

CHAPTER TWO

THE EUROPEAN MIDDLE AGES AND EARLY MODERN PERIOD

**Key Concepts:**

Middle Ages	Trading Company	Limited Monarch
Medieval	Mutual Obligation	Elizabethan Poor Law
Knights	Communalism	Overseers of the Poor
Serfs	Subsistence	Less Eligible
Manor	Enclosure Movement	Undeserving Poor
Artisan	Monarchy	Indoor Relief
Guilds	Protestant Reformation	Workhouse
Feudal	Martin Luther	Poorhouse
Fief	John Calvin	Deserving Poor
Merchant	Puritans	Outdoor Relief
Noblesse Oblige	English Civil War	Laws of Settlement
Commons	Mercantilist	Apprentice

**Chapter Objectives**

1. To describe the social, economic, and political institutions of Medieval society.
2. To explain the dynamics of class and other hierarchical structure in Feudal society.
3. To explore the principals of noblesse oblige, mutual obligation, solidarity, communalism and other traditions that provided social order to Feudal society.
4. To trace the changes in social, economic, and political relations that gave rise to capitalism during the Early Modern Period.
5. To present the impact of the change from a barter economy to a capitalist economy on the populations of Europe, especially the peasant population.
6. To present and define the concepts of the early public social welfare system established under the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601.
7. To explore the relationship between underlying explanations for poverty and the social policies that respond to the needs of the poor.
8. To parallel the similarities of the social welfare system established under the Elizabethan Poor Law, and the American social welfare system.

## Chapter Outline

- A. Characteristics of Medieval Society
- B. Transition to Capitalism
  - 1. The decline of Medieval Society
  - 2. The Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601

## Chapter Overview

The **Middle Ages** provides an important starting point for the evolution of social policy in the United States. Society in this period is often referred to as “**medieval**” or “**feudal**” society. The **monarchy** consisted of the **king**, noblemen or “**lords**” and peasants, also known as “**serfs**.” The lord and his serfs comprised a form of social and economic organization known as a “**manor**.”<sup>3</sup> The king maintained a military force of **knights** for protection against outside invasion.

A medieval village typically contained a group of artisans and merchants, a sort of medieval business sector. An “**artisan**” was the term used for craftsmen who made candles, barrels, silver items, and so forth. Artisans organized themselves into “**guilds**,” a form of professional association. Guilds and trading companies were necessary to protect the interest of craftsmen and merchants.

Under feudalism people were born into one of the social classes and usually remained there for life. Conformity to this hierarchy was maintained by traditional deference to social superiors, mutual obligation, and various forms of social control.

The feudal system was subsistence and bartering economy. Land was controlled by the church, kings, and lords. Serfs inherited the right to cultivate a piece of land. Based on a fundamental principle of **mutual obligation**, each institution and socioeconomic group had a specific role to play.<sup>8</sup> The king and higher lords granted “**fiefs**” to lesser lords in exchange for military service. Lords stocked food in case of famine and provided peasants with certain feasts during the year. The principle of **noblesse oblige** developed in which it became a moral obligation for the lords to treat peasants with generosity.<sup>10</sup> Serfs, tied by birth to their allocated land, provided agricultural labor. Serfs often owned farm tools and animals in common, and grazed their animals in pastures called **commons**.

The medieval period is noted for its values of mutual obligation, solidarity, and communalism, which were a prerequisite for survival. Feudalism led to a strong obligation on the part of the state towards the needy. The individual was not blamed for poverty and other problems during the feudal era. Famine, war, and generally speaking, fate were typically viewed as the source of social problems.

A population explosion in Europe coincided with the “**enclosure**” movement in which fields were enclosed with fences and hedges.<sup>16</sup> A major reason for this change was the increase in the profitability, and production of wool. Consequently, the new landless population began to seek work for wages in the villages and towns. During this epic transition from a barter economy to a capitalist economy, foreign trade became more important in creating employment and national wealth. Under the **mercantilist** policies the wealth of a nation-state was measured by the amount of gold and silver. The basic economic unit was the state in contrast to the individual under capitalism. As a result of economic and political changes, new social relations evolved among kings, church leaders, and emerging capitalists.<sup>19</sup> Merchants and bankers became more powerful members of society. Merchants began to seek limits on the power of monarchs and government in general,<sup>20</sup> and began to seek freedom from regulation. Intellectuals such as **John Locke**, the English philosopher of the 1600s, began to speak out, describing government as a necessary evil, the power of which should be limited.

**Martin Luther** called for reform of the Roman Catholic Church in 1517.<sup>21</sup> Luther objected to the corruption and basic principles of medieval Catholicism, specifically, the sale of dispensations, which allowed for the annulment of marriages, and indulgences, a remission by the Roman Catholic Church of punishment for sin. He believed that people could be saved by God’s grace alone, not through priests or good works.

**King Henry VIII** declared the English branch of the Roman Catholic Church to be a state church in 1534,<sup>23</sup> and the **Church of England** was established. The increasingly powerful merchants, bankers, artisans, and small landowners rebelled against the monarchy. Protestant reformers and state churches challenged the Roman Catholic Church. Immorality was increasingly associated with the characteristics of corrupt monarchs, traits such as excessive pride, greed, laziness, lust, and wastefulness. The poor, likewise, began to be associated with many of these traits. Wealth was a reflection of the moral lifestyle.

This view of morality was associated with **John Calvin**, a French Protestant.<sup>25</sup> Followers of Calvin became increasingly influential in England, and became known as “**Puritans**.”

The “**Early Modern**” period (1560-1660) was fraught with religious warfare, riots by peasants in protest against the enclosure of agricultural land, rent increases, and the lack of food. The struggle for power resulted in the English Civil War (1642-1649).<sup>27</sup> Small landowners, merchants, and manufacturers revolted against the social policies of King Charles I. An outcome of the war was an England with a **limited monarchy**.

Primary goals of the Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601 were to alleviate distress among the needy, while maintaining social control. The Elizabethan Poor Law was meant to deal with the vagrancy, theft and rioting resulting from the enclosure movement, food shortages, and rising prices; while responding to the legitimate need of poor peasants willing but not able to work. The law’s major characteristics included, 1) the principle that the state had a responsibility to promote the social welfare of all its citizens,<sup>33</sup> using the parish was the “unit of local government for poor relief;” 2) the re-enforcement of the principle of local responsibility for direct care of the poor,<sup>34</sup> through the use of official “**Overseers of the Poor**” appointed within each parish; and, 3) the classification of the needy into children, the “able-bodied,” and the impotent (those that were sick, those with disabilities, and older members of the parish).<sup>35</sup>

Children of poor families were apprenticed to a member of the parish. Masters could be cruel and working conditions were often harsh. Yet, the apprentice system promoted the education and future independence of poor children.

The **able-bodied** were thought to be less deserving of relief than children and the impotent.<sup>37</sup> Those considered “**less eligible**” often received relief funds only after the needs of the more worthy poor were met. The “**undeserving poor**” were more likely to receive “**indoor relief**,” services provided in an institution such as a **workhouse**. Refusing to go to the workhouse could result in being sent to a house of correction, whipped, branded, stoned, or put to death.<sup>40</sup> The incapacitated poor were the “**deserving poor**”<sup>42</sup> and were more likely to receive “**outdoor relief**” or services in their home. Services might include assistance with health care, food, clothing, and fuel (i.e., wood).

Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601 enforced by “**laws of settlement**” that provided the poor could only receive assistance if they resided in the parish of their birth. With the Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601, the English government became the chief enforcer of, and ultimately responsible for its implementation. The guilds established by artisans and merchants continued to be a source of **private philanthropy**.<sup>46</sup> Benefits included financial assistance to disabled workers and survivors of deceased workers and “disaster insurance.” Along with individual parish members and guilds, **private foundations** were sources of private philanthropy during the high middle ages. English social policy in the 1600s promoted private philanthropy in addition public taxation to pay for the cost of health and human services to the poor. This policy became the model on which the American colonial system was founded.

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe the social, economic and political structures that made up the Feudal system of the Middle Ages. What were the underlying principles that guided the functioning of society and maintained social order? Explain how these principles were implemented to maintain social order. (see page 20-22)
2. Name two major events or phenomena that transitioned the barter economy of the Feudal System to a capitalist economy of the Early Modern Age. How did each of these phenomena impact the economy and contribute to the transitioning to capitalism? (see pages 22-25)
3. Compare and contrast the features of the Elizabethan social welfare system with the social welfare system of the US today. Consider values, services, and access to services. (see pages 25-29).

**Test Items**

*Multiple Choice*

1. A political structure made up of a king, noblemen and peasants is know as
  - a. Society
  - b. Parliament
  - c. Monarch
  - d. Democracy

[A: c]
  
2. During the Middle ages, if you were a *serf*, you belonged to the
  - a. Peasant class
  - b. Landed gentry
  - c. Aristocracy
  - d. Outcasts

[A:a]
  
3. In a medieval village, if you were a craftsman who made candles, barrels, or silver items, you were known as a
  - a. Journeyman
  - b. Peasant professional
  - c. Guild
  - d. Artisan

[A:d]
  
4. A professional association made up of craftsmen was called a
  - a. Serfdom
  - b. Fiefdom
  - c. Common
  - d. Guild

[A:d]
  
5. The principle that maintained that lords treat their peasants with generosity was known as
  - a. Mutual obligation
  - b. Communalism
  - c. Noblesse oblige
  - d. Solidarity

[A:c]
  
6. With the transition of the barter economy of the Feudal system to the capitalist economy of the Early Modern Period, the economic unit shifted from the
  - a. Village to the state
  - b. State to the individual
  - c. Family to the village
  - d. Monarch to the business sector

[A:b]
  
7. The Protestant Reformation was initiated by
  - a. Martin Luther
  - b. John Locke
  - c. John Calvin
  - d. Adam Smith

[A:a]

8. The person most responsible for the establishment of the Church of England was
- Martin Luther
  - John Calvin
  - King Henry VIII
  - Puritans
- [A:c]*
9. A primary goal of the Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601 was to
- Justify the raising of taxes
  - Address the legitimate needs of the poor
  - Deal with the theft and rioting that resulted from the enclosure movement
  - b & c
- [A:d]*
10. The unit of local government for implementing and overseeing the Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601 was the
- Local magistrate
  - Parish
  - Most prominent philanthropic organization
  - Justice of the Peace
- [A:b]*
11. Local officials charged with carrying out the duties of collecting taxes for poor relief and making sure that the poor received care were known as
- Priest
  - Local magistrates
  - Overseers of the poor
  - Less eligible
- [A:c]*
12. The needy receiving services and assistance through local institutions were said to be receiving
- Indoor relief
  - Outdoor relief
  - Less eligible relief.
  - Able bodied relief
- [A:a]*

## Social Welfare: The American Partnership

### *True/False*

1. The undeserving poor were more likely to receive outdoor relief. (F)
2. A major characteristic of the Elizabethan Poor Laws was the classification of the needy into children, the able bodied, and the impotent. (T)
3. Laws of settlement determined who could and could not receive relief by geographic location. (T)
4. Although Guilds acted as the professional association of the Feudal era, they did not provide benefits to workers like modern professional association do. (F)
5. The social welfare system established under the Elizabethan Poor Law was the model on which the American colonial welfare system was founded. (T)
6. Under the Feudal system, there was little obligation of the lords to care for the needs of the peasants under their domain. (F)
7. The basic tenets of Protestant beliefs grew out of the "Institutes of Christian Religion" written by John Locke. (F)
8. The Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601 established the principle that the state had a responsibility to promote the social welfare of all its citizens, including the poor. (T)
9. Overseers of the Poor were nominated from among the 'substantial households" by the Justice of the Peace in local areas. (T)
10. During the Middle Ages, poor children were often apprenticed out to Masters to learn more skills; however, this was NOT a function of the church. (F)