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THE FEUDAL SOCIETY IN TODAY'S UNIVERSITY

by

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Few institutions puzzle outsiders as much as the modern university. Even insiders may not grasp the primal essence of its life and behavior. The sheer size and diversity of many universities defeats orderly consideration. We adopt crude simplifications or, worse, numbing obfuscation. This is entirely unnecessary. The core of university life can be illuminated clearly through the prism of a rich and beguiling metaphor. This metaphor requires only that we see today's university as a thinly disguised feudal society such as existed in Europe during the 11th or 12th century A.D. In this medieval context, many otherwise baffling modern mysteries in academe become transparent.

The Feudal Metaphor

In the typical feudal society, land and other natural resources are controlled by the powerful and rich. The poor and weak have little more than the sweat of their brows to rely upon. Central authority and the rule of law are weak or non-existent. As a consequence, relations among people are based largely on the delivery of services and goods by the weak to the powerful in return for use of land and for protection against attack by hostile outsiders.

In our academic analogy, physical land is replaced by intellectual "turf". The products of this turf are a stock of knowledge, a flow of research publications generated by those who work it, and the teaching of the stream of students coming within its purview. The rights to these stocks and flows versus the obligations they create clearly form the fundamental organizing principles in the university.

For metaphorical clarity, think of each academic department (or similar unit) as a separate feudal kingdom. Every department, like every feudal society, displays fragmentation of authority, personalized lord-vassal relations, and fixed social classes. Although the society, feudal or academic, may be vigorous and productive, class distinctions are rigid since they are based on long-accepted traditions and customary perceptions of power.

Along with its land-based economy, the typical feudal society also features a parallel system of rights, obligations, and rewards tied to a complex hierarchy of reigning royalty and established religion. In the feudal metaphor, the "royalty" are elected and appointed academic administrators. The administrative royalty blends smoothly into a "religious" hierarchy of bishops and archbishops at the top of the academic pyramid. At the very top of this pyramid sits the university president who corresponds closely to the august personage of a medieval pope, a secular power and the supreme worldly authority on matters of universal belief and ceremonial practice.

## The Nobility

### The Barons

Landed barons are central figures in a feudal, land-based society. A department's full professors are surely metaphorical "barons". Their behavior is the key to life in the turf-based academic department. The department chair (or head) is clearly the metaphorical "king". The king and the barons are held aloft by the drudgery of many common folk. Yet all crucial decisions, as well as the tranquility or tension of everyday life, emanate from these exalted individuals.

The barons control large and small tracts of intellectual geography. Each owes his or her power to innate ability, taste for work, personal style, capacity to attract support, and, of course, luck. The departmental landscape, always features barons of greater or lesser stature. Some are strong, and some are weak. Some are growing in influence as their efforts meet with success, and some are waning as age or lassitude takes its toll. Newer claimants on the baronial power base jostle for power and turf. These are the rising associate professors -- call them "baronets." Usually, a few aggressive baronets will have surpassed some older barons within the kingdom's shifting power calculus.

In day-to-day business among the barons and baronets there usually exists an uneasy, but typically civil, equilibrium. Collegiality and cooperation on many matters is common. Often, the nobles respect each other professionally and some may even like each other personally. It is common that alliances among barons and baronets form and dissolve as issues of common interest arise and fade.

Occasionally, one group of barons will squabble with another. Usually, these squabbles concern matters of form and procedure. But now

and then they involve serious matters of turf and its use. Sometimes a lone baron will either attack another openly or perhaps arrange a private ambush. Outbreaks of hostility can even be caused by the casual disparagement of one baron's turf by another. Although skirmishes among barons are always conducted in the name of lofty principles, they usually boil down to narrow matters of individual advantage, turf, and hauteur.

Sometimes, all the kingdom's nobles will close ranks to oppose an external, foreign threat or to embrace or resist blandishments from the ecclesiastical/administrative royalty. However, broad baronial alliances are uncommon and do not endure for long. Barons worry mainly about themselves and their manors. Keeping them armed and poised for communal attack or defense is virtually impossible. They tend to wander off and return to their own holdings. Feudalism insures that patriotism and a sense collective belonging to the kingdom is weak. Although the feudal kingdom may provide useful services to its people and a focal point for ceremonial activities, it is really a collection of separate baronies stitched together for historical or imperial reasons.

From the barons' viewpoint, the idea of "kingdom" is a thin abstraction for which very few are prepared to suffer and die, though none will admit it openly. Nevertheless, individual barons and their vassals might actually go to extraordinary lengths to protect the person of a favored king or even that of another baron. All of this applies to an academic department too. The larger the department and the more dispersed are its academic baronies across the intellectual landscape, the weaker is the entity to which all departmental nobles will subscribe.

## The King

The department kingship is not easy to describe. As with historical feudal epochs, it differs from place to place and time to time. In today's academic kingdoms, the reigning monarch has limited internal power but occupies a vital niche. The king is needed by the barons. They require a strong leader for dealings with influential factions outside the kingdom. This is an arcane and time-consuming function. In addition, the barons, as well as the common folk, look instinctively to their king as a ceremonial figurehead upon whose person their aspirations, sense of self-worth, and communal yearnings can be focused and celebrated. Even so, the barons shrink from allowing their king to meddle with or arbitrarily rearrange internal affairs to any significant extent. Hence, the powerful barons seek a competent and attractive king, but one whose internal authority is severely hobbled.

The barons may want their king to occupy large, well-appointed quarters and to be attended by numerous functionaries. It reflects well on them. However, even as life in the kingdom becomes more complex, they dislike it when the king delegates authority or assigns previously royal responsibilities to paid underlings. The barons are conservatives in these matters and always long for earlier, simpler times.

## Knights

In medieval Europe, knights were often landless, trained warriors with aristocratic lineage, typically younger sons of landed nobility. They attached themselves to powerful lords, the king, or even militant bishops. In our metaphor, assistant professors, research associates, post doctoral fellows, and other highly trained but nontenured professionals fill this

function in the academic kingdom. These "knights" do not possess baronial turf, but they usually ache for it, especially the assistant professors. These worthies have received knightly credentials at the hands of powerful barons somewhere but not the landed, baronet status which they covet. Like their ancient counterparts, these academic knights are armed and restless.

A few of these academic knights are singled out every year or two for honorific attention by the higher nobility. Because of diligence, valor, and the accomplishment of clever deeds over several years of knighthood, they are granted a fief of land in the kingdom. Thus, they obtain a segment of the kingdom's intellectual turf to hold as their own; they receive tenure.

#### The Common Folk

##### Squires and Peasants

In feudal days, squires were knights-in-training, attached to noble households to learn the arts of war and obligations of chivalry. In this analogy, "squires" are the department's graduate students -- young people mastering the lore and practice of higher learning within the kingdom. Graduate students in a modern university department also perform another vital function in the feudal academic society. By straining the metaphor slightly, we also see graduate students as "peasants" who till the kingdom's research fields and tend its teaching pastures. The barons depend on their peasant/squires for these valuable functions, and they vie gently with one another for the services of the most productive.



## Craftspeople

The villages, towns, and shires of medieval Europe were home to many skilled and specialized workers who, in principle, could offer their products and services to any person in the kingdom, great or small, in return for money. These people were carpenters, blacksmiths, millers, weavers, masons, and the like. They resemble, analogously, today's secretaries, computer technicians, accountants, librarians, and administrative assistants.

These workers are vital to the academic kingdom, but because their fealty and skills are readily transferred, they are not enmeshed in the feudal web of reciprocal rights and obligations. They stand apart from it.

## The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy

Binding the petty kingdoms of a college or university together is a system of authority and veneration corresponding to the medieval Church. Its influence and authority is felt deeply in the kingdom, reaching into the lives of all subjects, strong and weak alike. This churchly organization, in metaphor, is the university's administration from the president down to and including college deans and their minions.

To honor and appease this hierarchy, the king and, occasionally, the barons, perform tasks and rituals of subservience. Homage is required because this ecclesiastical oligarchy possesses both divine authority and wealth. It attracts its leading figures from the barony and royalty of various kingdoms.

It is difficult to know why a call to vocation in this organization is

heard by some subjects and not others. To be sure, the anointed receive worldly goods, rich vestments, and the exercise of divine authority for lofty purposes. If and when they are offered, many laymen cannot resist. Having once joined this sacerdotal profession, a few select individuals eventually return to secular life, but many do not.

The papal figure of the university president stands at the top -- aloof, distant, often seen speaking and waving from distant podiums. The vice-presidents are the metaphorical equivalent of archbishops. They confer regularly with the pontiff and manage decisions made by the Holy See. Further down this divine ladder are "bishops" in the guise of college deans and directors of various institutes, schools, and centers. These bishops deal directly with the monarchs of the kingdoms within their individual Sees, employing a network of lesser churchly officials known variously as assistant deans, associate deans, program directors, and the like.

Academic administration, like the Church, was once simple and uncluttered. It functioned with just a few well-articulated and widely believed principles. Its day-to-day operations were handled by a few dedicated zealots. Then, as with the medieval Church, this simple structure and its basic tenets eventually became only faintly discernible through an intricate and bizarre lattice-work of bureaucratic complexity.

#### The Flocks and Herds

What niche do undergraduate students occupy in the feudal department? With absolutely no intent to demean or diminish, one can see them as the flocks and herds which graze on the common pastures of the kingdom. They

are vitally important to the feudal society, representing wealth, strength, and accomplishment.

As individuals, students can graze where they please within specific pastures laid out by the barons. Like grazing herds, most undergraduates are passive and docile, but occasionally some are quite unruly, even disruptive. Their care and nourishment requires resources from the kingdom and conflicts to some extent with other baronial pursuits.

The teaching of undergraduate students, like other pastoral functions, is an extensive activity requiring space and a certain number of committed, if not kindly, shepherds. Its rewards for the kingdom and for individual barons are achieved over the long-run and are subject to cycles of uncertain duration and amplitude. This pastoral function stands in sharp contrast to the intensive, hot-house cultivation of grants and publishable research with its more immediate harvest of rewards.

In academic kingdoms where the barons have few resources for producing research, honor becomes closely tied to the quality of the student herd and the lushness of their pastures. In kingdoms where hot-house research is featured, the undergraduate flock likely lives a meager existence on poorly tended, over-grazed, and underwatered pastures.

#### In Conclusion

Like all metaphor, these ideas spring from imagination and simplification. Yet, the parallels with modern reality are engaging and palpable. In the elegant little book, Mediaeval Feudalism, Carl Stephenson writes, "Wherever we encounter feudal institutions . . . , they appear to have been developed in response to actual needs. To regard feudalism as

something apart from practical politics is utterly to misunderstand the life of the Middle Ages." Let us add, "and the life of the modern university."

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