The English Revolution and the transition from feudalism to capitalism


BRIAN MANNING

The first great debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism was started by the publication in 1946 of Maurice Dobb’s Studies in the Development of Capitalism, and the second was begun by Robert Brenner’s article on ‘Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe’ in Past And Present (1976). These debates provide for Marxists a framework within which to interpret the English Revolution of 1640 to 1660. Brenner’s important new book is a major contribution to the latter. It is concerned with the role of the London merchants in the revolution, but a ‘Postscript’ of 78 pages places his subject in the context of a general interpretation of the revolution.

In 1961 Valerie Pearl made the first detailed attempt to establish the allegiances of London merchants in the civil war. She found that most of the biggest merchants who dominated the great chartered overseas trading companies and the government of the city were royalists, while the parliamentarians were ‘merchants of the middle rank’, ‘...wealthy, but not the wealthiest men in the city...', ‘...important traders but not directors of the chartered companies...’. Brenner carried this research further in an article in 1973 which was the embryo of the present book.

A serious problem in analysing the parties is that even among well documented groups like gentry and merchants there are substantial numbers about whom no information can be found of their allegiances in the civil war. Brenner has examined 274 of the London merchant elite, but for about half of them there is no evidence about which side they supported, and this must be borne in mind when drawing conclusions. Of 130 merchants who can be allocated to the parties, 78 were royalists, 43 were parliamentarians, and nine were side changers. Breaking these figures down, he finds that the leading merchants of the Levant and the East India companies, which controlled the city government before the revolution,
were overwhelmingly royalists, while the Merchant Adventurers, who were now less dominant than they had been in the 16th century, were more evenly divided.¹

Independently of each other, Robert Brenner and Keith Lindley have analysed the signatories of party forming petitions from Londoners in 1641-2 and reached broadly the same conclusions. Lindley’s fuller account shows that the royalist citizens were ‘the men of wealth and superior standing, the city’s traditional rulers...’ Twice as many overseas merchants were royalists as were parliamentarians. The typical parliamentarian ‘was the more modestly prosperous domestic tradesman with his own house and shop, and sometimes other city property, who was engaged in the retailing of textile and other goods’. He was a citizen of substance but ‘generally less prosperous, well-connected and powerful’ than the typical royalist. ’It was this kind of London citizen, working with fellow militants in his parish, ward and livery company, and ready to exert a radical influence in the city’s and kingdom’s affairs, who provided much of the dynamism in the English Revolution.’²

It is thus now well established that the merchant elite of London—the richest and most powerful citizens—were mostly royalists in the civil war. This substantiates the Marxist thesis, as advanced by Dobb, that the great merchants were tied into feudal society, their wealth and power were derived from royal and aristocratic grants and favours, and they were not agents of the transition from feudalism to capitalism.² Brenner notes that the ability of these merchants to make a profit depended on buying cheap and selling dear, and so on their power to prevent overtrading in their markets and to restrict the number of traders, which could be achieved only by political assistance from the feudal monarchy and aristocracy in granting them monopolies, such as those of the Levant and the East India companies:

Far from transforming the old system economically or subverting it politically, the merchant class thus tended to live off the old socioeconomic order and to constitute one of its main bulwarks. As Marx concluded, 'commerce imparts to production a character directed more and more towards exchange value', nevertheless, 'its development [and that of merchant's capital]...is incapable by itself of promoting and explaining the transition from one mode of production to another.'²

The merchants were, however, part of the bourgeoisie which, in Dobb’s phrases, 'compromised with feudal society' and were 'essentially parasites on the old economic order'. At the same time the great merchants were the ruling elite of London and defended not only their economic privileges but also the king’s cause, because that was the defence of the existing political and social hierarchy in which they ranked close to the top.
While the big merchants involved in trade with Europe, the Mediterranean and the East through the monopoly companies were predominantly royalist, there were new traders overseas who were different. Brenner’s major contribution is the discovery of the role of colonisation in North America and the Caribbean in shaping the English Revolution:

Unlike commerce to Europe or to the East, trade to America was dependent upon the prior development of colonial production. Without staple-producing plantations, there could be no colonial exports or markets. In the great colonising companies, the natural suppliers of investment funds for plantation development were London’s greater merchants. But the city’s commercial elite was unwilling to make the long-term fixed capital expenditures on plantations which were required. Their participation in colonial development petered out during the second decade of the seventeenth century...

The crucial point is that colonial merchants were involved in production as well as exchange.

Virginia (including Maryland) and the Caribbean Islands (including Bermuda) became the chief production centres in British America. Before 1640 they produced mainly tobacco, which was shipped to England, and from there to the rest of Europe and the Near East. 'In the years between 1622 and 1638, tobacco imports from the American colonies leaped from about �000 to �00,000 a year...' The men who provided 'the crucial input of capital and entrepreneurship for colonial developments' did not come from the established elite of merchants in the chartered overseas trading companies. Some of them began by emigrating to the colonies and starting up plantations, and they often used the profits of their plantations to return to London and set up as overseas merchants, but continuing to be involved with the colonial economy. Others started as domestic traders, sea captains or shopkeepers in London, and extended their business by exporting provisions to the colonies and importing tobacco. From a mass of small traders engaged in this commerce there emerged an elite which 'provided the most important source of motivation, capital and organisation for the whole colonisation movement... They were behind almost every important colonial adventure of the period and controlled a disproportionate share of the trade... They dominated the rapidly developing tobacco trades with Virginia and the West Indies, which formed the heart of the new American commercial economy.' They are the subject of this book.

During the revolution sugar planting was introduced into the West Indies and was more profitable than tobacco. The elite group, which already dominated American enterprise, 'provided much of the energy and capital' behind this 'commercial-industrial' development. Tobacco was produced on small plots by
yeoman farmers but sugar was produced on large plantations by black slaves. ’It opened the way for the decline of small-scale production, the replacement of free white by black slave labour, and the concentration of land and capital in the hands of a relatively small number of businessmen who could afford to invest and innovate.’ ’The sugar plantation was a factory set in a field.’

Brenner demonstrates that the colonial merchants, or ‘new merchants’ as he terms them, were overwhelmingly parliamentarians in the civil war. Of the small number of merchants in the Levant and East India companies who opted for parliament, most were involved in the colonial trades with the Americas. Very few royalist merchants were involved in the colonial trades.

What Brenner has to say about the origins of the ’new merchants’ is of great interest and adds support to the view that ’middle sort of people’ provided the dynamic core of the parliamentarian party. Few of the ’new merchants’

had been members of the great London trading companies, or overseas merchants of any kind. Nor did they come from the upper ranks of either London or county society. Originally men of the ’middling sort’, they were mostly born outside London and were, in many cases, the younger sons of minor gentry or prosperous yeomen. A few came from borough commercial families.

They began as domestic traders, shopkeepers and ship captains, and many of them combined colonial trade with domestic trade from their London shops, and so ’they were closely related to that loosely defined middle layer of London shopkeepers, ship captains, and domestic traders...’

The new merchants’ social origins and their continuing participation in domestic commercial activities gave them strong and extensive ties to that broad layer of city shopkeepers, mariners, and artisans who largely made up the city radical movement. The majority of new merchants could, in fact, in 1640, be properly regarded as belonging to that layer.

This leads to another issue in the revolution to which Brenner’s work draws attention—the conflict between domestic traders and overseas merchants:

The aim of the chartered companies was not merely to keep out poorer, badly connected traders so as to restrict the numbers participating in the trade; it was, especially, to prevent entry into overseas commerce by the city’s shopkeepers, small producers, and ship captains, whatever their wealth. Moreover, many of them were by no means poor, and an important minority... undoubtedly possessed sufficient wealth to pursue overseas trade...
Company charters confined overseas trade to 'mere merchants' and excluded people who continued to work as retailers or craftsmen, and the latter opposed this ban:

Indeed, the conflict between company merchants and the city's domestic tradesmen, above all those shopkeeper and mariner elements that had gravitated toward overseas commerce, either legally in the open areas of Spain and the Americas or illegally via interloping, was to constitute an important underlying basis for the political and ideological struggles in London during the civil war.¹⁴

This helps to explain the parliamentarianism and radicalism of shopkeepers and craftsmen, and throws new light on the reasons for 'middle sort of people' to be anti-royalist. The Levellers' constituency is revealed by their persistent campaigning against the monopoly companies and demands for the opening of overseas trade to all who wanted to take part.¹⁵

Brenner's thesis has subsequently found support in the work of David Sacks, who extends it to the provinces. For at least a century before the revolution there was controversy in Bristol over the claim of the city's major overseas merchants to an exclusive right to trade with foreign markets from that port. The Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol, by political and jurisdictional means, excluded retailers and craftsmen from overseas trade. By 1640 there was a long history of antagonism towards the Merchant Venturers among the retailers and craftsmen of Bristol, whose aim was that all citizens should be free to engage in overseas trade if they wished. It became one of the bases of the division into parties in the civil war, when, as a contemporary puritan minister recorded, the king's cause in Bristol was favoured by 'the wealthy and powerful men... but disgusted by the middle rank...'

... The rapid rise of colonial enterprise in the 1640s and 50s had provided new openings for small shopkeepers and artisans to enter into overseas commerce. In the early 1650s, hundreds of townsmen, some of them not even sworn burgesses of the city, engaged freely in dealings with the Chesapeake region and the West Indies, shipping small wares and indentured servants in return for the tobacco and sugar their overseas customers produced. A number of these figures had a history of political support for parliament and the New Model Army; many too were members of the sects.¹⁶

The exclusion of shopkeepers and artisans from engaging in the profession of a merchant not only maximised the profits of the latter, but also upheld the concept of hierarchy, which as it separated the status and function of gentlemen from that of plebeians, so it separated the status and function of merchants from that of shopkeepers and artisans. Challenge to the ecclesiastical hierarchy
by the 'middle sort' radicals—demand for abolition of episcopacy—correlated with challenge to the secular hierarchy; rights were located in the community rather than in the status or function of a particular group, and as the radical religious sects regarded liberty of conscience as a natural right, so they regarded liberty to trade as a natural right. The Levellers said that it was the 'birthright' of 'every Englishman' who 'hath propriety of goods, wares, and merchandise' 'to transport the same to any place beyond the seas, and there to convert them to his own profit'. They argued that it was contrary to the native rights of Englishmen and the fundamental laws of the land to prevent a man from trading to certain parts of the world because he did not belong to a company.  

Brenner says that in London the parliamentarian party

... was dominated by rank-and-file citizens drawn heavily from among shopkeepers, mariners, artisans, and craftsmen, with new merchants making up one (though only one) crucial element of its leadership... These men were largely cut off from the sources of commercial, political, and ecclesiastical power by the privileged merchant companies that controlled much of foreign trade, by the aldermanic oligarchy that dominated city government, and by the crown and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which exerted a stranglehold over the official parish churches of London. They were, in consequence, open to religio-political courses of action...

They shifted the parliamentarian cause in 1641-2 to

a struggle to revolutionise the city's constitution and to abolish episcopacy root and branch as the prelude to the introduction of a Presbyterian or Independent order in the church. This was a political conflict that had a clear social character, as the forces of order drew the core of their strength from the privileged overseas company merchants of London and the forces of revolt drew theirs primarily from non-merchant citizens outside the ranks of London's wholesalers.  

How does Brenner's thesis in this book relate to his general interpretation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and of the English Revolution? Two points of debate are central: who were the agents of transition and how far had the transition proceeded by 1640?  

Brenner explains the transition from feudalism to capitalism in terms of '...the rise of a capitalist aristocracy which was presiding over an agricultural revolution'.  
While the peasants possessed the means of production—land—the feudal class could appropriate part of their production only by juridical and political power, backed by force. The weakening of that power, as a result of peasant resistance, caused a crisis from which the feudal class recovered by
shifting from claims to power over people to claims to power over land. Smaller holdings were consolidated into larger farms, which were cultivated not for subsistence but for the market, by means of wage labour. Landlords entered into 'contractual relations with free, market-dependent commercial tenants (who increasingly hired wage workers)...' Thus they came to rely on economic means—the market forces that determined land values and rents—rather than political and jurisdictional means to appropriate part of production, and so they became capitalists:

... Capitalism developed in England from the end of the medieval period by means of the self-transformation of the old structure, specifically the self-transformation of the landed classes. As a result, the rise of capitalism took place within the shell of landlord property and thus, in the long run, not in contradiction with and to the detriment of, but rather to the benefit of the landed aristocracy.

Thus Brenner rules out conflict between the aristocracy and an emerging capitalist class. By 1640 he thinks that the old ruling class 'was by and large—though not of course uniformly—capitalist, in the sense of depending on commercial farmers paying competitive rents...'

In contrast to Brenner's focus upon the aristocrats transforming themselves from feudal lords to capitalist landowners, Dobb's focus was on small producers rising to become capitalists. Dobb followed closely Marx's chapter on 'Primary Accumulation' in Volume One of Capital, where the first stage of the development of capitalism was the emergence of richer peasants who expanded their holdings and employed wage labour, so that '...at the close of the 16th century, England had a class of capitalist farmers...' Also '...many small guild masters, and yet more independent petty artisans or even wage workers, developed into small capitalists; and later (extending by degrees the scale of the exploitation of wage labour, and thus extending accumulation) some of them developed into full-blown capitalists.'

Dobb dwelt on the process of differentiation among the peasantry in medieval England, which led to a strata of richer and poorer peasants. He pointed to 'the rise of relatively well-to-do peasant-farmers in the village', who, by taking advantage of local trade and local markets, accumulated small amounts of capital, improved their lands and enlarged their holdings, and hired the services of their poorer neighbours. The 16th century

... saw a considerable growth of independent peasant farming by tenants who rented land as enclosed holdings outside the open-field system. Among these there developed... an important section of richer peasants or yeomen, who as they prospered added field to field, by lease or purchase... and grew by the end of the century into considerable farmers who relied
on the hire of wage-labour, recruited from the victims of enclosure or from the poorer cottagers. It was by this class of rising yeomen farmers that most of the improvements in methods of cultivation seem to have been pioneered.

Dobb saw the point of transition as being when the 'growth in the resources of the small man' became 'sufficient to cause him to place greater reliance on the results of hired labour than on the work of himself and his family, and in his calculations to relate the gains of his enterprise to his capital rather than to his own exertions...'. Thus a capitalist class was born 'from the ranks of production itself'.

This also occurred, according to Dobb, in industry, as the next and most vital stage of the transition to capitalism. '... This final stage generally seems, as Marx pointed out, to have been associated with the rise from the ranks of the producers themselves of a capitalist element, half-manufacturer, half-merchant, which began to subordinate and to organise those very ranks from which it had so recently risen.' 'The opening of the 17th century witnessed the beginnings of an important shift in the centre of gravity...' 'the rise among the craftsmen of a richer, capitalist element who wished to invest their capital in the employment of other craftsmen and themselves to assume the role of merchant-employers...'.

There is a conflict 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, for there had to have come into existence, before the aristocracy could be transformed, richer peasants who could afford to lease the larger farms, and who had the capital to invest in wage labour and improving production. 'The breakthrough from below of the yeomanry on the basis of petty capitalist accumulation', as Colin Mooers says, 'was a crucial intervening stage in the later development of large-scale capitalist farming.' Landlords were responding to changes taking place within the peasantry. Patricia Crook and David Parker comment that Brenner's 'concept of capitalist relations is narrow and cannot do justice to the perhaps decisive role played by the small capitalist farmers at least from the early 16th to the mid-17th century.'

The insertion of a phase of petty capitalist accumulation before and alongside the transformation of the aristocrats into capitalists can partially save Brenner's thesis, but there is still a difficulty about his view that by the time of the English Revolution the ruling class was '... by and large--though not of course uniformly--capitalist...'. But this has yet to be proved, and research has still to be done to ascertain how many landowners did depend on
commercial farmers paying competitive rents' and employing wage workers before 1640. Dobb thought that before the revolution the ruling class was still by and large feudal, maintaining that 'the majority of small tenants, although they paid a money rent (which was, however, more often a customary payment than an economic rent), were still largely tied in various ways and subordinated to manorial authority' and that labourers still often had some land and common rights and were not solely dependent on wages: 'Social relations in the countryside between producers and their lords and masters retained much of their medieval character, and much of the integument at least of the feudal order remained.' In that earlier debate on the transition Hilton and Hill agreed with Dobb, Hilton saying that '... however important were the changes which gave free reign to the agricultural and industrial commodity producers, there was no transformation of the basic relationships constituting the feudal mode of production', and Hill saying that '... the partial emancipation of the petty mode of production does not in itself change the economic base of society (and still less the political superstructure), although it does prepare the conditions for the development of capitalism.' Dobb added, however, that '... in many places the feudal integument was wearing very threadbare', and though the form of exploitation of the petty mode had not shed its feudal form, it was 'a degenerate and rapidly disintegrating form'. Those are bare assertions, and whether the focus is upon the aristocrats or the yeomen, there is a problem about how far capitalism had advanced by 1640, and whether the mode of production had changed. It is not just a question of how many peasants and artisans had become petty capitalists or how many landlords had become big capitalists, but also how far the poorer peasants and artisans had been reduced to a proletariat. '... Capitalism presupposes the existence of a proletariat...', wrote Dobb, who stressed what Marx said on 'Primary Accumulation':

... primary accumulation... is nothing other than the historical process whereby the producer is divorced from the means of production. It assumes a 'primary' aspect because it belongs to the primary phase that is traversed immediately before the history of capitalism begins, immediately before the establishment of the method of production proper to capitalism.

'The expropriation of the agricultural producers, the peasants, their severance from the soil, was the basis of the whole process.' It was 'the starting point of the development that gave rise both to the wage worker and to the capitalist...' '... The expropriation of the great mass of people from the land, from the means of subsistence, and from the instruments of labour... comprises the prelude to the history of capitalism.' The transition to capitalism is not
just a history of the wealth of a few but it is also a history of the poverty of the many. 28

Before 1640, however, small peasant farming was still viable and predominated in many areas, and artisans often possessed small holdings. The degree of dependence of labourers on wages was reduced by the possession of a little land and the rights to pasture a few animals on the commons, and to take fuel and building materials. The dispossession of the mass of the people—the poor peasants from the land, the poor artisans from ownership of raw materials, tools, and their finished product—came mainly after the revolution. Donald Woodward writes:

English society during the 16th and early 17th centuries had not yet become a predominantly wage-earning society... It was a poor society and many in the lower ranks frequently sank perilously close to the subsistence level, especially in years of harvest failure. But it was above all still a society in which the small unit of production and the small unit of ownership and control prevailed in most trades. 29

In his account of the transition Brenner leaves out industrial developments, but if agrarian developments were transforming economic and social structures in some areas, so were industrial developments in others. This is shown in two recent books, one by David Levine and Keith Wrightson on the impact of coal mining on an agricultural community, and the other by David Rollison on the impact of clothmaking on a rural district before the revolution. It is a one sided view to focus on agrarian changes in the 16th and early 17th centuries to the exclusion of the contemporaneous restructuring of rural societies in a number of regions—economically, socially and intellectually—by the development of clothmaking, metalworking and mining. Brenner’s concentration on the landowners, and to a lesser extent his concentration on merchants, cuts him off from adequately explaining both the transition to capitalism and the English Revolution.

Although he maintains that the ruling class was already a capitalist class before the revolution, Brenner does not fall back on explaining the conflict in conventional terms as one within the ruling class over the constitution or religion or both:

... It is a mistake to see the split within parliament as resulting from fundamental differences within the parliamentary classes over political or religious principles or goals. The landed class was, from a trans-European perspective, rather homogeneous in socioeconomic terms, its members possessing roughly the same interests and sharing many of the same life experiences. As a result, they held, to a very great extent, a common ideological outlook, both religiously and politically. The
social and ideological unity of the parliamentary classes was expressed in the striking level of agreement among the MPs on the very extensive political and religious programme passed by parliament through the summer of 1641. The split is thus inexplicable merely in terms of dynamics internal to parliament or the parliamentary classes alone; it must be explained in terms of forces external to and acting on parliament and the landed classes.

This external force was 'the London mass movement' whose leadership included the colonial or 'new' merchants. Brenner gives support to my own view that the split in the ruling class was caused by the intervention of the London mob: a section of the ruling class was willing to ally with the radicals who controlled the London mass movement as the only means to secure the reform programme against the resistance of the king, while another section found this too dangerous and the price demanded by the radicals too high, fearing '... that the further pursuit of reform would inevitably encourage popular and radical interventions in the political arena and in religious affairs', and that alliance with radical London citizenry would 'open the way for what many saw as a serious challenge to social hierarchy and social order.'

The aim of the radical leaders of the London popular movement was 'to overturn the established sociopolitical oligarchy in London and so to significantly democratise London’s municipal government', and to overthrow episcopacy and replace it 'by a more locally--and popularly--controlled church, Presbyterian or Independent.' The popular movement was composed of shopkeepers, mariners, smaller domestic traders, craftsmen and artisans. But Brenner pursues this no further and fails to root the radical and popular movement in the challenge of the 'middle sort of people' to the existing order, in the provinces as well as in London. This follows from his interpretation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in terms of the landlords rather than the producers. His theory of the transition cannot explain the revolution whereas Dobb's can.

Dobb's thesis that capitalism in its revolutionary form developed from the ranks of the small producers led him to pose that the smaller gentry and rising yeomen 'were a most important driving force in the bourgeois revolution of the 17th century...'. His view of the transition helps to explain the crucial role of the 'middling sort' in the parliamentary party and in driving forward the revolution. Brenner's thesis ignores industrial development before 1640 and so cannot explain why industrial districts—not all of them—provided a main base for the parliamentarian and revolutionary parties. Dobb stressed the development of industrial capitalism before 1640 and the parliamentarianism of industrial districts in the civil war. This is supported by modern research and, for example, Rollison says that without the manufacturing districts there would have been no effective parliamentarian party in Gloucestershire:
Manufacturing, as Marx claimed, was the dynamic element in the field-of-force. It alone made the kind of civil war which took place in the 1640s possible. In this sense long-term developments were decisive.\(^\text{1}\)

However, there is much more work to do on identifying the revolutionary forces in the industrial districts and the relations between various elements in those districts—gentry, yeomen farmers, and merchants, landholding and landless artisans, proto-capitalists and proto-proletarians.

Brenner has made an invaluable contribution to understanding the English Revolution by establishing the central role of colonial merchants and colonisation, based on massive research. That will need to be matched by a similar study making the development of industry and the industrial classes equally central. Brenner builds on Marx’s stress on the role of colonisation in primary accumulation, but Marx also linked it to the proletarianisation of the masses: ‘... the veiled slavery of the European wage earners became the pedestal of unqualified slavery in the New World.’

Notes

1. 'Science and Society' (Spring 1950, Fall 1952, Spring 1953, Fall 1953) reprinted with additional essays in R Hilton (ed), The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism (London, 1976).
18. R Brenner, Merchants and Revolution, p693.
27. M Dobb, op cit, ch VI.