Chapter One

Introduction: Themes in Historical Materialism

By ‘modes of production’, Marx meant forms of domination and control of labour bound up with a wider set of class-relations expressive of them and of the social functions implied in them. He saw these general ‘forms’ and the class-divisions grounded in them as ‘historically created’, that is, specific to the period they belonged to, yet capable of subsuming often much earlier forms as an intrinsic part of their own (form of) development, as, for example, in ‘the connection between Roman civil law and modern production’ (*Grundrisse*). Marx also believed that these general configurations (‘totalities of production relations’) were defined by an inherent dynamic that worked itself out in the eventual dissolution of existing relations. *How* this happened, or could happen, was, of course, best described in his description of capitalism and its general ‘laws of motion’.

The essays published in this collection span a period of just over thirty years (from debates in the late 1970s down to 2009) and set out first to map a general conception of modes of production as *historical characterisations* of whole epochs, in other words, to restore a sense a historical complexity to them, and then to illustrate/explore *some* of that complexity in detailed studies based as far as possible on primary-source material.

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Marx himself was opposed to a ‘supra-historical’ approach that simply reduced historical characterisations to formulae. It was obvious to him that historical materialists would have to ‘study the different forms of evolution’ and ‘compare them’ before a workable characterisation was available for any period. He said as much in his reply to Mikhailovsky. By contrast, most Marxist historiography of the precapitalist period tends to assume we already know the different modes of production from the labels attached to them, and lacks any sustained attempt to grasp (explore, construct) their complexity. Kula’s study of feudal economy had a considerable impact precisely because he broke with this method of ‘formal abstraction’.

The challenge is formidable. We shall almost certainly never be able to replicate the rigour that Marx could demonstrate in his analysis of capitalism for any comparable epoch before it. But historical materialism establishes an element of continuity between that analysis and attempts to understand earlier periods. That Marx conceived the complexity of historical modes of production in law-like terms is clear from the famous citation in the ‘Nachtrag’ to the second edition of Capital, where the Russian reviewer’s description of his ‘method’ claimed, to Marx’s approval, that what chiefly interested him (Marx) were ‘the special laws that regulate the origin, existence, development and death of a given social organism and its replacement by another, higher one’. That ‘social organism’ was Kaufman’s peculiarly biological way of referring to the general form of society characteristic of the main historical periods in Europe’s development is clear from his statement elsewhere that, for Marx, ‘every historical period possesses its own laws’.

After this introductory essay, Chapter 2 develops this theme (of the complexity and law-like nature of modes of production as Marx understood these) against the background of literature and debates that were current in the 1970s. That its central arguments are still relevant today is shown by the present state of discussion of these issues. One of the key distinctions suggested there was between ‘relations of production’ and ‘forms of exploitation’, yet the conflation of these categories is still endemic to a whole form of Marxism and runs through even some of the best historical work, such as Chris Wick-

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2 Marx 1877a; Marx 1877b.
3 Kula 1970.
4 Marx 1976, p. 100ff., citing the review by the Russian economist I. Kaufman.