João Bernardo is one of the most prolific, and prodigious, radical theoreticians of the past thirty years, yet, because he writes in his native Portuguese and because very little of his work has been translated into English, he remains largely unknown in the world of Anglophone Marxism. The publication in 2002 of the third and final volume of his massive 2,000-page study of the seigneurial régime in Europe from the 5th to the 15th centuries provides an occasion to correct modestly this lacuna. The purpose of the following review is both to make João Bernardo better known in the Anglophone Marxist world, and, above all, to bring his most ambitious work to date to the attention of that world, and beyond. One hopes that this review will make Bernardo’s book known to a few real medievalists – which I am emphatically not – capable of reviewing it in greater depth, and to expedite its translation into English.¹

Readers of Bernardo’s previous work know the significance he gives to os gestores [managers and administrators] in the development of capitalism, but those encountering the author for the first time in this three-volume study of the seigneurial régime (a term with which he replaces the overused and inadequate term ‘feudalism’) would not necessarily recognise the centrality and sources of this aspect of his agenda, just as os gestores were not socially front and centre in most of the period he is analysing. But the book ‘looks forward’ often enough – towards the emergence of absolutism, and beyond absolutism to capitalism – to make it clear what the ultimate import of the ‘impersonal state’ is for Bernardo.

What stands out in Bernardo’s entire analysis is a serious challenge to mainstream (including orthodox-Marxist) interpretations of these centuries. These interpretations all converge around the thesis that the crisis of the seigneurial régime (most dramatically,

¹ See references for a summary of Bernardo’s most important works to date.
² Bernardo also prefers the term ‘régime’ to the Marxist term ‘mode of production’, believing the current level of historical research to make the use of such a term for modes other than capitalism ‘premature’ (I, p. 237).
of course, in the Black Death of 1348–9) was the result of the exhaustion of virgin land available for cultivation, following nearly a thousand years in which a central dynamic of the system had been precisely the occupation and development of such lands, a process that, in fact, had virtually ground to a halt by the fourteenth century. Within this dynamic, the mainstream interpretations cite demographic, agrarian and technological factors. As for the impact of the monetisation of the economy in the following centuries, some tend to anachronistically see protocapitalist categories therein, as if commerce were equivalent to capitalism. For Bernardo, on the contrary, all these phenomena, up to and including international trade and finance through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, have to be seen as an active unfolding of the class relations of the seigneurial régime, mediated at every step of the way by the active struggle between classes.

Bernardo begins by identifying thirteen regional and temporal variants on the seigneurial régime, in contrast to the more traditional use of ‘feudalism’ derived from the case of northern France. Central to his entire study are the concepts of the *bannum* and the *mundium*, or the spheres of the power and (roughly) social service of the seigneur, respectively. The *bannum* is ‘in sum, the seigneur’s power to say yes and no’ (I, p. 226), in times of peace and war; the *mundium* was the more benevolent, protective side of the power associated with the *bannum*. Bernardo sees these spheres beginning initially in the seigneur’s household and then expanding to include other families. A relationship of inequality that began within the family became the basis of the relationships between the seigneur and the serfs, and between the seigneur and his vassals. Family structures were the main organisational element of this mode of production, based on the exchange of gifts. Bernardo thus formulates what he calls

---

3 Bernardo argues that exploratory probes into virgin lands were closely linked to social tensions (II, p. 62).

4 These include (i) the zone between the Loire and the Rhine; (ii) Franconia, Thuringia, Alemania and Bavaria; (iii) Frisia and Saxony; (iv) Anglo-Saxon England; (v) the area that makes up contemporary north-eastern France; (vi) the area south of the Loire; (vii) central and northern Italy; (viii) Spain; (ix) and (x) two inter-related zones extending from the Cantabrian mountains to the sea, and the Douro valley. (i), (iv) and (vi) are further divided into two distinct periods, making a total of thirteen variants. This use of variants, as opposed to ‘types’ (such as Weberian ideal types), is the core of Bernardo’s method. Later, for example, discussing the appearance of occasional wage-labour in the countryside, Bernardo says:

Only historical evolution can make distinctions among what, in a given epoch, appears as a unique situation. One of the characteristics of the model of history infusing this book is the consideration of each phenomenon, not in light of a supposedly typical phenomenon, but always as an articulation of variants. And when given variants stand out in a certain context and give rise to something different, this is not due to the minutiae of historiographical analysis, but to the dictates of real history. If, centuries later, capitalism had not come along to take this aspect of peasant life as one of the bases of its development, we would today have no reason to separate the precursor forms of the introduction of the wage from the other forms of domestic labour and services made in the form of labour… (II, p. 345).

5 Bernardo identifies no less than twenty-two different types of transfers of wealth, between and within different classes, and also shows how each transfer effected the *bannum*, that is seigneurial power (summarised in I, p. 430). It is also in the discussion of money in Volume I that he integrates wide-ranging anthropological material from all over the world, to explain the economy of gifts.