

der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie

Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, Karl Marx

In his introduction, Eric J. Hobsbawm tries, in every way possible, to "downgrade" Hegel. In view of the fact that there was hardly a phrase that is not Hegelian in this section of Marx, Hobsbawm sounds absolutely ludicrous. For example, directly following Marx's passage about "the absolute movement of becoming" EJM remarks:

"Marx's vision is thus a marvellously unifying force. His model of social and economic development is one which (unlike Engel's) can be applied to history to produce fruitful and original results rather than tautology; but at the same time it can be presented as the unfolding of the logical possibilities latent in a few elementary and almost axiomatic statements about the nature of man - a [dialectical] working out of the contradictions of labour, property, and the division of labour. It is a model of facts, . . ." (p. 16)

What is interesting is his various references to G. Lichtheim, especially his piece on the "Asiatic mode of production". And yet the two are trying to prove entirely different things about it. EJM comes out the worst for it, especially as his narrow concept of history is forever leading him to "facts", which hide the movement of history.

Another interesting point is the reference to the debates in the Stalinist world on the question of the "Asiatic mode" in post-Stalin's Russia.

Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations is one of the most brilliant pieces of writing by Marx. Why it never saw the light of day tells even more sharply than the fact that the Humanist Essays have not been published the copia of Marx's "heirs". The excuse for the Essays was the "immaturity" of Marx but the precapitalist economic formations is part of the very famous Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, was written in his mature years (1857-1858), is, in fact, the first draft of his entire greatest work, Capital, is forever being quoted but not to this day translated. Even the odd sections that get translated, invariably for the ulterior purposes of what the author wants to prove of his own, not Marx's views, (see Marcuse) Even Grace, who translated about twenty pages for me, plus the contents pages, and herself wrote a first draft of a chapter of the Grundrisse, never once mentioned or translated these remarkable 53 pages. This

The question is why? It certainly wasn't that she was trying to keep me from knowing. Rather, it simply made no impression on her. On the other hand, the chapter on money which is section 2. of these notebooks) is translated quite extensively, although it is the chapter that was used by Marx in Critique of Political Economy.

The third section on Capital extends from page 149 to page 762. Naturally that encompasses all too many pages for anyone to be able to locate any one part or to know whether a part consists of one page or, as in this case, 53 pages. This part is, I believe, the one she translated as Progressive Epochs of economic social formations. And, of course, we know that the Introduction to the Grundrisse was the one section the Social Democracy did publish as an appendix to Critique of Political Economy and that was first published in 1904.

The manuscript here, therefore, is actually the only section we have of the history, not only of other economic formations but conceptually as the very heart of the theory of Historic Materialism.

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Now, then, Marx begins with:

"One of the prerequisites of wage ~~labor~~ labor and one of the historic conditions for capital is free labor . . . This means above all that the worker must be separated from the land which functions as his natural laboratory. This means the dissolution both of free petty land-ownership and of communal landed property, based on the Oriental commune." (p. 67)

The point of the Oriental Commune is, therefore, related to what Marx called "the natural unity of labour with its material prerequisite". And the question he asks is how the individual as a worker was stripped of all qualities except work, and his answer is always "let's look at it historically." History will then show to him that:

"The spontaneously evolved tribal community, or, if you will, the herd - the common ties of blood, language, custom, etc. - is the first precondition of the appropriation of the objective conditions of life, and of the activity which reproduces and gives material expression to, or objectifies (vergegenständlichen) it (activity as herdsmen, hunters, agriculturalists, etc.) The earth is the great laboratory, the arsenal which provides both the means and the materials of labour, and also the location, the basis of the community." (pp. 68-69)

There is here no difference between tribal and oriental. The despotism appears later when, as against the development from the tribes to slavery and then to feudalism (Graeco-Roman and then Germanic), there arises instead the immovable Asiatic form - the legal absence of property which Marx calls "appearance only" since, in fact, the rule of the despot is based on tribal or common property, which he becomes sole proprietor as the state is responsible for the irrigation works which hold the community together. Marx also sees in the beginnings of surplus labour, slave labour, though at first it is only "the labour of wives and daughters" (spinning and weaving). Of course, irrigation works is not the only function of the state; the other is war.

To this oriental form, he contrasts the Germanic community:

The Germanic community is not concentrated in the city; a concentration - the city the centre of rural life, the domicile of the land workers, as also the centre of warfare - which gives the community as such an external existence, distinct from that of its individual members. Ancient classical history is the history of cities, but cities based on landownership and agriculture; Asian history is a kind of undifferentiated unity of town and country (the large city, properly speaking, must be regarded merely as a princely camp, superimposed on the real economic structure); the Middle Ages (Germanic period) starts with the countryside as the locus of history." (pp. 77-78)

The point is where the Germanic allowed for new transition through private property, the Oriental did not;

"The Asiatic form necessarily survives longest and most stubbornly. This is due to the fundamental principle on which it is based, that is, that the individual does not become independent of the community; that the circle of production is self-sustaining, unity of agriculture and craft manufacture, etc. If the individual changes his relation to the community, he modifies and undermines, both the community and its economic premise; conversely, the modification of this economic premise - produced by its own dialectic pauperisation, etc. Note especially the influence of warfare and conquest." (p. 83)

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It is at this point where he shows that among the ancients, it was never a question of which property creates most wealth but what develops ("in however narrowly national, religious, or political a definition") man. And yet he isn't glorifying that past as Rousseau glorified "natural man", but instead shows if you strip away the bourgeois form of property, wealth would first then show itself to be "the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers of individuals." (the full quotation will appear as the frontpiece of the book.

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In a word, Marx refuses to make a fetish of the primitive commune, even as, contrary to the new bourgeois discoverers of Marxist position on the Asiatic Mode of Production, he refused to make Oriental despotism equivalent just to backwardness. On the contrary, he shows that even in "Oriental Despotism", the resistance to imperialistic dissolution has something a great deal more in favor of itself than "progressive" capitalism. Or, to put it differently the despotism of the Asiatic Mode of Production, like the despotism of the capitalist factory, arises from certain exploitative relations of production. The central point is (1) centralization, (2) state, (3) stationary or what he calls in capital itself "the state as supreme landlord". What he traces is various forms of property but again not just as a thing but as a condition and relationship of production:

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"Property - and this applies to its Asiatic, Slavonic ancient classical and Germanic forms - therefore originally signifies a relation of the working (producing) subject (or a subject reproducing himself) to the conditions of his production or reproduction as his own. Hence, according to the conditions of production, property will take different forms. . . . Slavery, serfdom, etc., where the labourer himself appears among the natural conditions of production for a third individual or community" - and where property therefore is no longer the relationship of the independently labouring individual to the objective conditions of labour - is always secondary, never primary, although it is the necessary and logical result of property founded upon the community and upon labour in the community. (This character of slavery does not apply to the general slavery of the Orient, which is so considered only from the European point of view." (p. 95)

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Not so incidentally, the constant stress on history as the actual way in which classes resolved their contradictions is a beautiful point against Sartre's fantastic nonsense about going from the individual to history, whereas as Marx shows, "man is only individualized through the process of history. He, originally, appears as a generic being, a tribal being, a herd animal." (p. 96)

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Marx also brings in part I. of these manuscripts the first information of what we will get to know by automation. (the other section of the Grundrisse that was not published is very largely concerned with automation or that which Marx called the automaton and which we published in part in the last December issue of News & Letters.) Here is the way he expresses it at this point:

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"For capital the worker does not constitute a condition of production, but only by water or air, so much the better. And what capital appropriates is not the labourer, but his labour - and not directly, but by means of exchange.

Labour if this can be developed by machinery, etc.

These, then, on the one hand, are historic prerequisites without which the labourer cannot occur as free labourer, as objectiveless, purely subjective (capacity for labouring, confronting the objective conditions of production as his non-property, as someone else's property, as value existing for itself, as capital. On the other hand, we must now ask what conditions are necessary if he is to confront capital." (p. 99)

The second part of the pre-capitalistic economic formation is on Capital as against the first which was on labour, and stresses the relationship of living labour in relationship to ~~the~~ materials, etc. as "non-property". That is he is now going to begin with the first formulation of capital as dead labour oppressing living labour, so that his second historical step is "property in the instrument". The whole point of the historic epoch, Marx calls the "age of dissolution" x of earlier modes of production is the manner in which the mere existence of money did not mean capital:

" The original formation of capital does not, as is often supposed, proceed by the accumulation of food, tools, raw materials or in short, of the objective conditions of labour detached from the soil and already fused with human labour. Not by means of capital creating the objective conditions of labour. Its original formation occurs simply because the historic process of the dissolution of an old mode of production, allows value, existing in the form of monetary wealth to buy the objective conditions of labour on one hand to exchange the living labour of the now free workers for money, on the other. All these elements are already in existence. What separates them out is a historic process, a process of dissolution, and it is this which enables money to turn into capital. . . . It is certainly not by creating the objective conditions of such labourers' existence, but rather by accelerating their separation from them, i.e. by accelerating their separation from them, i.e. by accelerating their loss of property." (p. 11)

" Money had neither created nor accumulated these means of subsistence. They were already present . . . Monetary wealth neither invented nor manufactured spinning wheel and loom. But once spinners and weavers had been separated from their land, they and their wheels and looms came under the sway of monetary wealth, etc. Capital unites the masses of hand and instruments which are already there. This and only this, what characterises it. It brings them together under its sway. This is its real accumulation; the accumulation of labourers plus their instruments at given points." (pp. 111-112)

"Nothing can therefore be more foolish than to conceive the original formation of capital as if it meant the accumulation and creation of the objective conditions of production - food, raw materials, instruments - which were then offered to the dispossessed workers." (p. 113)

The constant degradation of man to things is what is done by bourgeois political economy theoretically in almost as categorical terms as that which is done by the capitalist practically in the labour process, or, as Marx puts it, "inasmuch as this process establishes reified labour as what is simultaneously the non-reification of the labourer, as the reification of a subjectivity opposed to the labourer, as the property of someone else's will, capital is necessarily also a capitalist. The idea of some socialists that we need capital but not capitalists, is completely false; The concept of capital implies that the objective conditions of labour -- and these are its own product -- acquire a personality . . . the concept of capital implies the capitalist" (p. 118)

For the rest of the manuscript (1 1/2 pages) Marx is concerned with establishing that capital is not a thing but "a relation and can only be a relation of production" (p. 120)

Far from Asiatic Mode of Production being something that forever and anon was supposed to characterize the Orient, Marx used it "merely" descriptively, that is to say, he described its origin as he used the primitive accumulation of capital to describe the steps toward the birth of capitalism as the dissolution of all other modes of production, including also that of primitive communism. Neither the latter nor the Oriental was transfigured as "eternal". The best proof of that lies in the following two actual relations of Marx to the historic developments of his day: (1) his enthusiasm for the Chinese revolution (the Taiping revolt) for which please read The American Journalism of Marx & Engels; and (2) the Letters to Zasulich as well as the Russian Introduction (1882, the year before he died) where he projected the Russian Revolution as possibly coming in advance of that in Western Europe and, moreover, could be successful provided it united with the European Revolution.

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