

Correspondence

To the Editor of the Journal of British Studies:

It would be *une méchanceté sans pareille* for a Tudor historian to instruct Professors Hollister and Cheyette in the elements of feudalism. It would be even a worse folly to pretend that historians' verbal differences about their terminology will be resolved before the coming of the Greek Kalends. Nonetheless, it may not seem pointless to mention that neither Hollister nor Cheyette paid close enough attention to Marc Bloch's vital distinction between what he called "the two ages of feudalism." (Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, tr. L. A. Manyon (Chicago, 1961), pp. 59 and 59-72 *passim*.) By so doing, perhaps, some may feel that part of the difference between Hollister's and Cheyette's views will melt away.

I will not rehearse in detail the argument which can be read in the pages of the *J.B.S.* Rather, I will seize upon the single point that interests me here. Cheyette is concerned with the *too restrictive* conception of feudalism employed by Hollister, especially when compared with the total societal implications of Bloch's "definition." Hollister defends himself, rightly, I think, against the charge by noting that Cheyette offers some crude paraphrases in place of Hollister's own careful statements about both Bloch and what Hollister designated as the meaning of feudalism. Then, in his reply to Cheyette, Hollister emphasizes his main point again, which I shall simply quote in order to avoid incurring wrath aroused by error in paraphrasing:

The evidence shows, as was pointed out in 'The Irony of English Feudalism,' that certain essential elements in Bloch's picture were diminishing sharply in early post-Conquest England. The 'service tenement' was dissolving into the scutage-paying tenement and salaried service; changes in military techniques and social organization were slowly reducing the supremacy of the 'specialized warriors'; the increased use of mercenaries was eroding the significance of vassalage within the warrior class . . . In short, Bloch's fundamental features of European feudalism were visibly waning in 'feudal England.'

The ellipses do not distort the facts pertinent to our inquiry: Hollister finds a weakness in citing Bloch against his position, because what Bloch took to be characteristic of feudalism does not seem to

fit too well the changing world of the post-Conquest period to which Hollister addressed his inquiry.

Here, one must raise a quibble. Bloch spoke out very clearly on just this point; and while misconceptions might touch "even Marc Bloch," I am afraid on this occasion that it is not Bloch who is at fault.

If one checks closely Hollister's citations of Bloch's *Feudal Society*, in either the French or English versions in print, he will note a curious thing. The passages cited are relevant to what is at issue, to be sure. But passages even more revealing for the confusion which produces disagreement are neglected. Nor does Cheyette, in championing Bloch, do better justice to Bloch's subtle distinction between the *Feudal Ages* of which I spoke above. What in fact distinguished Bloch's handling of the meaning of feudalism was his consciousness that one does not *define* real things but instead seeks to identify them in their landscape, a statement which itself implies something about that great historian's sophistication in methodology and which also led him to distinguish between the "model" of feudalism and feudal society before the vital upswing in the demographic curve ca. 1050 – the first feudal age – and that which coincided with Hollister's post-Conquest problem, which Bloch himself defined differently, for which he used a different model, and to which he attributed different characteristics. This point, and a number of others related to Marc Bloch's methodology, especially the complex matter of time and the "retrogressive method," which Bloch shared with Maitland and Halévy, have recently been studied by Lawrence Walker. (See his review article, "Marc Bloch: *Feudal Society*," in *History and Theory*, III (1963), 247-55.) The problem of "time span" was one of which Marc Bloch took particular cognizance. For that reason, it is regrettable that a characteristic of Bloch's work so distinct, giving to it the dynamic character which seizes our interest and makes us follow on breathlessly, should be so slighted. But it reminds us that Bloch defined *problems*, reserving *things* for the detailed interdisciplinary investigation that makes his work a great book.

Both Hollister and Cheyette would do well to remember Bloch's distinction, which ought to be introduced here, before they pursue their argument further.

The framework of institutions which governs a society can in the last resort be understood only through a knowledge of the whole human environment. For though the artificial conception of man's activities which prompts us to carve up

the creature of flesh and blood into the phantoms *homo oeconomicus*, *philosophicus*, *juridicus* is doubtless necessary, it is tolerable only if we refuse to be deceived by it. That is why, despite the existence of other works on the various aspects of medieval civilization, the descriptions thus attempted from points of view different from ours did not seem to us to obviate the necessity of recalling at this stage the fundamental characteristics of the historical climate in which European feudalism flourished. (Bloch, *Feudal Society*, p. 59.)

Then, after a digression about the difficulties of drawing causal inferences from sets of phenomena belonging to separate series, with an even more stringent passage about the problems of so discussing sets of dissimilar phenomena over a period of several centuries, he makes a further point:

It would, moreover, be a grave mistake to treat 'feudal civilization' as being all of one piece chronologically. Engendered no doubt or made possible by the cessation of the last invasions, but first manifesting themselves some generations later, a series of very profound and very widespread changes occurred towards the middle of the eleventh century. No definite break with the past occurred, but the change of direction which, despite inevitable variations in time according to the countries or the phenomena considered, affected in turn all the graphs of social activity. There were, in a word, two successive 'feudal' ages, very different from one another in their essential character. We shall endeavour in the following pages to do justice as much to the contrast between the two phases as to the characteristics they shared. (Bloch, *Feudal Society*, p. 60.)

Interminable squabbles we shall always have. And between Professors Hollister and Cheyette there are many issues in the balance. But let the arguments ring about things, not words, and, above all, let the professor be true to his text. Or, as Bloch himself might have put it: *ne prêcher pour son saint!*

ARTHUR J. SLAVIN
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