

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

Capitalism, Merchants and Bourgeois Revolution: Reflections on the Brenner Debate and its Sequel

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The “Brenner Debate” launched by *Past and Present* in 1976 was about “agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe”. Robert Brenner’s recent book, *Merchants and Revolution*, has opened a new front in the debate by introducing merchants and “commercial change” into the equation.¹ Although the book’s massive Post-script carefully situates Brenner’s analysis of commercial development in the context of his earlier account of the agrarian transition from feudalism to capitalism, this is unlikely to foreclose debate about how, or even whether, his more recent argument about the role of merchants in the English revolution can be squared with the original Brenner thesis. What is at issue here is not just divergent interpretations of historical evidence but larger differences about the nature of capitalism. The following argument has more to do with the latter than with the former, and it will be concerned with Brenner’s work and the debates surrounding it not just for their own sake but for what they reveal about the dominant conceptions of capitalism, in Marxist and non-Marxist histories alike.

One important reviewer of Brenner’s recent book has already claimed to discover a fundamental contradiction between his latest work and his original thesis. This criticism goes straight to the heart of the issues I want to explore. Perry Anderson has argued that there is a “deep paradox” in Brenner’s account of the English revolution, at odds with his original theory of European economic development.² While in his earlier thesis, “it was the unique self-transformation of the English landowners which ushered in the world of capital – and it alone”, in

¹ Brenner’s original article was first published in *Past and Present*, 70 (February 1976). Responses from M.M. Postan and John Hatcher, Patricia Croot and David Parker, Heide Wunder, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Guy Bois, R.H. Hilton, J.P. Cooper and Arnost Klima followed in subsequent issues, with a comprehensive reply from Brenner at the end. The whole debate was republished in T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin (eds), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985). The new book is *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Cambridge and Princeton, 1993).

² Perry Anderson, “Maurice Thomson’s War”, *London Review of Books*, 4 November 1993, p. 17.

Merchants and Revolution the new merchants have “the catalytic role”, especially in converting “a Parliamentary revolt into an armed revolution”. “Here, if ever,” Anderson continues,

were revolutionary bourgeois. The species declared a fiction in France was *bel et bien* a reality in England, a hundred years before the Convention. There is a nice irony that it should be massive historical evidence, running against – not with – a theoretical conviction which has brought a Marxist scholar to this conclusion. The detractor of the significance of merchant capital in principle has been the first to establish, in spell-binding detail, its role as a demi-urge in practice.

My intention here is not simply to consider the validity of this claim about Brenner’s work but, more generally, to explore the widely shared assumptions on which that claim is based and their implications for our understanding of capitalism. I shall not pretend to contribute anything of substance to the resolution of contentious empirical questions about agrarian development in pre-industrial Europe or the role of various classes in the English Civil War. But the claim that there is a “deep paradox” in Brenner’s work – that the role he now assigns to revolutionary merchants runs counter to his explanation of the transition to capitalism as a process rooted in agrarian relations – has less to do with disagreements over matters of historical fact than with certain assumptions about “bourgeois revolution” and, indeed, about what defines capitalism as a historically specific social form. The object here is to bring into focus these larger issues rather than to adjudicate among the various readings of historical evidence proposed in the Brenner Debate.

The “Brenner Debate”

First, a brief sketch of the Debate itself as it relates to the issues here in question. Brenner’s original article, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe”, took aim at two dominant models of historical explanation. The first was the increasingly dominant demographic model according to which economic development in post-medieval Europe followed long-term cycles in population growth – what he called a secular Malthusianism. The second, a historiographical orthodoxy against which the demographic model had at the outset often defined itself, was the commercialization model, which attributed the processes of European economic change to the growth of markets and trade. The latter model – which, in one form or another, has arguably appeared in every major explanation of the transition to capitalism since the late eighteenth century – has been largely out of favour in recent years; but it still exerts at least a subterranean influence, not only on conventional wisdom but (as I shall suggest in what follows)

even on its scholarly critics, including the demographers who claim to have displaced it.³

Brenner attacked the very foundations of both these competing models. In particular, he emphasized their inability to account for the fact that very different, indeed opposite, effects were produced in different countries by the same factors – with consequences not only for income distribution between classes but also for long-term economic growth and the development of productive forces. These divergent effects of apparently similar causes – similar demographic patterns in one model and insertion in the same network of increasing trade in the other – were enough to put in question the status of these causes as independent variables and seriously weakened the explanatory force of the dominant models. In their place, Brenner constructed a powerful alternative explanation for the unprecedented process of self-sustaining economic growth which established itself in early modern England. His explanation focused on the varying configurations of social property relations which determined the divergent effects, in different contexts, of other factors (whose importance he did not dismiss) such as demographic cycles or the expansion of trade. The critical factors for him were the different patterns of relations between feudal lords and peasants which distinguished not only Eastern from Western Europe, but also England from France, and so on. Only in England, he argued, did the dominant property relations compel the principal economic actors, landlords and peasants, to follow a distinctive and unprecedented course, the unintended consequence of which was capitalism – as landlords largely devoid of extra-economic powers of exploitation, and peasants increasingly dependent on the market for access to their means of self-reproduction, found themselves relying on the proceeds of cost-effective and competitive production, specialization, accumulation and innovation.

The ensuing debate drew in a wide range of distinguished historians whose various oxen Brenner had gored. When the whole debate was republished in a single volume, the result was described in the publisher's blurb, with ample justification, as "one of the most important historical debates of recent years". But while the debate generated much that was profoundly illuminating – including a comprehensive reply by Brenner to his critics, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism", which recapitulated, clarified and expanded his argument decisively⁴ – there remained something not quite satisfying about the proceedings. Brenner's explanation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism must surely rank as one of the most important and fruitful advances in modern

³ I have discussed the dominant models in *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States* (London, 1991), ch. 1, and *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge, 1995), especially ch. 5.

⁴ Aston and Philpin, *The Brenner Debate*, pp. 213–327.

historical scholarship, with major theoretical as well as empirical implications. Yet despite a wide range of more or less interesting and sometimes telling local disagreements registered by Brenner's critics, there remained larger issues on which the participants in the debate seemed to be talking at cross purposes.

Not the least of the problems was that the critics sometimes tended to beg the question by simply reproducing the very assumptions that Brenner was challenging. His argument was from the start predicated on the historical specificity of capitalism and was directed against the widespread inclination to take as given precisely those features of capitalism that require explanation. This had certainly been true of the commercialization model, which assumes that trade and markets are by nature tendentially capitalist, requiring only *expansion* and not qualitative transformation. The pre-existence of capitalism is in effect invoked, in a circular fashion, in order to explain its coming into being, without acknowledging the specificity of its distinctive competitive pressures, its systemic imperatives of profit-maximization, accumulation and improving labour-productivity.

Nor was it clear that the underlying premises of the demographic explanation were as far removed from the "commercialization model" as its exponents claimed. While challenging the primacy of expanding markets as a determinant in European economic development, they continued to assume, as Brenner pointed out, that development occurred "more or less automatically, in a direction economically determined by the 'laws of supply and demand'".⁵ Those laws might be determined in more complicated ways than the commercialization model could account for – not simply as a function of almost contingent developments in the contraction and expansion of trade but in response to the complex (natural?) cycles of population growth and decline or Malthusian blockages; but the nature of the market and its "laws" was never put in question, nor did the demographic model represent a challenge to – or, for that matter, an explicit defence of – the prevailing convention according to which the capitalist market is not so much qualitatively different from as quantitatively larger and more inclusive than markets in non-capitalist societies.

Not all the implications of Brenner's thesis were plainly stated in the Brenner Debate, although some of them have been elaborated elsewhere.⁶ It was, however, clear that his argument, in contrast to those of his critics, presupposed the specificity of the *capitalist* market and the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶ The most important of these other works are Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism", *New Left Review*, 104 (July–August 1977), pp. 25–92; "The Social Basis of Economic Development", in John Roemer (ed.), *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge, 1985); and "Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism", in A.L. Beier *et al.* (eds), *The First Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989).

necessity of explaining its very particular “laws”, its historically unique impetus to self-sustaining growth based on an equally unique systemic compulsion constantly to improve the productivity of labour. This unique historical drive was not simply a function of markets as they had always been, or of some age-old law of supply and demand, but the product of distinctive social property relations whose origins he sought to explain.

There were other ways too in which Brenner’s critics, including both demographic historians and some Marxists, argued against him from a vantage point that took for granted the very features of capitalism that demanded explanation. So, for example, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, in an argument that presupposed a separation of the “economic” and the “political” which is specific to capitalism, attacked Brenner for conflating economic and political factors by talking about “surplus-extracting, or ruling, classes” as if they were one and the same. Similarly, Guy Bois took exception to the “voluntarism” of Brenner’s “political Marxism” which, he maintained, neglected economic factors altogether. The latter account of Brenner’s argument seemed to be reinforced in the introduction to the volume by Rodney Hilton, who (with a diplomatic and more or less coded note of dissent) presented the issue between the two varieties of Marxism, represented respectively by Bois and Brenner, as having to do with the relative weight given to *forces* as distinct from *relations* of production, the “*whole* mode of production” as distinct from just class conflict, economic as distinct from simply political factors. Hilton, despite his own tremendous contribution to the history of class struggle, seemed to be hinting that Brenner had leaned too much in the “politician” direction.

The criticisms levelled by Bois and Le Roy Ladurie were quite substantially beside the point, for Brenner’s whole argument was predicated on the important observation, proposed originally by Marx, that pre-capitalist societies were characterized by “extra-economic” forms of surplus extraction, carried out by means of political, juridical and military power, or what Brenner now calls “politically constituted property”. In such cases, direct producers – notably peasants, who remained in possession of the means of production – were compelled by the superior force of their overlords to give up some of their surplus labour in the form of rent or tax. This is in sharp contrast to capitalism, where surplus extraction is purely “economic”, achieved through the medium of commodity exchange, as propertyless workers, responding to purely “economic” coercions, sell their labour-power for a wage in order to gain access to the means of production. Following this insight to its logical conclusion, Brenner was not, as Le Roy Ladurie complained, simplistically assimilating economic and political factors, nor, as Bois maintained, “privileging” political as against “economic” factors in his explanation of the transition from feudalism, but rather exploring the consequences of the *fusion* of the “economic” and the “political”, the

unity of “surplus-extracting” and “ruling” classes, which was, precisely, a constitutive feature of the feudal mode of production.

Nor was it a matter of neglecting the technical forces of production. Brenner was simply building on the fundamental difference between the capitalist mode of appropriation, which depends on improving labour-productivity – and hence encourages the improvement of productive forces – and pre-capitalist modes of appropriation which are not driven by the same requirement to improve the productivity of labour. The principal question, then, was how old forms of “politically constituted property” were replaced in England by a purely “economic” form, and how this set in train a distinctive pattern of self-sustaining economic growth.

If Brenner’s critics had failed to engage these larger issues, they nevertheless compelled him to elaborate his argument. One result was a profoundly innovative discussion of what he called “political accumulation”, the process by which various – and especially English and French – feudal lords responded to the “crisis” of feudalism not by encouraging the development of productive forces (which would have presupposed a capitalist logic) but by enhancing their coercive powers of *appropriation*, especially by means of state-centralization. Among the most fruitful outcomes of this exploration was a comparative account of state-formation in England and France and the very different patterns of relations between landlords, peasants and the monarchical state associated with their respective processes of feudal centralization.

Brenner also explained much more clearly than he had before how the specific disposition of agrarian relations in England gave rise to a distinctive pattern of economic growth. He made it clear that the issue was not simply the size of holdings which permitted English lords to benefit from increasing productivity when their extra-economic powers failed them, but rather the specific conditions of English *tenant*-farmers which subjected them to the imperatives of market competition. Not only did they sell their products in the market like other commercial farmers, but their very access to land was mediated by a market in leases which compelled them to produce competitively, by means of improvement and specialization, in order to pay economic rents. (It should probably be added here that the importance of such “economic” forms of tenure cannot be judged simply on the basis of how many farmers actually held their land on such terms. The point is that, whatever their numbers, once their more productive agriculture established the conditions of survival and success, it could impose its logic on land held in different ways, and on farmers whose tenure may have been more unconditionally secure but who might nevertheless bring their goods to the same market.) At the same time, the distinctive position of English landlords, the relative weakness of their access to “extra-economic” means of exploitation by direct coercion, had implications

too. While in other conditions landlords might obtain the best returns simply by squeezing their tenants, English landlords were increasingly dependent on the capitalist profits of their tenants, and hence less on enhancing their own powers of appropriation than on encouraging more competitive *production*.

One final point probably needs to be clarified about the implications of the Brenner thesis. One line of argument that might be pursued against it has to do with the claims it makes for the distinctive productivity of English agriculture in the era of "agrarian capitalism". If Brenner is correct about the specific logic of English property relations and their effects in compelling farmers to produce cost-effectively, to specialize, accumulate and innovate, it ought to be clear that English agriculture was significantly more productive than others. Yet some historians have argued, for example, that the "productivity" of French agriculture in, say, the eighteenth century, at the height of English "agrarian capitalism", was roughly equivalent to that of the English.

Only the most basic misunderstanding of the issues, however, and the most fundamental misconceptions about the specificity of capitalism, can turn this into an argument against Brenner's assertions about English agrarian capitalism. It turns out that what is at issue here is not *productivity* (output per unit of work) but total output. The critical point is that in France a much larger number of people engaged in agricultural production was required to yield an output similar to that generated by a small agrarian population in England. In fact, the absence of agricultural "improvement" is one of the most notable facts about French agriculture at the time of English agrarian capitalism, as is the striking difference between the attitudes of French and English landlords towards their tenants.⁷ Nothing could illustrate more clearly the distinctiveness of English property relations and their contribution to the evolution of capitalism – not only in establishing a new dynamic of self-sustaining economic growth but in creating the agricultural surplus, labour force and market that laid a foundation for industrialization. Far from challenging the specificity of English agrarian capitalism, then, the "productivity" of French agriculture only serves to confirm it.

Merchants and Revolution

The scene of the original Brenner thesis was the English countryside. Inevitably, questions were to arise about the role he would assign to

⁷ On the lack of "improvement" in French agriculture in the seventeenth century and throughout much of the eighteenth, see Hugues Neveux, Jean Jacquart and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *L'âge classique des paysans, 1340–1789* (Paris, 1975), especially pp. 214–215. On the failure of French landlords to regard their tenants as entrepreneurs or improvers, see Robert Forster, "Obstacles to Agricultural Growth in Eighteenth-Century France", *American Historical Review*, 75 (1970), especially p. 1610.

cities, trade and merchant classes, more conventionally associated with the rise of capitalism. This is the background against which to read *Merchants and Revolution*. It is a very different kind of work than any of his others, a massive and detailed study, in large part prosopographical and supported by the kind of archival evidence and empirical specificity that would satisfy even the most exacting professional historian. Instead of ranging widely across centuries and geographic boundaries in the manner of the *Brenner Debate*, this book stays closer to the kind of temporal and spatial parameters more palatable to the profession, especially in these "revisionist" days. Its command of detail and its erudition are impressive, and it is clearly the product of many years of painstaking research. These qualities will no doubt compel historians of the period to take his work very seriously; so it is to be hoped that they, and other readers, will also be compelled to reflect on the larger project of which it forms a part. Perhaps they will feel obliged to consider its implications for the kinds of long-term historical processes that have become unfashionable to think about, at a time when "grand narratives" are out and contingency, fragmentation and very local, particularistic and proximate causes are in (if causality is admitted at all).

Brenner's book is too rich in detail and nuance to summarize except in the broadest terms. The argument has fundamentally to do with the economic and social changes that transformed the English merchant classes, specifically in London, first displacing the Tudor Merchant Adventurers in favour of the great monopolistic trading companies which dominated the Levant-East India trade, and then giving rise to a new social group, the "new merchants" who flourished in the growing colonial trade and the new commercial order connected especially with the plantation economy (together with "interloping" merchants in the East India trade). This new social formation, which came to fruition in the 1640s, was to play an important part in the Civil War as a crucial link in the parliamentary alliance which joined aristocratic oppositionists at one extreme with London radicals at the other; and, after Cromwell's victory, the new merchants played a dominant role in the formation of the Commonwealth's commercial policy, in sharp opposition to the old company merchants on whom the Crown decisively depended.

The new merchants, together with an important group of colonizing aristocrats increasingly detached from the old alliance between landlords and company merchants, formed an important base for the relatively radical but anti-democratic republicanism (given explicit expression, for example, by Ireton in the Putney Debates) which formed an increasingly uneasy alliance with popular forces. The very alliance that brought the Commonwealth to power drove away the bulk of the parliamentary classes, while the undemocratic republicanism of the Commonwealth leadership was bound to come into conflict with the popular radicalism of its supporters among artisans and small tradesmen, especially in

London, and among the army rank and file. The Commonwealth leaders consolidated their power by destroying their most radical allies, compelling the regime to rely that much more heavily on those elements in the alliance with whom they had most in common ideologically, notably the new merchants. But this political formation, resting on a narrow social base, could not survive its irreducible contradictions, what Brenner calls a disjunction between political and social power.

It was no doubt inevitable that this unstable regime would end as the leadership of the Commonwealth was forced to choose between concessions to popular radicalism in order to secure its social base and an "institutional and constitutional conservatism" which would win greater support from the parliamentary classes, a choice that ended in a repudiation of the radical alliance by Cromwell and his officers. But if the new merchants lost something of their political prominence in the new dispensation, the alliance between them and the landed aristocracy would be strengthened as the aristocracy became ever more firmly rooted in agricultural capitalism and commercial expansionism. When the project of the parliamentary capitalist aristocracy which had come on to the agenda in 1640–1641 was realized in 1688 and its sequels, so too, argues Brenner, was "the project of 1649–1653 of its leading allies outside the landed classes, the American colonial and East Indian-interloping leadership" (p. 716). An increasingly capitalist aristocracy became even more intertwined with expansionist commercial interests, as well as with a dynamic manufacturing sector.

The lengthy Postscript to *Merchants and Revolution* – a small book in itself – situates the story of the London merchants in the larger context of Brenner's original thesis about England's long-term development and specifically in relation to debates on the Civil War. Like the original Brenner Debate, it begins by canvassing two major currents of interpretation, this time the traditional social interpretation – including both Marxist and non-Marxist variants, represented respectively by such distinguished historians as Christopher Hill and Lawrence Stone – and the "revisionist" tendency (Conrad Russell, John Morrill, *et al.*).⁸

The first depicts a declining traditional aristocracy in crisis, unable to benefit from new economic opportunities and turning to the Crown for support, pitted against a rising "bourgeoisie", including not only merchants but a thrusting yeomanry and gentry, poised to take advantage of a new economic order. Like the "commercialization model" of economic

⁸ See George Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London, 1987), for an earlier, analogous treatment of the French Revolution and the debate between the old "social interpretation" and the "revisionist challenge". Like Brenner's Postscript, Comninel's Conclusion also sketches an alternative historical-materialist "social interpretation" of the Revolution, not based on the model of a direct confrontation between a feudal aristocracy and a capitalist bourgeoisie. This account of the French Revolution is to be elaborated in a future volume.

change, this interpretation depends on assuming a “bourgeois [i.e. capitalist] society” existing in embryo within a largely inert feudal society and struggling to be released from its bondage; but, Brenner argues (without, perhaps, doing justice to the important modifications introduced in recent years by other Marxist historians, especially Christopher Hill and Brian Manning), this model has foundered on its inability to demonstrate that there actually existed the kind of opposition between feudal and capitalist classes on which it depends, or that the division between royalists and parliamentarians corresponded to a social division between classes or even within the landed class. The English aristocracy, extraordinarily homogeneous in the seventeenth century, was itself increasingly involved in agrarian capitalism (depending not on “extra-economic” appropriation but on economic rents from capitalist tenants subject to competitive pressures) and largely united in its opposition to any absolutist programme. By contrast, the mercantile elite, benefiting from privileges and monopolies conferred by the Crown, were among the king’s staunchest supporters.

But if “revisionism” has flourished at the expense of the traditional social interpretation, its own conception of politics in seventeenth-century England as little more than a disconnected series of very local clashes among particular groups and factions, within a larger context of national consensus, is unable, Brenner convincingly argues, to account for certain consistent patterns of political conflict over similar constitutional and religious issues, repeated from before the Civil War to 1688 and beyond. His challenge to the dominant revisionisms should provoke yet another major debate and may even bring about yet another “paradigm shift”. The revisionists, he suggests, have relinquished the advantage possessed by the old social interpretation, which recognized the necessity of accounting for the repeated patterns of conflict in seventeenth-century England by looking for their social-structural roots. Only an alternative social interpretation can fill the explanatory gap.

Again, Brenner offers an alternative, building on his earlier accounts of England’s long-term economic and political development, its specificities and differences, especially in contrast to France. The demilitarized ruling class of England was, even by European standards, unusually devoid of “extra-economic” powers or “politically constituted property” and increasingly reliant on purely “economic” modes of appropriation. This meant both that it had no use for an absolutist state like the French, which served a section of the aristocracy as a form of property, and also that the English state was a uniquely centralized and unitary formation, formed by aristocracy and monarchy together in an unusually cooperative process, a state unchallenged by competing aristocratic jurisdictions but serving the aristocracy as an instrument of order. Yet if the English aristocracy provided no social base for absolutism, it also, and for the same reasons, lacked the means to withstand any absolutist

project by the Crown without forging alliances with other forces and accepting a dangerous degree of popular mobilization – as occurred in the 1640s and again during the exclusion crisis of 1679–1681. The particular nature of the English state and social property relations created, to put it simply, a structural disposition to political alliances which acquired a momentum of their own.

Brenner shows how, in the pre-Civil War period, the logic of such alliances pushed the growing conflicts over taxation (especially of commerce), religion and foreign policy beyond the limits of any social divisions within the ruling class – such as those between the bulk of the propertied classes which had no use for absolutism and the relatively small group that did, notably the old merchant elite. It is not difficult to explain the emergence of a powerful Parliamentary opposition once it became clear that the king could not be deflected from his apparently absolutist project; and why, until the middle of 1641, Parliament was almost entirely united in its opposition not to monarchy as such but to any absolutist programme. What requires explanation is the very existence of a significant Royalist party under those circumstances. The irony is that, with a ruling class largely united in its anti-absolutist interests, the base of support for the Crown would not have sufficed to create a substantial Royalist alliance if the revolutionary threat unleashed by popular agitation and Parliamentary mobilization of popular forces had not driven many propertied Parliamentarians back into the arms of the king. Here Brenner has more in common than he explicitly concedes with the social interpretation of other Marxist historians like Christopher Hill and Brian Manning, who have shown how popular mobilization itself became a major source of conflict, creating a Royalist party – and ultimately the Restoration – as the threat from below temporarily overshadowed the threat from above.⁹ At any rate, the political project of the Parliamentary aristocracy was thus left unfinished, to be more or less completed in the settlement of 1688–89.

“Deep paradox”? Bourgeois revolution vs. transition to capitalism

In his Postscript, Brenner unequivocally situates his account of London merchants in the context of his earlier thesis about the transformation of social property relations in the English countryside and its role in the transition to capitalism. The scene may have shifted in *Merchants and Revolution*, but there is, on the face of it, nothing in his historical account of London merchants that contradicts the original thesis about the development of English agrarian capitalism. There is no warrant

⁹ See, for example, Brian Manning, *The English People and the English Revolution* (London, 1991, 2nd ed.), especially chs 1 and 3; and Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution* (New York, 1961), pp. 121 and 124–125.

here for any reinstatement of the old division of capitalist bourgeoisie and feudal aristocracy, nor is commerce depicted as the solvent of feudalism. It was not the expansion of trade as such, not the mere existence nor even the size of markets, but the transformation of social property relations – particularly on the land – that fuelled the transition to capitalism by subjecting producers to market imperatives, thereby completely transforming the logic of commerce and the structural role of markets.

If a “new merchant” class played a prominent role, or even existed, it was because agrarian capitalism had opened the way not just for a quantitative increase in trade but for a qualitatively new kind of commerce. This was in turn sustained by an alliance with agrarian capitalism, an alliance between classes united in their economic and political interests against absolutism and in favour of economic expansionism. Nor does Brenner’s argument – which stresses the symbiosis of agrarian capitalism and the new commerce, together with a dynamic manufacturing interest – lend support to the view that British capitalism’s agrarian origins held back its development to a full maturity. It was, if anything, the old merchant class that represented the *ancien régime*, not least in its role as pillar of of the royalist alliance; while the landed interest impelled commerce toward capitalism.

Why, then, might a sophisticated reader remain convinced that, for all his disclaimers, Brenner has shifted his ground and embroiled himself in a “deep paradox”? Here, again, we come up against the question-begging assumptions which plagued the original debate, the tendency to argue from the very premises Brenner is challenging.

In the original debate, Brenner’s principal objective was to find an explanation for the rise of capitalism which did not assume the very thing that needed to be explained. Although he certainly did not deny that cities, trade and markets which had evolved throughout Europe were a pre-condition for the development of English capitalism, neither did he assume that cities and markets were by nature or even tendentially capitalist, or that capitalism existed in embryo within the interstices of feudalism, in the shape of trade and burgher classes, just waiting for the fetters of feudalism to be broken. Instead, he sought a moving force within the dominant relations of feudalism itself, in the relations between lords and peasants.

The consequences of this argument for all variants of the commercialization model of economic development, and even for demographic explanations which ultimately still rely on some transhistorical principles of supply and demand, are obvious. But Brenner’s thesis had no less far-reaching implications for conventional Marxist explanations. Among other things, it threw down a powerful challenge, at least by implication, to the conventional Marxist idea of “bourgeois revolution”. This idea shared many assumptions of the commercialization model even when

the bourgeois revolution was situated in the context of English agrarian capitalism, with a forward-looking yeomanry or gentry to supplement the old revolutionary bourgeoisie. This was a challenge already hinted at in Brenner's criticisms of "neo-Smithian" Marxism in his earlier writings. Later, he made it even more explicit.

The traditional conception of bourgeois revolution, he argued, belongs to a phase of Marx's work still heavily dependent upon the mechanical materialism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and contrasts sharply with his mature critique of political economy.¹⁰ The earlier theory of history simply begs the central question: productive forces develop almost naturally via the division of labour which evolves in response to expanding markets, so that the pre-existence of capitalism is invoked in order to explain its coming into being. The traditional conception of bourgeois revolution as an account of the transition to capitalism is, then, self-contradictory and self-defeating, because on its own assumptions, it renders revolution unnecessary in a double sense. First, there really is no *transition* to accomplish: since the model starts with bourgeois society in the towns, foresees its evolution taking place via bourgeois mechanisms, and has feudalism transcend itself in consequence of its exposure to trade, the problem of how one type of society is transformed into another is simply assumed away and never posed. Second, since bourgeois society self-develops and dissolves feudalism, the bourgeois revolution can hardly claim a necessary role.¹¹

Having argued that the "bourgeois revolution" was a question-begging formula which, like the old commercialization model, assumed the very thing that needed to be explained by attributing to the bourgeoisie a capitalist rationality that needed only to be released from the bonds of feudalism, Brenner opened the way for a thorough reassessment of the bourgeoisie and its role in the rise of capitalism. This is the background to his account of London merchants, and especially the Postscript. The charge that he has undermined his own original thesis simply replicates the circular and question-begging logic which that thesis was designed to correct.

The point is nowhere better illustrated than in Perry Anderson's "deep paradox". The issue here is the importance Brenner attaches to the role of the new merchants in the Civil War. For Anderson, they constitute a revolutionary bourgeoisie of a kind that played no part in Brenner's original account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The new account also places towns and trade at centre stage, Anderson suggests, while the original story took place in the countryside. Anderson here

¹⁰ Again, a similar argument had been made before by Comninel in *Rethinking the French Revolution*, which also elaborated the differences between Marx's earlier debt to Enlightenment materialism and liberal historiography and his later critique of political economy.

¹¹ Brenner, "Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism", p. 280.

invokes what amounts to his own version of the commercialization model. "The idea of capitalism in one country, taken literally," he writes,

is only a bit more plausible than that of socialism. For Marx the different moments of the modern biography of capital were distributed in cumulative sequence, from the Italian cities to the towns of Flanders and Holland, to the empires of Portugal or Spain and the ports of France, before being "systematically combined in England at the end of the 17th century." Historically, it makes better sense to view the emergence of capitalism as a value-added process gaining in complexity as it moved along a chain of inter-related sites. In this story, the role of cities was always central. English landowners could never have started their conversion to commercial agriculture without the market for wool in Flemish towns – just as Dutch farming was by Stuart times in advance of English, not least because it was conjoined to a richer urban society.¹²

It should probably be noted here that Marx, in the passage cited by Anderson, is explaining not the origins of capitalism but the "genesis of the *industrial* capitalist", not the emergence of specifically capitalist "laws of motion", or specifically capitalist social relations, or the imperatives of self-sustaining growth, but the accumulation of wealth which, only in the right, already capitalist, social conditions (i.e. in England) was to be converted from simply the unproductive profits of usury and commerce into industrial capital. As for the origins of the capitalist *system*, the "so-called primitive accumulation" which gave rise to specifically capitalist social property relations and the specific dynamic associated with them, Marx situates it firmly in England and in the countryside. It is here too that the conditions emerged for the unprecedented kind of *internal* market that Marx regarded as the *sine qua non* of industrial capitalism.¹³ Like Brenner, Marx acknowledges the need to explain the *distinctiveness* of England's development. Not the least of England's specificities, as Brenner points out, is that while other centres of production even in the medieval period had experienced export booms, early modern England was unique in maintaining industrial growth even in the context of declining overseas markets:¹⁴ in other words, albeit within a network of international trade, capitalism indeed in one country.

Lest, however, we get distracted by speculations about Marx's views on the relation between agrarian and industrial capitalism (or about the questions he left unanswered and, indeed, the inconsistencies he left unresolved), let us simply note that Anderson's observations here precisely beg the question. It is one thing to say, for example, that English commercial agriculture presupposed the Flemish market for wool. It is quite another to explain how "commercial agriculture" became *capitalist*

¹² Anderson, "Maurice Thomson's War", p. 17.

¹³ See, for example, Marx, *Capital*, I (Moscow, n.d.), pp. 699–701.

¹⁴ Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development", pp. 76–77.

agriculture, how the *possibility* of trade became not only the *actuality* but the *necessity* of competitive production, how market *opportunities* became market *imperatives*, how this specific kind of agriculture set in train the development of a capitalist *system*.¹⁵ Brenner's argument at the very least makes it necessary to demonstrate – not merely to assume – that commerce and capitalism are one and the same, or that one passed into the other by a simple process of growth. Failing that, Anderson is assuming the very thing that needs to be demonstrated, namely that commerce, or indeed production for the market (a widespread practice throughout much of recorded history), became capitalism by means of sheer expansion, which at some point achieved a critical mass. His argument suffers from the very circularity that Brenner has so effectively challenged.

Whether or not Anderson has given an accurate account of the role assigned by Brenner to the new merchants in the Civil War, there is no evidence in the Postscript that Brenner is ready to make the concession Anderson ascribes to him. But more fundamentally, Anderson's argument, reproducing the question-begging assumptions of the old commercialization model, seriously mistakes the issues in the debates surrounding the concept of bourgeois revolution. Two principal issues are raised by the "bourgeois revolution": the first has to do with how, or whether, a *revolution* was necessary to the emergence of capitalism, or, at least, to "smooth its path", as Anderson puts it. This question has a corollary: if revolution *was* a necessary or inevitable moment in the development of capitalism, was it cause or effect? The second major question concerns the relation between "bourgeois" and "capitalist".

Brenner has certainly argued that the specific development of English social property relations was bound to produce serious conflict between a growing capitalist aristocracy and a non-capitalist monarchy. At the same time, as we have seen, he has demonstrated that the traditional conception of bourgeois revolution as an account of the transition to capitalism is circular and self-defeating. It cannot explain the emergence

¹⁵ The Dutch example, incidentally, while it continues to be perhaps the most perplexing one for historians of the transition, does not make quite the point Anderson wants it to make. It does indeed provide an example of an advanced agriculture and thriving international trade, "conjoined to a richer urban society"; but it has been argued that the very characteristics which the commercialization model treats as the motors of economic development – flourishing cities and international trade – proved in the Dutch case to be major factors in *blocking* further development. (See, for example, Jan de Vries, *The Dutch Rural Economy in the Golden Age, 1500–1700* (New Haven, 1974).) According to this argument, the Republic's powerful cities, which certainly promoted its early development, eventually strangled Dutch productivity by imposing upon it a rentier-type parasitism which acted as a drain on its flourishing agriculture. At the same time, dependence on the traditional international trading system subjected the Republic to a European economic crisis in the seventeenth century to which England alone remained immune – not least because of England's internal market and its "capitalism in one country".

of a social form whose pre-existence it must assume. Nevertheless, if capitalism pre-exists the revolution, it still remains possible for revolution to be an *effect* of capitalist relations and, of course, a factor in the further economic and political development of capitalist society – as, indeed, it seems to be in Brenner's own account of the English revolution as the product of capitalist developments in agrarian social property relations. (It would, however, presumably follow that in later capitalisms, whose development was conditioned by the competitive pressures of an already existing capitalist system elsewhere, revolutions would play a rather different role; but that question is far beyond the scope of this essay.¹⁶) The critical difference between Brenner's agrarian model and the traditional "bourgeois" and commercialization models is that his actually *explains* what the other merely *assumes*.

While in the traditional model, an already present capitalist society simply grows to maturity, in Brenner's model, "one type of society is transformed into another". The point is not that city is replaced by countryside in his analysis, nor that trade and commerce play only a marginal role, but rather that Brenner acknowledges the *specificity* of capitalism and its distinctive "laws of motion". This also means acknowledging the necessity of explaining how trade and commerce (not to mention cities), which have existed throughout recorded history, became something other than they had always been.

It goes without saying that the existence of cities and traditional forms of trade throughout Europe (and elsewhere) was a necessary condition for England's specific pattern of development; but to say this is, again, far from explaining how they acquired a distinctively *capitalist* dynamic. Brenner has yet to explain the role of cities and the urban economy in European economic development; but, by giving an account of how the *market* acquired a qualitatively new role in agrarian production relations, in a situation where the principal economic actors, appropriators and producers, became market-dependent in unprecedented ways, he has established the context in which the systemic role of towns and trade was transformed. And once the specific dynamic of the *capitalist* market is clear, it is possible to consider how its new competitive pressures imposed themselves on the rest of Europe and the world.

This brings us to the second question raised by the concept of "bourgeois revolution", the one most fundamentally at issue here: the relation between "bourgeois" and "capitalist". It is not clear who, according to Anderson, has declared the revolutionary bourgeois in France a "fiction" – though it cannot be Brenner. There are even "revisionist" historians of the French Revolution who allow the bourgeoisie a

¹⁶ In *Pristine Culture*, I make some suggestions about other patterns of capitalist development, in which, for example, pre-capitalist state forms served to advance capitalist development once they were subjected to the competitive pressures of English capitalism.

“revolutionary” role, however much they may question the role of the Revolution in bringing about a major social transformation (as distinct from a political coup) from something like feudalism to capitalism, or however much they may deny that there was any fundamental social division between aristocracy and bourgeoisie. We may be utterly convinced that the Revolution was undoubtedly “bourgeois”, indeed much more so than the English, without coming a flea-hop closer to determining whether it was also *capitalist*.¹⁷ As long as we accept that there is no necessary identification of “bourgeois” (or burgher or city) with “capitalist”, the “revolutionary bourgeois” can be far from being a fiction, even – or especially – in France, where the model revolutionary bourgeois was not a capitalist or even an old-fashioned merchant but a lawyer or office-holder. At the same time, if the “revolutionary bourgeois” in England *was* inextricably linked with capitalism, it is precisely because the very nature of trade and commerce had already been transformed by the development of capitalist social property relations in the English countryside.¹⁸

Continuing the “transition debate”

The original conception of “bourgeois revolution” has been modified and refined by Marxists in various ways, making it less dependent on the class opposition between feudal aristocracy and capitalist bourgeoisie and in some respects detaching it from the commercialization model. For some Marxist historians, it has become little more than a conventional shorthand for summing up the processes by which revolutions of various types since the seventeenth century have removed obstacles to capitalist development. One might object that even to identify “bourgeois” with “capitalist”, as this formula continues to do, is again to reproduce the assumptions of the commercialization model; or that to speak of *obstacles* and their removal is still to take for granted the self-development of capitalism, without explaining its coming into being. None the less, in these usages, the “bourgeois revolution” has gone some distance beyond the commercialization model and its Marxist variants. If anything, those varieties of Marxism that place burghers and towns in the vanguard of history have long been displaced by Marxist explanations of the transition from feudalism to capitalism that situate its principal dynamic in the countryside.

Brenner was certainly not the first Marxist to seek the “prime mover” of the transition in agrarian class relations. There already existed a

¹⁷ For a treatment of the French “bourgeois revolution” as non-capitalist, see Comminel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*, especially the Conclusion.

¹⁸ I discuss some of the ways in which English trade differed from the traditional commercial system in *Pristine Culture*, ch. 6.

strong tradition of Marxist historiography, rooted in Marx himself but inspired especially by the work of Maurice Dobb, that opposed Marxist versions of the commercialization model in just this way, arguing that cities and trade were not in themselves inimical to feudalism.¹⁹ In the "Transition Debate", Dobb and others insisted that the "prime mover" in the transition was to be found in the relations between lords and peasants. Hilton in particular spelled out the ways in which money, trade, towns and even the so-called "commercial revolution" belonged integrally to the feudal system. They certainly contributed in complex ways to the transition, but they were not antithetical or inimical to feudalism and could not be regarded as its principal solvents.

Both Dobb and Hilton suggested that the class struggle between lords and peasants contributed to the dissolution of feudalism and the rise of capitalism by liberating petty commodity production from the fetters of feudalism. Dobb, for example, argued that, while class struggle did not, "in any simple and direct way", give rise to capitalism, it did serve to "modify the dependence of the petty mode of production upon feudal overlordship and eventually to shake loose the small producer from feudal exploitation. It is then from the petty mode of production (in the degree to which it secures independence of action, and social differentiation in turn develops within it) that capitalism is born."²⁰ Similarly, Hilton suggested that the pressures imposed by lords on peasants to transfer surplus labour generated the improvement of production techniques and the growth of simple commodity production, while peasant resistance to those pressures was crucially important to the process of transition to capitalism, "the freeing of peasant and artisan economies for the development of commodity production and eventually the emergence of the capitalist entrepreneur".²¹

These arguments are clearly different from the old commercialization model. What, then, of their relationship to the Brenner thesis? Here, we can turn to a review of *Merchants and Revolution* by Brian Manning, which criticizes Brenner from the explicit vantage point of Dobb's thesis.²²

¹⁹ The most important starting-point in this tradition was Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London, 1946, reprinted in 1963 and 1972). Paul Sweezy's criticism of this work in 1950 sparked a major debate among Marxists (now often called the "Transition Debate") on the issue of the "prime mover" in the pages of *Science and Society*, later republished, with additional materials, in R.H. Hilton (ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1976), which forms the (largely silent) background to the Brenner debate. Among the central issues in the "Transition Debate" were the role of money rents, trade, markets and cities in feudalism and the relation between town and country.

²⁰ Hilton, *Transition*, p. 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²² Brian Manning, "The English Revolution and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism", *International Socialism*, 63 (Summer 1994).

Manning too raises the obvious question about the connection between this book and Brenner's general interpretation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. His principal objections, however, have more to do with the flaws in the original thesis itself than with any contradictions between that thesis and the recent book – though his conclusion is that Brenner's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism makes him finally incapable of accounting for the English "bourgeois revolution". "Two points of debate are central", he argues: "who were the agents of transition and how far had the transition proceeded by 1640?"²³ Attributing to Brenner the view that the principal agents were capitalist aristocrats, Manning contrasts this view to Dobb's contention that "capitalism in its revolutionary form developed from the ranks of the small producers".²⁴

The relevant process is the differentiation of the peasantry in medieval England which created two distinct strata, a poorer peasantry and "relatively well-to-do peasant farmers" able to take advantage of new economic opportunities, to lease larger holdings and to employ wage labour. The critical point of transition for Dobb, Manning points out, occurred when the small producer became prosperous enough to rely more on the work of hired labourers than on his own and that of his own family. A capitalist class was born "from the ranks of production itself".²⁵ "There is a conflict", Manning continues, "between the idea of capitalism developing from below in Dobb's account and the idea of capitalism developing from above in Brenner's account. But there had to be the developments such as Dobb described if there were to be the developments such as Brenner describes" – that is, there had to be richer peasants who could function as capitalist producers before there could be capitalist landlords.²⁶ So, Manning argues, Brenner's focus on the aristocracy as agents of the transition, at the expense of small agricultural and industrial producers from whose ranks petty capitalists were rising, makes him finally incapable of explaining the critical revolutionary role of the "middling sort" in radical and popular movements.²⁷

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Manning here cites Colin Mooers, *The Making of Bourgeois Europe: Absolutism, Revolution, and the Rise of Capitalism in England, France and Germany* (London, 1991) in support of his views on the yeomanry.

²⁷ Brenner does not at all, as we shall see, neglect the role of small producers in the development of capitalism. On the contrary, he seeks to *explain* it. For the moment, it is, however, worth noting a small irony in Manning's own account of the transition. Few other historians have done as much to illuminate popular radicalism in the English Revolution as Brian Manning. Yet, at least for the purposes of his argument against Brenner, he seems to reduce all revolutionary impulses among popular radicals to a drive towards capitalism and to the aspirations of rising capitalists, at the expense of other, more subversive and democratic motivations for challenging the existing order, indeed for

If Brenner's thesis about the role of capitalist landlords can, according to Manning, be partially rescued by acknowledging that petty capitalist accumulation preceded and accompanied it, there still remain doubts about how far capitalist development had already proceeded by the time of the Revolution. Here the question turns for Manning on the extent of wage labour: not just how many landholders – whether middling farmers or landlords – had become capitalists but how many of the poorer classes had been reduced to a proletariat. Since capitalism *presupposes* the existence of a proletariat, he maintains, the fact that the degree of dependence on wage labour seems still to have been limited argues against Brenner's contention that by 1640 the ruling class was already largely capitalist, that is, dependent on rents appropriated from capitalist tenants.

There are undoubtedly many important historical issues to be debated here, as Manning points out – about the extent of economic leases in seventeenth-century England, about the degree of proletarianization, about the role of industrial development, and so on. And it is also worth noting that Brenner, while giving a central role to popular mobilization in bringing about a revolutionary confrontation by dividing a remarkably united ruling class, is surprisingly silent about his debt to the groundbreaking work of Brian Manning (and Christopher Hill) on this score. But what is striking about Manning's account of the transition to capitalism is again the extent to which it begs the question, and, as a consequence, the degree to which he and Brenner are talking at cross purposes.

First, the question of agency: the crux of Manning's argument, following Dobb, is that richer peasants (rising capitalists) had to exist before landlords could profit from capitalist rents. The first point that comes immediately to mind is that richer peasants have existed at many times and in many places without becoming capitalists. It still remains to be explained why richer peasants in England began to behave in ways substantially different from any other prosperous peasants throughout recorded history, why English yeomen were not like Russian kulaks, or indeed like large tenant farmers in France at the same time. Brenner's objective is precisely to explain what others have taken for granted. The point for him is not that landlords pioneered capitalism while yeomen played no role or simply followed suit. His argument has to do with the specific logic of English property *relations* and class struggles, in which the self-reproduction of *both* economic actors came to depend, directly or indirectly, upon capitalist appropriation – specifically, the maximization of exchange value via cost-cutting and improving productivity, by specialization, accumulation and innovation. The point is to

challenging property forms conducive to capitalist development. Brenner's explanation serves admirably to account for both kinds of revolutionary forces.

explain how a fundamentally new economic logic was established, how the main economic actors were obliged to follow new “rules for reproduction” completely different from those of any pre-capitalist society, the consequence of which was to set in train an unprecedented process of self-sustaining economic growth. The “rise of the yeoman” was certainly critical to the development of capitalism, and “middling” capitalist farmers are central to Brenner’s story. But his object is to explain how such people came to be capitalists at all.

This also helps to place in perspective Manning’s other point about how far the mode of production had changed by 1640. There are, of course, empirical questions that can be debated, for instance about how many tenant farmers were already paying economic rents (though simply to contrast such rents to customary payments, as Manning does, will not suffice to settle the question, since Brenner has made a substantial case that many customary tenures had long since begun to function effectively as economic leases²⁸). For Manning, however, since “capitalism presupposes the existence of a proletariat”, the critical question seems to be how many commercial farmers were profiting from the employment of wage labour, either directly, as in the case of capitalist tenant-employers, or indirectly through the appropriation of rents from such tenants: if England before 1640 was not yet a “predominantly wage-earning society”, he suggests, it cannot in any meaningful sense be called capitalist. The process of expropriation that produced a mass proletariat is the “prelude to the history of capitalism”.²⁹

How, then, is Brenner’s argument affected by Manning’s question about the extent of wage labour? The problem here is not only an empirical one. We may agree with Manning about his answer – that the extent of wage labour was limited – while having doubts about his *question* and the assumptions on which it is based. The process of expropriation is certainly central to the story of capitalism, as Brenner would be the first to insist. Nor would he disagree that England in the seventeenth century was not a “predominantly wage-earning society”. But here too there is a begging of the question, and here again Brenner sets out to explain what others have taken for granted. He does not assume that a pre-existing division between rich and poor peasants (such as has existed at other times and places) would inevitably lead to their polarization into rich farmers and dispossessed labourers. As he points out, for example, both England and France in the later fifteenth century possessed a middle peasantry with relatively large holdings; yet from this common starting-point, they diverged in substantially different historical directions, the French towards increasing morcellization of peasant holdings, the English towards the agrarian triad of landlord, capitalist tenant

²⁸ Aston and Philpin, *The Brenner Debate*, pp. 293–296.

²⁹ Manning, “The English Revolution”, p. 84.

and wage labourer; the English towards agricultural improvement, the French towards agricultural stagnation. Nor does he assume that the English ruling class could, or even would if they could, simply expropriate small farmers by brute force (how often has this been the preferred strategy of pre-capitalist ruling classes with a capacity to extract surpluses by coercive “extra-economic” means, while producers remain in possession of the means of production?).

So the differentiation of the English peasantry (the “rise of the yeoman”) which eventually ended in a polarization between capitalist farmers and propertyless labourers remains to be explained, and Brenner sets out to do this. His explanation has to do with the new economic logic that subjected English farmers to the imperatives of competition in unprecedented ways and degrees. This logic was imposed on farmers whether or not they consistently employed wage labourers (and applied even when the tenant was himself, or together with his family, the direct producer). Perhaps the simplest way to make the point is this: peasants elsewhere and at other times had availed themselves of market opportunities, but English farmers were distinctive in their degree of subjection to market *imperatives*.

Brenner has set out to explain why and how this came to be so, how producers were deprived of non-market access to the means of their self-reproduction and even land itself, how landlordly forms of exploitation were transformed from “extra-economic” surplus extraction to the appropriation of capitalist rents, how it came about that both landlords and tenants were compelled to move in response to the imperatives of competition, how new forms of appropriation established new compulsions and how those compulsions conditioned the differentiation, and in large part the dispossession, of the peasantry (both through purely “economic” pressures of competition and through more direct coercion, by landlords with a new kind of economic interest in large and concentrated holdings). A mass proletariat was the end not the beginning of the process; and it cannot be emphasized enough that for Brenner, the market-dependence of economic actors was a cause not a result of proletarianization.

Some might want to argue that the term “capitalist” should be reserved for that end result, but it needs at least to be acknowledged that the end of the process presupposes the process itself. It also needs to be acknowledged that this process itself already represented a major historical rupture and new economic “laws of motion”, without which a mature capitalism would not have emerged. The great strength of Brenner’s argument as against the others is that it recognizes the specificity of that new historical process, that new economic logic, and makes a convincing effort to explain how it came about, instead of assuming the very things that need to be explained.

It can be argued that even those Marxist historians who have done so much to displace the commercialization model have similarly tended to assume some of what needs to be explained. Even for historians like Dobb, Hilton and Manning, the problem seems to be mainly to discover how direct producers were freed to avail themselves of market *opportunities*, how “petty commodity production” (embodied in small or “middling” producers) was liberated by class struggle and allowed to grow into capitalism. For all their displacement of capitalist development from towns and trade to countryside and agriculture, these arguments in a sense reproduce the question-begging assumptions of the commercialization model, although this time middling farmers or yeomen serve as a kind of functional, if rural, equivalent of the burghers in the old model, while class struggle between exploiting and exploited classes – landlords and peasants – is given a role as the moving force which removed the obstacles to the free development of petty commodity producers into capitalists. The assumption seems to be that “middling” producers, faced with market opportunities and freed from the shackles of feudalism, would naturally take the capitalist road. Despite the focus on production and exploitation rather than simply exchange, despite the emphasis on class struggle, and despite the shift from city to countryside, these Marxist explanations have in common with the commercialization model a tendency to “explain” the transition to capitalism as an enhancement of market opportunities rather than the establishment of market imperatives, a “shaking loose” or liberation of an already existing economic logic, not the coming into being of a new one. So here too some kind of pre-existing capitalist rationality is invoked to explain the emergence of capitalism, and the same basic question is begged.³⁰

³⁰ For more on these points, see my “From Opportunity to Imperative: the History of the Market”, *Monthly Review* (July–August 1994). As should by now be clear, the issues in the debate surrounding the commercialization model do not turn on a simple opposition between urban and rural, town and country, even agriculture and commerce or industry. This critical point seems to have escaped another Marxist reviewer of *Merchants and Revolution*. Alex Callinicos, welcoming Brenner’s excursion into the history of mercantile classes, suggests not so much that there is a contradiction between the recent book and the earlier thesis but rather that it has up to now been unclear “what place his account allows for other forms of capitalism”, apart from its agrarian variety (*New Left Review*, 207 (September–October 1994), p. 131). “Thus,” he continues, “critics such as Chris Harman have taxed Brenner for ignoring the role played by urban mercantile capitalism in the transition. Sympathizers such as Ellen Wood have in turn dismissed such objections as examples of Pirenne’s old heresy of identifying capitalism with trade. On the face of it, *Merchants and Revolution* invalidates objection and defence alike.” Callinicos’s remark about “Pirenne’s heresy” suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the issues. My objection (like, I venture to say, Brenner’s) to the Pirenne thesis and other versions of the old model is not simply that they have concentrated on the city rather than the countryside, or on agriculture rather than trade, but rather that they treat commercial activity and profit-taking (whether urban or rural) as capitalism-in-embryo, requiring only

Brenner, I would argue, moved beyond the “Transition Debate” by recognizing that the problem was to discover not how producers were freed to avail themselves of capitalist *opportunities* but how they came to be subjected to market *imperatives*, the *compulsions* of competition, capital accumulation, profit-maximization and the necessity of increasing labour-productivity. These compulsions were not inherent in traditional forms of commercial profit-taking, the age-old practice of buying cheap and selling dear. They did not operate, for example, on merchants who typically bought craft-products in one market and sold them on at a higher price in another; nor did these imperatives operate on peasants – even those who sold their produce in the market – who, however exiguous their holdings, enjoyed non-market access to their conditions of self-reproduction. Brenner’s effort to explain how, in the very specific conditions of English agrarian relations, producers became market-dependent, is surely a major breakthrough in historical scholarship. His work remains among the very few attempts to explain the origins of capitalism without already assuming, in circular fashion, its prior existence.

There is still much work to be done, not least in explaining the role of towns, markets and burghers in the development of capitalism. But one thing is clear: no history of the transition from feudalism to capitalism will be remotely adequate that fails to come to grips with the specificity of capitalism and of the historical process that brought it into being. Anything less than a full engagement with that specificity is unlikely to *explain* the development of capitalism, so much as to assume the very thing that needs to be explained.

quantitative expansion rather than qualitative transformation to become capitalism – making no distinction between commercial profit-taking and capitalist appropriation. Callinicos is here again, as elsewhere, lapsing into the same confusion – as if the specificity of capitalist property relations, with the systemic laws of motion generated by them, still eludes him, in much the same way that it has long eluded advocates of the commercialization model. Finally, some readers will no doubt have noticed that my argument here has implications for the Marxist debate (for example, in the “Transition Debate”) about the two paths to capitalism: “Way I” – the “really revolutionary way” – where petty commodity producers grow into capitalists, and “Way II”, where merchants take over production. Some of this debate has, again, been conducted as if the development of petty producers into capitalists required no real explanation, apart from an account of how opportunities were expanded or obstacles removed. I touch on this point in “From Opportunity to Imperative”.