Chapter Three

The State in Historical Perspective

Class and state in ancient society

Greece and Rome are distinguishable from other ancient civilisations not only by their utilisation of slaves in unprecedented ways and degrees, but also by their distinctive relations between landlords and peasants and between both these classes and the state. The typical ancient state was the ‘bureaucratic’ kingdom in which the state exercised substantial control over the economy; property in land tended to be closely bound up with state-service; and peasant-producers were subject to surplus-extraction, less in the form of personal subjection to individual private proprietors, than in the form of collective subjugation to the appropriating, redistributive state and its ruling aristocracy, especially through taxation and compulsory services. Classes confronted each other not simply as individual appropriators and producers, or large and small proprietors, but collectively as appropriating states and subject peasant-villages. Although states of this kind, at least on a small scale, seem to have existed in Bronze-Age Greece (as the archaeological remains of Mycenaean civilisation and the decipherment of Linear B reveal), they completely disappeared and were replaced by new forms of social and political organisation. Unfortunately, the process by which this replacement occurred remains obscure.

1. For a more detailed discussion of the contrast between these different forms of state, see E.M. Wood 1981a, pp. 82–6. A modified version of this article is included as Chapter One of E.M. Wood 1995a.
What is important, from our point of view, is that in Greece and Rome, in the absence of this form of state and its characteristic relations between ruling and subject-groups, appropriators and producers confronted one another more directly as *individuals* and as *classes*, as landlords and peasants, not primarily as rulers and subjects. Private property developed more autonomously and completely, separating itself more thoroughly from the state. In other words, a new and distinctive dynamic of property- and class-relations was differentiated out from the traditional relations of (appropriating) state and (producing) subjects. We have seen this specific dynamic at work in the struggles over land, which were so central to Graeco-Roman history. Indeed, one might say that Greece and Rome were distinctive precisely in the degree to which a differentiated dynamic of class-conflict was at work, with a logic of its own.

New forms of *state* emerged out of these relations. The ancient ‘bureaucratic’ state had constituted a ruling body superimposed upon, and appropriating from, subject-communities of direct producers. Although such a form had existed in Greece, both there and in Rome, a new form of political organisation emerged that combined landlords and peasants in one civic and military community. The very notions of a *civic community* and *citizenship*, as distinct from a superimposed state-apparatus and rulership, were distinctively Greek and Roman. The unity of appropriators and producers, rich and poor, embodied in this new form of state, was, as it were, a ‘harmony of opposites’ (to adopt a concept beloved by the Greeks), imbued throughout with the tensions and contradictions, the internal dynamic, of the conflicts between and within these two classes. […]

Private property and class-exploitation require coercive power to sustain them; and the appropriating powers of the individual lord *always* depend in various ways and degrees on a collective class-power. Direct producers, even when exploited individually, never confront their exploiters *solely* as individuals. Even peasant-proprietors who are relatively isolated in production tend to be organised in communal groups, especially in village-communities. Appropriators must find ways of counteracting the divisions *within* their own class, the *intraclass*-conflict which results from private property and competition over land and limited sources of surplus-labour. It can also be argued that the balance of power between appropriators and producers may be less one-sided in favour of the former when petty producers are confronted by

2. This description does not, of course, apply equally to all parts of Greece. Sparta and Crete are the most notable examples of Greek states in which the citizen-community ruled over a subject-population of producers.

3. See Brenner 1985a, pp. 40–6, for an example of how village-organisation can function as a kind of peasant-class organisation and affect the relationship between landlords and peasants.