

Rethinking Late Antiquity: A Materialist Debate Between Chris Wickham and Perry Anderson

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Abstract

Late Antiquity, as a historical period and an economic mode - in the historical materialist tradition - is notoriously challenging to pin down. This article evaluates two contrasting interpretations by leading twentieth-century historians in the Marxist tradition: Chris Wickham's interpretation of Late Antiquity as a distinct economic mode and Perry Anderson's more traditional Marxist analysis. Wickham's focus on the tax-based model and his rejection of teleology are studied, as well as Anderson's emphasis on the proto-feudal characteristics of Late Antiquity. The article argues for a synthesis of both arguments and provides a more nuanced understanding of the period's transformative economic developments.

Keywords: Late Antiquity, Historical Materialism, Taxation, Teleology, Chris Wickham, Perry Anderson

Introduction

This article seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the period termed 'Late Antiquity,' and its collapse as an economic mode and as a political system in the Western Roman Empire (WRE). To do so, it will analyse the Marxist historian Chris Wickham's article, "The Other Transition: from the Ancient World to Feudalism."¹ His argument for Late Antiquity in the WRE as a unique economic mode, distinct from the slave-based and rent-based modes that preceded and followed it, will form the bulk of the first part of this article. His argument will then be contrasted with another historical materialist, Perry Anderson, and his account of Late Antiquity, which is more properly seen as proto-feudal, as contained in *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1978). Wickham's account will be shown to be more properly descriptive and Anderson's more explanatory and ambitious. The differences in their Marxist historiographical methods will be analysed and demonstrated as key to their arguments. The article will conclude by combining their arguments, in order to produce a nuanced historical materialist take on the distinctiveness of Late Antiquity in the Roman West.

The transition from Late Antiquity to Feudalism is a historical invention; contemporaries living in this period would have been aware, to varying degrees, of the political, economic, societal,

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¹ Chris Wickham, 'The Other Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism', *Past & Present*, no. 103 (1984), pp. 3-36.

and military changes taking place at the time. However, it is not the case that they would have thought about it in the same terms as Perry Anderson or a Chris Wickham do. For these Marxist historians, the transition from Late Antiquity to Feudalism is primarily a change in dominant economic modes. Both scholars agree that during its peak and ending around the time of Diocletian (reigned 284-305 C.E.), the Roman Empire's dominant economic mode was slavery. Both scholars also have access to the same sources, and recognise that rent-taking, the mode of extraction dominant during the feudal period, played an increasingly large role from the third century. Their major disagreement, however, is whether this mode directly replaced Rome's slave-based economy. For Wickham, taxation's pivotal role in funding the Roman state during Late Antiquity made it the dominant mode. In Anderson's eyes, the replacement of slavery by indentured servitude (proto-serfdom) as the primary mode of surplus production makes rent-taking the dominant mode of production. This difference, which may appear minor, leads to totally different interpretations of Late Antiquity and derives from major differences in their Marxist methodology.



Figure 1. A map of the Western Roman Empire c. 418, after the Gothic Wars (Wikimedia Commons).

Wickham's Historical Materialism and his Account of Late Antiquity

Wickham sees Karl Marx's greatest achievement to be his description of the "economic logic underlying capitalism while making it clear that this logic was specific [to capitalism] ... rather

than a timeless historical given.”² Wickham’s project as a historian in the Marxist tradition is to unearth the specific logic underpinning economic modes in the past. He is particularly interested in explaining the transition from the ‘ancient mode’ of production into the ‘feudal mode’.³

He is, however, not a typical Marxist historian and rejects teleology and any notion of historical ‘progress’ found in authors like Anderson. Whereas Marxist historical narratives, like Anderson’s *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, craft grand narratives about historical progress from one economic mode through many others, Wickham’s analysis is more granular. In his analysis, a dominant mode of production can be replaced by another and regain dominance again at a later age. Thus the ancient mode of production which, for him, is dominated by the collection of tax or tribute is replaced, in Rome, by the slave mode when the expanding city-state increasingly produced surpluses via the work of unfree people. The ancient mode becomes dominant again, however, with the reduced importance of slavery around the time of Diocletian in the late third century.⁴ This opposes him to other Marxist historians, like Perry Anderson and even Marx, who view historical progress as a linear process. Wickham’s rejection of teleology allows for more historical unpredictability, allowing a period and its economic mode to be studied more independently from what preceded and followed it. He relies heavily on comparison to strengthen this approach, demonstrating how societies with similar economic modes do not meet the same fate despite possessing similar internal contradictions.⁵ This enriches his analysis and eliminates simple answers to complex issues.

Traditionally, historians in the Marxist tradition describe the transition from Antiquity to Feudalism as a transition from an economic mode dominated by slavery to one dominated by rent-taking, which is the essence of feudalism.⁶ This traditional account highlights how, in the closing stages of Late Antiquity, rural estates in Western Europe expanded and were increasingly worked not by slaves but by indentured tenant farmers, or proto-serfs, bound by various mechanisms to their landlord’s estates.⁷ Whilst Wickham agrees with the broad outline of slavery being replaced by indentured servitude, he does not see this typically feudal social relation as the dominant economic mode of Late Antiquity. For him, the primary and largest means through which surplus was acquired and redistributed was through the state. Despite the important role of rent-taking, Wickham insists that taxation was most important to the late imperial bureaucracy, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. As he says: “tax, and through it the state, came to dominate the whole structure of the economy.”⁸

² Chris Wickham, *Land and Power: Studies in Italian and European Social History, 400-1200* (London: British School at Rome, 1994), p. 44.

³ Neil Davidson, ‘Centuries of Transition’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 19, no 1 (2011), pp.73-97.

⁴ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 14.

⁵ Wickham, *Land and Power*, pp. 37-8, 51-2, outlines how the Byzantine empire in the seventh century and multiple Chinese states throughout history with similar economic modes to the WRE were able, when faced with similar external pressures and internal contradictions, to adapt and continue without changing dominant modes. In short, these states were better able to incorporate political elites into the functioning of the government, tying their wealth, prestige and military command to their active participation within the political apparatus.

⁶ See account of Anderson below.

⁷ Wickham, *Land and Power*, pp. 8-9.

⁸ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 16.

As long as tax was efficiently collected, the tension between landowners and the imperial administration did not lead to a systemic collapse. With the Germanic invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries, however, the ideological hegemony of the imperial state was undermined. Alternative social arrangements could be imagined and, as Wickham highlights, Roman writers from this period began to imagine a world not dominated by the empire, up till this period an impossibility.⁹ Internal tensions compounded the destabilisation by foreign invaders, as large landowners began to systematically dodge their tax obligations. The benefits afforded to large landowners for their loyalty to the state, previously the key mechanism through which elites gained wealth, status and prestige, were being frittered away. Indeed, possession of large estates worked by indentured servants was now the road to wealth and prestige. As Wickham states: “The structures of the feudal mode were, in other words, more solid than the rival structures of the ancient mode, for those with the chance to choose between them.”¹⁰ The state was reduced to an annoyance, demanding taxes and unable to provide necessary incentives to aristocrats for them to deliver these payments. The successful barbarian invasions brought this tension to a boiling point and also occupied the imperial armies; preventing them from being wielded against insubordinate aristocrats.



Figure 2. Ostrogoth Kingdom of Italy, 508-534 (Wikimedia Commons)

Contributions to the central authority, collected within the classical framework of the city-countryside dynamic, were crucial to the functioning of the late imperial administration. These collections, in the West especially from large landowners of rural estates, were key to all the

⁹ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 19.

Empire did: its large army, its public works, its grain relief for regions with poor harvests, and so on.¹¹ For Wickham, the key to understanding the difference between the Roman Empire in the west and the successor Germanic kingdoms lies in recognising that these successor states ultimately failed, or rather, did not seek to replicate the tax-based system that preceded them. Taxation, under the successor Germanic kingdoms, continued - for the moment - to be collected. In some cases, as with the Ostrogoths in Italy, more successfully than had been the case in Rome since the fourth century.¹² A major difference with the new political settlement, however, lay in the composition of the army. Germanic armies were based upon land ownership, with landlords owing fealty to lords and supplying them with soldiers for campaigns. This eliminated the Empire's largest expense: its state-funded army.¹³ Nevertheless, Wickham notes many references to taxation and violent reactions against it in sixth-century Western European sources, demonstrating that the tax mode had not yet expired.¹⁴ The rate of tax, however, seemed to have dropped considerably from the heyday of the late Empire - whilst still producing strong reactions against it. Indeed, Wickham highlights that by the seventh century, even the strong and centralised Merovingian kingdom, which was capable of efficient taxation:

could not hide the fact that taxation no longer had any purpose except the exaggerated enrichment of the kings ... There was barely anything to spend it on any longer ... The only thing that the tax system was good for was to give away in gifts, particularly as exemptions to the church, for short- (or long-) term political gain. But in doing this, the Merovingians were already speaking the language of feudal social relations.¹⁵

Anderson's Materialist Account of Late Antiquity

Perry Anderson's vision of the transition from Late Antiquity focuses on the collapse of the slave mode of production and the emergence of proto-serfdom within the WRE. In his book *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, Anderson dedicates the opening three chapters to an outline of the evolution of the classical/slave mode of production through the classical Greek world, the Hellenistic world, and into its most extreme manifestation during the Roman Republic and Empire. He demonstrates that the key features associated with the classical world resulted from the economic base of its model, one dominated by large-scale slavery as the primary mode of production. The 'metropolitan grandeur' of the classical world, in which the splendour of the cities of Athens or Rome appears divorced from the exploitation of the natural world, is dependent upon the complete separation of *labour* and *freedom*.¹⁶ Whilst not the only extant form of labour, slavery

¹¹ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 17.

¹² Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 23.

¹³ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Wickham, *Land and Power*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁵ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 25.

¹⁶ Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left Books, 1978), pp. 23-24, Anderson here provides a powerful account of how mental frameworks in the classical world - regarding how people thought about

was by far the most widespread during the peak of these civilisations and came to dominate how *labour* as a whole was depicted: as something shameful and unfit for true free men. Elites gravitated to life in the city, whilst their wealth and capacity for leisurely activity depended upon their ownership of people and countryside estates whose surplus enabled their lifestyles. Even the administration of these estates was usually conducted by other slaves, further removing elites from the domain of *labour* and crystalising the stigma surrounding work.¹⁷ The fullest expression of this economic logic and its contradictions would emerge during Republican and Imperial Rome. It would motivate the large-scale expansions seen up till the time of Trajan. To sustain the slave-based model it depended upon, the Roman centre depended upon wars of expansion and the mass enslavement of foreign peoples these campaigns brought. As the wars of expansion ground to a halt in the second century, the contradictions within the slave-based model increasingly destabilised the Empire, as slave-based models in pre-large scale capitalist systems cannot naturally reproduce themselves.¹⁸ These led to significant reforms within the Empire - especially in the West, where indentured servitude became much more common - framed by Anderson as the emergence of proto-feudalism.¹⁹



Figure 3. Relief from Smyrna (present-day İzmir, Turkey) depicting a Roman soldier leading captives in chains, circa 200 CE (Collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England).

freedom, work, leisure, citizenship - were inextricably linked to the economic base, slavery, supporting the superstructure above it.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, pp. 77-78, see note 36 for discussion on why slave plantations in the classical world needed regular external contributions of slaves and could not have been self-replicating.

¹⁹ The situation in the Eastern Empire, governed from Constantinople, was different. See, for example, Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The Belknap Press, 2004); and also Youval Rotman, 'Slavery in the Byzantine Empire', in Damian A. Pargas and Juliane Schiel (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery throughout History* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 123-138

Two Different Materialist Accounts

Whilst sharing some features of analysis, most importantly the collapse of the slave mode of production around the second and third centuries, Anderson and Wickham's accounts diverge in their respective foci. Whereas Anderson prefers to prioritise the proto-feudal nature of the economic mode of indentured servitude during Late Antiquity, Wickham defines Late Antiquity by its superstructural political and state-based modes of economic extraction. In Anderson, what matters most is the nature of the relations of production between producer (i.e., indentured servant) and exploiter (land-owner) and in Wickham, it is the large-scale taxation of land-owners by a central state that sets this period apart from the later feudal period. Each approach has its merit and presents different strengths and weaknesses in its materialist methodology, which will be discussed in the following. A deeper understanding of Late Antiquity's particularity and contradictions is gained by blending both author's insights.

This divergence results from different visions of Marxist teleology, which Wickham rejects but Anderson fully embraces. Reading Anderson, there is a clear and intellectually satisfying progression between modes of production. The 'egalitarian' ancient mode of the city-state leads to the ruthlessly exploitative slave-based mode of production. This slave-based mode of production turns manual labour into a vile thing, only done by social inferiors, and necessitates constant expansion, conquest and enslavement to sustain itself. Once the Roman Empire reaches its zenith and ceases to expand, the cracks in this system become apparent and the state and its powerful aristocrats find the next-best source of cheap labour: indebted peasants.²⁰ This, much later, leads into the capitalist mode of production which Marx analyses, tying Anderson's theory nicely into broader Marxist theory. In Wickham, however, there is nothing of the sort. Historical contingencies matter greatly, and whilst he would also recognise that inherent tensions within systems like slavery contribute to their collapse, he prefers a more empirically grounded analysis. The collapse of the slave mode of production does not have to lead to a novel mode and does not. Whilst proto-feudal social relations emerge in his account, they are secondary to the imperial state's attempts via taxation to maintain itself afloat. Only once the tension pitting aristocrats and the state reaches a boiling point, caused by the central state's failure to command the loyalty of the aristocracy and by the shocks of the Germanic invasions, does the rent-taking model dominate.

For Wickham, the imperial bureaucracy was the primary benefactor - via taxation - of the surplus produced during Late Antiquity. Rent-taking played a key role, without question, but the sheer volume of surplus being acquired by the centre made rent only a secondary mode during this period. For Wickham, the main tension during this period was between the landowners who owed tax and the administration which depended on it for its functions. The collapse of the WRE as a political institution was largely due to the tension in this relationship and the failure of the administration to find a political solution to this economic contradiction. For Anderson, the fact that most of the agricultural surplus needed for life was no longer produced by slave labour but by the labour of indentured servants is most important. He situates this mode's key conflict between

²⁰ Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, p. 76.

landowners and indentured servants and sees in the growth of large estates worked by unfree peasants the prototype for later feudal seignorial relations.²¹ Thus, whereas Wickham focuses on the state and the conflict between it and the landowners owing it tax, Anderson sees the primary conflict as between landowners and their tenants.



Figure 4. Dominus Julius mosaic in the Bardo National Museum, circa fifth century (Wikimedia Commons).

Wickham's account of Late Antiquity is brilliant in its detailed description of how the breakdown of the central state's control of provincial aristocrats caused the collapse, avoiding simple teleological explanations, but can be critiqued as too descriptive and insufficiently explanatory. As discussed previously, Wickham grounds his account of Late Antiquity and its collapse in the central imperial administration's massive tax-raising efforts and the succeeding failure of these mechanisms. Eventually, the Empire was replaced by Germanic kingdoms in which taxation has an ever-diminishing importance, leading to economic systems no longer recognisable as tribute or taxation-based. This transition is not pre-ordained, and its replacement by new relations like those

²¹ Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, pp. 114-115.

of feudalism is not, either, pre-determined.²² His account of the perseverance of similar tribute-based systems also faced with similar pressures as those of the WRE highlights the unique problems which led to its collapse. The inability of successive emperors and administrators to curb the power of large aristocratic landlords, or to condition their wealth and prestige to their active contribution and involvement in imperial affairs was determining in the collapse of a political regime and the breakdown of an economic mode. Although providing a satisfying description of the features unique to the breakdown of imperial power in the West during the fourth and fifth centuries, this account does not provide as satisfying an explanation for why these aristocrats were not able to be brought back into the fold.

By contrast, Anderson bases his explanation for the collapse of the political structure in the West upon flaws within the economic relations of production in the slave-based system and its replacement by the proto-feudal mode; his account has a greater theoretical and explanatory potential than Wickham's but loses some of the unpredictability and particularity of history in its sweeping teleological narrative. Anderson's account of the inherent contradictions within the slave mode of production and its collapse once the Roman imperial war machine ceased to expand is powerful. The emergence of large-landed aristocracies, already a feature of the Western Empire, accelerates as poorer landowners turn to these powerful patrons for increased security in uncertain times. This creates the conditions for an economic base dominated by rent-taking and creates a proto-feudal society. These Western landowners had also increasingly become non-state affiliated elites, depending upon their possessions for their wealth and status rather than their participation in the state apparatus.²³ By contrast, the stability in the Eastern regions is due to the closer links of Eastern aristocrats with the state structures and the smaller role played by slavery in their economies, thus limiting the tremors caused by the collapse of the slave mode.²⁴ Anderson's account is neat and ordered; the transition from the classical slave-based mode to the proto-feudal one is easily explained in a few pages. The contradictions within the former naturally led to a new form of exploitation, based upon the former's devaluing of labour as an activity and the historical preponderance of large estates in the Western Mediterranean. The principal issue with Anderson, most noticeable when read concurrently with Wickham, is the path-dependent nature of his meta-narrative. The nature of economic relations is such that no alternate futures could have existed, of the sort which Wickham regularly emphasises.

Whilst Anderson's satisfying over-arching *explanation* for the collapse of Late Antiquity should inform any materialist account of the WRE's collapse, Wickham's emphasis on the state's political and cultural capital during Late Antiquity must also shape any account of this period. Indeed, the greatest flaw in Anderson's account should surely be the limited importance he accords to taxation within the late Empire.²⁵ Whilst Wickham agrees that proto-feudal relations were

²² Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 33.

²³ Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, p. 90, highlights that from the third century onwards, the bulk of the military commanders of Roman origin were drawn from within the army and often from the Illyrian region. Thus, landed aristocrats in the West were removed from the military apparatus entirely.

²⁴ Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, p. 89.

²⁵ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 7.

quickly becoming the defining characteristic of the estates in the Western Mediterranean, he argues that they were only one mode of production in this period and not the dominant one. There is some intuitive logic to this argument. If proto-feudal relations were already firmly entrenched by the late third century, then the dating of Late Antiquity's demise must be much earlier than even Anderson would suggest. Wickham is right to look to the strong political and cultural power wielded by the late Roman state. Even with large-landed aristocrats in the West no longer being part of the state apparatus as in prior centuries, the administration's ideological and military power was such that its tax demands were not systematically avoided on a large scale until the late fourth and fifth centuries.²⁶ The relations of production, between landowner and indentured worker, are the same in Wickham and Anderson but the overall shape of the system is radically different. The inevitable collapse in Anderson's account becomes less predetermined if one considers the steps a strong state could have taken to counter the power of landed aristocrats, as Wickham demonstrates in his comparative analysis of the Byzantine East in later periods or mainland Chinese states in various historical periods.²⁷ Nevertheless, the contradictions between Western landowners and the state are fundamentally linked to the collapse of the slave mode of production which Anderson emphasises; without the wars of expansion and an active role in the governance of the state, aristocrats in the West no longer recognised the value of the state. Once the barbarian invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries delivered body blows to the state's legitimacy and power, the expected insular responses by most Western aristocrats merely helped deliver the final blow to a politically Roman West.

Conclusion: Towards a Synthesis

Late Antiquity in the Roman West describes a system, formerly characterised by the dominance of a slave-based economic mode, to one in which the primary means through which surplus is *produced* (as opposed to collected) is via the labour of tenanted labourers working the large estates of their landlords. Thus far, Wickham and Anderson would concur, but they would disagree about the exact nature of the shift between what preceded this period and what follows. Anderson considers this period as transitional, not yet fully feudal but firmly proto-feudal, and Wickham views it as something in its own right, a society dominated by a tributary/tax-collecting centralising state. Thus, in broad strokes, Anderson sees this period as the death knell of the classical mode and the beginning of the feudal mode and Wickham sees it as the final apogee of the centralising Western Roman state.

When considering this period in its own right, Wickham is closer to the mark, but Anderson's meta-narrative is also key to understanding the evolution of economic modes in the Western Empire over a longer period. Even though what was produced in the West was mainly done through tenanted labour, the large-scale tax-raising functions of the state and the role this wealth played in all imperial functions made this the dominant economic mode for this period. As

²⁶ Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 19.

²⁷ See footnote 3.

Wickham points out, the succeeding centuries after the collapse of the Empire in the West saw the gradual dissolution of most of this tax apparatus, despite the significant tax-raising capabilities of several successor kingdoms.²⁸ The pivotal functions realised via this system simply no longer existed, and thus tax-collecting's central logic in this was replaced by the more properly feudal characteristics of Late Antiquity. Anderson's account of these features, the collapse of the slave mode and the subsequent dominance in Western estates of the rent-based mode is powerful and his meta-narrative is right in broad strokes.²⁹ Undoubtedly, this system was a precursor to the later feudal arrangements. Anderson's focus on the tensions simmering under the surface highlights just how much each preceding era influenced the social arrangements of the following one.

Both readings complement each other and provide a holistic picture of the centuries of Rome's rise, its fall in the West, and the emergence of a feudal order that would dominate for a millennium afterwards. Whilst Anderson's reading is key to framing this transition and always has an eye to the past and the future, Wickham provides a deeper insight into Late Antiquity and its inherent tensions. The account which emerges from his reading is one in which the central tension of the period is between the centralising state, and the independent and unincorporated Western landed aristocrats. The real crisis of Late Antiquity in the West, once faced with sufficient external pressures and compounded by pre-existing internal tensions, thus appears as a *Crisis of the State*.

²⁸ See footnote 13.

²⁹ Jairus Banaji, 'Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages: What Kind of Transition?', *Historical Materialism*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2011), pp. 109-144,