

THE ASIATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

Science and Politics

Edited by
Anne M. Bailey and
Josep R. Llobera

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THE ASIATIC MODE OF
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of Production
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Selected further readings: Part IV

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PREFACE

Over the past few years there has been a growing interest in Marxist approaches to pre-capitalist societies. One of the central concepts in the contemporary discussions is that of the Asiatic mode of production (AMP). The English reading public has had limited access to both these recent debates (carried out in France, Italy, Eastern Europe, etc.) and to the earlier controversies surrounding the AMP (at the turn of the century and in the 1920s and early 1930s). The present work aims to document this highly significant and controversial chapter in the history of the social sciences and Marxism. The articles and excerpts published here represent contributions by scholars from a variety of disciplines. Many are published here in English for the first time. In order to keep the book to a reasonable length, we have been forced to select only a few representative texts out of what is now a vast literature.

In the General Introduction we outline the basic epistemological and historiographic assumptions that have informed the structuring of this reader. Part I provides a résumé of the recent literature on the historical, political, and epistemological parameters of the genealogy of the concept of the AMP. Limitations of space prevented the inclusion of selections from early authors who developed the ideas of oriental society and despotism. On the other hand, the writings of Marx and Engels on the AMP are generally available and we thought it unnecessary to reprint them here.

Part II traces the fate of Marx's ideas on the AMP from the time of his death until Stalin's consolidation of power. It includes texts from Plekhanov and Lenin, and excerpts from L. Mad'iar and the Leningrad discussions of 1931. Although we have concentrated on Russian Marxism in our selection, the brief introduction to Part II provides a guide-line to the views on the AMP held by other Marxist thinkers of this period.

Part III focuses on the political and theoretical impact of Karl Wittfogel's work on Marxists and non-Marxists from various disciplines. To begin this section, we have reproduced Wittfogel's earlier and less polemical formulation of the concepts of oriental society and despotism. We also present a cross-section of the reviews of his 'Oriental Despotism' (1957). The repercussions of Wittfogel's theory among anthropologists and archeologists is highlighted in the articles by J. Steward, E. Leach, and B. Price.

Finally, Part IV brings together a number of contributions to the renewed Marxist discussion of the AMP which began in the late

1950s. The articles by F. Tökei, M. Godelier, and I. Banu address the subject at a more theoretical level, while those by E. Welskopf, Le Thanh Khoi, J. Golte, and H. Islamoğlu and C. Keyder illustrate the range of societies to which the concept of the AMP has been applied. The excerpt from L. Krader's 'The Asiatic Mode of Production' (1975) serves as a conclusion - or rather as a starting point - for further research. Parts II, III, and IV are preceded by brief introductions intended to situate the selections within the intellectual and political contexts within which they first appeared. An extensive bibliography, containing both the works referred to in the general and short introductions to each part, and additional sources on the AMP, completes the present volume.

While we take full responsibility for the final content of this book, we would like to thank a number of persons who have helped in its preparation. The pioneering works of M. Godelier and L. Krader have had a great influence on our general approach to the AMP as is apparent in Part I of this book. Both have encouraged our endeavour and offered constructive suggestions. We have been fortunate to draw upon P. Skalnik's extensive knowledge of the recent Eastern European literature on the AMP and G.L. Ulmen's expertise on Wittfogel's work. We have also benefited from informal discussions with T. Asad, J. Friedman, P. Glavanis, J. Kahn, and C. Levitt.

Robert Croskey selected and translated the texts by Mad'iar and from the Leningrad discussions of 1931. The translations from the German of the excerpts by Plekhanov, Lewin, and Welskopf were made by J. Gordon-Kerr, and Levada's review has been translated by Peter Skalnik from the Russian. The editors have translated the articles by Tökei, Banu and Le Thanh Khoi from the French and that of Golte from the Spanish.

We should like to thank Adam Kuper, who expressed an interest in this project from its inception and has fostered its publication. Our thanks also to Eileen Lee and Teresa Weatherston who helped in typing parts of the manuscript. This book was researched, compiled, and written while we were associated with the University of Hull and we would like to express our gratitude to that institution for the research facilities extended to us.

Anne M. Bailey
Josep R. Llobera

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Anne M. Bailey and Josep R. Llobera

PRELUDE

The Asiatic mode of production (hereafter AMP) is one of the most controversial concepts in the history of Marxism. The term was originally coined by Marx to account for a type of society outside the mainline of Western development (the term 'Asiatic' was not restricted to the geographical area of Asia). The theoretical status of the concept of the AMP has never been too secure for three main reasons. First, the formulation of the concept was precarious in the work of Marx. Second, within the Marxist scheme of evolution, the AMP was an anomaly and, as such, has been and still is considered anathema for those nostalgic for orthodoxy and eager to embrace a unilineal and mechanical conception of history. Third, the tremendous political potential of the concept has triggered off all sorts of ideological manipulations destined to suit short- or long-term national and/or party interests; this is especially clear in the characterization of certain societies as 'Asiatic' in different historical moments. From an 'orthodox' Marxist perspective, a society defined as 'Asiatic' (or 'feudal' for that matter) can not be transformed into a 'socialist' one before going through the purgatory of a 'capitalist' period.

As we have stated in the Preface, we view the present volume as a contribution to the history of the social sciences and Marxism. Such history was long seen as unproblematic; it was assumed that no special skills were required to approach the subject: that it was sufficient to be a social scientist or a Marxist to have the necessary insights. We believe that this picture corresponds by and large to a situation that lasted until the mid-1960s. This is not to suggest that prior to this time there had not been scholarly work on the history of the social sciences and Marxism; the 'Journal of the History of Ideas' is proof to the contrary. However, the impact of such work on mainstream social sciences and Marxism was negligible. After 1965 a noticeable change occurred as a result of the following interrelated factors:

- 1 The prodigious development of the history of the sciences, which had begun after the Second World War, began to have its effects on the social sciences. The Kuhnian revolution, in particular, proved to be very appealing for social scientists, though often for the wrong reasons. By challenging the objectivity of the natural sciences, it added respectability to the social sciences.
- 2 The crisis that the social sciences underwent in the late 1960s

2 General introduction

and early 1970s subverted the most cherished beliefs of its practitioners. At the theoretical level, it challenged the foundations of the dominant paradigm: structural-functionalism; at the epistemological level, it shook the foundations of the most popular philosophy of science: positivism; and at the political level, it destroyed many illusions of value-neutrality, and pressed for relevance.

3 Marxism irrupted on to the horizon of the social sciences and became an actual and promising alternative, partly as a result of the factors mentioned above, partly because of its own dynamics (the end of Stalinism). However, it would be wrong to assume that the term 'Marxism' corresponds to a clearly defined and unequivocally agreed-upon meaning. It is in the nature of the recent interest in Marx that it rethinks his contribution to the social sciences from different standpoints and consequently arrives at different conclusions. The Althusserian approach is one of many, though in terms of research elicited, it was and probably still is one of the most influential.

Althusser's suggestion that an epistemological break took place in the work of Marx, which made the constitution of a science of history possible, was undoubtedly a momentous idea. It may well be that it created more problems than it solved, but it had a tremendous impact on a significant number of Marxist intellectuals who were impressed by the forceful arguments, the impeccable logic, and the concrete intimations of a promised land of scientific bliss. In this sense, it triggered off a fair amount of research, both in France and elsewhere. In retrospect, it is easy to say that the emperor was naked, but the truth is that Althusser's work appeared to many of us as one of the few serious attempts to show that Marx's contribution to the foundation of a science of history was paramount. Althusser's achievement was, on the whole, the result of rethinking Marx in the light of contemporary (French) epistemology and structuralism.

It is now fashionable to treat Althusser as a 'dead dog', but those who proceed in such a way are often the same persons who some years ago blindly accepted his ideas. In this introduction there are a number of implicit and explicit criticisms of Althusser; however, we would like to point out that many of our ideas (particularly in the area of epistemology and history of the sciences) have been forged in an intensive, though far from exclusive, dialogue with his work.

We shall first of all set out the broad outlines of the fundamental epistemological and theoretical assumptions belying our general approach to the history of the social sciences and Marxism. In particular we will explore the relevance of the problematic of the history of the sciences to the history of the social sciences and Marxism. Second, in Part I, we examine the sources, formation, and development of the concept of the AMP in the works of Marx and Engels. This epistemological history of the AMP is taken up further in the sectional introductions to Parts II, III, and IV.

THE PROBLEMATIC OF THE HISTORY OF THE SCIENCES

The new historiography of the sciences emerged in the interstitial space between history, epistemology, and the sciences. It is by no means uniform in its theoretical approach, but I think that there is an underlying problematic, in the sense used by Althusser, of a total and autonomous intellectual structure which can be expressed in two pairs of oppositions: internalism versus externalism and continuism versus discontinuism.

The opposition between internalism and externalism refers to the *focus* of the research. In order to explain scientific development, the internalist concentrates almost exclusively on the scientific works (theoretical and experimental problems as defined by a scientific community) while the externalist also considers other influences, such as technological, socio-economic, institutional, political, and ideological factors. For the former, the interaction of scientific ideas (or in a wider sense, the intellectual interaction) suffices to explain the dynamics of science, while for the latter other conditions - external to science - are required.

The controversy between internalists and externalists centred upon the problem of the so-called scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the internalists the scientific revolution was fundamentally an intellectual revolution; for the externalists its origins had to be sought elsewhere in the development of capitalism. This opposition was subsequently generalized to include not only the appearance of modern science, but also to explain its steady growth in the following centuries and the developments up to the present day. In its extreme forms, the internalist places science outside of society, while the externalists challenge its objectivity independent of an *hic et nunc* society.

The controversy between internalists and externalists is far from resolved in spite of statements from both sides that they have won the war; it will probably rage for a long time. Unfortunately the rules of the game are not yet clearly defined. There is neither firm agreement on the meaning of such terms as 'pure science' and 'technology' (though most internalists tend to equate science with 'pure science'), nor is there a clear delineation of the range and scope of external factors. What are these factors supposed to influence? The cognitive aspect of science, its origins, its developments, its shifts? And is their influence equal for all times and cultures or does it vary from one society to another?

The opposition between continuism and discontinuism refers to the vexed question of whether there is a continuous development of knowledge from common sense to scientific knowledge. The continuist states that progress and historical change take place step by step, gradually, and that scientists are greatly indebted to their predecessors. The discontinuists see knowledge as being subverted, as changing from one period to another. For the continuist, science has always existed, albeit in rudimentary forms.

Ideally, the discontinuist sees science (and sometimes each science in particular) as an epistemological irruption that emerges in a particular historical period.

Some continuists conceive of scientific progress as a process of indiscriminate accumulation, others prefer to look at it as a process of selective accumulation. All use the idea of precursors: this is based on the principle that to every thinker one can find a list of forerunners who show different degrees of intellectual kinship. As a technique, this idea facilitates the transition from one period to another, thus contributing to the idea that there are no revolutions or abrupt changes in science.

The discontinuists think that scientific progress takes place by abrupt and sudden leaps forward which subvert the ancient order. They talk about scientific revolutions. For example, they believe that modern science, that originating in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, represents a radical change, a discontinuity, with respect to medieval science. Discontinuists often concern themselves with the problem of the beginnings of science, be it the beginnings of science in general which they place in a particular historical period (Mesopotamia, Greece, Western Europe) or with the beginnings of each specific science.

Obviously the discontinuists reject the idea of precursors, but they accept that scientific ideas which were born in one individual can be developed and brought to completion by another. Their main complaint is against the assumption that theories, concepts, experiments and the like can belong to different periods and can be easily transferred from one intellectual space to another. This activity - which may be condoned in the practising scientist who, for pedagogical reasons or with the purpose of enlisting some scientific authority of the past, is trying to trace the filiation of his theories to a forerunner - is inexcusable for the proper historian in so far as his attitude represents a distortion of the past in a way that makes it practically unintelligible.

As a result of the polemic between continuists and discontinuists a number of areas of research have been delineated. Three of them seem to us of the greatest interest: the emergence of two different types of history, the question of the beginnings of science, and the relations between history of science and epistemology.

The first effect of the dispute between continuists and discontinuists has made it possible to distinguish clearly between two types of histories. On the one hand, there is the type of history in which the theories of the past are classified as correct or incorrect according to whether they do or do not conform with the current practice of science. This attitude has been referred to by Butterfield as the 'Whig interpretation of history'. It informs the typical history of scientists-historians, inductivists, and positivists. Its only concern is to show the triumphant progress of science from the beginnings up to the present, always looking at past achievements from the standpoint of the scientific attitudes of today.

There is another kind of history that looks at the past in a different way. It does not look only at the concepts that are confirmed by the scientific practice of today, but also at those that have been abandoned. It works under the assumption that what now has been abandoned and excluded was once held to be true and might have been considered indissociable from what we still consider to be true today. In other words, it tries to understand the work of the scientist of the past as a whole and not as a mixture of scientific and non-scientific theories. This kind of history 'is an effort to investigate and try to understand to what extent superseded notions, attitudes, or methods were in their time an advance, and consequently how the superseded past remains the past of an activity for which we should retain the name of scientific' (Canguilhem, 1968, p. 14).

These two ways of writing history have been labelled differently. For example, in the history of anthropology, G. W. Stocking (1968) talks about 'presentism' and 'historicism' respectively, but we would prefer to avoid the term 'historicism' altogether since it has so many different connotations. A similar, but no means equal, classification is the one put forward by G. Bachelard (1951). He distinguishes between sanctioned history (*histoire sanctionnée*) and outdated history (*histoire périmée*); the former is a history of thoughts that have been confirmed by contemporary science, the latter is a history of thoughts that do not make sense from the present state of scientific rationality.

There is a crucial difference between Whiggism and sanctioned history, in that although both use the concept of recurrence, Bachelard does not believe in linear progress, but instead a dialectical one - progress that takes place by sudden, abrupt mutations. Of course, the proper historian has to pay attention to both histories.

The second area of crucial interest that has developed around the controversies between continuists and discontinuists concerns the question of the beginnings of science or of each specific science. This is, of course, related to the wider and more complex question of what science is. This problem does not seem to bother the natural scientist too much, but it is time-consuming for philosophers of science and social scientists.

A number of answers have been given to these two questions. As a matter of fact, answers can only be provided - short of adopting the diffuse attitude of the extreme continuists - by accepting an epistemological intervention of one kind or another. The whole issue can thus only be tackled if one is aware of the different epistemological issues that exist. For a positivist, for example, the crucial element that defines the beginnings of science is methodological; the imposition of certain standards of observation and experience; the empiricist sees the primordial feature in the collection of facts; others prefer to talk about the delineation and definition of an object; finally, the rational materialists insist that the definition of a science is its history - the history of the real conditions of production of its concepts

(the formation of the concepts and theories) - and see a science as constituting itself by departing from a previous ideology.

The third area of interest refers to the relation between history of science and epistemology. It is clear from what has been said up to now that it is neither possible nor desirable to keep history of science and epistemology separate. We can agree with Lakatos that epistemology without history is empty and that history without epistemology is blind, but otherwise they should not be confused. There is always the danger, in a pure sanctioned type of history, of reducing history to epistemology, while the other extreme would be to reduce history to a pure narration of events without any evaluation.

As to epistemology it can either mean the universalizing project of the philosophy of the sciences or a certain normative stand which claims to draw its judgments from a continuous and up-to-date contact with each science, and in consequence is bound to be provisional and changing.

SOME CRUCIAL ISSUES IN THE HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MARXISM

The general scheme that we have presented delineates in its very broad lines the quintessence of the current problematic of the history of the sciences. It is our intention now to examine the suitability of this scheme for the history of the social sciences and Marxism.

The first thing to be noticed, as T. S. Kuhn has aptly remarked, is that 'the new historiography [of science] has not yet touched the history of the social sciences' (1968, p. 77). Kuhn does not mention the question of whether he thinks that the tools developed to deal with the fully fledged sciences can also be applied to the social sciences, the scientificity of which is suspect - or uncertain to say the least. It is true that in the last chapter of Kuhn's famous 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions' (1962), a reference is made to the pre-paradigmatic stage in which the social sciences are found.

In what follows we will examine two issues which we consider crucial and preliminary to any attempt to write a proper history of the social sciences and Marxism. We believe that until now these issues have received either inappropriate attention, or no attention at all. We will refer to them respectively as the problem of the epistemic status of the social sciences and Marxism (i.e. the reliability of their knowledge) and the problem of theoretical externalism.

1 *The problem of the epistemic status of the social sciences and Marxism*

Unless it is willing to start on the wrong footing, a history of the social sciences and Marxism can not avoid a consideration of their epistemic status. This, of course, requires the use of