

4	The Theory, Dilemmas and Contradictions of the Asiatic Mode of Production	152
	Historical Materialism	152
	The General Theoretical Problems of the Asiatic Mode of Production	161
	Conclusion	201
5	The Asiatic Mode of Production and Varieties of Historical Materialism	203
	Productivist Historical Materialism and the Asiatic Mode of Production	203
	Structuralist Historical Materialism and the Asiatic Mode of Production	215
	Hegelian Historical Materialism and the Asiatic Mode of Production	222
	The Fate of Marxist Historians without the Asiatic Mode of Production	225
	Conclusion	234
6	Wittfogel and Oriental Despotism	235
	The Arguments of <i>Oriental Despotism</i>	237
	A Critical Appraisal of <i>Oriental Despotism</i>	250
	Conclusion	260
7	The Asiatic Mode of Production and Indian History	262
	Judging Marx's Theory of Indian History by His Contemporary Sources	262
	Judging the Asiatic Mode of Production by Contemporary Historiography	267
	Conclusion	307
	Appendix 7.1 Rational Choice and Indian Despotism	309
	Appendix 7.2 Indian and Soviet Marxists on India and the Asiatic Mode of Production	316
	Appendix 7.3 Feudalism in Indian History?	323
8	Conclusion	330
	Bibliography	336
	Index	385

Foreword

The first thing I wish to do in writing the preface to this powerful, incisive and definitive study is to disagree with the author's opening remark in his own Introduction. The Asiatic Mode of Production is far more than merely a bastard child of historical materialism. The name itself may indeed have such an origin. But the idea behind it has preceded Marxism and will, I suspect, survive it. The 'Asiatic Mode of Production' is the projection into the Marxist scheme of thought and terminology of one or two of the deepest fears and preoccupations of political thought.

The first of these is the problem of power. Man is indeed a social and political animal, but, unlike the social insects, he is not so constructed as to form, spontaneously and automatically, a well-ordered and viable community. On the contrary, he is a genetically under-programmed animal. He is capable of internalizing a wide variety of quite distinct cultural values and constraints, and of modifying them. His comportment is not channelled in a unique direction. This alone makes possible the wide range of cultures encountered in history. It is also this alone which renders possible sustained and cumulative improvement; in other words, progress. But it carries with it the inescapable consequence that the preservation of minimal social order is precarious and problematic. Some additional, non-genetic element is required for our collective perpetuation.

If order is neither self-generating nor self-preserving, how then does it arise, and how is it maintained? Certainly not, as some optimistic liberals have hoped or even maintained, by rational calculation or spontaneous benevolence. The information available to any given individual does not unambiguously and persuasively convey to him the advisability of being a good citizen. It does nothing of the kind. The power of human reason either to convince or to motivate us in that desirable direction is sadly limited. Other factors must operate if we are to comport ourselves in a way which will enable our society to survive.

What then? If neither nature nor reason can turn us into tolerable

citizens and neighbours who will co-operate sufficiently to make society viable, then order can only be sustained by socially recognized force; or, in other words, by political authority. As the available logical justifications of conformity are woefully inadequate, authority must be either arbitrary or based on superstition, or both. Good reasons not being given, authority must be sustained either by bad reasons or by none at all. Authority will then need to be not merely arbitrary, but also absolute. It is always best to eliminate rivals, including potential ones, before they eliminate you, and to establish a monopoly of effective force. This internal logic is reinforced by an external logic: societies not endowed with a firm, cohesion-enforcing centre are at a grave disadvantage in comparison with societies which are so endowed. In due course, they are liable to find themselves eliminated.

This powerful abstract argument is reinforced by historical evidence. The great majority of complex societies rich enough to sustain a complex social organization at all are characterized by authoritarian political regimes. Those which are free of them are but a minority, and constitute a kind of exceptional social condition. The normal political state of mankind is absolutism. The prevailing outcome of the interaction between culturally developed human nature and the surrounding environment is centralized and uncontrolled power. It is the absence and not the presence of absolutism which calls for special explanation.

Marxism is an optimistic philosophy, a variant of the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century theory of Progress, a promise of guaranteed collective salvation on earth made to all mankind. It maintains that a social order free of violence, domination, oppression, exploitation and institutionalized superstition is not merely possible, but is somehow the normal and normative condition of humanity. The ultimate emergence of such an order is, for Marxism, the manifest destiny of mankind.

In order to maintain such a view, the pessimistic theory which insists on the pervasiveness of arbitrary and falsehood-sustained domination must somehow or other be refuted. Marxism claims to do this by a well-known argument. Violence and political domination are not, it insists, inherent attributes of human society. They may indeed be pervasive in *recorded* history, but the reason for this is special rather than general. Recorded history is the story of class struggle; but classes and the conflict they engender are not inherent in human society as such. All possible levels of the development of human productive forces — with the exception of the last and, strangely but significantly, the first — do indeed produce differential relations to the means of production, and thereby produce social classes. But it is this resulting class structure, and not human society as such, which alone requires and produces political reinforcement.

Social order as such does not need coercive reinforcement. Thus Marxist eschatology contains a marked anarchistic element. It is only class-endowed

social systems which cannot manage without force. This is the Marxist theory of the state, in a nutshell. Its optimistic implications are tremendous and obvious. Oppression, domination, superstition can all be eliminated from human life; in a sense, effortlessly. They will evaporate of their own accord once exploitation and class stratification have gone.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment felt a profound despair when they contemplated the powerful hold of superstition, false belief and deference over the minds and hearts of men, and in particular of "the people". The effective diffusion of their own enlightenment seemed dreadfully difficult. If Marxism is right, they need not have felt quite so daunted by the task which lay ahead. Domination and institutionalized falsehood will disappear of their own accord once their social base, i.e. class structure and the differential access to the means of production which is of its essence, have been destroyed — or rather, when they have destroyed themselves through their own inner contradictions.

This is not the place to discuss whether this view has much merit, and whether there ever was a time when it was reasonable to endorse it. What is relevant is that even within that untidy mass of materials and ideas which constitutes Marxist scripture — as opposed to the elegant coherence of its central guiding ideas — there is *already* a blatant, dramatic contradiction of the optimistic vision of the collective Salvation of Humanity. Its name is the Asiatic Mode of Production.

The picture contained in this notion is one of a social order in which domination, oppression and ideological befuddlement prevail and are stable and secure — and have not simply been brought into being by a pre-existent and ultimately unstable system of class exploitation. The social classes which constitute the crucial dramatis personae of the Asiatic Mode of Production, the hydraulic bureaucrats, soldiers and hieratic specialists, do not and cannot exist prior to the system. They only come into being with it. They create it, they are not its creation. So domination, in one important and recurring case, enters history not as the handmaiden of economic exploitation, but independently and as a prime mover. Worse still, it is functional. Repellent though the social order in question may be, without the centralized irrigation system and its authoritarian personnel it would not survive at all. Its members would starve. Better Red than dead; and better under a Hydraulic Despotism than famished. So, if the Asiatic Mode of Production is indeed to be found in the historic world, the entire optimistic Marxist vision goes by the board.

The theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production is a kind of dreadful mirror-image of the hopeful Marxist eschatology. It strikes terror where Marxism offers hope. Marxism teaches that the abolition of non-social property will lead to a harmonious social order in which the fulfilment of human potentialities will at long last be possible; where centralized coercion

will be redundant, and will, in the famous phrase, wither away. The model of the Asiatic Mode of Production presents the opposite argument, to the effect that the absence of special, socially localized rights over resources leads not to freedom and harmony but, on the contrary, to despotism. This not only contradicts the central idea of Marxism, without which it loses both its coherence and its appeal; it also provides an all-too-plausible explanation of why, when Marxism was implemented for the first time in Russia, it led, for over three decades, not to the liberation of man but to an appalling nightmare; a *kashmar*, as the Russians say. It also provides a powerful parable, as well as an explanation, for the mechanics of that nightmare. No wonder that, at the time, the idea and its name were rapidly excised from canonical Marxism.

There is another way of putting all this. Within Marxism, there always was a tension, not to say a contradiction, between the functionalist and the reductionist-epiphenomenal views of the state. Both were conspicuously present, but questionably compatible with each other. The idea that the state serves the needs of the social base clearly attributes an important and presumably indispensable function to it. The doctrine that the superstructure merely *reflects* the base and follows its transformations, possibly with an occasional delay, would seem to contradict the first point. The shadow is redundant: look to the base; that is where the action is. Don't waste your time on the mere reflection. In the theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production, the functionalist element in Marxism takes over completely, and displaces the reductionist element altogether. But in so doing, it also totally and fatally undercuts all justification for the Marxist promise of general salvation, the expectation that oppression can and will be eliminated from human society by the overcoming of property and class differentiation and exploitation. If this is so, then no institutional political devices will be needed thereafter to prevent their reappearance. It is this preposterous optimism which led to the conviction that no checks are required on the privileged institution which is charged by history with setting up classless society on earth: the Party. The basicness of this expectation is highlighted by the theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production, and by its re-application, whether as parable or as sociology, to the society engendered by the Soviet path to rapid and forced industrialization. If the Asiatic Mode of Production ever existed, there was no reason to expect the disappearance of coercion: no wonder that the attempt to set up a classless, coercion-less order only led to a new version of the Asiatic Mode.

The question concerning the extent to which Marx and Engels actually perceived the problem inherent in having one theory for the West and another for the East must be left to the specialists of Marxism. My own guess is that at least one element in the answer must be that Marx and Engels, in common with most of the thinkers of the nineteenth century,

were profoundly Euro-centric. On such a view, the philosophically significant sections of mankind, so to speak, lived or had lived roughly between the Eastern Mediterranean and the North Atlantic. What happens elsewhere was not to be taken very seriously. It is perhaps for this reason that the contradiction between their central vision and the ideas contained in the notion of the Asiatic Mode of Production did not trouble them as much as it should have done. On this view, formally speaking the philosophy of history may apply to all mankind; but really it only concerns us Europeans. All men are human but we are more so, and the others enter World History only by courtesy of incorporation in our story. What happens to Asiatics and what they do to each other does not matter too much, certainly not as much as would a contradiction found in the European mainstream. If a form of social organization is found in Asia which is forever stagnant, in which violence is a prime mover and is functional; and if, as Marx actually said, the only real social revolution in India was the work of the English, all that need not upset us too much. East is East and West is West, and the twain do meet only when *we* take *them* in tow; through capitalism, we have already done so.

This highlights the second reason why the idea of the Asiatic Mode of Production is so profoundly disturbing. Is the human race, and human history, One or Many? There is a long tradition, going back to the Greeks, of the European sense of uniqueness. Machiavelli's observations about the distinctive characteristics of the Asian state, whether ancient Persian or contemporary Ottoman or Mamluk, reintroduced this theme into political thought. Is there one social law for the West, and another for the East? The recent fashion of Orientalism-bashing has attempted, not very convincingly, to destroy all the ideas of this tradition in one fell swoop. Some social scientists, eager to atone for colonialism by a facile and uncritical cultural relativism, have eagerly joined the chorus. Alleged 'Orientalists' are blamed equally if they say that the East resembles the West and if they say that it does not. They are blamed not for what they say but for what they are. This indiscriminate abuse, though often entertaining, does not advance the serious purpose of comparative study of human societies and of their potential for freedom and oppression.

When the first self-proclaimed Marxist society became effectively centralized, politically and ideologically, under Stalin, the idea of the Asiatic Mode of Production was firmly and promptly excised from it. It was all a little too close to the bone. Russians are a bit touchy about their Asiatic connection, about *Aziatshina*. 'We are a savage, Asiatic country,' I heard a Russian say, openly and bitterly, on Soviet TV in January 1989.

It was also natural that critics of the Soviet Union should have seized upon the idea and used it as a parable for the social system engendered by forced industrialization. Not for nothing was the Dnieper Dam for so long

a symbol of Soviet technical achievement, the emblem of the new hydro-electric despotism. The parable is frightening for us all. In the long run, an increasingly complex and interdependent technology may produce a social system closer to the Asiatic Mode of Production than to the pluralism and individualism which gave birth to the industrial mode of production.

These are, in stark and simplified outline, the issues which give the entire debate its powerful and disturbing appeal. Dr O'Leary's book provides a superb and authoritative guide both to the logic and the history of the discussion, and it must, as such, be very warmly welcomed.

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