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COMMERCE, MARXISM, AND MEDIEVAL HISTORY: A CRITICAL COMMENT ON CHRIS WICKHAM'S *THE DONKEY AND THE BOAT. REINTERPRETING THE MEDITERRANEAN ECONOMY, 950-1180*[1]

Comercio, marxismo e historia medieval: un comentario crítico sobre el libro de Chris Wickham The Donkey and the Boat. Reinterpreting the Mediterranean Economy, 950-1180

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SUMMARY: 0 The Donkey and the Boat and the «commercial revolution». 1 Demand: Assessing economic growth. 2 The logic of the feudal economy. 3 Marxism and Medieval History. 4 Works cited.

0 *The Donkey and the Boat* and the «commercial revolution»

In an interview published in the Italian journal *Reti Medievali Rivista*, Chris Wickham stated that:

> Per molto tempo ho voluto scalzare le grandi narrazioni. Non perché sia a esse ostile in linea di principio, al modo di Jean-François Lyotard con la sua incredulité à l'égard des métarécits —anzi: ritengo che siano essenziali per dare un senso agli argomenti storici— ma

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> perché molto spesso riprendono dei miti nazionali o almeno ideologici, adottati dagli storici senza pensarci sopra a sufficienza[2].

Chris Wickham's works can indeed be interpreted as a call to escape from the self-complacency of assumed historical narratives, particularly those informed by nationalistic ideologies[3]. That was the stated aim of his *Framing the Early Middle Ages* twenty years ago, as it is of *The Donkey and the Boat*, which we shall address in this critical comment[4]. The book was born out of his dissatisfaction with one of those narratives, the idea that economic change in the High Middle Ages was driven by a «commercial revolution» —a term coined by Raymond de Roover and popularized by Robert Lopez in the 1970s— in which the Italian communes were attributed a leading role[5].

The Donkey and the Boat provides a kaleidoscopic view of the Mediterranean economy in the «long eleventh century» —in practical terms, between the mid tenth century and the late twelfth century—. After a brief and straight-to-the-point introduction, it combines five chapters of in-depth studies of the economies of six Mediterranean regions —Egypt, North Africa (Ifriqiya), Sicily, Byzantium, al-Andalus, and north-central Italy, all of which are investigated using the same analytical grid— with a broader reflection on the patterns that emerge out of the combination of the individual pieces. The latter is developed in the last two chapters of the book. One pulls the individual trajectories of the regions together into a broader historical account of economic change in the Mediterranean throughout this period. In the other Wickham outlines a theoretical model for the study of feudal economies that accounts for the findings of his research, namely the weight of peasant demand in economic growth and their tendency to establish «reasonably high-functioning production and exchange systems, which could often show considerable dynamism» without that necessarily leading to any other economic mode, «even in situations of high levels of commercialization» (pp. 680, 682)[6].

The book is open to many readings and debates, as the strings of critical comments published in *Quaderni Storici* (3, 2023) and *Reti Medievali Rivista* (25/2, 2024) already demonstrate. It is an interpretative proposal of economic change in a number of regions at a particular time in history —and a lens through which other regions can be investigated—[7]. It is also a methodological proposal as to how archaeology and history can —or should not, depending on the critics— be brought together, but also as to how

[2] Cortese, West and Wickham, «Intervista», 35.

[3] Cf. Wickham, «Alto Medioevo». As he forcefully notes in his response to S. Tognetti's comment on *The Donkey and the Boat*: «se gli storici pensano che il loro ruolo sia quello di difendere, anziché sottoporre a critica, l'immaginario nazionale del passato del Paese in cui si trovano, allora non sono più degli storici» (Wickham, «Risposta», 103). Cf. Tognetti, «Schumpeter incatenato», 834-5.

[4] Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*. Throughout the text we will cite or refer to passages in the book by providing page numbers in brackets in the text.

[5] Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution*.

[6] A version of which was published prior to the publication of the book: Wickham, «How did the Feudal Economy Work».

[7] Goldberg, «About *The Donkey*, I»; Wilkin, «About *The Donkey*, II»; Tabarrini, «About *The Donkey*, III»; Sénac, «The Donkey».

comparative history can be done[8]. Most fundamentally, it is an effort to theorize on the workings and logic of pre-capitalist economies, «the most crucial economic question of all» (p. 22), and one which transcends the geographical and chronological scope of the book[9]. It is at this latter level that we wish to engage with the book in this critical comment. Being no experts in any of the regions it covers, it would be unwise for us to attempt otherwise, though we also have a positive reason for this undertaking. As Wickham himself acknowledges, many readers will concentrate on those regions they know best, and yet it is important to emphasise that the arguments the book presents should concern historians interested in economic and social history more broadly, whatever their region or field of specialisation. The book is called to have a long-lasting relevance, and this, we believe, is to a large extent thanks to its theoretical contribution. Also, to the best of our capacity, we have tried to engage with other critical comments, in an attempt to offer not so much a critique of *The Donkey and the Boat* as a contribution to the broader conversation it is fostering.

1 Demand: Assessing economic growth

As other commentators have noted, one of the fundamental contentions of the book is that in order to understand the logic of pre-capitalist economies we have to focus first on demand, to which Wickham grants explicative priority (p. 11, 663). In taking demand as a benchmark to assess and compare economic systems, *The Donkey and the Boat* remains consistent with *Framing*. The difference is that while in the early medieval period élite consumption structured the large-scale systems of exchange —mainly of luxury goods— and the peasantries were not a sufficiently consistent and prosperous market for economies of scale to develop, in the long eleventh century peasant demand became increasingly important, allowing for the penetration of exchange networks at a regional level and fostering the production and circulation of higher volumes of increasingly cheap agricultural and artisanal products (pp. 12, 663-5). The reason for this upsurge in peasant demand is that while agrarian production grew in absolute terms, rents and taxes remained relatively stable —though not necessarily low—, due to the practical limits that elites and states had for extracting surplus from the peasantries (pp. 685-8). The peasants thus found themselves with more to spend in consumer goods. If we can speak of any «commercial revolution» in the Mediterranean in the high Middle Ages —and grant the Italian cities any credit for it—, it is in as much as a greater linkage developed «between regional economies, which were each growing along their own lines

[8] Augenti, «Storia e archeologia»; Saggioro, «Asini». The comparative methodology in *The Donkey and the Boat* has yet to receive closer analysis, as Laura da Graca did for *Framing* (Da Graca, «Reflexiones metodológicas»).

[9] Petralia, «Dai battelli». To an extent, S. Tognetti's critical comment engages with the more theoretical issues of the book —as Wickham himself acknowledges—, though his text is also pitched at an ideological level that escapes the realm of historiographical debate. Cf. Tognetti, «Schumpeter incatenato»; Wickham, «Risposta».

and for their own reasons» (p. 662)[10]. In other words, contrary to previous historians of commerce, who thought that «long-distance commercial and/or financial complexity is the principal element, even sometimes the prime mover, in economic historical analysis», Wickham argues insistently throughout the book that it is «production and demand, both agricultural and urban, [what] comes first, even if exchange follows on fast, linking them together» (p. 11).

Building upon this premise, throughout Chapters 2 to 6 we follow Wickham's comparative assessment of different indicators, first, of the breadth of demand, and second, of the complexity of the networks of exchange. For this, he relies largely on primary sources[11], so as to avoid prior historiographical assumptions about «what the historian *ought* to be finding» (p. 7, emphasis in the original). Moreover, like *Framing*, *The Donkey and the Boat* is also an attempt at combining archaeology and written records into the construction of a historical account —maybe flawed in some regards, as we will see, but altogether a more successful one in our understanding, though not all commentators will agree—[12].

In each chapter, after reviewing the historiography and the available sources for each region, Wickham addresses four key elements, which we will consider here in an order that does not necessarily correspond to how they are presented in the book. First of all, he pays attention to the political history of each region, and to the role of the state as an economic actor. Wickham admits that there is a dialectic relation between the state and the economy —or, more precisely, «between the stability of the state and that of the economy», in as much as «each reinforced the other» (p. 34)— and is careful to avoid constructing a direct causal link between the two. Thus, the state is not posited as a necessary framework for economic integration, nor economic integration as a precondition for —or a causal factor leading necessarily to— state development. In Egypt, the state contributed both in funnelling surplus to feed exchange and providing stability to trade routes and costs at a regional and supra-regional scale —particularly during the time in which Sicily and Ifriqiya were under Fatimid rule—, and was a «serious force in the maritime economy […] as a major buyer, of all types of good» (pp. 32-8, 132-3). In Byzantium, the state was the overarching framework not of one but of several, distinct economic regions (pp. 278-99), while in Al-Andalus and northern Italy, a significant degree of political fragmentation may have hampered at times but did not ultimately prevent economic growth throughout the period (pp. 367-72). Overall, Wickham carefully constructs the scales that actually mattered at each conjuncture for assessing socioeconomic and political integration. In his account, the state also matters in as much as, together with the elites, it was one of the actors extracting surplus from the peasants. In each chapter, Wickham evaluates what share of agrarian production went in taxes and

[10] In his reassessment of the contribution of Italian cities to economic change in this period, Wickham concludes that their «real achievement» was the unification or Mediterranean bulk routes from the second quarter of the twelfth century onwards (p. 644).

[11] Osterhammel, «Global History», 11.

[12] Augenti, «Storia e archeologia».

rents and how much of it may have remained in peasant hands that could be potentially spent in the market.

Wickham further identifies how settlement patterns were configured in order to assess how densely integrated the different regions were, and more specifically the capillarity of the networks of exchange —the latter being regarded as an indicator that local demand was indeed substantial—. These pages read as an exercise in critical geography, for Wickham does more than merely connect the dots. On the one hand, he considers the impact that economic systems and their transformation had in the configuration of space at both the local and the regional scale. Thus, for example, he pays attention to the economic dynamism and the development of specialised production at the local level in Egypt (pp. 53-6), or traces the changes in the economic integration of Sicily throughout the period (pp. 218-30). The latter provides a good illustration of how he proceeds. He follows the history of the island from the seventh century, a time in which there was a clear divide between the east and the west, the former being connected to broader networks of exchange in the Mediterranean —it received imports of Byzantine globular amphorae—. After the Islamic conquest, there was a shift and Palermo became the major economic driving force and its pottery productions began to reach all corners of the island, thus attesting to the capacity of peasants and rural elites to buy them, and ultimately to the internal coherence of its economic system. Palermo lost prominence in the twelfth century and the east-west divide became once again apparent in the thirteenth century, and yet internal routes of exchange within the island seemingly persisted.

The comparative perspective in the book does not erase the peculiarities of each region, but rather gives texture and complements the general ideas. These notwithstanding, there are some issues that are treated at a rather abstract level, such as the articulation between urban and rural spaces. The book privileges the circulation of products between the centres of production and demand, with cities occupying a central position in the account. Further flesh could be added to the argument by developing a more thorough analysis of how exchange networks in rural areas were structured at the local level. In Christian lands, monasteries are a case in point in this regard. They participated in commerce, and could have a foot in the cities as a way of engaging with broader networks of exchange —as the book shows in relation to the Athonite monasteries in Byzantium (p. 302-3, 321) and the Sicilian monasteries (p. 251)—, but they also had a role in the configuration of the networks through which surplus and goods circulated in the countryside, thus conditioning whatever access peasants had to them.

Finally, in each chapter Wickham assesses exchange in itself, distinguishing between internal and external exchange in each case. For this, he focuses on what —and how much of it— circulated from where to where and by what means. His reconstruction of the exchange networks, combined with his estimations of the volume of goods that moved through them, is very detailed, though here the methodological approach chosen creates something of a blind angle. Wickham takes bulk exchange as a fundamental indicator of exchange complexity (p. 15) and correspondingly focuses on the written and material evidence available for such products. In particular, ceramics play a crucial role with regards to the archaeological record as «our best guide to economic relationships,

taken as a whole» (p. 20). His approach is necessarily selective —as it needs to be for such undertaking— but derives from, and generates, a number of biases in the sources that need to be accounted for. First of all, the state of research in the different regions is a major factor in determining the quantity and quality of the available data —particularly in archaeology, as noted by Fabio Saggioro—[13]. The question, nonetheless, remains as to whether what we miss was never there or has yet to be found, for which different answers can be provided in different contexts[14]. Second, some pieces of the economic systems can be very elusive —as Jessica Goldberg has highlighted in relation to camel caravans in North Africa[15]—, or even outright invisible. Wickham, for example, notes this when he remarks that, contrary to the idea that exports were a sign of strength and imports of weakness, in these economies «unbalanced trade was effectively an economic impossibility», and that «commercial exports must always have been balanced by archaeologically undocumented imports and vice versa» (p. 230). Third, and finally, the methodological approach itself leaves some things out of the picture. Goldberg, for example, has noted that the book pays little attention to female economic activity —to which Wickham admits—[16]. More generally, the same could be said about the factors —including gender— that informed economic activity and consumers' choice more broadly among peasants and lesser elites. Wickham does not completely elude this question, though his remarks sometimes read more as a cautionary warning against cultural determinisms than as an actual assessment of consumption patterns. For example, he expresses his reticence to speak of «Islamization» for he thinks it had «no religious content» and rather insists that it represented «a trend towards the (at least partial) homogenization of Andalusī material culture with that of North Africa and the Islamic lands to the east» (p. 416). Similarly, he argues, even more sharply, that in Sicily «cultural shifts such as Latinization and Christianization are irrelevant to a consideration of how exchanged worked; what matters is demand, and the effect this had on production, specialization, and distribution« (p. 227). And yet how that demand materialized in terms of consumption and what informed consumption patterns should be relevant for a better understanding of what mattered —and what not— in driving exchange —something for which, once again, *The Donkey and the Boat* provides an excellent framework for research.

2 The logic of the feudal economy

It is actually easy to get carried away by the insistence on the importance of demand throughout the book. Petralia has spotted Keynesian undertones and suggests that it could be stretched even further in macroeconomic terms, leaving aside the differences that Wickham establishes between different sources of demand —or rather the demand generated by different social groups— to focus more generally on the «aggregated» or

13 Saggioro, «Asini».
14 Wickham, «Risposta», 81.
15 Goldberg, «About *The Donkey*, I», 849-51.
16 Goldberg, «About *The Donkey*, I», 849; Wickham, «About *The Donkey*, IV», 872.

«effective» demand[17]. This may make sense in purely macroeconomic terms but it overrides the theoretical underpinning of Wickham's proposed model for the logic of feudal economies.

At its heart lies the notion that the social relations of production, and more specifically class struggle over rents and taxes was what determined the availability of surplus in peasant hands: «Elite and peasant surpluses, of course, came above all from the same source, the land, and the more one class had, the less the other did. Class struggle had to occur over this, and did» (p. 658). This idea is introduced in the different chapters of the book and is more fully developed theoretically in the last two chapters, to the point that in the very last lines of the book, Wickham states:

> The balance between elite and peasant demand was established in each region, in shorter or longer-lasting forms. And the dynamism which we can see across the medieval Mediterranean economy or economies, in our period and up to the Black Death —in some regions after that as well— was the result (p. 688).

One could have the impression that for all its relevance, Wickham addresses this only two swiftly, and that beyond some general observations —for which he grants credit to other historians such as Rodney Hilton, Robert Brenner, and Guy Bois (p. 684) but which he has also addressed in detail in previous work[18]— we are left with little clue as to how this materialised on the ground. It is not, however, the schematism with which this is presented that we want to focus on here —Wickham himself acknowledges that is rather less clear «how, exactly, the "struggle for rent" actually did underpin the rest of the economy, including the commercial economy, and its internal logic» (p. 676), which we take as an invitation to further delve into it within the framework proposed by the book—. Rather, we would like to draw attention to what we perceive as a tension between the way in which he proceeds when articulating his model of the feudal mode of production and how he sets to theorize about medieval economies more specifically.

When articulating the former, Wickham seems to be in full dialectic gear[19]. Thus, for example, in a few lines that encapsulate one of the mysteries posed by the book (how the world of *Framing* connects to that of *The Donkey and the Boat*), he notes:

> The framework for serious growth in this period was, empirically, twofold. There needed to be enough elite demand […] to allow productive specializations to develop, in particular cloth, ironwork, and […] ceramics, plus some foodstuffs […] and to help establish or maintain the networks which moved goods around […] And there also needed to be peasant demand for the development of mass markets (by medieval standards), which in turn could allow for the development of mass production […] There must have been a dialectic between them (p. 663).

[17] Petralia, «Dai battelli», 63-4.

[18] E.g., from a more theoretical perspective, Wickham, «Le forme del feudalesimo»; Wickham, «Productive Forces». On peasant resistence: Wickham, «Looking forward».

[19] For what we understand here as dialectic, as well as on the notion of «vantage point» cited below, see Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*.

The vantage point through which Wickham sets to understand this process, to answer «the most crucial economic question of all: how the medieval economy actually worked as a whole, and how its economic logic operated» (p. 22), is that of peasant demand, and correspondingly of regional exchange —rather than international exchange relations, as defended by the proponents of the «commercial revolution» narrative—. The reason for this is that medieval economies «were never sufficiently dependent on international trade for this to be a helpful starting point for analysis» (p. 684). We can understand this at two different levels. On the one hand, theoretically, Wickham is here considering different abstractions that can serve as «starting points for analysis» and which must also be considered as mutually interdependent. The reason to choose one over the other as a departing point, however, is not theoretical but rather based on historical reasoning, and yet, in historical terms, the need to contemplate that in particular circumstances the alternative point of view may provide a better stance from which to look at the dynamics of the system is acknowledged at times throughout the text.

Let us illustrate this. Wickham, for example, affirms that «it is the organisation of that internal exchange which will, in most cases, underpin both the creation of something to export, and the buying power for imports» at the level of bulk exchange (p. 230). These lines reiterate the notion that regional exchange should be granted explanatory primacy over long-distance trade. The key in this rendition lies in the reservation expressed: «in most cases». For in some cases, it could be otherwise. Thus, Lorenzo Tabarrini has argued that there are indeed such cases in which elite-driven initiatives were the force behind economic growth —of Rome in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries he says that «the reinvestment of financial capital can be seen […] as the precondition to the growth in agricultural production, and not the other way round —a top-down movement as opposed to a bottom-up one», to which Wickham partly concedes[20]. Wickham may be right in saying that in most cases economic dynamism is best understood from below, and yet because he is trying to make the argument and a higher level of abstraction a certain tension is generated as there is still a need to account for the causal weight of elements to which he does not confer such theoretical primacy.

In our understanding, the more serious problem to Wickham's argument is not historical —it does not lie in the fact that other cases like Rome's could be adduced against it— but rather lies on the theoretical strategy he follows to operationalise the more abstract theoretical notions in actual historical analysis. Here, what in the above-cited formulation are presented as «starting points for analysis» become a quest for causes and prime movers. Or as he puts it at the beginning of the book:

> How can we theorize economic causes in the medieval period? What were the economy's prime movers? How far can we generalize about them? What, indeed, was the economic logic that characterized the medieval period? (p. 7).

The limits of such strategy become apparent in the critiques it engenders: in the arguments that other scholars advance in favour of alternative prime movers, be it elite

[20] Tabarrini, «About *The Donkey*, III», 866; Wickham, «About *The Donkey*, IV», 875.

demand, supply, demographic change, or any other, which preclude a more thorough examination of how those different factors were articulated[21]. Admittedly, as Wickham has insisted, even if we contemplate those different factors, to account for how social systems worked and changed over time we still need to establish a hierarchy of causes[22]. Likewise, Henry Bernstein, to whom Wickham refers for his analysis and critic of Banaji's works (p. 684, n. 41), warns of the danger of «infinite regress» —for «everything that happens is affected, in one way or another, to some degree or other, by everything that happened before»— and argues that while «restoring complexity to properly historical investigation requires a series of determinations […] there must be some hierarchical ordering of determinations to provide a control on the problem of infinite regress»[23]. However, while we can share Wickham's and Bernstein's concern, we must also note that in the way they present it, the building of that hierarchy of causes is posited in the abstract against a homogeneous notion of time and space. However, historical spaces and temporalities are not homogeneous, so we should at least contemplate in our theoretical models the possibility that in different places the hierarchy of causes may differ, so that some determinations may be more fundamental in some places than in others, and that this can change over time.

In any case, and notwithstanding the more abstract formulations of his theoretical framework, Wickham's goal in the book is actually much more historically grounded. What he sets to explain is, more specifically, how over the long eleventh century, across different regions in the Mediterranean, larger shares of the population at all social levels became involved in exchange, and the relative stability that those networks had once they had developed. Importantly, this concerns not only the configuration and transformation of the system at any one time, but also its reproduction. He poses the issue in terms of «balance»: «There also had to be a balance between elites being wealthy enough to be able to sustain their own demand […] and not being so wealthy that the weight of their exactions made the peasantry too poor to sustain a mass demand» (p. 663). In his view, once that balance was achieved, two things could happen depending on whether peasant demand was maintained or undermined. On the one hand, the system could be overturned as the elites intervened by force to extract a bigger share of surplus raising rents and taxes and thus cutting peasants out of the exchange system. On the other, the system could remain stable, for in as much as the subsistence of the peasantry remained separate from market exchange, there would be no «systemic trend to the impoverishment of the peasantry» (p. 680-1). Here we should note that in this model, the causes of change are posited upon social agency —peasants resisting surplus exaction, elites demanding higher taxes and rents— while social reproduction is not —it is a matter of «balances» and «systemic trends»—. We shall assume that this is so —i. e., that there is indeed a «logic» operating in the system that shapes, even if it does not fully determine,

[21] Petralia, «Dai battelli»; Tabarrini, «About *The Donkey*, III»; Tognetti, «Schumpeter incatenato».

[22] «[…] causes are hierarchical […] and have systemic interrelations, which also need to be explored» (Wickham, «Memories of Underdevelopment», 36).

[23] Bernstein, «Historical Materialism», 326-7.

social practice— but wonder if it is true that no systemic trend to the impoverishment of the peasantry is actually apparent in feudal economies.

Let us say from the start that we do not want to reinstate the notion that such high-functioning production and exchange systems were the prelude to the development of capitalism. Wickham rejects this notion early in the book (pp. 18-19, 682), and we share his view. However, we wonder whether all the elements of the feudal economies have been adequately considered to defend with such confidence the argument for the stability of the system. The reason is that while the book addresses exchange, little attention is paid to markets more generally, to their configuration, and to their social effects. Along with markets for output, which are the focus of Wickham's research, other markets could develop that could absorb part of the wealth generated by such growing feudal economies. Bas van Bavel, for example, has shown that factor markets —markets for land and leases, labour, and credit— developed in different pre-capitalist societies in which they were, for a time, successful in allocating those resources and responding fast to changing social needs. This is important, first, because further consideration of how markets of output were articulated with factor markets and with political structures may help us gain a better appreciation of the dynamics of the feudal economies. More specifically, it may help us better understand the position of those groups whose reproduction was not directly predicated upon social relations articulated around the struggle for agrarian surplus but rather around other social relations of production, as in the case of merchants and wage labourers. Furthermore, van Bavel has also argued that the workings of those markets could —and did, in the cases he considers— foster patterns of accumulation leading to the development of social and political inequalities that could ultimately undermine the workings of the markets[24]. In other words, it could be within the logic of the system for inequalities to develop that could ultimately lead to the disruption of the system's balance. This could provide an explanation for economic failure that goes otherwise unaccounted for in Wickham's model, and that is not posited upon teleological narratives about the development of capitalism, nor informed by cultural supremacism —two explicative frameworks against which Wickham rightly warns us at the beginning of the book (pp. 18-9).

One of the interesting things about van Bavel's approach is that he recognises that markets, as institutions, are biased, and that those biases respond partly to power inequalities between the participant actors, and also to the definition of the rules that regulate social interactions between them. From an institutional perspective, alongside the market, another key element in any account of how feudal economies worked is the state[25]. As we noted above, Wickham does pay significant attention throughout the book, acknowledging the influence of John Haldon in the matter (p. 684)[26]. There remains in *The Donkey and the Boat* a certain tendency to portray the state as an autonomous social actor in its own right, as if detached from society —as when it is said that Rome's «western

[24] van Bavel, *The Invisible Hand?*.
[25] Jessop, *State Power*.
[26] Haldon, *The State*.

successor states could not move goods around» like the empire had (p. 628)[27]— and yet in the book Wickham outlines a very nuanced and interesting approach to the role of the state in the economy, which he considers essentially along three lines that could be expanded further.

To begin with —though this is not the aspect to which he concedes more weight—, the state is considered in terms of its contribution to institutional stability, which in turn would be related to economic stability. Wickham shows a certain scepticism with regards to the postulates of *New Institutional Economics* but nonetheless admits that states could help stabilize, even lower transaction costs through fixing prices or providing stable coinage (p. 133). They were not, however, an *a priori* condition for economic growth, as already noted, and there were regions, like Ifriqiya, where their intervention in trade was probably insignificant (p. 191). Similarly, in Greece, in the Middle Byzantine period, the expansion of commerce and production is not regarded as a result of direct state intervention but of private capital investment (pp. 330-1). States could also be a source of demand incentivising the circulation of certain goods —though in this period never to the extent to which the Roman state had done in the past. They had to meet needs such as provisioning cities —like Constantinople (p. 280)— and their armies. In the case of Egypt, for example, maintaining the navy required the state to invest in iron and timber (p. 148). To a lesser extent, they could also engage into specialised production, as the production of linen in the case of the Egyptian state (p. 133) or green manganese wares in the case of Córdoba in the tenth century (p. 398). Finally, and more fundamentally, states intervened in the economy through taxation, to several effects. On the one, taxation was one of the ways through which the social relations of production materialised, and more specifically through which surplus was extracted from peasants. The weight of taxes —whether they were low or high— was one of the factors determining how much produce the peasants could keep, and could thus directly affect the configuration of demand. Importantly, by doing so, states did not deprive the elites of surplus they could have otherwise obtained had they extracted it directly from the peasantry. Rather, it redistributed its tax revenues among the elite groups in control of the state apparatuses (pp. 632-3) —which could cause frictions between these and those elite groups that did not control them; Wickham notes that in Sicily the Latin-speaking aristocracy resented state administrators (p. 209)—. Some dominant groups were thus reinforced, though not solely along the lines of feudal relations. In the case of Egypt, wealth obtained from the state enabled some elites to participate in trade (p. 131).

While the most general remarks about the state focus most notably on its role in the extraction and distribution of surplus and as a source of demand, the book shows how state institutions mediated social relations between classes and between different social groups. The specificity of state domination is sometimes downplayed, as when, in regards to royal cessions of tax rights to lords and ecclesiastics in Sicily, it is said that:

[27] We have written elsewhere about our dissatisfaction with both Wickham's and Haldon's understanding of the state: Carvajal Castro and Tejerizo-García, «The Early Medieval State».

> […] it does not matter so very greatly whether we are dealing here with concessions of taxpaying or rent-paying, or how far one slid into the other. In order to understand the prosperity of the inhabitants of the countryside, what matters most is how much they actually had to pay (p. 238).

The issue goes back to a long-settled debate on the distinction between tax and rent[28], and certainly for the purpose of the book, which is assessing how much surplus peasants could keep, it may matter little. However, in his assessment of the different regions, Wickham touches upon some other aspects that may have a more profound bearing for our understanding of the logic of the feudal economies as he portrays it. First of all, states legitimized institutional backgrounds and coercive measures for the extraction of surplus that could differ from those of other lords, and which could have a long-lasting impact, even once the hegemonic projects they originally responded to were overthrown. Also, the specific ways in which they framed the social relations of production could have a bearing on class struggle. In the case of Egypt, for example, Wickham acknowledges that since the tenth century the collection of taxes was increasingly entrusted to tax farmers, and that tax collection relied very often on local involvement, which «may have mediated the experience sufficiently to make it tolerable» for the peasants, to the extent that while the pressure of taxation did not lessen, «tax revolts ended for many centuries» (pp. 35-6). Second, state actors could actively intervene to regulate social relations between the different social classes —not necessarily on moral or ideological grounds but merely to defend their own interests. In Byzantium, Wickham explains, tenth-century emperors passed a series of laws aimed at combatting the aggrandisement of the *dynatoi* —the «powerful», a label that would have applied to imperial elites, as well as regional and local landowners, both lay and ecclesiastical—, and to ensure that they did not buy up peasant land and impose themselves on the villages. The laws were of little avail, and yet they would express the attempts of the emperors to protect the local communities, if to their own interest, in as much as local communities were central for tax-raising (pp. 340-4) —as was also the case in Sicily (p. 232-3) and Al-Andalus (p. 388). Third, these Byzantine laws are also an expression of how state institutions and their logic oriented the initiatives of the ruling classes and provided elite groups with arenas to settle —or at least to play out— their conflicts.[29] States resulted from hegemonic projects that draw elite groups with potentially competing interests together, and mediated the relationships between them, thus contributing to the reproduction of class domination even when the power balance between different fractions changed. Fourth, through tax-raising and other institutions, like justice, states could shape local societies. This was partly based on their capacity to produce the knowledge needed to control them —as in the case of Sicily, were the grants of land that the Norman kings made on behalf of churches and aristocrats were accompanied by inquests to establish the boundary of the lands given, as well as by *jarā'ids*, lists of people owing tax (pp. 231-3, 685). Overall, the role of the state should not be overstated, for states were not fundamental for economy growth to occur —Italy is a good reminder

[28] Wickham, *Framing*, 60.
[29] Bourdieu, *Sur l'État*, 15-6.

of this—, and yet where they were strong —or had at least some strength—, they could have an impact that transcends their capacity to contribute directly and indirectly to the circulation of surplus and goods, but rather pertained to the realm of how social relations were articulated and reproduced over time —and thus to class dynamics, which is something that definitely matters for our understanding of feudal economies.

3 Marxism and medieval history

Because class struggle matters. The book is built upon this notion and pushes forward a theoretical contribution along the lines of «Marxist history-writing» that Wickham has been developing for over forty years. Marxist approaches have gained some momentum over the last two decades after the eclipse of the nineties and early two-thousands, and this is true also for medieval history —though not without resistance[30]. *Framing* —awarded with no other than the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize— was already a major contribution in that direction. However, this increase in the volume of Marxist-based studies has not always been paired with more general theoretical reflection. The «flattening of the ideological charge of debate in the last two decades», which Wickham denounced in 2007, is still a reality[31]. One of the merits of *The Donkey and the Boat* is that it uses a case study —or several— to «think through» his theoretical approach[32], using some of the fundamental categories of Marxist thinking in an attempt to better understand the history of precapitalist societies —something to which has sought to contribute throughout his career[33]—. The book is an invitation to further debate along those lines, to keep thinking through our theoretical models, and to do so from and beyond our own fields of specialisation.

As Wickham has recently stated, *The Donkey and the Boat* is not a *Framing vol. 2*[34]. And this is true… at least in part. Like *Framing*, *The Donkey and the Boat*, is a powerful and thought-provoking analysis of medieval European societies. It is an account of commerce in the Mediterranean from the tenth to twelfth centuries that defends a very compelling counter-narrative to inherited ideas on medieval economies and to nationalistic myths. And it also represents a significant step ahead in a very solid and coherent academic pursuit in search of a theoretical and methodological approach to the Middle Ages that can still bear much fruit in developing a better understanding of that past. This is what we think makes of it a historiographical landmark beyond its own field: the capacity to change the ways in which we think about and discuss history.

[30] See Tognetti, «Schumpeter incatenato».
[31] Wickham, «Memories of Underdevelopment», 32.
[32] Wickham, «Memories of Underdevelopment», 36.
[33] Most explicitly in works like Wickham, «Historical Materialism»; Wickham, «Memories of Underdevelopment»; Wickham, «How did the Feudal Economy Work?».
[34] Cortese, West and Wickham, «Intervista», 36.

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