

# The Transition Debate

Presented By : DR AMIYA GHOSH  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR & HOD  
Dept. of History, Suri Vidyasagar College

# Overview

- Conceptualisations of transition to modern capitalist society 1880-1945
- The transition debate(s) and the British Marxist historians
- The transition debate, period I: Dobb vs. Sweezy.
- The transition debate as an Anglo-Saxon debate?

# Some conceptualizations 1880-1940

- Werner **Sombart** (1863-1941): capitalism as the unity of ‚spirit of enterprise‘ and the ‚bourgeois spirit‘ of reasonable calculation.
- Max **Weber** (1864-1920): Modern capitalism is distinguished by a specific ‚spirit‘ of pursuing **rationally** economic profit, a spirit encapsulated in the ‚protestant ethic‘.
- Henri **Pirenne** (1862-1935): economic historian; capitalism is production for market and expansion of commerce.

# The British Marxist Historians

- Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians. An Introductory Analysis*, Cambridge 1984.
- Decisive role of the *Communist Party Historians' Group* (1946-1956)
  - Including: Eric J. Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, E. P. Thompson, Dona Torr, Maurice Dobb et al.
  - Indirect origin of influential journals: *Past & Present* (1952), *New Left Review* (1960)

# A common tradition?

- Is there a common theoretical tradition of the British Marxist historians?
  - Transcending economic determinism and the base-superstructure metaphor -> History as a totality
  - Common historical problematic: social change, genesis of modern capitalism
  - Focus on class-struggle -> Theory of class determination
  - Perspective of ‚history from below‘
  - Personal political involvement

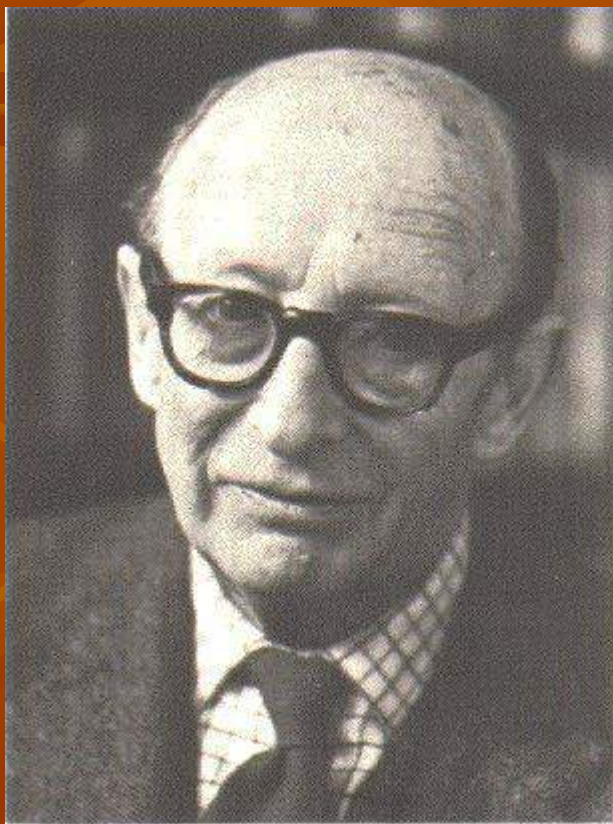
# Transition debates – a timeline

- 1946: Dobb, *Studies in the development of capitalism*.
- 1950-1953: debate in *Science and Society* (USA), *Critique, Reply, Further Comment, Rejoinder*, by P. Sweezy and M. Dobb.  
Various *Comments* by K. Takahashi, C. Hill, R. Hilton.

# Transition debates – a timeline II

- 1956-1975: Further comments and contributions in *La Pensée*, *La Società*, *Past and Present*, *New Left Review*, *Marxism Today*.
- 1970s: I. Wallerstein, *Origins of the Modern World System* (1974); Critique of Wallerstein by R. Brenner in *New Left Review*; Brenner-Debate in *Past & Present*.

Maurice Dobb (1900-1976)



Paul M. Sweezy (1910-2004)





# Mode or system of production?

- Dobb: defines feudalism and capitalism as modes of production: control of means of production, social relations in relation to process of production.
  - Sweezy: Feudalism is „system of production“ where „production for use“ predominates and not “production for exchange”.
- > relations of production/property relations perspective

vs.

perspective of market relations/exchange relations

# Decline of Feudalism? – external or internal?

- Dobb: disintegration of feudalism has internal reasons -> growing needs of overlords for revenue vs. Limited productive capacities of agriculture.
  - -> role of class struggle
- Sweezy: Feudalism is ‚immune‘ to change -> disintegration brought about by external factors: trade, money economy, towns.

# Routes and ways of transition.

- Discussion about the interval period between 14th and 17th century: “neither feudal nor capitalist“ (Sweezy) vs. „predominantly feudal“ (Dobb)
- Discussion about the two ways of transition according to Marx:
  - Dobb: the „really revolutionary way“ occurs when a „section of the producers themselves accumulated capital and took to trade“  
-> petty producers/‘Kulaks‘
  - Sweezy: revolutionary path was the „first industrial revolution“ in Britain: metallurgical, mining industries and soap industries (manufacture).

## Two ways of Transition according to Marx

- “The transition from the feudal mode of production is two-fold. The producer becomes merchant and capitalist, in contrast to the natural agricultural economy and the guild-bound handicrafts of the medieval urban industries. This is the really revolutionising path. Or else, the merchant establishes direct sway over production.”

(K. Marx, Capital, Vol 3, 1894, in: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch20.htm>)

# Central topics/ issues at stake.

- What is the feudal society? What is serfdom?
- What is the role of towns?
- What is the role of handicraft?
- What is the role of merchant capital and the European expansion?
- What is the ,prime mover‘ of change?
- What is the role of state power (absolutism)?
- What is the character of revolutionary events?

# Two kinds of Marxist outlooks

„In this exchange, we recognize the emergence and divergence of two kinds of Marxist analysis of economic history and development. One is decidedly economic, focusing on exchange relations, as in Sweezy’s critique. The other in politico-economic, focusing on the social relations of production directing us towards class-struggle analysis.“ (Kaye, British Marxist Historians, p. 46).

Productionists	vs.	Circulationists
Internalists	vs.	Externalists
Property/social relations	vs.	Exchange-/market relations.

# An Anglo-saxon debate?

- France: debate about the French Revolution and the character of the Ancien Régime (Albert Soboul et al.)
- Germany: Proto-industrialization debate (Kriedte/Medick/Schlumbohm 1977)
- Dependency-Theory in Latin America
- Modes of production-debate in parts of the ex-colonial world.
- Debates in the „real-socialist“-countries:  
e.g. GDR: Jürgen Kuczynski (Berlin), Leipzig School

# Question

- Write a short note on transition debate on rise of Capitalism and fall of the Feudalism. What was the role of serf in feudal society ? 10+2