Material Conditions of the Medieval "University"

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I. Material conditions of the medieval "university"

A. Complexity. Urban renewal in Europe 1000-1300 must be discussed as a complex system. Cities are regulators of flow of humans, animals, plants, (=bio-energy), and information, ideas, customs (culture-energy) from surrounding countryside (capital cities) or long-distance trade (gateway cities.) These are always linked; there never is an isolated city, always a network of cities in a "world-economy." These systems have a certain threshold of the intensity of the flows they regulate: once past that threshold, they take off until they reach bio-tech limits of the time (food production/distribution vs. sewage, overcrowding) in birth vs. death rate ratio. Below that threshold, the system collapses: the fall of the Roman Empire was the collapse of a complex system.

B. Protection. The seeds of "the growth of the towns" from 1000-1300 lay in the "Dark Ages" of 850-1000, the times of the invasions. Cities had become shrunken ghosts, though geographical advantages had kept remnants at key points. Churches or monasteries had converted Roman ruins, as at Cluny in Paris, built over Roman baths. Now under the pressure of Viking raids, walls went up again. They became protected islands of freedom, as the village surrounding a manor or abbey would be walled in. They began to attract a merchant class, who originally camped out outside the walls. The growth of cities is marked by the movement of the walls outward.

C. Surpluses. Where did the merchants come from? They fled the land: runaway serfs sometimes, other times let free on purpose by the lord to provide cash flow; often lords would try to attract runaways from rival lord's lands. But serfs can only run away in times of surplus, perhaps counter-intuitively. They were spared only when they weren't needed, due to increasingly efficient agriculture. Monasteries were a major agricultural innovator, as monks wanted to reduce manual labor to save time for study and prayer.

D. Money. Money is at first a political rather than financial phenomenon, needed to pay taxes to exploitating agency. Exchanges in feudal society were never purely and solely in kind; some money was always circulating, no matter how slowly. As desire for cash for trade goods increased (mutual presupposition and positive feedback of money and trade goods), basic feudal payments (military service/ land produce) were made in cash. Church/court/guild were ways of regulating flow of money. Free flow is what was to be avoided. Capitalism is the nightmare threshold haunting earlier forms of society.

E. Town charters. Towns however are intensifiers of flow of money. As towns grew they extracted charters from feudal lords: lump sum money in exchange for rationalized, predictable treatment re: tolls, fines, etc. (Such town charters are real historical origin of social contract concept.) Lords liked this source of money, but it eventually did them in, as merchants (able to operate only in rational, stable business environment of chartered towns) got richer than the lords, and had easier flows due to trade profit (vs. feudal exploitation of direct production). This needs precision: many times the same families stayed on top, but for different reasons, as they switched from land-owning to business owning. The real difference is which area of the economy allowed for the most efficient exploitation of surpluses: over time, this hot spot changed from land-owning to merchant business, to industrial production, to software production today (perhaps).

F. Trade and urban explosion. The threshold of urban explosion in Europe was reached when self-supporting regional capitals where linked up in trade networks. At first it was raw wool from England/Ireland going to

Flanders for weaving. The Normans bringing wine into England was another trade. A big push was the establishment of the Latin kingdoms of the Middle East by the First Crusade, which helped provide a safe trade route for Italian sea merchants (Venice, Genoa, Pisa) and the Eastern luxury trade. (It used to be thought this trade was the RESULT of the Crusades, but in fact it was only a reinforcement of an existing trade.) This was a huge intensification of culture/money flow between Europe and vastly more wealthy and culturally advanced Islam. Various banking practices, letters of credit, etc., were also Islamic imports to Europe.

G. Markets vs. merchant capital. Here we see a fundamental difference between markets and capitalism, as Braudel explains. Markets are regional affairs, with close producers and consumers: the technical definition of a market is that in which atomic producers and consumers can drop in and out of the market w/o affecting market price; capitalist organizations, on the other hand, have always been anti-market, stretching the distance between producer and consumer, escaping the information equality that is hallmark of market, and enabling super-profit. Markets are the places for craftsmen and farmers to trade; it was at huge trade fairs, as in Champagne of the 13th C that capitalism got its start, since merchants could hold back goods or otherwise manipulate supply and demand to achieve super-profits. In that way merchants got to expand their share of total economic activity. However, there's a way in which States during the Absolutist phases, let's say 1600-1750, took over from town merchant activity in setting up contemporary capitalism as they allowed the conjugation of decoded flows of money and labor to meet in their arms factories. In any event, it's important to remember today the distinction between markets and capitalism: Exxon and Mobil did not merge in order to have a better functioning market in the economic sense, but to escape market forces and become price-setters rather than price-takers.

H. Guilds. Towns are not just buildings, but also institutions. The major new institution of the new European towns was the "guild." The name for any corporate body, including guilds, was *universitas.* They were a social institution of the towns designed to regulate flow of money, or in case of scholars, culture/ideas. The merchants controlled the town guild; later craft guids split off in beginning of 13th C. Here we see rise of medieval "university." In the North, they were the unions of masters and scholars (the Paris model) while in the South they were unions of students (the Bologna model).

II. Growth of the medieval "university."

A. Student union in Bologna. The first medieval "university" is usually said to be Bologna, where civil law was the specialty. To ensure good teaching (masters had to stick to the text, and had to begin and end with the bell!) and good prices for books, lodging, and food & drink, law students at Bologna, who tended to be adult and well-placed, often even noble, formed a *universitas* or union in the early 12th C (Italy is ahead of the game always.)

B. Travelling scholars of the 12thC. Just before the guild movement, scholars travelled about between monasteries and cathedral schools, especially in Northern France. The guilds were ways of regulating teaching and learning, which had been pretty free-flowing. A charismatic scholar like Abelard, for instance, would draw lots of students wherever he set up lectures in Paris. But anybody could set up lectures and try to draw students too if they could buy/wrangle a license from the Chancellor at Notre Dame (or analogously, the local bishop wherever enough students hung around).

C. Paris. Paris was the big theology center. Study spread across the Seine to the Left Bank, the Latin Quarter, away from the cathedral school at Notre Dame. Here it was master's union. They saught independence from Notre Dame, which they got from the Pope, and clerical judicial status from the city and king, which they got in 1200 from Philip Augustus after a "town and gown" brawl over a tavern bill.

D. Introduction of the mendicant orders. In the early 13thC Franciscan and Dominican friars began teaching in Paris. Thier relations with the secular guild members were difficult, as they had independent financial support

from their orders and did not have to rely solely on student fees as did the secular masters. In fact, the mendicants cemented their positions when they continued teaching during a long strike by the masters in 1239-40. To be harsh, the mendicants got their foot in the door because they were scabs! This is not completely accurate, though, as the mendicants also had their own schools in Paris and so weren't completely dependent on the University for the chance to teach-which also exacerbated the tensions with the secular masters. (The 1239-40 strike also helped spur the growth of Oxford, as some masters and scholars went there at the time.) At various times in mid-13th C Paris was home to both Bonaventure and Aquinas, who were Franciscan and Dominican, respectively.

E. Social background of the masters and scholars. Travelling to Paris (Bologna, Oxford, ...) to study was an expensive proposition. (Your average parish priest, for instance, had to make do with study at the local cathedral school, rather than fancy theology training in a big city. This no doubt was a way to replicate class structures within the clergy under the guise of "merit," as bishops were the ones who could afford the fancy schooling that made them more able to lead, etc. Which is not to say there weren't scholarships for promising but poor students: buying off the best of the lower class is a time-honored--because effective!--strategy..) In any event, some things never change, and so some of the more charming historical documents of the time are form letters for asking for more money from parents, uncles, local bishops, etc--one for each occasion! The growth of university contemporaneous with growth of urban middle class is another example of positive feedback in a "take-off" phase of a complex system. More educated people of the urban middle classes allowed more successful businesses, which creates more demand for educated people, etc. In other words, as accounting, financial, and trade practices became more sophisticated, the need for logic and law training increased, and as business people and their educated sons became sharper, so did their business practices, which means more training to keep up, and so on. There were however aristocratic elements in the education system too: Thomas Aquinas, for instance, came from a noble family. These were of course the second and third-born of the family.

F. Social tensions. We have seen the *studium generale* in Paris develop as the dynamic "resolution" to a large number of social tensions, all with competing interests in regulating the flow of culture (ideas, information, practices.)

1) town and gown legal status: medieval students, as single young men, were notorious for drinking, fighting, and wenching. (Paris, like all big cities then and now had a big sex industry, supplied by displaced farm girls, urban poor, etc. One of the fascinating episodes in medieval cultural history is the implicit support of the brothels, and later official establishment of municipal brothels, in order to curb the otherwise high rates of homosexual practices among students and clergy and/or seductions of daughters of middle-class families and the rapes of servant girls.) Who was in charge of these guys, the mayor of Paris, the King of France, the Bishop of Notre Dame, the Pope? Students and masters ended up winning clerical legal status rather than be subject to city and king; a faint echo of this tension over jurisdiction is felt in campus police departments such as at LSU: why not just the BRPD?

2) Chancellor of Notre Dame vs. *universitas* of masters for right to grant license to teach (and charge fees).

3) mendicant and secular masters over financial independence of the mendicants and over the perception by the arts masters that the orders would poach the best arts students for themselves.

4) Arts and theology faculties over student preparation (more on this later re: Aristotle's theological correctness).

5) theology and the law faculty over numbers of students.

6) between masters and scholars over quality of education, etc.

7) aristocrat vs bourgeois class among both masters and scholars.

8) Finally, "national" origin of masters and scholars.

III. Course of study.

A. Higher and lower faculties. The lower faculty was the arts faculty, which was preparatory to the higher faculties of medicine, law and theology. The arts faculty was always the biggest by far. Among the higher faculties, law was by far the biggest draw, so much so that the Paris theology masters succeeded in forbidding civil law from being taught there, as they feared the competition. As it was, canon law was a big draw to the movers and shakers of the time; apparently the theology students despised the canon law students as power-mongers and careerists. Salerno was home to medical training, benefitting from Greek/Islamic trade. Bologna was home to civil law studies. Paris was a big theology center. Slightly later came Oxford.

B. *Trivium* and *Quadrivium.* The seven "liberal arts" surviving the decline of Rome and forming the backbone of pre-1200 education were divided into the "trivium": grammar (=literature), rhetoric, and logic. They came to overshadow the "quadrivium" of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music in the 12thC, to the extent of a brief flourishing of classical literature studies. But in the 13thC, logic came to overshadow literature. This was due to the Aristotle revolution of the 13thC.

C. *Studium generale* and *collegium. Universitas* was the general name for corporate body, as in candlemakers, butchers, even sex workers (in Paris). The place of study was *studium generale*. It had no special buildings, but rented lecture halls. Eventually teachers and students congregated in a *collegium*, which was the physical infrastructure of study, including dormitory, dining hall, kitchen, library, and teaching halls.

D. Lecture and disputation. The major form of instruction was close reading and commentary on a canonical text. The Bible, of course, and Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (@ 1150) were the standard texts in theology courses. To gain the master's license and allow one to teach in the guild, a commentary on Lombard's *Sentences* was required. Commentaries on other major texts were a major form of publication. Another, more prestigious form of teaching and publication was the disputation. A master would set a question and students would argue affirmatively and negatively. The next day the master would resolve the problem. This structure of thesis, pro and con arguments, and then resolution, is the basic structure of Aquinas' great *Summa Theologiae. A Summa*, was not, however, as prestigious an intellectual feat as a publication about "Disputed Questions."

IV. Source Chart (to be handed out in class)

A. Platonists and Aristotelians. To some extent, this maps onto the Fransciscan vs. Dominican rivalry. Aristotle had a rough reception in Paris' arts faculty, since some of his natural philosophy doctrines (eternity of matter, number of unmoved movers [only one in the *Physics*, but 55 in the *Metaphysics*!], singularity of agent intellect--at least in the Averroes interpretation) challenged Christian doctrines of creation and soul. More on agent intellect later, if time permits. Beyond that, there is the basic difference of a participation metaphysics, as in Plato (or better the neo-Platonists), in which the forms are separate (ideas in God's mind) and more real than earthly things which are real to the extent they participate in the greater reality of the forms, etc. vs. the Aristotelian substance/attribute or predication metaphysics, in which substance, analyzable into composites of formed matter, is the basic ontological level (even a sublunar and changeable substance is a substance) from which intellect can abstract forms (which are not substance). This can all get very technical! Suffice it to say that the Paris theology faculty protested the use of Aristotle's natural philosophy (but not logic) in the arts preparatory courses, and succeeded in having it banned in 1210. They had to give in by 1255 when it became apparent that students would start going elsewhere to study Aristotle if they couldn't get it in Paris. (Other towns would try to raid the lucrative Paris student market, as in the rivalry with Toulouse, which promised in a predatory prospectus of 1229 not only the good weather of southern France but also the chance to study Aristotle.)

B. Multiculturalism. In terms of today's cultural politics, the important point is to see Aquinas (and the other Aristotelians) as in interchange with Arabic and Jewish philosophers from Spain (Maimonides/Averooes) or from East (Avicenna). In other words, Aristotle comes back to West via the Arabs! The Western European heritage is only possible via this exchange! (NB: Most--but not all--translations of Aristotle came into Latin directly from the Greek. Nonetheless, all the Arabic commentaries were available and to a large extent helped frame the discussion in the Latin West.)

C. A biographical note: Aquinas, from Aquino, close to Naples, may have been predisposed to interchange with Muslim culture. Born a subject of Frederick II (the *stupor mundi*, the wonder of the world), Thomas grew up in southern Italy at at time that it and Sicily were points of intense cultural exchange between Islamic, Jewish, and Christian cultures. (NB: this is only a biographical anecdote, and hence not that important. The intellectual field of all Europe was permeated by Islamic/Jewish philosophical concerns, no matter where one was born.) Of course, we shouldn't call Aquinas a fan of multiculturalism: he was a committed Christian universalist, convinced his faith was true and that of others false. (Witness the oppositional stance of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.) Nonetheless, he treated Maimonides and Avicenna with respect and interest as fellow philosophers, which is quite enlightened in the time of Crusades and pogroms. Philosophically speaking, however, he didn't so much like Averroes or the so-called Latin Averroists. Let's consider briefly the case of the agent intellect to see the way in which an Islamic interpretation set the stage for a Latin debate.

V. The case of the agent intellect.

A. Aristotle *De Anima* 3.5. One of the most compact, elliptical, and even mysterious passages in W philosophy comes in A's treatise on the "soul." There A posits an active or productive (*poietic*) *nous* and a passive *nous*. *Nous* basically means "insight." It's the flash of insight, the eureka experience. Contemporary neuroscience would explain it in terms of formation of resonance patterns in neural firings: things click into place and you make connections. *Nous* is thus not a thought, but the enabling of new thoughts or even new patterns of thought. It's thus the highest mental capacity, and Aristotle, in perhaps a reflection of his Platonic heritage, calls it "divine" and "immortal." Aristotle likens it to light, tapping into one of the most basic W philosophical metaphors.

B. The Arab commentators. In the Arabic tradition, a question arose as to the number of the agent intellect. That is, does each one of us have our own agent intellects, or do we share in one single agent intellect?

C. Personal immortality. Now this becomes a theological issue, not just a philosophical issue of epistemology, if one equates the agent intellect with the immortal soul. (This may or may not do violence to A's notion of *psyche*, but the important point is that this is how the issue was phrased in Paris.) Now if there is only one agent intellect, it seems hard to uphold the notion of personal immortality, as we would only be sharing in one agent intellect when we have insight, and when we die, our sharing in that single intellect would cease and we would be re-absorbed into the divine unity as it were. This was the interpretation offered by the 12thC Spanish Islamic philosopher Averroes and championed in Paris by Siger of Brabant. Aquinas objected and upheld the multiplicity of agent intellects and hence personal immortality.

D. Philosophy and politics. All this raises an extremely important question, the relation of philosophical work to contemporary political power structures. For, obviously, a major form of social control in medieval Europe was reward/punishment in the afterlife. Any threat to notions of personal immortality, and hence to reward/punishment in afterlife was a threat to social stability. After all, all societies rely on internalized codes, the cop in the head, for there could never be enough cops to physically, externally keep people in line (first of all, the cops would themselves have to be kept in line, as the NOPD knows all too well!). So then what is the connection of Aquinas' upholding the multiplicity of agent intellects and hence personal immortality to systems of social control? Or in other words, the Church as intellectual institution and the Church as implanter of cops in people's heads? Did Aquinas consciously realize the social and political implications of his stance? Or was it

that the system needed protection, and that someone was going to do it, whether it be Aquinas or someone else? These are extremely deep and tough questions to ponder!