

GRAEBER ON MODES OF PRODUCTION

‘Sound Bites’
Dr Eloise Govier

- Argues Marxist theory has abandoned modes of production
- Argues its a flawed concept
- Argues the case for a better conceived version that
 - Recognises the primacy of human production
 - Offers a more sophisticated notion of materialism

- Links industrial capitalism to Chattel Slavery
- Argues world systems analysis, Marxist theory, modes of production can tell us something new about the world we inhabit
- Argues Marxists are naturalizing capitalism

- Not simply about making and struggling over material surplus but fashioning human beings - social production
- Capitalism - the only mode of production that divides homes and workplace
- “That is to say that the making of people and the manufacture of things should properly operate by an entirely different logic in places that have nothing to do with each other” - p62

- Marx used the term 'mode of production' casually
- speaking not only of the capitalist or feudal MoPs but 'patriarchal' or 'Slavonic' ones
- In the 1950s, Louis Althusser seized on the term as a way of breaking out of the official, evolutionist model that had dominated official Marxism up to his day – that saw history everywhere as proceeding, mechanically, from slavery to feudalism to capitalism – without entirely alienating the very dogmatic French Communist Party of his day.

- MoP reformulated (by the likes of Meillassoux)
- A mode of production (MoP) is born of the relation between two factors, the forces of production (FoP) and the relations of production (RoP)

- Forces of production
 - Quality of land
 - Level of technological knowledge
 - Availability of machinery

- Relations of production
 - Relations between classes
 - Primary producers v exploiting class
 - Exploiters live off the primary producers - the surplus extracted from the primary producers
 - State acts as a coercive force
 - Exploiting class the ruling class

- Societies or 'social formations' usually have several different MoPs
- MoPs are inherently unstable and will eventually collapse

- Argues: 'the 'forces of production' are rarely much invoked. Roman slavery and Haitian slavery involved completely different crops, climates, technologies and so on; but no one has ever suggested that they could not, for that reason, both be considered slavery'.

- The division between slavery, feudalism and capitalism was clearly designed to describe class relations in ancient, medieval and modern Europe, respectively. It was never clear how to apply the approach to other parts of the world. Anthropologists found it especially difficult to figure out how to apply the model to stateless societies.

- Some anthropologists used 'linear' or 'domestic' mode of production - argues didn't quite work
- Samir Amin (1973, 1985) tried to salvage the situation by proposing that pretty much all non-capitalist states should be subsumed into a single, much broader category, which he called the 'tributary mode of production'.

- Eric Wolf took this further in proposing three broad MoPs: the kinship mode of production, which encompassed those stateless societies that were the traditional stomping-grounds of anthropologists; the tributary mode; and then finally capitalism itself

- Eric Wolf

- Was the first major work of anthropology to try to come to grips with the kind of world-systems analysis being developed by Immanuel Wallerstein and others at the time[...] One reason for the collapse of the MoP approach was that it was essentially a theory of the state. For all the fancy terminology, 'social formations' just about always turned out to be kingdoms or empires of one sort or another.

- Proponents of the mode of production approach insisted that capitalism first emerged from the internal class dynamics of individual states, as wage-labor relations gradually became predominant... leading to a point where the bourgeoisie could seize control of the state apparatus (as in the English or French revolutions).

- World-systems – called this not because they encompassed the entire globe, since only capitalism has done that, but because they were spheres of regional interaction that were, in effect, worlds unto themselves.

- Wallerstein originally proposed three different sorts of world-system, in a formulation that looked suspiciously like yet another of those three-part evolutionary sequences: 'mini-systems' (self-sufficient, egalitarian societies), 'world-empires' (such as the Achmaenid or Chinese), and 'world-systems' linked by trade (which, prior to capitalism, tended eventually to transform into empires, then, usually dissolve) - inspired by Polyani

- Karl Polanyi's (1957) distinction between three modes of distribution of wealth: reciprocity (typical of mini-systems), redistribution (typical of empires), and the market (typical of world-systems).

- One school of world-systems theorists – the ‘Comparativists’, whose most prominent exponents are Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997) – have tried to refine the terms. First, they had to ditch the notion of mini-systems (basically ‘tribes’), by demonstrating that even in the case of extremely egalitarian societies like that of the Wintu of southern California, there were always regional spheres of interaction, ‘very small world-systems’ as they call them. These smaller systems, though, seemed to lack the cycles of growth and collapse typical of larger, more hierarchical systems like markets and empires.

- Wolf's three categories: kinship, tributary and capitalist (plus one hypothetical socialist one that does not yet exist but might some day).
- Friedman, Eckholm and others now openly talk of a capitalist world system that has existed for 5000 years

- The idea that capitalism is as old as civilization is of course a position long popular amongst capitalists; what now makes it palatable on the Left is largely that it can be seen as an attack on Eurocentrism: if capitalism is now to be considered an accomplishment, then it is deeply arrogant of Euro-American scholars to assume that Europeans invented it a mere 500 years ago.

- Defined so broadly, it becomes very hard to imagine eliminating capitalism at all.
- The great enemies of the Continuationists are mid-century scholars like Moses Finley (1960a, 1960b, 1973), and Karl Polanyi (1944, 1957, 1968), who argued that authors in ancient and non-Western societies really did understand what was going on in their own societies, and that if they did not speak of something that could be labeled 'the economy' it was because nothing exactly parallel to capitalist economic institutions existed.

- Capitalism is not a state of mind but a matter of objective structures, which allow wealth and power to be translated into abstract forms in which they can be endlessly expanded and reproduced. -68

- The key mistake of the mode of production model was to define 'production' simply as the production of material objects; any adequate theory of 'production' would have to give at least equal place to the production of people and social relations -69

- 'Material production' is assumed to be the production of valuable material objects like food, clothing or gold bullion; all the important business of life is assumed to be moving such objects around and transferring them from one person or class to another. -69

- Capitalism and 'economic science' might confuse us into thinking that the ultimate goal of society is simply the increase of national GDP, the production of more and more wealth, but in reality wealth has no meaning except as a medium for the growth and self-realization of human beings.-70

- Should we not be examining relations of service, domestic arrangements, educational practices, at least as much as the disposition of wheat harvests and the flow of trade?
- What has passed for 'materialism' in traditional Marxism – the division between material 'infrastructure' and ideal 'superstructure' – is itself a perverse form of idealism.