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Sharing Feudalism with the East? Considerations on the feudal system in the West and East of Europe

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A great part of the history of Europe has developed in the period conventionally named by historians the *feudal age*. Etymologically speaking, the terms *feudal*, *feudalism* are derived from the Frankish word *fehru-ôd*, which initially meant 'cattle'. The meaning of this word has afterwards expanded so it acquired the sense of 'wealth', 'reward' 'remuneration of services'.² After a linguistic evolution appeared the Frankish word *fief*, which designed a landed property given in property to a vassal who, in exchange for it, had to carry out some services to a landlord (seigneur). The Latin equivalent for the word *fief* is *feodum* (*feudum*)³. It seems that Giacomo Alvarollo mentioned this Latin word for the first time in 1439 in his work, *De feudis*⁴.

The expression 'Middle Ages' is frequently used as an equivalent of the notions 'feudalism' and 'feudal system'. This expression was 'in fashion' among the Italian humanists from *Cinquecento* (16th Century), who spoke about *media tempestas*, *media aetas*, *media tempora* and *medium aevum*, words which approximately mean the 'Middle Ages'. The term *media tempestas* was used for the first time in 1469 by the famous humanist and papal librarian Giovanni Andrea⁵. Until the end of the 17th Century the word *medium aevum* definitely imposed itself in the language of scholars. The German historian and philologist Christofor Keller has divided the European history into three periods and published the books *Historia antiqua* (1685), *Historia medii aevi* (1688) and *Historia Nova* (1696)⁶.

Logically, the term 'Middle Ages' is correctly used only if we have in mind any three historical periods. In that case, this term must be chronologically placed between an early period and a latter period. Italian Humanists used correctly the term 'Middle Ages' which, in their opinion, designated the 'barbarian' period between the end of Antiquity, so appreciated by them, and their own period (the Renaissance), which tried to revive the ancient cultural and artistic ideals. In a system in which four or five historical ages are included, the term 'Middle Ages' is nonsense. All the same, this term is used until nowadays because of methodological rather than scientific reasons and, also, it is a word that is included into the usual vocabulary of every European

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² Radu Manolescu (1974), *Societatea feudală în Europa apuseană*, Bucharest, p. 5.

³ See especially Eugen Haberkern, Joseph Friedrich Wallach (1995), *Hilfswörterbuch für Historiker. Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, Erster Teil (A-K), 8th edition, Tübingen und Basel, pp. 197-199.

⁴ Radu Manolescu (1972), *E v mediu și feudalism*, in "Studii și articole de istorie" (Bucharest), XIX, p. 30.

⁵ Jacques Le Goff (1970), *Civilizația occidentului medieval*, translated from French into Romanian by Maria Holban, Bucharest, p. 609. The original edition: Jacques Le Goff (1964), *La civilisation de l'occident médiéval*, Paris.

⁶ Radu Manolescu (1974), p. 7.

language. As for a personal opinion, we consider that is more correct to use the expression 'feudalism' instead of 'Middle Ages', because we cannot speak at the end of 20th Century about only three historical periods. On the other hand, we cannot conceive how to give up the terms 'Middle Ages', 'medieval', 'medievalist'. This paper will seek to offer the reader some considerations concerning the genesis and character of feudalism in Western and Eastern Europe.

Generally speaking, the modern science and epistemology appeared in the west of Europe, the place where have been created the paradigms, aims, methods of research and where the finality of modern scientific approach was theorized⁷. Thus Western Europe became a springboard for the spread of knowledge to the whole world. The historical science could not be an exception to this rule. That is why the most known opinions on the character and genesis of feudalism in Europe or in other regions of the world have been and are more or less influenced by a 'western' point of view about history. Naturally, because of a complex of cultural and historical circumstances, the historical ideas, which belong to a historian who develops his activity in a developed country of Europe, have more possibilities to be known than the ideas of a historian who works in any other geographical region (excepting USA, Canada and Japan). Generally, the ideas and cultural models impose themselves either by their intrinsic superiority or by the political-economical or military superiority of the area (state) where they come from.

Coming back to the topic of this study, we must remark the fact that the opinions from Western Europe on the genesis and character of feudal age are quite different. There is a historical school of thought which considers that the feudal age is an 'unique' age, which appeared in the western part of Europe only, because of the famous *Völkerwanderung* ('the Wandering of the Nations') of the Germanic populations. This *Völkerwanderung* finally led to the fall of the Roman Western Empire (476 AD) and set the foundation of ephemeral 'Barbarian Kingdoms'. In these authors' opinion, the Roman and the barbarian (Germanic) institutions either merged into⁸, or annihilated each other⁹. Anyway, in both cases some new different medieval institutions, so different in comparison with those from the Antiquity, appeared. We will present the ideas of some representative authors who belong to this historical school of thought. Thus, Joseph Calmette considers that the 'feudal world' limited itself to the Christian Occident of Europe and to the states from the south of Europe and Orient, conquered or founded by crusaders: Syria, the Latin Empire of Constantinople, continental Greece and its islands, Candia, Rhodos, Cyprus¹⁰. F.L. Ganshof thinks that we must call a 'feudal society' that society which existed only in France, Germany, Italy, England, Spain and in the states founded by crusaders in the Orient in 10th -13th Centuries¹¹. Robert Boutruche and Guy Fourquin generally

⁷ See especially the famous book signed by Thomas Kuhn (1970), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition (enlarged), Chicago Press University, *passim*

⁸ J. Calmette (1927), *La Société féodale*, 2nd edition, Paris, pp. 7-8.

⁹ M. Bloch (1998), *Societatea feudală. Clasele și cămărearea oamenilor*, translated from French into Romanian by Cristiana Macarovici, vol. 2, Cluj-Napoca (Romania), p. 177. The original edition: Marc Bloch (1949), *La Société féodale. Les classes et le gouvernement des hommes*.

¹⁰ J. Calmette (1927), p. 192.

¹¹ F.L. Ganshof (1957), *Qu'est-ce que la féodalité?*, Bruxelles, pp. 11-12.

support the view that the feudal society is characterized by the existence of a vassal's contract, of a *feudum* and of a society based on human personal links of vassal essence¹². We easily understand that all these things can be met in their 'pure form' only in Western Europe and in the states founded by the crusaders in the Orient. Basically, the above-mentioned authors present a rigid, static perspective on feudalism, best synthesized in Joseph Calmette's sharp conclusion, which will be presented to the reader.

« On est convenu d'appeler *féodal* le régime social et politique qui caractérise le moyen âge et qui s'oppose au régime antique, d'une part, et, d'autre part, au régime moderne.

Lorsqu'on parle, pour la commodité du langage, de « féodalité japonaise » ou de « féodalité marocaine », par exemple, on emploie une expression figurée que des analogies plus au moins extérieures peuvent pratiquement justifier, mais qui ne saurait prétendre à l'exactitude. Croire à un parallélisme d'évolution serait être dupe des mots et commettre une erreur certaine. En réalité, la *féodalité* est proprement occidentale et médiévale »¹³.

In western historiography there are also present some more tinted positions. Thus, Marc Bloch considers that the feudal society is characteristic to Western Europe and, partially, to Central Europe. The famous French author asks himself if the denomination 'feudal society' should not be extended to other countries of the world (in a specific historical period)¹⁴. Influenced by the Marxist historical point of view, the historian of Orient Claude Cahen appreciated that some feudal 'tendencies' can be observed in the Byzantine, Muslim and latter Slavic societies¹⁵.

The Marxist historians from every time and every place consider that the most important factors in a historical period are the economic and social ones, which decisively influenced the history of Mankind. That is why the Marxist literature approaching the Middle Ages is determinist in a very high degree, drawing many *a priori* conclusions. The non-Marxist western authors show that the specific social relations in the feudal period are the so-called 'vassal' or 'feudal' relations, established between noblemen or between noblemen and a king. The Marxist authors appreciate that the specific social relations in the feudal age are the so-called 'seigniorial relations', established between noblemen and their serfs. Because this kind of 'seigniorial relations' and some forms of serfdom can be met in the east of Europe, the Marxist authors conclude that there was feudalism present in this geographical area, too. We consider that this position is ideologically biased (it is influenced by the famous theory of 'the class fight'), because not only in feudalism, but also in every

¹² R. Boutruche (1959), *Seigneurie et féodalité*, vol. 1, Paris, p. 24; G. Fourquin (1970), *Seigneurie et féodalité au Moyen Age*, Paris, pp. 5-10.

¹³ J. Calmette (1927), p. 1.

¹⁴ M. Bloch (1996), *Societatea feudală. Formarea legăturilor de dependență*, translated from French into Romanian by Cristiana Macarovici, vol. 1, Cluj-Napoca (Romania), p. 21. The original edition: Marc Bloch (1939), *La Société féodale. La formation des liens de dépendance*. See also M. Bloch (1998), pp. 181-182 (on Japanese feudalism).

¹⁵ Claude Cahen (1963), *Reflexions sur l'usage du mot « féodalité »*; in « Recherches internationales à la lumière du marxisme. Féodalisme », nr. 37, mai-juin 1963, pp. 205, 212-214.

society there are landlords and agricultural workers who have different agreements, more or less unfavourable for the workers.

In the last two decades we can observe the tendency of western medievalists to give up the rigid chronological and geographical divisions of the feudal (medieval) age. Seeking to catch the essence of this period, Jacques Le Goff considers that it characterizes itself especially by the supremacy of the Christian religion in all compartments of the society. That is why the French author believes that it is correct to use the denomination 'long Middle Ages' for the period encompassed between 4th – the end of 18th Centuries. All the same, he does not geographically delimit the regions in which this 'long Middle Ages' existed¹⁶. We will seek to prove in the final part of this study that in the East of Europe existed specific forms of feudalism. On the one hand, our demonstration is based on some considerations concerning the common origins of religion and culture in the west and east of Europe. On the other hand, we will try to show that in Eastern Europe there were some institutions that are almost similar to the feudal institution of Western Europe.

Almost every book on the philosophy of history insists on the fact that the early European civilization represents a unique combination among elements of Roman and Greek extraction with the Christian religion. Basically, the Romans adopted the cultural values of the Greek (Hellenic) society and only added their superior conception of law and jurisprudence. Starting with the 2nd – 3rd centuries this 'Hellenic Society' entered into a grave and profound crisis. In those troubled times there appeared two marginalized minorities, Christians and barbarians, who will consciously or unconsciously act towards the destruction of this 'Hellenic society'¹⁷.

After the destruction of the Western Roman Empire (476 AD), the Germanic 'barbarians' and the Romanized populations from Western Europe will be the direct inheritors of the Hellenic society's achievements. Slavic 'barbarians' and the Romanized or un-Romanized populations from Eastern Europe will inherit these Hellenic achievements only after their Christianization. Though based on this common cultural background (Hellenic civilization and Christianity) Western Roman Catholic society and Eastern Orthodox society will develop separately on this continent. The development of the two societies has many common elements, brilliantly evidenced by Arnold J. Toynbee¹⁸. In the Catholic society of Western

¹⁶ Jacques Le Goff (1991), *Pentru un lung ev mediu*, in Idem, *Imaginarul Medieval*, translated from French into Romanian by Marina Rădulescu, Bucharest, pp. 39-41. The original edition: Jacques Le Goff, *Imaginaire médiéval*, Paris, 1985.

¹⁷ Placing ourselves at the standpoint of the Hellenic Society, we have called the Christians "the internal proletariat" and the Barbarians "the external proletariat" of this society in its last phase, when the leaven of creativeness in the Hellenic culture had lost its power to transfigure Mankind, and when even the salt of the Hellenic tradition had lost its savor, so that "the heirs of the kingdom" of Hellenism had ceased to perform their fathers' function as pioneers in one of the great experiences of Humanity and had degenerated into a "dominant minority", holding down by might and main a proletarian underworld which no longer voluntarily followed their lead, as, in our own Western World in the eighteenth century of the Christian era, the English Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland held down the Catholic Irishry' (Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 1, *The Genesis of Civilizations*, Part One, New York, Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 53-54.

¹⁸ 'What lies, for example, in the background of the history of the Orthodox Christian Society? In this first reconnaissance we have an easy task, for here we find a universal state, a universal church, and a

Europe, the Church will hold an independent position, even political power being sometimes subordinate to her, while in Eastern Europe the Orthodox Church was in a subordinate position to the secular power. Despite this fact, Christian societies from Eastern and Western Europe will reciprocally influence each other. Thus, numerous elements of Byzantine culture (which for a very long time dominated Western culture) were adopted in the West Europe. The reverse situation is more copiously illustrated by the translation of some elements of Western feudal society in the East of Europe. These feudal elements were borrowed to Eastern Europe either by means of Varangian mercenaries and merchants (in Eastern Europe) or through Poland and Hungary (in Eastern Europe and the Balkan Peninsula), exponents of Western civilization, or again by means of the Latin Empire of Constantinople (in the Balkan Peninsula, 1204-1261).

As a curiosity, the encounter between Scandinavians and Slavs edified a new urban society with special features that cannot be found in the Western Europe from the Early Feudal Times. For example, in Western Europe merchants were rather weak from the point of view of social importance, whereas in the East of Europe they enjoyed more prestige and wealth. A feudal aristocracy led the society from Western Europe. In European Russia, the Scandinavian merchants formed at least part of the upper class. In the early Middle Ages, Western economic life was autarchic. The Scandinavians brought open, active economical life in Eastern Europe.

These influences manifested themselves according to objective historical laws. In this framework, the culture, civilization or institutions of a society, which is economically, culturally, politically and militarily superior to others will be adopted, sooner or later benevolently or coercively, by those other, 'weaker', societies.

Yet, we must take into consideration the fact that, with the exception of Byzantine society, the rest of the Eastern European societies were inferior in many respects to those in Western Europe in early feudal times. In practice, human society witnessed along the centuries a process of expansion of European civilization and of 'Westernization' of the various societies of the world¹⁹. The peak of this process was reached in the 20th century.

The mutual influence between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox European societies was interrupted by the settlement in Eastern Europe of some nomad populations (Pechenegs, Cumans, and Mongolians). The settlement of these populations and the inclusion of parts of Eastern Europe in the so-called 'empires of the steppe'²⁰ lead to a marked regress, which slowed down for some centuries the normal development of Eastern European states. But despite all this regress, European States did not abandon the institutional influences received from the West but slowly developed them, and formed, in time, institutions similar to those in the

Völkerwanderung, which are not analogous to but identical with those, which we have already found in the background of our own Völkerwanderung of Teutons, Eurasians, Berbers, Arabs, and Slavs. From this we learn at once the particular fact that the Orthodox Christian Society as well as our own Western Society is "affiliated" to the Hellenic Society, and the general fact that a society may be "apparented" to more "affiliated" societies than one' (Arnold J. Toynbee, *op. cit.*, p. 63).

¹⁹ Samuel P. Huntington (1998), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster Ltd, printed in Berkshire (Great Britain), pp. 50-53.

²⁰ The expression is borrowed from Maurice Crouzet. See his book *L'Empire des steppes*, Paris, Payot, 1938.

West. We will now try to demonstrate to the reader the truth of this remark, by showing what these institutions were and what the differences between Eastern and Western feudal societies were.

Historians, who think that feudalism manifested itself only in Western Europe and in the territories conquered by the crusaders, practically have in view the so-called 'classical feudalism'. The paradoxical fact is well known that in the Oriental territories conquered by the crusaders feudal institutions existed which were 'purer' in form than the similar ones existing, at that time, in France, England, Germany, etc. *Mutatis mutandis*, we think that in the East of Europe also existed feudal institutions, of course, imperfect by comparison with those in the West. Marc Bloch appreciates that in feudal societies, there exists almost a perfect coincidence between the ruling class and the professional, well-armed warrior class²¹. This armed warrior class also existed in Eastern and South-eastern Europe. The small room of this study does not permit description *in extenso* of these warriors who had, at the beginning, full leadership in the Slavic or Romanian principalities from Eastern and South-eastern Europe. Bloch also shows that the companions of Slav princes were receiving from them gifts in domains (i.e. *vochina*, *pomestia*, our note), while Frankish nobles were receiving estates, which they could have in lifetime²². In the Western feudal society the city was considered a space of freedom²³ and had a special social structure within which the guilds of craftsmen and of merchants had an especially important role. Western medieval merchants were practicing a very active trade. We must remark upon the fact that in Eastern European towns there existed merchant and craftsmen guilds that enjoyed facilities bestowed by means of privileged charts. Also, Eastern European merchants participated intensely into the transit trade between the towns of the Germanic *Hansa* (union) from the Baltic Sea and the ones of the Black Sea, where Italian merchants held an important position. Poland's wish to ensure the security of this commercial road had great importance in the creation of the feudal principality of Moldavia, which had the mission to defend this commercial road which was vital to the interests of the Jagellonic monarchy²⁴. Feudal monarchs in Western Europe fought for diminishing of the influence of the Catholic Church in the field of politics and for the creation of centralized national states²⁵. One can notice that the same thing is true for Eastern Europe. With these aspects in view, we consider that the above stated definition of the 'long Middle Ages' belonging to Jacques Le Goff can also be applied for Eastern Europe.

There certainly existed marked differences between Western and Eastern feudalism. The process of weakening the central political authority did not fully

²¹ Marc Bloch (1998), p. 178.

²² *Ibid.* p. 179.

²³ In this respect, there was a famous German proverb in the Middle Ages: "Die Stadtluft macht frei", in Engl: "The air of the town is freedom-giving".

²⁴ See P.P. Panaitescu, *La route commerciale de Pologne à la mer Noire au Moyen Âge*, in "Revista Istorică Română", III, 1933. The Romanian variant of this study was published in P.P. Panaitescu, *Interpretări românești. Studii de istorie economică și socială*, Bucharest, 1947 (book reprinted in 1994).

²⁵ Pierre Manent (1992), *Istoria intelectuală a liberalismului*, translated from French into Romanian by Mona Antohi and Sorin Antohi, Bucharest, pp. 22-29. The original edition: Pierre Manent (1987), *Histoire intellectuelle du libéralisme*, Paris.

manifest itself in Eastern Europe, while the same was so strikingly evident in the west of Europe after Charlemagne. The nobility in Eastern Europe never issued their own coins and could not seriously jeopardize the power of the central political authority. For a long time a numerous class of free peasants was active in Eastern Europe, which in Western Europe it disappeared at an early stage. Western European towns were 'free' towns. Generally speaking, Eastern European towns did not enjoy the so-called privileged charts, being more strictly subjected to the central power of the state. Finally, mediaeval bourgeoisie from Eastern European towns was to a greater extent foreigner, was less important at all levels, and appeared later than in the West of Europe.

Having in view these differences in form rather than in essence, we support the view that there existed a feudal society in Eastern Europe and we also hope that this brief analysis would be useful in the initiation of a more extended research of the problem.

As a realization of environment Russia was the practical project of an idea advanced in the beginning of the 18th century that tried to adapt the European model of development to the Russian space, which was heterogeneous and still afflicted by its patriarchal byzantinism. Peter the Great's posterity had built Russia at the cost of obstructing the organic evolution of the Russian society, the latter being obliged to pay the price for Moscow's affirmation throughout Europe.

When we speak about Russian identity and its place in Europe, we must consider a distinction which was very obvious in the 19th century, the one between Russia and the Russians, between political Russia constructed with great effort in Petersburg and the Russian people, unprepared to step forward in embracing the new political-European model. Country in Europe, built on the grounds of Occidentalism and capitalist evolution which offered it strength and variety, the Russian prophesy assimilated only the European pretensions, ignoring the internal means to legitimize its political project. The most powerful influence over Russia did not come from the ever growing demands of market autonomy, but the transformation project in itself, in a completely new direction.

Political Russia was a superimposed structure of Russian society which posed a the last for at least two centuries, and which modelled itself following European standards, but without creating connections with its legitimizing sources. To justify its expansionist claims, the tsarist empire invoked the Byzantine legacy which it was entitled to in its opinion, especially under the circumstances of the power void in western European space. This first approach of the relation with Europe, where Russia behaved as periphery, unified different regions in the Russian population: integrating some on the part of the elite that wanted to embrace the European occidental heritage, and rejection at the social level, where European values were difficult to grasp due to the incipient stage of political awareness in the Russian masses.

Outside the walls of Petersburg were the Russians, or social Russia, forced against its will on a compulsory course of modernization. Up to a certain point, while discussing about the same experience of forced modernization imposed on all peripheral civilizations of the east and Balkans, which developed an acute and at the same time aggressive nationalism, under the influence of the elite following the values