
Review Article:

Byzantine Feudalism

Professor Robert Browning

A recent volume of the French Marxist journal *Recherches Internationales* (No. 79 [1974]) reprints in French translation ten recent articles on Byzantine Feudalism by Soviet, Bulgarian, Rumanian and Yugoslav specialists. The question whether Byzantine society, and especially late Byzantine society, from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, was in any meaningful sense feudal, is one which has been in the forefront of discussion at international congresses of Byzantine studies and elsewhere for many years. It has aroused interest beyond the narrow range of specialists. One of the most useful surveys of the "state of play" was published ten years ago by the Japanese historian K. Watanabe (*Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts and Sciences* 5 [1965]).

The dispute is not just about the meaning of words, though it is sometimes reduced to this level. It is in essence about the validity of the type of historical generalisation involved in postulating a succession of stages in the development of the relations of production. Those who reject the concept of Byzantine feudalism generally define feudal society in terms of specific political institutions and of a particular kind of hierarchy of personal relations which are both legal and moral. Those who accept it think of feudalism as a stage in the development of the productive forces of society marked by the predominance of agriculture and of a natural economy and by the institutionalisation of large-scale landed property through which the peasant, the primary producer, is exploited, paying part of the new value he creates to the owner of the land in the form of labour, deliveries in kind, or money.

Problems of Definition

Most non-Marxist historians—but by no means all—either expressly deny the existence of feudal society in Byzantium or burke the issue by speaking of "feudalism" in inverted commas. They tend to take up one or other of two positions. They may argue that Byzantine society belongs to those mainly oriental societies in which there was no real private property in land, and in which the state was patrimonial and in a certain measure entrepreneurial. This argument is presented in Marxist terms by those who class Byzantine society as an example of the "Asiatic

mode of production", along with the hydraulic societies of the great river valleys in Egypt, Mesopotamia and elsewhere. This view was critically examined by the French historian Hélène Antoniadis-Bibicou in "Byzance et le mode de production asiatique" (*La Pensée* 129 [1966]), an article regrettably omitted from the present collection because it was readily accessible in France. The argument is based on a fundamental misconception of property relations in the Byzantine world and of the purely fiscal nature of Byzantine state intervention in production.

More frequently the anti-feudalists argue that Byzantine society represents a continuation into the middle ages of the social and economic relations of the ancient world, like an erratic block in geology. This view has been set out with maximum lucidity and scholarship by the eminent French historian Paul Lemerle in a number of publications. A brief statement of the continuity thesis in Marxist terms is to be found in Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, London, 1974, 265-293.

Either of these arguments may be accompanied by the observation that the apparently feudal features found in late Byzantine society—including the personal oath of fealty—are the result of Western influences and not endogenous in Byzantine society.

Main Features of Byzantine Feudal Society

The view that essential feudal relations developed independently in Byzantine society is most cogently developed by the distinguished Yugoslav historian Georgije Ostrogorski—who never, I think, describes himself as a Marxist—in his by now classical book *Pour l'histoire de la féodalité byzantine* (Brussels, 1954), of which only a few pages are reprinted in the present collection. Subsequent study by Marxist scholars has concentrated upon elucidating the particular features of Byzantine society which made Byzantine feudalism often so different in its profile from that of Western Europe, though so similar in the essential nature of the system of exploitation which it embodied. The studies here reprinted are admirable examples of the way in which scrupulous study of particular events and

institutions are illumined by understanding of the more fundamental features of the society under examination and contribute in their turn to the refinement of that understanding. The authors propound no common doctrine; on the contrary, each of them suggests a new programme of research to be undertaken. And their conclusions cannot be adequately summarised in a paragraph.

At the risk of gross over-simplification, the following are suggested as the main particular features determining the development of Byzantine feudal society. The coexistence in full vigour in the early middle ages of various forms of property, state, communal and individual, surviving from antiquity. The continued existence of a centralised state, with its sophisticated bureaucracy. The survival of ancient cities well into the middle ages, their subsequent decline, and their resurgence in the tenth to twelfth centuries. The special position of the capital city, Constantinople. What is striking is how, in spite of the absence of the "anarchy" which accompanied the growth of feudalism in the West, the various forms of property come together to give rise to a régime of large-scale property based on feudal rent. The differing nature of feudal

immunities in East and West is examined and explained. The question of the existence of centralised feudal rent is posed, without being definitively answered. And a whole range of problems is thrown up which only further research can solve.

Critical and Creative

This book is an excellent example of the critical and creative—and totally undogmatic—way in which Marxist scholars treat a large historical problem, and one which is by no means academic in the pejorative sense. For many of the questions examined are closely related to those which arise in practice today in the politics of so-called underdeveloped countries today. If I were, say, an Ethiopian, I should find these studies of much more than theoretical interest.

Those who read Russian will find a more recent study of many of the same questions in an article by Z. V. Udaltsova and K. H. Osipova, "The Peculiarities of Feudalism in Byzantium" (*Voprosy Istorii*, 1974, 10, 98-117), which would certainly have been included by the French editors had it appeared in time.

Discussion Contribution on:

Trotsky and the Popular Front

Monty Johnstone

Part II

In June 1936 Trotsky had correctly appreciated the revolutionary mood of the most militant sections of the French workers. But, as Lenin had cautioned, "revolutionary tactics cannot be built on a revolutionary mood alone. Tactics must be based on a sober and strictly objective appraisal of *all* the class forces in a particular state (and of the states that surround it, and of all states the world over)."⁷⁴ A crucial element for such an appraisal was at hand in the results of the general election which had just been held in France.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ "Left-wing" *Communism*, C.W., Vol. 31, p. 63. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ Ernest Mandel, who has criticised my use of election figures in the evaluation of French events (E. Mandel, *Class Consciousness and the Leninist Party*, Colombo, n.d.—1970?—pp. 6-7), would do well to consider the

Marxists should not, of course, look at election results statically and formalistically. They need to be analysed dynamically in their social context to assess trends and revolutionary potential. Nevertheless "universal suffrage is an index of the maturity of the various classes in the understanding of their

prime importance accorded by Lenin to Russian election results, not only in the Soviets but also in the city council elections just held, in the autumn of 1917 to determine whether the time had come to organise the October Revolution. (See Lenin, C.W., Vol. 26, pp. 80, 183-4, 195.) Indeed we find Trotsky himself in 1923 writing that even without the existence of Soviets the Bolsheviks would have been able to ascertain when they had won the necessary majority of the working people by reference to "other gauges of our revolutionary influence" including "democratic elections of all kinds". (*The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 2, pp. 350-1.)