

BRIEF COMMUNICATION:

Last Rejoinder to Goldstein on Tibetan Social System

BEATRICE D. MILLER

I suspect other readers may be growing weary of Goldstein/Miller discussion regarding the applicability of the term "serfdom" to Tibet's *mi-ser*. Therefore, I promise this will be my final reply to Goldstein on this issue!

Goldstein introduced "house" to elucidate his rationale for the level of generalization he has claimed as the *scientific* justification for equating *mi-ser* with *serf*. I shall offer the label *bacteria*. This is the popular term for *one* specific type of *infectious agent*. (Western medicine regards such *infectious agents* as the ultimate cause for most disease.) Medical research finds that using *bacteria* as a general term contributes nothing to "comparative study and analysis." Instead, physicians, pathologists, and molecular biologists all agree that treatment -and study - of an infection requires specific alternatives. There is much more to be gained by recognizing the sharp differences between *bacterial*, *viral*, and other types of *infectious agents*. The course of the disease and the efficacy of treatment are radically different and are dependent upon the specific category involved, as well as upon the identity of the specific *infectious agent*. With molecular biology's revelations of the sharp differences between the genetic composition and the modes of reproduction of virus and bacteria few microbiologists would persist in labelling both as "bacteria" and argue that such labelling would enhance our understanding of *infectious agents* in general. One must recognize that comparative analysis as scientific method cannot depend upon the broad application of a single term to distinctively different systems.

Now to the issues at hand:

On page 62, Goldstein suggests that the question of "feudalism" applies to a *political system* whereas "*serfdom*" is "fundamentally an economic system..." (His footnote 2, p.65, further disassociates "the Tibetan political system of the 20th century...[from] a feudal system.") I confess that I still have difficulty in accepting this distinction. The authorities (Marc Bloch '...in his classic study of European *feudal* society ... '(my italics),¹ Paul Sweezy,² and Maurice Dobb³) cited by Goldstein in his original article⁴ professed somewhat different views, e.g.. "*serfdom* has at different times and in different regions been associated with *different* forms of *economic* organization...(my italics) (p.60) (Would Goldstein accept the idea that the peasants of the

People's Republic of China were "State Serfs" bound to their communal "estates" until the reforms instituted by Deng Xiao Ping? Goldstein indicate that another authority (Richard Hellie⁵) includes in his definition of serf, that he is "...subject in a meaningful way to the administrative and judicial authority of his lord..." (p.81) Certainly, the Party leaders and their political cadres wielded at least as much authority over the peasantry as any "lord".)

My principal reason for raising the issue of the limitations imposed on the Tibetan aristocracy by the State was not simply that "the lords were not free to sever their relationship with the central government..." (p.62) More to the point, they also were not free to sever their relations/obligations to their *estates*. Because of the nature of the lords' ties to the state, they could not wield absolute administrative and judicial authority over their tenants.

Goldstein decries my concern for the existence/absence of *personal ties* between lord and *mi-ser*. However, Goldstein himself introduced this factor in his articles, through his quotations from Bloch "...The tie between a man and man was almost unanimously accorded a sort of primacy..." (p.80)

Furthermore, Goldstein's own figures indicate that, while "manorial" estates comprised 62% of Tibet's total land resources, 37% were in the form of *religious estates*, and only 25% were held in *aristocratic* estates. (p.86). However, if one were to add the "impersonal" holdings (i.e., the State and monastic lands as distinguished from the aristocratic), 75% of the total would fall into that category. (He does not indicate how much of the religious holdings was associated with individual incarnate lamas, rather than specific monasteries, etc. These estates would fall into the "personal" holdings.)

Goldstein suggests that I have attempted to elevate the *as hoc* to the level of the jural in my examination of the *de facto* prevalence of options (whether good, bad, or indifferent an option is an option) for mobility he had presented in his article. It is all well and good to say that "...the (runaway) serf could be punished ...if he or she was caught ..." (p.64) Apparently, there was no legal mechanism for such capture. Goldstein himself indicated that it was easy to run away and escape "...the element of legal compulsion." (p.105) Tibet has not been a region with labor surpluses, and few would question a "gift" of labor from a runaway.

One final point. In his original article, Goldstein himself indicated that the "...obligation to provide goods in kind and corvee labor to his/her lord fell primarily on *households* not *individuals*..." (p.93) He strongly intimated that the lord "couldn't care less" about what particular individual *mi-ser* did with their time or their presence, as long as the Lord's labor requirements were met. (p.94)

Goldstein has made significant contributions to our understanding of the nature of the "Tibetan peasantry." I continue to reserve my right to disagree with his interpretations, but I willingly acknowledge that he has contributed immeasurably valuable and exciting data which may - eventually - permit us to find common ground.

Footnotes

- * Citations to this "rejoinder" are by page number (61-65).
1. Bloch, Marc *Feudal Society*, RKP Press, v.1,2, 1965.
 2. Sweezy, Paul "A Critique," in R. Hinton (ed) *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*. Verso editions, p. 33-56.
 3. Goldstein, Melvyn "Reexamining Choice, Dependency and Command in the Tibetan Social System: "Tax Appendages" and Other Landless Serfs, *The Tibet Journal*, vol.XI, #4, (Winter 1986), p.79-112. Since there is no overlap between the pagination of the rejoinder and the original article, all subsequent citations to the article will be by page number alone.