Introduction to Studies on Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production: Debates, Controversies and Lines of Argument

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This book analyses a variety of historical problems related to pre-capitalist societies and explores both the concept and the range of modes of production arising from the writings of Marx and Engels\(^1\) and subsequent Marxist elaborations. There are differing assessments of the Marxist tradition on pre-capitalist modes of production, which reflects the debate within historical materialism with regard to the potential or the inconsistencies of some of the categories proposed by Marx. The critique of these categories, or the perception that they are insufficient, has led to the elaboration of new concepts such as the domestic mode of production proposed by Claude Meillassoux aimed at the analysis of agrarian lineage societies,\(^2\) Marshall Sahlins’s homonymous concept covering hunter-gatherer societies,\(^3\) or Chris Wickham’s recently proposed peasant mode of production geared to the analysis of agrarian societies without systematic surplus extraction.\(^4\) These categories attempt a more precise structural study of different types of societies that are usually bundled into the concept of the primitive communist mode. The latter is for many the only non-exploitative mode of production proposed by Marx, whose evolutionary variations would express transitional modes such as the ancient and Germanic modes; other perspectives consider these structures independently, which widens the scope of non-exploitative modes of production; in the case of the Germanic mode, the varying interpretations of its contents highlight either the communal or the private component.\(^5\) The revision of the \textit{Formen} has also given rise to an

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3 Sahlins 1972.
5 The Germanic mode has been neglected according to Moseley and Wallerstein 1978. Maurice
intense debate on the viability of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production and its substitution for the tributary mode proposed by Samir Amin and later re-elaborated by John Haldon as the universal mode of pre-capitalist class societies based on the extraction of rents or tribute, of which feudalism would be an institutional variant. Another perspective emphasises the singularity of the feudal mode of production, characterised by its specific form of coercion and private appropriation of rents. Moreover, the study of ancient societies has posed the problem of the evolution of the ancient mode toward exploitative forms; this evolution would be expressed not only in the development of slavery in those societies – systematised in the concept of the slave mode of production – but also in the development of exploitation through taxation; from this perspective, the exploitative phase of the ancient mode has been understood as a subtype of the tributary mode, considering in this case the centrality of taxation in contrast to the private extraction of rents.

The most important debates and arguments regarding the mode of production and pre-capitalist modes of production took place between the 1960s and the 1980s, mainly in the 1970s, which witnessed a remarkable effort of compilation and publication in Latin America, the joint work published by Harold Wolpe, the work of systematisation by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst and

Bloch 2004, pp. 35 ff., remarks on the lack of relevance of the Germanic mode in Marxist studies, and he attributes it to the weakness of the sources used by Marx in his elaboration of the concept. Among others, Godelier 1964 considers the Germanic mode in its own terms; Macfarlane 2002 stresses the centrality of private property in the Germanic mode; however, Wickham 1994a, pp. 29–30 stresses the communal component.

6 Amin 1976.
8 Anderson 1979, pp. 402 ff.
9 On the ancient mode of production, see Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 79 ff.; on its evolution toward the appearance of classes, see Padgug 1975.
10 Haldon 1993, pp. 90 ff.
11 Wickham 1994a.
12 For example, in 1978 Gebran published a volume titled Conceito de modo de produção compiling earlier publications; see also Sempat Assadourian et al. 1973.
13 Wolpe 1980, with the participation of Banaji, Dupré and Rey, Lublinskaya, Meillassoux, Morris and Quijano Obregón.
14 Hindess and Hirst 1975 encompasses both the general concept of mode of production and the study of the concepts of primitive-communist, ancient, slave, feudal and Asiatic modes of production, without analysing concrete social formations; it is based on Marxist theory and attempts to avoid the generalisation into a series of historical societies in the sense of Weberian ideal types: Hindess and Hirst 1975, p. 2.