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Production, Distribution and Demand

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In the thesis for which he is famous, Henri Pirenne interpreted the decline of the ancient world and the beginning of the Middle Ages as the direct consequence of the Islamic expansion into the Mediterranean basin. The thesis was the result of two distinct historical considerations. Firstly, Pirenne maintained that the cultural and economic system of late Antiquity, based on the free movement of people, goods and ideas between the western and eastern provinces of the Empire, survived in outline until the seventh and eighth centuries. Secondly, he attributed the eventual crisis to an occurrence, such as the Muslim conquest, whose nature was ideological and military, rather than economic. The thesis had its most complete expression in Pirenne’s *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, which appeared posthumously in 1937.

Immediately after its publication, the book met with criticism of both its principle tenets. Serious questions were asked about the validity of the evidence used by Pirenne to demonstrate the cessation of traffic across the Mediterranean following the Islamic conquests. As a consequence, the crisis in the circulation of goods, men and ideas was denied or otherwise contested, and the timing of the cessation of Mediterranean trade variously pushed back or brought forward. Above all, the very attribution of the disappearance of Christian shipping from the Mediterranean to a deliberate Islamic blockade was strongly contested. In 1947, Maurice Lombard challenged Pirenne’s thesis, suggesting rather that the arrival of Islam in the Mediterranean created conditions favourable to a revival of commercial activity in the West, after a long period in which it had been stagnating.¹

The various critiques to which Pirenne’s thesis has been subjected have revealed its many and intrinsic weaknesses. Yet despite questions concerning the sources upon which it depends and the treatment of

the evidence, the fact remains that Mahomet et Charlemagne represents a truly formidable attempt to formulate a unified reconstruction, in structural terms, of the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages in the West. In its effort at unifying the diverse aspects of historical change, it has probably not yet been superseded. The alternative thesis proposed by Lombard was soon shown to be insufficient as an explanation both of the crisis of the ancient economy and the emergence of the medieval one. At present, with a few exceptions, the research seems to argue against a unified explanation of the multiple aspects of the transition.

Meanwhile, some of Pirenne's ideas have found support in recently discovered evidence. For example, recent work has confirmed the crucial position of the seventh century in the transformation of late Antiquity, in the West as in the East. Furthermore, the ever-expanding corpus of archaeological evidence available for the period reveals the Islamic conquest of North Africa to have impeded movement and trade in the Mediterranean, though admittedly not to the extent imagined by Pirenne and probably only within the western Mediterranean.²

This is by no means sufficient to reinstate the Pirenne thesis as an tenable explanation of the process of transition. Yet these considerations do reveal the actuality, at least in part, of some of Pirenne's hypotheses, while prompting us to reconsider the terms in which he elaborated his ideas. Possibly, the way of thinking followed by Pirenne to shape his thesis can be recognised as responsible for its fundamental weakness as a whole, perhaps more so than the nature and quality of the sources upon which he drew, or the evaluation of specific points.

Investigation of the thought of past historians may aim to reconstruct something of the cultural climate in which they worked; to locate the historian in history, as it were. Alternatively, it may expose the factors which informed their historical views and reconstructions. Historiographical analysis of this kind reveals what links us inextricably to the fathers of our discipline, while emphasising how different our present strategies of historical investigation are.

In this way, what follows is an attempt to elucidate the key stages of the formulation and elaboration of the Pirenne thesis and to identify the essential theoretical concepts underlying it.

I

In a well-known essay published in 1895 under the title L'origine des constitutions urbaines aux Moyen Age, Pirenne wrote:

On sait que les villes romaines ont survécu à l'empire romain en Occident. Si dans l'extrême nord, sur les frontières germaniques, quelques-unes d'entre elles ont été détruites de fond en comble, on s'aperçoit tout de suite, cependant, qu'après les invasions, la plupart des cités restent debout. Il suffit de lire les textes du VIe siècle pour voir que, dans ce temps là, la Gaule est encore un pays de villes. En dépit du désordre grandissant et de l'anarchie menaçante, toute vie municipale n'est pas éteinte. On continue à insinuer les actes aux 'gesta municipalia'. Ca et là, il est encore fait mention du 'defensor civitatis' ou des 'curiales'. D'ailleurs, il subsiste quelque activité commerciale et industrielle. Les droits de douane n'ont pas cessé de fournir à l'état des revenus assez abondants. Grégoire de Tours vante la richesse des Verdunois; il cite la 'negutianium domus' de Paris et parle fréquemment de marchands juifs et syriens. Il est manifeste que la Gaule se trouve encore, quand il écrit, en relations suivies avec l'orient et que les ports de la Méditerranée n'ont pas encore perdu toute importance.
Toutefois, cet état de chose ne pouvait durer. La vie économique s'éteint, en Gaule, comme s'éteint la vie littéraire, faute d'aliments. On voit l'or se raréfier peu à peu, puis disparaître complètement. Le système des échanges en nature tend à se substituer de plus en plus à celui de la circulation monétaire. Quand la Méditerranée est devenue un lac musulman, c'en est fait, et l'on entre alors décidément dans l'âge agricole du Moyen Âge. A l'époque carolingienne, l'argent atteint à la fois le maximum de sa valeur et le minimum de son emploi. La terre est maintenant la seule richesse connue, et dès lors se propagent victorieusement le système seigneurial et la féodalité.  

In this passage, all the basic elements of the later thesis are already present: the survival of Roman towns and civic life after the Germanic invasions; and the continuation of strong ties (and especially trade links) between East and West, broken only by the Islamic expansion which precipitated the collapse of the ancient economy and the onset of the ‘agricultural epoch’ of the Middle Ages. When he wrote this text, Pirenne was thirty-five, and until then had published nothing but his Histoire de la constitution de la ville de Dinant (1889). Nonetheless, it seemed that he had already conceived the thesis that was to become the theme of his ultimate and most widely-known book, Mahomet et Charlemagne.

Yet while the key elements of the thesis are present, Pirenne was still to investigate their inter-relation or to reconstruct the chain of agents and effects of historical change.

At this stage, Pirenne’s interest was not directed at the transition from late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Instead, he was concerned with the study of medieval cities from the eleventh century; and in particular in defining their social, economic and institutional character, with an understanding of the processes by which they emerged from the preceding “agricultural epoch”, during which it appeared that no comparable settlements existed. In his account of 1895, Pirenne took up a position against the theses advanced by various German scholars who identified the genetic factor of the medieval city with the juridical privilege of a given site (for example, a trading place or a fair), or a community (frequently described as Markgemeinde, or village community). Such privileges were credited with having caused migration to such a centre, thus encouraging the formation of a nucleated settlement, which was legally distinguished from rural settlements. In his opposi-

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tion, Pirenne maintained that the statutory definition of such settlements came later, and that it was the consequence, rather than the cause, of a particular social change; one which was provoked by a new set of economic conditions. As Pirenne saw it, this transformation was marked by the appearance of a class of merchants whose settlement patterns were determined by the movement of commercial traffic. Thus, permanent trading places were established, for example, near bridges, estuaries and cross-roads. This was determined not so much by local demand or supply of agricultural produce, but by the movement of long-distance trade and by the structural necessities of its trafficking. This kind of trade was an autonomous activity conducted by professional merchants; it therefore presented the requisites of an urban economy. According to Pirenne, medieval cities could not be described simply as markets, as they were by other scholars, but as trading places of a particular kind, supported by long-distance trade and managed by a specialised class of professionals. Local trade could be conducted in such centres, of course, but it was by no means the root-cause of their formation or development.

In 1895 Pirenne considered that professional merchants existed in the West as early as the ninth century; in the eleventh century a general improvement in conditions led to an increase in the numbers of traders and the creation of an increasingly extensive network of settlements, which became permanent centres of exchange and distribution, although the merchants continued to travel long distances in order to get the wares and supply the markets.

Traders quickly formed a new social class, one which claimed a new legal status, eliciting new laws and rights. This class soon established itself as the dominant group within the settlements in which it conducted business and reflected its special legal condition on the settlement itself. Thus the mercantile class gave birth to the medieval city.

In 1895 Pirenne did not attempt to explain the reasons why trade and the merchant class expanded during the eleventh century. He seems content to offer general references to an increased level of security and stability under the Ottonian emperors and other sovereigns. He seems still less concerned to identify the laws of historical change, although on this matter at least he formulates an interesting concept which he describes as follows:

Il est dans la vie des peuples des époques où la marche de la civilisation semble se hater sous l'action d'idées et de formes nouvelles et où... incapables d'attendre que se
soient transformées les institutions du passé, les hommes en créent d'autres qui les remplacent.⁴

Already in this passage we find an expression of the concept of discontinuity in history that was to characterise Pirenne's historical thought.

II

Twenty-two years on, Pirenne was to return to the same themes in one of his most significant (though comparatively neglected) works, the *Histoire de l'Europe*, which he began in February 1917, while interned in Germany.⁵

In this book, Pirenne gave substance to his ideas on the Middle Ages and the formation of Europe in that period. Political events and the institutional apparatus of the states were described in strict relation to the economic foundations and the development of European society from late Antiquity to the Renaissance.

Pirenne also dealt with the mechanisms of transformation in history. The various phases of the development of society and economics were strictly connected in a chain of cause and effect. The transition from the ancient world to medieval society was described as follows: the Germanic migrations did not result in the break-up of Roman society — rather, the barbaric invaders preserved Roman institutions in order to take advantage of them; the institutional apparatus of the late-Roman Empire (and above all the organisation of the economy) was adopted and exploited by the Germanic kings for their own interests; and the organisation of landholding continued to follow established patterns, Germanic settlers simply installing themselves alongside Roman proprietors. Towns survived as the centres of cultural, ecclesiastical and administrative life, as well as the terminals of long-distance exchange systems which ranged across the Mediterranean. Despite the Germanic invasions, the West continued to participate in the common

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civilisation which the Roman Empire had diffused throughout its provinces. Only with the Islamic invasions did this unity begin to dissolve, with the occupation of the opposite coasts of the Mediterranean by two very different and hostile cultures. The West was separated from the East, from which until that time it had derived not only commodities, but more general cultural impulses. Trade became impossible, and this determines the extinction of markets based in towns and, consequently, the dissolution of the economic basis of urban life. Towns did not physically disappear, but changed, becoming settlements of a different kind which, with an economy founded on agriculture, were almost indistinguishable from rural centres. Deprived of one its of essential components (long-distance trade and the social group which once served it), the West was forced to subsist, both economically and culturally, from its own resources.

The fundamental premise of this reconstruction is the concept of a strict relationship between town, market and long distance trade, such as Pirenne had formulated in his studies of the Flemish medieval towns. In his opinion, the three elements were strictly interdependent, and consequently none could exist without the others, at least in evolutionary form. Applying this model to the crisis of the late-Roman world, Pirenne implicitly adopted his position in the debate about the nature of the ancient economy which was conducted between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. His ideas opposed those of Karl Buecher, the brilliant and acute exponent of the German school of economic history, who interpreted the basis of the ancient economy in terms of Hauswirtschaft, a functional model according to which production and consumption occur within domestic structures. In such an interpretation exchange has no essential or autonomous role. Adopting a contrary position, critics such as Eduard Meyer argued for the fully commercialised nature of the ancient economy.6

In fact, in the History of Europe, Pirenne made no reference to the debate. He took it for granted that the ancient economy consisted of merchants and markets, and that there was an interchange of commercial traffic between the eastern and western provinces of the Roman world. Probably his position relied more on the numerous references

to the activity of merchants in western sources for the period from late Antiquity to the Merovingians — sources which had previously been used to make a similar case — than on any original analysis of the evidence.\(^7\)

On the other hand, Pirenne described the socio-economic structure of the Roman towns of the West with great discretion. He played down their potentialities as centres for an autonomous process of production and distribution, emphasising instead the role played by the state in supporting the conditions of urban society, even with regard to markets and trade. This is an important innovation, one which introduced a structural diversity between the towns of the later Roman Empire and the commercial towns of the Middle Ages.

While Pirenne’s ideas on the nature of the ancient economy itself are yet to be fully developed at this stage, the criteria which he used in the *History of Europe* to assess the transition from ancient to medieval economics prefigure those in *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, though as yet they do not precisely coincide.

The transition is described as the consequence of two concomitant processes, one of evolution, the other of disruption. For Pirenne, the Roman civilisation, and with it the organisation of the economy, society and administration of late Antiquity, was not interrupted by the Germanic invasions. Rather, they survived them for the simple reason that the invaders did not possess a different, equally effective, system of social relations and institutions, with which to replace them. However, the structures of the late Roman Empire were subject to a progressive degeneration, or ‘barbarization’, resulting from the invaders’ inability to effectively maintain Roman systems of state administration and public authority. Thus the power of the Merovingian kings was undermined by mismanagement of state government and resources. At the same time, the powerful landed aristocracy, went on imposing control over rural society and encroaching on the functions of the state. With time it became the only force capable of providing for essential social needs like security and stability. Consequently, Merovingian society was progressively ranged under the private power of the local aristocracy in the characteristic form of the landed *seigneurie*.

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Such a representation, reconciling the perceived continuity of conditions and institutions with their internal and protracted deterioration, was not a new one. In large part, Pirenne must have derived it from the work of Fustel de Coulanges, although eventually he reached very different conclusions. What is original here is the denial of any tangible contribution on the part of Germanic culture to the transformation of the late Antique world, apart from its barbarous incapability to sustain complex institutional systems. Throughout the *History of Europe*, Pirenne's treatment of Germanic culture is marked by a polemical attitude which in part resulted from the situation in which he was writing, confined in Germany, and from his personal aversion to a people and a culture which he perceived as responsible for the war. Later he was to temper his disdain; in *Mahomet et Charlemagne* he recognised an original and innovative Germanic civilisation, one capable of imposing order on society, at least within northern Europe.8

The degeneration which he attributed to the barbarity of the invaders also involved the towns of the late-Roman West. Under the Roman Empire, the towns had been the residence of landed proprietors, state officials and merchants: the life of the towns and their economies were sustained by the machinery of the state. The economy of the late-Roman town would have been limited to the production and consumption of local resources in a restricted area, (the sort of economy that theorists like Buecher termed *Stadtwirtschaft*), had not the Roman Empire brought about the extensive movement of people, commodities and ideas, incorporating the life and economy of each town within a vast network.

When the Merovingians revealed their inability to administer these support systems, the towns of Roman Gaul began to decline; the network which sustained city-life and urban culture progressively reduced itself to trade links with the distant Mediterranean countries, a trade largely dependent on the enterprises of foreign merchants – the Syrians – who were still free to sail across the Mediterranean, whilst Frankish society shifted to an agricultural economy. As Pirenne wrote:

"Au milieu d'une société qui glissait vers le régime de la propriété seigneuriale, les villes s'étaient maintenues vivantes par le commerce et avec elles une bourgeoisie libre."9

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When the Islamic invasions impeded the movement of eastern traders, the urban middle classes disappeared in the West, the towns lost their character of economic and cultural centres, and the landed aristocracy emerged as the only remaining force able to organise Merovingian society. Thus,

\[\textit{la conquête de la Méditerranée par les Musulmans devait précipiter l'évolution politique et sociale qui s'amorçait}.\]  

So Pirenne explained the structural change through two distinct, though inter-connected, circumstances: gradual transformation generated from within; and eventual collapse dealt by external forces. The role of the latter was decisive, though its great consequence derives from its fusion with a pre-existing and independently activated process of decline. Further to this, Pirenne identified a progressive economic decline prior to the Islamic invasions, given that he stated that "\textit{La transformation a du commencer dès le V \textdegree\ siècle}".\[Pirenne, Histoire de l'Europe, p. 62.\] The end of the Roman world and the origins of the social system that dominated Europe during the Dark Ages are explained therefore by a combined process of continuous evolution (or rather involution), and sudden disruption.

III

In the \textit{History of Europe}, Pirenne approached the explanation of historical change also with rather different conceptual models. This occurs when he discusses the problem of the eleventh-century rebirth of towns and the revival of trade and commerce, a theme to which he returned repeatedly following his first essay of 1895 on the subject. Indeed, prior to the First World War, Pirenne's reputation was attached above all to the history of medieval towns and of Belgium, his native country. Only later, was he to direct his energies to specific analyses of the problem of the late-Roman world.

In the \textit{History of Europe} Pirenne took a very different view of the resurgence of trade and the origins of the mercantile class to the one expressed in 1895. He modified his earlier conviction of the existence of

\[Pirenne, Histoire de l'Europe, p. 39.\]  

\[Pirenne, Histoire de l'Europe, p. 62.\]
professional merchants during the "agricultural epoch" of European history before the eleventh century. Now he attributed the revival of trade to impulses coming from the peripheral fringes of the West: Venice and parts of southern Italy (where political and economic relations with Byzantium had been maintained despite Islamic supremacy within the Mediterranean), as well as the Vikings raiding and trading between Byzantium and the shores of the North Sea. The combined effect of these two peripheral currents of traffic penetrated into continental western Europe reaching northern France and Flanders. This gave new subjects the opportunity to join the trading enterprises. They soon became numerous and active, and created a new social class of professional merchants. This group had no immediate predecessors in the society of the day, which until then had been marked by the conspicuous absence of any form of permanent trading activity managed by specialised operators.

The ancestors of the medieval merchants were the déracinés, the dropouts of the agrarian society. Here Pirenne reversed his opinions regarding this fundamental aspect of European socio-economic history: the appearance of the mercantile class which he saw as the origin of the bourgeoisie. Previously he had interpreted these events in terms of an increase and acceleration of factors indigenous to western-European society; now he was describing the sudden appearance of a totally new social group engaged in unprecedented forms of economic activity.

Thus, in the same book, Pirenne explained historical change through contrasting lines of interpretation. At the end of antiquity external forces accelerated and exacerbated a pre-existing process of decline, bringing about its eventual (though perhaps not inevitable) conclusion; by contrast, in the case of the eleventh-century transition from agricultural to commercial society, external forces are seen to introduce de facto a set of conditions which determine the formation of a thoroughly new socio-economic equation. In this second case, change is more abrupt and discontinuity more evident.

When and why Pirenne renounced his earlier ideas on commerce in the Carolingian and post-Carolingian period is unclear. The vitality of commerce in that epoch had been underlined by Alfons Dopsch in 1912-13, in his Wirtschaftsentwicklung der Karolingerzeit. Dopsch's erudite account was admired by Pirenne, though he was not convinced by the treatment of the evidence upon which it was based. Perhaps it was

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12 As, for example, in H. Pirenne, "Stages in the Social History of Capitalism", American Historical Review 19 (1914), pp. 494-515.
this which induced him to revoke his earlier evaluations of trade in the Carolingian period. In the *History of Europe* early medieval trade is described as highly-localised activity, restricted to the Low Countries and parts of Italy, with negligible importance in the economic system of the age.

Pirenne appears to follow T. Inama-Sternegg in emphasising the overall prevalence of an economy driven by agriculture and organised within a framework set by *seigneurial* landlordship. However, aim of accounting for the evidence for trade in the period, and in the interests of maintaining coherency with his earlier ideas on the crisis and collapse of trade after the Islamic invasions, Pirenne endeavoured to explain the nature and role of exchange within the "agrarian economy".

Pirenne first considered the question in a paper presented to the *International Congress of Historical Science* in London in 1913. There he maintained a case for the occasional, sporadic nature of early medieval trade and its non-professional organisation. The volume of commodities was small and credit did not exist. Sites specifically dedicated to commercial activities, such as the *portus* of northern France and the Low Countries did not invalidate the scheme, because they were comparatively few; moreover they were located only in particular geographical sites and did not possess the nature of towns. In this way, Pirenne took issue even with Inama, who had argued for a commercial revival under Charlemagne. The portrait of the Carolingian economy drawn by Pirenne in the *History of Europe* was less optimistic; he delineated a chain of economic consequence which deprived trade of real relevance. The disappearance of markets in the West following the closing down of the Mediterranean, extinguished in fact all forms of economic activity which involved the generation of profit through a process of exchange. Once profit ceased to be the prime mover of economic activity, agriculture and other forms of production were geared to direct local consumption. In this situation, trade takes on an 'absolutely secondary' importance.

This resembles a version of the system described by German economic theorists and in particular by Buecher, as a "domestic" or "closed economy". Pirenne’s account, however, differs in attributing its inception to external forces rather than to a spontaneous re-shaping of medieval society. Moreover, he assumed that limited exchanges never ceased because no society can totally do without them. However, he

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13 *Supra* n. 12.
could no longer explain the eleventh-century revival in terms of the acceleration of a pre-existing activity, as he had in 1895. The impetus for the rebirth of the commercial economy must have been external to the agricultural society of the early Middle Ages; as he put it:

*Bref, l'histoire du commerce européen ne nous présente pas de tout, comme on aimeraît le croire, le spectacle d'une belle croissance organique, faite à plaisir pour les amateurs d'évolutions.*

The contrast with his account of the late Antique crisis is clear. In the eleventh century it is discontinuity that prevails; the agents of change had to be external, as the "agrarian epoch" was devoid of indigenous potential.

**IV**

This history of European development rests on theoretical concepts referring to economic systems, their organisation and historical development. Pirenne derived them from a number of works which exerted wide-ranging influence on the historical and sociological thought of his time. According to these theories, the economic life of societies passes through a series of stages, each characterised by typical relations between production, distribution and consumption. Among the most widely-known and arguably most influential works of this time was Karl Buecher's *Zur Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft*, published in 1893. Buecher maintained that in historical and ethnological experience, there are three principle stages of economic organisation, which he defines respectively as 'Hauswirtschaft', 'Stadtwirtschaft' and 'Volkswirtschaft'. Each stage is characterised by more and more complex and indirect relations between the production and consumption of commodities. Another important theory of economic stages was put forward by Werner Sombart in 1900. Sombart linked the stages of economic organisation to patterns of social interaction through which the satisfaction of needs is realised; to forms of the institutional organisation of social relations, and to the social psychology of economics. Unlike

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Buecher, Sombart did not argue that the theoretical sequence of the stages necessarily corresponds with the chronological order in which they appear in history.

Pirenne did not adhere to any of these theoretical schemes, objecting above all to the manner in which the complex of historical reality is confounded by predetermined models and formulae. He expressed his disagreement with Beucher and Sombart on a number of occasions. He questioned the concepts of "domestic economy" and its relevance and usefulness when applied to late Antique and early medieval economics; above all, he questioned the notion of the "town economy", which Sombart and Beucher used to describe the foundation of the medieval town as an economic system based on direct exchange between producer and consumer and limited to the confines of the town and its immediate environs.

While rejecting many of the specific claims made by the various exponents of economic theory in this period, Pirenne adopted much of their way of thinking and methodology. One can identify at least three points revealing their influence: the interest in the internal structures of economic systems as they appear in the course of history; the idea that systems can be interpreted as distinct phases of economic organisation; and the attention reserved for the psychological motivations of economic activity.

Pirenne's interest in social psychology did not depend only on the influence of Sombart. In 1901, he expressed his admiration for the work of Karl Lamprecht, because of the attention Lamprecht paid to the "ferments psychiques de la vie économique".\(^{16}\) For a period the two scholars were close friends, yet when later Lamprecht began to formulate his model of a succession of psychological phases in the historical development of the German people, Pirenne communicated his serious doubts concerning Lamprecht's work and ended in refuting his friend's conclusions outright.\(^ {17}\)

Pirenne's mature attitude towards development and stages as fundamental problems of historical representation, was fully expressed in his address to the International Congress of Historical Science in London.


entitled *Stages in the Social History of Capitalism*. The intervention mainly aimed to demonstrate the capitalist nature of medieval commerce since its first appearance in the eleventh century; namely that its *raison d'être* was the generation of surplus, independent of any necessity to provide for the essential needs of society. Buecher, Sombart and Max Weber had maintained that it was impossible to speak of anything resembling capitalism in the modern sense before the sixteenth century. Taking a different position, Pirenne set out to trace the evolution of European capitalism, its workings and attitudes, from the economic revival of the eleventh century to the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century. As he put it:

*I believe that, for each period into which our economic history may be divided, there is a distinct and separate class of capitalists. In other words, a group of capitalists of a given epoch does not spring from the capitalist group of the preceding epoch. At every change of economic organisation, we find a breach of continuity. It is as if the capitalists who have up to that time been active, recognise that they are incapable of adapting themselves to conditions which are evoked by needs hitherto unknown and which call for methods hitherto unemployed... In their place arise new men... The permanence through the centuries of a capitalist class, the result of a continuous development and changing itself to suit changing circumstances, is not to be affirmed. On the contrary, there are as many classes of capitalists as there are epochs in economic history. That history does not present itself to the eye of the observer under the guise of an inclined plane; it resembles rather a staircase, every step of which rises abruptly above that which precedes it.*

Thus the history of capitalism (and with it the course of history in general) seemed to Pirenne to develop and unfold through sequences of steps, each of which represents a distinct phase of economic and social life. Each successive phase was characterised by a new psychological disposition which directed and sustained economic activity, and which was the prerogative of an emergent group of individuals. The theories of the stages of economic activity and its psychological conditioning were thus brought together. Such a reading of the economic history of medieval Europe allowed Pirenne to reconcile his argument for the capitalist organisation of economics from the eleventh century with those of his opponents who refused to admit the existence of a true capitalist economy prior to the sixteenth century. He achieved this by describing the two periods of economic history as two separate distinct phases of a discontinuous evolution.

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18 Pirenne, "*Stages in the Social History of Capitalism*", p. 494.
It is worth emphasising how Pirenne conceived the transition from one stage to the next. In his opinion, transition was effected by two sets of agents: the external conditions (or 'circumstances') under which economic activity was carried out; and the psychology of the individuals and groups engaged in it. Psychology is not responsible for changing conditions; rather, it is interpreted as a pattern of 'responses' to altered circumstances. The type of response characterises a phase of historical development. The outstanding problem concerning the causes and rhythms of changes in “circumstances” was not addressed here.

In the *History of Europe* Pirenne made use of the concepts described above as instruments of historical interpretation. This is evident both in his description of the agrarian system of the early Middle Ages and in the transition from this system to the commercial economy which followed.

Dark Age society and economics were characterised by the widespread renunciation of the generation of profit. This psychological attitude was determined by external forces and hardened into culture. On this basis, Pirenne reconstructed the social order of production as one in which subjection did not correspond to exploitation of the subjected people; a social order capable of producing surplus but not investment. The psychological set is used to explain the lack of internal movement in a society which had no impulses capable of overcoming the prevailing socio-economic configuration. Pirenne examined the mental attitudes of the three orders of “agrarian” society – landed lords, the clergy and peasantry – concluding that it was not in the interests of any party to disturb a socio-economic equilibrium by which the primary needs of subsistence, security and ‘status’ were satisfied. Given the lack of dynamism of the early medieval economy, the thrust of it had to come from must be sought outside its social structure; furthermore, the very protagonists of new forms of economic activity, were necessarily individuals or groups with no place in the established social order and no interest in its preservation. The psychology of these agents was the convenient response to the changing circumstances, which were imported and imposed upon the medieval West. They engaged in a new economic activity, which transformed the order of society; an activity based on the quest for profit.

The socio-psychological determination of new social and economic forms was not used by Pirenne to explain the transformation of the late-Roman economy. The new “circumstances” brought about by the Islamic conquests did not give rise to a new entrepreneurial class or set
of economic innovations; rather, society in the West was forced to adapt to a situation which had made such innovation impossible and useless. The external factors, rather than stimulating creative transformation, precipitated an economic recession; thus, bereft of trade, the society had to settle on simpler socio-economic forms that had been evolving within it for a considerable time. The transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages is consequently less innovative than the subsequent transition from the agrarian age to the mercantile one.

Nonetheless, psychology and mental attitudes played a role also in Pirenne's description of the demise of the ancient world. He insisted that the success of the Islamic invasions was due to the religious zeal of the Arab conquerors, a psychological and moral attitude which determined their intentional subversion of the pre-existing order. By contrast, the Germanic invaders were prepared to acknowledge the inferiority of their culture vis-à-vis the superiority of Roman culture; according to Pirenne, it is precisely on account of this cultural mutability that the Germanic peoples missed the opportunity to transform the history of the world.

In due course Pirenne was also to consider the economy of the late-Roman West in terms of a static structure. However, it is worth noting that not even in the History of Europe, did he care to explain the reasons for the change of “circumstances” whose “responses” he expounded at such length. Change appeared to be produced by chance; throughout his life, Pirenne frequently meditated on the role of chance in history.19

V

Pirenne did not publish his History of Europe. Probably he was aware of the polemical bias that limited its reliability. Instead, he dedicated a number of separate studies to its central themes; in particular he returned to the problem of the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages in two brief studies, Mahomet et Charlemagne in 1922, and Un contraste économique: mérovingiens et carolingiens in 1923.20 His intention in these essays was not to consider the crisis of the late-Roman economy


20 Published in Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire 1 (1922), pp. 77-86; and Ibid. 2 (1923), pp. 223-235, respectively.
as such. Pirenne's principle objective was rather to claim a crucial place for the Carolingian period in the history of Europe. He believed that during this period, the creative force of civilisation was relocated in the regions between the Seine and the Rhine whilst the Mediterranean countries lost the creative and determinative role which had been theirs since antiquity, becoming a periphery and the frontier of Europe.

It is in this dramatic disruption of an age-old settlement, conceived in terms of Universalgeschichte, that Pirenne located the beginnings of the history of modern Europe. In his view the geo-political settlement inaugurated by the Carolingians had lasted until his own period and still characterised European civilisation.

In the above-mentioned essay he only hinted at the two complementary tenets of his thesis on the transformation of the Roman world: the irrelevance of the barbarian invasions as the cause of the transformation and the decisive impact of the Islamic conquests in the crisis of the late-Antique Mediterranean world.

A year later Pirenne returned to the subject. This could have been prompted by the new essay of Alfons Dopsch, Wirtschaftliche und soziale Grundlagen der europäischen Kulturrentwicklung published between 1918 and 1919. Dopsch proposed a pattern of the continuous evolution of socio-economic structures in the period between the fall of the Roman empire and the emergence of the Carolingian. He maintained that no caesura or dramatic change could be perceived through the whole period and consequently the Carolingian epoch did not constitute such a new set of historical circumstances as Pirenne believed.

Pirenne held firm to his thesis, again addressing his arguments to the new position of the Carolingian period in every aspect of early medieval civilisation. He set out to substantiate his argument in the field with which he felt most comfortable, which was also that worked by Dopsch: socio-economics. He framed his response to Dopsch as a comparison of Merovingian and Carolingian economics, in such a way as to reveal the diversity and originality of the latter. He described the economic systems of the two periods as two distinct models or types, utilising concepts with which he had experimented in the History of Europe, although now he made them more explicit.

21 'A comparer les temps carolingiens aux temps mérovingiens, ce que l'on constate c'est un changement de type': Pirenne, "Un contraste économique: mérovingiens et carolingiens", p. 230.
These types were characterised by the same structural factors identified in 1895: towns and trade. Moreover, while Pirenne accepted that, as during the Roman Empire, agriculture represented the prevalent factor of the Merovingian economy, and land-ownership its staple, he maintained that the structure or, as he preferred it, the type, of economy was characterised by the level and organisation of exchange mechanisms, as trade was not conducted independently of the agricultural activity but was thoroughly integrated with it. Its prevalent characteristics were: the presence of a professional mercantile class, made up not only of eastern traders but also by indigenous merchants; the circulation of more commonplace goods alongside high-status commodities; the movement of commercial traffic within inland Merovingian Gaul as well as along Mediterranean coastal routes; and the widespread availability of a strong currency. These factors reveal within the economics of the Merovingian period a broad and permanent network of traffic; the pre-requisite for considering trade and exchange as fully integrated aspects of the economic structure.

The situation under the Carolingians was very different. Exchange and the movement of goods (the existence of which is not denied by Pirenne) lost their former characteristics, taking on a very different appearance and function: Carolingian economics consisted of an mosaic of restricted and self-sufficient economies and of a largely inconsequential traffic of precious non-essential commodities; this latter was transient in its organisation, and was for the most part serviced by groups of individuals drawn from outside the agrarian society: adventurers and foreigners. Pirenne was ready to explain the appearance under these circumstances of markets and coinage: trading places were temporary, make-shift centres; coinage was rare and its circulation limited. All indicators for the Carolingian period point to exchanges that were occasional and sporadic or highly-localised in character.

The exercise of historical dissection of the workings of economies, as they emerge from documentary sources, is prominent in this essay, which for this reason, is a significant product of Pirenne's own historiography. The psychological determinants of economic activity were now disregarded in favour of a functionalist analysis of systems.

Yet the typological approach used by Pirenne rendered the description of structures even more rigid than it had been in the History of Europe; eventually this rigidity affected the very presentation of the late Antique and Merovingian economies. Internal movement and change became irrelevant, given that the type of economy was described and
characterised by those aspects which appear to be constant and which remain so as long as the type itself survives. In this way, Pirenne gave up the progressive movement of Merovingian society and its economy on to the land and the consequent disintegration of the towns. He stated that the transition from Merovingian to Carolingian economics occurred gradually, not as the result of changes in internal structures, but of the successive recessions caused by the progress of the Islamic conquest, which by its every turn provoked a significant decline in trade until its eventual extinction. Under the Carolingians, economics were redefined, though in rather a different sense than that intended by Inama-Sternegg and Dopsch: trade having become impossible, the economy was adapted to functioning without it, taking the static form that Pirenne had already described in the *History of Europe*. There are oddities in this historical interpretation. Pirenne was interested in movement. In a letter to Heinrich Sproemberg of 1931 he writes:

\emph{Ce qui me frappe surtout dans l'histoire ce sont les mouvements de masse que l'observation empirique révèle et qui m'apparaissent comme les réalités les plus scientifiquement observables de l'évolution historique.}  

In his essay *Mahomet et Charlemagne* of 1922, Pirenne made a case for the continuity of the ancient socio-economic system through the Merovingian age and took issue against the customary division of historians into opposing camps of ancient and medieval history. He regarded this practice as a misleading and intolerable barrier to a more sophisticated comprehension of the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages:

\emph{De point de vue proprement historique, ce sont justement les périodes intermédiaires, les périodes de transition qui s'imposent surtout à l'attention, parce que c'est en elles que peuvent le mieux s'observer les changements sociaux qui forment l'objet même de l'histoire.}

Despite taking this line, in the following year he went on to describe the relationship between the Merovingian and Carolingian periods in terms which suggest precisely the same kind of historical rupture that he was refused to acknowledge for the fifth century.

In constructing his ‘typology’ of socio-economic systems, Pirenne did not pay attention to the variations in the relative frequency and inten-

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sity of historical events that may allow a description of social change in terms of continuity. Thus, all evidence for the ‘period of transition’ was lost in the historical representation; the “période intermédiaire” is therefore presented as an obscure time lapse suspended between two historically-distinct systems, between which no links of continuity can be detected. Hence, the change in ‘circumstances’ must be ascribed to external and independent causes. On this basis the source of change was best considered the result of an event, rather than of a broader historical process. The Islamic invasion of the Mediterranean was well suited to the role of determinant factor in the decline of antiquity to the Dark Ages.

VI

Pirenne’s meditation on the transformation of the Roman world found mature form in Mahomet et Charlemagne, the book which repeated the title of the former article. In this the hypotheses outlined by the essays of 1922 and 1923 were developed and supplemented with an abundance of source material. Perhaps it was precisely the detailed treatment of the evidence that led the book to encounter the harsh criticism of other scholars, who were quick to point out the weakness of its tenets, above all those concerning the evolution of the economy and society of late Antiquity and the supposed consequences of the Islamic conquests.

In fact, Pirenne gathered a huge amount of evidence to give the ideas that he had already outlined a more solid foundation. However, he regularly neglected to pay attention to the geographical and chronological context in which every piece of evidence occurred. He remarked on the irregular occurrence of structural indicators but did not care to delve deeply into the circumstances. He frequently chose one of several possible explanations of a given fact basing his conclusions not on rational evaluations but on preteritions or false statements.

There is only one theoretical justification, albeit a contentious one, to this method; the silent assumption that the survival of individual aspects of late-Roman economics provides testimony of the continuity of the late-Roman economy in its entirety. Such presumption led Pirenne to neglect the symptoms of the progressive disintegration of late Antiquity systems which can be shown to predate the Arab conquests and even the Germanic invasions. By placing emphasis on this evidence,
Pirenne’s critics presented a very different version of the crisis of late Antiquity, casting serious doubts on the historical legitimacy of the model he proposed. Similar reservations inflicted more limited damage to his account of the Carolingian period, in which Pirenne himself acknowledged irregularities, though he endeavoured to integrate these into his thesis.

Nevertheless, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* must not be cast as the simple restatement of themes previously dealt with in *Un contraste économique*; a restatement probably worsened by the fragile treatment of the evidence. Despite the method and substance contained in this last work, one must acknowledge that the narrative is richer and the problems faced are in part new.

The principle objective of *Mahomet et Charlemagne* was the same as in the essay of 1922; that is to establish a claim for the significant novelty of the Carolingian period. This Pirenne did by describing how in that period a new Europe was forged, not merely in economic terms, but also in political, social and cultural terms. The crisis of the ancient order caused new political forces to emerge to supplant moribund predecessors; this they were able to do by basing their authority on novel economic and cultural forms, more adapted to the altered circumstances of the day. Such forces were embodied by the Carolingians, the representatives of Austrasian society, which Pirenne regarded as the least-Romanised society of Merovingian Gaul, and thus the least affected by the crises afflicting Roman institutions and economy. However, while the Carolingians progressively assumed exclusive authority throughout the Frankish kingdoms and the political hegemony over the Christian West, a parallel process was occurring with the Papacy, the only “Mediterranean” institution remaining in the West following the Arab conquest, as its protagonist. Abandoning their former ties with the Byzantine East, the popes redirected their interests towards the north, finally throwing their political lot with the Carolingian kings in a formal alliance. The importance of these parallel processes is derived from Pirenne’s realisation that the rising Europe consisted not only of crude economic or political quantities, but presupposed a unitary cultural ethos drawn from the traditions of the Roman church.

In this version of the transition, the Islamic conquests did not simply result in the interruption of Mediterranean trade. In the causal chain the direct effect of the conquests was only that of robbing the Merovingian kings of the financial foundation of their power. On a larger scale Islam contributed to the birth of Carolingian Europe by subtract-
ing Spain and North Africa from western Christendom. The political transformation that took place in Gaul derives its significance from these facts. At the same time Islam confined the activities of the Byzantine Empire to the Eastern Mediterranean and thus contributed to the isolation of the papacy from the East, and therefore to draw it progressively towards the north-western connection and the kingdom of Charlemagne.

Pirenne stressed that:

*L'empire de Charlemagne est le point d'aboutissement de la rupture, par l'Islam, de l'équilibre européen. S'il a pu se réaliser, c'est que, d'une part, la séparation de l'Orient d'avec l'Occident a limité l'autorité du pape à l'Europe occidentale; et que, d'autre part, la conquête de l'Espagne et de l'Afrique par l'Islam avait fait du roi des Francs le maître de l'Ocident chrétien. Il est donc rigoureusement vrai de dire que, sans Mahomet, Charlemagne est inconcevable.*

Once again, one may recognise the application of a principle formed by Pirenne since 1913. New circumstances determined by external influences, result in the emergence of new historical subjects. The level on which this theory was applied and verified was now considerably more extensive and complex, since Pirenne was seeking here to describe not the emergence of a single social group, but of a new civilisation: an organic complex of political institutions, intellectual culture, literacy, learning, art and of connections between church and state. In Pirenne’s view, political initiative played a crucial role in the creation of the Carolingian civilisation, in as far as it promoted the circulation of individuals and ideas, the formulation and realisation of projects, the fusion of traditions and the creation of cultural institutions. In fact, in *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, Pirenne described the events which gave shape to the Carolingian world in terms of a coherent political evolution starting from late Merovingian times and aiming to reconstruct the whole Christian West into new forms.

This was exactly the sort of passage which Pirenne declined to go into when he discussed the relation between the Merovingian and the Carolingian economies. This may have resulted from the fact that he did not consider Dark Age economy as an effect of innovation, but rather as an adaptation to worsened conditions; for him it was not worth examining it in terms of evolving mechanisms, but only in terms

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of economic constraints in which the creative forces of the age were bound to operate.

On the other hand, it will be observed that Pirenne's interest in economic and social organisation constitutes but a single aspect of the historical panorama distilled in *Mahomet et Charlemagne*; this may be apparent from, among other things, the position of chapters dealing with social and economic history after those which set forth the order of political events and the creation of the state institutions. The formal structure of the thesis may indicate that, in the construction of the framework of society, Pirenne attributed pre-eminence to political will rather than economic determinants; at the same time, he regarded political and juridical institutions both as products of the culture in which they appear, and as instruments for the propagation of social ethos.

Indeed Pirenne explicitly asserted his conviction that movement in history is caused by the human will, being the product of the conscious intention and action of individuals or social groups. He also held that success in history depends on the moral foundation of the action and on the personal skill of the individuals. This recalls the explanation he proposed for the success of the Islamic conquest, or the emphasis with which he underlined the degree of enterprise and 'intelligence' of the new capitalists, revealed in his eyes even by their assumed knowledge of foreign languages.

All this does not conflict with the basic assumption that action is always firmly contained within the parameters set by economic conditions. In *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, political and economic histories are tightly interwoven. However, the former achieves pre-eminence in moulding the new European civilisation. *Mahomet et Charlemagne* is a history of the birth of Europe as a political and ideological entity, although in the field of economics Dark Age Europe remained primordial.

It is worth remarking that Pirenne modified a number of controversial statements he made in the *History of Europe*, in that he acknowledged the Germanic elements present in Carolingian culture. In the rise of Europe 'le germanisme commence son rôle. Jusqu'ici la tradition romaine s'était continue. Une civilisation romano-germanique va maintenant se développer'. The focus of cultural innovation moved northwards exactly because in the continental regions of Europe, Romano-Germanic cross-fertilisation was most diffuse and intense.

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Nothing could therefore be more inappropriate than to reduce the Pirenne Thesis to an essay on the transformation of the economic structures of the ancient world. But since this aspect is at least one conspicuous focus of Pirenne's treatment of the theme, the conceptual limitations which determined the thesis' intrinsic weaknesses must be identified and explained. In doing this, it should be remembered that Pirenne drew upon a vast corpus of sources for social and economic history, and that he was ready to appraise the variety and irregularity with which such data appears; neither did he allow himself the convenience of traditional historical periodisation or theoretical formalism. By so doing, he was able, for instance, to illustrate the continued activity of trade routes long after the fall of the Roman empire. Similarly, he identified a number of indices of significant change between the seventh and eighth centuries, the importance of which has been demonstrated by recent research; he also illustrated the different roles that can be assumed by one form of economic activity across different periods or in different circumstances.

Many of these perceptions are still useful, and certain of the problems addressed by Pirenne continue to occupy historical debate. Despite this, his contribution is coloured by the general presuppositions on the basis of which he marshalled his data and formulated his hypotheses. Pirenne was no student of economic or social theory. From scholars active in these disciplines he borrowed more in the way of superficial influence and modes of reasoning than he did with regard to actual doctrines or canons for historical interpretation.

It has been seen how Pirenne's mode of representing the structure as a *type*, although more in a historical than a theoretical perspective, prevented him from adequately quantifying change occurring within the structure. Furthermore, in giving order and significance to his material, Pirenne held two basic criteria: firstly, he assumed the perceived social and economic homogeneity of the whole of the West throughout the transition from late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages; and secondly he distinguished the successive economic systems in the history of Early Medieval Europe with reference to their level of commercialisation.

Pirenne's inter-connected analytical hypotheses kept him from a thorough awareness of the place of regional economies in the crisis of

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26 This was noted by F.L. Ganshof, "Les grandes théories historiques de Henri Pirenne", *Henri Pirenne. Hommages et souvenirs 1* (Brussels, 1938), pp. 208-212.
the antique world, though he recognised their existence in the Low Countries and in Italy. They also prevented him from realising that systems of exchange were not to be reduced to the opposition between long-distance and local trade; a third and original sort of trade might have existed founded on local and inter-regional exchange.

Besides, Pirenne does not offer a single coherent theory of the relation between economics and social change. While for him economy provided the essential background within which societies operate, he did not investigate the ways in which social operation modifies economic structure. Consideration of these broader limitations may go further than the critique of individual statements and hypotheses in explaining why Pirenne is consistently called into question. Nevertheless, their very nature still prompts reflection and explains the continued standing of Pirenne’s historical research.

[Translated by Matthew Moran]