16.2A: Preindustrial Societies: The Birth of Inequality

Pre-industrial typically have predominantly agricultural economies and limited production, division of labor, and class variation.

Learning Objectives

• Discuss the different types of societies and economies that existed during the pre-Industrial age

Key Points

• A hunter-gatherer society is one in which most or all food is obtained from wild plants and animals, in contrast to an agricultural society that relies mainly on domesticated species.
• Feudalism was a set of legal and military customs in medieval Europe that flourished between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, and, broadly defined, was a system for structuring society around relationships derived from the holding of land in exchange for service or labor.
• Manorialism, an essential element of feudal society, was the organizing principle of rural economy that originated in the villa system of the Late Roman Empire.

Key Terms

• **pre-industrial society**: Pre-industrial society refers to specific social attributes and forms of political and cultural organization that were prevalent before the advent of the Industrial Revolution. It is followed by the industrial society.
• **manorialism**: A political, economic, and social system in medieval and early modern Europe; originally a form of serfdom but later a looser system in which land was administered via the local manor.
• **feudalism**: A social system that is based on personal ownership of resources and personal fealty between a suzerain (lord) and a vassal (subject). Defining characteristics of feudalism are direct ownership of resources, personal loyalty, and a hierarchical social structure reinforced by religion.

Pre-industrial societies are societies that existed before the Industrial Revolution, which took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some remote societies today may share characteristics with these historical societies, and may, therefore, also be referred to as pre-industrial. In general, pre-industrial societies share certain social attributes and forms of political and cultural organization, including limited production, a predominantly agricultural economy, limited division of labor, limited variation of social class, and parochialism at large. While pre-industrial societies share these characteristics in common, they may otherwise take on very different forms. Two specific forms of pre-industrial society are hunter-gatherer societies and feudal societies.

A hunter-gatherer society is one in which most or all food is obtained by gathering wild plants and hunting wild animals, in contrast to agricultural societies which rely mainly on domesticated species. Hunter-gatherer societies tend to be very mobile, following their food sources. They tend to have relatively non-hierarchical, egalitarian social structures, often including a high degree of gender equality. Full-time leaders, bureaucrats, or artisans are rarely supported by these societies. Hunter-gatherer group membership is often based on kinship and band (or tribe) membership. Following the invention of agriculture, hunter-gatherers in most parts of the world were displaced by farming or pastoral groups who staked out land and settled it, cultivating it or turning it into pasture for livestock. Only a few contemporary societies are classified as hunter-gatherers, and many supplement their foraging activity with farming or raising domesticated animals.

Feudalism was a set of legal and military customs in medieval Europe that flourished between the nineteenth and fifteenth centuries. Broadly speaking, feudalism structured society around relationships based on land ownership. Feudal lords were landowners; in exchange for access to land for living and farming, serfs offered lords their service or labor. This arrangement (land access in exchange for labor) is sometimes called “manorialism,” an organizing principle of rural economy that originated in the villa system of the Late Roman Empire. Manorialism was widely practiced in medieval western and parts of central Europe, until it was slowly replaced by the advent of a money-based market economy and new forms of agrarian contract.
Feudal Manor: This painting from feudal time shows how fields surrounded the feudal manor where the noble who owned the farms lived—a good depiction of how society was oriented around the agricultural economy.

Feudal Systems: This video explains the basics of feudal societies in Europe.