

# Oriental Despotism

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TOTAL POWER

by Karl A. Wittfogel



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## PREFACE

TWO ASPECTS OF THIS STUDY of Oriental despotism quickly aroused interest: the attempt to establish the peculiarity of a non-Western semi-managerial system of despotic power and the interpretation of Communist totalitarianism as a total managerial, and much more despotic, variant of that system.

A third aspect has been less commented on, but it is largely responsible for whatever insights the inquiry achieved: the use of big structured concepts for the purpose of identifying big patterns of societal structure and change.

To be sure, this method is not new. It was employed by Aristotle, Machiavelli, and the physiocrats. It produced spectacular results when Adam Smith and his successors erected a system of economics that considered the minutiae of the workshop and market within the context of the over-all economic and social order.

Then followed years of indifference. But today the method is again coming to the fore. Comprehensive analytic tools are needed for the understanding of our complex national and international industrial economy. They are vital for a realistic appraisal of the complex operations of the Communist world. Today the economists are clamoring for a new macro-economy. And social scientists in other disciplines are as eager to find what may be called macro-analytic methods of research.

The macro-analytic revolution is the most promising development in our present intellectual crisis. But it will be successful only if we face empirical reality in its geo-historical depth, and if we include in our arsenal the tested big concepts of our intellectual forebears. Efforts to appraise the phenomena of Communist totalitarianism, such as collective leadership and autocracy, power economy and subsistence economy, self-perpetuation and self-liquidation, will do more harm than good if we rely primarily on the experiences of multicentered societies and neglect the only major precedent of enduringly successful total power: Oriental despotism. Efforts to explain the agrarian crises in the USSR and Communist China will yield problematic results if we view Soviet agriculture in terms of American agriculture and Chinese agriculture in terms of Soviet agriculture. Such efforts are macro-analytic in intent, but meso-analytic in substance. They improperly generalize from a limited, and inadequate, empirical base.

A genuinely macro-analytic inquirer will carefully utilize the theoretical heritage of his field just as does the engineer who endeavors to

exhaust the creative possibilities of his craft on the earth, under the sea, and in space. A scientist who thinks he must invent all his tools anew may well enter the research situation with an empty mind—but he will also leave it with an empty mind. Properly applied, the growth potential of a reality-tested big concept is enormous. Rooted in past experiences and ideas, it has every chance to develop with the new empirical data that it is likely to uncover.

Macro-analytical principles guided me when, in the early thirties, I tried to determine the peculiarity of Chinese economics as part of a peculiar Chinese (and "Asiatic") society. They guided me when, in the early forties, I tried to determine the difference between China's conquest dynasties and the typically Chinese dynasties. They guided me when I tried to determine the difference between Oriental despotism, the multicentered societies of the West (and Japan), and Communist (and Fascist) totalitarianism. These same principles continue to guide me in my comparative study of total and totalitarian power today.

The present volume reproduces the original text of *Oriental Despotism* with a few additions and corrections from the third American printing and the German edition. For his work in the preparation of the German edition I wish to thank Frits Kool, Amsterdam, with whom I discussed many of its problems in an extended correspondence.

The original study received friendly support from many institutions and persons. I am profoundly indebted to the Far Eastern and Russian Institute of the University of Washington for enabling me to engage in the diverse research that constitutes the factual basis of the present book. As co-sponsor of the Chinese History Project, New York, Columbia University provided facilities of office and library. For a number of years the Rockefeller Foundation supported the over-all project of which this study is an integral part. Grants given by the American Philosophical Society and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research made possible the investigation of special aspects of Oriental despotism.

Scholars from various disciplines have encouraged my efforts. Without attempting to list them all, I mention in gratitude Pedro Armillas, Pedro Carrasco, Chang Chung-li, Nathan Glazer, Waldemar Gurian, Karl Menges, Franz Michael, George P. Murdock, Angel Palerm, Julian H. Steward, Donald W. Treadgold, Hellmut Wilhelm, and C. K. Yang. I have been privileged to discuss crucial problems with two outstanding students of modern totalitarianism: Bertram D. Wolfe and the late Peter Meyer.

In the field of the Muslim and pre-Muslim East I was particularly aided in my researches by Gerard Salinger. In the realm of Chinese studies I drew upon the knowledge of Chaoying Fang, Lienche Tu Fang, Lea Kisselgoff, and Tung-tsu Chu, all of whom were, at the time of writing, on the staff of the Chinese History Project. Bertha Gruner carefully typed and checked the first draft of an analysis of Russian society and the Marxist-Leninist attitude toward Oriental despotism, intended originally as a separate publication but eventually included in significant part in the present volume. Ruth Ricard was indefatigable in preparing the manuscript, which offered many problems of form, source material, and bibliography.

An inquiry into the nature of bureaucratic totalitarianism is bound to encounter serious obstacles. Among those who helped in overcoming them, two persons must be mentioned particularly. George E. Taylor, director of the Far Eastern and Russian Institute of the University of Washington, never wavered in his understanding of my endeavors and in his support for what seemed at times beyond hope of completion. My wife and closest collaborator, Esther S. Goldfrank, shared every step in the struggle for the clarification of basic scientific truths and human values.

It was my belief in these values that put me behind the barbed wire of Hitler's concentration camps. My final thoughts go to those who, like myself, were passing through that inferno of total terror. Among them, some hoped for a great turning of the tables which would make them guards and masters where formerly they had been inmates and victims. They objected, not to the totalitarian means, but to the ends for which they were being used.

Others responded differently. They asked me, if ever opportunity offered, to explain to all who would listen the inhumanity of totalitarian rule in any form. Over the years and more than I can express, these men have inspired my search for a deeper understanding of the nature of total power.

KARL A. WITTFOGEL

*New York, September 1962*

## FOREWORD CONCERNING ARGUMENTS THAT HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY "DISQUIETING"

MORE THAN TWENTY years have passed since the original publication of my comparative study of total power, *Oriental Despotism*. In it I maintained that in the open parts of the world a momentous crisis was brewing; that the understanding of the entire world required the understanding of its Eastern sector; and that this understanding had been given a very consequential but little noticed turn by two men: Marx and Lenin.

Since then, the need for understanding Marx and Lenin has grown enormously. Since then, Marxism has become the *lingua franca* of restless intellectuals in many lands. And the crisis, which is political, social and even ethnic, and which is not only a crisis of ideas (including Marxism), but a moral crisis, is today more terrifying than it was in 1957—much more terrifying.

Do the readers of *Oriental Despotism* grasp what I am trying to say? In many countries, even in those under Communist rule, I have become known as the author of a theory of "hydraulic society." On this score, there is general agreement. But in the Communist world and in those realms that share its ideology, my socio-historical and socio-political analysis is held to be out of bounds. From the Communist orbit in 1962 the Hungarian Sinologist Ferenc Tökei went to Paris to keynote the first conference of the "Great Debate" concerning the concept of the Asiatic mode of production, and made me the main target of his attack. According to him, I have, like an evil Prometheus, seized Marx' "precious" Asiatic concept. In a formulation which he soon tried to discard but which was not forgotten, he insisted on the need to "reclaim" the concept. A notable French participant in the "Great Debate," the Sinologist Jean Chesneaux, repeated Tökei's reprendre argument twice in 1964<sup>1</sup>, and in 1966 he referred to my book as "the disquieting work of Wittfogel on Oriental despotism (l'inquiétant ouvrage de Wittfogel sur le despotism oriental)." <sup>2</sup>

## A. THE "ASIATIC" ROOT OF A GREAT IDEOLOGICAL SECRET

IT IS EASY to understand why Stalin eliminated the idea of the Asiatic mode of production from the Marxist heritage, and why, after Stalin's death, the Communist ideologues tried to keep Marx' view of Russia's "semi-Asiatic" conditions and Lenin's view of Russia's "Asiatic restoration" under wraps. The most disquieting element in this complex is, of course, the idea of the Asiatic restoration. Hidden behind the attack on my study of Asiatic (hydraulic) society and Oriental despotism is the attack on my revelations regarding the idea of the Asiatic restoration. My discussion of this idea, which I presented systematically and with full documentation in *Oriental Despotism*, shows that Lenin identified the Asiatic restoration theoretically since his debate with Plekhanov in 1906,<sup>3</sup> and that he realized it practically after 1917. Lenin did so with highly illuminating admissions. His followers "purified" his heritage in the interest of the new regime, whose beneficiaries they were. Above all, they tried to eradicate his formula, "Asiatic restoration," and his interlocking arguments concerning the "guarantees"—whose effectiveness he considered necessary for advancing the Russian revolution toward socialism and for preventing its degeneration.<sup>4</sup>

Socialism was for Lenin the order that Marx had outlined in 1871 in the sense of the Paris Commune, and that Lenin professedly accepted in 1916–17 in *State and Revolution* as the necessary step on the road to Communism. The degeneration of the Bolshevik revolution, which Plekhanov declared inevitable and which Lenin feared, involved the restoration of the "old" Tsarist order, which he and Plekhanov sometimes called "semi-Asiatic," sometimes "Asiatic."<sup>5</sup>

From a socio-historical point of view, the difference between a "completely" Asiatic and a "semi"-Asiatic configuration is very important. In Marx' view, which he first formulated with regard to India, Oriental despotism appeared in completely Oriental societies based on an agrarian order with large state-operated works of water control and a system of dispersed village communities interlocked with an agro-hydraulic economy. Of course, no such agro-hydraulic economy existed in Russia. But the dispersed village communities provided a sufficient foundation for an Oriental despotism that had been brought in from the outside.<sup>6</sup> I observed variants of semi-Asiatic societies in Inner Asia, especially in certain Chinese conquest societies and their offshoots where agro-hydraulic management played only a minor role or no role at all.<sup>7</sup>

*Oriental Despotism* deals with these various forms of social organization and with Marx' definition of "completely" Asiatic societies, and the "semi"-Asiatic society of Russia. Here I shall govern myself with only one point that is essential for the problem of the "Asiatic restoration." People living in either of the two major variants of Oriental society—the "completely" Asiatic and the "semi"-Asiatic—all were, according to Marx, under the yoke of an unqualified despotism. In Marx' opinion, Oriental despotism smothered all "historical energy" and the will to engage in meaningful political struggle. For reasons which I shall discuss below, Marx, when speaking of Oriental despotism, avoided using the explosive term "class struggle." But he made it clear that under such a regime there was no class struggle as defined in the *Communist Manifesto*, no political struggle for progressive social change, and no social revolution. "The only social revolution ever heard of in Asia," he stated, came about through the action of non-Asiatic conquerors—the English, who, despite their "swinish" colonial policy, initiated in India, as blind tools of history, the breakthrough to human relations of a more dignified social type.<sup>8</sup>

These were the ideas on Oriental despotism that Marx presented in 1853 in the *New York Daily Tribune* in his "observations"<sup>9</sup> on Indian (and Asiatic) society. These were the ideas whose socio-historical core he disclosed in the first volume of *Capital* in 1867,<sup>10</sup> and whose original version became easily accessible in 1925.<sup>11</sup> From these ideas sprang Marx' interpretation of Tsarist Russia as a "semi-Asiatic" society, most fully elaborated in the series of articles published in their entirety in London in 1856–57 in the *Free Press*, under the title "Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century."<sup>12</sup> From them sprang Lenin's fear that even an outwardly successful Russian revolution must degenerate, if certain hoped-for guarantees should prove inoperative or illusory. The events of the first years after the October Revolution showed that these guarantees were indeed inoperative. Since 1919, Lenin reluctantly admitted this development<sup>13</sup> that he himself had been instrumental in bringing about.

The restitution of the Orientally despotic system was the terrifying secret of the revolution Lenin desired and accomplished. Yet for many intellectuals and workers in many lands this revolution involved the call to fight for the expansion of the "socialist" development Russia had initiated—and, if necessary, to die for it.

What will occur when this revolution is exposed for what it is? What will occur when it becomes known that, according to Lenin himself, this revolution leads not to socialism but to a new form of Oriental despotism? Who, except for its privileged beneficiaries, will die for an



### Asiatic restoration?

From the standpoint of his power policy, Lenin was consistent when he spoke of this secret of his revolution in veiled Aesopian terms. From their standpoint, Stalin and his heirs were entirely logical and indeed more consistent than Lenin, when at first they censored Marx' Asiatic ideas and when, particularly after the appearance of Oriental Despotism, they sought to conceal the significance of these ideas for Russia. From the standpoint of the beneficiaries of the Asiatic restoration, it is completely understandable that they should fear these "disquieting" ideas and seek to eradicate them. But how understandable is it that the ideological and political leaders of the intellectually and morally open world should neglect these ideas which, in today's mounting world crisis, are becoming increasingly significant and increasingly disquieting? If it is true that the "socialist" world follows "Asiatic" laws of motion, then the American "democracy" (as Alexis de Tocqueville called this complex) and other similarly conditioned orders in Europe, Japan and the Southern Hemisphere are confronted by societies whose foundations are radically different from theirs.

### B. THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SECRET

THE LEADERS of the democratic world have long—all too long—been satisfied to measure Russia with their own institutional yardsticks. They have believed that as a world power the Soviet Union lagged far behind the West, because its industry is crude and its standard of living low. We heard this argument at the time of the Weimar Republic and again at the end of World War II. It is wrong. It fits countries responsive to the pressures of public opinion. But it certainly does not fit "completely" Asiatic societies. Nor does it fit the "semi"-Asiatic conditions under which Chingis Khan achieved his sweeping conquests.<sup>14</sup> In May 1950 I presented the following arguments before the Second National Conference on the Study of World Areas: "Chingis Khan's economic potential was crude and inferior: the Mongols probably never produced as many calories as did the great agrarian society of China. . . . But only an ostrich-strategist can console himself by stressing aspects of *subsistence economies*, when the relative total strengths of antagonistic *power economies* are at issue."<sup>15</sup>

The relation between the subsistence and power economies of totalitarian countries is basically different from that of democratic countries. The take-over of Eastern Europe by the armies of the economically exhausted Soviet Union at the end of World War II illustrates this. Stalin was not prevented by the pressures of an effective "bring-

the-boys-home" movement from utilizing the power vacuum on his Western flank (which he had not expected)<sup>16</sup> to carry out his expansionist policies.

A non-military variant of the same principle shaped the Russian attitude toward the Weimar Republic. The subsistence economy of the Soviet Union was very weak, but its power economy was strong enough to permit the investment of large funds into the German Communist movement at the time of the first Soviet famine (1921-22) and of the second Soviet famine (1931-32). Stalin saw Germany's "anti-Versailles" nationalism as a "mine under Europe."<sup>17</sup> This insight, which he shared with other macro-strategists, could in his case be converted into effective action, because the political and ideological arm of the Soviet foreign policy—the German section of the Communist International (which Stalin directed)—was strong enough to paralyze the fight against fascism in Germany.

Stalin's policy enabled Hitler to come to power. We must remember this fact, which partisans of the USSR try to hide. Fortunately, we have the evidence of the Czech Joseph Guttman, who, during the critical years held one of the highest positions at the Moscow center of the Communist International (Comintern). Guttman's statement that behind the fateful behavior of the German Communist Party there was the fateful behavior of the Comintern (the Stalin-directed Comintern), has been distorted but not wiped out by the Communist Press.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, we must remember also that Stalin could carry out his Hitler policy only because his power was total in terms of Eastern, not Western absolutism and because he had at hand a political weapon unavailable to both the old (Asiatic) Russian regime and to modern fascist governments—a weapon that gave the Soviet Union the support of a unique Fifth Column. The Soviet system is not a *nationalist* totalitarianism, as was the Fascism of Hitler, whose international appeal was greater than that of Mussolini, but also definitely restricted. The Soviet system is a *social* totalitarianism, whose international appeal is worldwide as long as its claim to socialism is believed.

Machiavelli postulated that under feudal conditions it was easy to find discontented natives of a society ready to cooperate with foreign powers against their own rulers. But, he declared, this was not the case in such strongholds of Asiatic despotism as Turkey. One could easily penetrate a loosely coordinated country such as France "by winning over some baron of the kingdom, there always being malcontents and those desiring innovations. These can, for the reasons stated, open the way for you and facilitate victory." But in Turkey

political slavery prevailed; like Aristotle before him and Marx after him, Machiavelli considered this the substance of Asiatic despotism. Since in Turkey they are "all slaves and dependent, it will be more difficult to corrupt them, and even if they were corrupted, little effect could be hoped for, as they would not be able to carry the people with them."<sup>19</sup>

Russia was not so conditioned when, after the October Revolution, the Soviet Union consolidated its power. Agents of the Tsar's (Asiatic) regime, whose law of motion, according to Lenin's ambivalently expressed opinion, was being restored in the new (Soviet) order, had of course tried to find friends and allies abroad. But except for the nationalist splinter groups—especially Slavs, who, in their fashion, were idealists—the Tsarist agents had had no international appeal. Their influence had reached only as far as the money they could spend. Contrariwise, the power of attraction exerted by the Soviet Union and its non-diplomatic foreign arm (the Communist International and its auxiliaries) was enormous. While Moscow put out considerable sums of money for the creation and maintenance of international Communist organizations, the masses that supported their movement cost them nothing. The members of this movement were not the representatives of a restored Asiatic system. They were a new type of a social Fifth Column.

Lenin probably did not recognize these and other modifications in his perspective of a restoration. Nor did he recognize the institutional possibilities of this perspective. The change from a semi-managerial order (in which the despotic regime occupies only the commanding heights of the economic system) to a total managerial order (in which the ruling forces manage all the important branches of production and circulation, beginning with industry and generally also seizing agriculture)<sup>20</sup> results in a system that, in its power economy and population control, structurally and operationally goes far beyond the old despotism. Under these circumstances, the inhumanity toward the population can assume forms which, to paraphrase Engels' comment on the arbitrariness of Oriental despotism, "we in the West simply cannot imagine."<sup>21</sup>

Engels saw this problem only in its socio-historical shape. Lenin, who, in his comments on the restoration, projected it into the future, also saw it only in its social shape. Both argued essentially in terms of classes. And while social totalitarianism demands even from supposedly progressive classes total submission (and in case of disobedience, metes out total punishment) the masters of the new order do indeed formulate their new policy essentially in social terms. But

the horrifying events of the last decades show that, just as the oppressed classes of yesterday may be oppressed in a new way today, and even more brutally, the oppressed national (ethnic) groups of yesterday may be oppressed again, and even more brutally, either by proxy (through support of foreign genocide of ethnic minorities), or directly (through domestic extinction). In this manner, total social and ethnic oppression may interlock: Gulag and Auschwitz.

We must not forget either Gulag or Auschwitz. Nor must we forget that, on the basis of a superior power economy and its military logic, the total managerial system may spread over the whole of the globe. We must not forget that the common institutional denominator, which includes old and new forms of a dominant "functional" (Asiatic) power, according to Marx, endows this system with a unique capacity of self-perpetuation, which again according to Marx amounts to its "Unveränderlichkeit"—"unchangeability."

#### C. MARX: UNIQUE SCIENTIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND UNIQUE "SINS AGAINST SCIENCE"

THE ARGUMENT returns to its starting point: Marx. How seriously should we take Marx, the scientific analyst? Max Weber ascribed to Marx' "developmental constructs (*Entwicklungskonstruktionen*)" a "singular" truth-finding power.<sup>22</sup> This judgment, whose neo-Kantian form must not detract us from its ontological intent, is confirmed by the productivity of Marx' macro-historical categories and by his inter-related meso- and micro-historical insights. On all three planes it is confirmed by Marx' study of the world Hegel called "Oriental." With due respect for various preparatory ideas about the institutional peculiarity of the Orient, including those of Engels, it must be said that Marx' break-through to the identification of Asiatic society and a new concept of world history was a unique accomplishment, which remains unequalled even today, despite or, better, because of the conventional efforts made by the orthodox Marxists and the unconventional efforts made by Max Weber.

Weber was an outsider in the academic world and also in the realm of Marxism. His thought-discipline was not that of Marx. The treatment he accorded to the Russian revolution of 1905-06 shows this clearly. Although he was aware of Lenin's "Jacobin" attitude,<sup>23</sup> and although he knew of the debate on the agrarian question between the Bolshevik minority and the Plekhanovite majority at the Stockholm Party Congress in 1906<sup>24</sup> (a conflict which culminated in the debate on the Asiatic restoration), Weber was not sufficiently interested in

the underlying argument to establish its socio-historical foundation and allow for the possibility of an Asiatic turn of the next Russian revolution. Despite his recognition of Russia's "Tatar" tradition,<sup>25</sup> Weber saw as the decisive factor in the Jacobin perspective a definitely Western force, "high capitalism" (*Hochkapitalismus*).<sup>26</sup> Although by 1918, due to Stolypin's reform,<sup>27</sup> he saw Russia's land question in a new light, he had learned nothing from the arguments that since 1906 had dealt with Russia's Asiatic past and the possibility of an Asiatic restoration.

The orthodox Social Democrats did have a Marxist thought-discipline. But the great Marx scholar, the Russian Social Democrat Boris I. Nicolaevsky, stated in 1958 that "hitherto" they had paid little attention to Marx' "Asiatic" ideas. According to him, it was only after the appearance of *Oriental Despotism*—which he reviewed approvingly—that the significance of these ideas for "the foundations of Marxism" and for the understanding of "Lenin"<sup>28</sup> (i.e. of the Russian Revolution) became evident.

Nicolaevsky's remarks indicate that the orthodox Marxists had taken little interest in this part of the Master's thought. Implicitly they point to serious limitations in the theoretical position of such prominent Marxist socialists as Mehring, Cunow, Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Parvus and Trotsky. Ultimately they point to an even more significant fact—to the ambivalence with which Marx himself treated his socio-historical discovery.

It is essential to identify this ambivalence. It is essential to understand the form it took in 1859 in the Preface to *On the Critique of Political Economy*, in 1872 in the Preface to the new German edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, and in his treatment of the extraordinary letter which he wrote in 1877 and in which, without mentioning the *Manifesto*, he rejected the "universalist" (unilinear) concept of history and society as unscientific.

In the 1859 Preface Marx spoke of his theoretical principles (his "guiding line") as "the general result" of economic studies which he "began in Paris" (in 1844) and "continued in Brussels"<sup>29</sup> (in 1845). We recall that during the Brussels period of Marx' life (1845-48) he produced *The German Ideology*, which he wrote jointly with Engels in 1845-46; *The Misery of Philosophy*, which he wrote alone in the first half of 1847; and the draft of the Communist credo, the "Principles of Communism," which Engels outlined in Paris in the fall of 1847, which Marx radically rewrote in Brussels between December 1847 and January 1848<sup>30</sup> and which appeared as *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in February 1848.

It is unfortunate that Marx' followers later pointed to his theoretical declaration of 1859 as constituting the definite statement of his "materialistic" interpretation of history. In fact, in the arguments concerning structure and development which Marx presented in the first and second parts of this declaration he essentially followed the *Manifesto*. He did this in the structure argument by failing to stress the essential role played in material production by the natural conditions—the role which he and Engels had abstractly acknowledged in 1845–46<sup>31</sup> and which in 1853 they had found strikingly manifest in Oriental economy and government. Marx furthermore followed the *Manifesto* in the first part of his declaration by stressing the "material" productive powers<sup>32</sup> without giving the organizational productive powers their due. These organizational productive powers figured conspicuously in manufacturing industry and, on a colossal scale, in the "Asiatic" world.

Marx did not in the second part of his 1859 declaration abandon the idea of a unilinear and necessarily progressive development which the *Manifesto* suggested. Rather he strengthened it by presenting the developmental thesis impressively and without any hint that, according to previous observations, this thesis might not be valid even for antiquity<sup>33</sup> and that, according to his 1853 insights, it certainly was not valid for Asiatic society.

Marx did hint at a new world-historical image in the third and last part of his declaration by referring to a special "Asiatic" formation, which the *Manifesto* had not done. But he perverted this image by placing the Asiatic order into a consecutive developmental pattern where, according to his new insights, it did not belong. Marx wrote in a passage which in the full context of the Preface becomes more important than it was in the declaration alone:<sup>34</sup> "In broad outlines the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society," the bourgeois relation of production being "the last antagonistic form of the social process of production."<sup>35</sup>

As noted above, this developmental thesis is problematic for antiquity; and it is altogether unacceptable for Asiatic society. It suggests a progressive trend, to the end of the ancient world which Marx and Engels had already doubted in 1845–46, and which Marx explicitly rejected after 1859.<sup>36</sup> Most significantly it disregards the peculiar "stagnatory" character of Asiatic society, which evolved from its peculiar geo-economic and socio-historical character. It implies that the recognition of the Asiatic mode of production does not negate the unilinear concept of societal development which the *Communist*

Manifesto had claimed for all major antagonistic societies.<sup>37</sup>

Marx' (and Engels') behavior in 1872 confirmed what the "progressive" formulation of 1859 had suggested. The two friends declared in the Preface to the new German edition of the *Manifesto* that, despite the need for some "improvement" in detail, "the general principles" of the *credo* were "on the whole as correct as ever."<sup>38</sup>

Marx' attitude to the letter he wrote in 1877 to the editor of the liberal Petersburg journal, *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*, is significant for several reasons. In this letter he used the issue of Russia's socio-historical past and future (which a Russian writer, N. Michailovsky, had connected with Marx' ideas about primitive accumulation), to emphasize that Russia's "particular historical conditions" were not those of Western Europe, where a capitalistic economic order "evolved from the womb of the feudal economic order."<sup>39</sup> Comparison of the rise of capitalism in Western Europe with Russia's developmental conditions did not justify a "historical-philosophical theory of the general course imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historical circumstances." Marx held that the Russian writer who ascribed such a view to him rendered him "too much honor and too much shame."<sup>40</sup>

In this argument Marx juxtaposed the development of feudal and capitalistic Western Europe to the situation of Russia prior to "1861," the year in which Russia, through the reforms following the shattering defeat of the Crimean War, began to pursue "the path toward a capitalistic order."<sup>41</sup> According to an elaboration of the underlying argument which Marx undertook in 1881 in three lengthy drafts of a letter to Vera Zasulich, there "still" existed in Russia, due to a "singular coincidence of circumstances," the isolated village community which in Western Europe had more or less disappeared. This village community was, in Russia, "probably favored by the vastness of the territory and largely consolidated by the Mongol invasion."<sup>42</sup> As Marx had postulated previously, the dispersed village communities were the solid foundation of Oriental despotism,<sup>43</sup> a key to the understanding of Asiatic societies and states.<sup>44</sup>

In the main part of his *Zapiski* letter Marx referred implicitly to the developmental peculiarities of the first of his four antagonistic orders, the Asiatic—to the cause and fact of its stagnation. In the "example" which he added to this part he explicitly referred to the peculiarity of the second antagonistic order, the ancient, which instead of progressing toward a modern economic system had regressed. Stating that he had hinted at this phenomenon "in several passages of *Capital*," Marx pointed to the fate of the free peasants and of big

land and money owners in late Rome. The former had degenerated into an idle mob; the latter had created no capitalism, but a "mode of production that rested on slave labor."<sup>45</sup> That is, "events of a strikingly analogous character that occurred in a different historical setting, led to entirely different results. By studying each of these developments separately and then comparing them, one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never accomplish this with a universal key of a general historical-philosophical theory, whose greatest merit is to be super-historical."<sup>46</sup>

Did Marx' *Zapiski* letter answer all the questions about world history, "Asia" and Russia that his researches had been raising since 1853? Certainly not. But it did condemn the universalist image of history that Marx had offered during his Brussels period, and that the 1859 statement had offered with obvious contradictions and a not so obvious indulgence in the "sin against science."

"Sin against science." I am employing this term in the sense in which Marx used it in the early 1860's.<sup>47</sup> When he and Engels in 1845-46 declared history *the science*, they placed it first in the hierarchy of sciences. When Marx in 1859 presented the theoretical guiding line of his studies essentially as a set of historical ideas, he confirmed this. When in 1877 he called the universalist approach "super-historical," he condemned it as unscientific.<sup>48</sup>

The *Zapiski* letter indicated the socio-historical core thesis which had been in Marx' mind since 1853 and which he had failed to proclaim programmatically for more than two decades. Even in 1877 he did not systematically disclose the peculiarities of the Asiatic and ancient elements of his world-historical concept. But he did forcefully proclaim his anti-universalist position. To paraphrase a formulation Marx had created in 1865, we may say: compared with earlier attempts to substantiate the world-historical pattern of man's fate, his statement in the *Zapiski* letter was "decidedly poor." However, compared with his Brussels position it was "epoch-making."<sup>49</sup>

Marx initiated an epoch-making advance, but he never completed it. Having written the *Zapiski* letter he left it undischpatched. After the death of Marx, Engels found the original French draft among his friend's papers. On March 6, 1884, he sent a copy of it to Vera Zasulich noting that he was aware of the reason why Marx had written it (see Michailovsky's article, "Karl Marx before the Tribunal of Mr. Shukovsky"). Engels did not make it equally clear whether he had seen what Marx had written in response to it, yet about one point he was definite: "Marx composed this answer in such a form that it bears the shape of a writing intended to be published in Russia, but he never



sent it to Petersburg, because he feared to endanger through his very name the existence of the journal that would have printed his answer."<sup>50</sup>

Engels was ready to let his Russian friends in Geneva have and employ the *Zapiski* letter: "You may use it as you wish."<sup>51</sup> He probably overrated the interest of the Tsarist censorship in Marx' new world-historical views. But he apparently underrated the interest of the Marxists in them. And he certainly failed to see that Marx' own attitude toward the *Zapiski* letter was independent of the censorship problem and far more important.

A Russian translation of the original version of the letter appeared in Geneva in 1886. It appeared also in a law journal in Petersburg in 1888,<sup>52</sup> as far as I know without promoting punitive action. That is, the Russian translation was tolerated by the Tsarist regime even after the assassination of Alexander II, which led to greatly increased censorship.<sup>53</sup> Would it have been repressed prior to the Tsar's assassination, when the government policy, although not soft, was less harsh? (The publication of *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* was forbidden in 1884.)

Whatever the answer to this question may be, there can be no doubt that Marx did not depend for the publication of his anti-universalist letter on the Petersburg journal, to whose editor he had addressed himself. In 1887, a year after the Russian Marxist group in Geneva had published the first Russian translation of the *Zapiski* letter, German translations of it were published in Zürich in *Sozialdemokrat*,<sup>54</sup> and in the *Volkszeitung* in New York.<sup>55</sup> Again we may ask: if there was interest in German socialist circles in Marx' world-historical views in 1887, is it not possible that such interest already existed in these circles in 1877? Furthermore, was Marx not free to offer his ideas on this subject at that time and to search for publication outlets in various countries of the Western world, if he had wanted this? In fact, could he not there have expressed these ideas more openly than he had done in the Aesopian *Zapiski* letter, if he had had the strength and will to do so?

In 1877 Marx was getting on in years and was ailing. But his subsequent notes, his general correspondence and his memoranda-like letters (such as the three drafts of the letter to Vera Zasulich of 1881) show that he still was physically and mentally capable of formulating his ideas—newly established ideas—if he had wished to do so. Whatever his inhibitions about publishing in Russia may have been, why should he not have sought other and less restricted outlets for his ideas about world history, "Asia" and Russia, if such had been his will? But this will was lacking. Hegel had grimly declared: "A will