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The object of this work is to attempt a comparative survey of the nature and development of the Absolutist State in Europe. Its general character and limits as a reflection on the past are explained in the foreword to the study that precedes it.¹ Some specific remarks about the relationship of the enquiry undertaken in this volume to historical materialism may be added. Conceived as a Marxist study of Absolutism, the work below is deliberately situated between two different planes of Marxist discourse, which normally lie at a considerable distance from each other. It has been a general phenomenon of the last decades that Marxist historians, the authors of a now impressive corpus of research, have not always been directly concerned with the theoretical questions of implications raised by their work. At the same time, Marxist philosophers, who have sought to clarify or solve the basic theoretical problems of historical materialism, have often done so at a considerable remove from the specific empirical issues posed by historians. An attempt has been made here to explore a mediate ground between the two. It is possible that it may serve only by negative example. At all events, the aim of this study is to examine European Absolutism simultaneously ‘in general’ and ‘in particular’: that is to say, both the ‘pure’ structures of the Absolutist State, which constitute it as a fundamental historical category, and the ‘impure’ variants presented by the specific and diverse monarchies of post-mediaeval Europe. These two orders of reality are customarily separated by a major gap in much Marxist writing today. On the one hand, ‘abstract’ general models are constructed, or presupposed – not only of the absolutist state, but equally of the bourgeois revolution or the capitalist state, without concern for their effective variations; on the other hand, ‘concrete’ local cases are explored, without reference to their reciprocal implications and

interconnections. The conventional dichotomy between these procedures derives, doubtless, from the widespread belief that an intelligible necessity only inhabits the broadest and most general trends in history, which operate so to speak ‘above’ the multiple empirical circumstances of specific events and institutions, whose actual course or shape becomes by comparison largely the outcome of chance. Scientific laws if the notion of them is accepted at all – are held to obtain only for universal categories: singular objects are deemed the domain of the fortuitous. The practical consequences of this division are often to render general concepts – such as the absolutist state, the bourgeois revolution or the capitalist state – so remote from historical reality that they cease to have any explicative power at all; while particular studies confined to delimited areas or periods – fail vice-versa to develop or refine any global theory. The premise of this work is that there is no umb-line between necessity and contingency in historical explanation, dividing separate types of enquiry – ‘long-run’ versus ‘short-run’, ‘abstract’ versus ‘concrete’ – from each other. There is merely that which is known – established by historical research – and that which is not known: the latter may be either the mechanisms of single events or the laws of motion of whole structures. Both are equally amenable, in principle, to adequate knowledge of their causality. (In practice, the surviving historical evidence can often be too insufficient or contradictory that definite judgements are not feasible: but this is another question – of documentation, not intelligibility.) One of the main purposes of the study undertaken here is thus to try to hold together a tension two orders of reflection which have often been unwarrantably divorced in Marxist writing, weakening its capacity for rational and controllable theory in the domain of history.

The actual scope of the study below is marked by three anomalies or discrepancies from orthodox treatments of the subject. The first of these is the much longer ancestry accorded to Absolutism, implicit in the nature of the study that is the prologue to it. Secondly, within the bounds of the continent explored in these pages – Europe – a relatively systematic effort has been made to give equivalent and complementary treatment to its Western and Eastern zones, as was done in the preceding discussion of feudalism. This is not something that can be taken for granted. Although the division between Western and Eastern Europe is an intellectual commonplace, it has very rarely been the object of a direct and sustained historical reflection. The most recent vintage of serious works on European history has to some extent redressed the traditional geo-political imbalance of Western historiography, with its characteristic neglect of the Eastern half of the continent. But a reasonable balance of interest has still largely to be struck. Moreover, it is not so much a mere parity of coverage within the two regions that is needed, as a comparative explanation of their division, analysis of their differences, and account of the dynamic of their interconnections. The history of Eastern Europe is not merely a poorer copy of that of Western Europe, which can simply be added side by side to it, without affecting study of the latter; the development of the more ‘backward’ regions of the continent casts an unwonted light on that of the more ‘advanced’ regions, and often throws into relief novel problems within it, concealed by the limits of a purely Western introspection. Thus, contrary to normal practice, the vertical division of the continent between West and East is here taken throughout as a central organizing principle of the materials discussed. Within each zone, of course, major social and political variations have always existed, and these are contrasted and explored in their own right. The aim of this procedure is to suggest a regional typology that can help to clarify the divergent trajectories of the major Absolutist States of both Eastern and Western Europe. Such a typology may serve to indicate, if only in outline, precisely the sort of intermediate conceptual plane that is so often missing between generic theoretical constructs and particular case-histories, in studies of Absolutism as of much else.

Thirdly, and finally, the selection of the object of this study – the Absolutist State – has determined a temporal articulation unlike that of the orthodox genres of historiography. The traditional frameworks of historical writing are either single countries or closed periods. The great majority of qualified research is conducted strictly within national bounds; and where a work exceeds these for an international perspective, it usually takes a delimited epoch as its frontiers. In either case, historical time normally seems to present no problem: whether in ‘old-fashioned’ narrative studies or ‘modern’ sociological studies, events or institutions appear to bathe in a more or less continuous and
mogeneous temporality. Although all historians are naturally aware of the fact that rates of change vary between different layers or sectors of society, convenience and custom usually dictate that the form of a work implies a chronological monism. That is to say, its materials are treated as if they share a common departure and common conclusion, spanned by a single stretch of time. In this study, there is no such uniform temporal medium: for the times of the major Absolutisms of Europe—Eastern and Western—were, precisely, enormously diverse, and this diversity was itself constitutive of their respective nature as state systems. Spanish Absolutism suffered its first great defeat in the early 16th century in the Netherlands; English Absolutism was cut down in the mid-17th century; French Absolutism lasted until the end of the 18th century; Prussian Absolutism survived until the later 19th century; Russian Absolutism was only overthrown in the 20th century. The wide disjunctures in the dating of these great structures inevitably corresponded to deep distinctions in their composition and evolution. Since the specific object of this study is the whole spectrum of European Absolutism, no single temporality covers it. The story of Absolutism has many, overlapping beginnings and disparate, staggered endings. Its underlying unity is real and profound, but it is not that of linear continuum. The complex duration of European Absolutism, with its multiple breaks and displacements from region to region, commands the presentation of the historical material in this study. Thus, the whole cycle of processes and events which assured the triumph of the capitalist mode of production in Europe after the early modern epoch, is omitted here. The first bourgeois revolutions occurred long before the last metamorphoses of absolutism, chronologically. For the purposes of this work, however, they remain categorically posterior to the latter, and will be considered in a subsequent study. Thus such fundamental phenomena as the primitive accumulation of capital, the onset of religious reformation, the formation of nations, the expansion of overseas imperialism, the advent of industrialization—all of which fall well within the formal compass of the periods’ treated here, as contemporaneous with various phases of Absolutism in Europe—are not discussed or explored. Their dates are the same: their times are separate. The unfamiliar and disconcerting history of the successive bourgeois revolutions is not our concern here:

the present essay is confined to the nature and development of the Absolutist States, their political antecedent and adversary. Two subsequent studies will deal specifically, in turn, with the chain of the great bourgeois revolutions, from the Revolt of the Netherlands to the Unification of Germany; and with the structure of the contemporary capitalist states that eventually, after a long process of ulterior evolution, emerged from them. Certain of the theoretical and political implications of arguments in the present volume will only become fully apparent in these sequels.

A last word is perhaps needed on the choice of the State itself as a central theme for reflection. Today, when ‘history from below’ has become a watchword in both Marxist and non-Marxist circles, and has produced major gains in our understanding of the past, it is nevertheless necessary to recall one of the basic axioms of historical materialism: that secular struggle between classes is ultimately resolved at the political—not at the economic or cultural—level of society. In other words, it is the construction and destruction of States which seal the basic shifts in the relations of production, so long as classes subsist. A ‘history from above’—of the intricate machinery of class domination—is thus no less essential than a ‘history from below’: indeed, without it the latter in the end becomes one-sided (if the better side). Marx in his maturity wrote: ‘Freedom consists in the conversion of the State from an organ superimposed on society into one completely subordinated to it, and today too, the forms of the State are more free or less free to the extent that they restrict the “freedom” of the State.’ The abolition of the State altogether remains, a century later, one of the goals of revolutionary socialism. But the supreme significance accorded to its final disappearance, testifies to all the weight of its prior presence in history. Absolutism, the first international State system in the modern world, has by no means yet exhausted its secrets or lessons for us. The aim of this work is to contribute towards a discussion of some of them. Its errors, misconceptions, oversights, solecisms, illusions can safely be left to the criticism of a collective debate.
I. Western Europe
The Absolutist State in the West

The long crisis of European economy and society during the 14th and 15th centuries marked the difficulties and limits of the feudal mode of production in the late mediaeval period. What was the final political outcome of the continental convulsions of this epoch? In the course of the 16th century, the Absolutist State emerged in the West. The centralized monarchies of France, England and Spain represented a decisive rupture with the pyramidal, parcellized sovereignty of the mediaeval social formations, with their estates and liege-systems.

Controversy over the historical nature of these monarchies has persisted ever since Engels, in a famous dictum, pronounced them to be the product of a class equilibrium between the old feudal nobility and the new urban bourgeoisie: ‘By way of exception, however, periods occur where the warring classes balance each other (Gleichgewicht halten) so nearly that the State power, as ostensible mediator, acquires, for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both. Such was the absolute monarchy of the 17th and 18th centuries, which held the balance (gegen einander balanciert) between the nobility and the class of burghers.’

The multiple qualifications of this passage indicate a certain conceptual unease on the part of Engels. But a careful examination of successive formulations by both Marx and Engels reveals that a similar conception of Absolutism was, in fact, a comparatively consistent theme in their work. Engels repeated the same basic thesis elsewhere in more categorical form, remarking that ‘the basic condition of

1. See the discussion in Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism, London 1974, which precedes this study.
the old absolute monarchy’ was ‘an equilibrium (Gleichgewicht) between the landowning aristocracy and the bourgeoisie’. Indeed, the classification of Absolutism as a political balancing-mechanism between nobility and bourgeoisie frequently glides towards an implicit or explicit designation of it as fundamentally a type of bourgeois State as such. This slippage is most evident within the Communist Manifesto itself, where the political role of the bourgeoisie ‘in the period of manufactures proper’ is characterized in a single breath as ‘serving either the semi-feudal or the absolute monarchy as a counterpoise (Gegengewicht) against the nobility, and, in fact, corner-stone (Hauptgrundlage) of the great monarchies in general’. The suggestive transition from ‘counter-poise’ to ‘corner-stone’ is echoed in other texts. Engels could refer to the epoch of Absolutism as the age in which ‘the feudal nobility were made to understand that the period of their social and political domination had come to an end’. Marx, for his part, repeatedly asserted that the administrative structures of the new Absolutist States were a peculiarly bourgeois instrument. ‘Under the absolute monarchy,’ he wrote, ‘bureaucracy was only the means of preparing the class rule of the bourgeoisie.’ Elsewhere Marx declared that: ‘The centralised State power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy and judicature – organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labour – originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle-class society as a mighty weapon in its struggles against feudalism.’

These reflections on Absolutism were all more or less casual and allusive: no direct theorization of the new centralized monarchies which emerged in Renaissance Europe was ever made by either of the founders of historical materialism. Their exact weight was left to the judgement of later generations. Marxist historians, in fact, have debated the problem of the social nature of Absolutism down to this day. A correct solution of it is, indeed, vital for any understanding of the passage from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, and of the political systems which distinguished it. The Absolute monarchies introduced standing armies, a permanent bureaucracy, national taxation, a codified law, and the beginnings of a unified market. All these characteristics appear to be preeminently capitalist. Since they coincide with the disappearance of serfdom, a core institution of the original feudal mode of production in Europe, the descriptions of Absolutism by Marx and Engels as a State system representing either an equilibrium between bourgeoisie and nobility, or even an outright dominance of capital itself, have often seemed plausible. A more careful study of the structures of the Absolutist State in the West, however, inevitably infirms such judgements. For the end of serfdom did not thereby mean the disappearance of feudal relations from the countryside. Identification of the two is a common error. Yet it is evident that private extra-economic coercion, personal dependence, and combination of the immediate producer with the instruments of production, did not necessarily vanish when the rural surplus ceased to be extracted in the form of labour or deliveries in kind, and became rent in money: so long as aristocratic agrarian property blocked a free market in land and factual mobility of manpower – in other words, as long as labour was not separated from the social conditions of its existence to become ‘labour-power’ – rural relations of production remained feudal. In his properly theoretical analysis of ground-rent, Marx himself made this clear in Capital: ‘The transformation of labour rent into rent in kind changes nothing fundamental in the nature of ground-rent. . . . By money-rent we here mean the ground-rent which arises from a mere change in the form of rent in kind, just as the latter in turn is but a modification of labour rent. . . . The basis of this type of rent, although approaching its dissolution, remains the same as that of rent in kind, which constitutes its point of departure. The direct producer as before is still possessor of the land, either through inheritance or some other traditional right, and must perform for his lord, as owner of his most essential condition of production, excess corvée-labour, that is, unpaid labour for which no equivalent is returned, in the form of a surplus-product transformed into money.’ The lords who remained the proprietors of the fundamental

6. The first formulation is from The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in Selected Works, p. 171; the second is from The Civil War in France, in Selected Works, p. 289.
7. Capital, III, pp. 774, 777. Debb’s exposition of this fundamental question in
means of production in any pre-industrial society were, of course, the noble landowners. Throughout the early modern epoch, the dominant class — economically and politically — was thus the same as in the mediaeval epoch itself: the feudal aristocracy. This nobility underwent profound metamorphoses in the centuries after the close of the Middle Ages; but from the beginning to the end of the history of Absolutism, it was never dislodged from its command of political power.

The changes in the forms of feudal exploitation which supervened at the end of the mediaeval epoch were, of course, far from insignificant. Indeed, it was precisely these changes which altered the forms of the State. Absolutism was essentially just this: a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination, designed to clamp the peasant masses back into their traditional social position — despite and against the gains they had won by the widespread commutation of dues. In other words, the Absolutist State was never an arbiter between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, still less an instrument of the nascent bourgeoisie against the aristocracy: it was the new political carapace of a threatened nobility. The consensus of a generation of Marxist historians, from England and Russia, was summed up by Hill twenty years ago: "The absolute monarchy was a different form of feudal monarchy from the feudal-estates monarchy which preceded it; but the ruling class remained the same, just as a republic, a constitutional monarchy and a fascist dictatorship can all be forms of the rule of the bourgeoisie." The new form of noble power was in its turn determined by the spread of commodity production and exchange, in the transitional social formations of the early modern epoch. Althusser has in this sense correctly specified its character: "The political regime of the absolute monarchy his 'Reply' to Sweezy in the famous debate of the fifties on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism is trenchant and lucid: Science and Society, XIV, No. 2, Spring 1950, pp. 157–67, esp. 163–4. The theoretical importance of the problem is evident. In the case of a country like Sweden, for example, standard historical accounts still claim that 'it had no feudalism' because there was an absence of serfdom proper. In fact, of course, feudal relations predominated in the Swedish countryside throughout the late mediaeval era.

8. Christopher Hill, 'Comment' (on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism), Science and Society, XVII, No. 4, Fall 1953, p. 351. The terms of this judgement should be treated with care. The general and epochal character of Absolutism renders any formal comparison of it with the local, exceptionalist régimes of fascism inappropriate, of course.

is only the new political form needed for the maintenance of feudal domination and exploitation in the period of development of a commodity economy." But the dimensions of the historical transformation involved in the advent of Absolutism must in no way be minimized. It is essential, on the contrary, to grasp the full logic and import of the momentous change in the structure of the aristocratic State, and of feudal property, that produced the new phenomenon of Absolutism.

Feudalism as a mode of production was originally defined by an organic unity of economy and polity, paradoxically distributed in a chain of parcellized sovereignties throughout the social formation. The institution of serfdom as a mechanism of surplus extraction fused economic exploitation and politico-legal coercion at the molecular level of the village. The lord in his turn typically owed liege-loyalty and knight-service to a seigneurial overlord, who claimed the land as his ultimate domain. With the generalized commutation of dues into money rents, the cellular unity of political and economic oppression of the peasantry was gravely weakened, and threatened to become dissociated (the end of this road was 'free labour' and the 'wage contract'). The class power of the feudal lords was thus directly at stake with the gradual disappearance of serfdom. The result was a displacement of politico-legal coercion upwards towards a centralized, militarized summit — the Absolutist State. Diluted at village level, it became concentrated at 'national' level. The result was a reinforced apparatus of royal power, whose permanent political function was the repression of the peasant and plebeian masses at the foot of the social hierarchy. This new State machine, however, was also by its nature vested with a
coercive force capable of breaking or disciplining individuals and groups within the nobility itself. The arrival of Absolutism was thus, as we shall see, never a smooth evolutionary process for the dominant class itself: it was marked by extremely sharp ruptures and conflicts within the feudal aristocracy to whose collective interests it ultimately ministered. At the same time, the objective complement of the political concentration of power at the height of the social order, in a centralized monarchy, was the economic consolidation of the units of feudal property beneath it. With the growth of commodity relations, the dissolution of the primary nexus of economic exploitation and politico-legal coercion led not only to an increasing projection of the latter onto the royal apex of the social system, but also to a compensatory strengthening of the titles of property guaranteeing the former. In other words, with the reorganization of the feudal polity as a whole, and the dilution of the original fief system, landownership tended to become progressively less 'conditional' as sovereignty became correspondingly more 'absolute'. The weakening of the mediaeval conceptions of vassalage worked in both directions: while it conferred new and extraordinary powers on the monarchy, it at the same time emancipated from traditional restraints the estates of the nobility. Agrarian property in the new epoch was silently alodialized (to use a term which was itself to become anachronistic in an altered juridical climate). Individual members of the aristocratic class, who steadily lost political rights of representation in the new epoch, registered economic gains in ownership as the obverse of the same historical process. The final effect of this general redissipation of the social power of the nobility was the State machine and juridical order of Absolutism, whose coordination was to increase the efficacy of aristocratic rule in pinning down a non-servile peasantry into new forms of dependence and exploitation. The royal States of the Renaissance were first and foremost modernized instruments for the maintenance of noble domination over the rural masses.

Simultaneously, however, the aristocracy had to adjust to a second antagonist: the mercantile bourgeoisie which had developed in the mediaeval towns. It has been seen that it was precisely the intercalation of this third presence that prevented the Western nobility from settling its accounts with the peasantry in Eastern fashion, by smashing its resistance and fettering it to the manor. The mediaeval town had been able to develop because the hierarchical dispersal of sovereignties in the feudal mode of production for the first time freed urban economies from direct domination by a rural ruling class. The towns in this sense were never exogenous to feudalism in the West, as we have seen: in fact, the very condition of their existence was the unique 'detotalization' of sovereignty within the politico-economic order of feudalism. Hence the resilience of the towns in the West throughout the worst crisis of the 14th century, which temporarily bankrupted so many of the patrician families of the Mediterranean cities. The Bardi and Peruzzi collapsed in Florence, Siena and Barcelona declined; but Augsburg, Geneva or Valencia were just starting their ascent. Important urban industries such as iron, paper and textiles grew throughout the feudal depression. From a distance, this economic and social vitality acted as a constant, objective interference in the class struggle on the land, and blocked any regressive solution to it by the nobles. Indeed, it is significant that the years from 1450 to 1500, which saw the emergence of the first prodromes of unified Absolute Monarchies in the West, were

10. The celebrated debate between Sweezy and Dobb, with contributions by Takahashi, Hilton and Hill, in Science and Society 1950–3, remains to this day the only systematic Marxist treatment of the central problems of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In one important respect, however, it resolved on a false issue. Sweezy argued (following Pirenne) that the 'prime mover' in the transition was an 'external' agent of dissolution – the urban enclaves which destroyed the feudal agrarian economy by their expansion of commodity exchange in the towns. Dobb replied that the impetus to the transition must be located within the contradictions of the agrarian economy itself, which generated social differentiation of the peasantry and the rise of the small producer. In a subsequent essay on the subject, Vilar explicitly formulated the problem of the transition as that of defining the correct combination of 'endogenous' agrarian and 'exogenous' urban-commercial changes, while himself emphasizing the importance of the new Atlantic trading economy in the 16th century: 'Problems in the Formation of Capitalism', Past and Present, No. 10, November 1956, pp. 33–4. In an important recent study, 'The Relation between Town and Country in the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism' (unpublished), John Merrington has effectively resolved this antinomy, by demonstrating the basic truth that European feudalism – far from constituting an exclusively agrarian economy – was the first mode of production in history to accord an autonomous structural place to urban production and exchange. The growth of towns was in this sense as 'internal' a development as the dissolution of the manor, in Western European feudalism.
also those in which the long crisis of the feudal economy was surmounted, by a recombination of production factors in which for the first time specifically urban technological advances played the leading role. The cluster of inventions which coincides with the hinge between the 'mediaeval' and the 'modern' epochs is too well-known to need discussion here. The discovery of the seiger process for separating silver from copper ore restarted the mines of Central Europe, and the flow of metals into the international economy; monetary production from Central Europe quintupled between 1460 and 1530. The development of bronze-cast cannon made gunpower for the first time the decisive arm of warfare, rendering baronial castellary defences anachronistic. The invention of movable type brought the advent of printing. The construction of the three-masted, stern-ruddered galleon made the oceans navigable for conquests overseas. All these technical breakthroughs, which laid the foundations of the European Renaissance, were concentrated in the latter half of the 15th century; and it was then that the secular agrarian depression finally lifted, towards 1470 in England and France.

This was precisely the epoch in which a sudden, concurrent revival of political authority and unity occurred in country after country. From the pit of extreme feudal chaos and turmoil of the Wars of the Roses, the Hundred Years War and the second Castilian Civil War, the first 'new' monarchies straightened up virtually together, during the reigns of Louis XI in France, Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain, Henry VII in England and Maximilian in Austria. Thus when the Absolutist States were constituted in the West, their structure was fundamentally determined by the feudal regroupment against the peasantry, after the dissolution of serfdom; but it was secondarily over-determined by the rise of an urban bourgeoisie which after a series of technical and commercial advances was now developing into pre-industrial manufactures on a considerable scale. It was this secondary impact of the urban bourgeoisie on the forms of the Absolutist State which Marx and Engels sought to capture with the misleading notions of 'counter-poise' or 'cornerstone'. Engels, in fact, expressed the real relationship of forces accurately enough on more than one occasion: discussing the new maritime discoveries and manufacturing industries of the Renaissance, he wrote that 'this mighty revolution in the conditions of the economic life of society was, however, not followed by any immediate corresponding change in its political structure. The political order remained feudal, while society became more and more bourgeois.'12 The threat of peasant unrest, unspokenly constitutive of the Absolutist State, was thus always conjoined with the pressure of mercantile or manufacturing

12. Anti-Dühring, Moscow 1947, p. 126: see also pp. 196-7, where correct and incorrect formulae are mixed. These pages are cited by Hill in his 'Comment' to exculpate Engels from the errors of the notion of 'equilibrium'. In general, it is possible to find passages in both Marx and Engels where Absolutism is more adequately grasped than in the texts discussed earlier. (For example, in the Communist Manifesto itself, there is a straightforward reference to 'feudal Absolutism'; Selected Works, p. 56; see also Marx's article Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritizierende Moral of 1847, in Werke, Bd 4, pp. 347, 352-3.) It would be surprising if it were otherwise, given that the logical consequence of baptizing the Absolutist States as bourgeois or semi-bourgeois would be to deny the nature and reality of the bourgeois revolutions of Western Europe themselves. But there is no doubt that, amidst a recurrent confusion, the main drift of their comments was in the direction of the 'counter-poise' conception, with its concomitant slide towards that of the 'corner-stone'. There is no need to hide this fact. The immense intellectual and political respect we owe to Marx and Engels is incompatible with any piety towards them. Their mistakes—often more revealing than the truths of others—should not be eluded, but located and surpassed. A further warning is necessary here. It has long been fashionable to depreciate the relative contribution of Engels to the creation of historical materialism. For those who are still inclined to accept this received notion, it is necessary to say calmly and scandalously: Engels's historical judgements are nearly always superior to those of Marx. He possessed a deeper knowledge of European history, and had a surer grasp of its successive and salient structures. There is nothing in the whole of Engels's oeuvre to compare with the illusions and prejudices of which Marx was on occasion capable in this field, such as the fantasмагoric Secret Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century. (The supremacy of Marx's overall contribution to the general theory of historical materialism scarcely needs to be reiterated.) Engels's stature in his historical writings is precisely what makes it worth drawing attention to the specific errors in them.
capital within the Western economies as a whole, in moulding the contours of aristocratic class power in the new age. The peculiar form of the Absolutist State in the West derives from this double determination.

The dual forces which produced the new monarchies of Renaissance Europe found a single juridical condensation. The revival of Roman law, one of the great cultural movements of the age, ambiguously corresponded to the needs of both social classes whose unequal power and rank shaped the structures of the Absolutist State in the West. Renewed knowledge of Roman jurisprudence dated back, in itself, to the High Middle Ages. The dense overgrowth of customary law had never completely suppressed the memory and practice of Roman civil law in the peninsula where its tradition was longest, Italy. It was in Bologna that Inerius, the ‘lamp of the law’, had started the systematic study of Justinian’s codifications once again, in the early 12th century. The school of Glossators founded by him methodically reconstituted and classified the legacy of the Roman jurists over the next hundred years. They were followed, in the 14th and 15th centuries, by ‘Commentators’ more concerned with contemporary application of Roman legal norms, than with scholarly analysis of their theoretical principles; and in the process of adapting Roman law to the drastically altered conditions of the time, they both corrupted its pristine form and cleansed it of its particularist contents. 13 The very infidelity of their transpositions of Latin jurisprudence paradoxically ‘universalized’ it, by removing the large portions of Roman civil law that were strictly related to the historical conditions of Antiquity (for example, of course, its comprehensive treatment of slavery). 14 Beyond Italy, Roman legal concepts gradually began to spread outwards from the original re-

discovery of the 12th century onwards. By the end of the Middle Ages, no major country in Western Europe was unaffected by this process. But the decisive ‘reception’ of Roman law – its general juridical triumph – occurred in the age of the Renaissance, concurrently with that of Absolutism. The historical reasons for its deep impact were two-fold, and reflected the contradictory nature of the original Roman legacy itself.

Economically, the recovery and introduction of classical civil law was fundamentally propitious to the growth of free capital in town and country. For the great distinguishing mark of Roman civil law had been its conception of absolute and unconditional private property. The classical conception of Quiritary ownership had sunk virtually out of sight in the obscured depths of early feudalism. For the feudal mode of production, as we have seen, was precisely defined by juridical principles of ‘scalar’ or conditional property, the complement of its parcellized sovereignty. This property statute was well adapted to the overwhelmingly natural economy which emerged in the Dark Ages; although it was never wholly adequate for the urban sector which developed in the mediaeval economy. The reemergence of Roman law during the Middle Ages thus had already led to juristic efforts to ‘harden’ and delimit notions of ownership, inspired by the classical precepts now available. One such attempt was the invention in the late 12th century of the distinction between *dominium directum* and *dominium utilit*, to account for the existence of a vassal hierarchy and hence multiplicity of rights over the same land. 15 Another was the characteristic mediaeval notion of ‘seisin’, an intermediate conception between Latin ‘property’ and ‘possession’, which guaranteed a protected ownership against casual appropriations and conflicting claims, while retaining the feudal principle of multiple titles to the same object: the right of ‘seisin’ was neither exclusive nor perpetual. 16 The full reappearance of the idea of absolute private property in land was a


14. ‘Now when this law was transposed into entirely strange fact situations, unknown in Antiquity, the task of “construing” the situation in a logically impeccable way became almost the exclusive task. In this way that conception of law which still prevails today and which sees in law a logically consistent and gapless complex of “norms” waiting to be “applied” became the decisive conception for legal thought.’ Weber, *Economy and Society*, II, p. 855.

15. See the discussion in J.-P. Lévy, *Histoire de la Propriété*, Paris 1972, pp. 44–6. Another ironic side-effect of the efforts towards a new juridical clarity inspired by mediaeval researches into Roman codes was, of course, the emergence of the definition of serfs as *glebae adscripti*.

product of the early modern epoch. For it was not until commodity production and exchange had reached overall levels—in both agriculture and manufactures—equal to or above those of Antiquity, that the juridical concepts created to codify them could come into their own once again. The maxim of *superficies solo cedit*—single and unconditional ownership of land—now for the second time became an operative principle in agrarian property (if by no means yet a dominant one), precisely because of the spread of commodity relations in the countryside that was to define the long transition from feudalism to capitalism in the West. In the towns themselves, a relatively developed commercial law had, of course, spontaneously developed during the Middle Ages. Within the urban economy, commodity exchange had already achieved considerable dynamism in the mediaeval epoch, as we have seen, and in certain important respects its forms of legal expression were more advanced than Roman precedents themselves: for example, proto-company law and marine law. But there was no uniform framework of legal theory or procedure here either. The superiority of Roman law for mercantile practice in the cities thus lay not only in its clear-cut notions of absolute property, but also in its traditions of equity, its rational canons of evidence, and its emphasis of a professional judiciary—advantages which customary courts normally failed to provide.\(^\text{17}\)

The reception of Roman law in Renaissance Europe was thus a sign of the spread of capitalist relations in towns and country: *economically*, it answered to vital interests of the commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie. In Germany, the country where the impact of Roman law was most dramatic, abruptly superseding local courts in the homeland of Teutonic customary law in the late 15th and 16th centuries, the initial impetus for its adoption occurred in the Southern and Western cities, and came from below through the pressure of urban litigants for a clear and professional juridical law.\(^\text{18}\) It was soon, however, taken up by the German princes and applied on an even more imposing scale in their territories, to serve very different ends.

For *politically*, the revival of Roman law corresponded to the constitutional exigencies of the reorganized feudal States of the epoch. In fact, there is no doubt that on a European scale, the primary determinant of the adoption of Roman jurisprudence lay in the drive of royal governments for increased central powers. For the Roman legal system, it will be remembered, comprised two distinct—and apparently contrary—sectors: civil law regulating economic transactions between citizens, and public law governing political relations between the State and its subjects. The former was *jus*, the latter *lex*. The juridically unconditional character of private property consecrated by the one found its contradictory counterpart in the formally absolute nature of the imperial sovereignty exercised by the other, at least from the Dominate onwards. It was the theoretical principles of this political *imperium* which exercised a profound influence and attraction on the new monarchies of the Renaissance. If the rebirth of notions of Quiritary ownership both translated and promoted the general growth of commodity exchange in the transitional economies of the epoch, the revival of authoritarian prerogatives of the Dominate expressed and consolidated the concentration of aristocratic class power in a centralized State apparatus that was the noble reaction to it. The double social movement engraved in the structures of Western Absolutism thus found its juridical concordance in the reintroduction of Roman law. Ulpian’s famous maxim—*quod principi placuit legis habet vicem*, ‘the ruler’s will has force of law’—became a constitutional ideal of Renaissance monarchies all over the West.\(^\text{19}\)

The complementary idea that

\(^{17}\) The relation of prior mediaeval law to Roman law in the cities still needs considerable investigation. The comparative advance of legal rules governing commenda-type operations and maritime trade in the Middle Ages is not surprising: the Roman world, as we have seen lacked entrepreneurial companies and comprised a unitary Mediterranean. Hence there was no reason for it to develop either. On the other hand, the early study of Roman law in the Italian cities suggests that what appeared by the time of the Renaissance as ‘mediaeval’ contract practice may well have often been originally informed by legal precepts derived from Antiquity. Vinogradoff had no doubt that Roman contract law exercised a direct influence on the business codes of urban burghers in the Middle Ages: *Roman Law in Mediaeval Europe*, pp. 79–80, 131. Urban real estate, with its ‘burgage tenures’, was always, of course, closer to Roman norms than rural property in the Middle Ages.


\(^{19}\) *An* ideal, but by no means the only one: we shall see that the complex practice of Absolutism was always very far from corresponding to Ulpian’s maxim.
kings and princes were themselves *legibus solutus*, or freed from anterior legal constraints, provided the juristic protocols for overriding mediaeval privileges, ignoring traditional rights, and subordinating private franchises.

In other words, the enhancement of private property from below was matched by the increase of public authority from above, embodied in the discretionary power of the royal ruler. The Absolutist States in the West based their novel aims on classical precedents: Roman law was the most powerful intellectual weapon available for their typical programme of territorial integration and administrative centralism. It was no accident, in fact, that the one mediaeval monarchy which had achieved complete emancipation from any representative or corporate restraints was the Papacy, which had been the first political system of feudal Europe to utilize Roman jurisprudence wholesale, with the codification of canon law in the 12th and 13th centuries. The Pope’s assertion of a *plenitudi potestatis* within the Church set the precedent for the later pretensions of secular princes, often realized precisely against its religious exorbitance. Moreover, just as it was the canon lawyers within the Papacy who had essentially built and operated its far-reaching administrative controls over the Church, so it was semi-professional bureaucrats trained in Roman law who were to provide the key executive servants of the new royal States. The Absolutist monarchies of the West characteristically relied on a skilled stratum of legislators to staff their administrative machines: the *letrados* in Spain, the *maîtres de requêtes* in France, the *doctores* in Germany. Imbued with Roman doctrines of princely decretal authority and Roman conceptions of unitary legal norms, these lawyer-bureaucrats were the zealous enforcers of royal centralism in the first critical century of Absolutist State-construction. It was the imprint of this international corps of legislators, more than any force, that Romanized the juridical systems of Western Europe in the Renaissance. For the transformation of law inevitably reflected the distribution of power between the propertied classes of the epoch: Absolutism, as the reorganized State apparatus of noble domination, was the central architect of the reception of Roman law in Europe. Even where, as in Germany, autonomous towns initiated the movement, it was princes who captured and drove it home; and where, as in England, royal power failed to impose civil law, it did not take root in the urban milieu. In the overdetermined process of the Roman revival, it was the political pressure of the dynastic State which had primacy: the demands of monarchical ‘clarity’ dominated those of mercantile ‘certainty’. The growth in formal rationality, still extremely imperfect and incomplete, of the legal systems of early modern Europe was preponderantly the work of aristocratic Absolutism.

The superior effect of juridical modernization was thus to reinforce the rule of the traditional feudal class. The apparent paradox of this phenomenon was reflected in the whole structure of the Absolutist monarchies themselves – exotic, hybrid compositions whose surface ‘modernity’ again and again betrays a subterranean archaism. This can be seen very clearly from a survey of the institutional innovations which heralded and typified its arrival: army, bureaucracy, taxation, trade, diplomacy. These can be briefly considered in order. It has often been remarked that the Absolutist State pioneered the professional army, which with the military revolution introduced in the late 16th and 17th centuries by Maurice of Orange, Gustavus Adolphus and Wallenstein (infantry drill and line by the Dutchman; cavalry salvo and platoon system by the Swede; unitary vertical command by the Czech) grew immensely in size. Philip II’s armies numbered some

20. Roman law was never naturalized in England, largely because of the early centralization of the Anglo-Norman State, whose administrative unity rendered the English monarchy comparatively indifferent to the advantages of civil law during its mediaeval diffusion: see the pertinent comments of N. Cantor, *Mediaeval History*, London 1953, pp. 345–9. In the early modern epoch, the Tudor and Stuart dynasties did introduce new juridical institutions of a civil-law type (Star Chamber, Admiralty, or Chancery), but were ultimately unable to prevail over common law: after sharp conflicts between the two in the early 17th century, the English Revolution of 1640 sealed the victory of the latter. For some reflections on this process, see W. Holdsworth, *A History of English Law*, IV, London 1924, pp. 284–5.

21. These were the two terms used by Weber to denote the respective interests of the two forces working for Romanization: ‘While thus the bourgeois classes seek after “certainty” in the administration of justice, officialdom is generally interested in “clarity” and “orderliness” of the law.’ See his excellent discussion, *Economy and Society*, II, pp. 847–8.

60,000 or so, while a hundred years later Louis XIV’s ran to 300,000. Yet both the form and the function of these troops diverged immensely from that which later became characteristic of the modern bourgeois State. They were not normally a national conscript force, but a mixed mass in which foreign mercenaries played a constant and central role. These mercenaries were typically recruited from areas outside the perimeter of the new centralized monarchies, often mountain regions which specialized in providing them: the Swiss were the Gurkhas of early modern Europe. French, Dutch, Spanish, Austrian or English armies included Swabians, Albanians, Swiss, Irish, Wallachians, Turks, Hungarians or Italians. The most obvious social reason for the mercenary phenomenon was, of course, the natural refusal of the noble class to arm its own peasants wholesale. ‘It is virtually impossible to train all the subjects of a commonwealth in the arts of war, and at the same time keep them obedient to the laws and magistrates’, confided Jean Bodin. ‘This was perhaps the principal reason why Francis I disbanded in 1574 the seven regiments, each of 6,000 infantry, which he had created in this kingdom.’ Conversely, mercenary troops ignorant of the very language of the local population, could be relied on to stamp out social rebellion. German Landsknechten dealt with the East Anglian peasant risings of 1549 in England, while Italian arquebusiers ensured the liquidation of the rural revolt in the West country; Swiss Guards helped to repress the Boulonnais and Camisard guerrillas of 1662 and 1702 in France. The key importance of mercenaries, already increasingly visible in the later Middle Ages, from Wales to Poland, was not merely an interim expedient of Absolutism at the dawn of its existence: it marked it down to its very demise in the West. In the late 18th century, even after the introduction of conscription into the main European countries, up to two-thirds of a given ‘national’ army could be composed of hired foreign soldiers. The example of Prussian Absolutism, both bidding and kidnapping manpower beyond its

border, using auction and emprission, is a reminder that there was not necessarily a clear distinction between the two.

At the same time, however, the function of these vast new agglomerations of soldiers was also visibly distinct from that of later capitalist armies. There has hitherto been no Marxist theory of the variant social functions of war in different modes of production. This is not the place to explore the subject. Yet it can be argued that war was possibly the most rational and rapid single mode of expansion of surplus extraction available for any given ruling class under feudalism. Agricultural productivity was, as we have seen, by no means stagnant during the Middle Ages: nor was the volume of trade. But both grew very slowly for the lords, compared with the sudden and massive ‘yields’ afforded by territorial conquest, of which the Norman invasions of England or Sicily, the Angevin seizure of Naples or the Castilian conquest of Andalusia were only the most spectacular examples. It was thus logical that the social definition of the feudal ruling class was military. The economic rationality of war in such a social formation is a specific one: it is a maximization of wealth whose role cannot be compared to that which it plays in the developed forms of the successor mode of production, dominated by the basic rhythm of the accumulation of capital, and the ‘restless and universal change’ (Marx) of the economic foundations of every social formation. The nobility was a landowning class whose profession was war: its social vocation was not an external accretion but an intrinsic function of its economic position. The normal medium of inter-capitalist competition is economic, and its structure is typically additive: rival parties may both expand and prosper — although unequally — throughout a single confrontation, because the production of manufactured commodities is inherently unlimited. The typical medium of inter-feudal rivalry, by contrast, was military and its structure was always potentially the zero-sum conflict of the battlefield, by which fixed quantities of ground were won or lost. For land is a natural monopoly: it cannot be indefinitely extended, only redivided. The categorial object of noble rule was territory, regardless of the community inhabiting it. Land as such, not language, defined the natural perimeters of its power. The feudal ruling class was thus essentially motile, in a way that a capitalist ruling class later could never be. For capital itself is par excellence internationally mobile.

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thereby permitting its holders to be nationally fixed; land is nationally immobile, and nobles had to travel to take possession of it. A given barony or duchy could thus typically transfer its residence from one end of the continent to the other without dislocation. Angevin lineages could rule indifferentely in Hungary, England or Naples; Norman in Antioch, Sicily or England; Burgundian in Portugal or Zeeland; Luxemburger in the Rhineland or Bohemia; Flemish in Artois or Byzantium; Habsburg in Austria, the Netherlands or Spain. No common tongue had to be shared between lords and peasants in these varied lands. For public territories formed a continuum with private estates, and their classical means of acquisition was force, invariably decked out in claims of religious or genealogical legitimacy. Warfare was not the ‘sport’ of princes, it was their fate; beyond the finite diversity of individual inclinations and characters, it beckoned them inexorably as a social necessity of their estate. For Machiavelli, as he surveyed the Europe of the early 16th century, the final rule of their being was a verity as obvious and unimpeachable as the sky above them: ‘A prince should thus have no other thought or aim than war, nor acquire mastery in anything except war, its organization and discipline; for war is the only art expected of a ruler.’

The Absolutist States reflect this archaic rationality in their inmost structure. They were machines built overwhelmingly for the battlefield. It is significant that the first regular national tax to be imposed in France, the taille royale, was levied to finance the first regular military units in Europe—the compagnies d’ordonnance of the mid-15th century, of which the premier unit was composed of Scots soldiers of fortune. By the mid-16th century, 80 per cent of Spanish State revenues went on military expenditure: Vicens Vives could write that ‘the impulse towards the modern type of administrative monarchy began in Western Europe with the great naval operations of Charles V against the Turks in the Western Mediterranean from 1535 onwards.’ By the mid-17th century, the annual outlays of continental principalities from Sweden to Piedmont were everywhere predominantly and monotonously devoted to the preparation or conduct of war, now immensely more costly than in the Renaissance. Another century later, on the peaceful eve of 1789, according to Necker two-thirds of French state expenditure were still allocated to the military establishment. It is manifest that this morphology of the State does not correspond to a capitalist rationality; it represents a swollen memory of the mediaeval functions of war. Nor were the grandiose military apparatuses of the late feudal state left idle. The virtual permanence of international armed conflict is one of the hallmarks of the whole climate of Absolutism. Peace was a meteorological exception in the centuries of its dominance in the West. It has been calculated that in the entire 16th century, there were only 25 years without large-scale military operations in Europe; while in the 17th century, only 7 years passed without major wars between states. Such calendars are foreign to capital, although as we shall see, it eventually contributed to them.

The characteristic civilian bureaucracy and tax system of the Absolutist State was no less paradoxical. It appears to represent a transition to Weber’s rational legal administration, in contrast to the jungle of particularist dependencies of the high Middle Ages. Yet at the same time, the Renaissance bureaucracy was treated as saleable property to private individuals: a central confusion of two orders that the bourgeois State has everywhere kept distinct. Thus the prevalent mode of integration of the feudal nobility into the Absolutist State in the West took the form of acquisition of ‘offices’. He who privately purchased a position in the public apparatus of the State could then recoup himself by licensed privileges and corruption (fee-system), in a kind of monetarized caricature of investiture in a fief. Indeed, the Marqués del Vasto, Spanish governor of Milan in 1544, could request the Italian office-holders of that city to pledge their fortunes to Charles V in his hour of need after the defeat of Ceresole, on an exact

30. The best overview of this international phenomenon is K. W. Swart, Sale of Offices in the Seventeenth Century, The Hague 1949; the most comprehensive national study is Roland Mousnier, La Vénalité des Offices sous Henri IV et Louis XIII, Rouen (n.d.).
model of feudal traditions. Such office-holders, who proliferated in France, Italy, Spain, Britain or Holland, could hope to make up to 300–400 per cent profit, and perhaps very much more, on their purchase. The system was born in the 16th century and became a central financial support of the Absolutist States during the 17th century. Its grossly parasitic character is evident: in extreme situations (France during the 1630’s is an example), it could even cost a royal budget something like as much in disbursements (via tax-farms and exemptions) as it supplied in remunerations. The growth of the sale of offices was, of course, one of the most striking by-products of the increased monetarization of the early modern economies and of the relative ascent of the mercantile and manufacturing bourgeoisie within them. Yet by the same token, the very integration of the latter into the State apparatus by the private purchase and inheritance of public positions and honours, marked its subordinate assimilation into a feudal polity in which the nobility always necessarily constituted the summit of the social hierarchy. The officiers of the French parlements who played with municipal republicanism and sponsored the Mazarinades in the 1650’s became the most die-hard rampart of noble reaction in the 1780’s. Absolutist bureaucracy both registered the rise of mercantile capital, and arrested it.

If the sale of offices was an indirect means of raising revenue from the nobility and the mercantile bourgeoisie on terms profitable to them, the Absolutist State also, and above all, of course, taxed the poor. The economic transition from labour dues to money rents in the West was accompanied by the emergence of royal taxes levied for war, which in the long feudal crisis at the end of the Middle Ages had already been one of the main provocations for the desperate peasant upheavals of the time. ‘A chain of peasant uprisings clearly directed against taxation exploded all over Europe. . . . There was little to choose between foragers and friendly or enemy armies: one took as much as the other. Then the tax-collectors appeared and swept up all they could find. Lastly the lords recovered from their men the amount of the “aid” they themselves were obliged to pay their sovereign. There is no doubt that

of all the ills which afflicted them, the peasants suffered more painfully
and less patiently from the burdens of war and remote taxation.’

Virtually everywhere, the overwhelming weight of taxation – taille
and gabelle in France, or servicios in Spain – fell on the poor. There was
no conception of the juridical ‘citizen’ subject to fiscality by the very
fact of belonging to the nation. The seigneurial class was in practice
everywhere effectively exempt from direct taxation. Porshnev has thus
aptly dubbed the new taxes imposed by the Absolutist States ‘centralized
feudal rent’ as opposed to the seigneurial dues which formed a
‘local feudal rent’; this doubled system of exactions led to a tor-
mented epidemic of rebellions by the poor in 17th century France, in
which provincial nobles often led their own peasants against the tax-
collectors so as the better to be able to extort their local dues from
them. Fiscal officials had to be guarded by units of fusiliers to be able
to perform their duties in the countryside: re-embodiments in a modernized
guise of the immediate unity of politico-legal coercion with economic
exploitation constitutive of the feudal mode of production as such.

The economic functions of Absolutism were not exhausted, how-
ever, by its tax and office system. Mercantilism was the ruling doctrine
of the epoch, and it presents the same ambiguity as the bureaucracy
which was intended to enforce it, with the same underlying reversion to
an earlier prototype. For mercantilism undoubtedly demanded the sup-
pression of particularistic barriers to trade within the national realm, and
strove to create a unified domestic market for commodity production.
Aiming to increase the power of the State relative to that of all other
States, it encouraged exports of goods, while banning exports of bullion
or coins, in the belief that there was a fixed quantity of commerce
and wealth in the world. In Hecksher’s famous phrase: ‘The State
was both the subject and the object of mercantilist economic policy.’

functionaries refused the demand of their governor: but their homologues
elsewhere might not have been so resolute.

32. Duby, Rural Economy and Country Life in the Mediaeval West, p. 333.
33. B. F. Porshnev, Les Soulèvements Populaires en France de 1623 à 1648,
34. Hecksher argued that the object of mercantilism was to increase the ‘power
of the State’ rather than the ‘wealth of nations’, and that this meant a subordi-
nation, in Bacon’s words, of ‘considerations of plenty’ to ‘considerations of power’
(Bacon praised Henry VII for having restricted wine imports to English ships
on these grounds). Viner, in an effective reply, had no difficulty in showing that
 Its characteristic creations were the royal manufactures and state-regulated guilds in France, and the chartered companies in England. The mediaeval and corporatist lineage of the former scarcely needs comment; the tell-tale fusion of political and economic orders in the latter scandalized Adam Smith. For mercantilism exactly represented the conceptions of a feudal ruling class that had adapted to an integrated market, yet had preserved its essential outlook on the unity of what Francis Bacon called ‘considerations of plenty’ and ‘considerations of power’. The classical bourgeois doctrines of laissez-faire, with their rigorous formal separation of the political and economic systems, were to be its antipode. Mercantilism was precisely a theory of the coherent intervention of the political State into the workings of the economy, in the joint interests of the prosperity of the one and the power of the other. Logically, whereas laissez-faire was consistently ‘pacifist’, urging the benefits of peace among nations to increase mutually profitable international trade, mercantilist theory (Montchrétien, Bodin) was heavily ‘bellicist’, emphasizing the necessity and profitability of warfare.56 Vice-versa, the aim of a strong economy was successful prosecution of a conquering foreign policy. Colbert told Louis XIV that the royal manufactures were his economic regiments, and the corporations his reserves. This greatest practitioner of mercantilism, who restored the finances of the French State in ten miraculous years of intendency, then launched his sovereign on the fateful invasion of Holland in 1672, with this expressive piece of advice: ‘If the king were to subjugate all the United Provinces to his authority, their commerce would become the commerce of the subjects of his majesty, and there would be

nothing more to ask.’38 Four decades of European conflict were to follow this sample of economic reasoning, which perfectly captures the social logic of Absolutist aggression and predatory mercantilism: the trade of the Dutch treated as the land of the Anglo-Saxons or the estates of the Moors, a physical object to be taken and enjoyed by military force as the natural mode of appropriation, and possessed permanently thereafter. The optical error in this particular judgement does not make it unrepresentative; it was with such eyes that Absolutist States gazed at one another. The mercantilist theories of wealth and of war were, indeed, conceptually interlocked: the zero-sum model of world trade which inspired its economic protectionism was derived from the zero-sum model of international politics which was inherent in its bellicism.

Trade and war were not the only external activities of the Absolutist State in the West, of course. Its other great effort was invested in diplomacy. This was one of the great institutional inventions of the epoch – inaugurated in the miniature area of Italy in the 15th century, institutionalized there with the Peace of Lodi, and adopted in Spain, France, England, Germany and throughout Europe in the 16th century. Diplomacy was, in fact, the indelible birth-mark of the Renaissance State: with its emergence an international State system was born in Europe, in which there was a perpetual ‘probing of the weak points in the environment of a State or the dangers to it emanating from other States’.37 Mediaeval Europe had never been composed of a clearly demarcated set of homogeneous political units – an international State system. Its political map was an inextricably superimposed and tangled one, in which different juridical instances were geographically interwoven and stratified, and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties

most mercantilist writers on the contrary gave equal emphasis to both, and believed the two to be compatible. ‘Power versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the 17th and 18th Centuries’, World Politics, I, No. I, 1948, now reprinted in D. C. Coleman (ed.), Revisions in Mercantilism, London 1969, pp. 61–91. At the same time, Viner plainly underestimated the difference between mercantilist theory and practice, and those of the laissez-faire which followed it. In fact, both Hecksher and Viner in different ways miss the essential point, which is the indistinction of economy and polity in the transitional epoch which produced mercantilist theories. Dispute as to whether either of the two had ‘primacy’ over the other is an anachronism, because there was no such rigid separation of them in practice until the advent of laissez-faire.

35. E. Silberman, La Guerre dans La Pense Economique du XVIe au XVIIIe Siecle, Paris 1939, pp. 7–122.

37. B. F. Porsline, ‘Les Rapports Politiques de l’Europe Occidentale et de l’Europe Orientale a l’Epoque de la Guerre de Trente Ans’, XIe Congres International des Sciences Historiques, Uppsala 1960, p. 161: an extremely speculative foray into the Thirty Years War, that is a good example of Porsline’s strengths and weaknesses. Contrary to the intimations of his Western colleagues, it is not a rigid ‘dogmatism’ that is his major failing, but an over-fertile ‘ingenuity’ not always adequately restrained by the discipline of evidence; yet the same trait is in another respect what makes him an original and imaginative historian. The brief suggestions at the end of his essay on the concept of ‘an international state system’ are well-taken.
and anomalous enclaves abounded.\textsuperscript{38} Within this intricate maze, there was no possibility of a formal diplomatic system emerging, because there was no uniformity or parity of partners. The concept of Latin Christendom of which all men were members provided a universalist ideological matrix for conflicts and decisions, which was the necessary obverse of the extreme particularist heterogeneity of the political units themselves. Thus ‘embassies’ were sporadic and unpaid voyages of address, which could equally well be sent by a vassal or a rear-vassal within a given territory, or between the princes of two territories, or a prince and his suzerain. The contraction of the feudal pyramid into the new centralized monarchies of Renaissance Europe produced for the first time a formalized system of inter-State pressure and exchange, with the establishment of the novel institutions of reciprocal fixed embassies abroad, permanent chancelleries for foreign relations, and secret diplomatic communications and reports, shielded by the new concept of ‘extra-territoriality’.\textsuperscript{39} The resolutely secular spirit of political egoism which henceforward inspired the practice of diplomacy was limpidly expressed by Ermolao Barbaro, the Venetian Ambassador who was its inaugural theorist: ‘The first duty of an ambassador is exactly the same as that of any other servant of a government, that is, to do, say, advise and think whatever may best serve the preservation and aggrandizement of his own state.’

Yet these instruments of diplomacy, ambassadors or state secretaries, were not the weapons of a modern national State. The ideological conceptions of ‘nationalism’ as such were foreign to the inmost nature of Absolutism. The royal States of the new epoch did not disdain to mobilize patriotic sentiments in their subjects, in the political and military conflicts which constantly opposed the various monarchies of Western Europe to one another. But the diffuse existence of a popular

\textsuperscript{38} Engels liked to cite the example of Burgundy: ‘Charles the Bold, for example, was the feoffee of the Emperor for a part of his lands, and the feoffee of the French king for another part of them; on the other hand, the King of France, his feoffor, was at the same time the feoffee of Charles the Bold, his own vassal, for certain regions.’ See his important manuscript, posthumously entitled \textit{Ueber den Verfall des Feudalismus und das Aufkommen der Bourgeoisie}, in \textit{Werke}, Bd 21, p. 396.

\textsuperscript{39} For this whole development of the new diplomacy in early modern Europe, see Garrett Mattingly’s great work, \textit{Renaissance Diplomacy}, London 1955, passim. The quotation from Barbaro is cited on p. 109.

proto-nationalism in Tudor England, Bourbon France or Habsburg Spain was basically a token of bourgeois presence within the polity,\textsuperscript{40} and it was always manipulated by grandees or sovereigns more than it governed them. The national aureole of Absolutism in the West, often apparently very pronounced (Elizabeth I, Louis XIV), was in reality contingent and borrowed. The ruling norms of the age lay elsewhere. For the ultimate instance of legitimacy was the \textit{dynasty}, not the territory. The State was conceived as the patrimony of the monarch, and therefore the title-deeds to it could be gained by a union of persons: \textit{felix Austria}. The supreme device of diplomacy was therefore marriage – peaceful mirror of war, which so often provoked it. For, less costly as an avenue of territorial expansion than armed aggression, matrimonial manoeuvring afforded less immediate results (often only at one generation’s remove) and was thereby subject to unpredictable hazards of mortality in the interval before the consummation of a nuptial pact and its political fruition. Hence the long detour of marriage so often led back directly to the short route of war. The history of Absolutism is littered with such conflicts, whose names bear them witness: Wars of the Spanish, Austrian, or Bavarian Successions. Their outcome might, indeed, accentuate the ‘fotation’ of dynasty over territory that had occasioned them. Paris could be defeated in the ruinous military struggle over the Spanish Succession; the Bourbon house inherited Madrid. In diplomacy, too, the index of feudal dominance in the Absolutist State is evident.

Immensely magnified and reorganized, the feudal State of Absolutism was nevertheless constantly and profoundly over-determined by the growth of capitalism within the composite social formations of the early modern period. These formations were, of course, a combination of different modes of production under the – waning – dominance of one of them: feudalism. All the structures of the Absolutist State thus reveal the action from a distance of the new economy at work within

\textsuperscript{40} The rural and urban masses themselves, of course, evinced spontaneous forms of xenophobia: but this traditional negative reaction to alien communities was quite distinct from the positive national identification that started to emerge within literate bourgeois milieux in the early modern epoch. The fusion of the two could, in crisis situations, produce patriotic outbursts from below of an uncontrolled and seditious character: the Comuneros in Spain or the League in France.
the framework of an older system: hybrid ‘capitalizations’ of feudal forms abounded, whose very perversion of future institutions (army, bureaucracy, diplomacy, trade) was a conversion of past social objects to repeat them.

Yet the premonitions of a new political order contained within them was not a false promise. The bourgeoisie in the West was already strong enough to leave its blurred impress on the State, under Absolutism. For the apparent paradox of Absolutism in Western Europe was that it fundamentally represented an apparatus for the protection of aristocratic property and privileges, yet at the same time the means whereby this protection was promoted could simultaneously ensure the basic interests of the nascent mercantile and manufacturing classes. The Absolutist State increasingly centralized political power and worked towards more uniform legal systems: Richelieu's campaigns against the Huguenot redoubts in France were typical. It did away with a large number of internal barriers to trade, and sponsored external tariffs against foreign competitors: Pombal's measures in Enlightenment Portugal were a drastic example. It provided lucrative if risky investments in public finance for usury capital: 16th century Augsburg bankers and 17th century Genoese oligarchs could make fortunes from their loans to the Spanish State. It mobilized rural property by seizure of ecclesiastical lands: dissolution of the monasteries in England. It offered rentier sinecures in the bureaucracy: the Paulette in France ordained stable tenure of them. It sponsored colonial enterprises and trading companies: to the White Sea, to the Antilles, to Hudson Bay, to Louisiana. In other words, it accomplished certain partial functions in the primitive accumulation necessary for the eventual triumph of the capitalist mode of production itself. The reasons why it could perform this ‘dual’ role lie in the specific nature of merchant or manufacturing capital: since neither rested on the mass production characteristic of machine industry proper, neither in themselves demanded a radical rupture with the feudal agrarian order which still enclosed the vast majority of the population (the future wage-labour and consumer market of industrial capitalism). In other words, they could develop within the limits set by the reorganized feudal framework. This is not to say that they everywhere did so: political, religious or economic conflicts could well fuse into revolutionary explosions against Absolutism after a certain period of maturation, in specific conjunctures. There was, however, always a potential field of compatibility at this stage between the nature and programme of the Absolutist State and the operations of mercantile and manufacturing capital. For in the international competition between noble classes that produced the endemic warfare of the age, the size of the commodity sector within each ‘national’ patrimony was always of critical importance to its relative military and political strength. Every monarchy thus had a stake in gathering treasure and promoting trade under its own banners, in the struggle against its rivals. Hence the ‘progressive’ character that subsequent historians have so often conferred on the official policies of Absolutism. Economic centralization, protectionism and overseas expansion aggrandized the late feudal State while they profited the early bourgeoisie. They increased the taxable revenues of the one by providing business opportunities for the other. The circular maxims of mercantilism, proclaimed by the Absolutist State, gave eloquent expression to this provisional coincidence of interests. It was appropriately enough the Duc de Choiseul, in the last decades of the aristocratic ancien régime in the West, who declared: ‘Upon the navy depend the colonies, upon the colonies commerce, upon commerce the capacity of a State to maintain numerous armies, to increase its population and to make possible the most glorious and useful enterprises.’

Yet, as the final cadence of ‘glorious and useful’ implies, the irreducibly feudal character of Absolutism remained. It was a State founded on the social supremacy of the aristocracy and confined by the imperatives of landed property. The nobility could deposit power with the monarchy, and permit the enrichment of the bourgeoisie: the masses were still at its mercy. No ‘political’ derogation of the noble class ever occurred in the Absolutist State. Its feudal character constantly ended by frustrating and falsifying its promises for capital. The Fuggers were eventually ruined by Habsburg bankruptcies; English nobles appropriated most of the monastic lands; Louis XIV destroyed the benefits of Richelieu’s work by revoking the Edict of Nantes; London merchants were plundered by the Cockayne project; Portugal reverted to the

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Methuen system after Pombal's death; Parisian speculators were defrauded by Law. Army, bureaucracy, diplomacy and dynasty remained a hardened feudal complex which governed the whole State machine and guided its destinies. The rule of the Absolutist State was that of the feudal nobility in the epoch of transition to capitalism. Its end would signal the crisis of the power of its class: the advent of the bourgeois revolutions, and the emergence of the capitalist State.

Class and State: Problems of Periodization

The typical institutional complex of the Absolutist State in the West has now been outlined. It remains to sketch very briefly some aspects of the trajectory of this historical form, which naturally underwent significant modifications in the three or more centuries of its existence. At the same time, it is necessary to give some account of the relationship between the noble class and Absolutism, because nothing could be less justified than to assume that this was an unproblematic one of natural harmony from the start. On the contrary, it may be argued that the real periodization of Absolutism in the West is at bottom to be found precisely in the changing rapport between the nobility and the monarchy, and the multiple attendant political shifts which were correlated with it. At any rate, a provisional periodization of the State and an attempt to trace the relationship of the dominant class to it, will be proposed below.

The mediaeval monarchies, as we have seen, were an unstable amalgam of feudal suzerains and anointed kings. The extraordinary regalian rights of the latter function were, of course, a necessary counterweight against the structural weakness and limitations of the former: the contradiction between these two alternate principles of royalty was the central tension of the feudal State in the Middle Ages. The role of the feudal suzerain at the summit of a vassal hierarchy was ultimately the dominant component of this monarchical model, as the retrospective light shed on it by the contrasting structure of Absolutism was to show. This role dictated very narrow limits to the economic base of monarchy in the early mediaeval period. In effect, the feudal ruler of this epoch had to raise his revenues primarily from his own estates, in his capacity as a particular landlord. The dues from