centuries occurred during a period when feudalism was still supreme. But it indicates the beginning of its decline after the high peak which it had reached in the 12th and 13th centuries. Feudal society survived the crisis of the 14th and 15th centuries not only in the sphere of agrarian relations, but also in the spheres of industry, state structure, law, religion and culture.

Bibliography

Abel, W., *Agricultural fluctuations in Europe (13th-20th centuries)*, Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1980.

Bean, J.M.W., *The Decline of English Feudalism, 1215-1540*, Manchester, 1968.

Boutruche, R., *La Crise d'une Société*, Paris, 1947.

Brenner, R., "Agrarian Class Structure & Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe", *P. & P.* No. 70, 1976.

Bridbury, A.R., *Economic Growth: England in the later Middle Ages*, London, 1962.

Dobson, B., "Urban Decline in Late Medieval England", *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.* 5th ser. XXvii, 1977.

Hatcher, J., *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348-1530*, London, 1977.

Helleiner, K.F., "Population Movement and Agrarian Depression in the Later Middle Ages", *The Canadian Journal of Economic & Political Science*, vol.XIV. no.3, 1949.

Hilton, R.H.(ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, London, 1976.

Hilton, R.H., *Bond Men Made Free*, London, 1973.

Hilton, R.H., "A Crisis of Feudalism", *P. & P.* no. 7, . 1955.

Hilton, R.H., *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, Verso,1990.

Kaye, H.J., *The British Marxist Historians*, Cambridge, 1984.

Kosminsky, E.A., *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, Oxford, 1956.

Kosminsky, E.A., "The Evolution Feudal Rent in England from the XIth to the XVth Centuries", *P. & P.* no.7, 1955.

Perroy, E., "Les crisis du XIV^e siècle", *Annales*, 1949.

Postan, M.M. and Power, E (eds.), *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century*, London, 1933.

Postan, M.M., "Some Economic Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages", *Eco.Hist.Rev.sec.ser.*, no.3, 1950.

Postan, M.M., *The Medieval Economy and Society*, London, 1972.

Postan, M.M., *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy*, Cambridge, 1973.

Schreiner, J., "Wages & Prices in England in the Later Middle Ages", *The Scandinavian Economic History Review*, vol. II.