Regional Modes of Production and Patterns of State Formation in Western Europe

Michael Hechter and William Brustein
University of Washington

The rise of the modern territorial state in early modern western Europe was a spatially skewed process. An endogenous model of the uneven pattern of 16th-century state formation is presented. It holds that the geographical distribution of the first modern state structures was largely determined by preexisting regional differences of social and economic organization, differences emanating from the 12th century if not earlier. The model specifies that three distinct regional modes of production existed in 12th-century western Europe. These postulated forms of social organization are designated as the sedentary pastoral, petty commodity, and feudal modes of production. The optimal preconditions for the initial formation of modern states were to be found only in those regions dominated by the feudal mode of production. The paper concludes with a discussion of some methodological and theoretical implications of these findings.

Despite its preeminent role in enforcing the rules of the game and thereby delimiting the economy, polity, and culture of any complex social form, sociologists have been reluctant to consider the modern state until quite recently. Now there are unmistakable signs that this neglect is being remedied (Moore 1966; Eisenstadt and Rokkan 1973; Anderson 1974a, 1974b; Wallerstein 1974; Tilly 1975a; Collins 1978; Poggi 1978).

One of the puzzles about the modern state has been to account for its genesis. Although states of one kind or another have existed for millennia (see Service 1975; Wright 1977) the first modern, or national, states arose in 16th-century western Europe. Many different types of states have existed in history: leagues of independent cities, empires, federations held together by loose central control, and theocratic federations (Tilly 1975b). Modern states differed, at least quantitatively, from these other forms in four respects (Sabine 1953; Watkins 1968; Tilly 1975b). First, the mod-

1 Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, 1979. A preliminary version was presented at a meeting of the Social Science History Association, Ann Arbor, and at colloquia of the Center for European Studies, Harvard University, and the Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego. We are grateful to Margaret Levi, Douglass C. North, Joan Thirsk, Franklin Mendels, Jonathan Pool, Andreas Teuber, M. Estelle Smith, and two anonymous AJS referees for their comments on previous drafts.

© 1980 by The University of Chicago. 0002-9602/80/8505-0003$02.63

AJS Volume 85 Number 5 1061
ern state everywhere sought and was able to achieve some degree of territorial expansion and consolidation. Second, it managed to attain an unprecedented degree of control over social, economic, and cultural activities taking place within its borders. Third, it encompassed a set of ruling institutions that were formally separate from all other kinds of institutions in its territory. Last, its rulers had a quantitatively greater capacity to monopolize and concentrate the means of violence. Dramatic evidence of the growth of the modern state is provided by the fact that Europe in 1500 was composed of some 500 sovereign political units, whereas by 1900 this number had been reduced to about 25 (Tilly 1975b, p. 15).

The reasons for the success of this kind of political unit are far from understood. As an organizational form, the modern state must have been well suited to the historical circumstances existing since the Renaissance, else why did it succeed at the expense of rival state forms? Since the survival of a political unit in this environment ultimately meant its military survival, it is likely that states of this kind were somehow able to maximize tax revenues (net of collection costs), maintain standing armies, delimit national economies, provide economic growth, and be recognized as sources of legitimate authority. All of this may be taken to be axiomatic, but it does not offer much help in specifying the precise nature of its comparative advantages (for an interesting attempt in this direction, though it offers an explanation at variance with some of the evidence presented below, see Friedman [1977]).

In retrospect, it can be seen that the survival prospects for any given 16th-century political unit were extremely slim. Against these formidable odds, political units that became the nuclei—or what Whittlesey (1944, p. 596) has termed the cores—of today's states emerged in particular areas of western Europe, including the Paris basin, southeastern England, and Castile (see map 1). But other political units which had sprung up in vast reaches of territory on the continent and the British archipelago were destined to be superseded. What distinguished the small number of surviving political units, the cores, from the great majority of short-lived failures?

Previous discussions of this issue have offered long lists of possible differentiating factors, but not much in the way of explanation. For heuristic purposes these factors may be placed in two categories. First, there are attributes of the various sovereign territories themselves. Thus it has been claimed that the survival prospects of a political unit were maximized if it encompassed territory that was blessed with a high concentration of landholding (Rokkan 1973, 1975); cultural homogeneity (Tilly 1975b); geographical advantages, such as natural barriers promoting security or a high proportion of fertile lowlands (Ardant 1975; Collins 1978); the availability of extractable resources (Tilly 1975b); and a continuous supply of political entrepreneurs (Tilly 1975b).
However, because evidently the variation in the location of modern states cannot be fully explained by these factors, which are endogenous to the early political units, increasing attention has recently been focused on a second category, characteristics of the units’ environment. Thus exogenous variables, such as a territory’s geopolitical situation and its position in the international division of labor, have been held to be important determinants. It has been argued that modern states tended to arise in territories that had a protected position in time and space (Anderson 1974a; Tilly 1975b); that were removed from the city-studded dorsal spine of western Europe (Rokkan 1973, 1975); or that specialized in the production of manufactured commodities (such as textile goods), rather than in the supply of primary products or in subsistence agriculture (Wallerstein 1974).

Each of these variables may indeed be correlated with the appearance of core regions in western Europe. But the significance of the correlations remains murky in previous discussions. Are some of these variables causally prior to or more significant than others? And what is the relative importance of the endogenous as against exogenous causes of core formation?

Before leaping to conclusions about the salience of geopolitical or international economic factors as determinants of core formation in western Europe, it is necessary to appreciate, first, that there were extensive regional social organizational differences in early modern Europe, and second, that these regional differences themselves influenced the course of the formation of modern state apparatuses. Yet these considerations have generally been ignored in the literature. The failure to take regional differences in social organization into account has led to an unwarranted emphasis on the exogenous determinants of initial state formation in western European history.

We will argue that until the 17th century the spatial pattern of core formation was decisively influenced, but not wholly determined, by the distribution of three quite distinct types of social organization, or modes of production, existing in western Europe from the 12th century if not earlier. These are designated as the *sedentary pastoral*, *petty commodity*, and *feudal* modes of production.

For reasons not yet entirely clear, each of these types of social organization came to dominate specific territories; hence they will be referred to as regional modes of production. However, the optimal preconditions for the initial development of cores, and thus of modern states, were to be found in those regions predominantly characterized by the feudal mode of production alone. First the paper will outline the general features of each mode of production. Then it will discuss the preconditions generated by each mode of production for the development of the modern state. Altogether, an elementary endogenous model of core formation in western
Europe will be presented. This model attempts to account for the initial development of modern states in western Europe, but other factors need to be considered in order to explain state formation in later historical eras.

REGIONAL MODES OF PRODUCTION IN EARLY MODERN WESTERN EUROPE

A consideration of regional differences in medieval western Europe must begin with the 12th century, since the evidence for earlier periods is frag-
Modes of Production

mentary. However, by this date regional differentiation was already consider- able. This indicates that the origins of regional differences are older than the historical record permits us to see. By the 12th century, western European regions varied with respect to a host of social factors, including types of agricultural organization, patterns of settlement, inheritance cus- toms, modal family types, class composition, systems of governance, legal systems and types of property rights, and, in some cases, religious practices.

Whereas each of these individual differentia warrants and has received separate study, what is striking to us is that there appears to be a pattern of correspondence among them. For example, one mode of agricultural or- ganization (the open-field system) is usually found in conjunction with a particular settlement pattern (villages distributed according to the expecta- tions of central-place theory), a particular set of inheritance customs (unigeniture), a particular modal family type (the stem family), a par- ticular class structure (in which the bourgeoisie and artisanry are of in- termediate strength), a particular political system (characterized by parcelized sovereignty), a particular legal system (based upon customary codes), and so on. A similar correspondence can be observed between the two other major field systems and the same factors. While the intercor- relations are by no means perfect, they occur with such regularity that some kind of ideal-typical analysis is justified.

These ideal-typical constellations of social factors can be considered to be modes of production. Following Marx, a mode of production contains two separate elements: the social and technical means by which production is organized and carried out (the forces of production); and the institu- tions and practices associated with the way goods are produced, exchanged, and distributed (the relations of production). Although a wide variety of these modes of production have been described in abstract terms, here we pos- it that three particular modes coexisted in 12th-century western Europe.

The sedentary pastoral mode of production was composed of self-suffi- cient households, loosely linked together by kinship ties. In this mode the productive forces were at a low level of development: hunting, pas-

2 See the various regional studies in Baker and Butlin (1973), particularly that of Roden.

3 Other attempts to describe regional differentiation in medieval western Europe in- clude Bloch’s (1966) “régimes agraires” and Arensberg’s (1963) “culture areas.” The concept of the mode of production seems preferable in that it insists upon the essential holism of these systems of social organization—a holism sacrificed when field systems, inheritance patterns, and the other dimensions of these social formations are treated as if they were autonomous institutions unconnected by an underlying social structural logic. The best rationale for using the concept of the mode of production is that it indicates the presence of a single social structural logic at the base of these social forms.

4 On the concept of mode of production see Anderson (1974a); Terray (1975); Gurley (1976); Hindess and Hirst (1976); Godelier (1977); Foster-Carter (1978).
toralism, and intermittent agricultural cultivation were the major economic activities (see Hobsbawm 1964, p. 35). Labor was organized either through the nuclear family or through the extended family. The principal means of production were controlled by the clan. Kinship relations largely determined the appropriation of the product. Class distinctions were virtually nonexistent.

In contrast, the petty commodity mode of production was made up of congeries of individual producers residing in communities. The principal means of production, for both agriculture and handicraft, were owned by these individual producers. Production was oriented toward exchange rather than use, for long-distance trade was an essential precondition of this type of social organization (see Amin 1976, pp. 32–33). Political authority tended to be concentrated in the hands of a class of producer-merchants who controlled the appropriation of the product as well as the profits from trade. The principal class distinction was that between citizens and non-citizens (Hobsbawm 1964, p. 41).

Last was the feudal mode of production. Its basic unit was the manor; its major economic activity, arable agriculture. While the serf-tenant, as direct producer, owned some of the means of production, particularly tools and draught animals, he lacked control over the land. The landlord subjugated direct producers by charging rents and monopolizing such services as ovens and mills (Duby [1968] 1974, p. 130). A political system dominated by large landlords insured that the serfs could not own land. Feudal society was divided principally into two classes, lords and serf-tenants. However, since towns also tended to develop within the feudal mode of production, merchants and artisans were also present to some degree.

It must be emphasized that each of these modes of production is an ideal type that does not correspond to any actual social formation. All historical social forms represent combinations of several modes of production. However, within any social formation one mode of production tends to predominate. A mode of production is predominant to the extent that its characteristic class structure pervades the social form as a whole. Thus, observable patterns of stratification may be taken to indicate the presence of the underlying modes of production.

Elements of all three modes of production may be found in each of the 12th-century western European regions. For example, in the petty commodity zone some direct producers paid nonproducers in labor services. In the feudal zone some communal practices may have persisted in land ownership and livestock grazing. And in the sedentary pastoral zone it would have been possible to find both merchants and artisans. However, these classes—representative of secondary modes of production—were of lesser importance in each of these zones. The dominant mode of production in
Modes of Production

each social formation circumscribed the extensiveness of each subordinate mode.

THE SEDENTARY PASTORAL ZONE

The sedentary pastoral zone was principally located in the strip of coastal territory stretching south from Norway to northwest Portugal (see map 2). (A predominantly agrarian variant of this mode existed in the Northern

![Map 2](image)

**Map 2.**—Late medieval modes of production in western Europe (around the 12th century). N.B.: This is a provisional map based on diverse secondary sources.
American Journal of Sociology

Netherlands [deVries 1974, pp. 24–41] and in East Anglia [Homans 1975].) In addition to the littoral, this type of social formation could be found in the Hebrides, Highland Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Man, Cornwall, western France, Galicia, the Basque country, and parts of Aquitaine (Flatrès 1959, p. 193).

As its name implies, the major form of agricultural activity in these regions was pastoralism. The existing arable was divided between the infield—land with richer soil where cultivation was intensive and continuous—and the outfield—poorer land surrounding the infield, serving continuously as enclosed pasture fields. Typically there was no field rotation (Flatrès 1959, p. 194; Smith 1967, pp. 210–14; Baker and Butlin 1973, pp. 617–18). The fields themselves were square and usually surrounded a dwelling. They were separated from one another by enclosures of trees, hedges, or dirt mounds. Land was most often worked by a group of descendants of a near and common ancestor dwelling in proximity. Households were clustered together in small hamlets where the inhabitants were grouped according to their distribution in kindreds (Vinogradoff 1911, pp. 15–16). Examples of this settlement pattern include the treo in Brittany, the tref in Cornwall, the tref in Wales, the treen in the Isle of Man, and the townlands in Ireland. This description of the tref is illustrative: “The tref was not an isolated farm. Neither was it a village. It was something between them in size—nine houses is the number mentioned in the law, and these houses seem to have clustered close to each other. It was a hamlet, too, in which the group of people lived who used one plough in common and kept their cattle in a single herd” (Homans 1975, p. 27). Throughout this region towns were rare; villages and hamlets were the predominant form of settlement.

Social life was organized by clan and family associations. The blood relationship of the agnatic group was the central principal of consociation (Koebner 1941, p. 51). This can be seen by considering the inheritance customs found in this mode of production. The system of inheritance was not concerned with the economic costs of excessive fragmentation of landholdings, but rather, with the continuity of the lineage. The norm of egalitarianism in this inheritance system thus tended to override all considerations of economic productivity (Le Roy Ladurie 1976, pp. 53–54). An equal and partible inheritance was obtained regardless of the genealogical position of the child. Each adult inhabitant (save in Normandy, where women were excluded) of the village or clan was entitled to an equal share in the village lands. Upon the death of the father, all previous arrangements made by him with respect to inheritance were nullified and all possessions were returned to a common pool. The primacy of the blood relationship of the agnatic group was so strong that it was the custom for a childless

1068
Modes of Production

couple to will its property from the paternal line to the local chief or tax collector rather than to the nonlineal outsiders from the distaff side (see 1906, p. 9; Le Roy Ladurie 1976, p. 58). These practices led to nuclear families because partible inheritance provided each member of the family with rights to land.

The extent of social stratification in this zone was moderate. Differences in wealth between chieftains and peasants were far less than elsewhere in western Europe in this period. The peasant, for his part, owned the means of production and had no regular personal service to perform (Nabholz 1941, p. 252). However, marked ranks and privileges existed, and these were to increase. Although land was regarded as common property of the clan, livestock and other goods were distributed without any regard to the allotment of shares. Through the practice of patronage, a ruling class began to emerge (Vinogradoff 1911, pp. 24, 31, 34). The Armorican accounts of the 9th through the 11th centuries mention tribal leaders (Machtierns) who furnished personal protection and insurance from famine for their men. Soon they owned the parish outright and dominated it by hereditary rule (Bloch 1941, pp. 262–63). Descendants of these chieftains were later to become the noble class of Brittany in the high and late Middle Ages (Bloch 1941, p. 272). Similar patterns may be observed in Wales and Ireland. Despite this rigidification of the class structure, neither urban burghers nor artisans were to be found in significant numbers, however.

Government in these regions was tribal. The chief of the tribe or clan could be chosen by an election of elders, or he could emerge as simply the wealthiest or most powerful individual in his territory. Clan members pledged their fidelity to the chief and were obliged to follow him into battle. Patrimonialism, albeit in a small-scale form, was at the basis of the political structure. Finally, the religious practices in this region were somewhat distinct, representing a syncretism of paganism having strong supernatural and magical elements with standard orthodox Christianity. Some have claimed this combination resulted in a type of Christianity peculiarly resistant to change, in part because it encouraged passive obedience and resignation on the part of parishioners toward their priests.6

5 The concepts of nuclear, stem, and joint family types were introduced, somewhat vaguely, by Le Play (1895). Types of family structures do not, however, vary independent of other social relations (see Godelier 1975, p. 4).

6 Tilly (1962, p. 110) quotes from Siegfried (1913): "In the Vendée, it is the priest who remains as in other days the peasant's real chief. [The peasant] is not only religious; he also feels a kind of sacred superstition regarding that priest toward whom ancestral habit prescribes passive obedience." See also Le Bras (1956, pp. 75, 83).
THE PETTY COMMODITY ZONE

The petty commodity region was found largely in the Mediterranean area, in lands stretching westward from north central Italy to Catalonia. But a similar system emerged also in southern Germany (in the region of Augsburg) and in Flanders (Slicher van Bath 1963; Anderson 1974b). Whereas pastoral agriculture played a dominant role in the first zone, in this one arable agriculture was practiced in a relatively commercial setting sometimes described as un capitalisme précoce (Vilar 1977, p. 136). For the most part cultivation was carried out in a two-field rotation, using the light scratch plow (the araïre). Since this plow could be pulled rather easily, cultivation did not require extensive cooperation among producers. The light scratch plow did not make intensive use of scarce livestock: two oxen sufficed as against a team of horses. Moreover, the simple construction of the araïre made it possible for peasants of merely moderate wealth to possess their own plow. Both factors aided the peasant in his emancipation from the collective restraints and obviated the need for collective obligations (Smith 1967, pp. 244–45).

Transhumant pastoralism tended to develop in the Mediterranean area (Bloch 1966, pp. 48–55). The seasonal migration caused by transhumance, coupled with an absence of collective restraints and a lack of manorial control, led to greater variability in the settlement pattern than existed elsewhere (Smith 1967, pp. 269–70).

The typical farm throughout the zone was a small parcel of land worked by a peasant family. As in the previous mode of production, the fields were square; however, these fields had no habitations on them (they were termed Blockflur, champs ouverts et irréguliers, and terroir en puzzle).

The entire system of farming in this zone was more flexible than that of northwestern Europe, and it could produce a much greater crop variety. The variety of soil conditions in the Mediterranean favored heterogeneous cropping—wheat in rich loams, beans in less fertile areas, and vines in marginal and rocky soils. Much of this agricultural production was oriented either to local urban markets, far more numerous in these regions than elsewhere in western Europe, or to long-distance trade (principally in wheat, olive oil, and wine). The relative density of towns encouraged a two-field system of rotation, because this kind of system was geared to crop specialization. As a consequence, cash cropping was most advanced in

---

7 These regions had many parallels with Islamic Spain in this period (see Lewis 1966, pp. 68–69, 122).

8 Smith (1967, p. 329) finds similarities in South German towns with respect to urbanization, specialization, and residence patterns.

9 Even in open-field areas, the nearness of markets often yielded a two-field system, as in the case of the Rhine rift valley (Smith 1967, p. 209).
Modes of Production

this zone. To a much greater extent than elsewhere, the towns determined
the nature of countryside activity (Merrington 1975; Fourquin 1976, pp.
24–25). Indeed, towns were the center of social, political, and economic
life. Not only was the town a marketplace where peasants sold their sur-
plus; it was also an administrative capital having council and magistrates,
a center of manufacturing, a religious center, and a social center where
landlords tended to reside. In contrast to the first zone, where farms were
isolated from one another and peasants seldom had contact with urban
institutions, here the typical farm was very much attached to the town
(Sion 1974, p. 124). The bulk of the agricultural population lived in large
villages or small cities (Agulhon 1970, p. 59).

In the early 13th century the inheritance pattern in these regions changed
from a partible system to a distinctive system of unigeniture called préciput
52–53; Le Roy Ladurie 1976, pp. 61–72). This change is often ascribed
to increasing commercialization, and it is associated with the revival of
Roman law (Aubenas 1936, p. 530; Vilar 1977, p. 173; Le Roy Ladurie
1976, pp. 61–63). Préciput followed from the Roman tradition of patria
potestas, in that the wishes of the father with respect to inheritance were
supreme. The father alone determined who was to inherit the land. He
could will it to one of his children (Vilar 1977, p. 175) or divide it among
many (Livet 1962, pp. 350–51). Thus préciput occasionally led to the
fragmentation of landholding.

Commercialization caused considerable social mobility. Private property
rights in land enabled wealthy merchants to acquire country estates. The
distinction between aristocrat and bourgeois was very blurred in these
regions. The petty urban nobility was favorably disposed toward the de-
velopment of trade, taking a direct part in commercial activities. These
lords were often townsmen, either nobles who had come at some time in the
past to live in the city or burgesses who had bought estates. An essential
element of the petty commodity social structure was the fusion of noble
and bourgeois: nobles became bourgeois through business and bourgeois
became ennobled by law (Smith 1967, pp. 310–11; Hibbert [1953] 1974,
pp. 157–59; Fourquin 1976, p. 213). The urban residence of the aristocracy
was itself a reflection of the domination of the countryside by the towns.
South of the Alps, country districts were not—as they were in the north—
centers of economic, social, and political life. Cities retained this role, so
potentes, both counts and warriors, maintained their urban residences. In
the petty commodity social formation the law hardly recognized the con-
nection between fief and military service, as witnessed by the Jus Lango-
bardorum in north and central Italy (Fourquin 1976, pp. 74–75).

These fluid conditions were not conducive to the establishment of rigid
class structures. Even distinctions between peasants and townsmen were
difficult to draw, since the local markets brought the peasants into frequent contact with urban life. Many cities abolished all forms of personal and material subjection, thus restricting the exactions of the lords. Competition among the urban lords for labor and political influence invariably strengthened the peasantry's hand. In these circumstances, the nobility could not demand personal services of the peasantry (Fourquin 1976, p. 179).

The city-state politics of these regions was dominated by urban patricians, half noble and half bourgeois. The power of this middle stratum resulted mainly from its control of markets and exchange rates. Leading families from this stratum controlled the courts, the banks, and the militia. They were also important in the struggle against episcopal attempts to control the towns (Hibbert [1953] 1974, pp. 158–59).

In this zone (as in the previous one) property tended to be alienable, and most of the land was made up of individual peasant allods (parcels of land that can be freely disposed of through sale or gift). Where land was held in tenure, the contract was explicitly to be reformulated at the time of each renewal (Bloch 1941, p. 234). The small free peasant proprietor dominated the region's agriculture, and landholding was relatively unconcentrated (Vinogradoff 1911, p. 68; Sion 1974, p. 124). The emphasis on individual private property rights emanating from Roman law stimulated the existence of peasant allods (Vilar 1977, pp. 168–69). The agriculturalist of this region found legal support for enclosing his property, as did his counterpart in the previous zone.10

Finally, religion in these territories was strongly reformist. This was in part, no doubt, a function of urbanization. This region provided fertile ground for heretical movements such as the Cathari movement of southern France (Wakefield 1971, pp. 79–80; Le Roy Ladurie 1978). And at a later date the Huguenots found their strongest social base among the urban populations of the Midi (Leonard 1955, p. 20; Scoville 1960, pp. 7, 11; Le Roy Ladurie 1966, pp. 342 ff.).

THE FEUDAL ZONE

The feudal zone is by far the best known. Feudalism arose most generally in the territory between the Loire and the Rhine; in Burgundy, Southeastern and Midland England, and—imperfectly—in parts of the Iberian peninsula, Southern Italy, and Lombardy (Bloch 1961, pp. 445–46; Duby [1968] 1974, p. 124; Fourquin 1976, p. 71). Agriculture was organized through the manorial system. The manor was a fief that provided revenue from which the landlord and his tenants were supported. Production and

10 In the Mediterranean, peasant rights to land were enhanced by the maxim "no lord without title," in contrast to the north where the law was "no land without a lord" (Fourquin 1976, p. 140; see also Livet 1962, p. 312).
distribution were both coordinated in the manor. The manor itself was divided into two parts: the demesne, or the reserve exploited by the owner, and the farms worked by dependent villeins. The demesne consisted of the arable, the meadowlands, and occasionally vineyards, water mills, breweries, and inns. The farm included house, garden, arable land, meadows, and sometimes vineyards. The villein also had the right to exploit woods, wastes, and fallow (Slicher van Bath 1963, p. 44; Duby [1968] 1974, pp. 124–25; Fourquin 1976, p. 164).

The mode of production that had developed in this third region employed a new system of agricultural organization and new techniques. The first mode basically employed ancient pastoral agriculture. Cultivation in the second was of secondary importance and tended to require traditional productive techniques and organization. The manorial system of the third region, however, made use of the heavy wheeled plow (the charrue), modern (horse) harnesses, and a three-field rotation.

Here the arable was laid out in open fields. No fences or hedges separated one field from another, and there was no habitation upon them. The open-field arable was subdivided into sections of considerable size, which in turn were subdivided into long strips (these have been termed open fields, champs ouverts et allongés, and Gewannen). Most often, a strip was that parcel of land the oxen could plow in a single day. Peasant families seldom had rights to contiguous strips; instead they farmed strips located in the different fields (Reynolds 1961, p. 132).11 Normally one family’s strip was bordered by strips of families that belonged to the same plow team, thereby fostering the coordination of plowing.

The manorial pattern of agriculture, based as it was upon collective grazing rights, the interdependence of arable and waste, the communal regulation of cultivation (vaine pâture), and the harnessing and pulling of the heavy wheeled plow clearly required extensive organization and peasant cooperation (Thirsk 1964). This system was naturally associated with the establishment of village communities.

Nucleated village settlement was the optimum pattern in the feudal regions. The three-field system encouraged the peasant to reside in a central location, since he owned strips in each field and needed to have quick access. Moreover, the collective obligations and the restraints of farming with the heavy plow also encouraged nucleated settlements (Smith 1967, pp. 269–71). These communities evolved a system of self-government and strong communal consciousness and unity (Vinogradoff 1892, pp. 9, 396, 169).

11 According to Dion (1934, p. 81), as long as arable and pastoral production were intertwined, open fields coexisted with the practice of collective grazing rights. This coexistence differed from the practice in the Mediterranean region, where the cultivators set aside land distinct from the arable for the purpose of pasturing. Dion attributes the pattern of separation of arable from pasture to the Roman practice of ager and saltus.
American Journal of Sociology

408–9; Dion 1934, p. 37; Flatrès 1964, p. 29). Villagers knew each other, shared their problems, worked and prayed together.

As the new agricultural techniques increased the efficiency of production, towns arose to fulfill central place functions. Unlike the towns of the petty commodity zone (many of which had persisted since Roman times) these new towns were exclusively involved in trade with their hinterlands. The class composition of these towns was less heterogeneous: burghers, artisans, and emancipated peasants were the most important groups. The landed aristocracy remained in residence on their manors. The aristocracy had little to say about what went on in towns of this third region; for here alone autonomous towns had developed.

Impartible inheritance, or unigeniture, was generally the rule, and it kept the size of tenement constant (Goody 1976, pp. 26–27; Le Roy Ladurie 1976, pp. 41–44). The pressure toward unigeniture arose from the lord’s interest in preserving his return from the tenement. Fragmentation not only threatened this return but also inhibited the application of technical innovations. The use of the heavy plow, for example, would make little sense in small holdings. Unigeniture in the feudal mode of production led to a high degree of social stability and to an extensive division of labor. Noninheriting offspring were forced to follow other pursuits in the growing urban centers, the developing bureaucracy, or the armies of the feudal kings. Unigeniture also led to a family structure in which the father and mother lived with the married inheriting child under one roof (Le Roy Ladurie 1976, pp. 44, 47). This system, however, differed from préciput in that the inheriting child was not chosen at the whim of the father, but according to customary formulae (thus, there was primo- or ultimogeniture).

The class composition of this region therefore differed substantially from that of the two previous zones. The peasant, for one, was more dependent upon his lord than elsewhere, and his labor was more intensively appropriated. The interstitial urban economy produced a bourgeoisie and artisanry of intermediate strength—stronger than in the first mode of production, weaker (because cities were far less numerically important) than

12 Even in those occasional instances where the pattern of inheritance was not impartible, the lord in the open-field area could exert pressure on peasants to maintain the unity of the tenement: “Although it was hereditary, the land was held by a written, periodically renewable contract from the landlord, who had the legal right to approve every transfer effected through a marriage contract, inheritance settlement, or sale, and could deny any provisions that threatened to reduce his income. This was specifically aimed at preventing the peasants from dividing their holdings or burdening them with debts paid out as marriage portions” (Berkner 1976, p. 77). The lord’s drive to insure that unigeniture was instituted often met with resistance because of the family’s desire to split the holding, whether fief or farm, among offspring (Fourquin 1976, pp. 150–51).
in the second mode. Further, this was a relatively hierarchical class structure.

The political structure of this region was distinctive. The suzerain granted land to his vassal, who was bound by personal fealty. Personal loyalty linked each set of superiors and subordinates throughout the system as a whole. Bloch (1938) claimed these authority relations amounted to a form of parcelized sovereignty, and Anderson (1974a, pp. 148–49) has ably summarized their consequences: “political sovereignty was never focused in a single center. The functions of the State were disintegrated in a vertical allocation downwards, at each level of which political and economic relations were, on the other hand, integrated.” The stability of the system derived, in part, from the fact that feudal law did not recognize the concept of land ownership. The recipient of a fief did not have the right to alienate it, since in principle every tenement was held directly or indirectly by the king (*ius in re aliena*) (Ganshof 1964, p. 145). The practice of *relief*, surrendering the fief to the lord on the previous vassal’s death, which was widespread in areas of the strongest feudal presence, further strengthened the principle of the inalienability of the tenement (Fourquin 1976, pp. 148–49). Finally, the religious ideology of this zone was orthodox and antagonistic to mystical or individualistic versions of Christianity, such as Catharism (Le Roy Ladurie 1978).

This brief description must conclude with an important caveat. No single western European region can be adequately described by a general typology of this kind. For one thing, each of the differentiating factors discussed concerning these regions must be regarded as a continuous rather than a binary variable. For another, significant intraregional differences lent innumerable shadings to any particular territory. Differences between south and north Wales, eastern and western Ireland, Highland and Lowland Scotland, Basse and Haute Bretagne, as well as the existence of champion (open-field) areas in parts of Brittany, Normandy, Devon, Cornwall, Poitou, the French Alps, Aunis, and Saintonge illustrate the extent of variation within each of these regions. However, despite the importance of variations existing within each zone, at a macroscopic level the zones take on a reasonably homogeneous appearance.18

18 The uneven distribution of these modes of production in the territories of western Europe raises the problem of their origins. Why is the sedentary pastoral zone principally found on the Atlantic littoral and in northern Europe, the petty commodity zone oriented to the Mediterranean, and the feudal zone located in lands far from either sea? Basically two different approaches have been taken to this question. Some writers have insisted that each type of social organization ultimately had common cultural roots (Vinogradoff 1911; Gray 1915; Homans 1969). Others have favored explanations based on the different ecological endowments of the respective territories (Thirsk 1966; Baker 1966; Blum 1971; Hoffman 1975; Smith 1967). Anderson (1974b) has offered a historical interpretation emphasizing both cultural and geographical causes. He attributes the existence of three distinctive areas in medieval Europe to the differential
American Journal of Sociology

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF THESE DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL ORGANIZATION, 1000-1350

From the 11th century on, political units in the feudal zone gained territory and power at the expense of those in the sedentary pastoral and petty commodity zones. This is because the feudal mode of production was superior to its rivals in two important respects. First, feudal law gave these units definite political and organizational advantages. Second, the open-field system increased agricultural productivity so that economic development in the feudal zone was the highest in all Europe.

As late as the 12th century, the comparative superiority of the feudal zone was by no means obvious. After the collapse of Rome, prospects for political and economic development did not appear promising anywhere in western Europe. The Imperial traditions were kept alive in the eastern Mediterranean, while the West as a whole was plunged into a dismal period of instability and disintegration. Following the invasions the different regional social formations that were evolving coexisted for a time on a basis of mutual isolation and noninterference. Contemporaries undoubtedly would have believed that the West's best chance for development lay in the petty commodity zone. For during a period when Europe as a whole was peripheral to the international economy, these regions were by far the most civilized and urbanized in all the West. From the 10th to the 12th centuries, the Italian city-states and the cities of the Midi and Catalonia all gained wealth and territory throughout the western Mediterranean. However, from hindsight it is evident that even by this time the center of gravity of western Europe was shifting from the Mediterranean toward those territories that were developing a feudal mode of production largely insulated from international markets.

The reasons for this shift northward, representing a sharp discontinuity of development in that the parts of Europe that were least commercial in the 6th century came to supersede the most commercial parts in the 11th

impact of Roman institutions with the Barbarian social formation in its hinterland. No monocausal theory appears adequate in the light of existing evidence, because counter evidence can be provided to show the limitations of each approach. The cultural determinists have difficulty explaining the variation of field systems occurring within each of the west European culture areas (see Baker and Butlin 1973). Further, their expectations about the origins of institutions such as the open fields do not jibe with the English and German historical record (see Thirsk 1966; Mayhew 1973, pp. 23-28; Slicher van Bath 1963, p. 56). The ecological determinists, on the other hand, have no ready explanation for evidence that common institutions existed within areas having significant geographical variations (see Bloch 1966, pp. 58-59; Dion 1934, pp. 29-30). Thus, regardless of the merits of each approach, reasonable doubt remains. It therefore seems prudent to accept Kerridge's (1976, p. 48) verdict that "very likely we shall have to reconcile ourselves to the reality that the early origins of field systems are unknowable." The same must be said for the genesis of these regional modes of production more generally.
Modes of Production

century, have been at the center of one of the great historical controversies of our time. Pirenne (1939) argued that the Germanic invasions began to sever Mediterranean influence in the north, but that an Islamic blockade of the Mediterranean decisively ended this influence, forcing the West to live upon its own resources and to invent its own institutions. Islamic control of the Mediterranean thus provided an exogenous spur to development: Charlemagne would have been impossible without Mohammed. Apart from the dubiousness of his evidence (see Havighurst 1958), Pirenne did not offer a compelling account of the fact that European development occurred primarily in the particular regions where the feudal mode of production had its strongest hold; indeed, his analysis tends to downplay regional differences within western Europe during the Middle Ages.14

To understand the comparative superiority of the feudal mode of production it is necessary to begin with feudal law, for many of feudalism’s ultimate structural and political advantages are direct consequences of its nonallodial property rights and system of impartible inheritance.

Customary law produced a contract based on personal fealty between lord and vassal, as well as between peasant and lord, that could not be abrogated by allodial transfer. Even in instances where free peasants paid monetary rents, they were obliged to render services and lacked rights to sell their property. Feudal law stipulated that each tenement was held directly or indirectly by the lord. By custom, the vassal could cede the fief only to the lord. The right of property was divided into two parts: *jus eminens*, the right of (lord’s) ownership; and *jus utile*, the right of usucruct (Fourquin 1976, p. 139). But alienation and division were contrary to feudal custom. Both unigeniture and the nonallodial property rights basic to feudal law led to the consolidation of landholdings and therefore laid the basis for the emergence of relatively large political units, or principalities, by the 11th century.

Feudalism has often been viewed as a source of weak political power since it is identified with parcelized sovereignty. Yet in other respects the system of vassalage facilitated political coordination (Ganshof 1964, pp. 163–64, 167; Strayer 1968, p. 21). The vitality of feudalism can be seen in the context of the early Middle Ages in northwestern Europe. During the chaotic period from 1000 to 1200, the strongest principalities in western Europe were the most feudalized: in France, the Ile-de-France, Burgundy,

14 As does Hilton (1973, p. 26): “In spite of . . . widely differing physical environments, there was a basic similarity of social structure in the rural communities of medieval Europe. This arose from the simple fact that in a subsistence economy and in the climatic conditions of most parts of Europe, the most easily and cheaply produced foods were derived from cereals.” But surely there are different ways to produce grain. Just as Pirenne was convinced long-distance trade was the fount of most historical dynamics, Hilton falls into a similar error by reifying the concept of class.
American Journal of Sociology

and Normandy; in Spain, Castile—rather than economically advanced Catalonia.

These principalities were ruled through a hierarchy of authority extending from the independent castellans to the counts and vassals and finally to the king (Fourquin 1976, p. 70). As such, they possessed all the administrative machinery and the corps of officers, if not the power, that the monarchies would exhibit at a later date (Fourquin 1976, p. 231). Though the authority of the feudal king vis-à-vis his lords was highly limited, under feudal ideology no lord could refuse to recognize the theoretical supremacy of the monarch. This may be illustrated by the case of the count of Ile-de-France, who was viewed as sacred because he was the heir to the title of Charlemagne. The king took advantage of his dual role as both sovereign and suzerain to increase his power (Strayer 1968, p. 19; Fourquin 1976, pp. 102–3).

By its effects on territorial concentration and hierarchical administration feudal law thus provided a material and ideological framework for political cohesiveness that was clearly lacking elsewhere. In the other zones of western Europe the traditions of partible inheritance and allodial property rights fostered the widespread fragmentation of landholdings (Berkner 1976). In the petty commodity regions the change in allodial ownership of all lands or rights given out by ruling families to those who were their subordinates weakened the territorial polities. Allodial ownership also emerged in the sedentary pastoral zone. And the partible inheritance characteristic of both regions prevented dominant landowners from creating large enough holdings to establish hereditary kingdoms (Lewis 1965, p. 352). Part of the reason for the failure of the powerful duchy of Normandy to defeat the Ile-de-France in the 12th century stems from a legacy of partible inheritance that created a division in the Norman leadership. Impartible inheritance in the Ile-de-France contributed to its more cohesive leadership (Haskins 1966, p. 123).

All told, the combination of personal fealty, impartibility, and the inalienability of property essential to the maintenance of the feudal pyramid of authority was absent in both the sedentary pastoral and petty commodity zones.

But the feudal zone had economic as well as political and organizational advantages. It is clear that by the late Middle Ages the agriculture of the feudal zone was among the most productive on the continent. The reasons for this have long been subject to debate. Climate has been held to be an important cause of this superior productivity. If it is accepted that the major advantage the North held over the South lay in its more productive system of agricultural organization—the open-field system—then the spring sowing, the chief economic novelty of this system, was unprofitable in the South owing to the scarcity of summer rains there (White 1940). However,

1078
Modes of Production

dthis explanation cannot easily account for the substantial variation among field systems in northern Europe. As has been suggested above, cultural, social structural, political, and geographic factors must all be considered determinants of the different modes of production.

Technological change is perhaps a more convincing factor than climate to account for the economic advance of the feudal regions. The wheeled plow used in this zone was more efficient in that it eliminated the need for cross-plowing, enabled better drainage of the fields, and improved the circulation of minerals and plant nutrients within the soil on account of its deeper furrows (Herlihy 1974, p. 17). Other agricultural improvements developed here were a more modern harness; triennial rotation, which dramatically increased the arable; the use of the horse in place of the less efficient ox; the planting of legumes, adding valuable sources of protein to the diet and simultaneously increasing soil fertility through their nitrogen-fixing properties. Some of these improvements could be adopted more efficiently in regions with large parcels of land. All told, the improvements led to a virtual agricultural revolution that permitted increased population densities in the feudal zone (Duby 1968).

By the 12th century the most densely populated regions in western Europe were also the most feudalized—with the single exception of the northern Italian city-states, whose survival depended on long-distance trade (Russell 1972, p. 235). This relative population density gave these regions a decisive military advantage in the fluid political conditions of the high Middle Ages.

For the most part, the petty commodity regions did not take part in the agrarian technological revolution that occurred in the feudal zone (though Flanders and Lombardy may be cited as exceptions). The major landowners in this social formation did not reside in the countryside. Instead they lived in major urban areas, removed from the daily concerns of their holdings. It appears that these landholders did not apply to the management of their lands the spirit of initiative which they displayed in their commercial dealings (Fourquin 1976, p. 213). For in these regions the attraction of the market, and the two-field system of agriculture, had geared agriculture toward specialization and profit making. Thus cycles of expanding and contracting production continued to characterize the agriculture in the petty commodity zone (Smith 1967, p. 266).

Agricultural techniques in the sedentary pastoral zone were archaic, and production was oriented toward subsistence. Neither the technological in-

15 An alternative explanation of the relatively greater economic development of these regions has been offered by North and Thomas (1973, chap. 4). In their model, demographic growth is the exogenous variable that determines technological improvement. But this leaves the cause of population growth unexplained. The paucity of relevant data from the early Middle Ages makes a resolution of the issue unlikely in the near future.
novations occurring in the open-field areas nor the stimulus of commercial production in the South had parallels in the isolated regions of the Atlantic fringe.

By the early 14th century the feudal zone tended to have greater political cohesiveness, economic productivity, and, hence, military effectiveness than its two rivals. Its ultimate predominance in western Europe seemed all but assured.

THE EFFECT OF THE PLAGUES

Then came the plagues. The principal economic consequence of the plagues was to alter sharply the land/labor ratio everywhere in Europe. This increased the relative value of labor. But this single stimulus led to quite different results in the three zones. The feudal zone, which had possessed the most repressive system of labor control previous to the 14th century, subsequently developed the highest degree of peasant class consciousness. This relatively strong solidarity among peasants in the feudal regions promoted labor unrest and helped to ease peasant dependency. Since dependency inhibits the productivity of labor, the feudal zone emerged in the 15th century with still another comparative advantage.

The impact of sharply increased mortality varied in regions having different class structures. Not only were the class structures of the three zones different, but the solidarity of the various classes should be expected to have varied widely between zones. This is most evident for the peasantry. If class formation is considered to be at least partially a function of interaction patterns (see Hechter 1978), each mode of production should have produced different levels of peasant solidarity. Clearly the feudal mode, with its open-field agriculture based on peasant cooperation in the context of strong community institutions, would have produced the highest degree of peasant class consciousness. Just as clearly, class consciousness should have been weakest among peasants in the sedentary pastoral mode, owing to its field system composed of isolated farmsteads and to the scarcity of nucleated settlements. Finally, the petty commodity mode should have promoted an intermediate degree of peasant class consciousness—higher than in the sedentary pastoral mode, since agricultural laborers lived in villages or cities, but lower than in the feudalized areas, since agricultural production was individually rather than communally organized and the class composition of the cities in the petty commodity zone was so very heterogeneous.

In principle these ideas can easily be tested. If the mode of production affected class formation in this way we should expect to find that (ceteris paribus) 14th- and 15th-century peasant jacqueries occurred primarily in territories having a feudal and—less frequently—a petty commodity mode
Modes of Production

of production, rather than a sedentary pastoral one. In fact, such outbreaks occurred in southeastern England, the Paris basin, Flanders, Lombardy, the Rhine basin, and Barcelona, although there is no quantitative information about the relative strength of these movements (see map 3). Perhaps they arose, not because of commercialization, as Hilton (1973, p. 174) would have it, but because the modes of production of these regions provided a basis for the development of peasant solidarity.

MAP 3.—Principal areas of peasant rebellion in 14th-century western Europe (after Hilton 1973).
American Journal of Sociology

The high level of peasant solidarity in the feudal areas also worked to favor limited independence from landlords. A solitary peasantry was better able to resist the attempts of landlords to limit its freedom of action than a fragmentary peasantry. This partially explains regional differences in labor control within western Europe, as well as between western and eastern Europe. Basically, the labor scarcity induced by the plagues was associated with peasant dependency in eastern Europe (that is, the Second Serfdom) while at the same time the bulk of the western peasantry was gaining greater independence (see Brenner 1976). It is less appreciated that a similar pattern occurred within western Europe itself. Peasant solidarity in the feudal areas was one factor that led to independence, whereas peasant disorganization led to greater dependence. Under market conditions an independent peasant is likely to be more productive than his dependent counterpart because he reaps all the benefit from additional inputs of labor. Likewise, he gains from the adoption of efficient methods and techniques. On the other hand, the dependent peasant is by no means sure that he will get a reasonable return on the investment of more labor or capital than the amount he is obligated to provide. Thus, it is likely that the independent peasantry of the once-feudal areas tended to have greater labor productivity than the peasantry of the other zones. As a consequence, economic development was spurred to some degree in the former areas.

Whereas nonallodial property rights and the open-field system gave the feudal regions organizational and economic advantages relative to the other two zones, neither of these factors bears directly on the problem of state formation. The major argument of this paper is that the prospects for state formation were greatest in regions that were politically divided.

REGIONAL MODES OF PRODUCTION AND THE FORMATION OF MODERN STATES

The distribution of these three modes of production substantially influenced initial patterns of state formation in western Europe. This is evident because the core areas of the first modern states emerged for the most part in the feudal zone alone. In this period, state formation never occurred at all in the sedentary pastoral zone, and the petty commodity zone developed city-state forms that were eventually subdued by expanding feudal cores.

Ultimately, each of the three zones evolved distinctive types of political cleavages. The fact that political power in the feudal region was to some

16 Castile’s social organization was not, however, strictly comparable to that in the Paris basin or southeastern England. While all three areas were characterized by parcelized sovereignty, manorialism was much less important in Castile, where production was oriented toward the transhumant pastoralism of the Mesta (see Klein 1919).

1082
extent divided between two competing classes, whereas in the other zones it was monopolized by a single class, enhanced the prospects for state formation in the feudal zone. As will be seen, the development of strong states is aided by the existence of political divisions within a society and hindered by the absence of them.

Here the critical factor was the rise of towns. In the feudal region towns grew up to fulfill central place functions in an increasingly productive agrarian economy. The framework of parcelized sovereignty made it possible for the towns to win municipal liberties and thereby to gain autonomy from the aristocracy. But neither of the other two modes of production developed both a significant bourgeoisie and a strong artistocracy.

In contrast, the cities in the petty commodity zone played an entirely different role. They were the places of residence of aristocrats gaining a rentier income from their countryside estates. Hence, these cities were more likely to be centers of consumption than the northern towns, which arose largely on the basis of intermanorial trade. Far from arising endogenously out of a relatively self-sufficient economy, the southern cities were dependent on long-distance trade. They gained revenues by being centers of transshipment and of the production of manufactures for export to the international economy. The transalpine towns of southern Germany and Switzerland arose to fulfill similar functions. Consequently, in these territories the bourgeoisie and artisanry were relatively more numerous than in any other part of Europe. The urban classes in these regions of the petty commodity zone established a kind of political monopoly that could not be achieved by their counterparts elsewhere. Catalonia, for instance, had the most developed estates system anywhere in Europe during the high Middle Ages (Anderson 1974a, pp. 64–65). The sedentary pastoral regions, on the other hand, had the fewest urban settlements of all. Here the landed classes dominated the polity. Therefore, while a balance between urban and rural classes had been struck in the feudal territories, the other zones had an entirely different distribution of political power.

Parcelized sovereignty did not occur elsewhere, because in the non-feudal regions a single class could in effect obtain political control.17 The modern state first developed precisely in those territories where the political authority of the dominant social class had been most limited in the Middle Ages. What was the nature of the political division in feudal areas?

It was basically a class conflict between a well-established landowning nobility and a rising and autonomous urban bourgeoisie. In general, the two classes tended to have competing productive imperatives, material interests, and ideological principles. The bourgeoisie was committed to

---

17 This argument has been made previously in Hechter (1977).
production for exchange; it thus had an interest in attracting labor from
the countryside and in securing the widest possible markets for its prod-
ucts and services. Because its status rested on capital rather than land,
it felt that capital, not ascriptive privilege, should be the arbiter of a
man's worth. On the other hand, the aristocracy as a whole was com-
mited to production for use, constrained factor markets, and the prin-
ciple of ascription.

Some of the consequences of this class conflict can be appreciated by
a reconsideration of the issue of peasant dependency. While high peasant
solidarity may have limited the ability of lords to exploit their labor
force following the plagues, the role of towns was undoubtedly much
more significant. Faced with a relative shortage of labor induced by wide-
spread mortality, individual lords in all of the European regions had an
evident interest in agreeing not to compete amongst themselves for scarce
labor. This is because competition would only serve to drive up the price
of labor for each lord. The peasants, for their part, could flee a manor
(or an estate) only if they had somewhere to go—a place where they
would be welcomed and offered an alternative livelihood. To the degree
that lords were able to collude, and thereby restrict competition for la-
bor, the peasantry would be subject to maximal exploitation.

The existence of towns was therefore crucial, for the towns represented
a safe refuge beyond the control of the lords. When the urban areas
faced a shortage of labor (an event much more likely following the
plagues) they could only look to the countryside for new supplies. In
this situation collusion was out of the question, for towns and lords had
opposing interests with respect to labor. A flow of labor from rural to
urban areas would lower its price in towns but increase it in the coun-
tryside.

Thus in regions with thriving towns, the competition, and hence price,
for labor increased pari passu. Under competitive conditions, when labor
was a scarce factor of production it could gain at the expense of the
other factors, and particularly at the expense of the lords. One of the
things it could gain was independence; another was higher wages.

This illustrates how roughly similar degrees of labor scarcity could
increase peasant dependency in regions having few towns (in eastern
Europe generally, and the sedentary pastoral zone of western Europe),
while it could have quite the opposite effect in relatively urbanized re-
gions (in the feudal and petty commodity zones).

Marx often noted that feudalism was the first mode of production in
history to cause an opposition between town and country, but he failed
to analyze how this opposition presaged the formation of modern states.
To account theoretically for the rise of strong, centralized states, one
must explain why leading individual actors in a social form surrender
at least part of their power to the state, a corporate actor over which no individual has effective control. This can happen only if most of these individuals expect to gain, or to prevent the surrender of, enough resources by having a state apparatus to override the costs incurred by their loss of sovereignty (see Coleman 1973).

Now the outcome of this individual calculus of benefits and costs is decisively affected by the extent of political diversity within the society. All other things equal, state formation will be more likely to the degree that powerful individual actors form two groups on the basis of divergent economic and political interests. The reason is that, in politically divided societies, actors in the more powerful group always have an incentive to band together and create an organization—a state apparatus—to tax, repress, or otherwise expropriate the members of the weaker group. This incentive is magnified if, as in the case of late feudalism, the weaker group seems capable of mounting a challenge to the system of property rights under which the stronger group prospers.

Consider the feudal social formation. It was divided politically by two groups, a strong rural aristocracy and a weaker but growing urban bourgeoisie. As has been noted, this bourgeoisie was generally committed to freeing markets for land, labor, and capital as well as restricting the salience of ascriptive privilege in the social order as a whole. All of these principles were anathema to the lords. Were the bourgeoisie and their urban allies, the artisans, somehow to seize political power (perhaps with the aid of the peasantry) this would threaten not only the life-style but the livelihood of every aristocratic lord. Under these circumstances, seeing the handwriting on the wall, each lord might be willing to give up some of his power to a state that would maintain the prevailing social order.

Obviously such an outcome would grow more likely as the potential threat represented by the bourgeoisie appeared more credible. As this paper has shown, from the 14th century on the feudal social order was increasingly subject to challenge in two measurable ways. First, the feudal zone had witnessed a significant incidence of peasant rebellion; the docility of its labor force could no longer be taken for granted. Second, the link between the growth of towns and the rise of wage labor in the countryside could not easily be ignored. This explains why state formation did not begin in earnest until the 15th and 16th centuries: previous to this time the bourgeoisie cannot have been regarded as a credible challenging group by the bulk of the lords.

This analysis would therefore suggest that the first modern states in western Europe were set up at the behest of the landed aristocracy (this is a major theme in Anderson [1974a]). But a further point should be borne in mind. Class divisions were not the only kind of political divi-

1085
American Journal of Sociology

...sions that could promote state formation, as they largely did in the feudal parts of France and England. Cultural differences within a population could serve the same end. Thus, there is little doubt that state formation in the Iberian peninsula was fostered by the Reconquista directed against an internal enemy, the Moors. The common element in both types of examples is that group formation, and consequent organization, among actors in a given category is made possible by the recognition that each can either gain substantially, or preserve his position, by the subjection of an enemy within.18

Once the state gained power at the expense of its constituents it was free to pursue its own interests, subject, as always, to existing constraints. At first the modern state enacted policies on behalf of the landed aristocracy. In Spain, it preserved the property rights of the Mesta (North and Thomas 1973); in England, it braked the pace of enclosures, preventing the emergence of a free market in land (Polanyi 1957); in France, it circumscribed the mobility of labor and capital (North and Thomas 1973, p. 127) and never managed to levy taxes on the nobility at all. But gradually thereafter, modern western European history tells the story of how the state slowly deprived the landed aristocracy of its prerogatives, biting the very hands that had once fashioned its existence.

However, in the absence of such political divisions there was no compelling incentive for leading actors to surrender their power by creating a centralized state. While it might make sense for a particularly strong lord, or a particularly strong city-state, to attempt to dominate weaker neighbors, it was in the interest of the weaker actors to form coalitions to prevent this. Hence a system made up of relatively similar kinds of actors—be they individual actors, like feudal lords or tribal chiefs, or corporate ones, like city-states—will tend toward a balance of power composed of more or less stable coalitions. But this solution militates against the formation of a strong state encompassing all the actors in a given territory. Thus the urbanburghers of southern Germany and northern Italy spent most of their energies competing against rival city-states for shares of trade and tribute.19

18 In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels argued that “the separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors" (1970, p. 82).

19 In that eminent 16th-century treatise on state building, The Prince, Machiavelli clearly saw that the prevalence of autonomous city-states in Italy impeded that territory’s prospects for political unification. “And whoever becomes the ruler of a free city and does not destroy it, can expect to be destroyed by it, for it can always find a motive for rebellion in the name of liberty and of its ancient usages, which are forgotten neither by lapse of time nor by benefits received; and whatever one does or provides, so long as the inhabitants are not separated or dispersed, they do not forget that name and those usages, but appeal to them at once in every emergency, as did Pisa after so many years held in servitude by the Florentines. But when cities or provinces have been accustomed to live under a prince, and the family of that prince

1086
Likewise, the tribal chieftains of Ireland never yielded their individual authority to support a king from their midst.\textsuperscript{20}

The cumulative advantages of the feudal mode of production over its rivals may now be summarized. First, feudal law promoted the concentration of landholding and established a primitive hierarchical administrative structure capable of encompassing extended territories. This led to relatively powerful principalities by the 11th century. Second, the open-field system and the development and adoption of technical improvements in agriculture spurred economic and demographic growth in the feudal regions. But, most important, the existence of political competition between the bourgeoisie and the landowning aristocracy of these regions alone provided a setting in which leading aristocrats found it expedient to surrender their individual power and create a strong, centralized state. For this combination of reasons those territories having a feudal mode of production—with all that this implies—were most likely to subdue contiguous territories having other modes of production. Thus were formed the first modern states in western Europe.\textsuperscript{21}

is extinguished, being on the one hand used to obey, and on the other not having their old prince, they cannot unite in choosing one from among themselves, and they do not know how to live in freedom, so that they are slower to take arms, and a prince can win them over with greater facility and establish himself securely” ([1532] 1952, p. 46).

\textsuperscript{20} One of the best discussions of such a system comes not from western Europe at all, but from ethnographic research on the Berbers of the Maghreb conducted by Montagne ([1931] 1973). The Berbers have an institution called the \textit{legj}—a system of alliances between cantons of a particular faction that involve reciprocal obligations of loyalty. Thus, “when a canton enters into a state of war with one of its neighbors it receives assistance from the next canton but one, and step by step there develops a sort of vast political chequer-board in two colours. These blocs are very stable and it is considered a great dishonour if a canton changes allegiance. We know from the history of the Marabouts of the High Atlas that they have hardly changed at all, at least during the last hundred and fifty years” (Montagne [1931] 1973, p. 37; see also Gellner 1969).

\textsuperscript{21} Feudalism, then, was a sufficient condition of state formation in western European history; it was not, however, a necessary condition. If the lack of internal political divisions in a social form proved fateful for subsequent state formation, this did not mean that modern states could under no circumstances emerge in the petty commodity or sedentary pastoral zones. If the leading actors in either of these areas feared conquest by external enemies which might threaten their vital interests (by exacting tribute or expropriating property) then they would have an incentive to support a state apparatus to defend themselves. While the nonfeudal regions lagged behind in state formation, once the comparative superiority of the first modern states—Portugal, Spain, France, and England—became evident, the lords in many of these territories were compelled to establish centralized states in order to avoid being dominated. This trend was undoubtedly reinforced by changes in military technology (the greater importance of the infantry, the maturation of the siege cannon, and the increasing size of armies) that favored the centralized state (see Bean 1973). Most of the modern states formed in the 17th century and later, especially after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, had never had feudal cores. The emergence of the Swiss Confederation (East
American Journal of Sociology

CONCLUSION

Social scientists have often considered late medieval western Europe an area that can be characterized by a single system of social organization. This system has been termed "feudal" by some, and "patrimonial" by others. To be sure, these writers have admitted the possibility of variations on the theme, most often variations on national grounds. Hence careful scholars are quick to note that the social structure in medieval England was somewhat different from that in medieval France.

In contrast, it is the claim of the preceding analysis that three quite different types of social organization coexisted in late medieval western Europe. These types—which we have termed the sedentary pastoral, petty commodity, and feudal modes of production—were found in specific regions on the continent and the British archipelago. But their distribution was seldom, if ever, coterminous with the emerging boundaries of our modern states.

Although the concept of the mode of production has a long history in social science, it has rarely been used effectively for comparative analysis. This paper provides but a single illustration of the utility of the concept once it is endowed with an operational form. Indeed, it is quite difficult to explain many regional economic and political differences in early modern western Europe unless these modes of production are given their due. Thus, aspects of the various modes have been seen to be important determinants of differential patterns of peasant rebellion and types of labor control in the various territories. However, their principal effect was on the initial formation of modern states. Feudalism provided a set of conditions that helped bring modern states into being, but state formation was inhibited in the sedentary pastoral and petty commodity zones.

Two issues implied by this argument—one methodological, the other theoretical—seem especially worthy of comment here. The first is the question of the most appropriate unit of analysis for the comparative study of early modern societies in western Europe. This paper argues that the region, a territory defined in terms of the homogeneity of its mode of production, is

1966) and the Netherlands (Wallerstein 1974, pp. 164–224) had much to do with conflicts among the great powers. Both were formally recognized in 1648 after the resolution of the Thirty Years' War. Swedish state building has been explained plausibly as a reaction against the threat of Danish overlordship (Anderson 1974a, pp. 179–84), though Sweden was itself the most feudalized region in all Scandinavia (Osterud 1978). The German core, Brandenburg-Prussia, was as far removed from feudalism as any territory in the Empire—despite the fact that areas like Westphalia had been highly feudalized; the same is true of the Italian core, Piedmont. In these two territories external enemies included both popes and Holy Roman Emperors, neither of whom had an interest in seeing his prerogatives usurped by upstart princes (Ganshof 1974, p. 164; Hintze 1975, p. 167; Rokkan 1975). Germany suffered from its proximity to the Emperors, just as Italy was crippled by its proximity to the popes.

1088
the optimal unit of analysis rather than any unit circumscribed by a political boundary—such as the state. All the early states were made up of territories embracing more than one mode of production. Indeed, probably until the 19th century the feudal regions of England had more in common with the feudal regions of France than with the sedentary pastoral parts of England, and vice versa. To make comparisons between structurally heterogeneous units such as England and France in this period is therefore to invite considerable confusion.\footnote{A recent example of this confusion is offered by Macfarlane (1979). Finding evidence of widespread allodial property rights in parishes of late medieval East Anglia and Cumbria, the author rushes to the judgment that England never experienced anything like continental feudalism (p. 206)! But this evidence comes from two English regions lying outside the zone delimited by the feudal mode of production. As such it has no logical bearing on the characteristics of English feudalism. By falling to take cognizance of English regional diversity, Macfarlane is led to serious errors of interpretation.} Since most comparative sociologists take states as their unit of analysis by convention (and convenience), this constitutes far from a minor claim. In fact, it suggests the need for some reinterpretation of modern European history.

The second issue concerns a very grand problem, related to the theory of the state. In one form or another the question of state origins lies at the heart of theoretical concern in sociology. This is because since the inception of the discipline, sociological theorists have argued, in contrast to economic and psychological theorists, that the most important determinants of human behavior are institutional rather than individual (see Parsons 1937). And of all the institutions in complex societies the state must take pride of place. Thus to understand the genesis of the state is to learn something significant about the evolution of social order in general.

In the view of contractarian theorists such as Hobbes, Maine, Spencer, and their contemporary followers (see Olson 1965, chap. 4) the state arises as a response to individual needs, that is, to the demand for its services. These services can be termed protection and justice, in short. The contractarian theory holds that when the demand for these services increases to some unspecified threshold, individuals will voluntarily surrender their freedom to the state to gain protection and justice. Writers in the tradition of Marx, Engels, and Weber, on the other hand, tend to see the state as a predator imposed upon the powerless by a ruling group anxious to extend or consolidate its privileges.

The evidence relating the rise of the modern state to the existence of political divisions in a social form makes little sense from the perspective of the contractarian theory. If the modern state first arose through the establishment of a contractual agreement among its potential constituents, the explanation would surely be that such a contract was in the mutual

---

\[ Modes\ of\ Production\]

---

\[ This\ content\ downloaded\ from\ 129.219.247.33\ on\ Tue,\ 29\ Jul\ 2014\ 13:36:12\ PM\\]
\[ All\ use\ subject\ to\ JSTOR\ Terms\ and\ Conditions\]
interest of most of the leading actors, if not all of them. Yet if this were so, state formation would have occurred initially in regions having minimal political divisions, because these regions are composed of leading actors with the greatest commonality of interest. Instead, the first modern states arose precisely in regions where the leading actors had the least commonality of interest.

When the state is perceived as a revenue-maximizing institution providing a public good (Olson 1965)—namely, protection and justice for all within its borders—the explanation for this finding becomes evident. In societies without significant political cleavages, the strongest actor may have an incentive to establish a state to dominate weaker ones, but these weak actors, in turn, will likely coalesce in opposition to him. The typical result will be a standoff precluding the establishment of a strong centralized state. Leading actors will have an incentive to jointly surrender their power to a strong state only if they live in a politically divided society in which the weaker group can make a credible threat to change the rules of the game to their advantage and to the detriment of their opponents.

On the basis of the limited evidence presented in this paper we cannot hope to say anything definitive about a problem as deep as that concerning the origin of the state. Nonetheless, the finding that state formation occurred initially in politically divided regions casts some doubt on the contractarian theory of the state, while it is consistent with expectations derived from the predatory theory—particularly the Marxist version of it.

Marx insisted that group formation, on a class basis, was of cardinal importance as a cause of social change. Yet this analysis differs in one crucial respect from Marx’s discussion of these issues. Marx always tended to assume that the bourgeoisie was the class within feudalism that generally attained consciousness first, presumably because it was destined to play a revolutionary role. But this assumption is far more tenable for the early medieval period, during which the burghers successfully pressed their claims for municipal autonomy, than for the later. In contrast, we argue that in late feudalism the nobility, not the bourgeoisie, was more likely to have attained class consciousness. The modern state was a direct result of this development. Thus, bourgeois class consciousness in the late medieval period did not grow from the seeds of a new, capitalist mode of production so much as reemerge in reaction to the policies of the first modern states.

REFERENCES


1090
Modes of Production

Goody, J. 1976. "Inheritance, Property and Women: Some Comparative Considera-

1091
American Journal of Sociology


1092
Modes of Production


American Journal of Sociology