

## Introducing Modes of Production in Archaeology

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It is an understatement to observe that historical materialism has had a profound influence on the social sciences. In fact, the proposals of Marx and Engels are so fundamental to how social scientists, including archaeologists, analyze societies that the insights have moved to the realm of disciplinary common sense (Gilman 1989; Kohl 1981; Patterson 2003, 2009). Processual archaeologists adopted evolutionary concepts from historical materialism through the writings of White, Wittfogel, Service, and Polanyi—who were all Marxists—that were depoliticized in the writings of Steward and Binford (McGuire 1993:114; Trigger 2003:13–16). Some of the early post-processualists (e.g., Shanks and Tilley 1987a, 1987b; Spriggs 1984) advocated an idealist reformulation of Marxism, inspired by the French structural Marxists.<sup>1</sup> And everyone has internalized the Marxist-inspired analytic program of Childe (1936, 1950) to some degree, especially his Neolithic and Urban revolutions. The basis of some theoretical debate is therefore not a matter of whether to employ Marxist insights, but a product of the different ways that they have been fragmented and incorporated into archaeology, often without these ties being explicit.

Our proposal, emphasized in this book, is that historical materialism, as originally described by Marx and Engels, remains relevant to archaeologists. There are many different forms of materialism, but the one defined by Marx and Engels is particularly relevant to explain long-term patterns in human history. The analytic system laid out by Marx and Engels assumes that economic organization is rooted in a web of social relations (Wolf 1999:288). *Homo sapiens* is a social species whose history is not a passive response to natural processes. More than social animals, our ancestors were also political animals and became more so as population density increased. Even among the biological sciences, there is increasing realization that human evolution was embedded within a political economy (e.g.,

Hicks and Leonard 2014). In fact, proposals for a niche construction theory (Odling-Smee et al. 2003), when brought to their logical conclusion for *Homo sapiens*, are to define the cultural niche that humans have created and subsequently adapted to for thousands of years.<sup>2</sup> Such a nonreductive materialism reaffirms the long-standing Marxist belief that technology, social organization, and political realms form a cohesive holism.

Our assumption in writing this introduction is that many readers (and especially those English-speakers under ~50 years of age) primarily employ secondhand knowledge of the writing of Marx and Engels. Basic Marxist concepts that structure analysis (such as mode of production) have been filtered through the writings of anthropologists and understood under different names and are now attributed to scholars of the second half of the twentieth century. McGuire et al. (2005:356) observe “that many contemporary archaeologists, positivists, postmodernists, and feminists alike simply do not know that many of their key concepts and perspectives derive from Marxism.” We therefore begin by reviewing key concepts from Marx and Engels’ original writings and define basic Marxist terms.

Fundamental to a historical materialist analysis is the mode of production that describes how sociopolitical organization and economic relations are integrated and how surplus is deployed. As Saitta (1994:226) notes: “That all societies produce surplus labor was one of Marx’s key insights, and this basic idea has been developed by anthropologists.” How this surplus labor is organized and “spent” provides the engine for social developments (but see Clark [2007] for a contrary opinion).<sup>3</sup> In the collection of essays that follows, modes of production are employed to understand a wide range of societies. We adhere to a basic tenet in mode of production analysis, which is that different production systems have their own economic and political “logics.” This does not mean that economic decisions are irrational; rather, that rationality is expressed differently according to particular social and political organization as well as ideological traditions that structures decision making. We accept that “rational” decisions underlie all economic organization and decisions of individual actors. However, the structure of sociopolitical relations (especially differences between those that are egalitarian and hierarchical) affects how economic rationality is expressed (Hirth 1996:205; Patterson 2003:25–27; Saitta 1994:207). As discussed at greater length below, we describe Eric Wolf’s (1982) three distinct “logics” that can be discerned based on different modes of production (i.e., kin-ordered, tributary and capitalist). These are not necessarily the only modes of productions (and authors in this volume describe a range of modes) but

they are inclusive and simple so as to focus attention on historical process rather than classification.

Modes of production are used in a variety of ways by authors in this book but all employ the framework as an analytical tool to explore the reproduction of society. Each author provides examples of how one or multiple modes of production (in succession or simultaneously) promotes distinctive questions and new insights about the past. The aim of the volume is not to (re)affirm the value of mode of production analysis to those already convinced of its utility, but instead to suggest to a broader audience that such analyses can provide insights that are not available through conventional archaeological approaches. As a group, we follow Marx's analysis of capitalism in making our cases for the utility of mode of production analysis by working through concrete examples. Changing modes of production—and combinations of modes (Cunningham, chapter 8; Ensor 2000:20–21, Ensor, chapter 10; Gailey 1987:34–38; Gailey and Patterson 1988; Patterson 1986:56–57; Patterson, chapter 2)—should resonate with all archaeologists who collect diachronic data and try to infer changing economic organization, social relations, political structure and associated forms of social consciousness (also known as culture).

It is worth emphasizing that modes of production, by their very definition, do not refer to a stable form of organization (either through time or over space). Marx and Engels defined various modes of production as abstractions played out in the historical contingencies of actual societies. Ancient societies were described as having Germanic, Slavic, Asiatic, and Teutonic Roman modes of production, defined in the ethnic terms of social science at the time. Such early modes were further contrasted with a capitalist mode of production that was spreading during the 19th century and a feudal mode that was waning in Western Europe at the time. Precapitalist modes were often vaguely modeled and/or inconsistently defined (Gilman 1984:115, 1995; Roseberry 1989:155; Wolf 1982:75). Marx's definitions of non-capitalist modes are thus not always directly transferable for archaeologists to adopt (Rolland 2005; but see Anderson 2010:198). However, it does not matter whether Marx “should have postulated two or eight or fifteen modes of production, or whether other modes should be substituted for those suggested by him. The utility of the concept lies not in classification but in its capacity to underline the *strategic relationships* involved in the deployment of social labor by organized human pluralities” (Wolf 1982:76, emphasis added). It is these strategic social relations that transform labor into political capital that concern us in this volume.

There is a risk of reifying a series of modes of production into a set of types and the classification of society as providing a goal in itself. A classification-focused research agenda for pigeonholing modes of production would parallel the limited utility of processualist evolutionary typologies, epitomized in identifying chiefdoms as a research end in itself (Yoffee 1993; Pauketat 2007). Soviet scholars and the so-called vulgar materialists<sup>4</sup> were criticized for this very thing. We accept this critique as valid and endorse a more nuanced historical materialism such as that proposed by Wolf (1982), Roseberry (1989), Haldon (1993), Trigger (1993, 1998, 2006), and Patterson (2003, 2009), among others. We agree that ideal evolutionary types (devoid of historical specificity) provide limited interpretive insight. However, non-reified modes of production can instead be used to comparatively explore historical (or prehistorical) processes.

Studying mode(s) of production is to ask questions about how social labor is organized, how surplus is deployed, and how this can either maintain or change an existing political system. Surplus labor is work undertaken beyond that required to maintain the life of those working and their dependents. Archaeologists generally identify the material residue of surplus labor in exotic or labor-intensive objects as well as monumental architecture. Surplus can be produced by egalitarian foragers and ranked horticulturalists as well as socially stratified ancient empires and modern nation-states (or any other social plurality). A key question in mode of production analysis is how surplus is directed to maintain or transform a social and political status quo that can be egalitarian, hierarchical, or both. Put simply, the mode of production concept provides a set of heuristic concepts that can focus attention onto specific processes and actions in a social and historical context and develop a framework to compare the structural logics and organizations of a wide range of societies. It thus provides the potential for archaeologists to comparatively investigate changing human organization (Chapman 2003:29–31; Trigger 1993:167–169, 1998:89–91). Modes of production focus attention on how social labor is deployed to facilitate the reproduction of society, and how political motivations result in the appropriation of surpluses by those in power. McGuire (1986:253) notes, “It does not seek to specify universal causes but rather to identify the key structural relations we should examine in any given instance of change.” Archaeologists have long acknowledged that understanding a society’s political economy provides a powerful framework through which to explore the economic foundations of political evolution (Cobb 1993; Feinman and Nicholas 2004; Hirth 1996). The mode of production does one better by

emphasizing specific linkages between the economy and the realms of politics and ideology. In the nineteenth-century context in which they were writing, Marx and Engels agreed with the political economy framework (advocated by Adam Smith, etc.) as a description but one that failed to “see” who benefited from the value-laden, taken-for-granted concepts embedded in industrial society. The mode of production framework helps us to explore a “politicized political economy”—both today and in the past.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, we first review the mode of production framework as it was originally defined by Marx and Engels. We then examine two influential uses of the term *mode of production*, specifically, the Asiatic mode of production (Polanyi 1957; Wittfogel 1957) and the household mode of production (e.g., Sahlins 1972). We observe that Wittfogel and Polanyi’s work caused much disagreement (and spurred much new research) by their particular view of how ancient non-Western societies were organized. Sahlins’ definition of a “domestic” mode of production is a neo-Marxist redefinition of the term based on ontologically idealist assumptions that are fundamentally antithetical to what Marx and Engels actually wrote (Trigger 1993:177). A domestic mode of production would more accurately have been called a domestic “type” or “form” of organization.<sup>5</sup> We end our introduction by describing Eric Wolf’s (1982) formula of kin-ordered, tributary, and capitalist modes of production. Our intention throughout this chapter is not to squabble about the historiography of Marxist theory, or with those who draw inspiration from it. Instead, we provide a simple definition of modes of production that is amenable to making cross-cultural comparisons.

### **Marx and Engels’ Modes of Production**

As noted, our goal is to begin with what Marx and Engels wrote about modes of production to provide a historical context for the terms. Rather than being synonymous with a “type” or “form” of production, modes of production are the social relations that permit the existing technology, environmental conditions, etc. to generate surplus that is then employed to perpetuate, reproduce, or alter existing social and political relations (and associated forms of social consciousness). The social/political system can be egalitarian or hierarchical (or both), but those in decision-making positions generally strive to maintain the culture norms that have placed them in decision-making roles.