Chapter Two

Precapitalist Societies

Class and state in China and Rome

The Roman case is significant not only because Western images of empire are self-consciously rooted in it, or even because it was, by the standards of its time, very large and widespread, but also because Rome created and administered its vast empire in a distinctive way, which would thereafter represent the criterion, whether positive or negative, of European imperialism. In a sense, it was the first colonial ‘empire’, as we have come to understand the word.

Early-imperial China, by contrast, had established, already by the third century BC, a very different pattern of rule. This pattern – which, with some variation, formed the framework of Chinese imperial rule for many centuries thereafter – was based on a centralised bureaucratic state, unifying a hitherto-fragmented collection of warring states under the rule of the emperor and administered by a vast apparatus of office-holders. Underlying the coercive powers of the state, needless to say, was military force; but its mission was not colonisation of a kind that marked later European empires.

The Chinese imperial state reproduced, on a large scale, a pattern of state-formation that was probably more the rule than the exception in ‘high’ civilisations of the non-capitalist world: a bureaucratic hierarchy descending from a monarch to administrative districts governed by royal functionaries and fiscal officials, who extracted surplus-labour from subject-villages of peasant-producers for redistribution up
the hierarchical chain. Something like this pattern is visible in many of the most highly organised civilisations, from the relatively small and modest states of Bronze-Age Greece, to the more elaborate and powerful New Kingdom of Egypt, and even, much further afield, the vast empire of the Incas.

The material base of imperial China was the peasantry, which was directly taxed by the state, both to sustain its administrative functions and to line the pockets of its office-holders. The imperial state often took measures to block the development of powerful landed classes, even prohibiting the ownership of land by mandarins in the provinces they governed; but office was itself a route to wealth. This meant that, while peasants lived under oppressive conditions, the imperial state had good reason to preserve the peasantry and its possession of land. It also meant that, while the position of the landed aristocracy fluctuated with the rise and fall of China’s successive empires, at the height of China’s imperial powers, especially in later centuries, truly great wealth was associated with office. This was less an empire than a single large and over-arching territorial state; and its mode of ‘extra-economic’ exploitation was less like what we think of as colonial exploitation, than like the direct exploitation of peasants by a tax-office state, which, in another form, existed even in, say, absolutist France.

Like other empires ruled by central bureaucracies, the Chinese imperial state always confronted a dilemma: the direct reach of the central state was necessarily limited, while the means by which that reach could be extended – a proliferation of officers with local administrative and fiscal powers – always threatened to create local power-centres and dynasties that might challenge the central imperial power. This tension, no doubt, limited the state’s imperial ambitions.

The Romans were not similarly inhibited. In keeping with its own specific social-property relations at home, the Roman Republic, dominated by a self-governing aristocracy of landowners, made a virtue of necessity in its project of imperial expansion by mobilising, and even creating, landed aristocracies elsewhere as an instrument of empire from the start. They embarked on a ruthless programme of territorial expansion, a massive land-grabbing operation. The transition from republic to empire certainly required the development of a complex imperial state. But, even after the republic was replaced by imperial rule and bureaucracy, the Romans administered their empire with a relatively small central state, through what amounted to a wide-ranging coalition of local landed aristocracies, with the help of Roman colonists and colonial administrators.

If the ‘redistributive’ kingdom of the ancient world was the foundation of other great non-capitalist empires, the basis of the Roman Empire was a