

# The Concept Of “Asiatic Mode of Production” and the Marxist Schemata of Social Evolution\*

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[This translation is a rough draft. Only the most glaring errors have been corrected.--GB]

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## **Foreword**

Published in 1964, this text was discussed, sometimes with some controversy, in the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia<sup>1</sup>, Mexico, Peru. Its reissue in 1968 calls for a brief update.

Nothing came to invalidate the main theses that we were developing and that we will recall in a moment. However, on a secondary point, whether Engels, after reading Morgan, had abandoned the concept of an “Asiatic mode of production,” our conclusion was wrong. A more careful and *chronological* analysis of the correspondences of Marx and Engels made it clear that neither had rejected the ideas developed from 1853 to 1877 on the existence of “despotic” forms of state. built in Asia, Russia or elsewhere on the basis of ancient agricultural communities.

In 1881, writing the drafts of his response to Vera Zasulich, Marx, who had just read Kovalevsky and Morgan, once again affirmed the existence of a despotic state in Russia. He seeks its foundations not in the need for major works, hydraulic or otherwise, but, on the one hand, in the dispersion and isolation of agricultural communities over an immense territory (which he also suggested in 1858 for India ), on the other hand in the Mongol domination. In 1882, Engels, who had just signed the preface to the Russian edition of the *Manifesto* with Marx , took up the ideas of Marx’s response to Vera Zasulich of 1881 when he wrote the “Frankish period” text in which he suggests the possibility for the old Germanic village communities to evolve, in another historical context, towards a “despotic” society of the Russian type. More specifically, in January and February 1884 , four weeks before beginning to write *The Origin of the Family*, Engels wrote to Bebel and Kautsky about “state socialism” that the example of Java, India and Russia perfectly illustrate how the exploitation of man by man and a despotic state find their “broadest basis” in the existence of primitive communities.

This is enough to demonstrate that neither Marx nor Engels abandoned their old theses on reading Morgan. In itself this point is

<sup>1</sup> Petr SKALNIK - Timoteus POKORA: “Beginning of the discussion about the Asiatic mode of production in the USSR and the people’s republic of China,” *Eirene* v., Prague 1966 pp. 179–87.

of minor importance since, even if they had abandoned them, nothing would prevent them from being taken up again today if the current state of scientific information gives them a new topicality.

In fact, *The Origin of the Family* left out the history of Asia and of America because, unlike that of the Greco-Roman West, they did not, in the eyes of Engels, develop *the most direct* forms of transition from the ancient clan community to the *typical* forms of state and class societies.

*The Origin of the Family* therefore deepens, in the light of Morgan, one of the two paths of passage to the State that Engels had suggested in *Anti Dühring* (1887), the Western path which leads to the generalization of the productive slavery and commodity production.

Alongside this path, another leads to Russia, Peru, India, towards primitive, crude and despotic forms of state and class societies without breaking the old community organization.

There is therefore continuity between the text of the *Formen, the Anti-Dühring* and *The Origin of the Family*. The theses on the Asiatic mode of production remain valid in the eyes of Engels and continue to designate a form of *transition* from classless societies to class societies, a transition which is in some way unfinished and which leads to the slowness or stagnation of social development.

However, this real continuity should not conceal the incomplete, open character of the thought of Marx and Engels, an incompleteness expressed by the fact that some of their theses remain unadjusted or ill-adjusted. For example, when in 1881 Marx, following Kovalevsky, suggested that Hindu, Russian or Germanic communities were the most recent forms of the old “primitive formation” of society and showed a dynamism and vitality unknown to common Greek, Roman, Semitic, etc., a profound change took place in the analyzes developed between 1853 and 1877. Asia finds itself “rejuvenated” and the vision of an Asia vegetating for millennia in stagnation and misery and passively undergoing foreign invasions seems to be transformed. These young forms of primitive communities, Marx calls them “rural communities” and he is careful to note that part of their dynamism comes from the fact that they no longer rest entirely on the “strong but narrow” circle of kinship relations between its members.

In Engels, on the contrary, the accent is placed on the persistence of primitive kinship relations, on the vitality of clan organization. To explain primitive history, we move definitively from the Hindu model to the “Indian” model of the clan societies of hunter-farmers, characteristic of the lower and middle stages of barbarism. All the old agricultural communities once again became “gentile” forms of society, thus based on kinship relations, and thus lost in part the “new youth” that Marx had discovered in them in 1881. Such are the facts.

By sketching the *historical* reconstruction of the archaeological context (excavations of Schliemann at Troy in 1870–1873, of

Mycenae in 1874), ethnological and historical context of the texts of Morgan and Engels, by showing that the Morganian concept of “military democracy” prevented Engels to take up, with regard to the Aztecs and the Incas, the theses on the Asiatic mode of production and to take up again the analyzes of *Anti Dühring* of the process of genesis of a tribal aristocracy, process which is, in our eyes, the key problem of the formation of primitive class societies, we were doing useful work, even if that did not prove that Engels had abandoned the hypothesis of the Asiatic mode of production.

But the essence of our text was not there and can be summed up in three theses that the international discussion of recent years has in no way invalidated:

### ***1. Specificity of the Asiatic mode of production.***

The concept of Asiatic mode of production designates *a specific, original mode of production* that cannot be confused with either the ancient slavery mode of production or the feudal mode of production.

The very essence of the Asiatic mode of production is the combined existence of primitive *communities* where common possession of the soil reigns and organized, still partially, on the basis of kinship relations, and of a *state power* which expresses the real or imaginary *unity* of these communities, *controls* the use of essential economic resources and *directly appropriates* part of the labor and production of the communities it dominates.

This mode of production constitutes *one* of the possible forms of *passage* from classless societies to class societies, perhaps the oldest form of this passage and contains the *contradiction* of this passage, that is to say the combination of communal relations of production and embryonic forms of exploiting classes and the state.

### ***2. Basis for the emergence of primitive forms of state and class societies***

For the narrow explanation proposed by Engels (in 1853) of the appearance of a central power above the local village communities, Marx substituted a much broader and more fruitful hypothesis which is summed up in the *Anti-Dühring* formula, “It is always the exercise of social *functions* which is the basis of political supremacy.” The fundamental change which leads to the appearance of class societies consists in the gradual transformation of this functional power of a social minority into an exploitative power and into the domination of an exploiting class.

This formula goes beyond the narrow explanation of Engels who sought (in 1853) in an ecological determinism imposing the organization of great hydraulic works the main reason for the appearance of

despotic forms of state power. This explanation, criticized and extended by Marx, is however the one that K. Wittfogel limits himself to mechanically repeating to the point of making it pass in the eyes of an uninformed scientific public for the true thought of Marx (cf. Carasco, Leach, Murdoch, etc.).

Now, this hypothesis of Marx goes *beyond* the problem of the Asiatic mode of production by posing the *general* problem of the *multiple forms* of evolution of classless societies organized mainly according to kinship relations towards different forms of class societies and State. By seeing in the Asiatic mode of production *one* of the possible forms of passage to the State and not the *only* possible form, one avoids inventing a new dogmatism which would limit itself to *adding* a new “necessary stage” to those enumerated by Stalin.

Moreover, we go *beyond* the Asiatic mode of production as soon as we follow to the end Marx’s idea that the appearance of exploiting classes arises from the transformation of the functions of a social minority. For these functions do not concern only the economy, and particularly that of the “Asiatic” peoples, but religion, political authority, kinship relations. It is therefore necessary to analyze in depth this transformation of functions, to mobilize the knowledge accumulated by religious, social, economic anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, history; combine this available knowledge, bring together compartmentalized disciplines in distinct university institutions and specific approaches.

In the light of this modern knowledge, the hypotheses inherited from the 19th century concerning the primitive forms of the evolution of humanity as well as the postulates and methods of evolutionism must be confronted and criticized. It is also Marxism which must be transformed if it wants to play the role of avant-garde in this great comparative research where archeology, anthropology, history and linguistics converge, as in the nineteenth century but on a new theoretical basis.

And, as we indicated in 1964, this transformation of Marxism is not and cannot be, despite the richness of Marx’s theses on the Asiatic mode of production, a return to Marx.

### ***3. Development of Marxism and not “return to Marx”***

Current research cannot in any way present itself as a simple “return to Marx” and this, for two reasons: the first is that this return would mean the resumption of a *partially outdated* state of theoretical information and conceptualization. with regard to primitive societies; the second is that our current information requires *further* elaboration of certain fundamental Marxist concepts, such as concepts of infrastructure, superstructure, dominant structure, causality of a structure, and historical necessity.

This is why if the concept of the Asiatic mode of production or

an *equivalent but better named concept* can and must be “restarted” by modern science, it is on the condition that it be *rid* of its *dead parts confronted* with *all* available information and *enriched* by a *new* theoretical analysis of kinship structures, economic and religious structures in classless societies or primitive class societies.

Among these dead elements, let us quote:

a) The concept of “despotism” which is not a scientific concept but ideological. It conveys with it the philosophical and political conflicts of the eighteenth century and, in general, it translates in a distorted and partial way the fact that in the primitive forms of the State this is embodied in the person of the sovereign and seems depend on his arbitrary will . As Radcliffe-Brown pointed out of the traditional African ruler, the king is the chief executive, legislator , supreme judge , master of ritual, and administrator of the kingdom’s essential resources. This “fusion” of functions and powers in the person of a single man has most often appeared to a Westerner only as the mark of a “*despotic*” power knowing no other law than arbitrary will of the sovereign.

b) The image of an Asia stagnant for a thousand years in an unfinished transition between classless societies and class societies , between barbarism and civilization has not withstood the progress of archeology and the history of the Orient and the New World. In fact, if Pharaonic Egypt, Mesopotamia, the pre-Columbian empires belong to something like the Asiatic mode of production, this then corresponds to the times when humanity tears itself away locally but definitively from the economy. occupation of the land, invents agriculture, breeding, architecture, calculation, writing, trade, money, law, new religions , etc. It was not civilization that was born in Greece but the West, one of its particular forms, which was ultimately to dominate it while claiming to symbolize it.

In its original forms, the Asiatic mode of production would signify not stagnation but the greatest progress of the productive forces accomplished on the basis of the old communitarian forms of production and social existence . The Asiatic mode of production therefore does not *necessarily* imply stagnation and despotism. Marx’s thesis may, however, seem to retain a certain validity for the *subsequent* evolution of societies of the “Asiatic” type , which would then have been bogged down in a millennial stagnation. Without denying the slowness and uneven development of many non-Western class societies, we have suggested that this process of getting bogged down would only appear in cases where the contradiction specific to the Asiatic mode of production did not develop , where the old community relations of property and sometimes of production have not been destroyed and replaced by various forms of private property. In other cases, that of China and Japan above all, we have suggested that the evolution may have passed from various forms of Asiatic mode of production to forms more or less analogous to European feudal relations , even though the state had been able to play a role that was not

found in Europe.

c) If the discussions on the Asiatic mode of production must necessarily lead to a more general discussion of the structures of classless societies, and in particular of their kinship structures, other parts of the work of Morgan and Engels will have to be eliminated. It is thus that Morgan's reconstruction, accepted by Engels, of the evolution of kinship relations in primitive societies from a stage of primitive promiscuity and making matrilineal kinship succeed each other and patrilineal kinship is no longer acceptable nowadays. The binary correspondence between forms of marriage and terminology of kinship that he assumed in order to reconstruct the vanished stages of the evolution of the family does not exist. The terminology of kinship translates not only marriage but also residence and the multiplicity of functions assumed in a primitive society by kinship relations, and this poses a larger problem for Marxism, the starting point for a new theoretical enrichment.

d) Kinship relationships in a primitive society are both relations of production, relations of authority, ideological scheme partially organizing the representation of the relations between nature and society.<sup>2</sup> They are therefore *both* infrastructure and superstructure and it is because they *unify* multiple functions that they play the role of *dominant* structure in social life.

This poses a double problem for Marxism. How can we understand the determining role of the economy in social life and the dominant role of kinship relations in primitive societies<sup>3</sup>? Under what conditions do kinship relations cease to play a dominant role in these societies and slip into a secondary place while new social structures, the State, develop and occupy the central place left free?

e) On a philosophical level, current research imposes on Marxism to deepen the notion of "historical necessity" in addition to those of "dominant structure" and "causality of a structure."

f) Finally, on a secondary but important level, many nineteenth-century conclusions shared by Marx and Engels concerning the chronological priority of nomadic herding over agriculture, the self-subsistence character of primitive economies, the problem castes, the *direct* evolution of primitive Greece and Rome towards class societies based on "clan" relations must be abandoned or reassessed.

This dry enumeration suffices to demonstrate that Marxism, purified of all dogmatism and at the cost of an immense theoretical effort, the very idea of which is excellent, will be able to take charge of the scientific revolutions demanded by our era just as much as the social revolutions.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Cl. LÉVI-STRAUSS: *The Raw and The Cooked*.

<sup>3</sup> See also on this point our work *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, ed. Maspéro, 1966, pp. 90–98 and our article "System, structure and contradiction in *Capital*," *Temps Modernes*, Nov. '66, pp. 828–64.

*“The Greeks once lived as the Barbarians live now.”*

—THUCYDIDE I, 6, 6.

## **Introduction**

Marxism has posed itself, from its origins,<sup>4</sup> as an attempt to think about history scientifically, that is to say, to lay bare the essential structures of societies and to explain their reasons for being and their laws of evolution. Marx and Engels found and took up a general hypothesis advanced by many scholars according to which the history of humanity is that of the transition from classless forms of social organization to class societies.<sup>5</sup> They enriched this hypothesis by proposing to seek in the development of the productive forces and the relations of production the foundation, in the last analysis, of this passage. In this perspective, they showed that capitalism, by developing the productive forces, created the conditions for the abolition of societies and class exploitation . . . Through their works, they bequeathed, it seemed, the more precise image of a “necessary” evolution of humanity through the succession of the primitive community, slavery, feudalism and capitalism. For many Marxists, this “necessity” seemed to imply that it is found, more or less deformed by local “particularities,” in all societies. This interpretation, confronted with the immense archaeological, ethnological and historical material accumulated since Marx and Morgan, nourishes endless debates among specialists on the date of appearance and the development of a “slavery” stage in China, Japan, in Africa, a “feudal” stadium among the Mongols, the Islamic world, etc. All these difficulties came to be knotted in the drama of “periodizations” not those of the chronological succession of events but of the logical succession of slave, feudal, capitalist structures.

To escape this drama of the inability to spell out the logic of history, many scholars chose not to “arrange” the facts, the societies they were analyzing, in one stage or another. Non-Western history was bursting into a swarm of “empirical” facts, saved perhaps from misinterpretation but deprived of meaning. Source of these inversely complementary theoretical disorders, non-Western history seemed to escape the “necessity of history” because it did not reproduce the necessity of Western history.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from MARX to Joseph WEYDEMEYER, March 5, 1852.

<sup>5</sup> Several general diagrams of the evolution of humanity had been constructed before Marx by Ferguson, Adam Smith, etc. See, e.g. I. SELNOW: *Grundprinzipien einer Periodisierung der Urgeschichte* and the commentary by Ch. PARAIN, *La Pensée, op. cit.*



By a singular paradox, at the heart of the drama, certain specialists, whether Marxist or not, while also refusing to classify their “facts” under the categories of slavery or feudalism, proposed to give them a theoretical, comparative meaning, by classifying them under a Marxist category long overshadowed in many texts by Engels’s sparkling work, *The Origin of the Family*, the category of “Asiatic production model.” For example, J. Suret Canale, about precolonial black Africa declared

“It seems that we can compare the preponderant mode of production of the most advanced regions of traditional black Africa with what Marx called the ‘Asiatic mode of production.’”<sup>6</sup>

and A. Métraux, describing the pre-Inca states, wrote about the Mochicas, Indians of the northern coast of Peru (300 to 800 A.D.):

“As in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the conquest of the desert on the Peruvian coast postulates the existence of a respected authority and a well-organized bureaucracy. K. Marx had already foreseen the role of irrigation in the formation of despotic governments of the Asiatic type.”<sup>7</sup>

This singular return to a forgotten Marx would pose a new chain of theoretical problems. The first problem, arising from “Marxology” it seemed, was to establish the content of this category of Marx by locating it through a set of dispersed texts which had to be inventoried, then to confront this content with the diagram built by Engels in *The Origin of the Family*. Once the concept had been restored, it was then necessary to measure it against the facts in order to appreciate its fruitfulness, and possibly to reshape it, to put it back to work. This task is in progress. Finally, in the extension of these two approaches, a fundamental question inevitably arose: what is meant by the typical line of development of humanity? We will limit ourselves to developing the first point, sketching the two others to which we will return. But before embarking on this journey, we must first ensure that we have a clear idea of what is called “a schema of the evolution of societies.”

### ***1. What is a schema of the evolution of societies?***

It is a simplified, ideal representation of the functioning mechanisms of societies, constructed to make their possible evolutions intelligible. Such a representation constitutes a “model,” that is to say a

<sup>6</sup> J. SURET-CANALE: *Black Africa, op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> A. METRAUX: *The Incas, op. cit.*, p. 24, pp. 113ff.

linked set of hypotheses on the nature of the elements that make up a society, on their relationships and their modes of evolution. Such “models” are essential instruments of the natural sciences and history. In *Capital*, Karl Marx describes the basic structure of the capitalist organization of production in these terms:

“Here there are only two classes present: the working class which has only its labor power, the capitalist class which has the monopoly of the social means of production and of money.”<sup>8</sup>

Starting from this fundamental relation, it is possible to understand both the other structures that make up a capitalist economic system (synchronic analysis) and their movement (diachronic analysis). But a model only partially corresponds to reality. *Capital* is not the real, concrete history of this or that capitalist nation, but the study of the structure which characterizes them as “capitalists,” leaving aside the infinite diversity of national realities. Marx warned us of this explicitly:

“*We shall always assume* in this *general* examination of capitalist production that the *real* economic relations *correspond well* to their *concept* or, which comes to the same thing, the real relations will only be exposed here insofar as they translate their own general type.”<sup>9</sup>

By this method, a “logic”<sup>10</sup> of social development can be apprehended. It is therefore necessary, in order not to make a gross mistake about the diagrams of evolution constructed by Marx and Engels, to recognize beforehand that they neither want nor can constitute the real history of societies but an abstract history of realities reduced to their essential structures, a retrospective view of the *raison d’être* of their evolution understood as the development of the *internal* possibilities and impotences of these structures.

These diagrams are therefore edifices of working hypotheses linked to a state of knowledge and reality, both the point of arrival for theoretical reflection and the starting point for further deciphering the infinite variety of history. concrete. It is at this level that the hypothetical diagrams prove their truth. There must be broken the

<sup>8</sup> K. MARX: *Capital II*, Vol. 2, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> K. MARX: *Capital III*, Vol. 1, p. 191, emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Z. F. ENGELS: “The Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy of K. Marx,” *Das Volk*, August 20, 1859. On these questions see:

BOCCARA: “Some hypotheses on the development of capital,” *Economics and Politics*, nos. 79, 80, 81, 82;

ILIENKOV: “The Dialectic of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s *Capital*,” *International Research*, 1962, no. 34;

GODELIER: “The Method of *Capital*,” *Economics and Politics*, nos. 70, 71, 80.

perpetual temptation to transform the hypothesis into dogma, a truth to be proven into evidence that no longer has to be verified and can, superbly, reign *a priori* over the facts.

In this spirit, Marx, drawing in *The German ideology* (1845) its first schema of evolution, gave us the instructions for its use, and criticized those who would like to see in it a new philosophy of history, a body of first or last truths accessible to the philosopher alone and from which history would derive its necessity and its meaning.

“In place of philosophy, we can at most put a synthesis of the most general results that it is possible to abstract from the study of the historical development of men. These abstractions, *taken by themselves*, detached from real history, have *absolutely no value*. They can at most serve to classify historical matter more easily, to indicate the succession of its particular stratifications. But they in no way give, like philosophy, a *recipe*, a scheme according to which we can *accommodate* historical periods. The difficulty only begins, on the contrary, when one begins to study and classify this material . . .”<sup>11</sup>

We will see how the forgetting of this grammar of the hypothesis in the historical sciences made many researchers enter little by little into crazy languages *by* which they summoned reality to enter into the words which were to express its “rational” meaning.

## ***2. The notion of the Asiatic mode of production in Marx and Engels.***

### **a ) Sources.**

The notion was developed around 1853<sup>12</sup> and remained present in Marx until the end of his life. Engels in *the Anti-Dühring* (1877), in *the Frankish Period* (1882) takes it up and enriches it, but it disappears in *The Origin of the Family, of Private Property, of the State* (1884). Engels left it in the editions of Volumes II (1885) and III (1894) of *Capital* which he published after Marx’s death.

The most advanced elaboration of this concept by Marx is found in a manuscript of 1855–59 which remained unpublished until 1939 and entitled *Formen die der Kapitalistischen Produktion vorhergehen*, published in the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. The *Formen* text is the most complex schema of the evolution of societies that Marx left us. It will therefore have to be confronted with in Engels’s *The Origin of the Family*, which it precedes by twenty-five years.

<sup>11</sup> K. MARX, F. ENGELS: *German ideology*, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–38.

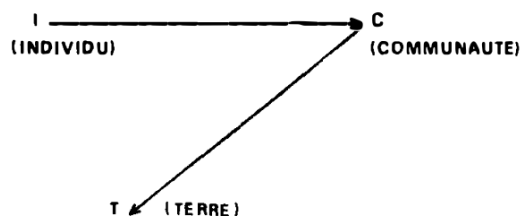
<sup>12</sup> In the correspondence of May, June, July 1853 between MARX and ENGELS. In MARX’s articles on India in the *New York Daily Tribune*, June, July, August 1853.

**b) The notion of the Asiatic mode of production.**

The notion was developed from a reflection on British documents<sup>13</sup> that described village communities and states of nineteenth-century Indian society. To this information were added readings of travelers' accounts in the Middle East and Central Asia.<sup>14</sup> A fact strikes Marx and Engels: the absence of private land ownership. In the manuscript *Formen*, Marx describes seven different forms of land appropriation, that is to say of the dominant relation of production between men in pre-industrial societies. These forms follow one another up to the capitalist mode of production in which the separation of the worker from the objective conditions of production is radical. Marx's text is therefore presented as a sketch of the evolution of landed property within humanity and especially in Europe and is a fragment detached from the analysis of the forms of primitive accumulation.<sup>15</sup> This evolution seems to succeed: the primitive community, the Asiatic mode of production, the ancient mode of production, the slave mode of production, the Germanic mode of production, the feudal mode of production, the capitalist mode of production. We will confine ourselves to a few words on the modes of production distinct from the Asiatic mode of production, which we will represent by diagrams borrowed from the Hungarian sinologist F. Tökei.<sup>16</sup>

*The primitive community*

Founded on ties of blood, language, customs, it appears "not as a result but as a precondition of the communal appropriation and use of the land." The "ownership" of the land belongs to the community as a whole and membership of the community is thus the condition for the individual of the (individual) "possession" of the land.



<sup>13</sup> Cf. Letter from MARX to ENGELS, June 14, 1853. MARX cites parliamentary reports and the *History of Java* by Sir Stamford RAFFLES.

<sup>14</sup> Narrative by François BERNIER on the kingdom of the Grand Mogul cited by MARX in the letter of June 2, 1852 to ENGELS and by ENGELS in his letter of June 6.

<sup>15</sup> The subtitle of the manuscript is "Über der Prozess, der der Bildung des Kapitalverhältnisses oder der ursprünglichen Akkumulation vorhergeht." See also *Capital I*, Vol. 3, chs. 16–23.

<sup>16</sup> F. TÖKEI: *On the Asiatic mode of production*, Conference at C.E.R.M., Paris, June 1962.

This community corresponds to the occupation economy of nature—hunting, gathering, fishing—and to the first forms of itinerant agriculture, to the transition to the transformation of nature. The survival of individuals depends entirely, at this level of development of the productive forces, on their belonging to a group and their place in this group depends first of all on the kinship relations they maintain with its members on the basis of the system of kinship which regulates them:

“The less labor is developed, the less the mass of its products and, therefore, the wealth of society, the more also the predominant influence of blood ties seems to dominate the social order.”<sup>17</sup>

Primitive communities took multiple forms according to lifestyles and kinship systems. They evolved during prehistory and can subsist, more or less altered, insofar as the primitive ways of life are maintained. Their evolution is linked to the development of new forms of production—agriculture, breeding, crafts—and goes in the double direction of the extension of individual possession and ownership of goods and the transformation of old family relationships.<sup>18</sup> During this evolution appears the Asiatic mode of production.

#### *The Asiatic mode of production*

It appears when more developed forms of production allow the appearance of a regular surplus, a condition for a more complex division of labor and the separation of agriculture and craftsmanship. This division reinforces the self-subsistence character of production:

“This combination of craftsmanship and agriculture within the small community thus becoming quite *self-sustaining*\* and containing within itself all the conditions for producing and reproducing a surplus.”<sup>19</sup>

Production is not oriented towards a market, the use of money is limited, the economy therefore remains “natural.”<sup>20</sup> The unity of these communities may be represented by an assembly of heads of families, or a supreme leader, and social authority takes more or less democratic or despotic forms. The existence of a surplus makes possible further social differentiation and the appearance of a minority of

<sup>17</sup> F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the Family . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 16. See also letter from ENGELS to MARX, December 8, 1882.

<sup>18</sup> F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the Family . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

\* In English in the original. [Tr.]

<sup>19</sup> K. MARX: *Grundrisse . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 376.

<sup>20</sup> The classic description of a community living in a self-subsistence economy is found in the famous passage on the communities of India, *Capital I*, Vol. 2, pp. 46–48.

individuals who appropriate a share of this surplus and thereby exploit the other members of the communities. How does this transition take place? Engels sketched a model of this process in *Anti-Dühring* (1874):

“... These individuals are armed with a certain plenitude of power and represent the premises of state power. Little by little, the forces of production increase; the denser population creates here common and there antagonistic interests between the various communities, the grouping of which into larger units leads to a new division of labor, the creation of bodies to protect common interests and defend themselves against antagonistic interests. These bodies, which already as representatives of the common interests of the whole group, have a particular situation vis-à-vis each community taken apart, sometimes even in opposition to it, soon take on an even greater autonomy, either fact of the heredity of the office, which establishes itself almost by itself in a world where everything happens according to nature, or because of the growing impossibility of doing without it as conflicts with other groups increase. How, from this passage to autonomy vis-à-vis society, the social function was able to rise over time to the domination of society ... how, in the end, dominating individuals became united to form a ruling class, these are questions which we need not study here. What matters here is only to *note* that, everywhere, a social function is the basis of political domination; and that political domination only survived in the long run when it fulfilled the social function entrusted to it.”<sup>21</sup>

In this context, the contours of the embryonic dominant class are extremely fluid and difficult to identify, because the same individual exercises a power of function and a power of exploitation. The part of the surplus attributed to it, insofar as it is the counterpart of its function, returns indirectly to the community and there is no exploitation of the latter by the former. The exploitation starts when the appropriation is carried out without compensation and it is difficult to determine the point at which the community begins to be exploited by those who render services to it.

Exploitation therefore takes the form of the domination not of one individual over another but of an individual personifying a function over a community. Given the structure of this relation of domination, one can easily assume the particular conditions which will favor the appearance and the maximum development.

<sup>21</sup> F. ENGELS: *Anti-Dühring*, *op. cit.*, pp. 211–13. See *Capital III*, Vol. 3, pp. 26, 175–76, 252.

These conditions will be met, when the development of certain natural data will require the large-scale cooperation of particular communities for the realization of major works of general interest which exceed the strengths of these communities taken in isolation. *as particular individuals* . The hydraulic development (draining, irrigation, construction works) of the great alluvial valleys of Egypt and Mesopotamia would be a striking example.<sup>22</sup>

The carrying out of such works required both new productive forces and a centralized direction bringing together and coordinating the efforts of the particular communities under its high economic command . The “gathering unity” then appears as the condition for the effectiveness of the work and the appropriation of the local communities. On this basis, the transformation of the functional power of the superior authority into an instrument of exploitation of the subordinate communities becomes possible. This transformation is accelerated when the gathering unit places under its direct control the lands of the communities which become the eminent property of the State, of the higher community which brings together and regulates all the local communities. The appropriation of land by the state, personified by king , pharaoh, etc., means the universal expropriation of communities who lose ownership but retain possession of their land.

“In most of the Asiatic base forms, the gathering unit that sits above all these small communities appears as the superior owner or the sole proprietor, the actual communities starting as hereditary possessors.”<sup>23</sup>

Having become the eminent owner of the land, the State appears even more as the condition for the appropriation by communities and individuals of the natural conditions of production. For the individual, possession of the land passes through the double intermediary of the local community to which he belongs and of the higher community which has become the owner.

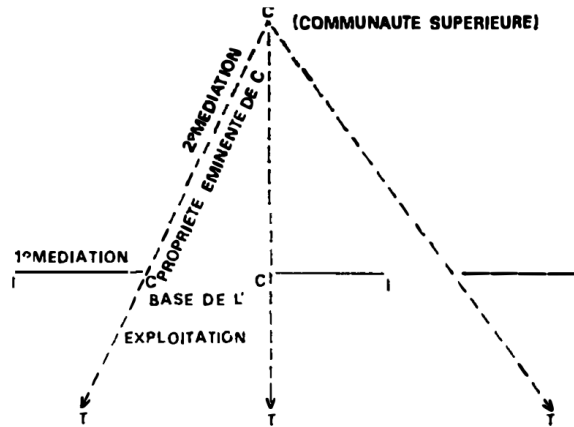
We propose, to represent this double relationship, the following diagram.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Letter from ENGELS to MARX, June 6 , 1853: “Artificial irrigation is here (in the large desert zones from the Sahara to the high plateaus of Asia) the primary condition of agriculture where it is the business either of the communities, or of the provinces or of the central government.”

F. ENGELS: *Anti-Dühring*, *op. cit.*, p. 212: “Whatever the number of despotic powers which have arisen or declined in Persia or India, each knew very exactly that he was, above all, the general contractor of the irrigation of the valleys, without which no cultivation is possible there.”

<sup>23</sup> K. MARX: *Grundrisse*, *op. cit.*, p. 376.

<sup>24</sup> J. CHESNEAUX informs us that this diagram evokes the old Chinese character *Wang* which means king (*Vuong* in Vietnamese) and about which he wrote: “The character *Vuong*, in its simplicity, already reflects the social relations which schoolchildren must to impregnate obediently: it comprises three parallel horizontal



This diagram shows that the appearance of the State and the exploitation of communities do not modify the general form of property relations since the latter remains community property, property of the superior community this time, while the individual remains possessor of the land as a member of his particular community . There has therefore been a transition to the state and to an embryonic form of class exploitation without the development of private land ownership.

In this context the surplus, formerly appropriated by the community local, goes in part to the representatives of the superior community:

“Some of the surplus labor of the community belongs to the superior community which comes to exist as a person and this surplus labor results both in tribute and in common labors to glorify unity, to glorify either the real despot or the imaginary representative god of the tribe.”<sup>25</sup>

The centralization and accumulation of this surplus in the hands of the state allowed the development of cities and foreign trade. Trade here is not the expression of market production internal to the

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lines, of which the first goes to represent the sky, that of the center, the shortest, the man and that of the bottom, the earth; a vertical line uniting the sky and the earth, pierces the man and imprisons him in the acceptance of his condition; it is from top to bottom that this line is traced because man must obey the will of heaven and the earth receive his works; only the king has a power vast enough to embrace the system of the world.” *Vietnam*, p. 99. M.J. BERQUE, professor at the College of France, suggested a connection with the starry polygon, used as a symbolic motif in the Islamic world.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Grundrisse* . . . , *op. cit.*, p. 376. For the analysis of the relationships between religious and political representations and the social organization of ancient societies, see FRANKFORT: *La Royauté et les dieux* (1951), *Before Philosophy* (1946) ch. 3, “The formation of the State,” and J.P. VERNANT: *The Origins of Greek Thought*, ch. 7, and the work of P. DERCHAIN: *Power and the Sacred*, Brussels, 1962.



life of the communities but the transformation of the surplus into goods (rare materials, weapons).<sup>26</sup> The trader appears as a civil servant.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, common labor for the benefit of communities is coupled with forced labor for the benefit of the State. The tax in kind levied by the State is transformed into land rent levied for the benefit of individuals personifying the State.<sup>28</sup>

The exploitation of peasants and craftsmen by an aristocracy of nobles and state officials is not individual since the exploitation is collective and the land rent is confused with the tax and both are required by a functionary, not in his own name but in the name of his office in the higher community. The individual, a free man within his community, is not protected by this freedom and this community from dependence on the state, on the despot.

The exploitation of man by man takes, within the Asiatic mode of production, a form that Marx called “general slavery,”<sup>29</sup> distinct in essence from Greco-Latin slavery since it does not exclude the personal freedom of the individual, is not dependent on another individual and is achieved through the direct exploitation of one community by another.

Within this framework, individual slavery and serfdom can however appear as a result of wars and conquests. Slave and subject become common property of the group to which their master belongs and this master himself depends on his community and is subject to the oppression of the state:

“Slavery and consequent serfdom are but developments of property based on tribal existence. They necessarily modify all forms of this property, but it is in the Asiatic form that they can modify them the least . . . Slavery here abolishes neither the conditions of labor nor does it modify the essential relation.”<sup>30</sup>

The productive use of slaves cannot become the dominant production relation. The lack of private ownership of land generally prevents this, as does the general obligation to overwork imposed on communities. The use of slaves by the king, the priests, the civil servants is slowed down by the use of peasant labor and is limited to exceptionally difficult activities such as work in the mines. The hereditary possession of estates by state dignitaries could, however, provide a basis for the productive use of slaves in agriculture. But a real development of productive slavery presupposes the private

<sup>26</sup> *Capital III*, Vol. 1, p. 338, on trading peoples in antiquity. See K. POLANYI: *Trade and market in early Empires*, chapter. by R. Rovere.

<sup>27</sup> GARELLI: “Studies of Assyrian settlements in Cappadocia,” *Annales*, 1961.

<sup>28</sup> E. WELSKOPF: *Problème der Periodisierung der Altgeschichte*, *op. cit.* 296–313.

<sup>29</sup> “Bei der allgemeinen sklaverei des Orients,” *Grundrisse . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

<sup>30</sup> See *Grundrisse . . .*, *op. cit.*

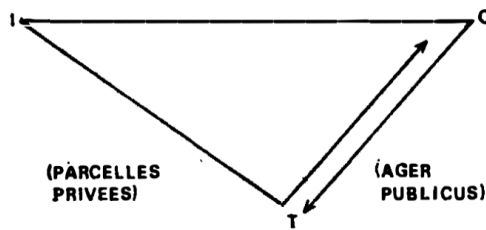
ownership of land within rural communities, and this, in Europe, was accomplished within what Marx called “the ancient mode of production.”

Before bringing together the elements described by Marx under the term Asiatic mode of production, let us briefly indicate the nature of the modes of production which, according to Marx, succeeded it in Europe.

*The ancient mode of production.*

Marx finds its “purest, most complete” form in Roman history. The village, the city, is the seat of the inhabitants of the countryside. The prerequisite for the appropriation of the land by the individual remains (the fact of being a member of the community but the land is divided into two parts, one remains with the community as such—it is “*the ager publicus* in all its forms”—the other is divided into parcels allocated as private property to each Roman citizen.

M. Tökei diagrams this structure in the following manner:



The individual is therefore co-owner of public land and private owner of his plot. The two landed properties, state and private, involve and limit each other. The history of Rome will develop this contradiction to the detriment of state property.

Maintaining this structure depends on maintaining equality among the small owners. The development of market production, conquests, etc., accelerate the inequalities between free men.<sup>31</sup> Among these, some even lose their property and with it their title of citizen. Debt slavery appears. The private use of slaves by individuals became widespread because the existence of private property in the land constituted the most favorable condition for their use. The ancient mode of production, by its very evolution, created the conditions for the transition to a real slavery mode of production.

*The slave mode of production.*

The latter therefore appears as the development and dissolution of the ancient mode of production that it replaces.<sup>32</sup> The slave mode of production evolved and broke down into a long agony in which Germanic forms of property were put in place, one of the bases of

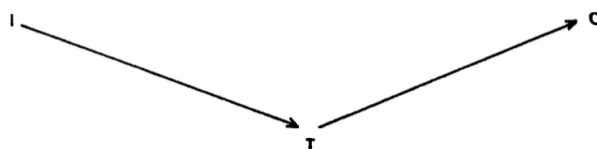
<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ch. PARAIN: “The Class Struggle in Classical Antiquity,” *La Pensée*, no. 108, 1963.

the feudal mode of production.

*The German mode of production.*

Product of a long evolution starting from a communal property of the ground of primitive type, related to the way of life of warlike tribes practicing itinerant slash-and-burn agriculture with predominance of the breeding,<sup>33</sup> the Germanic mode of production combines the common property and individual land ownership. Unlike the Roman *ager publicus*, common property appears as the functional complement of private property (grazing land, hunting grounds, etc.), as the “community accessory”<sup>34</sup> of individual appropriations. It is therefore “truly common property of individual owners.”<sup>35</sup> The agricultural community is an association of individual owners.



Slowly these free peasants lost their personal independence and were more and more enslaved under the authority of a new nobility, drafted from the Germanic leaders and their armed retinues, from the Romanized Gauls who entered the administration.

“Ruined by wars and looting, they had to put themselves under the protection of the new nobility or the Church, since the royal power was too weak to protect them; but this protection they had to buy dearly. Like the Gallic peasants of old, they had to transfer the ownership of their land to their suzerain who granted it to them as tenure in varied and variable forms, but always against the provision of services and royalties; once subjected to this form of dependence, they gradually lost their personal freedom; after a few generations they were already mostly serfs.”<sup>36</sup>

This process of partial subjugation of free men came to converge with the movement of partial liberation of slaves begun in the last centuries of the Roman Empire and lead, at the end of this multiline evolution, to a uniform situation of exploitation of a class of small direct producers dependent by a class of noble landed proprietors, on

<sup>33</sup> Letter from ENGELS to MARX, November 22, 1882, and F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the Family . . . op. cit.*, pp. 171–83 and pp. 272–73.

<sup>34</sup> “Allgemeinschaftliches Zubehör,” *Grundrisse . . . op. cit.*, p. 384.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Letter from MARX to Vera ZASSOULITCH (2nd version), March 1881: “The arable land belongs in private property to the cultivators at the same time as forests, pastures, waste lands, etc. still remain common property.” Cf. F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the Family . . . op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141–42.

feudal relations of production.

*The feudal mode of production*

The essential relations of production are those which regulate the appropriation of the earth and its products. They bind and oppose both the lord, owner of the land and partly of the person of the peasant, and the peasant, direct producer, possessor of more or less hereditary rights of occupation and use of the land and owner of the other means of production. In its typical form, this structure presents two characteristic features: the property of the lord is effective, but not absolute, when he himself belongs to the feudal hierarchy of lords and is the vassal of a suzerain who has the eminent property, but not effective, of his land.<sup>37</sup> The peasants, individually dependent on their lord, are grouped into village communities,<sup>38</sup> economic and social organization which increases tenfold their capacity to resist and struggle against their lord.<sup>39</sup> They are subject to the forced labor and rents in kind and in money and these royalties make necessary the use of extra-economic constraints.

The evolution of the feudal system led to the development of exchanges, towns and commodity production and the genesis of capitalist relations of production which were to become the main contradiction of the system and lead it to its downfall. During this genesis, many peasants were expropriated from their land and forced to work for wages. This historical movement,

“which divorces labor from its external conditions, that is the final word of the accumulation called ‘primitive’ because it belongs to the prehistoric order of the bourgeois world. The capitalist economic order emerged from the bowels of the feudal economic order. The dissolution of one released the constituent elements of the other.”<sup>40</sup>

Here we are at the end of the process by which Marx tried to take a retrospective view of the stages which had brought about, as a general condition of production, the separation of the producer from the objective conditions of production and above all from the land, separation characteristic of the capitalist mode of production. We can now define the specificity of what Marx called “Asiatic mode of production” by carefully distinguishing it from other modes of production with which it seems, in one way or another, to be confused.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ch. PARAIN: “Seigniorship and feudalism,” *La Pensée*, 1961, no. 96.

<sup>38</sup> K. MARX: *Capital I*, Vol. 3, p. 157: “The serf himself was not only possessor, tributary it is true, of the plots adjoining his house, but also co-possessor of communal property.”

<sup>39</sup> Cf. A. SOBOUL: “The French Rural Community,” *La Pensée*, 1957, no. 73.

<sup>40</sup> K. MARX: *Capital I*, Vol. 3, p. 155.

**c) Specificity of the “Asiatic mode of production” and its scope of application according to Marx and Engels**

We have tried to identify the theoretical content that Marx had given, in our opinion, to the concept of the “Asiatic mode of production.” Our brief sketch of the other concepts, primitive community, slavery, feudalism should enable us to distinguish it from these concepts, where they seem to be confused by one or other of the elements of their definitions.

—Primitive community and Asiatic mode of production both presuppose the existence of communities where forms of common ownership of the land prevail. Private ownership of land is absent and the individual, as a member of a community, has rights of use and occupation. But the Asiatic mode of production is not to be confused with the primitive community because its functioning implies and develops the exploitation of man by man, the formation of a dominant class. It appears as a form of evolution and dissolution of primitive communities linked to new forms of production, settled agriculture, more intensive animal husbandry, use of metals, etc.

—The Asiatic mode of production cannot be confused with the slavery mode of production, unless one misinterprets Marx’s texts where he speaks of “general slavery” of individuals subject to state despotism and shows that patriarchal slavery can take to a large extent within this regime. As a member of communities, the individual is free according to the forms of freedom of a communal existence. This freedom, however, does not protect him against taxation, exploitation, expropriation and submission to the State and its representatives. Slavery can develop with wars, conquests, but slavery is the property of a group that is itself dependent on the state. The productive use of slaves is limited within the communities and curbed at the level of the State by the possibility of having permanently and in abundance the work of exploitable peasants.

—Does the existence of peasants subject to forced labor make it possible to confuse the Asiatic mode of production with the feudal mode of production? The eminent state ownership of the land of village communities, the expropriation of these, which then retain rights of occupation and use, the hierarchy of nobles and officials subject to a prince, the incarnate nation of the community, are these features not to be compared with essential aspects of the feudal mode of production?

It seems to us that the fundamental difference lies in the character of peasant exploitation and dependence in the two cases. In the Asiatic mode of production, the state owns the land as the personification of all the communities and the exploitation of the peasants is collective. The dependence of the individual on a State official is indirect and passes through the intermediary of the dependence of his community of origin on the State represented by this official. On the contrary, in the feudal mode of production, the peasants are individ-

ually dependent on their lord who owns their land and his own domain. The community organization of peasants appears less like a community of blood than like the functional complement of the exploitation of individual plots and draws its existence from the economic constraints to which it responds and its strength from the advantages it procures (characteristics clarified through the notion of Germanic mode of production).

The notion of Asiatic mode of production would therefore designate in Marx's eyes a specific structure whose elements taken separately could be found in other structures (royalty, centralization, peasant exploitation and rents, etc.) but without it being possible to confusing the Asiatic mode of production with these structures or dissolving it in them.

For Marx and Engels, it seems to us that the essential interest of this notion was to indicate a way in which the state and class exploitation emerged from primitive communities.<sup>41</sup> Insofar as Marx and Engels linked this appearance above all to the carrying out of major works and particularly irrigation works,<sup>42</sup> this way seemed to them to be specific to certain Asian societies and to be the key to an "Oriental despotism."<sup>43</sup> This route, finally, would have involved the relative "stagnation" of these societies, their "immutability"<sup>44</sup> due to the lack of development of private property and market production.

Defined in this way, the notion seemed to them to apply to ancient Egypt, Persia, Hindustan, Java, Bali, the high plateaus of Asia, to certain parts of Russia, that is to say to a group of Asian societies from different eras but organized to respond to partly comparable natural conditions.

Following this theoretical reconstitution of the notion of the Asiatic mode of production, through the fragments of texts in which it appears and before asking the question of the validity today of such a notion, we must attempt to shed light on the reasons for its disappearance in Engels's *The Origin of the Family*, and the other misadventures the notion experienced among Marxists and non-Marxists since Engels.

### ***3. The misadventures of the notion of the Asiatic mode of production***

"Morgan is the first who *tries*, knowingly, to put *a certain order*  
in the prehistory of humanity; until some considerably

<sup>41</sup> This is very precisely what ENGELS declares in *Anti-Dübring, op. cit.*, pp. 211–13.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from ENGELS to MARX, June 6, 1853.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from MARX to ENGELS, June 14, 1853. Article from MARX on India, June 25, 1853. *Capital I*, Vol. 2, pp. 26, 55, 186–88; *Capital III*, Vol. 1, p. 339; *Capital III*, Vol. 2, p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from MARX to ENGELS, June 14, 1853. *Capital I*, Vol. 2, pp. 46–48.

expanded *documentation compels changes*, his method of *grouping the facts* is likely to remain in effect.”<sup>45</sup>

Until 1882 Marx and Engels return many times to the concept of Asiatic mode of production and enrich it. In *The Frankish Era* (1882) Engels wrote:

“The form of state power is in turn conditioned by the form which is momentarily that of the communities. Where—as among the Aryan peoples of Asia and among the Russians—it was born at a time when the commune still cultivated the land on a common account or at least only allocated it in the long term to the different families, where, consequently, there was no private property in the land, state power appears in the form of despotism.”<sup>46</sup>

In 1884 in *The Origin of the Family* Engels does not take up this notion. Why? We will briefly indicate the hypotheses that we have advanced at the end of a long analysis that we do not have the space to reproduce here.

What is Engels’s project in writing *The Origin of the Family*? It is to build a schema of the general evolution of humanity from classless society to class society by grasping the laws and relations of correspondence between the particular evolutions of three sets of structures: production systems, systems kinship and political systems. Drawing on the materials of ancient history and ethnology, Engels establishes that:

1st, The law of evolution of production systems is the tendency for the development of private ownership of the means of production from multiple forms of common property.

2nd, The law of evolution of kinship systems is the tendency for the development of the monogamous family from forms of group marriage and forms of gentry organization.

3rd, The law of evolution of political systems is the tendency for the development of the State from the forms of government of primitive societies, from primitive democracy.

When these three elements: private property, monogamous family, and State are tied together within a society, the latter has passed from barbarism to civilization, from a classless society to a class society. To be civilized therefore means to belong to a class society, to a “contradictory”<sup>47</sup> reality where the development of the productive forces is necessarily linked to the development of the forms of exploitation of man by man. Slavery, serfdom, wage labor, “are the three great forms of servitude which characterize the three great

<sup>45</sup> F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the Family* . . . , *op. cit.* p. 27. Emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

epochs of civilization.”<sup>48</sup> For Engels, the typical forms of the transition to class society and the evolution of class relations characterize Western history inaugurated by the Greeks and leading to industrial capitalism.

“Athens presents the purest, most classical form: here the State, assuming preponderance, is born directly from the class antagonisms which develop within the very interior of gentile society.”<sup>49</sup>

The first reason for not taking up the notion of an Asiatic mode of production is that Engels privileges Western history as typical of the general development of humanity and explicitly excludes from its field of analysis the history of Asia and the Near East.<sup>50</sup>

The fundamental reason is not there. It is found, in our view, in Engels’s acceptance of Morgan’s theses in *Ancient Society* (1877) on the impossibility of the development of the state and of a dominant class within the framework of barbarian, tribal, and on the acceptance of the concept of “military democracy” which Morgan made the last form of organization of classless societies before and during their transition to class society.

Let us clarify these points. For Morgan, echoed by Engels, humanity passes from the upper stage of savagery to the lower stage of barbarism when passing from *gens* (clan) to tribe. Humanity passes from the lower stage of barbarism to the middle stage, when society evolves from the tribe to the confederation of tribes; and from the middle stage to the upper stage of barbarism, when society passes from the confederation of tribes to military democracy. The peoples, in their “heroic” age, at the dawn of their entry into civilization, into class society, therefore find themselves organized in a “military democracy.”

“Like the Greeks in the time of the *heroes*, the Romans in the time of the *so-called* ‘kings’ therefore lived in a *military democracy* issuing from the gentes, phratries and tribes, on which it was based . . . even if the spontaneous patrician nobility had already won ground, even if the vines tried little by little to widen their attributions, that *does not change the original fundamental character of the constitution.*”<sup>51</sup>

The Greeks thus pass from the tribe to the confederation of tribes and to military democracy. To understand this evolution, one needs a clear idea of its starting point, the gentile organization.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122 (Asia), p. 137 (East).

<sup>51</sup> *Cf.* L. MORGAN: *Ancient Society*, about the Etruscans and the Romans, pp. 287–88.



Engels, following Morgan, assumes that:

“the American form (of *gens*) is the original form,\* while the Greco-Roman form is the later, derived form . . .”<sup>52</sup>

He assumes that the *gens* of the Iroquois, and particularly that of the Senecas, is “the classic form of this primitive *gens*.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the Iroquois had evolved in the nineteenth century to the organization into confederate tribes. The analysis of the Iroquois became the starting point for understanding the primitive history of the West. However, the confederacy of the Iroquois was not, according to Morgan and Engels, the most advanced social organization attained by the American Indians.

“The Indians of what are called the *pueblos* of New Mexico, the Mexicans, the inhabitants of Central America and the Peruvians were, at the time of the conquest, in (the end of) the middle stage of the barbarism.”<sup>54</sup>

Thus the great pre-Columbian civilizations (Incas, Mayas, Aztecs) were at the end of their autonomous history, at the point where the heroic history of the Greeks ended and where their history of class society began. For this reason, Engels does not analyze them since he assumes that their institutions are of the same type as those of the Greeks and instead analyzes the Iroquois *gens* to explain the transition to military democracy.

What characterizes military democracy? It is the fact that a gentile aristocracy disposes for the accomplishment of a war of exceptional powers. But this power is limited because it is both provisional and granted by the people or the council of elders. In this way, it cannot become permanent and, escaping the control of the members of the community, supplant the power of the latter and dominate it. The existence of a military democracy therefore does not mean the end or the opposite of a democratic government but one of its forms.<sup>55</sup>

Morgan sees this structure illustrated as much by the Aztec military leader as by the Greek *basileus*. Engels and Marx also admit it:

“The word *basileia* which the Greek writers use for the *Homeric pseudo-royalty* (because the command of the armies is its chief distinguishing mark) accompanied by the council and

\* “American” here means *Native* Americans—the people who lived in North America before Europeans arrived.

<sup>52</sup> F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the Family* . . . , *op. cit.*, p. 81. Marx also had accepted Morgan’s hypothesis. See *Archives*, p. 134.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> L. MORGAN: *Ancient Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

the assembly of the people *signifies* only military democracy.”<sup>56</sup>

“One substitutes, for the Aztec military leader, just like the Greek basileus, a *modern prince*. Morgan submits for the first time to historical criticism the accounts of the Spaniards, at first full of misunderstandings and exaggerations, later clearly untruthful; it proves that the Mexicans were at the middle stage of barbarism but at a more advanced stage than the Indians of the pueblos of the New Mexico and that their constitution, so far as the distorted accounts allow it to be recognised, corresponded to this: a confederation of three tribes, which had obliged a number of others to pay them royalties and which was governed by a federal council and a federal military leader; the Spaniards made the latter an ‘emperor.’”<sup>57</sup>

We are here at the heart of multiple sets of paradoxes.

By showing that tribal evolution gives rise to aristocracies, Engels had reached the exact point where he could take up the hypothesis of the Asiatic mode of production and interpret the great pre-Columbian civilizations in its light. But this theoretical possibility is taken away from it by Morgan, who excludes the hypothesis that the power of a tribal aristocracy can be transformed into absolute power in the hands of a monarch without this transformation destroying the village or tribal communities.<sup>58</sup> The existence of a tribal aristocracy opened up a possibility that the theory of military democracy closed.<sup>59</sup> But, another paradox, Morgan was right not to interpret the basileus of the Homeric poems or the great Inca as feudal monarchs. Moreover, modern criticism has confirmed it, the Greek basileus is not a king. But Morgan goes from rejecting the pseudo-kingdom of the basileus to rejecting all kingship among the peoples of pre-Columbian America and ancient Europe. The strength of his argument for his first rejection seemed to warrant his second conclusion. Was there a way for Marx and Engels not to follow Morgan on this second ground? No, because the archeology and the linguistics of primitive times of Greece and Rome were in the process of being born in 1880. Last paradox, modern discoveries were going to return to the Greeks kings who were not “basileus” but “anax,” thus confirming

<sup>56</sup> *Archives*, p. 145.

<sup>57</sup> ENGELS: *The Origin of the Family . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 101. Cf. MORGAN: *Ancient Society*, *op. cit.*, ch. VII, p. 193. The absence of serious discussion of the notion of “military democracy,” its origins, its nature, deprives of much scope the Marxist works which use this notion: J. VARLOT: “La Société homérique, la famille patriarcale, l’origine de la propriété privée.” M. RODINSON: “On the concept of military democracy,” *La Pensée*, no. 66 (1956). The best study is in SERENI: *Comunità rurali nell’Italia antica*, ch. IX.

<sup>58</sup> L. MORGAN: *Ancient Society*, *op. cit.* “The Kingdom of Mexico . . . is a figment of the imagination” p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 254.

Morgan on this particular point and invalidating his critical generalization.

These Greek kingships belong to the remote times of the Mycenaean and Cretan period, to the initial core of the oral traditions which from the fifteenth to the seventh century B.C. were to be sedimented in multiple layers and contain, in a great mixture, descriptions material objects and social realities from the Greek Bronze Age to Iron Age.<sup>60</sup> But at the time Morgan writes, Schliemann has just excavated Troy (1870–73) and begins the excavation of Mycenae (1874). He published a work on Mycenae in 1878 after having excavated Tirynthe and, in 1888, recognized the site of the Palace of Minos. The decisive step came after the death of Engels when Sir A. Evans discovered from 1900 to 1905 the Bronze Age and the Minoan civilization of Crete.<sup>61</sup>

In 1951, Mr. Ventris began the decipherment of Linear B, followed by Mr. Chadwick (1953) and discussions continue today between MM. Blegen, Palmer, etc. However, supreme paradox in this analysis of the destiny of the notion of Asiatic mode of production, these rediscovered Greek monarchies appear very close to the great societies of the Bronze Age of the Eastern Mediterranean of which they were contemporary, societies to which the Asiatic mode of production category . At the center of Mycenaean society, we see the palace and the king who “concentrates and unifies in his person” all the religious, political, military, administrative and economic elements of the sovereignty. The king regulates, through services and dignitaries, the production, distribution and exchange of goods within an economy that largely ignores trade and currency. Producers are grouped into rural communities that collectively own land that may be periodically redistributed.<sup>62</sup> Their dependence on the king is not absolute insofar as the conditions of production do not require the large-scale cooperation of the communities. These are therefore subject to the king and the warrior aristocracy that surrounds him and who represents him , in the person of the basileus, to the council of Elders of the village demes. With the Dorian invasions of the twelfth century,

“it is not a simple dynasty which succumbed to the fire which ravaged Pylos and Mycenae in turn, it is a type of royalty which is forever destroyed, a whole social life centered around the palace, which is definitively abolished, a character, the divine king, who disappears from the Greek horizon.”<sup>63</sup>

The Bronze Age was followed by the Iron Age, palatial society

<sup>60</sup> P. VIDAL-NAQUET: “Homer and the Mycenaean world,” *Annales*, 1963, no. 4.

<sup>61</sup> See WILLETTS: “Early Crete and early Greek,” *Marxism Today*, December 1962 and the bibliography of HUTCHINSON: *Prehistoric Crete*, 1962, pp. 355–68.

<sup>62</sup> J.P. VERNANT: *The Origins of Greek Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

was slowly followed by the *polis*, the Greek city.<sup>64</sup> Face to face remain two rival groups, the village communities and a warrior aristocracy that also holds legal and religious monopolies. Within a society that is somehow less complex, less developed than the Creto-Mycenaean society, another *basileia* appears which is in no way another royalty or even a legacy of the ancient royalty. There is therefore a discontinuity between the old society and that which succeeded it and which leads to the *polis* and the slave system.

But, as a final paradox, in the light of this new information, Morgan's and Engels's descriptions of Greek society and the genesis of the Athenian state are both invalidated and confirmed. Invalidated since they no longer refer to the first centuries of the evolution of the Greek peoples but to the last ones, and confirmed when they refer to the last centuries of this evolution, at the time when private property developed and a new State in service of private interests appears, the Athenian State, typical form of instrument of the power of a dominant class. In this late context, the concept of military democracy could be maintained to describe a society dominated by a warrior aristocracy, but it would no longer be an obstacle to the recognition for the ancient times of Greece of the existence of kingships. However, Engels's analysis could no longer claim to show that in Greece "the state was born *directly* from the class antagonisms which developed within the very interior of gentile society."<sup>65</sup> Indeed, before the Athenian state, the state had appeared in Crete and Mycenae and military democracy would not be the stage which precedes the appearance of the state, but a stage between two forms of state, the state of the "Asiatic" type and the typical city-state of Greece.

To sum up this too brief analysis of *The Origin of the Family*, the abandonment by Engels of the concept of an Asiatic mode of production is not due to obscure reasons of a political order, as K. Wittfogel has claimed,<sup>66</sup> but to the influence of Morgan, to the solidity of his criticism of the Greek *basileus* and of the Roman *rex*, a criticism which had led him to contest the existence of all royalty in the primitive history of the Greeks and the Romans. Through this influence of Morgan, what is shown is the state of scientific information in the middle of the nineteenth century on this primitive history.<sup>67</sup> This for

<sup>64</sup> F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the family . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 149: "Here we are in the upper stage of barbarism, a period during which all civilized peoples pass through their heroic times: the age of the iron sword but also of the plow and the iron axe."

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155. Emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> K. WITTFOGEL: *Oriental despotism, a comparative study of total power*, p. 411: "The managerial-bureaucratic implications of the Asiatic concept soon embarrassed its new adherent, Marx . . . increasingly disturbed his friend, Engels."

<sup>67</sup> L. MORGAN: *Ancient Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 222: "When Grecian society came for the first time under historical observation about the first Olympiad (776 B.C.), and down to the Legislation of Clisthenes (509 B.C.)."

ENGELS, about primitive Rome: "In the great obscurity which envelopes the

the scholars of that time began with the first Olympiad. Nowadays, archeology has extended this history by two millennia and brought to light in Europe social relations that evoke the Near East.<sup>68</sup> The hypothesis of the Asiatic mode of production therefore seems to acquire a validity that Marx had hardly foreseen, except in the theoretical form of the famous note in *Capital*, which remained obscure for a long time, where he situated the Asiatic mode of production,

“after the originally undivided *oriental property* had been dissolved and *before slavery* had seriously taken hold of the production.”<sup>69</sup>

It is to this period of the ancient mode of production that Engels’s analysis refers, that is to say to the period of the veritable “Greek miracle” marked by the generalization of private property and the development of market production. There was really inaugurated the line of Western development of which Engels had grasped the essential characteristics.

It remains for us to briefly narrate the other episodes of the misadventures of the notion of the Asiatic mode of production after Engels and to complete our awareness of the immense “ideological” charge conveyed by this notion and of which it will be necessary to purify it if we want it to become again a serious working hypothesis in the hands of the historian or the ethnologist.

The tendency developed more and more to consider the work of Engels as the definitive explanation of the law of evolution of mankind. In the name of this law, any society had to be more or less in one of the four stages enumerated by Engels and reproduce more or less the features of the Western society which had provided the typical form of this stage.

However, for a long time to come, Marxists would take up the notion of an Asiatic mode of production to shed light on particular aspects of the development of certain societies. Lenin, for example, speaks of a “semi-Asiatic” order in Russia, extending certain hypotheses of Marx on the despotic role of the state in Russia exploiting the village communities. From this, he underlines the late and original character of the development of a feudal system in European Russia.<sup>70</sup> In China and in Japan, the concept is discussed and applied by

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primitive history, all legendary, of Rome, it is impossible to say anything certain about the date, the course, the circumstances of the Revolution which put an end to the ancient gentile organization.”

<sup>68</sup> PIGANIOL: “The Etruscans, People of the Orient,” *Cahiers d'Histoire mondiale*, 1953 Vol. I, Part 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Capital I*, Vol. 2, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> See the important preface by P. VIDAL-NAQUET to the translation of *Oriental*

Marxists.

But the general trend was to abandon the concept. Plekhanov in his exposition, *Fundamental Questions of Marxism* (1908), supposes that Marx after reading Morgan abandoned his old hypothesis, or at least no longer considered the Asiatic mode of production as a “progressive” formation of the humanity, as he did in 1859, in the *Contribution*. Plekhanov’s interpretation reinforced the impression that the Asiatic mode of production meant millennial stagnation.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the tendency to see in the triad slavery, feudalism, capitalism a law of universal evolution for all societies made us forget the very particular character of the evolution of the Germans described by Engels. Indeed, Engels shows us the Germanic tribes confederated and organized, according to him, in “military democracy” like the Greeks and Romans of “heroic” times, following from this same stage of “superior barbarism” a complete line. Different, since they evolved after the conquest of the Roman Empire towards “prefeudal” kingships. He thus shows us classless societies evolving towards a society and a state of classes *without going through* ancient and slavery modes of production. From this fact the singularity of the Greco-Roman evolution was manifest since it appeared as *one* of the forms of passage to the organization of classes and not as *the* only form of this passage. The hypothesis of a plurality, of the forms of transition to class society, slipped more and more into the shadows with this oversight in Engels’s analysis.

Another episode which would make the scientific analysis of Marx’s hypotheses more difficult: following the failure of the Chinese revolution of 1927, discussion arose on the revolutionary path of Asia. Some, relying on excerpts from Marx’s quotations on the Asiatic mode of production, invoked the “stagnation” of Asia to justify their skepticism about the chances of revolution in China. They were doomed and, with them, the hypothesis of the Asiatic mode of production which seemed a theoretical obstacle to correctly analyzing the history of Asia.<sup>72</sup>

Last avatar, which was to complete its compromise in the eyes of the Marxists, the notion, expelled from Marxism, was to be picked up by a sinologist, K. Wittfogel and used to demonstrate that the Marxists had driven this notion out of fear of recognizing in it the acknowledgment of their totalitarianism, the acknowledgment that a bureaucratic class, disposing of despotic power, could be built on socialist forms of collective property.

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*Despotism.*

<sup>71</sup> G. PLEKHANOV: *Fundamental Questions of Marxism*, Social Editions, Paris, 1950, pp. 52–54. To our knowledge, no text can be invoked in support of Plekhanov’s interpretation of an abandonment by Marx of the notion of the Asiatic mode of production.

<sup>72</sup> This was the subject of the famous Leningrad discussion: “Diskussia o aziatskom sposobe proizvodstva,” 1931.

At the end of this long history, certain Marxists came to speak of an “*alleged* Asiatic mode of production, a thought which Marx never developed,” of the “*erroneous* theory of the Asiatic mode of production, erroneous because based on a *special* path of evolution of the Eastern peoples and on an alleged stagnation . . .” of “*discredited* and reactionary notions,”<sup>73</sup> etc. The list would be too long.

But the essential is not there. It is in the transformation and degradation of the theoretical hypotheses put forward by Marx and Engels to shed light on the history of humanity. This history, many Marxists approached it now, deprived of the double hypothesis of the Asiatic mode of production and the plurality of the forms of transition to class society. They only had one way left which seemed to impose itself: to find out how we had passed from the primitive community (the Asiatic mode of production being excluded) to ancient slavery (other forms of class societies being excluded) to follow then an evolution more or less like that of Western societies (slavery, feudalism, capitalism). Historical materialism, an open system of hypotheses to be verified, had thus been transformed and degraded into a “philosophy of history,” a philosophy that Marx stigmatized in *The German Ideology* as “a *recipe*, a schema according to which one can *accommodate* the historical epochs.”

This schema-recipe, the antipode of Marxism, found its clearest expression and its consecration in J. Stalin’s presentation *Dialectical materialism and historical materialism*. The task of many Marxist historians became paradoxically no longer to discover history, but to “re-cover” it, to rediscover a slavery stage, a feudal stage, and so on. But the facts are stubborn and the societies entered badly or did not enter into these conclusions made in advance, and their rebellion nourished the dramas of periodizations, not chronological but sociological, those which make it possible to characterize a society by a mode of production, slavery, feudal or otherwise. For the record, let us cite the interminable quarrels of scholars when a slavery stage was “found” in India, Japan, China,<sup>74</sup> Vietnam or black Africa. The work of S.A. Dange, *India from primitive communism to slavery* (1949), claimed for example to find in the evolution of the Aryans the passage from primitive communism to slavery without taking into account the new sources of archeology on the agricultural civilizations of Mohendjodaro and Harappa, etc. The response from other Marxist scholars, however, was clear. Mr. Kosambi said:

“Dange is so anxious to identify the general stages established by Engels that one can find excruciating untruths almost on every page . . . Interspersing baseless assumptions with

<sup>73</sup> M. SHAPIRO: *Marxism Today*, August 1962, pp. 282–84.

<sup>74</sup> See the discussion in T. POKORA: “Existierte in China eine Sklavenhalter gesellschaft?” *op. cit.*

quotations from Engels is not sufficient.”<sup>75</sup>

For China, the analysis was conducted from the same theoretical perspective, defined by Kuo Mo Jo in these terms:

“According to Marx’s views, the phases of the development of society may be shortened but not skipped . . . It is not possible for a simple nation to arrive at feudalism *without passing through slavery*, nor is it enough for them to pass through semi-slavery.”<sup>76</sup>

And *The History of China* (Beijing 1958) asserted about the society of the Zhou whose interpretation remains very controversial:

“The Zhou were also a slave society. The exploiting class included the king, feudal princes and nobility, and the exploited were the peasants and slaves.”<sup>77</sup>

Faced with the failures of this dogmatism, people came to dare to upset the schema of the four stages by contesting it, in a way, from within, without throwing it down. Having no other categories than those of slavery and feudalism and aware of the non-slavery nature of many societies where there were forms of exploitation of man by man, many historians pushed these societies into the category of feudalism, which thus dilated disproportionately, distorting the dogmatic schema but without breaking it. To take a borderline case, let us quote one of the participants in the discussion continued in *Marxism Today* in 1961–1962 on Marxist schemas of the evolution of societies:

“Homer, reflecting the Mycenaean civilization and finally edited around 750 B.C., does not paint either a primitive community society or a slave society: what is depicted is again rather a feudal society. In short, in the classical world, *feudalism seems to have both preceded and succeeded slavery*.”<sup>78</sup>

But in the end, the category of feudalism, while expanding, always found itself prisoner of the schema that its expansion contests. Paradoxically, this critique of dogmatism led Marxists to the very

<sup>75</sup> KOSAMBI: “On a Marxist approach to India chronology,” *Annals of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 1951. By the same author, “The Basis of ancient Indian History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1955, 1 and 4. And the critique of Dange by M. BEDEKAR: *Marxism Today*, July 1951.

<sup>76</sup> KUO MO JO: “Conference 1950,” *International Research*, pp. 31–32.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20. Cf. *History of Antiquity*, Moscow, 1962, p. 266: “It is established *without possible dispute* that Chinese society evolved from a communal regime to feudalism, passing through a form of exploitation based on the exploitation of slaves.” The contrary is affirmed on p. 270.

<sup>78</sup> B. TAIT: *Marxism Today*, October 1961.



positions of so many non-Marxist historians who invent a “feudalism” each time they find an aristocracy,<sup>79</sup> and these positions had already been the subject of merciless criticism by Marc Bloch in 1940.<sup>80</sup> This one did not retain all these “exotic” feudalisms except for the example of Japan, and expected, for the others, additional proof, joining the theses of Marx in *Capital*.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, faced with the double failure of blind dogmatism and distorted theoretical revisions, many historians sought “to save their facts” and were reluctant to propose any theoretical interpretation to explain them. This empiricism, while amassing immense quantities of new facts, led to the paradox of defending them from old nonsense or theoretical nonsense by simply depriving them of “meaning.” But weren’t the facts thought out through the old dogmatic or revised schemas also deprived of their theoretical meaning, waiting for “common sense,” their “true” meaning? These innumerable new facts, accumulated without theory or on the basis of false theories, remain the positive balance sheet of the effort of many Marxist historians who had devoted themselves to the knowledge of non-Western history. Alongside them, however, historians continued to use the hypothesis of the Asiatic mode of production, to shed light on the history of China like E. Welskopf, F. Tökei, of Japan or of pre-Columbian America like A. Métraux.

This brief analysis of the fate of the notion of the Asiatic mode of production highlights, in our view, the immense load of theoretical distortions, of contradictory ideologies of which this notion has become the vehicle. It seemed necessary to us to devote a great deal of trouble and time to minutely reconstructing the literal content of this notion in Marx and Engels and to follow its theoretical misadventures since *The Origin of the Family*, misadventures for multiple reasons but all leading to the transformation of the hypotheses of historical materialism into a philosophy of history, a body of dogma-recipes with which the historian mechanically managed the historical material entrusted to him.

Without a clear theoretical awareness of the original content of the concept and its successive distortions, it seems to us extremely dangerous to propose this concept to the public and to ask scholars to confront it with the facts of which they are aware. To imagine, moreover, that the simple reading of Marx’s texts without theoretical commentary would suffice to avoid the old ruts, is to believe that one can read *Capital* or a treatise on theoretical physics without prior preparation, it is to reassure oneself in the good old positivist way by postponing the theoretical analysis.

In conclusion, we would like to propose a new interpretation of

<sup>79</sup> Ex. POTEKHINE: *On Feudalism of the Ashanti*, XXVth International Congress of Orientalists, Moscow, 1960.

<sup>80</sup> Marc BLOCH: *The Feudal Society*, Vol. I, pp. 94, 350, and Vol. II, pp. 154, 250–52.

<sup>81</sup> *Capital I*, Vol. 3, p. 158.

the notion of the Asiatic mode of production and, since this problem is unavoidable, some hypotheses about what is called the typical line of development of mankind.

**4. Hypotheses on the nature and laws of evolution  
of the Asiatic mode of production and the notion  
of the typical line of development of humanity.**

**a) The nature of the Asiatic mode of production.**

Marx gave us, through the notion of the Asiatic mode of production, the image of societies in which particular village communities are subject to the power of a minority of individuals who represent a superior community, an expression of the real or imaginary unity of particular communities. This power, originally, takes root in functions of common interest (religious, political, economic) and is gradually transformed into a power of exploitation without ceasing to be a power of function. The particular advantages enjoyed by this minority in respect of services rendered to the communities are transformed into obligations without counterpart, that is to say into exploitation. Often, communities are expropriated from their land, which becomes the eminent property of the king, the personification of the superior community. There is therefore exploitation of man, appearance of an exploiting class without there being private ownership of the land.

It seems to us that this image highlights a form of social organization characterized by a contradictory structure. This form of organization is the unity of community structures and an embryonic exploiting class. The unity of these two contradictory elements resides precisely in the fact that it is in the name of a superior community that the particular communities are exploited by this minority. A society characterized by this contradiction therefore presents itself *both* as a last form of classless society (village communities) *and* a first form of class society (minority exercising state power, superior community).

We therefore make the assumption that Marx unknowingly described exactly, a form of social organization specific to the *transition* from classless society to class society, a form containing *the contradiction of the transition from classless society to class society*.

This theoretical hypothesis, it seems to us, would make it possible to understand why the notion of Asiatic mode of production is increasingly sought to shed light on periods and societies of ancient Europe (Creto-Mycenaean or Etruscan kingships), Black Africa (kingdoms and empires of Mali, Ghana, Bamoum royalty, etc.), pre-Columbian America (great Mesoamerican or Andean agrarian civilizations). Through these multiple singular realities, a common element would appear, a common structure combining community relations

and the embryo of class and referring to an identical situation of transition to class society. This relationship between situation and structure would make it possible to shed theoretical light on the geographical and historical universality of this form of social organization which appeared when the conditions for the transition to class society developed, whether at the end of the fourth millennium B.C. in Egypt with the transition from the tribal societies of the Nile to the two monarchies then to a unified empire,<sup>82</sup> or in the 19th century with the birth of the Bamoum royalty of Cameroon. The archaeological and ethnological knowledge accumulated since the 19th century, by multiplying the examples of societies on the way to the organization of classes, would bring to the notion a field of application that Marx or Engels could not foresee. By becoming more and more universal in time and space, the notion would cease to be exclusively characteristic of Asia and the use of the adjective “Asiatic” would have to be abandoned.

### **b ) Appearance and forms of the Asiatic mode of production.**

From the perspective of this general theoretical hypothesis, the second problem to be posed would be the systematic study of the conditions of passage to class society, of the appearance of transition situations.

For Marx, the Asiatic mode of production is linked to the need to organize major economic works that exceed the means of particular communities or isolated individuals and constitute for these communities the conditions of their productive activity. In this context, forms of centralized power appear which he calls in common usage since the seventeenth century, “oriental despotism.”<sup>83</sup> The state and the ruling class intervene directly in the conditions of production, and the correspondence between productive forces and relations of production is direct through the organization of major works.

This hypothesis does not seem to us to exhaust on its own all the possible conditions for the transition to the “Asiatic” mode of production, even if it provides the key to the typical, most developed forms of this mode of production. We propose to add a second hypothesis to that of Marx. We suppose that there can exist another way and another form of Asiatic mode of production by which a minority dominates and exploits the communities without intervening directly in their conditions of production, but intervenes indirectly by taking for its profit a surplus in labor or products. In West Africa, the appearance of the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, Songhai,<sup>84</sup> etc. was not

<sup>82</sup> EMBRY: *Archaic Egypt*, 1961. “The Unification,” pp. 38–104.

<sup>83</sup> See VENTURI: “The History of the Concept of ‘Oriental Despotism’ in Europe,” *Journal of History of Ideas*, 1963, no. 1.

<sup>84</sup> See SERENI: *Comunità rurali . . .*, *op. cit.*

born from the organization of major works but seems linked to the control of intertribal or interregional trade exercised by tribal aristocracies on the exchange of precious products, gold, ivory, skins, etc., between black Africa and white Africa.<sup>85</sup> In Madagascar, next to the kingdom of Imerina which was based on irrigated rice cultivation and had allowed the development of the marshes of the plain of Antananarivo,<sup>86</sup> the Sakalava kingdom had appeared, which was based on nomadic breeding and the trade in oxen and slaves.<sup>87</sup>

Our theoretical hypothesis would provide the possibility of shedding light on the appearance of a dominant class in agricultural societies not based on large-scale agricultural work or based on animal husbandry. This hypothesis would perhaps avoid the difficulties or contradictions raised by the expression “nomadic feudalism” (Mongol feudalism, etc.).<sup>88</sup>

If we compare these two forms of Asiatic mode of production with or without large works, we find that they have a common element: the appearance of an aristocracy with state power and providing the bases for its exploitation of class by taking part of the product of the communities (in labor and in kind). But, depending on the existence or non-existence of major works, a bureaucracy and an absolute, centralized power will appear or not, called by a vague and old-fashioned term, “despotism.” It is therefore not, in our view, necessary to look everywhere in a mechanical way, as K. Wittfogel does, for immense works of an especially hydraulic nature, a bureaucracy and a strongly centralized power to find the “Asiatic” mode of production.<sup>89</sup> The theoretical task would rather be to draw up a typology of the various forms of this mode of production with or without major works, with or without agriculture, and at the same time to draw up a typology of the forms of communities within which this mode of production is built. We could thus perhaps reconstitute several models of the processes by which inequality is introduced into classless societies and leads to the appearance of antagonistic contradictions and the formation of a dominant class. For this task, the collaboration of historians of antiquity and ethnologists would be indispensable.

<sup>85</sup> See J. SURET-CANALE: *Black Africa, op. cit.*, p. 112: “The appearance of the State . . . accompanies that of the aristocracy which is its instrument and the main beneficiary . . .”

<sup>86</sup> See G. CONDOMINAS: *Fokon' olona and rural collectives in Imerina*, Ed. Berger-Levrault, Paris, 1960, p. 29: Concerning the ownership of the land: “The great king only transposes, onto the sovereign, the eminent right parceled up until then among the multitude of fokon'dona who made up the country.”

<sup>87</sup> P. BOITEAU: *Contribution to the history of the Malagasy nation*, Éditions sociale, Paris, 1958.

<sup>88</sup> See VLADIMIRTSOV: *Mongol Feudalism*, 1948. Focus of BELENITSKY: “The Mongols and Central Asia,” *C. Hist. mondiale* 1960, 3, and the study by J. HARMATTA: “Hun Society in the Age of Attila,” *Acts Archeologics Ac. S. Mong.* 1952.

<sup>89</sup> See the objections of M. MAQUET to K. WITTFOGEL: “A hypothesis for the study of African feudalisms,” *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 1961, no. 6.

We have sought to define the structure, certain forms and certain conditions of appearance of the Asiatic mode of production; we must now tackle the problem of the laws of evolution of this social formation.

**c) Dynamics and laws of evolution  
of the Asiatic mode of production.**

If the appearance of the Asiatic mode of production signifies the emergence of a first class structure with still fluid contours, it signifies the regular appropriation of part of the work of the communities by this class, that is to say the existence of a regular surplus. From the point of view of the dynamics of the productive forces, the passage of a society to the Asiatic mode of production would not signify an entry into stagnation but would, on the contrary, testify to a progress of the productive forces. If Pharaonic Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Mycenaean kingdoms, the pre-Columbian empires belong to the Asiatic mode of production, we would have witness that this corresponds to the most brilliant civilizations of the age of metals, to the times when man tore himself definitively from the economy of occupation of the soil and passed to the domination of nature and invents new forms of agriculture, architecture, calculation, writing, commerce, money, law, new religions, etc. Therefore, in many forms, the Asiatic mode of production signifies in its origin not stagnation but, in our view, the greatest progress of the productive forces accomplished *on the basis* of the old *communitarian* forms of production. We would easily find in the work of the great archaeologists Child,<sup>90</sup> Clark,<sup>91</sup> confirmation of this.

What, then, is the law of evolution of the Asiatic mode of production, if it signifies in its origin the progress of the productive forces? For us, its law of evolution is, as for any other social formation, *the law of the development of its internal contradiction*. The internal contradiction of the Asiatic mode of production is that of the unity of community structures and class structures. The Asiatic mode of production would evolve through the development of its contradiction towards forms of class societies in which community relations have less and less reality as a result of the development of private property.

Like any other social form, the Asiatic mode of production would signify stagnation when it could not be overcome, when its contradictions not developing, its structure would petrify and cause the bogging down, the blocking of society in relative stagnation. The nature and the moment of this overcoming would depend each time on

<sup>90</sup> Especially in *Social Evolution*, 1950, where CHILDE sought to complete Morgan's scheme by integrating into it the great Eastern civilizations of the Bronze Age.

<sup>91</sup> *World Prehistory*. See our report, *La Pensée*, 1963, no. 107.

particular circumstances, but this overcoming would mean the defeat of the old modes of communal social organization, its failure would signify, on the contrary, their maintenance, their permanence.

This permanence and the stagnation that accompanies it can threaten an “Asiatic” society all the more because it is based on communities living in self-subsistence, without a radical separation of agriculture and industry and having, if there is a vacancy of land, the possibility of supporting their demographic growth by separating from daughter communities which will perpetuate alongside them the same traditional forms of production and social life. It is this possible evolution that Marx describes in his famous text on the Indian communities which has become the dogma of the partisans of the secular stagnation of Asia.

“The simplicity of the productive organism of these communities which are self-sufficient, constantly reproducing in the same form, and, once accidentally destroyed, reconstituting themselves in the same place and with the same name, furnishes us with the key to the immutability of Asiatic *societies*, an immutability which contrasts so strangely with the incessant dissolution and reconstruction of Asiatic states, the violent changes of their dynasties. The structure of the fundamental economic elements of society remains beyond the reach of all the turmoil of the political sphere.”<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, to the extent that state exploitation of communities takes the form of a massive extraction of a product rent, the structures of production can stabilize since there is no incentive at the birth of a market. The possibility for the State to dispose of peasant labor also limits the possibilities of developing a market and slows down the transformation of the productive forces. The intensity of these forms of exploitation can moreover be such that any development of production is hindered for a long time.<sup>93</sup>

Apart from this evolution of the Asiatic mode of production towards the stagnation and bogging down, what are the forms that its evolution can take when its internal contradiction develops? These are forms that lead to its dissolution through the appearance of private property. We assume at least two possible forms of this dissolution.

—One would lead to the slave mode of production via the ancient mode of production. This would be the path taken by the Greco-Latins. It would lead to societies based on the combination of private property and market production. In this combination would reside the secret of the “Greek miracle” and of the expansion of the

<sup>92</sup> *Capital I*, Vol. 2, p. 48. Emphasis in original.

<sup>93</sup> *Capital III*, Vol. 3, p. 176.

Roman Empire,<sup>94</sup> and at the same time the singularity of this line of evolution and the typical character of its class struggles between free men and the exploitation, by these latter, of the labor of slaves.

—Alongside this well-known path, we hypothesize that there is another that would lead slowly, with the development of individual ownership, from certain forms of the Asiatic mode of production to certain forms of *feudalism without going through a slavery stage*. The appearance of individual property within the communities or personal domains of the aristocracy would transform the communities and, with them, the forms of their exploitation by this aristocracy. We would move slowly from collective exploitation of communities to individual exploitation of peasants. This path of evolution seems to us the most frequent and corresponds to the transition to a class society in China, Vietnam, Japan, India, Tibet, . . .<sup>95</sup>

There is no space here to justify these hypotheses. We will point out, however, that they would perhaps shed light on the last century of the evolution of Inca society and would agree with the interpretation of A. Métraux of the late development of personal domains belonging to the emperor and his caste, on which were fixed Yana, people attached by ties of personal and no longer collective dependence to the nobles and greats of the kingdom:

“The increasingly important place that the Yana assumed in the empire can only be explained if their output was superior to that obtained by the traditional system of unpaid labor. By tearing some of their members from the communities, the Inca weakened them and began a revolution which, if continued, could have changed the structure of the empire. From an assembly of largely autonomous rural communities, it would have made a sort of ‘pre-feudal empire’ where nobles and civil servants would have owned large estates exploited by serfs or even slaves.”<sup>96</sup>

This path of evolution towards a certain feudalism would not only be the most frequent, but the simplest since, not being accompanied by a great development of market production and money, it would not break with forms of “natural” economy and would maintain the alliance of agriculture and industry for a long time. Moreover, insofar as the need to organize and control major works is maintained within this transition to individual ownership, the central power plays an important role and the domination of the State and the monarch on the “feudals” and the peasants gives these feudalities a “specific” profile in which traits of the Asiatic mode of production

<sup>94</sup> F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the family . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>95</sup> A. STEIN: *The Tibetan Civilization*, 1962, pp. 97–103.

<sup>96</sup> A. MÉTRAUX: *The Incas*, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

persist.<sup>97</sup> This feature and others would, however, prevent these “feudalities” that gradually emerged from the Asiatic mode of production from being compared, without extreme precautions, with Western feudalism resulting from the decomposition of the slavery mode of production. Their main difference with the West would be to have slowed down the development of commodity production and prevented the appearance and triumph of industrial capitalism. The case of the Meiji revolution in Japan should be studied separately. However, it is undeniable that the industrial base, the modern productive forces and the methods of organization were imported from Western capitalist countries and were not developed in Japanese feudalism within which a certain merchant capitalism had appeared.<sup>98</sup>

Of the two forms of evolution of the Asiatic mode of production, one towards a slavery system, the other towards certain forms of feudalism, the first, unlike the dogmatic conceptions of many authors, seems to us more and more singular, exceptional. The Western line of development, far from being universal because it would be found everywhere, appears universal because it is found nowhere. The error of the Marxists was generally to want to find everywhere a mode of slave production and, if need be, to create it in order to resuscitate it. If so, why was the Western line of development considered by Marx and Engels to be “typical” of human development? In what sense are we to understand the universality of what now appears as a singularity? Is this a residue of the ideas of superiority of the capitalist world over the rest of the world, disguised racism, pseudo-science? With this final question, we propose a final hypothesis on what is meant by the “dominant or typical” line of development of humanity.

**d) The forms of dissolution of the Asiatic mode of production and the “typical” line of development of humanity.**

Recognizing a “typical” form of development supposes that one has, beforehand, knowledge of the “general line” of this development, of *the nature of its overall movement*. Can we grasp retrospectively the general nature of the movement of history?

Marx and Engels had attempted the enterprise. No new knowledge, since their time, has come, in our opinion, to invalidate the essential points of their conclusions. In its overall movement,

<sup>97</sup> See L. SIMONOVSKAIA: *Two tendencies in feudal society in late China*, XXVth International Congress of Orientalists, Moscow, 1960.

<sup>98</sup> Among an innumerable documentation see the works of the Japanese Marxist TAKAHASHI: “The Place of the Meiji Revolution in the Agrarian History of Japan,” *Revue historique*, December 1953. “The Transition from feudalism to capitalism,” *Science and Society*, 1952, no. 4.



history has caused the majority of peoples to pass *from a social life without classes to class societies*. This is the essential fact. In order to appear, it presupposes the development of inequality in the appropriation of the means of production and this inequality itself presupposes the dissolution of the ancient community solidarities based on cooperation in work and the living ties of kinship relations.

The movement of history therefore appears in retrospect as the indissoluble unity of the development of two contradictory elements of social reality: (a) *the general development of the means of dominating nature* and ensuring the survival of an ever-growing species; (b) the gradual dissolution of community solidarity and *the general development of inequalities* between individuals and groups.

It is this contradiction that Engels put in the foreground to understand the nature of “civilization”:

“as the foundation of civilization is the exploitation of one class by another class, *its whole development* moves in a *permanent contradiction*.”<sup>99</sup>

Even if the old division of Anglo-Saxon ethnology of the last century (the succession of the three stages: savagery, barbarism, civilization) must be abandoned for its vague and ambiguous character, for all the ideology with which it is loaded, and replaced by the division into societies without classes and into societies of classes, the overall movement from one to the other was aptly described by Engels as the fundamental fact of history.

If the overall movement of history is such, the “typical” form of development of humanity is that through which, contradictorily, the *maximum* development of the productive forces and of the inequalities and class struggles takes place.

Thus, to recognize, among the lines of evolution of societies, the typical line, the criterion to follow is to seek where and when was made the greatest progress of the productive forces. The answer is obvious and without mystery: it is the line of evolution which gave birth to *industrial capitalism*, origin and foundation of the most modern and most efficient forms of production, of the transformation of nature. But industrial capitalism appeared nowhere else than in the line of evolution inaugurated by the Greeks. The decisive character of this line of evolution is that it has ensured the maximum development of the productive forces, thus offering immense possibilities for the exploitation of man by man. To explain this development, the appearance of private property is not enough. It existed in China, Vietnam,

<sup>99</sup> F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the family . . . , op. cit.*, p. 162. Emphasis added. There is therefore no possible misunderstanding of the use of the term “civilization” in Engels. It does not reflect unacknowledged racism or the ill-disguised confession of “moral” or intellectual superiority. And this attitude is shared by many anthropologists who have lived with the so-called “savages” or “barbarians.”

etc. It is necessary, in addition, that private property be combined with commodity production.<sup>100</sup> Only this combination created the *most favorable* conditions for technical progress, while proving *incompatible with* the functioning of the old solidarities of community life, by substituting the search for private interest for submission to common interests, and by tearing the most sacred collective bond of the individual from the ground of his ancestors.

It was, it seems, among the Greeks that, for the first time, appeared in its purity, this combination:

“And therein lies the germ of the whole upheaval that will follow.”<sup>101</sup>

The Romans took it up and generalized it, giving it its universal legal expression with the theory of “*Jus utendi et abutendi*” which became the model of the law of commercial societies based on private property.

The singularity of the line of evolution of Greco-Latin societies appears more clearly. It consists *not* in having overcome certain forms of the Asiatic mode of production, and this perhaps earlier than among other peoples, *but* in having overcome them *towards* a mode of production based on the combination of private property and commodity production.

Similarly, the singularity of Western feudalism, which, beyond the resemblance of forms with what is called the feudalisms of Turkey, China, Africa, Japan, etc., prevented confusing them and makes *their essential difference* is that *it alone* created the conditions for the appearance of industrial production and world trade. It alone has truly made it possible to definitively go beyond the forms of natural economy.

Finally, only the appearance of industrial capitalism, by allowing and imposing the creation of a world market, made possible a universal history in the form of submission to its development, which is that of Western capitalist societies, of all less developed.

Moreover, only industrial capitalism opened up the possibility of socialism, first in theoretical thought, then in practice.

The Western line of development is therefore typical because it alone has developed the greatest progress of the productive forces and the purest forms of class struggle and also because it alone has *created the conditions for overcoming, for itself and for all societies*, the organization of society into classes.

<sup>100</sup> It is the fact of commodity production that provides the key to the scientific study of capitalism, the ultimate term in the development of Western societies. What MARX emphasized in the first words of *Capital* (1867), repeating those of the *Contribution* (1859), was: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production reigns is announced as a ‘tremendous accumulation of goods.’ The analysis of the commodity, the elementary form of this wealth, will therefore be the starting point of our research.” (*Capital I*, Vol. 1, p. 51.)

<sup>101</sup> F. ENGELS: *The Origin of the family . . . op. cit.*, p. 105.

It is therefore typical because in its *singular* unfolding it has obtained a *universal result*. It provided the practical basis (industrial economy) and the theoretical conception (socialism) to emerge itself and bring all societies out of the most ancient or the most recent forms of exploitation of man by man. It therefore provides all of humanity with the conditions for the solution of a universal problem posed since the appearance of classes and which was to ensure the maximum development of the productive forces without exploitation of man by man. It is therefore typical because it has the value of a “model,” of a “norm,” because *it offers possibilities* that no other singular history has offered and creates the possibility of making in other societies the economy of its own progress.<sup>102</sup>

In this perspective, the words of Engels in *The Anti-Dühring* (1877) find their full meaning:

“If . . . the division into classes has a certain historical legitimacy, it only has it for a given time, for the given social conditions. It was based on insufficient production; it will be swept away by the full development of *modern* productive forces. And indeed, the abolition of social classes presupposes a degree of historical development where the existence not only of such and such a determined dominant class, but of *a dominant class in general*, and therefore of the distinction between classes itself, is become an anachronism, an old thing. It therefore presupposes a degree of elevation in the development of production where the appropriation of the means of production and products, and as a result of political domination, the monopoly of culture and intellectual direction by a particular social class has become not only a superfluity, but also, from the economic, political and intellectual point of view, *an obstacle to development*. This point is now

<sup>102</sup> It is in this perspective that we must understand the famous letter from MARX to Véra ZASSOULITCH, March 8, 1881: “Does this mean that, in all circumstances, the development of the ‘agricultural commune’ must follow this road? (to private property)? Not at all. Its constitutive form admits this alternative: either the element of private property which it implies will prevail over the collective element, or the latter will prevail over the former. Everything depends on its historical environment where it is placed . . . These two solutions are *a priori* possible but for one or the other, it obviously requires completely different historical backgrounds.” And in the second version of his letter, specifying these backgrounds, MARX added: “its historical background, the *contemporaneity* of capitalist production, lends it ready-made material conditions for cooperative labor organized on a vast scale. It can therefore *incorporate the positive acquests* elaborated by the capitalist system without going through its Caudine Forks. It can *gradually* supplant plot farming with agriculture combined with the aid of machines. After having been *previously restored to normal* in its present form, it can become *the direct starting point* of the economic system *towards which modern society tends and take on a new look* without starting with its suicide.” Cf. the preface by MARX and ENGELS to the *Manifesto*.

attained.”<sup>103</sup>

The true *universality* of the Western line of development is therefore *in its singularity* and not outside of it, in its difference not in its resemblance to other lines of evolution. The unity of universality and singularity is a contradiction, but this contradiction is in life, not in thought. When the unity of this contradiction is not recognized, two paths are possible, each of which leads to theoretical impotence: either societies and their lines of evolution subsist side by side in their abundance, each in its historical singularity whose the scientist refrains from going out. Nothing is comparable with anything and history remains a mosaic of shreds devoid of overall coherence.

Conversely, if we want to see the same process everywhere, the singularities disappear, history becomes the more or less successful application of universal forms to which it necessarily submits. In fact, these forms that we *want* to find everywhere are nothing other those of the line of Western evolution that one *must* seek everywhere since one denied beforehand the possibility of several lines of evolution.

The typical character of this line of evolution then finds its root not in itself, in its own singularity, but in a necessity external to history. Now, the reverse of an external necessity, as we know, is an internal finality. From such a perspective, history was a future without surprise, a reality made in advance by which humanity, as soon as it entered primitive communism, *was going to* emerge one day into definitive communism. It was this second path that many Marxists took, especially after Stalin’s exposition of the laws of historical development in *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*, in which primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism “necessarily” followed one another.

Marx, however, warned against this error by stating in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*<sup>104</sup>:

“What is called historical development is based on the fact that the last form considers past forms as *stages* leading to its own degree of development, and as it is rarely capable, and this only under well-determined conditions, of always conceiving *its own criticism* . . . it always conceives them under a *unilateral aspect*.”<sup>105</sup>

From this perspective, socialism appears as a modern mode of production, as incompatible with the old pre-capitalist modes of production as capitalism itself could be and perhaps more incompatible because capitalism could use the old relations of exploitation within the countries it dominated, which socialism cannot do.

<sup>103</sup> F. ENGELS: *Anti-Dühring*, *op. cit.*, pp. 320–21. Emphasis added.

<sup>104</sup> See M. GODELIER: “Political economy and philosophy,” *La Pensée*, October 1963.

<sup>105</sup> K. MARX: *Contribution . . . op. cit.*, p. 170. Emphasis added.



Going in search of a lost and even denied Marxist concept, we have sought to find it through the texts of Marx and Engels without prejudging its scientific validity. Once found, we still had to find out why it had been lost. Our quest led us to unmistakable reasons, the Morgan-Engels report and the state of the most advanced archaeological, linguistic and ethnological knowledge of the second half of the nineteenth century. Slipped into the shadow of Engels's dazzling analysis, the notion faded, returned to the scene somewhat around 1927–1930 after the failure of the Chinese revolution, then was denied and definitively rejected on the night when K. Wittfogel, a renegade, came to pick it up to make a war machine against socialism. At the same time, Marx's diagrams of the evolution of societies, amputated from the Asiatic mode of production, deprived of the hypothesis of the plurality of forms of passage and evolution towards class societies, ceased to be an open system of hypotheses to be verified in order to be transformed into a closed set of dogmas to be accepted.

Historical materialism emptied itself from within of its scientific substance and rose up like a new philosophy of history, an ideal world where the philosopher contemplated the historical necessity that pushes humanity to enter primitive communism in order to emerge in communism. final. On a practical level, the divorce between ethnology and history, Western history and non-Western history seemed more and more complete. By a strange paradox, innumerable facts have prompted scholars to resuscitate a dead concept. If this concept designates a social formation corresponding to the contradiction of certain forms of transition from classless society to class society, then we have perhaps rediscovered a historical reality which requires and founds the collaboration of ethnologist and historian (or archaeologist). Because to understand the specific contradiction of the Asiatic mode of production, one must be both an ethnologist to analyze community structures and a historian to account for the embryo of exploiting classes. Around this contradictory reality, the disjoint pieces of historical and ethnological knowledge could be recomposed into a unified set of anthropological knowledge.

But in coming back to life, the Asiatic mode of production seemed to us to strike with agony old outdated affirmations, theoretical corpses crumbled at the first shock because they had always pretended to live: the existence of a universal slavery stage, the impossibility to skip stages. But this resurrection is, and must be, more than a return to Marx, for it would then be a return to an outmoded state of historical science. We have therefore sought to

restore the concept to working order so that it becomes effective in the face of the problems posed by archaeology, ethnology and comparative history today. We have proposed a structural definition of the Asiatic mode of production, assumed a relationship between this structure and certain situations of transition to class society and seized, at this abstract level, the theoretical possibility of a broader field of application of the concept than Marx could have foreseen. But to move forward, it would be necessary, in our opinion, to abandon the geographical adjective "Asiatic," rigorously define the old word "despotism," and cautiously seek out "great works" and "bureaucracies."

We should see in stagnation a case of possible evolution, but not the only possible form of evolution of the Asiatic mode of production, and imagine several forms of dissolution of the Asiatic mode of production whose springs we should seek. We have proposed the hypothesis of an evolution of the Asiatic mode of production towards certain forms of feudalism and considered this path as a more frequent form of transition to a real class society than Western evolution. This appears more and more singular and at the same time universal for having developed to the highest degree the characteristic traits of a class society, domination of man over nature and domination of man over man. . So we think, in the final analysis, that it is not only the concept of the Asiatic mode of production that must be restored to working order, but the very notion of historical necessity, of law in history. Without this, the work of historians will engage blindly, tomorrow threatened by the fate of yesterday, and, on another level, social practice will develop without really knowing where it comes from and where it can go and how to get there.

Of course, our analyzes and our proposed hypotheses are to be challenged or confirmed in a broad discussion. To accept them without proof would be to abandon the letter of dogmatism without losing its spirit. Conversely, to seek in such and such a history an Asiatic mode of production without first posing the problem of the theoretical status of this concept, is to practice positivism with good intentions. We therefore propose to search in the following directions:

1st, can we reconstruct various processes by which inequality is introduced into classless societies and leads to the formation of a dominant class? (question posed to historians of antiquity and ethnologists).

2nd, can we constitute a typology of the forms of the Asiatic mode of production, with or without major works, with or without agriculture, etc., and pose the problem of a typology of community forms by analyzing the forms of land appropriation, the origin and nature of aristocratic and royal powers, etc.?

3rd, can we describe several forms of evolution of the Asiatic mode of production towards class societies?

4th, what is the process that inaugurated the commodity economy in the Greeks and the Romans? How can we take the "Greek

miracle” seriously and de-idealize it at the same time?

5th, what are the relationships between the concepts of Asiatic mode of production and military democracy?

Through this research, it will be necessary to invent a rigorous language and perhaps abandon tomorrow the expression “Asiatic mode of production” for other words that are more exact and less laden with evil hexes.<sup>106</sup>

Maurice GODELIER.\*

<sup>106</sup> We would like to point out the important article by A. CASO: “Land Tenure among the Ancient Mexicans,” *American Anthropologist*, August 1963, vol. 65, no. 4, pp. 862–78, on landed property among the Aztecs. We read this text after having written our analysis of the Morgan-Engels report and it seemed to us to confirm it in a striking way. According to the author, Aztec society combined the features of a communal, tribal society with common ownership of the land and those of a class society dominated by an aristocracy holding religious, political, military and state-controlling powers (p. 875): The king owned land “not as an individual but as an official” (p. 868). The clergy and the military were maintained by tributes and unpaid labor levied on the communities of free men. Alongside this state property, the nobility and the king owned private estates operated by “serfs” attached to the estate (p. 870). The existence of such social inequalities and of aristocratic private property can, according to the author, be understood “as long as we do not try to do it in terms of Iroquois organization or Roman property” (p. 874). He concludes: “One is surprised to see that such false conclusions could have been drawn, such as those of Morgan (1878) and Bandelier (1880) which were in vogue during the first quarter of a century.” (p. 862).

Let us point out GIBSON’s two articles on “The Transformation of Indian Communities into New Spain from 1500 to 1820,” *Cahier d’Histoire mondiale*, no. 3 1955, and especially “The Aztec Aristocracy in Colonial Mexico,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, II, 2, January 1960 pp. 169–97, where the author criticizes (p. 171 § 5) the conclusions of BANDELIER, disciple of Morgan, on the Aztecs in *On the social organization and mode of government of the Ancient Mexicans*, Cambridge, March 1880 and F. KATZ: *Die Sozialökonomische Verhältnisse bei den Azteken im 15 und 16 Jahrhundert*, ch. III and X. Berlin 1956.

\* Translated by Gregory Berry (human) and Google (machine).