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The ancient world systems versus the modern capitalist world system

The modern world has produced a general image of universal history founded on the proposition that (European) capitalism is the first social system to unify the world. The least that can be said in that respect is that this statement seriously distorts reality and – I submit – is basically an expression of the dominant Eurocentric ideology. In fact, societies prior to the 16th century were in no way isolated from one another but were competitive partners within at least regional systems (and perhaps even a world system). Overlooking their interaction, one can hardly understand the dynamics of their evolution.

Simultaneously, I maintain that capitalism is a qualitatively new age in universal history which started around 1500. Therefore I insist upon distinguishing the modern capitalist overall structure from protocapitalist elements which indeed appeared in anterior societies, sometimes since quite ancient times; I also insist upon the specificity of the capitalist centre/periphery dichotomy *vis-à-vis* previous forms of polarisation.

The specificity of capitalism *vis-à-vis* anterior social formations

The theoretical contribution of the Marxist concept of the capitalist mode of production is crucial to this discussion. Its eventual dilution (fashionable nowadays of course) does not help clarify the issues. The capitalist mode of production entails private ownership of the means of production which are themselves the product of labour, namely machinery. This in turn presumes a higher level of development of the forces of production (compared to the artisan and his instruments) and, on this basis, the division of society into two fundamental classes. Correspondingly, socially necessary labour takes the form of free wage labour. The generalised capitalist market thus constitutes the framework in which economic laws ('competition') operate as forces independent of subjective will. Economistic alienation and the dominance of economics are its expression.

No society prior to modern times was based on such principles. All advanced societies from 300 bc to 1500 ad were, from one end of the period to the other, of a profoundly similar nature, which I call tributary in order to show this essential *qualitative* fact: namely, that the surplus is directly tapped from peasant activity through some transparent devices associated with the organisation of the power hierarchy (power is the source of wealth, while in capitalism the opposite is the rule). The reproduction of the system therefore requires the dominance of an ideology – a state religion – which renders opaque the power organisation and legitimises it (in contrast to the economist ideology of capitalism which makes economic exploitation opaque and justifies it through this means, counterbalancing the relative openness of political relations, itself a condition for the emergence of modern democracy).

Having taken a stand on some of the debates of historical materialism, I believe it helpful to recall my essential conclusions. They affect my suggestions on the nature of the one (or more) pre-modern system(s). I have rejected the supposedly Marxist version of five stages. More precisely I refuse: (1) to regard slavery as a necessary stage through which all societies that are more 'advanced' have passed; (2) to regard feudalism as the necessary stage succeeding slavery. I have also rejected the supposedly Marxist version of the two roads. More precisely, I refuse to consider that only the European road (slavery-to-feudalism) would pave the way to the invention of capitalism, while the Asiatic road (the supposed Asiatic mode of production) would constitute an impasse, incapable of evolving by itself. I have described these two interpretations of historical materialism as products of Eurocentrism. I refer to my alternative

suggestions in *Class and Nation*. I suggested the necessary succession of two families of modes of production: the communal family and the tributary family. This suggestion comes from highlighting two qualitative breaks in the general evolution: (1) later in date: the qualitative break from the dominance of the political and ideological instance (state plus metaphysical ideology) in the tributary phase into the dominance of the economic instance (generalised market and economic ideology) in the capitalist phase; (2) previously: the qualitative break from the absence of a state and the dominance of the ideology of kinship in the communal phase into the crystallisation of social power in the statist-ideological-metaphysical form in the tributary phase, with precisely the description of feudalism as a peripheral tributary form.

To some, the forms I call 'tributary' would not constitute a single mode of production in the sense that they believe Marxism attaches to the concept of the mode of production. I shall not indulge in this kind of Marxology. If it is a nuisance I am ready to replace the term 'tributary mode of production' with the broader expression 'tributary society'. Of course my suggestions remain within a framework dominated by the search for general laws. Include in this, on the basis of these conceptualisations I have suggested, their transition towards capitalism, marked by the development of the protocapitalist elements which appeared earlier in history. There is of course a strong current nowadays rejecting any search for general laws and insisting on the irreducible specificity of various evolutionary paths. I take this epistemological orientation to be a product of a Eurocentrism concerned above all with legitimatising the superiority of the West.

The specificity of the capitalist world system

The first question the debate on this subject encounters concerns the character of worldwide capitalist expansion. For my part, along with others (including A.G. Frank), I hold that the processes governing the system as a whole determine the framework in which local adjustments operate. In other words, this systemic approach makes the distinction between external factors and internal factors relative, since all the factors are internal at the level of the world system. Is there any need to stress that this methodological approach is distinct from prevailing (bourgeois and even current Marxist) approaches? According to the latter, internal factors are decisive in the sense that the specificities of each ('developed' or 'undeveloped') national formation are mainly due to internal factors, whether favourable or unfavourable to capitalist development.

My analysis remains broadly based on a qualitative distinction (decisive in my view) between the societies of capitalism, dominated by economics (the law of value), and previous societies dominated by the political and ideological. There is, as I see it, a fundamental difference between the contemporary (capitalist) world system and all the preceding (regional and tributary) systems. This calls for comment on the law of value governing capitalism.

On that ground, I have expressed my point of view in terms of what I have called 'the worldwide expansion of the capitalist law of value'. Generally speaking, the law of value supposes an integrated market for the products of social labour (that then become commodities), capital and labour. Within its area of operation it brings a tendency to uniformity in the price of identical commodities and returns on capital and labour (in the form of wages or returns to the petty commodity producer). This is a close approximation to the empirical reality in central capitalist formations. But on the scale of the world capitalist system, the worldwide law of value operates on the basis of a truncated market that integrates trade in goods and the movement of capital but excludes the labour force. The worldwide law of value tends to make the cost of commodities uniform but not the rewards for labour. The discrepancies in world pay rates are considerably broader than in productivities. It follows from this thesis that the polarising effect of the worldwide law of value has nothing in

common in terms of its quality, quantity and planetary scope with the limited tendencies to polarisation within the former (regional) tributary systems.

In this context the qualitative break represented by capitalism remains totally valid; it manifests itself in a fundamental reversal: the dominance of the economic replaces that of the political and ideological. That is why the world capitalist system is qualitatively different from all previous systems. The latter were of necessity regional, no matter how intensive the relations they were able to maintain among each other. Until the reversal has occurred it is impossible to speak of anything but protocapitalist elements where they exist, subject to the prevailing tributary logic. That is why I am not convinced of the usefulness of a theoretical view that suppresses this qualitative break and sees a supposedly eternal world system in a continuum whose origin is lost in the distant past of history.

The significance of the qualitative break of capitalism cannot, therefore, be underestimated. But an acknowledgement of it reveals its limited historical application, as it is stripped of the sacred vestments in which bourgeois ideology has dressed it. The simple and reassuring equations can no longer be written, such as capitalism (nowadays market) equals freedom and democracy, etc. For my part, along with Karl Polanyi, I give a central place to the Marxist theory of economic alienation. With Polanyi, I draw the conclusion that capitalism is by its nature synonymous not with freedom, but with oppression. The socialist ideal of bringing freedom from alienation is thus reinvested with all the force of which some sought to deprive it.

The critique of Eurocentrism in no way implies refusal to recognise the qualitative break capitalism represents and, to use a word no longer fashionable, the progress (albeit relative and historically limited progress) it ushers in. Nor does it propose an act of contrition by which westerners renounce describing this invention as European. The critique is of another kind and centred on the contradictions the capitalist era opens up. The system conquers the world but does not make it homogenous. Quite the reverse, it effects the most phenomenal polarisation possible. If the requirement of universalism the system ushers in is renounced, the system cannot be superseded. To sum up in a phrase, the critique I suggested in *Eurocentrism*: the truncated universalism of capitalist economism, necessarily Eurocentric, must be replaced by the authentic universalism of a necessary and possible socialism. In other words, the critique of Eurocentrism must not be backward-looking, making ‘a virtue of the difference’ as the saying goes.

The mercantilist transition in Europe, 1500–1800

The world system is not reducible to the relatively recent form of capitalism dating back only to the final third of the 19th century, with the onset of imperialism (in the sense that Lenin attached to this term) and the accompanying colonial division of the world. On the contrary, we say that this world dimension of capitalism found expression right from the outset and remained a constant of the system through the successive phases of its development. The recognition that the essential elements of capitalism crystallised in Europe during the Renaissance suggests 1492 – the beginning of the conquest of America – as the date of the simultaneous birth of both capitalism and the world capitalist system, the two phenomena being inseparable.

How should we qualify the nature of the transition from 1500 to 1800? Various qualifications have been suggested, based on the political norms prevailing at the time (Ancien Régime or the Age of Absolute Monarchy) or character of its economy (mercantilism). Indeed, the old mercantilist societies of Europe and the Atlantic and their extension towards central and eastern Europe are problematic. Let us simply note that these societies witnessed the conjunction of certain key preliminary elements of the crystallisation of the

capitalist mode of production. These key elements are a marked extension of the field of commodity exchanges affecting a high proportion of agricultural production; an affirmation of modern forms of private ownership and the protection of these forms by the law; a marked extension of free wage labour (in agriculture and craftsmanship). However, the economy of these societies was more mercantile (dominated by trade and exchange) than capitalist by virtue of the fact that the development of the forces of production had not yet imposed the factory as the principal form of production.

As this is a fairly obvious case of a transitional form, I shall make two further comments on this conclusion. First, the elements in question – that some have called protocapitalist (and why not?) – did not miraculously emerge in 1492. They can be found long before in the region, in the Mediterranean precinct particularly, in the Italian cities and across the sea in the Arab- Islamic world. They had also existed for a very long time in other regions: in India, China, etc. Why then begin the transition to capitalism in 1492 and not in 1350, or in 900, or even earlier? Why speak of transition to capitalism only for Europe and not also describe as societies in transition toward capitalism the Arab-Islamic or Chinese societies in which these elements of protocapitalism can be found? Indeed, why not abandon the notion of transition altogether, in favour of a constant evolution of a system in existence for a long while, in which the elements of protocapitalism have been present since very ancient times? My second comment explains in part my hesitation in following the suggestions made above. The colonisation of America accelerated to an exceptional extent the expansion of the protocapitalist elements indicated above. For three centuries the social system that participated in the colonisation were dominated by such elements. This had not been the case elsewhere or before. On the contrary, the protocapitalist segments of society had remained cloistered in a world dominated by tributary social relations (feudal in medieval Europe). So let us now clarify what we mean here by the domination of tributary relations.

One question we might ask is whether the dense network of Italian cities did or did not constitute a protocapitalist system. Undoubtedly protocapitalist forms were present at the level of the social and political organisation of these dominant cities. But can the Italian cities (and even others, in south Germany, the Hanseatic cities, etc) really be separated from the wider body of medieval Christendom? That wider body remained dominated by feudal rural life, with its ramifications at the political and ideological level: customary law, the fragmentation of powers, cultural monopoly of the church, and so on. In this spirit it seems to me essential to give due weight to the evolution of the political system of protocapitalist Europe from the 16th to the 18th century. The evolution that led from the feudal fragmentation of medieval power to the centralisation of the absolute monarchy kept pace precisely with the acceleration of protocapitalist developments. This European specificity is remarkable, since elsewhere – in China or in the Arab-Islamic world for example – there is no known equivalent of feudal fragmentation: the (centralised) state precedes peripheral character of the feudal society – the product of a grafting of the Mediterranean tributary formation onto a body still largely at the backward communal stage (the Europe of the Barbarians).

The (belated) crystallisation of the state, in the form of absolute monarchy, implied, at the outset, relations between the state and the various components of the society that differed abstractly from those that were the case for the central tributary state. The central tributary state merged with the tributary dominant class, which had no existence outside it. The state of the European absolute monarchies was, on the contrary, built on the ruins of the power of the tributary class of the peripheral modality and relied strongly in its state-building on the protocapitalist urban elements (the nascent bourgeoisie) and rural elements (peasantry evolving towards the market). Absolutism resulted from this balance between the new and rising protocapitalist forces and the vestiges of feudal exploitation.

An echo of this specificity can be found in the ideology accompanying the formation of the state of the Ancien Régime, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment of the 18th century. I stress the specificity – and in my opinion advanced character – of this ideology, which broke with the tributary ideology. In the latter scheme, the predominance of metaphysical view of the world is based on the dominance of the political instance over the economic base. To avoid any misunderstanding, I stress that metaphysics is not synonymous with irrationality (as the radical currents of the Enlightenment have painted it), but seeks to reconcile Reason and Faith (see my discussion of this theme in *Eurocentrism*). The ideological revolution from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment did not suppress metaphysics (metaphysical needs), but freed the sciences from their subjection to it and thereby paved the way to the constitution of a new scientific field, that of the social sciences. At the same time, of course, (far from accidental) concomitance between the practices of the new state (of the Ancien Régime) and developments in the field of ideology began to move rapidly towards the bourgeois revolution (1688 in England, 1776 in New England, 1789 in France). They challenged the absolutist system that had provided a platform for protocapitalist advances. New concepts of power legitimised by democracy (however qualified) were introduced. It is also from there on that the Europeans developed a new awareness of their specificity. Before the Renaissance the Europeans (of medieval Christendom) knew they were not superior (in power potential) to the advanced societies of the Orient, even if they regarded their religion as superior, just as the others did! From the Renaissance on, they knew they had acquired at least potential superiority over all the other societies and could henceforth conquer the entire globe, which they proceeded to do.

The Arab-Islamic and the Mediterranean prior systems

Everybody knows that the Arab-Islamic Mediterranean and Middle East region enjoyed a brilliant civilisation even before the Italian cities. But did the Arab-Islamic world constitute protocapitalist systems? The protocapitalist forms are present and, at certain times and places, inspired a glorious civilisation. The views I have put forward on this subject (see *The Arab Nation, Eurocentrism*) tie in with Mansour Fawzy's book (1990) on the historical roots of the impasse of the Arab world and, in some regards, with the works of the late Ahmad Sadek Saad. Beyond possible divergences – or shades of meaning – we are of the common opinion that the Arab-Islamic political system was not dominated by protocapitalist (mercantilist) forces but, on the contrary, that the protocapitalist elements remained subject to the logic of the dominant tributary system power. In fact, I consider the Arab-Islamic world as part of a larger regional system, which I call the Mediterranean system.

I have suggested (in *Eurocentrism*) that we can date the birth of this Mediterranean system from the conquests of Alexander the Great (3rd century bc) and conceptualise a single long historic period from this date to the Renaissance, encompassing at first the 'Ancient Orient' (around the eastern basin of the Mediterranean), then the Mediterranean as whole and its Arab-Islamic and European extensions.

I have in this regard put forward the thesis that we are dealing with a single tributary system from 300 bc (unification of the Orient by Alexander the Great) to 1492. I refer to a single 'cultural area' whose unity is manifested in a common metaphysical formulation (the Tributary ideology of the region), beyond the successive expressions of this metaphysics (Hellenistic, Eastern Christian, Islamic, Western Christian). In this tributary area I find it useful to distinguish between its central regions (the Mediterranean Orient) and its peripheral regions (the European West). Within this entity exchanges of every kind have (nearly always) been highly intensive and the associated protocapitalist forms highly advanced, particularly evident in the central regions (in the period of the first flowering of Islam from the 8th to the 12th centuries and in Italy for the succeeding centuries). These exchanges have been the

means of a significant redistribution of surplus. However, the eventual centralisation of surplus was essentially tied to the centralisation of political power. From that point of view the cultural area as a whole never constituted a single unified imperial state (except for the two brief periods of the Alexandrine empire and the Roman empire occupying all the central regions of the system). Generally speaking, the peripheral region of the European West remained extremely fragmented under the feudal form (and this is the very expression of its peripheral character). The central region was divided between the Christian Byzantine Orient and the Arab-Islamic empires (the Umayyad, then the Abbasid dynasties). It was first subject to internal centrifugal forces, then belatedly unified in the Ottoman empire, whose establishment coincided with the end of the period and the overall peripheralisation of the eastern region – to the benefit of a shift of the centre towards the previously peripheral region of Europe and the Atlantic.

Could this system be described as protocapitalist? In support of the thesis is the presence of undeniable protocapitalist elements (private ownership, commodity enterprise, wage labour) throughout the period, expanding in certain places and times (especially in the Islamic area and in Italy), declining in others (especially in barbarian Europe of the first millennium). But in my view the presence of these elements does not suffice to characterise the system. On the contrary, I would argue that, at the crucial level of ideology, what began in the Hellenistic phase of this period (from 300 bc to the first centuries ad), and then flourished in the (Eastern then Western) Christian and Islamic forms, is purely and simply the tributary ideology, with its major fundamental characteristic: the predominance of metaphysical concerns. Global history: a view from the south²²

What we are talking about is indeed a system, but not a protocapitalist system, that is, a stage in the rapid transition from tributary society to capitalist society. On the other hand, we are dealing with a tributary system, not a mere juxtaposition of autonomous tributary societies (in the plural), which just happened to share some common elements, such as religion, for example, or integration – albeit of limited duration – in an imperial state, such as that of Rome, Byzantium, the Umayyad or Abbasid dynasties.

The distinction implies in my view a certain degree of centralisation of surplus, which took the form of tribute and not, as in capitalism, that of profit from capital. The normal method of centralisation of this tributary surplus was political centralisation, operating to the advantage of imperial capitals (Rome, Byzantium, Damascus, Baghdad). Of course this centralisation remained weak, as did the authority of the centres concerned. Byzantium, Damascus, and Baghdad could not prevent their staging-posts (Alexandria, Cairo, Fez, Kairouan, Genoa, Venice, Pisa, and so on) from frequently achieving their own autonomy. The entirety of barbarian Christendom (the first millennium in the West) escaped such centralisation. In parallel, the logic of the centralisation of authority stimulated protocapitalist relations to the point that mercantile handling of part of the surplus never disappeared from the region, and took on great significance in some areas and epochs, notably during the glorious centuries of Islam, and the emergence of the Italian cities following the Crusades. On this basis I have described the social formations of the Arab world as tributary-mercantile formations. All this leads me to conclude that capitalism might have been born in the Arab world. This takes me back to other discussions on this issue with which I have been associated. I have argued that once capitalism had appeared in Europe and the Atlantic, the process of evolution towards capitalism was brutally halted in its development elsewhere. The reason why the evolution towards capitalism accelerated in the Atlantic West (shifting the centre of gravity of the system from the banks of the Mediterranean to the shores of the Atlantic ocean), it seems to me, is mainly due to the colonisation (of America, then of the entire globe) and contingently to the peripheral character of Western feudalism.

Did a single world tributary system exist?

My methodological hypothesis leads me to regard the other cultural areas as further autonomous tributary systems. In particular, it seems to me that the Confucian-Chinese tributary system constituted a world on its own and of its own. It had its own centre (China), characterised by a strong political centralisation (even if the latter under the pressure of internal centrifugal forces exploded from time to time, it was always reconstituted), and its peripheries (Japan especially) had a relationship with China very similar to that of medieval Europe with the civilised Orient. I leave a dotted line after the question of whether the Hindu cultural area constituted a (single) tributary system.

This having been said, the question is: was the Mediterranean system isolated or in close relation with the other Asiatic and African systems? Can the existence of a permanent world system, in constant evolution, be argued beyond the Mediterranean area and prior to its constitution? A positive response to this question has been suggested to some (notably Frank) by the intensity of exchange relations between the protocapitalist Mediterranean, the Chinese and Indian Orient, and sub-Saharan Africa, and perhaps even the significance of the exchanges in earlier times between these various regions of the ancient world. For my part, I do not believe that it is possible to answer the questions, given the current state of knowledge. It is, however, useful to raise it in order to provoke a systematic exchange of views on what can be deduced from our knowledge, the hypotheses it may inspire, and the directions of research indicated for verification of these hypotheses.

I do not intend to substitute my own 'intuitive views' for the eventual results of these debates. I advance them here only provisionally, to open the discussion. I should therefore suggest the following (provisional) theses.

First, humankind is one since its origins. The itinerary of the earth's population begins from the nucleus of hominids appearing in East Africa, going down the Nile and populating Africa, crossing the Mediterranean and the Isthmus of Suez to conquer Europe and Asia, passing the Bering Straits and perhaps crossing the Pacific to install themselves (in the most recent epoch) in the Americas. These successive conquests of the planet's territory are beginning to be dated. The following may be the pertinent question: has the dispersal brought a diversification of the lines of evolution of the various human groups, installed in geographical environments of extreme diversity and hence exposed to challenges of differing kinds? Or does the existence of parallel lines of evolution suggest the conclusion that humankind as a whole has remained governed by laws of evolution of universal application? And as a complement to this question, it might be asked what effect have relations between the scattered human populations had on the fate, intensity and rapidity of the transfer of knowledge, experience and ideas?

Intuitively it might be imagined that some human groups have found themselves fairly isolated in particularly difficult circumstances and have responded to the challenge by particular adaptation unlikely to evolve of themselves. These groups would then be located in 'impasses', constrained to reproduce their own organisation without the latter showing signs of its own suppression. Perhaps included here would be the (still highly fragmented) societies of hunters/fishers/gatherers of the Arctic, the equatorial forest, small islands and some coasts.

But other groups have found themselves in less arduous circumstances that have enabled them to progress simultaneously in mastery of nature (passage to settled agriculture, invention of more efficient tools and so on) and in tighter social organisation. In regard to the latter the question arises of possible laws of social evolution of universal application and the role of external relations in this evolution.

Second, in regard to societies that have clearly advanced, can one detect similar phasing followed by all, albeit at faster or slower rates? Our entire social science is based on this

seemingly necessary hypothesis. For the satisfaction of the spirit? As legitimation of a universalist value system? Various formulations of this necessary evolution succeeded one another up to and during the 19th century. They were based either on the succession of modes of exploitation of the soil and instruments utilised (Old Stone Age, New Stone Age, Iron Age), or on the succession of social forms of organisation (the ages of Savagery, Barbarism, Civilisation). Various evolutions in these particular domains were regrafted on to what we regarded as fundamental general tendencies. For example, the matriarchal–patriarchal succession, the succession of the ages of philosophical thought (primitive, animist, metaphysical, Auguste Comte-style positivist), and so on. I shall not spend time here discussing these theories, which are almost always more or less overridden by subsequent research. I merely point to their existence as evidence of the persistence of the need to generalise, beyond the evident diversity that is the property of the scientific approach.

It seems to me that the most sophisticated formulation of all the theories of general evolution was that proposed by Marxism and based on the synthetic notions of modes of production. The latter comes from a conceptualisation of the basic elements of the construction (forces of production, relations of production, infrastructure and superstructure, etc). They are then enriched by the grafting on of particular theories articulated to those of modes of production (such as theory of the family, of the state, etc). Here again I shall not discuss whether these Marxist constructs are indeed those of Marx himself, or the product of later interpretations that may or may not be consonant with the spirit of the Marxism of Marx. Nor shall I discuss the validity of these theories in the light of our present-day greater knowledge of the societies of the past. Once again I merely point to the formulations as the expression of this same need to understand, which implies the possibility of generalising.

Third, on the basis of the conceptualisation proposed, it is not difficult to identify several tributary societies at more or less the same level of maturity of general development: production techniques, instruments, range of goods, forms of organisation of power, systems of knowledge and ideas, and so on. Noteworthy too is a fairly dense web of exchanges of all kinds between these societies: exchange of goods, knowledge, techniques, and ideas. Does this density of exchange justify speaking of a single world system (albeit described as tributary) in the singular? Frank provides an explicit criterion: an integrated system arises when reciprocal influences are decisive (A would not be what it is without the relation it has with B). So be it. But the overall question remains: were these relations decisive or not?

However, the universality of the laws of social evolution in no way implies the concept of a single system. Two distinct concepts are involved. The first refers to the fact that distinct societies – separated in geographical distance or time – have been able to evolve in a parallel manner for the same underlying reasons. The second implies that these societies are not distinct from one another but ingredients of the same world society. In the evolution of the latter – necessarily global – the laws in question are inseparable from the effects of the interaction between the various components of the world society.

I would in this context make two prefatory comments. First, economic exchanges are not necessarily a decorative element, making no lasting impression on the mode of production and hence on the level of development. Exchanges may be a significant means of distribution of surplus, decisive for some segments of the inter-related societies. The question is not one of principle but of fact. Were they? Where and when? I discount any hasty generalisation that they were always (or generally) so or that they were never (or with rare exceptions) so. In the case of the Arab-Islamic region, for example, I have said that the exchanges were significant. They were enough to mark the formation of a tributary–mercantile character essential to an understanding of its involuted history of succession from a ‘glorious’ phase to one of ‘degeneration’, and of shifts of the centres of gravity of wealth and power in the region. I have also said that the protocapitalist formation of mercantilist Europe (17th–18th centuries)

rapidly climbed the step towards capitalism thanks to these exchanges it dominated. But whether the exchanges had a matching role in China, India, the Roman empire, etc, I personally am in no position to say. Second, the exchanges in question must not be limited only to the economic field; far from it. The writing of the history of the precapitalist epochs puts greater emphasis on cultural exchanges (especially the spread of religions) and military and political exchanges (rise and fall of empires, ‘barbarian’ invasions, etc), whereas the accent is on the economic aspect of relations within the modern world system. Was this distinction wrong?

I do not think so. I believe, on the contrary, that the historians – albeit intuitively – have grasped the reversal of dominance, from the political and ideological to the economic, which is the central core of my own thesis. At this level is it possible to speak of a single tributary political and ideological world system? I do not believe so. I have therefore preferred to speak of distinct tributary ‘cultural areas’ founded precisely on broad systems of particular reference – most often the religious: Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity. Of course there is a certain relationship between these various metaphysics since they express the fundamental requirement of the same type of (tributary) society. The relationship in turn facilitates mutual borrowings. To approach an answer to the question (of one or more systems), it is necessary to combine three elements: the density of economic exchanges and transfers of surplus distributed through this channel; the degree of centralisation of political power; and the relative diversity/specificity and hence autonomy of the ideological systems. Autonomy of the various tributary systems does not preclude economic relations and other exchanges among them, nor even that such exchanges could be significant. It would be impossible to understand many historical facts and evolutions without reference to these exchanges: the transfer of technology of all kinds (the compass, gunpowder, paper, silk that gave its name to the roads in question, printing, Chinese noodles becoming Italian pasta, etc); the spread of religious beliefs (Buddhism crossing from India to China and Japan, Islam travelling as far as Indonesia and China, Christianity as far as Ethiopia, south India, and central Asia), etc.

There is certainly no centralisation of surplus at the level of a world system comparable to that characterising the modern world in the exchanges that led here and there to lively protocapitalist links (from China and India to the Islamic world, the African Sahel and medieval Europe) and transfers of surplus – perhaps even decisive at key points of the network of exchanges. The explanation is that centralisation of surplus at the time operated mainly in association with the centralisation of power, and there was no kind of world empire or even a world power comparable to what British hegemony would constitute in the 19th century or United States hegemony in the 20th. The ancient (tributary) epochs had nothing comparable to the polarisation on a global scale of the modern capitalist world. The earlier systems, despite significant levels of exchange, were not polarising on a world scale, even if they were on a regional scale to the benefit of the centres of the regional systems (for example, Rome, Constantinople, Baghdad, the Italian cities, China, India). By contrast, the capitalist system is truly polarising on a global scale and is therefore the only one deservedly described as a world system. This methodology for the analysis of the interactions between the tributary systems may call for a reassessment of the traditional findings in the history of the notorious ‘barbarians’ who occupied the interstices of the great tributary cultural areas. Was the role of these barbarians really as it has been made out, a purely negative and destructive role? Or did their active role in inter-tributary exchanges give them a certain vocation to take decisive initiatives? The latter would explain their success (not only military) in unifying immense territories (Genghis Khan’s empire), their capacity to situate themselves at the heart of ideological initiatives (Islam born in Arabia, the barbarian crossroads of Mediterranean–Indian–African exchanges), their capacity to hoist themselves rapidly to

central positions in a tributary system (the glorious example of the Khwarizm area in the first centuries of Islam), etc.

A final reservation concerning the systematisation of the hypothesis of the existence of a single world system throughout history: is it possible to speak of tributary systems and significant exchange networks among them before the 5th to 3rd centuries bc? I do not think so for the following three reasons at least: (1) because the social systems of the greater part of humankind were still backward at the stage I have described as communal; (2) because the islets of civilisation at the stage where the state was the recognised form of the expression of power had not yet found complete tributary ideological expression (see the argument on the ideology of the ancient world in *Eurocentrism*); (3) because the density of the exchange relations between these islets remained weak (this did not preclude some exchange relations; for example, technological borrowings that were able to travel unexpected distances).

A critique of evolutionism

The theory according to which all human societies have been forever integrated in a single world system, in continuous evolution (capitalism not representing, therefore, any kind of qualitative break in this respect) arises from a philosophy of history which is in the end based on the notion of competition. Certainly it is based on a realistic observation of facts, namely, that all societies on earth, in all eras, are to some extent in competition with one another – it would not matter whether the relations they did or did not entertain showed their awareness of it. We know that the strongest must carry the day. At this level of abstraction there is indeed a single world, because there is a single humankind. It might perhaps be added that most ‘open’ societies with intensive relations with the others have a greater chance of measuring up to this competition and facing up to it more effectively. It is otherwise for those who shy away from competition and seek to perpetuate their way of life; they risk being overtaken by the progress made elsewhere and later being marginalised.

This discourse is not wrong, but merely at such a high level of abstraction that it begs the real issue, namely, how this competition is manifested. Two bourgeois historians – themselves philosophers of history – deliberately placed themselves at this most general level of abstraction (in order to refute Marx). Arnold Toynbee in this regard suggests an operative model reduced to two terms: the challenge and the response to the challenge. I suggest that as a model valid for all times and all places, it teaches us nothing that is not already obvious. Toynbee suggests no law to explain why the challenge is taken up or not. He is satisfied with a case-by-case treatment. There is an almost natural parallel with the contradiction between the axioms of neoclassical bourgeois economics defined in terms claiming to be valid for all times (scarcity, utility, etc) and the historical concept of qualitatively differing successive modes of production, determining specific institutional frameworks in which the ‘eternal rationality of human beings’ is expressed. Jacques Pirenne, far superior to Toynbee in my opinion, suggests a refinement of constant contradiction between (seagoing) open societies and (land-based) closed societies and does not hesitate to describe the former as capitalist (Sumer, Phoenicia, Greece, Islam in the first centuries, the Italian cities, the modern West) and the latter as feudal (from ancient Persia to the European Middle Ages). He never hesitated to attribute to what I call protocapitalist elements the decisive place in the progress of the open societies making the driving force of development of the forces of production. He likewise never concealed that his thesis intended to discount the closed experiences of the Soviet Union and salute the dynamism of the Atlantic world. Hence, Pirenne managed – certainly with skill – to replace class struggle with a constant struggle between the capitalist tendency and the feudal tendency within human societies.

I still believe that Marx’s method is superior, precisely because it situates the abstraction at the appropriate level. The concept of modes of production gives back to history its explicit

real dimension. At that level the significance and character of the capitalist break can be detected. The break is such that I do not think that competition between societies of earlier times and within the modern world system can be treated in the same way. First, because the competition of earlier times rarely crossed the threshold of consciousness and each society saw, or believed, itself 'superior' in its own way, protected by its deities, even when a looming danger imposed a greater consciousness (as between Muslims and Crusaders). Moreover, the discrepancy between the great tributary pre-capitalist societies is not such that the superiority of one over another is obvious; it is always conjunctural and relative. There is nothing comparable to the subsequent overwhelming superiority of capitalist societies over the rest. That is why I see the seizing of consciousness of this superiority as crucially important and therefore date the beginnings of capitalism to 1492. From then on the Europeans knew that they could conquer the world and went on to do so (see my arguments on this point in *Eurocentrism*). We know, *a posteriori* (but the actors of the time were unaware), that the 'strongest' is the one who has advanced to a qualitatively superior mode of production – capitalism. I would add that in the competition of earlier times geographical distance had a blunting effect. However intensive the exchanges between Rome and China, I find it difficult to believe that the external factor could have a similar impact to that of the discrepancies in productivity of our own times. I believe that this distancing gave strictly internal factors a considerably more decisive relative weight. It also explains why those concerned had difficulty in assessing the real balance of forces. Quite different, it seems to me, is competition within the modern world system, where consciousness is so acute that it is a plaintive chorus in the daily discourse of the authorities.

A diagram of the tributary regional and world systems

Figure 1 illustrates my concept of the ancient world system (reduced to societies of the so-called eastern hemisphere: Eurasia–Africa) for the periods covering the eighteen centuries between the establishment of the Hellenistic system in the Middle East (300 bc), the establishment of the Han state in China (200 bc), the Kushāna and Maurya states in Central Asia and India (200 bc), and the European Renaissance, that is, from 300 bc to 1500 ad. I wish to summarise its characteristics as follows.

First, as I have already said, all societies of the system in question are, from one end of the period to the other, of a tributary nature. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish among all these societies those which I would call central tributaries from those which are peripheral tributaries. The former are characterised by a surplus centralisation at the relatively high state level, with its redistribution placed under its control; while in peripheral formations, the embryonic character of the state (and even its virtual non-existence) leads to a complete disintegration of surplus distribution monopolised by local feudal systems. The centres/peripheries antithesis is not, in this case, analogous to that which characterises the (modern) capitalist world. In the latter, the relationship in question is an economic domination relationship in which the centres override the peripheries (and this is associated with economic dominance). This is not so in the ancient relationship. Dominated by the ideological authority, the tributary structures are either central or peripheral depending on the degree of the completion of the power centralisation process and its expression through a state religion. In the central formations, the latter takes the form of a state religion or a religious-oriented state philosophy with a universal vocation which breaks with the specific local religions of the former periods which I called 'communal formations' (see *Class and Nation*). There is a striking relationship between the establishment of big tributary societies in their completed form and the emergence of great religious and philosophical trends which were to dominate civilisations over the ensuing 2,000 years: Hellenism (300 bc), Oriental Christianity, Islam

(600 ad), Zoroaster, Buddha, and Confucius (all three 500 bc). This relationship – which in no way excluded the reciprocal concessions provided by the relations that all tributary civilisations maintained among themselves – is not, in my view, an accident, but rather one of the consistent bases of my thesis on the dominant tributary mode.

The establishment of great philosophical and religious movements associated with the formation of tributary systems represents the first wave of revolutions related to universal history, which is expressed by a universalist-oriented vocation transcending the horizons of the local – almost parochial – line of thinking in the ancient periods. This revolution sets up the tributary system as a general system at the entire level of mankind – or almost does so – for 2,000 to 2,500 years. The second wave of universal-oriented revolutions, which opens up capitalist modernity and its possible socialist overtaking, is marked by the Renaissance (and the revolution in Christianity with which it is associated) and, subsequently, by the three great modern revolutions: the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions (see *Eurocentrism*).

The model *par excellence* of this tributary mode is, in my view, provided by China which, without it seems a long incubation period (there is only one millennium between the Shang and the Zhu and the establishment of the Han dynasty), crystallises in a form which undergoes no fundamental change, either with regard to the organisation of productive forces and production relationships or ideology (the Confucianism–Taoism tandem replaced for only a brief moment by Buddhism), or with regard to power concepts during the 2,000 years between the Han dynasty and the 1911 revolution. Here, surplus centralisation is at its height, at the level of an enormous society, not only during the brilliant periods where political unity was entirely or almost entirely achieved in this continent-country by great successive dynasties (Han, Tāng, Sōng, Yuǎn, Ming and Qing), but even during the periods of inter-dynastic disturbances when the country was divided into several kingdoms whose size was nonetheless considerable for the period. At the borders of China, Korea and Vietnam also turned, during the course of the first millennium of our era, into similar tributary systems which, in spite of their political independence with regard to China borrowed its model of organisation and Confucian ideology.

Figure 1 The tributary world system (300 bc–1500 ad) Global history: a view from the south³⁴

In the Middle East, the tributary system derived its completed form from the conquest of Alexander the Great. I have recommended in this connection (see *Eurocentrism*) this reading of the successive philosophical and religious orientations of Hellenism, Oriental Christianity, and Islam. However, in this region, the incubation period lasted for as long as 30 centuries for Egypt and Mesopotamia, ten centuries for Persia, Phoenicia, etc, and five centuries for Greece. Hellenism, Christianity, and Islam were, moreover, to produce a synopsis which borrowed some elements crucial to each of these ancient components and even from Persia and India as well. Here, too, surplus centralisation for the ensuing 2,000 years is remarkable. Doubtless, the region was split after the precarious political unification in the Alexander era; but it was split into large kingdoms for the period. Hence, divided between even bigger empires – those of Byzantium (300 to 1400 ad) and the Sassanids (200 to 600 ad) – and subsequently reunified gradually through the expansion of the Muslim Caliphate, formed in the 7th century ad, which conquered Constantinople at the end of our period (in 1453), the spaces of surplus centralisation were still either vast (during the first three centuries of the Caliphate), or at the very least, considerable, after the break-up of the Caliphate from the year 1000 to the advantage of Arabo-Berber dynasties in North Africa and Turco-Persians in the Mashreq and western part of Central Asia. The western Roman empire finds its place in this reading of history as an expression of an expansion of the tributary model to the banks of the western Mediterranean. Of secondary importance in universal history, the Roman empire owes its place to the fact that it has transmitted tributary ideology – in the form of western Christianity – to the European periphery.

A Eurocentric reading of history (see my critical appraisal in *Eurocentrism*) has, in this regard, distorted the achievements which, beyond the Italian peninsula failed to resist barbaric feudalisation (that is, the disintegration of the tributary system).

A third completed tributary centre was established on the Indian continent in 200 bc from the Maurya period, followed by the Kushāna state (which overlaps the western part of Central Asia) and Gupta after the long incubation period which began with the Indus civilisations (Mohenjodaro and Harappa – 2500 bc). The Muslim conquest from the 11th century on which followed after a ‘pulverisation’ period (of the 7th and 9th centuries) re-established together with the Ghaznavids, the Sultanates of Delhi (1200–1500 ad), and subsequently the Mughal empire (1500–1800 ad), a tributary centralisation on a large scale, while the Hinduist states of Dekkan, also tributaries, equally represented considerable kingdoms for the period.

Three zones are shown in Figure 1 whose peripheral character is striking during the entire or almost entire period under consideration (from 300 bc to 1500 ad). Europe (beyond the Byzantine region and Italian, that is, ‘barbaric’ Europe), was the product of a tributary graft (transmitted by the ideal of the Roman empire and Christian universalism) on a social body still organised, to a large extent, on deteriorated community bases. Here, I wish to refer to the analysis I made (see *Class and Nation*) which simultaneously gives an account of the disintegration in the control of surpluses, and which defines feudalism as an uncompleted peripheral form of the tributary system, although the collapse of the state system was partially offset by the church. Europe was slowly moving toward the tributary form, as testified by the establishment of absolute monarchies (in Spain and Portugal after the Reconquista, and in England and France after the Hundred Years War). This belatedness constitutes, in my view, the crucial advantage which facilitated the early qualitative strides made by the Renaissance and capitalism (see *Class and Nation*).

Japan constituted, at the other end of the Euro-Asian continent, a peripheral tributary mode whose resemblance to Europe had struck me even before Mishio Morishima came to confirm my thesis. The degraded form of Japanese Confucianism, the feudal disintegration which preceded the belated formation of a monarchical centralisation from the Tokugawa State (1600 ad) bear testimony to this peripheral character (see *Eurocentrism*), which, here, too,

explains the remarkable ease with which Japan switched over to capitalism in the 19th century. Sub-Saharan Africa constituted the third periphery. It was still lingering at the communal stage developing towards tributary forms. At this stage the tributary surplus centralisations still operated only on societies with limited size. Disintegration therefore remained the rule.

The status of Southeast Asia was ambivalent. It seems to me that here it is possible to recognise some central type of tributary formations – even if they only cover smaller spaces than those of other great Asian systems – and peripheral zones (defined by surplus disintegration). To the first type belongs the Khmer empire, followed by its Thai, Burmese and Cambodian successors from the 5th century and, perhaps, in Indonesia, the Majapahit kingdom from the 13th century. On the other hand, the organised societies of Malaysia and Indonesia which crystallised into states under the influence of Hinduism (from the 5th century) and subsequently Islam, seem, in my view, to belong to the peripheral family, crumbled by the scattering of the surplus, collected in very small and relatively numerous and fragile states. The status of the Central Asian region was special. The region itself is less defined in its borders than the others. Some large states were established in this region at an early period – such as the Kushāna empire – which directly linked up the Hellenistic Middle East and the Sassanids and then the Islamic Middle East to India and China. The region itself became the centre of gravity of an immense empire at the time of Genghis Khan (1300 ad). Before and after this final crystallisation, it had entered the Islamic orbit. Its modes of organisation were tributary-oriented, at one time advanced (where the expression of centralised power on a large scale makes it possible), at another time relapsing into feudal disintegration. But the major feature of the region was that, by virtue of its very geographical position, it was the indispensable transit zone for East–West trade (China, India, the Middle East and beyond to as far as the peripheries of the system). Having been in competition with the sea route from time immemorial, the continental route lost its importance only belatedly in the 16th century.

As for the second characteristic of the ancient world system: during the entire 18th-century period under consideration, all the societies represented in Figure 1 not only existed together, but still maintained trade links of all types (trade and war, technological and cultural transfers), which were much more intense than was generally thought. In this very general sense, one can talk of the general system without, of course, mistaking its nature for that of the modern (capitalist) world system. In Figure 1, I represent these links by eleven arrows. Of course, the intensity of flows that each of these arrows represents varied considerably with time and space. But above all – and I wish to emphasise this point – their connection with the internal dynamics peculiar to the different tributary systems they link up is not only fundamentally different from that which characterises the international links within the modern world system, but has also operated differently from one tributary formation to another. To clarify things, I want to distinguish four sets of links:

1. The links mutually maintained between the three major centres (A – Rome and Byzantium, the Sassanid empire, the Caliphate; B – China; C – India) are marked by arrows 1 (Middle East–China through central and Northern Asia), 2 (Middle East–India across western central Asia), and 3 (Middle East–India by sea route). These links were undoubtedly the most intense of all, merely in view of the wealth and relative power of the centres in question, at least in the glorious years of their history.
2. The links maintained by the Arabo-Persian Islamic centre with the three peripheries (Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia) are shown by arrows 4 (Middle East–Malaysia, Indonesia sea route), 5 (North Africa–African Sahel trans-Saharan route), 6 (Middle East–Swahili eastern coast sea route), and 7 (Caliphate and Byzantium–Europe). The trade in question was less intense than that of the previous group (due to the relative poverty of the peripheries), and especially

important is the fact that it was asymmetrical (a concept that I clearly distinguish from the specific inequality of the centres/peripheries relationships of the modern world) in the sense that they were perhaps neutral in their effects on the centre, but crucial for the development of the peripheries. These relationships considerably accelerated the establishment of states in the African Sahel and East Africa (see *Class and Nation*) as well as in Malaysia and Indonesia and thus opened the way for the Islamisation of these regions (Islam then replacing the ancient local religions in line with the needs of the tributary world). They also contributed immensely to the emergence of Italian trading cities and, through these cities, of infiltration throughout the whole of feudal Europe.

3. The links maintained by the Chinese centre with the Japanese periphery (arrow 8) and the Southeast Asian periphery (arrow 9) are of the same nature as those in the second group. Here, I wish to refer to arrow 11, which indicates a direct communication establishment between China and Europe, using of course the routes of Central Asia but without passing through the canal in the heart of the Islamic Caliphate. This direct relation existed only for a relatively short period, within the framework of the Mongol Pax (the Genghis Khan empire in the 13th century). But it was crucial for subsequent events of history because it made it possible for Europe to resort to China's vast technological accomplishments (gunpowder, printing, the compass, etc); Europe was mature enough to do this and take the qualitative leap from a peripheral tributary (feudal) system to capitalism. Furthermore, shortly thereafter Europe substituted the sea route it dominated for all ancient forms of long-haul transport, thus establishing direct links between itself and each of the other regions of the world (Africa, India, Southeast Asia), 'discovering' and then 'conquering' America at the same time.
4. The links maintained by the Indian centre (Buddhist and Hindu) with its Southeast Asian peripheries (arrow 10) are similar to the China-Japan links.

It obviously appears that the relative intensity of external flows, as compared with the different masses constituted by the regional formations under consideration, varies considerably from one region to another. The three key central regions, A, B and C (Middle East, China, India), represented, in terms of economic weight, a multiple of what constituted each of the other regions. If, therefore, the volume of the surplus identified in each of these key central regions is measured by index 1,000, it could hardly have exceeded index 100 for each of the other regions (Europe, Africa, Japan, Central Asia and Southeast Asia). Moreover, only a part and probably a relatively minor part (10 to 20 per cent perhaps) of this surplus could involve long-distance trade.

The four arrows which concern China (major 1, minors 8 and 9, and transitory 11) could, for instance, represent an index 'value' of about 100 (10 per cent of the surplus produced in China). The three arrows which concern India (majors 2 and 3 and minor 10) probably hardly exceeded index 50 or 70. All historians have observed that the external trade of these two continental masses were marginal as compared with their volume of production.

On the other hand, the weight of external trade seems more pronounced for region A, which is the only region in direct relationship with all the others. To major arrows 1, 2 and 3 representing A's trade with B and C (total index value: 115 in our assumption) is added the region's trade with the peripheries of Europe (arrow 7), Africa (arrows 5 and 6), and Southeast Asia (arrow 4), making a total index value of about 25. In sum then, external trade, in this case, would have represented an index value of 140 (almost 29 per cent of the surplus).

For each of the peripheries too, the contribution of external trade would appear relatively considerable: index 20 for Europe, 10 for Africa, 20 for Southeast Asia and 20 for Japan, that is 20 to 33 per cent of the surplus generated in these regions. Similarly, transit flows through Central Asia (arrows 1, 2 and 11) on the order of index 100, might have accounted for a volume even greater than that of the locally produced surplus.

The index values assigned to both the surplus volumes produced in each region and the trade volumes indicated by each of the arrows are, of course, mere fabrications on my part, created with a view to suggesting some relative orders of magnitude. It is for historians to improve upon them. Failing this (and we have not found any figures in this regard), the figures I have used constitute some orders of magnitude which seem plausible to me and which can be summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Locally generated external flows

Surplus (1)	(2)	%	(2/1)
Middle East	800	140	18
China	1,000	100	10
India	1,000	60	6
Europe	100	20	20
Africa	50	10	20
Japan	60	20	33
Southeast Asia	60	20	33
Central Asia	60	100	166

Geography has assigned to key central region A an exceptional role without any possible competitor until modern times, when Europe, through its control over the seas, overcame the constraints. Indeed, this region is directly linked to all the others (China, India, Europe, Africa) and is the only one as such. For two millennia, it was an indispensable transit route to Europe, China, India or Africa. Besides, the region does not reflect a relative homogeneity similar to that of China or India, neither at the geographical level (stretching from the Moroccan shores of the Atlantic to the Aral Sea, Pamirs and to the Oman Sea, it does not have the features of a continental block as in the case of China and India), nor at the level of its peoples, who themselves are products of the early proliferation of the most ancient civilisations (Egypt, Sumer, Assyria, Mesopotamia, Iran, Hittites, Phoenicians and Greeks) and speak languages from various families (Semitic, Hamitic, Indo-European). The conquest of Alexander the Great and the triumph of the Hellenistic synthesis triggered a collective awareness which was subsequently strengthened by Oriental Christianity (limited by the Sassanid border) and subsequently and, above all, by Islam.

One of the keys to the success of Islam relates, in my view, to this reality. The region was finally firmly established within the short period covering the first three centuries of the Hegira. It was thus composed of the three superimposed strata of Islamised peoples, namely, the Arabs from the Atlantic to the Gulf, the Persians beyond Zagros to Pakistan, the Turks in Anatolia and in the entire Turkestan from the Caspian Sea to China proper. Thus, Islam did not only unify the peoples of the so-called classical 'East' but annexed, at the same time, Central Asia, the indispensable transit route to China and northern India. I think that this success should be attributed to the fact that in spite of all the conflicts witnessed by history internal to this region, it created a certain solidarity and strengthened the sense of a particular identity with regard to the 'others'; that is, specifically, the Chinese, Indians, Europeans and Africans that the Muslim *umma* borders on along each of its frontiers. In Central Asia the success of Islam created regional unity, which, until then, was absent. For the civilisation in this region, in which trade flows represent larger volumes than the surplus produced locally, depended on the capacity to capture, in passing, a part of these transit flows

Figure 2 The early roots (up to 200 bc)

The magnitude of the links with the others for the entire key central region A and its Central Asia annex bestows on its social system a special character which I venture, for this reason, to call ‘mercantile-tributary’, thus indicating even the magnitude of protocapitalist forms (commercial links, wage labour, private property or estate) in the tributary societies of Islam. Moreover, beyond the original boundaries of Islam, the gradual conquest of African and Southeast Asian peripheries is also worth putting into close relationship with its mercantile dynamism of region A (see *The Arab Nation, Class and Nation*).

Third, the world system described above for the period of 18 centuries preceding the Renaissance is not analogous to the modern system that follows it (in time). To talk about the ancient system in its spatial and time universality or even in its Arab–Islamic component as the ancestor of the modern system would be misleading. For this is only a platitude – succession in time and nothing more; or it implies that there was no qualitative break but only quantitative development and a shift of the system’s centre of gravity from the southern shore of the Mediterranean to its northern shore (Italian cities) and then to the Atlantic shores, and this boils down to eliminating the essential, that is, the qualitative change in the nature of the system: the law of value which governs the dynamics of the modern system but not those of the tributary system. This universalisation of the law of value is exclusively responsible for the establishment of one single antinomy which operates worldwide (a centre composed of historically established national centres as such and peripheries all economically dependent on this centre), thus creating an *ever-increasing* differentiation from one period to another between the centre and the peripheries, over the entire five-century history of capitalism and for the entirely visible or imaginable horizon within the framework of its immanent laws. In this connection, there is nothing comparable to the lasting relative balance (for 2,000 years!) between the key central regions of the tributary period. This qualitative difference forbids talking about interdependence – unequal, as it were – of the different components of the ancient system in terms similar to those that govern the modern world. Key regions A, B and C are certainly in relation with one another (and with the other regions). It remains to be demonstrated that this interdependence would have been essential. The parallelism in their trend is no evidence of the crucial nature of their relations; it only reflects the general character of the laws governing the social development of all mankind (thus defining the status of the specificities). The possible concomitance of the rise and the specificities of states of the past is far from obvious.

A cursory glance at Figure 3, which describes the parallel history of the three key centres and the other regions, shows that this concomitance is merely a matter of pure chance.

Pirenne had already observed – a view taken up again by A.G. Frank – the concomitance between the fall of the Roman empire and that of the Han dynasty. But the Roman fall was followed by the rise of Byzantium, the Sassanid and the Kushāna state, while the decline of the Hans was followed, right from the year 600 (the height of barbarianism in the West) by the rise of the Tāng and, three centuries earlier, by that of the Guptas, whose fall coincided (also by chance) with the rise of Islam. There are no clues to the identification of the general cycles of the rise and fall. The very term ‘fall’ is, even in this context, misleading; it is the fall of a form of state organisation in a given region, but, in most cases, as regards the development of productive forces, there is no parallel fall. I am struck rather by the opposite phenomenon, that is, the continuity of these long parallel historical events: from Rome–Byzantium–Sassanids–Islam to the Ottomans and the Safavids, from the Maurya dynasty to that Mughal state, from the Han dynasty to those of Ming and Qing, there were only a few qualitative changes but a great quantitative progress on the same organisation (tributary) bases. This does not exclude the fact that, in examining local developments, it is possible to explain any particular political rise (or fall) which may still be relative – by a special link in which external relations have occasionally played a role. Once again, there is nothing similar

to the cycles of the capitalist economy, whose scope is really global as a result of the universalisation of the law of value, the basis of the modern capitalist economy. The crystallisation of new modernity in Europe which was achieved within a short time (from the rise of Italian cities to the Renaissance: three to four centuries) is not the repetition of a general phenomenon under which would be subsumed all together the birth of civilisations (Egypt, Sumer, Harappa, Shang) and the establishment of empires (Achemenid, Alexander, Rome, Byzantium, Sassanid, Umayyad, Abbasid, Ottoman, Safavid, Maurya, Gupta, the Mughal state, Han, Tāng, Sōng, Ming, Qing and the Genghis Khan empire).

I proposed an explanation of this fact (see *Class and Nation*) that the qualitative break is first made within a tributary periphery (Europe) and not in one of its centres (A, B or C) and is then repeated in another periphery (Japan). I based my explanation on the contrast between the flexibility of the peripheries and the rigidity of the centres, that is, while keeping to the logical context of the general nature of the laws of the evolution of societies (the ‘uneven development’ which is the general form of an identical overall evolution). I consider this explanation more satisfactory than those proposed by the different characteristically Eurocentric conceptions (see *Eurocentrism*). I also think it is more satisfactory than Pirenne’s theory, which I have referred to as being based on the permanent contrast between capitalism (the synonym of openness, especially in maritime terms) and feudalism (the synonym of closure, especially in landlocked terms). Like A.G. Frank’s (who is close to the extreme), Pirenne’s theory is a transformation of the Eurocentric deformation: it attributes the European miracle to the maritime openness of the region, since each of the theories is based on the negation of the specific nature of the capitalist modernity.

Of course the crystallisation of capitalism in Europe has a history (it is not done by magic, in 1493 for instance) and entails specific consequences for the subsequent evolution of the other regions. The rapid development of Italian cities, which of course accounted for such crystallisation, is in turn a result of the tributary mercantile expansion of the Arab-Islamic region. However, it is because it operated within an outlying zone (feudal Europe) that this Italian expansion set fire to the grassland and accelerated the rate of evolution to the extent of creating in Europe a system that was qualitatively superior to that of the formerly more advanced societies. I have given (in *Class and Nation*) a detailed explanation of this conjuncture which establishes a link between the state’s weakness and the establishment of an area of autonomy for a veritable new class – the middle class – to appear, then the state’s alliance with the latter in order to go beyond the alliance with the latter in order to go beyond

Figure 3 The tributary systems (300 bc–1500 ad)

the breaking up of the feudal system by creating a new absolutist and mercantilist state, and so on. The general consequence of the new crystallisation of Europe (capitalist and no longer feudal) is obvious: it blocked the evolution of the other societies of the world, which were gradually marginalised in the new global system. Moreover, the capitalist crystallisation of Europe brought about a specific hostility towards the Arab-Islamic region. We recall at this juncture the observation I made earlier about the specific position of the Islamic world in the old system. In order to establish direct links with the rest of the world to its advantage, Europe had to break the indispensable monopolistic and intermediary position enjoyed by the Islamic world. Ever since the early attempt of the Crusades, which was followed immediately by the establishment of the link between Europe and China that was opened by the Mongolian peace during the era of Genghis Khan, this hostility has been pursued to date and has found expression in a particularly neurotic attitude towards Muslims and generated in turn a similar response from the opposite direction. It is finally to break up this inevitable intermediate zone that Europeans set off on the seas. Contrary to Pirenne's thesis, such a choice was not the result of some geographical determinism.

Fourth, the remarks made concerning these 2,000 years are not valid for the previous periods: on the one hand, the civilised societies known during previous periods – *a fortiori* the barbarians – were sometimes organised in a manner that was different from those of the subsequent tributary period; on the other hand, the network of relations that they engaged in among themselves was also different from the one illustrated by Figure 1 and Figure 3. Certainly our scientific knowledge of the past becomes even less as we recede further in time. Nevertheless, it seems to me that two lines of thought relating to the 'pretributary' eras can be distinguished (two philosophies of history). Pirenne's theory – which on this basic point is similar to the points of view defended by A.G. Frank – does not recognise any qualitative break around 300 bc, neither around the Christian era nor from the end of the Roman empire (the end of Antiquity, according to contemporary textbooks), just as it does not recognise any qualitative break separating modern times from ancient times. Indeed, as I already mentioned, according to Pirenne, all periods of human history are marked by the same contrast between open, maritime and capitalistic societies and closed, landlocked and feudal societies. Moreover, like Frank, Pirenne emphasises the exchange relations that existed among the societies at all times, irrespective of the distance separating them (for example, on the exchanges between Sumer, the Indus civilisation, Egypt, Crete, Phoenicia and Greece). Like Frank, Pirenne's theory is based on a philosophy of linear history: the progress is quantitative and continuous, without any qualitative change; in the words of Frank, it is the 'culmination of accumulation'. On the other hand, the commonly accepted theory of Marxism distinguishes three stages of civilisation that are different in terms of quality: slavery, feudalism and capitalism. I do not enter into this field of Marxology, to resolve the question of knowing whether this theory is really that of Marx (and of Engels) – and to what extent – or whether it is only that of the subsequent Marxian common understanding. In any case, this theory states that all the societies listed in Figure 3 are feudal societies: for Europe, from the end of the Roman empire; for the Byzantine and Islamic Middle East, right from their constitutions; for India, since the installation of the Maurya dynasty; and for China, since the Han era. Previously, on the other hand, according to this theory, they must have passed through a phase of slavery whose obvious and indisputable existence would be exemplified by Greece and Rome. In my opinion, people put forward by analogy a stage of slavery in China (from the Shang to the Han), in India (the Indus and Aryan civilisations), in the Middle East (in Mesopotamia). The existence of slavery located elsewhere and later on in certain regions of Africa, produced by the disintegration of earlier communal configurations, proves – according to this theory – that the passage through slavery constitutes a general requirement.

I do not share this point of view (see *Class and Nation*) and have offered instead a theory according to which: (1) the general form of class society that succeeded the previous communal formations is that of the tributary society; (2) the feudal form is not the general rule but only the peripheral form of the tributary type; (3) various conditions determine the specific form of each tributary society (castes, estates of the feudal era in the European sense – *Stände*; peasant communities subjected to a state bureaucracy, etc); (4) slavery is not a general requirement – it is absent from most of the landmarks of history (Egypt, India, China); it hardly undergoes any important development unless it is linked to a commercial economy and is therefore found within ages that are very different from the point of view of the development of productive forces (Graeco-Roman slavery and slavery in America up to the 19th century). Are the periods before the break of tributary societies which is marked in Figure 3 not then to be distinguished from the rest of the precapitalist history? For instance, Egypt in particular offers the example of a tributary society having practically nothing to do with slavery whose history begins 3,000 years before the crystallisation of the Hellenistic era. Assyria, Babylon, Iran of the Achemenids and probably pre-Mauryan India and pre-Han China sometimes practised slavery but this practice did not constitute the main form of exploitation of productive labour. Finally, according to my theory, a tributary society is not crystallised into its complete form until it produced a universal ideology – a religion based on universal values that go beyond the ideologies of kinship and country religions peculiar to the previous community stage. In this perspective, Zoroaster, Buddha and Confucius announce the crystallisation of the tributary society. Until then, I prefer to talk about ‘incubation’ or even the ‘long transition from communal forms to the tributary form’. This transition, which is perhaps relatively simple and rapid in China, is made more complicated in India as a result of the Aryan invasion that destroyed the Indus civilisation. In the Middle East the diversity of the peoples and trajectories, as well as the mutual influence of one people by the other, compels us to consider the region as a system. I place within this context the early maturing of Egypt into a tributary society, the distinctive mercantile nature of slavery in Greece, and therefore I give particular importance to the Hellenistic synthesis, the prelude to the Christian and Islamic revolutions which were to take over the unification of the region.

Does the intensity of the exchange relations among the societies of these distant eras make it possible to talk about a ‘system’? I doubt it, considering that the civilised societies, that is, those advanced in the transition to the tributary form, still remain islets in the ocean of worlds of communities. Even when they are parallel, the trajectories do not prove that the societies in question do constitute a system but establish only the validity of the general laws of evolution.