

The F-Word: The Problem with Feudalism, Melissa Snell
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Medieval historians aren't generally bothered by words. In fact, the intrepid medievalist is always ready to leap into the rough-and-tumble milieu of Old English word origins, medieval French literature and Latin Church documents. Icelandic Sagas hold no terror for the medieval scholar! Next to these challenges, the esoteric terminology of medieval studies is mundane, and no threat to the historian of the Middle Ages.

But there's one word that has become the bane of medievalists everywhere. Use it in discussing medieval life and society, and the average medieval historian will screw up his face in revulsion. There might be some sighs, some head shaking, and perhaps even some hands thrown in the air.

What is this word that has the power to annoy, disgust, and even upset the ordinarily cool and collected medievalist?

Feudalism.

Every student of the Middle Ages is at least somewhat familiar with "feudalism." The term is usually defined as follows:

Feudalism was the dominant form of political organization in medieval Europe. It was a hierarchical system of social relationships wherein a noble lord granted land known as a fief to a free man, who in turn swore fealty to the lord as his vassal and agreed to provide military and other services. A vassal could also be a lord, granting portions of the land he held to other free vassals; this was known as "subinfeudation," and often led all the way up to the king. The land granted to each vassal was inhabited by serfs who worked the land for him, providing him with income to support his military endeavors; in turn, the vassal would protect the serfs from attack and invasion.

Feudalism arose at a time when central governments were weak or nonexistent in Europe, and kings used the system to exert control over their subjects and secure military strength throughout their lands. In the absence of a strong monarchy and rule of law, the feudal relationship between the lord and his vassal was the glue that held medieval society together.

Of course, this is an extremely simplified definition, and there are many exceptions and caveats that go along with this model of medieval society, but the same could be said of any model applied to a historical period. Generally, it is fair to say that this is the explanation for feudalism you'll find in most history textbooks of the 20th century, and it is very close to every dictionary definition available.

The problem? Virtually none of it is accurate.

Feudalism was not the "dominant" form of political organization in medieval Europe. There was no "hierarchical system" of lords and vassals engaged in a structured agreement to provide military defense. There was no "subinfeudation" leading up to the king. The arrangement whereby serfs worked land for a lord in return for protection, known as manorialism or

seignorialism, was not part of a "feudal system." Monarchies of the early Middle Ages may have had their challenges and their weaknesses, but kings did not use feudalism to exert control over their subjects, and the feudal relationship was not the "glue that held medieval society together."

In short, feudalism as described above never existed in Medieval Europe.

I know what you're thinking. For decades, even centuries, "feudalism" has characterized our view of medieval society. If it never existed, then why did so many historians say it did for so long? Weren't there entire books written on the subject? Who has the authority to say that all those historians were wrong? And if the current consensus among the "experts" in medieval history is to reject feudalism, why is it still presented as reality in nearly every medieval history textbook?

The best way to answer these questions is to engage in a little historiography. Let's begin with a look at the origin and evolution of the term "feudalism."

The first thing to understand about the word "feudalism" is that it was never used during the Middle Ages. The term was invented by 16th- and 17th-century scholars to describe a political system of several hundred years earlier. This makes "feudalism" a post-medieval construct. There's nothing inherently wrong with "constructs." They help us understand alien ideas in terms more familiar to our modern thought processes. The phrases "Middle Ages" and "medieval" are constructs, themselves. (After all, medieval people didn't think of themselves as living in a "middle" age -- they thought they were living in the now, just like we do.) Medievalists may not like the way the term "medieval" is used as an insult, or how absurd myths of past customs and behavior are commonly attributed to the Middle Ages, but most are confident that the use of "middle ages" and "medieval" to describe the era as in between the ancient and early modern eras is satisfactory, however fluid the definition of all three time frames may be. But "medieval" has a fairly clear meaning based on a specific, easily-defined viewpoint. "Feudalism" cannot be said to have the same.

By the end of the 18th century, the term "feudal system" was in use among historians, and by the middle of the 19th century, "feudalism" had become a fairly well-fleshed out model, or "construct," of medieval government and society. And the idea spread beyond the cloistered halls of academia. "Feudalism" became a buzzword for any oppressive, backward, hidebound system of government. Having a straightforward model by which to view the Middle Ages gave scholars the sense that they understood the time period. Medieval society becomes so much easier to evaluate and comprehend if it can be labeled and fit into a simple organizational structure.

Although several historians expressed concerns over the indefinite nature of the well-worn model and the term's many imprecise meanings, it wasn't until 1974 that anyone thought to stand up and point out the most basic, fundamental problems with feudalism. In a ground-breaking article entitled "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe," Elizabeth A. R. Brown leveled an unwavering finger at the academic community and roundly denounced the term feudalism and its continued use.

Clearly feudalism was a construct that was developed *after* the Middle Ages, Brown maintained, and the system it described bore little resemblance to actual medieval society. Its many differing, even contradictory definitions had so muddled the waters that it had lost any useful meaning. The construct was actually interfering with the proper examination of evidence concerning medieval law and society; scholars viewed land agreements and social relationships through the warped lens of the feudalism construct, and either disregarded or dismissed anything that didn't fit into their chosen version of the model. Brown asserted that, considering how difficult it is to unlearn what one has learned, to continue to include feudalism in introductory texts would do readers of those texts a grave injustice.

Brown's article was very well-received in academic circles. Virtually no American or British medievalists objected to any part of it, and almost everyone who read it agreed: Feudalism was not a useful term, and really should go.

And yet, feudalism stuck around.

There were improvements. Some new publications in medieval studies avoided using the term altogether; others used it only sparingly, and focused on actual laws, land tenures, and legal agreements instead of on the model. Some books on medieval society refrained from characterizing that society as "feudal." Others, while acknowledging that the term was in dispute, continued to use it as a "useful shorthand" for lack of a better term, but only as far as it was necessary.

But there were still authors that included descriptions of feudalism as a valid model of medieval society with little or no caveat. Why? For one thing, not *every* medievalist had read Brown's article, or had a chance to consider its implications or discuss it with his colleagues. For another, revising work that had been conducted on the premise that feudalism was a valid construct would require the kind of reassessment that few historians were prepared to engage in, especially when deadlines were drawing near.

Perhaps most significantly, no one had presented a reasonable model or explanation to use in place of feudalism. Some historians and authors felt they had to provide their readers with a handle by which to grasp the general ideas of medieval government and society. If not feudalism, then what?

The uncomfortable limbo persisted for about 20 years, with few historians of the Middle Ages addressing the feudalism problem indirectly and even fewer doing so directly. Then, in 1994, another medievalist dared to step forward and present evidence -- heaps and heaps of evidence -- against the feudalism construct. In her colossal work *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*, Susan Reynolds took on the very core of the premise of feudalism: the vassalage that supposedly held medieval society together, and the fiefs that were supposedly given to vassals as part of that social glue. Both the terms "fiefs" and "vassals" were just as much constructs as feudalism itself; neither of them, Reynolds maintained, was used in the way those 16th-century French lawyers thought they were.

In fact, just about everything that historians thought they knew about the origins of both the feudalism construct and all feudal terms related to it was subject to reinterpretation. The assumptions the legal scholars made in the 16th century concerning feudalism were completely wrong. Actual "feudal" relationships were few and far between, because most grants of land were not based on an agreement of military service. Some were bestowed as rewards for past service, or as payment for continued or future service *without the specific oaths of fidelity or any understanding that the land was held on condition of service to the lord*. The land didn't necessarily *belong* to nobles to begin with; the authority of a nobleman might have come into play in confirming that the free man had the right to occupy the land, but that didn't mean the nobleman or the king owned it. It wasn't at all uncommon for the land to be owned outright by a free man or knight.

Furthermore, vassalage was not a common relationship. Oaths of fidelity did take place, but the holding of the land by the free man was not necessarily contingent upon his upholding that oath to a lord. And society was by no means dependent on feudal relationships for stability; even when the monarch was weak, there was an expectation that all men were subject to the king and should therefore follow the king's laws. Historians were already aware that the general perception of lawless noblemen and renegade knights holding sway over a fearful populace in their accumulation of personal power was yet another myth about medieval times. But it wasn't the feudal relationship that kept lawlessness to a minimum; it was respect for the monarchy and rule of law.

It's 14 years later and the holds still aren't unpacked. While there have been a few criticisms and dissenting opinions on specific aspects of *Fiefs and Vassals*, on the whole, most medievalists agree with Reynolds. She has succeeded very well in shaking loose the hold the feudalism construct had on the academic community. Now, some who are aware of her work refrain from including the archaic F-word in their medieval histories, or offer some explanation as to how it either no longer applies or should be taken with a grain of salt.

But there are *still* publications that include feudalism with no explanation of or reference to the recent reevaluation. Why? Publishing a book can take years, and delaying production long enough to reevaluate a chapter is usually not feasible. And when it comes to high-school textbooks, no one ever asks medievalists what they think. Perhaps the key reason the old model still persists is that there have been no major works to counter or support Reynolds, and thus no new raw material for the synthesizers of history to process and turn into general texts.

One of the reasons so many medievalists may be annoyed by the term "feudalism" is that the situation regarding its validity is still very much up in the air. There is a general consensus that the old definition regarding a "system" is inaccurate, and even narrowing the term "feudal" to the specific relationship between a lord and vassal regarding a fief has been questioned. But, just as after Elizabeth Brown's article, authoritative books are still being published that include the old feudalism model, and there has been no new model introduced to take its place.

But do we need one?

The feudalism model was popular because it simplified medieval society. But medieval society wasn't really simple. The more historians have learned over the last century, the clearer this has become. In the Middle Ages . . .

- Society wasn't as rigid as it was once believed; there *was* such a thing as social mobility.
- Women had more power and rights than was originally deduced from reading sources written by monastics who rarely saw any women, let alone interacted with them.
- The charming triangle of "those who fought, those who prayed, and those who worked," which was actually devised as a description of society *during* the Middle Ages, does not take into account a wide variety of people who lived in and contributed to medieval communities. And . . .
- Fighting men were not limited to knights who swore fealty to their lords and received land in return; there were paid mercenaries, archers, miners, foot-soldiers, and a host of other types of combatants who participated in the fierce and frightening conflicts of medieval battles under a variety of conditions.

Some teachers and authors are focusing on the realities of medieval society instead of concentrating on a model to explain them. This seems a sensible way to proceed. Admit that the Middle Ages was a complex time, and that studying it can be complicated (but worth the effort!). Examine the monarchies, the duchies and counties and earldoms, the empires and leagues, and the treaties, contracts and customs that related them to one another without trying to fit them into any kind of model. Look at how leaders pulled together their armies in each individual case without automatically attributing it to a "feudal system" -- or any kind of system, unless one reveals itself in the course of uncovering the facts.

In the meantime, perhaps more academics will focus their energies on the feudalism problem instead of avoiding it. Perhaps there will be more symposiums, more panels at medieval conferences, more seminars in post-graduate programs, to deconstruct feudalism and lay open the workings of medieval society in terms non-academics can understand (possibly the most difficult aspect of their work). There may yet be reason to hope, as Elizabeth Brown put it, "that, with a resounding whoop, historians [will] join together, following the example of the National Assembly, to annihilate the feudal regime . . ." ⁷ With fresh scholarship to incorporate in new publications, it may be possible to get the word out to other historians, as well as non-academics.

Then, maybe someday, medievalists can stop sighing at the mention of the F-word, and there'll be no need to repeat the refrain that there was no such thing as feudalism.