CHAPTER 1

Asiatic Mode of Production: Considerations on Ancient Egypt

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This chapter will inquire into the validity of Marx and Engels’s elaborations on the Asiatic mode of production – with their contradictions and the modifications they went through over time\(^1\) – in connection with the historical process of an ancient state. It will also analyse in part how these elaborations were later received and transformed by the more relevant Marxist historiography.

More precisely, our aim is to analyse the Asiatic mode of production from the particular perspective of the dominant relations of production in pharaonic Egypt.\(^2\) The goal of our inquiry does not merely imply a recourse to the ‘facts’ of Egyptian history in the empirical sense so strongly criticised by Hindess and Hirst,\(^3\) but a recourse to an abstraction of the historical process, which is not the same as the abstraction of an ideal elaboration devoid of historical meaning. We will thus focus on a certain social formation and on the economic, social, political and ideological relations that appear historically in consonance with the dominant Asiatic mode of production, and with other relations typical of other modes of production.

Tackling this inquiry is not an easy task given that Marx did not publish his theory on the Asiatic mode of production in one singular work and did not give it a definitive shape.\(^4\) Indeed, the only textual mention of the Asiatic

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1 It is hard to top O’Leary’s chronological analysis of the works of Marx and Engels and of the interpretative problems they pose; however, it is not our intention to present a historiographical assessment. See O’Leary 1989, pp. 82–151; book review in Loone 1995.

2 An analysis based on comparative history would be more fruitful, but I lack the specific knowledge and skills to attempt it. My academic training led me to approach this problem from the perspective of the history of ancient Egypt. Or perhaps exploring the terms under which the Asiatic mode of production was conceived allows me to think of Egypt’s history in Marxist terms, as part of the larger logic of historical processes and not as micro-history.


mode of production\textsuperscript{5} is found in the preface to \textit{A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy}, and the formulations associated with the Asiatic mode are found in the section of the \textit{Formen} that Marx worked on between 1857–8 in preparation for \textit{Capital} and \textit{A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy}. Due to this, the debate has often centred on the definition and characterisation of the alleged attributes of the Asiatic mode of production – such as Asiatic despotism, the existence of self-sufficient village communities and the absence of private property – or on a kind of geographical determinism associated to irrigation control.\textsuperscript{6} There have also been attempts to chronicle the history of those attributes and trace their origins in order to reconstruct them. It has even been suggested that although Marx and Engels gave the concept a new perspective, the idea itself might not be original to the German authors,\textsuperscript{7} and should therefore be understood as part of a Western tradition. However, if it were to be understood as part of the Western tradition, it would still be original in the sense that it explained the transformation of social relations related to productive forces.\textsuperscript{8}

Another difficulty lies in the fact that studying the Asiatic mode of production is like trying to raise the dead\textsuperscript{9} given that the notion was denied, declared

\textsuperscript{5} Also, in \textit{Capital}, volume 1, section 4, in a section on the fetishism of commodities, Marx 1965, pp. 50–1, writes '[i]n the ancient Asiatic and other ancient modes of production, we find that the conversion of products into commodities, and therefore the conversion of men into producers of commodities, holds a subordinate place, which, however, increases in importance as the primitive communities approach nearer and nearer to their dissolution'.

\textsuperscript{6} These two attributes are addressed in the correspondence between Marx and Engels of June 1853: Marx 1983, pp. 330ff. and Engels 1983, pp. 335ff.; as well as in an article Marx wrote for the \textit{New York Daily Tribune}, also in 1853, Marx 1979, pp. 125–9; we will return to these further on in this article.

\textsuperscript{7} For example, Bartra 1983, pp. 21–34, analyses the evolution of related concepts, especially that of Oriental despotism from Plato and Aristotle to Richard Jones and Hegel. Anderson also traces the origins of concepts associated to Asiatic countries as a way of contrasting them with Europe, which would have influenced the works of Marx and Engels, Anderson 1979, pp. 462ff.


\textsuperscript{9} It was Anderson 1979, p. 548, who suggested that we ‘let this last notion (the Asiatic Mode of Production) be given the decent burial it deserves’. Zaccagnini 1989, p. 13, wonders ironically what other heuristic model an author like Komoróczy could propose for the interpretation of the socio-economic formations of ancient Mesopotamia once the Asiatic mode of production is dead and buried.