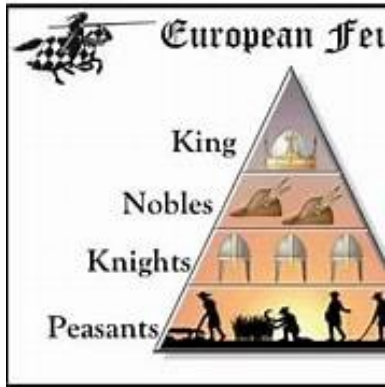


## Rebirth of feudalism

How and why were the feudal societies formed?



Feudalism was a hierarchical system of land use and patronage that dominated Europe between the 9th and 14th centuries. A monarch's kingdom was divided and subdivided into agricultural estates called manors. The nobles who controlled the manors oversaw agricultural production and swore loyalty to the king. The church played an important part in the system. Despite the social inequality it produced Feudalism helped stabilize European society.

To succeed, feudalism required considerable manpower. Vassals and serfs worked the manor year in and year out, bound by law to a lifetime of labor.

### Why did the medieval feudal system cease to exist

In the 14th century Feudalism waned. The underlying reasons for this were warfare and political change.

The Hundred Years' war and intermittent conflicts lasted until 1543. In both England and France the army swelled its ranks with feudal laborers, undermining the manorial system while increasing the value of commoners by teaching them much-needed military skills.

The end of serfdom meant the end of feudalism itself. Europe's manors could no longer function without a labor supply. As feudalism faded, it was gradually replaced by the early capitalistic structures of the Renaissance. Land owners now turned to privatized farming for profit. Laborers began demanding - and were given - better wages and additional liberties. Thus, the slow growth of urbanization began, and with it came the cosmopolitan worldview that was the hallmark of the Renaissance.

Ten years after the Hundred Years' War began, the plague broke out in Europe. Spreading northwards from Italy, the bacterial infection known as the Black Death claimed at least a third of Western Europe's total population. With the young men of France and England off at war, agricultural output was already declining.

## **Consequences and developments**

By the 1350s, war and disease had reduced Europe's population to the point that peasant labour had become quite valuable. Yet conditions for the serfs themselves remained largely unchanged. They were still heavily taxed on wages kept artificially low. Unable to survive in these circumstances, Europe's peasantry revolted. Between the 1350s and the 1390s, uprisings took place in England, Flanders, France, Italy, Germany and Spain. After an English revolt in 1381, Richard II promised to abolish serfdom. Though he later failed to keep his word, serfdom nonetheless died out in the next century.

In the 19th century, influenced by Adam Smith and other Scottish thinkers, Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95) made “the feudal mode of production” one stage in their visionary reading of Western historical development; the feudal model followed “the ancient mode of production” and preceded capitalism, socialism, and communism.

Marx and Engels rejected the traditional understanding of feudalism as consisting of fiefs and relations among the elite and emphasized the lords’ exploitation of the peasants as the essence of the feudal mode of production. Their followers came to view the feudal stage as a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of socialism, and socialist scholars and activists sought traces of it throughout the world.

## **Traces of feudal system in modern West European societies**

In modern democratic societies there are free elections, serfdom is forbidden and the human rights are respected. We are supposed to have equal rights regardless of gender, race etc.

The aristocracy in most West European countries, however, has kept an important part of their historical privileges, such as inheritance of titles and property. In September 2017 The Guardian published an interesting article titled 'How the aristocracy preserved their power'. According to this article The House of Lords has had influence in some of the British governments' formations.

## **Neo Feudalism**

Neo-feudalism or new feudalism is the theorized, contemporary rebirth of policies of governance, economy, and public life, reminiscent of those which were present in many feudal societies.

Generally, the term refers to a 21st century form of feudalism—akin in some respects to what was seen in Medieval Europe, but unfolding as an emerging phenomenon in modern times.

Author Jonathan Bluestein has written about neo-feudalism as a feature of social power: economic, political and martial alike. He defines the neo-feudal sovereigns as those who, while not directly referred to as lords, aristocrats, kings or emperors, still hold an equivalent power in a modern sense. That is, people who are not subject to everyday laws, can create their own laws to an extent, dominate large markets, employ immense swathes of individuals, have the means to hold a private military force, wield the economic might equivalent of entire nations and own assets, especially real-estate, on a massive scale.

After the financial crisis of 2007–2008, American technology billionaire Nick Hanauer stated that "our country [i.e. the United States] is rapidly becoming less a capitalist society and more a feudal society". His views were echoed by, amongst others, the Icelandic billionaire Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson.

The private capture of entire legal systems by corporate America goes far beyond neoliberalism. It evokes the private fiefdoms of the Middle Ages. Neo-feudalism entails an order defined by commercial interests and administered in large areas, according to Bruce Baker, who argues that this does not fully describe the extent of cooperation between state and non-state policing. The significance of the comparison to feudalism, for Randy Lippert and Daniel O'Connor, is that corporations have power similar to states' governance powers. Similarly, Sigward Neckel (professor in sociology at Hamburg University) has argued that the rise of financial-market-based capitalism in the later twentieth century has represented a 'refeudalisation' of the economy.

The American Prospect has published on its website an article called The Rise of Neo-Feudalism. It says:

The history of the modern democratic state can be understood as a story of shifting authority and lawmaking, first from private potentates to sovereign monarchs, and then to publicly accountable democracies.

Today, this centuries-long democratizing trend is rapidly being reversed. Western democracies are not simply embracing neoliberalism in the sense of deregulating the economy. Elites are pursuing something aptly described as a new form of feudalism, in which entire realms of public law, public property, due process, and citizen rights revert to unaccountable control by private business.

The below social ladder compares mediaval feudalism and the supposed modern society (neo)feudalism.

