

# MODES OF PRODUCTION

[Karl Marx saw labor as a social process; that is, labor – the human transformation of nature – is done by groups. The worker is never an isolated figure, a Robinson Crusoe, but is someone who stands in relationship to others as kinsman, self, slave, or wage laborer. Marx used the term "production" to mean the complex set of mutually dependent relations among nature, work, social labor, and social organization. Marx listed many modes of deploying social labor; Eric Wolf has simplified them to three modes. These modes do not necessarily represent an evolutionary sequence, but many societies have, in fact, passed from one of the modes to the next. ]

## **Kin-Ordered Mode of Production**

The kin-ordered mode of production is found in "stateless" societies. In these societies kinship can be understood as a way of committing social labor to the transformation of nature. Kinship is, thus, a particular way of laying claims to labor: because of certain relations based on birth or marriage, one person or group of persons has the right to claim work from another person or group. In 1450 the societies using this mode of production would have been found only at the peripheries of state societies.

## **Tributary Mode of Production**

The tributary mode of production is based on a ruling elite of surplus takers who have the right or power to take surplus from the working population. This elite may be centralized or decentralized. In this system, the laborer is the possessor of the means of production: the workers

own the tools necessary to do the work. The workers conduct agricultural activity and the rural home industries connected with it independently. The surplus taking elite provides management, defense, and often such other services as irrigation. In 1450 those areas of the world organized into states used this mode of production.

## **Capitalist Mode of Production**

The capitalist mode of production came into being when monetary wealth became able to buy labor power. For labor power to be offered for sale, the relationship between producers and the means (tools) of production had to be severed. Holders of wealth had to acquire the means of production and choose those who were to operate them. The capitalist mode of production is based, then, on 1) workers who are free to sell their work; 2) ownership of the means of production by a small economic elite; 3) the emergence of a money based economy. In 1450 this mode of production had not been established; by 1850 it was becoming the predominant mode in Western industrialized nation states.

[adapted from Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.]