

Volume 1 : The Growth of the Separation

FEUDAL SOCIETY



MARC BLOCH

Translated by L.A. Manyon

Feudal Society, Volume 1

Marc Bloch, L.A. Manyon (Translator)

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"Few have set themselves to the formidable task of reconstructing and analyzing a whole human environment; fewer still have succeeded. Bloch dared to do this and was successful; therein lies the enduring achievement of *Feudal Society*."—Charles Garside, *Yale Review*

Feudal Society, Volume 1 Details

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Cat says

Certainly an undeniable classic in the field of "history of the middle ages". As other reviewers have already noted, Bloch was one of the initial members of what grew to become the "annales" school of western history, though, to be fair, he died before you could call it a "school" or "movement".

Volume one of the two volume set looks at the growth of feudalism in western society, and by western I'm talking about Northern France, Western Germany, England and Northern Italy. Bloch's main concern in this volume is setting the conditions which led to the development of feudalism from 800 AD to 1000 AD and then describing the various forms that feudalism took.

The book is well translated, and I found it hard to argue with much of the thesis. I too have read Norman Cantor's "the Making of the Middle Ages" where he calls Bloch a Marxist (and maligns the entire Annales school). I've also read more recent productions from the Annales school. I have to say, based on this particular book, I don't really see where Bloch is a)romanticizing the peasant (another Cantor criticism) or b) a marxist.

It seemed to me that Bloch's explanation for the growth of feudalism was, basically, that central government decayed to the point where various muck a mucks needed to find an alternative way to "rally the troops" in the face of frequent small to mid size invasions. Feudalism, with its emphasis on individual obligation and quid pro pro, was an attempt to remedy the lack of communication over long distances and lack of central authority.

The peasants didn't really figure in this book at all, except near the end. Certainly, one wouldn't accuse this book of being filled with marxist/post-modern/deconstructionist gobbledegook. This is a must read for those interested in the field, especially lay men.

Raymond says

A well-known milestone in medieval historiography and one of the easiest five stars I've ever given. To sum up, Bloch starts off with the internal breakdown of state power in early medieval Europe and the numerous external threats it faced, setting the stage for a society where power was increasingly local and based on personal bonds of allegiance - in other words a feudal society. He then proceeds to analyse in-depth the nitty-gritty workings of these personal bonds and how they shaped both the workings of power and the mentality of the people, and this is where the book really shines. I can hardly think of a better book if one wants to understand the nuts and bolts of how feudalism worked in medieval Europe and how it impacted European culture, or at least parts of it: It's heavily focused on France, particularly northern France which provides the standard model of European feudalism for Bloch, as well as Germany and England, with occasional asides to Spain, Italy and Scandinavia. To finish off, he explains how the growth of the power of the kings through increasingly effective state bureaucracies began to reduce the feudal character of these regions during the high middle ages. It's not however what I'd call an "entertaining" book as the subject matter can be dense, but it's highly informative and thus never boring if one has an interest in the subject.

Steven says

Feudal Society by Marc Bloch is one of the definitive guides to the study of feudalism during the medieval period. The book's main focus is on feudalism in Western Europe, though it does mention other regions as well, however only briefly. If you are just beginning the study of feudalism, I would actually recommend investigating other titles that give a more general overview of the subject from a high-level. Bloch's books, volumes I and II, discuss the subject on a granular level, a "down in the weeds" approach as opposed to a surface-level overview. You will have to read and re-read this book, and even then, you will likely not understand everything fully. It's certainly a book to be pored over, to diagnose sections or chapters or even paragraphs. It's a book where you could spend hours investigating his cross-references and still not be satisfied. It is life's work condensed into two volumes.

If you were to start with Bloch's book as an introduction to the subject, I would recommend reading it through without stopping to examine or meditate too much. It can be overwhelming. Personally, as a reader, I have a hard time doing this. I found myself reading the same paragraphs several times to make everything sink in. If you were to read it without pause, you will come away with remembrance of the important points of the subject. You can easily get sidetracked if you want, for example, stopping to further investigate the differences between feudalism and manorialism.

A general breakdown of the book is as follows:

Part I -The Environment: The Last Invasions

This section focuses on the time around the fall of the Roman Empire and the subsequent invasions of Europe by the likes of the Hungarians, Moslems, and Scandinavians.

Part II – The Environment: Conditions of Life and Mental Climate

If you are reading this through for the first time, I actually feel like you could skip most of this section and come back to it later. In my opinion, the subject matter in this section is secondary or tertiary to the actual foundations of feudal society, except for Chapter 4: Material Conditions and Economic Characteristics. You should read Chapter 4, but the others you could probably skip (Chapters 5, 6, and 7). You might want to read Chapter 8 as well, as it discusses The Foundations of Law.

Part III – The Ties Between Man and Man: Kinship

This section is important to understanding the powerful bond among kin that would carry over to the powerful bond between lord and vassal later on.

Part IV – The Ties Between Man and Man: Vassalage and the Fief

This section is where you really get into the topics most people think of when they hear the word feudalism: vassal and lord, homage, the fief. Remember, this is not your seventh grade history course on feudalism. This part takes a deep dive into the subject matter. Be prepared to read in short bursts and come back to it later. If you are reading this book for a second time, I would start in part four and begin my study here.

Part V – Ties of Dependence among the Lower Orders of Society

This is the last part of volume I. Here, you will find topics such as manorialism, serfdom, and villeinage.

This is another great section to read and re-read.

So in conclusion, if you are new to the subject of medieval history and feudalism, do not start here. It will

likely be overwhelming. If you are reading Bloch's book for the first time, I would read it on a surface level and re-visit certain sections later. Also, you might consider skipping chapters five through seven on a first go-around. If I am coming back to Bloch's book for a second or third time, I would start with sections four and five. These two sections get to the heart of the subject matter.

Mihai Zodian says

“Marc Bloch, *La société féodale*, Albin Michel, 1982, edi?ie electronic?, 513 p.

Societatea feudal? demonstreaz? importan?a interpret?rii, a perspectivelor teoretice în cunoa?terea socialului ?i trecutului. Dup? cum remarcă prefa?atorul celei de-a doua edi?ii americane, T.S. Brown, lucrarea a influen?at disciplinele umaniste, inclusiv ?tiin?ele politice, oferind o cale de a în?elege conexiunile dintre structuri, grupuri ?i menta?it??ile unei epoci[2]. Din acest motiv, de?i veche de decinii ?i des criticat?, ea reprezint? una dintre produsele de c?p?t?i ale ?colii Annales ?i nu numai.

Sinteza con?ine dou? teze majore. Mai întâi, în contrast cu Regii taumaturgi, avem aici o abordare structuralist? a societ??ii medievale, inspirat? de Émile Durkheim[3]. În al doilea rând, conceptul definitoriu al lui Marc Bloch este cel de feudalism, care, în opinia sa, dincolo de multele sale sensuri, acoper? dou? realit??i sociale distin?te, aici autorul deosebindu-se de cercet?torii care au privilegiat Res publica Christiana, Imperiul sau imaginarul religios drept tr?s?turi fundamentale.

Discu?iile recurente din domeniul rela?ilor interna?ionale despre neorealism fac ca abordarea istoricului francez s? ofere unele sugestii, chiar dac? vorbim despre o carte publicat? în 1939-1940. De exemplu, a?a cum a avertizat Ruggie[4], Evul Mediu ?i aranjamente institu?ionale precum feudalismul nu se înscriu u?or în dihotomia waltzian? anarhie-ierarhie[5]. Structura lui Bloch este modificat? de c?tre procese angrenate de schimb?ri din cadrul interac?iunilor ?i se corelez? cu o imagine a lumii ?i divinit??ii, în stil durkheimian.

Prin feudalism, istoricul în?elegea „subordonare a ruralului, plat? în natur?... suprema?ia unei clase de r?zboinici specializa?i... leg?turi de ascultare ?i protec?ie personal?... atomizare a puterilor... dar ?i supravie?uirea altor forme de organizare”[6]. Ap?rut în urma migra?iilor arab?, viking? ?i maghiar?, prima form? caracteriza o lume a depopul?rii, c?l?toriilor riscante, autoconsumului ?i f?r? o prea mare r?spândire a banilor[7]. Cea de-a doua, în schimb, eviden?ia o intensificare a „emigra?iei interne” ?i nu numi, dezvoltarea comer?ului în Mediteran? ?i în Flandra, o cre?tere a importan?ei monezilor, rena?terea urab?, un importan?? sporit? a monarhiilor[8].

În centrul feudalismului g?sim un grup social, aristocra?ia armelor, formând un corp social nu întotdeauna u?or de în?eles. Pentru Marc Bloch, nu este vorba despre o nobilime ereditar?, pe care o consider? „o apari?ie relativ tardiv?”[9]. Ini?ial, elita se definesa prin posesia domeniului ?i prin func?ia r?zboinic?[10], iar din secolele XII-XIII, începe s? devin? mai formal?; istoricul str?lucind în rememorarea modului de via?? al acestor cavaleri ?i baroni[11].

Uneori al?turi, alteori în rivalitate cu aristocra?ia, Biserica. Frontiera dintre clerici ?i laici nu era, în epoca feudal?, acea linie clar? ?i ferm? pe care Contrareforma avea s? se str?duiasc? a o trasa[12]. Integra?i în ordinea vremii, cu propriile domenii[13], cei dintâi aveau s? devin? mai bine organiza?i în urma ini?iativelor gregoriene[14] ?i erau marca?i de dualismul destinului lor, situat între Dumnezeu ?i lumea p?c?toas?[15].

„O opozitie primordială se revelează, foarte ușor de înțeles: de-o parte, oamenii liberi, de celalaltă parte, servicii”, sublinia Marc Bloch[16]. În această lume predominant rurală, inegalitatea este însă mai ambiguă? și supusă variațiilor spațioiului și timpului și moștenită, cu obligațiile diverse, iar iobăgia ia amploare[17]. Aceasta avea un caracter personal și va tinde spre exprimarea obligațiilor în monedă, mai ales odată cu a doua perioadă a feudalismului[18].

„Din secolul al XI-lea... termenilor de cavaler, de cleric, de rustic, numele de burghez li se opune frântă ambiguitate”, evidenția autorul[19]. Orașul era definit în principal prin activitatea comercială și mercantilă[20]. Originală pentru că reunea egali, „ferment propriu-zis revoluționar”, mișcarea comunală aparține acestui spațiu care a influențat pe termen lung tipul și anvergura proceselor sociale[21].

De la structurile unei lumi nesigure, plină de sărăcie și mortalitate ridicată, la imaginări: „aceste catastrofe dau existenței un gust al precarității perpetue... Una dintre dintre răuiniile instabilității sentimentale”[22]. „O vastă indiferență față de timp”[23], bilingvism latină-limbi vernaculare[24], acea societate își găsește prima formă de expresie accesibilă nouă în arhitectura romanică[25]. Mentalitatea religioase, dar autorul insistă, nu dominate de un „crez rigid și uniform”[26], pentru care „lumea sensibilă nu era decât o mască, în spatele căreia se întâmplau lucrurile cu adevărat importante”[27].

O lucrare ambițioasă și clară, la société féodale împrimează prin metodă, dar a devenit vulnerabilă odată cu schimbarea curentelor dominante din studiile umaniste[28]. Ea ne arată, însă, importanța interdisciplinarității, destul de greu de realizat, iar, pentru cercetătorii din relațiile interneționale, o modalitate de a integra structura și schimbarea. Lectură plăcută, lucrarea lui Marc Bloch își exercită încă influența prin intermediul succesorilor istoricului din coala Annales (MZ).

[1] T. S. Brown, ”Foreword”, în *Feudal Society*, Routledge, f.1., 1962, vol. I, pp. xi-xii.

[2] Marc Bloch, *Regii taumaturgi*, Polirom, Iași, 1997.

[3] John G. Ruggie, ”Continuity and Transformation in World Polity: Towards a Neorealist Synthesis”, *World Politics*, ianuarie 1983.

[4] Idem, pp. 273-276.

[5] Marc Bloch, *La société féodale*, Albin Michel, 1982, ediție electronică, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, <http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/>... (spetembrie 2012), p. 418.

[6] Idem, pp. 67-74.

[7] Idem, pp. 75—78.

[8] Idem, p. 269.

[9] Idem, pp. 274-277

[10] Idem, pp. 304-310, p. 264.

[11] Idem, p. 38.

[12] Idem, pp. 329-330.

[13] Idem, pp. 333-335

[14] Idem, p. 331.

[15] Idem, p. 264.

[16] Idem, pp. 244-246, 250, 252.

[17] Idem, pp. 253, 266.

[18] Idem, p. 335.

[19] Idem, p. 336.

[20] Idem, p. 337.

[21] Idem, p. 79.

[22] Idem, p. 80.

[23]Idem, p. 81

[24]Idem, p. 66.

[25]Idem, p. 87.

[26]Idem, p. 88

[27] T. S. Brown, "Foreword", in op. cit., p. xi."

<http://semnalesirecenzii.tumblr.com/p...>

Eduardo says

Bloch was and is a sort of a paradigm for scholars. When the Nazis invaded France he joined the French resistance in order to fight for his humanistic ideals; close to the end of the war he was caught by the Gestapo and executed. *The Feudal Society* was his last book.

Daniel B-G says

Unfocused and confusing. Some good snippets, but I found my head hurting just trying to focus on the text.

Sally says

A detailed and interesting study of Medieval life and times, by a fine French historian.

Jan-Maat says

What I particularly enjoy about Bloch's study is the sense of feudal Europe as dynamic. Institutions are changing while different areas are developing in different ways and influencing each other. Waves of immigrant Magyars, Vikings and Muslims are sweeping, sailing and galloping in from the edges of the European land mass at the beginning of Bloch's story - this is a world in crisis, productivity is low, authority is weak, everything is vulnerable, nailed down or not.

Despite its age it's still a treasure trove of information about the period and well worth reading. Read with Ganshof's Feudalism for an alternative view. Ganshof's work is careful, precise and legalistic, Bloch is impressionistic, bold and all about the big picture, his still the defining vision of a weak Europe out of which develops this curious resilient society. The basic feature of which is the voluntary acceptance of dependency in exchange for title to land. The slight problem is that in the universality of Bloch's vision one can't escape the worry that the concept is so dilute as to be quackery or homoeopathy depending on your level of personal sourness. Suddenly Bloch discovers Feudal societies everywhere from Ireland to Japan, yet if we accept his view that these were all Feudal societies, plainly they were not all the same, a common feature of a link between service, generally military, and landholding is fairly thin, I'm no longer sure if it is an insight of brilliance or profoundly insubstantial, it is not central to his discussion but it is why I link him to Ganshof, two opposing visions that need to be taken together like having coffee with your brandy. The peculiar

strength of Feudal society was that it was bi-directional, benefits and duties ran together, the grant of land required service to the grantor, but also gave legal authority over the people who worked the land. A kind of deep decentralisation, it is also curiously legal, on the one hand horses, swords and castles, on the other courts, trials and rights and rights of appeal. Its all about jurisdiction as much as economics.

Though once you've read this then Feudal Society, Volume 2 is almost unavoidable - one book cruelly split by translator and publisher.

Katie says

I think that Marc Bloch is the historian that all current historians secretly (or not) wish that they could be. He writes beautifully, researches with a remarkable breadth, and conveys his ideas with thoughtfulness and clarity, weaving together little details into big tapestries. He also, to top it off, fought in the French Resistance. Even if you're not a historian, you probably want to be like Marc Bloch too, and just don't know it yet.

Feudal Society takes the scope of its name very seriously: unlike a lot of books on feudalism, Bloch roams through all the relevant fields of interest. There are chapters on literacy, the development of legal culture, and the pervading attitudes towards nature and time. The first 150 or so pages could read like a selection from a general textbook on medieval history (that I really wish Bloch had written). This forms the bedrock for the bulk of his study: the emergence and development of vassalage and feudal ties. Bloch explores it in all its complexities, essentially characterizing it as a mesh of the personal, the political, and the economic, arising in the midst of a period of disorder when the traditional ties of kinship no longer sufficed. It's very nuanced but very readable.

On to volume two!

Lars says

Insightful and pleasant to read, Bloch's analysis of the development and maintenance of feudal structures and societies is one of the best I have read. Succinct but still rich in detail, highly recommended work from a premier medieval scholar.

Mike says

An insightful, revolutionary examination of medieval society, written by a predecessor of the Annales school of history. The Annales widened the traditional focus of historical scholarship from a simple focus on political and military events to a broader view of the wider aspects of social and economic environments that shape long-term developments within a society. Bloch's 1940 work is a seminal development in both the study of medieval history as well as the wider discipline itself.

Siria says

One of those "ought to read" books for medievalists, though now perhaps more for its standing as the inspiration of much subsequent debate on feudalism than for its actual content. Some of Bloch's arguments have held up and have been used by later historians, but there's much here that's dated (his discussion of female lordship, for instance, or how he uses documentary evidence) or based on assumptions (Germanic kin structures, for instance). However, one still can't fault his main point that during the various stages of its development, feudalism was all about a tangle of politics and kinship.

Jackson Cyril says

A work of monumental erudition and breathtaking scope. A masterpiece in the truest sense of the word. We can only wonder what more he could have added had Bloch not been killed by the Nazis. (There is a touching story of an older Bloch-- tortured, battered and bloodied-- facing the Nazi shooting squad: "A kid of sixteen trembled not far from him. "This is going to hurt." Marc Bloch affectionately took his hand and simply said, "No, my boy, it doesn't hurt," and fell first, crying out: "Vive La France!" (taken from the *Annales d'histoire sociale*))

Conceitedreader says

p.good

Gabriel says

Read this for a medieval studies class. But my affection for Marc Bloch began in a high school history course in which my teacher kept bringing up Bloch's ideas of a historical continuum I think it was. Don't remember much of what Mr. Bloch taught on the rudiments of Feudal Society. Mostly I remember the bleak landscape of UMass Boston, and myself transposed into a future feudal society, this largely being the result of my lifelong addiction to apocalyptic fiction of the sci fi variety.
