CAPITA(FEUDA)LISM / LONG-FORM ESSAY

Who Owns Tomorrow?

Capitalism, Feudalism, and the Multiplied Master

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

> *Who has the right to decide how another person's tomorrow will be used?*

Based on Emil Venn's *Pocket Guide to Capita(feuda)lism 2026*

By Emil Venn

Contents

Abstract

Modern society describes itself through the vocabulary of capitalism: markets, contracts, competition, private property, mobility, and choice. Yet much of everyday life is increasingly organized through dependence on institutions that own the infrastructures through which other people must work, live, communicate, borrow, and become visible. The old lord has not returned in medieval costume. His functions have been separated, professionalized, limited, and redistributed among employers, banks, landlords, public authorities, platforms, and algorithms. No single institution owns the whole person, but many institutions may each possess an enforceable claim on a part of the person's future.

This essay treats **capita-feudalism** not as a new historical period, but as a configuration of power: a way of asking which functions of older lordship were separated, limited, and redistributed, and where ownership, rule-making, control, sanction, and exit become concentrated again. It asks what persists when personal lordship is replaced by impersonal organization; how the control of land becomes the control of access, data, credit, reputation, and time; why formal freedom can coexist with material necessity; and where the comparison with feudalism becomes misleading. Its central claim is that the decisive political resource is not wealth alone, but the practical capacity to decide how tomorrow will be used. A free society is therefore not defined merely by the existence of contracts or elections. It depends on meaningful exit, accountable authority, distributed ownership, social security, and protected domains of time that no employer, creditor, landlord, platform, or public office can casually appropriate.

1. The Master Who Disappeared by Multiplying

In the conventional story of European modernity, feudalism was abolished and capitalism took its place. Status yielded to contract. The hereditary estate gave way to private property. The manor was replaced by the firm. The subject became a citizen, the servant became an employee, and the ruler became an officeholder. Power ceased to belong to a person and came to belong to an institution. The modern world, in this account, is freer because the individual is no longer born into a fixed place in a personal hierarchy.

This story is true, but incomplete.

Modernity did not eliminate the functions once concentrated in the lord. It separated them. The feudal lord could be landowner, local judge, tax collector, military intermediary, employer, protector, and political superior at the same time. The modern order regards such concentration as dangerous. It distributes these roles among different institutions. A judge decides a dispute but does not own the disputed land. A tax office collects revenue but does not personally keep the proceeds. A landlord receives rent but cannot imprison the tenant. An employer directs work but does not ordinarily control marriage, inheritance, worship, or residence. A bank enforces repayment but does not formally rule the debtor's entire household. A platform controls visibility and access but insists that it is merely providing technical infrastructure.

This fragmentation is one of the greatest achievements of modern political development. It limits arbitrary power by preventing any single actor from holding the entire bundle. Yet fragmentation also creates a new difficulty: power becomes harder to perceive. The person confronted by one lord knows where authority sits. The person confronted by twenty contractual, administrative, financial, and digital relationships encounters power as a sequence of specialized claims. Each institution says that it controls only one narrow area. The employer controls the shift. The bank controls the payment schedule. The landlord controls continued residence. The platform controls access to customers. The insurer controls the classification of risk. The public agency controls eligibility. The algorithm controls ranking. No one claims the whole life, but the life may nevertheless be fully booked.

This is the starting point of capita-feudalism. It does not claim that contemporary employees are medieval serfs or that democratic governments are feudal estates. Such equations would erase decisive differences in law, violence, mobility, citizenship, and personal freedom. The comparison instead asks a functional question: **who possesses enforceable rights over the activity, resources, and future choices of another person?**

The older lord said, "Obey because I am your lord." Modern authority speaks in several voices. The judge says, "Comply because I have jurisdiction." The employer says, "Perform because you signed a contract." The bank says, "Pay because the debt is due." The platform says, "Accept because these are the terms of use." The algorithm says nothing. It simply lowers a rating, hides a listing, refuses a transaction, or raises a price.

The change in language matters. Personal command becomes impersonal necessity. The order appears not as someone's will but as the natural output of a procedure. This can be more lawful, more predictable, and more just. It can also make responsibility evaporate. The official followed the rule. The manager followed the target. The bank followed the model. The platform followed the policy. The algorithm followed the data. Everyone participates in the result; no one appears to have chosen it.

Power did not disappear. It organized itself better. The master disappeared by multiplying: the old bundle of powers was divided among offices, contracts, owners, procedures, and institutions. His castle becomes an organizational chart. His steward becomes a manager, caseworker, compliance officer, moderator, or automated notification. His memory becomes a database. His command becomes a deadline. His gate becomes a password. His favor becomes a score.

The central problem is no longer simply who owns the land. It is who owns the systems through which land, work, money, recognition, and opportunity are reached. The key question is not whether a person is legally free in the abstract. It is whether that person can refuse a demand without losing the material conditions of freedom.

2. Analogy as a Hammer and an X-Ray

The four provocative equations at the center of Venn's argument are deliberately excessive:

> **Feudal lord = judge**
>
> **Emperor = minister**
>
> **Servant = employee**
>
> **Serf = entrepreneur**

Here “servant” refers to the rural, often live-in hired servant; “serf” is retained in the deliberately blunt equation, while the historical discussion below more often concerns the dependent or subject peasant.

They are not historical definitions. They are hammers. First we strike. Then we examine what broke and what remained. Only after the glass is broken do they become diagnostic instruments - an X-ray of functions hidden beneath different legal names.

An analogy of this kind is valuable only when it is tested against its own failure. It should not ask whether two institutions are identical. It should ask which organizational problem both institutions solve, by what mechanism, at whose expense, and under what limits. Four tests are especially useful.

The first is the **scene**. What does the relationship look like in ordinary life? A medieval steward arrives at the farm and claims labor on a day the household had planned to use for itself. A factory bell marks the beginning of the paid day. A smartphone notification announces a deadline, an installment, a rating change, or a request that must be answered quickly. The technologies differ, but each scene concerns the allocation of time by an external authority.

The second is the **mechanism**. How is compliance produced? Feudal obligation may rest on inherited status, customary dues, jurisdiction, and the threat of force. Employment rests on contract, organizational hierarchy, and dependence on wages. Debt rests on a legal promise backed by collateral, penalties, and credit consequences. Platform power rests on access, ranking, network effects, reputation, and unilateral terms. The mechanisms are not the same. Yet all can convert another person's future action into a predictable resource.

The third is the **objection**. What has genuinely improved? Modern employees have legal personality, wages, labor protections, private lives, mobility, and access to courts. Ministers hold office temporarily and are constrained by constitutions, elections, budgets, and law. Judges must provide reasons and permit appeal. Entrepreneurs may own, sell, close, relocate, or transform an enterprise. These differences are not minor. They are the substance of modern freedom.

The fourth is the **boundary**. At what point does the analogy stop illuminating and begin distorting? Calling every employment relationship slavery or every tax feudal tribute destroys the distinctions needed for criticism. A metaphor that explains everything explains nothing. The purpose is not to announce that history never changed. It is to show that emancipation often changes the form of dependence rather than abolishing dependence itself.

The X-ray reveals five recurring organizational questions:

1. Who sets the goal?
2. Who controls the means needed to reach it?
3. Who bears the risk when the plan fails?
4. Who receives the surplus when it succeeds?
5. Who can leave, and at what cost?

These questions cut across historical periods. A serf household, a factory, a ministry, a franchise, a startup, and a digital platform answer them differently, but none can avoid them. The analogy becomes useful when it exposes a mismatch between legal form and practical power. Two people may be formally equal before signing a contract, yet one may control the scarce resource the other needs to survive. A worker may be legally free to resign, yet unable to lose health insurance or housing. A seller may be free to abandon a platform, yet unable to reach customers elsewhere. A citizen may have the right to appeal, yet lack the time, information, and money required to use it.

Capita-feudalism is therefore best understood as a **diagnostic of concentrated dependency**. It appears where an institution controls access to a necessary domain, can change the rules unilaterally, extracts continuing value, makes exit costly, and remains difficult to challenge. Not every hierarchy meets this standard. A temporary, transparent, contestable hierarchy may be compatible with freedom. The danger begins when dependence becomes durable, opaque, and self-reinforcing.

The analogy also changes the meaning of ownership. Ownership is not merely possession of an object. It is a bundle of rights over use, exclusion, transfer, income, and decision. A medieval lord could exercise authority because land carried political and social powers. A modern platform may exercise authority because ownership of infrastructure carries the power to define participation. The object changes from soil to system. The political question remains: what kinds of command are hidden inside property rights?

3. The Manor as an Enterprise That Cannot Be Sold

The medieval peasant household is often imagined as a passive unit crushed between landlord, church, and ruler. This picture captures subordination but misses organization. A farm was not only a family residence. It was a productive institution that had to coordinate labor, animals, tools, seed, food, obligations, weather, and succession. Someone had to decide who would plow, repair, care, transport, preserve, negotiate, and wait. If coordination failed, the result was not a delayed quarterly report. It was hunger.

Seen from below, the dependent peasant was subordinate. Seen within the household, the same person could be manager, employer, planner, and authority. Upward he owed rent, labor, dues, or loyalty. Downward he allocated work among family members and servants. This double position makes the equation "serf = entrepreneur" provocative but productive. The peasant organized a productive unit, maintained capital goods, carried immediate risk, and attempted to preserve the enterprise into the next season.

The decisive difference is that the productive unit was not freely separable from social status. A modern entrepreneur may sell a business, change industries, incorporate, declare bankruptcy, relocate, or close. The medieval holder of a dependent farm could not necessarily treat the holding as a disposable asset. The land was simultaneously livelihood, obligation, identity, and place in the social order. The enterprise was not merely something the peasant operated. It was the institutional form through which the peasant existed.

This distinction clarifies a central feature of modern economic freedom: **the ability to separate oneself from one's productive role**. A person who can sell an asset, resign from an office, or close an enterprise possesses an exit that a status-bound person lacks. Yet modern arrangements frequently recreate partial forms of inseparability. A small business owner may be personally tied to guarantees, leases, tax liabilities, subscriptions, and customer reviews. A professional may possess credentials that are valuable only within one jurisdiction or institutional network. A platform-dependent seller may formally own the business but lack independent access to the market. A mortgaged homeowner may own the house while years of future income are pledged to the lender.

The older farm reveals another important point: corvée was not merely labour. It was a subscription to someone else's calendar. The burden was not only how many hours were taken, but who decided when the most valuable day ceased to be yours. Timing matters. Suppose a household owes several days of labor. The burden is not simply the number of hours. It is the loss of control over which hours are taken. Agricultural work is sensitive to weather, seasons, animal health, and narrow windows of opportunity. A demanded day at the wrong moment may cost more than several demanded days at an ordinary moment.

This insight applies directly to modern work. An employer may pay for eight hours but also acquire discretion over when those hours occur, whether schedules change, how quickly a worker must respond, and which personal commitments become impossible. A platform may not order a driver to work, yet may make the most profitable periods available only to those who remain constantly responsive. A client may not formally control a freelancer's day, yet repeated urgent requests can turn nominal independence into permanent availability.

The most valuable resource is therefore not time in the abstract. It is **self-directed time at moments that matter**. A parent may possess several free hours but not the hour when a child needs care. A farmer may possess several days but not the dry day needed for harvest. A contractor may be free between assignments but unable to predict when the next request will arrive. A debtor may choose how to spend money after fixed payments have already claimed the first part of every month.

The manor also exposes the distribution of risk. The peasant household could bear the immediate consequences of weather, disease, poor harvest, and labor shortage while superior claimants retained rights to dues. This does not mean every obligation was absolute or every lord indifferent to collapse. Long-term systems sometimes moderated demands because destroying the productive base harmed everyone. But the structural question remains: who absorbs the first loss?

Modern firms similarly distribute risk asymmetrically. Employees may receive fixed wages while owners bear profit volatility, but workers can lose jobs when the enterprise fails. Small suppliers may finance large customers through delayed payment. Franchisees invest local capital while the franchisor controls brand and standards. Gig workers provide vehicles, maintenance, insurance, and idle time while the platform controls matching and price. The label "entrepreneur" can therefore describe genuine autonomy or serve as a device for moving risk downward without moving control.

The comparison with the manor adds value because it refuses to romanticize either side. The dependent peasant had practical knowledge, initiative, and responsibility, but lacked full exit. The modern entrepreneur has legal autonomy, but may operate inside networks whose owners control the essential gateways. The relevant question is not whether a person owns a business name. It is whether the person controls the conditions under which the business can survive.

4. The Servant and the Total Social Package

The rural servant was not necessarily unpaid. The more important point is that payment could not be cleanly separated from life. In many European settings, servants lived within the employer's household and received a mixed package of food, lodging, clothing, protection, reputation, training, and money. Employment was embedded in life. The boundary between wage, welfare, discipline, and domestic authority was unclear because the household supplied them together.

This arrangement could provide security, especially for young people moving between family households and the establishment of an independent home. It could also create extreme vulnerability. Losing the position might mean losing not only income but bed, meals, social standing, and the recommendation required for the next place. The servant's dependence was powerful because several necessities had a single gatekeeper.

Modern wage labor separates these necessities. The employer pays money. The worker buys food from a retailer, housing from an owner or bank, insurance from a public or private system, education from institutions, and communication from network providers. This separation is a profound form of liberation. The employer no longer needs to provide a total household, and the worker is not ordinarily absorbed into the employer's family order.

Yet separation does not eliminate dependence. It **diversifies** it. Instead of one master for almost everything, the individual encounters many specialized providers, each controlling a narrow necessity. The worker sleeps not in the employer's house but perhaps in a dwelling effectively claimed by a mortgage. Food is available through markets, but only while income continues. Health security may depend on contributions, employment status, premiums, or eligibility rules. Communication may depend on privately owned networks. Professional existence may depend on digital identity and reputation.

Money partly frees a person from one master by allowing that person to obtain the separate necessities of life elsewhere. In the book's deliberately sharper formulation, money frees us from one master partly by allowing us to find other masters ourselves. Personal dependence decreases; market dependence increases.

This shift has two opposing effects.

First, it increases choice. A worker can change shops, landlords, insurers, service providers, and sometimes employers. Competition can prevent any one provider from becoming a total authority. Cash is portable. It does not ordinarily tell the recipient where to eat or what to wear.

Second, it creates a system in which the loss of money can trigger simultaneous exclusion from multiple domains. The servant might lose one household. The modern employee who loses income may soon confront rent, debt, insurance, transport, communications, and childcare costs at once. The system is decentralized in administration but tightly coupled through money.

This explains why formal labor freedom cannot be assessed only at the workplace. A worker's bargaining power depends on the surrounding social package. Affordable housing, health care, unemployment protection, childcare, transport, education, and access to credit affect whether resignation is a real option. Labor law can prohibit coercion, yet material insecurity can reproduce compliance without a direct threat.

The phrase "employee as servant" is therefore wrong if it refers to legal status and useful if it refers to the temporary incorporation of a person's capacity into an organization the person does not own. During working time, the organization typically sets goals, procedures, reporting lines, acceptable conduct, and performance standards. The employee has not sold the self. The employee temporarily places working capacity inside an organization the employee does not own.

But capacity cannot be detached from the person. Fatigue returns home. Stress crosses the boundary. A schedule affects family life. Surveillance alters behavior before and after work. Professional reputation can follow a person between employers. Remote work can reverse the historical separation by bringing the firm back into the home, not as a resident master but as software, calendar, camera, and notification.

The modern employment contract is therefore a remarkable legal construction: a relation of subordination between formally equal persons. Both parties are legal equals when they contract. Once the contract begins, one acquires a limited authority to direct the other. The legitimacy of this arrangement depends on limits: working hours, safety, nondiscrimination, privacy, representation, dismissal rules, minimum standards, and the practical possibility of departure.

The crucial distinction is between **rented capacity** and **captured life**. Employment remains compatible with freedom when authority is specific, proportionate, transparent, and bounded. It drifts toward capita-feudalism when the employer's influence expands through housing, insurance, immigration status, reputation systems, noncompete clauses, scheduling unpredictability, or control of professional access. The more necessities are tied to one organizational relationship, the more the modern employee approaches the servant's total package from the opposite direction.

5. From Lordship to Functions

The feudal lord bundled powers that modern institutions attempt to separate. This separation is often described as differentiation: political, legal, economic, religious, and administrative roles become distinct. The judge is not the tax collector. The employer is not the priest. The landlord is not the police. The minister is not the owner of the state.

The following comparison is not an equation of institutions. It shows how functions once concentrated in a personal position have been redistributed.

Function once associated with lordship	Modern institutional location	Modern safeguard	Persistent danger
Control of land and access	Private owners, banks, planning authorities	Property law, tenancy law, courts	Rent dependence, foreclosure, exclusion

Function once associated with lordship	Modern institutional location	Modern safeguard	Persistent danger
Local judgment	Independent courts and tribunals	Reasons, appeal, recusal, public law	Cost, delay, category blindness
Collection of dues	Tax administrations, creditors, platforms	General law, contracts, oversight	Automatic extraction, weak bargaining power
Direction of labor	Employers, managers, clients, platforms	Labor law, unions, contract limits	Surveillance, precarity, disguised employment
Maintenance of order	Police, regulators, compliance systems	Legality, proportionality, review	Administrative overreach, selective enforcement
Recognition of identity and status	Registries, licensing bodies, platforms	Due process, data rights	Exclusion through records, scores, verification
Protection and welfare	Social state, insurers, employers	Entitlements, universality, appeals	Dependency on eligibility and classification
Control of communication	Media firms, telecoms, platforms	Competition law, speech protections	Ranking power, deplatforming, attention capture

The modern safeguard column matters as much as the danger column. The point is not that modernity merely disguises feudalism. The point is that freedom depends on the institutional design that accompanies fragmentation. Power becomes less personal, but it does not become harmless. It must be made answerable.

The judge illustrates this most clearly. A modern judge does not own the parties, the territory, or the object of dispute. The office is not hereditary. The decision must be grounded in law and usually explained. Procedures allow evidence, challenge, appeal, and review. These are not decorative differences. They transform command into jurisdiction.

Yet the citizen standing before a judge still encounters an asymmetry. The judge has authority to translate a life into legal categories and produce a binding result. The citizen has a story; the court has a file. Without categories, equal law is impossible. With categories, part of reality is always excluded. The modern problem is therefore not to abolish judgment but to ensure that judgment remains revisable, reasoned, independent, and human enough to notice what the category misses.

The minister similarly inherits a fragment of sovereign power. A minister does not own the state and cannot ordinarily pass the office to a child. The minister's authority is temporary, legally defined, budget-limited, and politically contestable. Yet temporary power remains real. The minister controls attention, appointments, information flows, priorities, and administrative energy. A policy problem can become urgent or remain buried depending on what reaches the agenda.

The emperor did not become the minister. He multiplied. Modern constitutional government cut the former sovereign bundle into offices, and the minister became a temporary user of one part of it. This is the difference between authority as property and authority as office. This is a central achievement of constitutional government. Officeholders are users, not owners, of public power. They must return the keys.

But the separation of powers also generates responsibility gaps. When a harmful decision emerges from several offices, each actor can point elsewhere. The legislature created the rule. The ministry issued guidance. The agency designed the form. The contractor built the system. The official applied the category. The software produced the result. Fragmentation limits personal arbitrariness, yet it can make collective arbitrariness difficult to contest.

Capita-feudal analysis therefore asks not only whether powers are separated, but whether **responsibility travels with power**. An institution that can affect a person's livelihood should be identifiable, explainable, and challengeable. Otherwise the modern subject faces a Multiplied Master with no address.

6. The State Learns to See

A small community can govern through memory. People know families, histories, boundaries, debts, reputations, and exceptions. Large organizations cannot rely on such knowledge. They require records. The growth of states, armies, taxation, trade, churches, firms, and welfare systems therefore depends on a revolution in legibility: names, addresses, parcels, measures, accounts, categories, files, and identifiers.

This transformation is often experienced as administrative progress. Records allow continuity beyond the life of an official. Standard measures make exchange more reliable. Registries protect ownership and identity. Accounts expose theft. Written procedures reduce favoritism. A person can claim a pension as a right because contributions were recorded; without records, support depends on memory or mercy.

But legibility is also a form of power. Before an authority can tax, recruit, regulate, insure, compensate, or punish a population, it must be able to locate and classify it. The authority does not need to know the person in the rich sense. It needs to identify the correct record.

The contrast is captured by a simple scene. A villager says, "There is one horse, but it is lame." The register records, "one horse." The local story contains context; the administrative category contains countability. Neither is useless. The story is difficult to scale. The category is easy to compare. The cost of scale is the cutting away of detail.

Max Weber helps explain why the official must be replaceable. Authority belongs to the office, not to the private personality of the officeholder. A file permits the next official to continue the process. James C. Scott helps explain why the citizen must become comparable. The state simplifies complex local reality into standardized units that can be seen from the center.

These two developments create modern administration. The official becomes impersonal; the citizen becomes legible. The first reduces personal favoritism. The second increases administrative reach.

The same logic governs the corporation. Accounting transforms events into entries. Human resources transforms people into positions, grades, competencies, and headcount. Logistics transforms places into nodes. Risk management transforms uncertainty into categories. Performance systems transform activity into indicators. Digital platforms transform behavior into data points.

The problem is not that these representations are false. The problem is that they are **operationally incomplete**. A score can be accurate about what it measures and still produce injustice because what it excludes matters. A credit model may predict default while reinforcing past exclusion. A productivity metric may count completed tasks while ignoring care, cooperation, repair, and prevention. A welfare rule may treat two households as equivalent because the form cannot see their different obligations.

Modern power often operates through the authority of the representation. Once the person has been converted into a file, the file begins to govern the person. An error in a name, address, status, debt, or rating can block access across multiple institutions. Correction may require the individual to prove reality to the system that misdescribed it.

The medieval lord needed a steward who knew where the household lived. The modern institution needs an identifier. The house number becomes an early username for public administration. The account number becomes a coordinate in finance. The platform profile becomes a portable reputation. The biometric marker promises to bind the record to the body.

Data also outlives purpose. Information collected for delivery becomes evidence of consumption. Information collected for insurance becomes a risk score. Information collected for friendship becomes an advertising profile. Information collected for convenience becomes a behavioral prediction. The register begins modestly; secondary use becomes ambitious.

This is why privacy is not merely secrecy. It is the right to prevent one institution's knowledge from becoming another institution's command. Data protection is a boundary between functions, just as the separation of judicial and economic power is a boundary. Without such separation, the Multiplied Master begins to reassemble himself through information.

A free administrative order therefore requires more than accurate data. It requires purpose limitation, correction rights, explanation, proportionality, human review, and the preservation of contexts that categories omit. The person must remain more authoritative about the self than the file.

7. The Clock Enters the Body

Agrarian work is often organized by tasks and natural rhythms. The animal must be fed, the field harvested, the roof repaired, the meal prepared. Work ends when the task is complete or conditions make continuation impossible. Industrial organization increasingly standardizes time itself. The shift begins at a fixed hour. The bell rings. Attendance is recorded. Minutes become measurable units of performance.

E. P. Thompson's account of work discipline shows that this is not merely a technical change. It is a moral transformation. Punctuality, regularity, and efficient use of time become signs of character. Delay becomes more than inconvenience; it becomes failure of discipline. A person begins to carry the clock internally.

This standardization enables enormous achievements. Trains run on schedules. Factories coordinate thousands of workers. Hospitals organize shifts. Schools gather students. Wages can be calculated. Overtime can be recognized. Public services become dependable.

The clock is not the master. It is his most reliable steward. Industrial organization no longer needs to claim only the right day; it standardizes every day into measurable intervals that can be bought, compared, recorded, and supervised. The lord no longer needs to claim a particular day through personal command. The organization purchases standardized intervals and defines what counts as proper use within them. Time becomes abstract, divisible, comparable, and exchangeable.

The factory worker is freer than the status-bound servant because the relation begins by contract and can end. Yet the sold interval is governed externally. The organization determines when the clock starts, what pace is expected, when breaks occur, and how deviation is recorded. The worker's day is not taken as inherited duty. It is purchased as measured capacity.

Digital work extends this discipline beyond the visible shift. The smartphone enables flexible work but also flexible intrusion. Messages arrive before breakfast, during travel, after dinner, and on leave. The organization may not explicitly order constant availability. It may merely reward responsiveness, schedule meetings across time zones, or create a culture in which silence carries reputational cost.

Platforms intensify the ambiguity. A gig worker appears free to log on or off. Yet pricing, ranking, and demand forecasts may make only certain periods economically viable. The platform does not command the worker to be present. It structures incentives so that freedom exists formally while profitable freedom exists only at selected times.

This distinction between **commanded time** and **pre-shaped time** is essential. Modern systems often avoid direct orders by arranging the environment in which choices are made. A deadline, interest schedule, surge price, cancellation penalty, or performance target can organize conduct without a human superior issuing a command.

The clock has also entered consumption. Subscription renewals, loan payments, insurance premiums, software licenses, rent, and taxes divide the future into recurring claims. Before the month begins, parts of income are already assigned. The debtor is free to spend what remains, just as the dependent farmer was free to use the harvest after superior claims were met.

This does not make a mortgage identical to feudal dues. The borrower chose the contract, receives an asset, benefits from legal protections, and may refinance or sell. But the comparison reveals how future labor becomes collateral. A large debt is not merely a number. It is a claim on future working time.

The most important inequality may therefore be inequality of temporal sovereignty. Some people can decline a meeting, survive a delay, take leave, wait for a better offer, or absorb an emergency. Others live inside tightly scheduled obligations where a missed shift, late payment, or low rating produces cascading harm.

Wealth buys more than goods. It buys the ability to wait. It buys control over the calendar. It buys the right to say, "not today."

A theory of freedom that measures only formal choice overlooks this temporal dimension. A person may possess many options but lack the time, predictability, or financial margin to use them. The central question becomes the book's recurring question: **who has the right to decide how another person's tomorrow will be used?**

8. Contract: Freedom and Structured Necessity

Modern society justifies many unequal relations through contract. The employee agrees to work. The tenant agrees to pay rent. The borrower agrees to repay. The user agrees to the platform's terms. The contractor agrees to provide a result. Consent distinguishes these relations from inherited status and direct compulsion.

That distinction is indispensable. A person who chooses a relationship and can end it occupies a different moral and legal position from a person born into an inescapable estate. Contract allows strangers to cooperate without belonging to the same household, religion, family, or political faction. It converts personal dependence into limited obligation.

Yet a contract can be legally voluntary and materially difficult to refuse. The two parties may possess equal legal capacity while facing radically unequal alternatives. One needs labor; the other needs income before rent is due. One offers standardized terms; the other can accept or disappear. One can spread risk across thousands of transactions; the other places a home, career, or livelihood in a single agreement.

This does not invalidate consent. It means that consent has degrees of practical depth. A signature answers the question, "Was agreement formally given?" It does not fully answer, "What alternatives were realistically available?" or "How much power does the agreement create after signature?"

Capita-feudal tension increases when contract becomes a bridge through which durable dependence is privately legislated - especially when rules are unilateral, exit is costly, and rights, data, reputation or security cannot be carried elsewhere. Terms of service can define speech, dispute resolution, data use, fees, ranking, termination, and access. The user clicks once; the platform reserves the right to revise the terms repeatedly. The agreement looks bilateral but operates like a rulebook issued by the owner of a territory.

Employment contracts can contain confidentiality, intellectual-property assignment, mobility restrictions, monitoring rights, bonus discretion, and broad definitions of misconduct. Credit contracts can trigger fees, acceleration, collateral seizure, or negative reporting. Leases can define access to the basic space of private life. Franchise agreements can control appearance, suppliers, prices, procedures, and transfer.

The issue is not that such terms are always abusive. Complex cooperation requires rules. The issue is whether the weaker party has meaningful voice, comprehension, alternatives, and remedy. A contract is less a meeting of wills when one party writes a reusable legal environment and the other merely enters it.

The old order bound a person through status. The modern order can bind through accumulated commitments. No single promise is total. Together, promises can create a dense net: mortgage, insurance, lease, school fees, subscriptions, taxes, platform rules, employment duties, and family obligations. The person remains legally mobile, but movement becomes expensive because many arrangements must be unwound simultaneously.

This is **structured necessity**. It differs from direct coercion because no official orders the person to choose one path. Instead, institutions shape the cost of alternatives. A worker may be free to leave a job, but the loss of income threatens housing. A tenant may be free to reject a rent increase, but moving costs and local scarcity make refusal unrealistic. A seller may be free to leave a platform, but customers are concentrated there. A borrower may be free to default, but the consequences are designed precisely to make default unbearable.

The correct response is not to abolish contract. It is to civilize it. Modern law already does this through minimum wages, safety rules, consumer protection, usury limits, tenancy protections, bankruptcy, disclosure, collective bargaining, competition law, privacy rights, and judicial review of unfair terms. These rules recognize that private agreements can produce public forms of power.

The deeper principle is that freedom cannot be outsourced entirely to the moment of consent. A person does not waive citizenship by entering a workplace, renting a home, borrowing money, or opening an account. Rights must follow the person into institutions. Otherwise the private contract becomes a miniature constitution written by the stronger party.

The question is therefore not simply whether a person agreed. It is what kind of authority the agreement creates, how long it lasts, how transparently it operates, how it can be challenged, and whether exit remains survivable. Consent begins legitimacy. It does not complete it.

9. An Entrepreneur Between Title, Control, and Risk

The entrepreneur occupies a heroic place in capitalist culture. The entrepreneur is imagined as the person without a master: self-directed, risk-bearing, inventive, and responsible. Unlike the employee, the entrepreneur owns the enterprise or at least controls its direction. Unlike the bureaucrat, the entrepreneur does not wait for permission. Unlike the dependent peasant, the entrepreneur can sell, move, expand, close, or begin again.

These are real freedoms. But the image becomes misleading when it treats ownership as independence from all superior claims. An enterprise is often the point where many claims meet. Employees expect wages. Suppliers expect payment. Landlords expect rent. Banks expect installments. Insurers expect premiums. Tax authorities expect declarations and revenue. Regulators expect compliance. Customers expect delivery. Platforms expect commissions. Only after these obligations are met does the owner discover whether a residual remains.

This is the force of the equation "serf = entrepreneur." The comparison does not deny property rights or mobility. It highlights a shared organizational position: the person who coordinates production, bears immediate uncertainty, and distributes the result among claimants who may have priority.

The dependent farmer feared weather, disease, and obligation. The modern entrepreneur fears demand shifts, interest rates, regulation, technological change, late payment, litigation, and platform dependence. Both must preserve productive capacity into the future. Both may appear powerful within the unit while remaining subordinate to the wider order.

The analogy becomes especially sharp in small enterprise. A multinational corporation can bargain with governments, lenders, workers, and suppliers. A small shop, contractor, farmer, or independent professional may possess formal ownership but little market power. The person controls daily operations yet cannot control rent, platform fees, payment terms, financing costs, energy prices, or the rules imposed by dominant buyers.

The modern economy frequently transfers risk downward by renaming dependency as entrepreneurship. A worker becomes an independent contractor and provides the vehicle, equipment, insurance, maintenance, downtime, and tax administration. The principal retains control over pricing, access, standards, and customer relationships. The worker receives autonomy over fragments of execution but not over the commercial architecture.

This arrangement can be legitimate when independence is genuine. Many people value control over schedule, clients, methods, and growth. The diagnostic question is whether risk and control travel together. If the worker bears entrepreneurial risk while the platform or principal retains employer-like control, the label "independent" becomes a legal costume.

Franchising offers another example. The franchisee may invest capital, hire staff, and bear local loss. The franchisor controls brand, systems, suppliers, and contractual standards. The relationship can create successful cooperation, but it can also resemble a layered estate: local operators work land they nominally own while a superior owner defines the terms of productive legitimacy.

Credit deepens the comparison. Many enterprises begin with borrowed money and personal guarantees. Ownership is therefore conditional. The entrepreneur holds the upside after creditors are paid and absorbs loss before creditors do. A business owner may be socially described as capitalist while economically behaving as a manager for debt holders, landlords, and platforms.

The point is not that creditors are parasites or employees undeserving claimants. Credit enables investment; wages compensate labor; taxes finance public goods; rent provides access to property. The point is that the rhetoric of absolute entrepreneurial sovereignty conceals a hierarchy of claims.

A more realistic description distinguishes three dimensions:

- **Title:** Who legally owns the enterprise?
- **Control:** Who determines key conditions of operation?
- **Residual risk:** Who loses first when revenues fail?

Capita-feudal conditions appear when title sits below control and risk. The nominal owner bears the loss, while superior institutions set the rules. The capita-feudal tension is greatest when title, control, and risk pull apart: the lower participant bears the risk while a higher institution retains control over price, access, standards, customers, or the rules of participation.

The solution is not to romanticize small ownership or condemn scale. It is to make markets genuinely plural. Access to finance, interoperable platforms, fair payment terms, portable reputation, transparent ranking, reasonable bankruptcy, cooperative ownership, and competition policy all expand the entrepreneur's capacity to exit one hierarchy without losing the enterprise itself.

Entrepreneurial freedom is not the absence of obligation. It is the ability to negotiate obligations among several real alternatives.

The entrepreneur nevertheless remains a genuine residual claimant: after employees, suppliers, rent, creditors, taxes and other prior claims are paid, what remains - profit or loss - is the entrepreneur's

10. The Welfare State: Collective Protection and Administrative Dependency

Industrial society creates a distinctive problem. Workers are legally free but materially dependent on wages. Illness, injury, unemployment, disability, parenthood, and old age can interrupt income without interrupting need. Formal liberty does not pay for food or shelter.

The welfare state responds by collectivizing part of life's risk. Support is no longer only a favor from an employer, family, church, landlord, or benefactor. It becomes an entitlement grounded in law. This is a decisive break with personal lordship. Mercy depends on the will of the giver; a right can be claimed.

But a right requires administration. The system must know who contributed, who qualifies, what event occurred, how much is due, and for how long. The social state therefore expands both security and legibility. It protects the person from market exclusion by placing the person inside a public record.

This dual character produces a persistent tension. The welfare state can be described as a collective insurance mechanism created because markets and families do not reliably protect everyone. It can also become an intrusive classifier that divides people into eligible and ineligible categories, monitors conduct, and demands proof at moments of vulnerability.

The relevant contrast is not between freedom and bureaucracy. Rights without bureaucracy often become unequal favors. The challenge is to design bureaucracy that serves the right rather than making the right serve the procedure.

Social protection changes bargaining power far beyond the benefit itself. Unemployment insurance makes refusal of dangerous or abusive work more possible. Universal health care prevents employment from becoming the gatekeeper of treatment. Public education reduces dependence on inherited wealth. Pensions reduce dependence on children or employers. Housing support can prevent immediate homelessness. In each case, the state creates a material basis for exit from private authority.

For this reason, the social state is not simply another master. The welfare state is not a feudal lord that learned to speak kindly. It is a historical response to the fact that legal freedom without material security can produce new dependence. It collectivizes part of the risk when the market loses interest in a person. Democratic legitimacy, general law, taxation, universality, and appeal distinguish public provision from feudal protection.

Yet public power can reproduce dependency when access is conditional, opaque, stigmatized, or politically unstable. A claimant may be required to prove incapacity repeatedly. A family may adjust behavior to avoid losing eligibility. A person may avoid temporary work because a small income increase triggers a larger benefit loss. A bureaucratic error can suspend support without a timely human remedy.

The result is an administrative version of insecurity: the person is protected but must remain correctly classified. The form becomes the gate. The caseworker becomes the interpreter. The database becomes the memory of need.

The deeper distinction is between **universal citizenship rights** and **discretionary relief**. Universal systems reduce the personal power of administrators because eligibility follows broad status: residence, age, disability, parenthood, or contribution. Highly targeted systems may use resources efficiently but increase surveillance and boundary disputes.

Capita-feudal drift occurs when the welfare state ceases to enlarge autonomy and instead manages poverty through permanent conditionality. A system that merely keeps people compliant at the edge of survival becomes less a foundation for freedom than an apparatus of social discipline.

The solution is not administrative innocence. No large system can operate without categories. The solution is contestable categorization: clear rules, accessible explanations, correction, independent review, human discretion in exceptional cases, and benefits designed to support movement rather than punish it.

The welfare state shows why the metaphor of the master must remain disciplined. Public authority can compel taxation and define eligibility, but it also creates roads, schools, courts, care, and security that make private independence possible. The same institution can be both a concentration of power and a protection against other concentrations of power.

The correct question is not whether the state is a master. It is whether citizens can govern the master they have collectively created.

11. The Platform as Private Territory

A digital platform presents itself as an intermediary. It connects drivers and passengers, buyers and sellers, creators and audiences, hosts and guests, workers and clients. It claims not to own the underlying activity. It merely provides the place where others meet.

But control of the meeting place can become control of the market. The platform defines entry, ranking, fees, visibility, payment, reputation, dispute resolution, and removal. It writes the rules, observes behavior, changes the environment, and receives a share of transactions. It resembles a market, a regulator, a landlord, and a court at once.

This is not feudalism in a historical sense. Users are not tied to land, and the platform does not possess public sovereignty. Yet the organizational analogy is unusually strong because the platform governs a private territory whose value comes from the presence of others. Network effects make departure costly. The more participants gather in one place, the harder it becomes to build an alternative.

The medieval estate controlled access to productive land. The platform controls access to productive visibility. A seller may own inventory but not customer attention. A driver may own the car but not the stream of ride requests. A creator may own content but not the distribution channel. A developer may build an application but depend on an app store's approval, fee structure, and search ranking.

Ownership therefore moves one level upward. The participant owns the productive tool; the platform owns the environment in which the tool becomes valuable.

The platform's power is often constitutional in character. Terms of service function as private law. Moderation systems function as police and courts. Ranking systems allocate opportunity. Design choices define permissible behavior. Yet the platform ordinarily claims contractual rather than political legitimacy. Users agreed.

This creates a governance deficit. Public institutions must justify rules through law, procedure, and democratic authority. Platforms often revise rules unilaterally, communicate through automated notices, and offer limited appeal. Their decisions can have public consequences while being treated as private administration.

The problem is intensified by information asymmetry. The platform sees the market in aggregate. It knows demand, supply, conversion rates, prices, locations, search behavior, and performance. Individual participants see only a partial interface. The platform can experiment on the environment, change incentives, and predict responses. The user cannot easily distinguish a neutral market outcome from a result designed by the platform.

A driver sees fewer requests and does not know whether demand fell, ranking changed, location mattered, or a hidden penalty applied. A seller sees declining traffic and does not know whether competitors improved, advertising became necessary, or the recommendation system changed. A creator sees reduced reach and cannot tell whether audience interest shifted or distribution rules were modified.

This is power through uncertainty. The steward once appeared at the door. The platform modifies the landscape before the participant arrives.

The platform can also separate control from responsibility. Workers are described as independent. Sellers are responsible for products. Hosts are responsible for property. Users are responsible for content. The platform controls the architecture while disavowing the substance.

A fair platform economy therefore requires more than consumer choice. It requires governance principles: transparent fees, explainable ranking, meaningful appeal, due process before exclusion, data portability, interoperability, collective representation, clear employment classification, and limits on self-preferencing by dominant gatekeepers.

The goal is not to turn every platform into a public agency. It is to recognize that ownership of essential digital infrastructure can create quasi-public power. Where exit is unrealistic and access is necessary, private governance should acquire public obligations.

A platform becomes capita-feudal not because it is digital, but when ownership of a necessary gateway lets the same actor set the rules, observe compliance, impose consequences, and control continued access. Whoever owns the gate need not own the person.

12. The Algorithm and Power Without a Face

Personal authority carries a face. The ruler, manager, judge, or clerk can be questioned, blamed, persuaded, embarrassed, or replaced. Automated systems promise to reduce bias by applying consistent rules. They can process more cases, detect patterns, allocate resources, and make services faster.

Yet algorithmic authority introduces a new form of distance. The result arrives without a visible decision-maker. A score falls. A transaction is refused. A listing disappears. A person is classified as risky, suspicious, low-performing, or irrelevant. The system appears to have produced the outcome rather than anyone having chosen it.

This linguistic shift is politically important. "I decided" becomes "the model indicates." The human actor retreats behind technical necessity.

Algorithms are not neutral simply because they are mathematical. They embody choices about objectives, data, categories, thresholds, error costs, and acceptable tradeoffs. A credit model must define what counts as risk. A hiring system must define a desirable candidate. A fraud system must decide which false positives are tolerable. A recommendation system must decide what outcome to maximize: attention, revenue, satisfaction, safety, or something else.

The most consequential decision may occur before the model runs. It occurs when an institution chooses the target.

Algorithmic governance also expands the scale of shallow power. A feudal lord could know a small number of people deeply. A digital system can classify millions of people with little context. Its power is broad but thin. It does not understand the person's life; it recognizes patterns associated with similar records.

This can improve fairness when human discretion is corrupt, inconsistent, or prejudiced. It can also industrialize error. A bad human decision harms one case. A bad rule can harm a category. A bad model can repeat the same distortion at enormous speed.

The affected person faces a special difficulty: how to contest a result without knowing the reason. Traditional due process assumes an identifiable decision, applicable rule, and responsible authority. Algorithmic systems may involve proprietary code, distributed vendors, changing data, and probabilistic outputs. Explanation becomes technically and institutionally fragmented.

Capita-feudal power appears when the model is both consequential and unanswerable. The person must comply with the output but cannot inspect, challenge, or meaningfully escape it. Reputation scores can become a form of digital status. Unlike inherited estate, they are produced continuously through behavior. Yet they can still harden into durable rank, especially when multiple systems reuse similar data.

The model's authority may also reshape behavior before any explicit punishment. Workers learn to anticipate metrics. Drivers position themselves according to demand predictions. Creators tailor expression to recommendation systems. Employees optimize visible tasks. Citizens learn which answers fit forms. The person becomes the steward of the self, continuously adjusting to an invisible evaluator.

This is not merely surveillance. It is **self-administration under anticipated scoring**.

The appropriate response is neither blind rejection nor blind faith. Automated systems should be judged by the authority they exercise. Low-stakes recommendation can tolerate opacity that would be unacceptable in employment, credit, welfare, policing, health, or access to essential services.

A legitimate system should provide at least five protections: notice that automation is used; an intelligible account of decisive factors; access to relevant data; meaningful human review; and responsibility assigned to an institution that cannot evade liability by blaming the tool.

The algorithm may not have a face. The organization using it must have an address.

13. Ownership, Rent, Debt, and the Shift from Things to Access

Classical capitalism celebrates private property because ownership can support independence. A household that owns land, tools, savings, or a home possesses resources not immediately subject to another person's permission. Property can be unequal and exclusionary, but distributed property can also protect citizens from both market and state power.

In many contemporary domains, ownership is supplemented - and sometimes replaced - by access arrangements. Housing is rented. Software is licensed. Media is streamed. Devices depend on remote services. Professional tools require subscriptions. Vehicles may contain functions activated by payment. Data is stored on systems controlled by others. The user receives convenience and reduced upfront cost but acquires fewer durable rights.

Access is not inherently inferior. Renting can be efficient when needs are temporary. Subscription services can spread costs and provide maintenance. Cloud systems can offer capabilities individuals could never build alone. The danger appears when access becomes the only realistic form of participation and the provider retains unilateral control.

The distinction is between a transaction that ends and a relationship that must continue. Ownership can end the seller's authority over the object. Access preserves the provider's authority because payment, authentication, compatibility, or permission must be renewed.

Rent is therefore more than a housing payment. It is a general economic form: payment for temporary use of an asset controlled by someone else. For this essay, the more relevant question is not whether every recurring payment is “rent” in a strict economic sense, but whether control of a scarce gateway creates a continuing claim on people who need access to it. Land, intellectual property, digital gateways, licenses, and network control can all create rent-like power.

Housing makes the issue concrete. A homeowner with manageable costs accumulates security and often wealth. A long-term tenant finances the owner's asset while remaining exposed to price changes, termination, and limited control over the space. The tenant may possess legal protections, but the structural division between owner and non-owner compounds across generations.

Debt complicates ownership. A mortgaged household is both owner and debtor. The bank does not occupy the house, yet it holds a legally enforceable claim on future payments and, ultimately, collateral. Debt enables access to ownership but also pre-allocates future income.

The relevant measure is not whether a person owns on paper. It is how much discretionary capacity remains after superior claims are satisfied. A highly indebted owner may have less practical freedom than a secure tenant in public housing. A business with substantial assets may be controlled by lenders through covenants. A state may be formally sovereign while fiscal obligations narrow policy choices.

Capita-feudalism emerges where ownership concentrates and the majority become permanent users. The owners of land, housing, platforms, intellectual property, and financial claims receive recurring payments from those who must access essential resources. The user may move among providers, but every path requires tribute in contractual form.

Again, the analogy must remain bounded. Rent is not feudal rent merely because the same word is used. Modern tenants have rights, markets, mobility, and political citizenship. Credit can create prosperity rather than hereditary subjection. Intellectual property can reward invention. The point is cumulative: when many domains shift from ownership to revocable access, autonomy becomes conditional on uninterrupted income and compliant participation.

A society of access can be materially rich and politically fragile. Everything is available, but little is secure. The person can summon transport, entertainment, storage, workspace, and services instantly, yet a lost account, payment failure, price increase, or policy change can remove them just as quickly.

Distributed ownership is therefore not nostalgic attachment to objects. It is a constitutional question. Who has the right to continue using the means of life when income stops, rules change, or institutions fail?

Property policy, cooperative housing, employee ownership, open standards, repair rights, data portability, public infrastructure, and limits on anti-competitive control are not separate technical issues. They determine whether citizens possess durable footholds outside institutional permission.

14. The Citizen as Fragmented Sovereign

Democracy declares that legitimate public power originates in the people. The citizen is not the owner of the state in the ordinary property sense. No one can sell a share of parliament or mortgage a police station. Yet citizens collectively authorize the institutions that govern them.

This creates a paradox. The citizen is both source and subject of authority. The citizen helps choose the system and then receives its tax bill, court order, permit decision, or penalty. The same person is a fragment of the sovereign and an object of administration.

The transition from emperor to democratic state does not eliminate sovereignty. It redistributes legitimacy. No citizen individually inherits the emperor's power. Each holds a minute share in the authority by which offices are created and constrained.

This makes public power fundamentally different from private lordship. Taxation is compulsory for the individual but authorized through a collective legal order. Revenue finances public functions that citizens may influence, scrutinize, and challenge. Officials act in offices that are temporary and legally limited. Courts can review government. Elections permit replacement.

These safeguards are decisive. Yet democratic authorization can become thin. A citizen votes periodically but encounters administration continuously. Complex systems are governed through agencies, regulations, procurement, expert bodies, and software that few voters can understand. The distance between collective sovereignty and individual experience widens.

The citizen may therefore feel politically powerful in theory and administratively small in practice. The state says, "This authority comes from you." The office says, "Take a number."

Capita-feudal analysis asks whether democratic voice is strong enough to govern the institutions that act in the citizen's name. Elections alone may not provide sufficient control over technical, local, or routine power. Transparency, consultation, ombuds institutions, judicial review, public-interest litigation, freedom of information, local participation, and independent media translate abstract sovereignty into usable influence.

The question of taxation illustrates the difference between public obligation and private extraction. A feudal due may be tied to status, land, or the right of a particular lord. A modern tax rests on general law and is supposed to finance public purposes. The taxpayer can vote, protest, request information, criticize spending, and challenge unlawful assessment.

But legitimacy weakens when taxation appears opaque, unequal, wasteful, or captured by interests. Citizens do not experience the state as collective self-government when rules are written by actors with privileged access, when burdens fall unevenly, or when public services fail while extraction remains efficient.

The social contract cannot survive on formal authorization alone. It requires visible reciprocity. Roads, schools, care, security, courts, infrastructure, and protection must demonstrate that collective claims return as collective capacity.

The state can also become a platform-like gatekeeper when essential public services are digitized without accessible alternatives. A citizen may need an account, device, identifier, or automated verification to exercise a legal right. Efficiency improves for many while exclusion deepens for those whose lives do not fit the interface.

The democratic challenge is thus twofold: constrain private powers that govern without public legitimacy, and constrain public powers that govern in the public name without effective participation.

The citizen is not free merely because the sovereign is collective. The citizen is free when collective authority remains reachable, reasoned, reversible, and bounded.

15. Why People Accept, Seek, and Reproduce Hierarchy

No system of authority survives through external coercion alone. Durable orders are carried inside the people who inhabit them. Rules become habits, expectations, identities, and moral judgments. The subordinate does not merely obey. The subordinate may learn to desire the security of the hierarchy, defend its symbols, and transmit its discipline to others.

Erich Fromm's analysis of escape from freedom begins with a difficult observation: liberation can be frightening. Freedom removes external bonds but also exposes the individual to uncertainty, responsibility, isolation, and failure. A fixed place can be oppressive and reassuring at the same time. The person who knows where to stand may feel more secure than the person required to invent a life under conditions of risk.

This helps explain why modern dependency cannot be understood as simple deception. Institutions offer real goods: income, identity, expertise, protection, community, status, convenience, and relief from decision. The employee receives not only wages but a role. The platform user receives not only service but visibility and belonging. The citizen receives not only rules but a public world. The organization reduces uncertainty by telling people what counts.

Hierarchy also allows responsibility to move upward and downward. The subordinate can say, "I followed instructions." The superior can say, "The system required it." Each person occupies a partial role, and the moral burden of the whole becomes difficult to locate.

Wilhelm Reich's polemical figure of the "little man" captures another mechanism: a person who feels powerless may seek compensation through the small authority available over someone else. The clerk blocks the form. The supervisor disciplines the worker. The experienced employee humiliates the newcomer. The user reports another user. The citizen demands harshness toward a weaker group. Subordination and domination can coexist in the same person.

The modern organization is a pyramid of people who are simultaneously above and below. The manager is subordinate to targets and superior to staff. The minister is superior to the department and subordinate to law, cabinet, parliament, party, budget, media, and election. The platform worker is subordinate to ranking and may exercise power over customers through service. The citizen is subject to the state and participates in authorizing it.

This dual position stabilizes the system. Nearly everyone possesses some fragment of authority and some experience of dependence. The Multiplied Master is not only above us. He is reproduced through us.

Ideology strengthens the arrangement by presenting contingent institutions as natural. A market result appears deserved because it is a market result. An algorithmic ranking appears objective because it is numerical. A bureaucratic category appears necessary because it is standardized. A workplace rule appears efficient because it serves the organization. The question "Who chose this design?" disappears behind the statement "That is how the system works."

Slavoj Žižek's work on ideology is useful here because modern belief often does not require naive conviction. People may know that a system is imperfect, manipulated, or absurd and continue participating because participation is materially required. Cynicism does not automatically produce freedom. A worker can joke about pointless metrics while optimizing them. A user can distrust a platform while depending on it. A voter can condemn bureaucracy while demanding the benefits it administers.

Belonging also matters. Gustave Le Bon's theory of crowds should not be treated as a universal scientific law, but his concern with suggestion, prestige, and emotional identification remains historically instructive. Mass politics does not govern only by command. It offers images in which people recognize themselves. The leader, party, nation, movement, company, or platform becomes a container for identity.

The old master demanded obedience. The modern institution often seeks identification. The ideal employee internalizes the mission. The ideal customer joins the community. The ideal citizen performs belonging. The ideal creator adapts expression to the audience. When identity and institution fuse, criticism feels like betrayal of the self.

A free society must therefore cultivate more than legal rights. It must cultivate psychological capacities: tolerance for uncertainty, ability to dissent without total exclusion, confidence to change institutions, and identities broad enough to survive departure from a job, party, platform, or status group.

Exit is difficult when a hierarchy supplies the person's entire meaning. Institutional pluralism is therefore psychological protection. A person should belong to more than one world.

16. Where the Feudal Analogy Fails

A serious theory must identify not only what its analogy reveals but what it obscures. The phrase capita-feudalism is memorable precisely because it risks excess. Used carelessly, it can flatten history, trivialize oppression, and convert every disliked obligation into evidence of servitude.

The first limit is **legal status**. Medieval and early modern dependent populations could be bound by birth, estate, land, customary obligation, and inherited jurisdiction. Modern employees, tenants, borrowers, entrepreneurs, and users are legal persons with citizenship, contract rights, mobility, and access to courts. These rights may be unequal in practice, but they are not cosmetic.

The second limit is **violence**. Feudal and household hierarchies often operated within social orders that tolerated forms of corporal, domestic, sexual, and judicial violence unacceptable under modern law. Contemporary institutions can be coercive, but an employment dismissal is not equivalent to physical punishment, and an account suspension is not equivalent to imprisonment.

The third limit is **mobility**. Modern people can change employers, occupations, residences, associations, and political representatives to a degree unavailable in status societies. Exit may be costly, but the legal possibility changes bargaining and identity.

The fourth limit is **public legitimacy**. A democratic tax is not simply a lord's due. It rests on general law, finances public functions, and can be challenged politically and judicially. A judge's authority is not private ownership of jurisdiction. A minister's office is not hereditary sovereignty.

The fifth limit is **market plurality**. Competitive markets can disperse power. When many employers, lenders, landlords, and platforms compete under fair rules, individuals gain alternatives. Feudal relations were not ordinary market exchanges among interchangeable providers.

The sixth limit is **ownership and innovation**. Capitalist property can enable broad experimentation, investment, and mobility. The platform, corporation, or bank is not merely a rent collector; it may create infrastructure, coordinate complex production, bear risk, and provide services of extraordinary value.

These differences mean that the thesis should never be "nothing changed." Much changed, and much improved. The better thesis is that modernity transformed the architecture of dependency. Personal, bundled, inherited authority became specialized, legal, contractual, and institutional authority.

The analogy fails whenever it ignores safeguards. A judge with independence, reasons, appeal, and recusal is not a feudal lord. An employer constrained by labor law and collective bargaining is not a household master. A platform with interoperability, due process, and real competition is not a private estate. A welfare agency that delivers universal rights is not a patron distributing favors.

The analogy succeeds when these safeguards weaken. It becomes useful where ownership merges with governance, where dependence is durable, where rules are unilateral, where exit threatens basic survival, where authority is opaque, and where the affected person lacks voice.

Capita-feudalism is not a historical period or a complete social system replacing capitalism. It is a configuration of power that can appear within modern capitalism and administration when functions that modernity separated become concentrated again.. It is a **drift within modern capitalism and administration**. It describes situations in which modern legal forms carry concentrations of dependency that resemble older lordship at the functional level.

The concept should therefore be used comparatively, not theatrically. It should ask "more or less" rather than declare "is or is not." An economy can contain highly competitive sectors and feudal-like bottlenecks. A person can be autonomous in one domain and deeply dependent in another. A state can be democratic at the constitutional level and arbitrary at the administrative edge.

The aim is precision. Calling everything feudal is an excuse not to analyze the actual institution. The point of the metaphor is to begin investigation, not end it.

17. A Diagnostic of Capita-Feudal Power

The concept becomes more valuable when converted into a practical test. The following framework distinguishes ordinary organization from concentrated dependency. No single factor is decisive. The pattern matters.

Dimension	Low capita-feudal intensity	High capita-feudal intensity
Necessity	Service is optional or easily substituted	Access is essential to work, housing, credit, identity, or public life
Exit	Departure is affordable and rights are portable	Exit causes major economic, reputational, legal, or social loss
Rule-making	Terms are negotiated, stable, and understandable	Rules are unilateral, complex, and frequently changed
Voice	Users or workers can organize, appeal, and influence decisions	Complaints are individualized, automated, or ignored
Transparency	Prices, ranking, obligations, and reasons are visible	Key decisions depend on hidden models or discretionary criteria
Ownership	Participants retain durable control of tools, data, and relationships	Gatekeeper owns infrastructure, customer access, and reputation
Risk and control	Those who control decisions bear corresponding risk	Risk is pushed downward while control remains above
Competition	Several interoperable alternatives exist	Network effects, scarcity, licensing, or switching costs create lock-in
Time	Obligations are predictable and bounded	Permanent availability and recurring claims pre-allocate the future
Remedy	Independent, timely, affordable review is available	The institution is judge of its own decisions

A relationship with low intensity may still be hierarchical. Hierarchy is not automatically domination. Hospitals, courts, schools, firms, and public agencies require coordination, expertise, and decisions. The diagnostic asks whether authority is bounded by reciprocal obligations and meaningful alternatives.

Five questions provide a shorter version.

1. Can the person say no without losing the foundations of life?

This is the exit test. Legal permission to refuse is insufficient when refusal triggers homelessness, loss of health care, deportation, professional exclusion, or unmanageable debt. The more essential the relationship, the stronger the duty to protect exit.

2. Can the institution change the rules without meaningful consent?

This is the private-legislation test. A dominant platform, landlord, employer, or lender acquires quasi-governmental power when it can revise terms while participants bear the cost of leaving.

3. Does control match responsibility?

This is the risk test. An institution should not control price, access, data, and standards while assigning all operational risk to nominally independent participants. Power without liability is a signature of Multiplied Mastership.

4. Is the decision intelligible and contestable?

This is the due-process test. A person subject to a consequential decision should know who made it, under which rule, based on what information, and through which procedure it can be corrected.

5. Who already owns tomorrow?

This is the time test. Add fixed obligations, expected availability, debt service, rent, care, administrative tasks, and reputational pressure. The result shows how much of future capacity remains self-directed.

The framework avoids a common mistake: measuring freedom by the number of visible choices. A person may choose among ten platforms that use similar terms, several landlords in a scarce market, or multiple jobs with equally unstable schedules. Choice among dependent positions is not the same as institutional independence.

It also avoids the opposite mistake of treating every obligation as oppression. A person living in society will owe taxes, debts, care, work, and compliance with legitimate rules. Freedom is not the absence of claims. It is participation in shaping claims, proportionality of burden, security against arbitrary exclusion, and the preservation of a meaningful remainder.

The diagnostic can be applied to organizations, sectors, or personal situations. It can guide regulation, competition policy, labor classification, platform governance, tenancy law, data rights, and welfare design. Most importantly, it directs attention away from labels. A "partner" may be subordinate. An "owner" may lack control. A "user" may be governed. An "independent contractor" may be dependent. A public "beneficiary" may possess a legal right.

Names describe the surface. The diagnostic examines the relation.

18. Freedom as Exit, Voice, Ownership, Security, and Time

The Possibility of Failure Without Erasure.

Modern freedom is often reduced to choice. The consumer chooses a product. The employee chooses a job. The voter chooses a representative. The user chooses whether to click. Choice matters, but it is only one dimension.

A more complete account of freedom requires five capacities.

Exit

A person must be able to leave a relationship without catastrophic loss. Exit disciplines power because the institution knows participants can depart. But exit must be practical, not merely legal. Portable pensions, benefits, credentials, data, reputation, phone numbers, and professional networks make freedom real.

Voice

Exit alone is insufficient. People should not have to abandon every institution that affects them. Workers need representation. Tenants need organization. Users need appeal. Citizens need participation. Voice converts the individual complaint into a capacity to change shared rules.

Ownership

Durable ownership creates zones of independence. This may include a home, savings, tools, intellectual property, data rights, shares, cooperative membership, or public ownership of essential infrastructure. Ownership need not always be individual. Common and cooperative property can prevent both private monopoly and bureaucratic domination.

Security

A person cannot negotiate freely under immediate threat of destitution. Social insurance, health care, education, basic income supports, unemployment protection, and accessible bankruptcy create the material floor from which refusal becomes possible. Security is not the enemy of freedom; it is often its precondition.

Time

The person must retain control over a meaningful part of life. Predictable schedules, rest, care leave, limits on surveillance, the right to disconnect, and protection from endless administrative burden preserve temporal sovereignty.

These capacities reinforce one another. Ownership without security can be lost in a crisis. Exit without portable rights is expensive. Voice without time is unusable. Security without due process becomes conditional dependence. Time without income becomes involuntary idleness rather than freedom.

This model also clarifies the role of markets and states. Markets can provide exit through alternatives, but concentration can remove it. States can provide security and rights, but bureaucracy can weaken voice and time. Ownership can protect autonomy, but concentrated ownership can dominate others. No single institution guarantees freedom.

Freedom is therefore ecological. It arises from a balance among powers.

The ideal is not a society without hierarchy. Complex societies need specialized authority. The ideal is a society in which no hierarchy becomes total, no institution becomes the sole gatekeeper, and people can move among roles without losing personhood.

The medieval servant's vulnerability came from the fusion of wage, home, food, protection, and reputation under one household. Modern freedom expanded by separating these domains. Capita-feudal drift begins when they are fused again through employment-linked benefits, credit scoring, platform identity, data integration, housing scarcity, or monopolized infrastructure.

The political task is therefore to preserve **functional separation around the person**. The employer should not own the home. The landlord should not control political voice. The platform should not own the reputation needed to use a competitor. The creditor should not determine access to unrelated rights. The state should not reuse every piece of data for every purpose.

A person should be able to fail in one domain without disappearing from all others.

19. Institutional Design Against Capita-Feudal Drift

The critique of Multiplied Mastership becomes empty if it offers only suspicion. The goal is not to abolish organization, contract, credit, platforms, or public administration. It is to design them so that power remains limited and reciprocal.

Several principles follow from the analysis.

Separate ownership from unchecked governance

Owners may set rules for their property, but control of essential infrastructure creates obligations beyond ordinary ownership. Dominant platforms, utilities, payment systems, app stores, housing providers, and data intermediaries should face duties of fairness, nondiscrimination, transparency, and access proportionate to their gatekeeping power.

Make rights portable

People should not lose accumulated identity when changing institutions. Benefits, credentials, reputation, data, content, and professional history should move where possible. Portability reduces the cost of exit and prevents a single institution from owning the participant's past.

Match risk with control

Employment classification, franchise law, supply contracts, and platform regulation should examine actual control rather than labels. An actor that determines price, access, performance standards, and customer relationships should bear corresponding duties and risks.

Build due process into automated and private systems

Consequential decisions require notice, reasons, correction, appeal, and human responsibility. The cost of review should not exceed the value of the right. An institution should not be the final judge of its own hidden process.

Protect temporal sovereignty

Predictable scheduling, limits on after-hours demands, reasonable notice, paid leave, rest, and reduction of unnecessary administrative labor protect the resource through which every other freedom is exercised: time.

Support plural ownership

Employee ownership, cooperatives, mutuals, public options, community land trusts, open-source infrastructure, and small-property access diversify control. The purpose is not to replace every private firm but to prevent one ownership model from becoming the only gateway.

Preserve competition through interoperability

Competition is weak when users cannot transfer data, communicate across networks, or retain reputation. Interoperability changes the market from a choice among enclosed estates into a choice among connected services.

Provide universal foundations

Health care, education, legal protection, basic infrastructure, and social insurance reduce the capacity of any private institution to make survival conditional on obedience. Universality also reduces stigma and administrative surveillance.

Strengthen collective voice

Individual consent is weak against standardized systems. Unions, professional associations, tenant organizations, user councils, cooperatives, and public-interest bodies allow affected people to negotiate rules collectively.

Limit secondary use of data

Information collected for one purpose should not automatically become power in another. Purpose limitation preserves the separation of institutions and prevents the reassembly of total profiles.

Design for graceful failure

A civilized system permits mistakes without total ruin. Bankruptcy, payment restructuring, appeal periods, benefit continuity, correction of records, and second chances prevent temporary failure from becoming permanent status.

These reforms share a principle: **dependence should not silently become domination**. Every institution creates some dependence because cooperation requires reliance. Domination begins when the relying party lacks alternatives, voice, knowledge, and remedy.

The standard is not perfect equality. An employer will direct work. A court will issue binding orders. A bank will require repayment. A platform will enforce rules. The standard is whether authority remains connected to purpose and limited by the personhood of those subject to it.

A modern society should not attempt to eliminate all masters by pretending no one governs. It should make governance visible, divisible, contestable, and temporary.

20. Who Owns Tomorrow?

In 1350, the steward arrives at the farm. The household had planned to use the day for its own field, but an inherited obligation has already assigned the day elsewhere.

In the age of expanding administration, the official arrives with a register. Nothing is taken immediately. The household becomes legible, and future claims become easier to organize.

In the industrial city, the clock rings. The worker entered by contract, yet the measured interval now belongs to the organization.

In the digital economy, no one arrives. The phone vibrates. A payment is due. A client requests urgency. A platform changes visibility. A score shifts. The day is not openly commanded. It is priced, ranked, scheduled, and pre-allocated.

Across these scenes, the tool changes. The question persists.

Who has the right to decide how another person's tomorrow will be used?

The answer cannot be "no one." Human beings live through obligations. Children, partners, patients, customers, coworkers, citizens, and future selves all have legitimate claims on time. Freedom is not a calendar emptied of duty.

The answer also cannot be "whoever owns." Property is necessary for autonomy but can carry powers over others that require limits. Nor can the answer be "the state," because collective authority can become remote and administrative. Nor "the market," because market choice can coexist with bottlenecks and necessity. Nor "the individual" alone, because individuals depend on infrastructures they did not build.

A defensible answer is constitutional: tomorrow should be divided through institutions in which claims are visible, justified, reciprocal, limited, and contestable. No actor should acquire so many claims that the person loses a meaningful remainder.

Modernity did not abolish the master by removing every function of command. It disassembled the master. It removed land from the judge, heredity from the minister, household ownership from the employer, and personal discretion from many public offices. It converted status into contract, memory into records, command into procedure, and violence into regulated enforcement.

These were enormous achievements. But the fragments can accumulate again. A platform can combine marketplace, regulator, court, and tax collector. An employer can combine income, health security, immigration status, and reputation. A bank can convert decades of labor into a payment stream. A data system can connect identities across institutions. Concentrated ownership can turn citizens into permanent tenants of the systems they need.

Capita-feudalism names this re-bundling of power. It is not medievalism reborn, but a configuration in which ownership, rule-making, monitoring, sanction, and control of exit begin to gather again in the same hands.

The old lord was visible because he occupied the castle. The multiplied master is difficult to see because he appears as normal procedure. He is present in every arrangement where a narrow contractual claim becomes a broad capacity to shape life; where an owner becomes a governor; where a score becomes a status; where access replaces secure possession; where the future is pledged before the person can choose it.

The appropriate response is not nostalgia for a simpler world. The manor was not free. The household master was not humane merely because he was known personally. Local knowledge could coexist with violence, exclusion, inherited rank, and arbitrary dependence.

The goal is a more complete modernity: one that preserves law, mobility, markets, public administration, and technological coordination while extending the logic of separation and accountability into new centers of power.

Judges must remain separated from private interest. Ministers must remain temporary users of public authority. Employers must remain unable to purchase the whole person. Entrepreneurs must retain control proportionate to the risks they carry. Platforms must not govern essential territories without public duties. Algorithms must not issue consequential judgments without accountable institutions behind them. Citizens must possess enough security, property, voice, and time to refuse.

The measure of progress is not only how much society produces or how quickly systems respond. It is how much unclaimed future remains in an ordinary person's hands.

A society may offer limitless convenience and still narrow autonomy. It may make everything accessible while making nothing secure. It may multiply choices while standardizing the terms beneath them. It may celebrate independence while requiring permanent payment to institutions that own the gateways.

The deepest political conflict is therefore not simply between state and market, worker and capitalist, public and private, or tradition and progress. It is between arrangements that distribute agency and arrangements that concentrate dependency.

The master has not returned.

He has become a contract, an office, a schedule, a platform, a database, a landlord, a lender, and a score.

No single one owns the whole person.

Freedom depends on ensuring that together they do not own tomorrow.