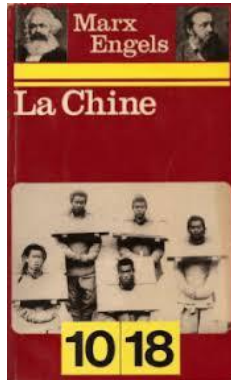


# NOTES ON THE ASIAN MODE OF PRODUCTION



It is not our intention to intervene in the academic field of "Marxology," except to indicate the political reasons for Stalinist negationism, which, beyond the polemic on the importance of the Marx-Engels categories, reveal the dangerously counterrevolutionary sense of Stalinist hermeneutics. The question of the Asian Mode of Production (AMP) is therefore not a "detail" in the historical and dynamic understanding of the succession of pre-capitalist modes of production before the AMP was imposed on the entire planet.

*«In short, the scheme of successive forms of production gives an account of the process of formation (genesis) of present-day society, which is constituted by the structures that have successively developed in production and form the backbone or organs and members of present-day society that are the product of its history and the work of its producers.»* Succession of forms of production and society in Marxist theory, p.54, Le Fil du temps No. 9, 1972.

Stalin and his "Marxist-Leninist" successors denied the very existence of the AMP, and not only because of their doctrinal reductionism and their total lack of dialectics (the dogma of the five indispensable and immutable stages: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism); above all, thanks to these permanent distortions, they were able to impose a caricatured and unilinear vision of the "European" succession of modes of production. These falsifications allowed them to justify, in the eyes of the revolutionary proletariat, the preliminary passage of the bourgeois revolution, first through colonialism and then, later, through anti-colonialism. In all cases, the objective was the forced crushing of the workers who, in their opinion, were in too much of a historical hurry to fight for their social emancipation.

This also allowed them to consolidate their own domination of the capitalist mode of production in places where they already held political, economic, and social power, crushing any hint of revolution on the part of the working class they directly exploited within their own borders. This counterrevolutionary strategy also allowed them to maintain a supposedly "Marxist" discourse, thus expressing the fact that Stalin's counterrevolution originally came from within the revolutionary camp itself, through its degenerative defeat crystallized, among other things, by the lie of "socialism in one country." Furthermore, the suppression of the AMP, definitive in 1938 in the Stalinist "doxa," served to confirm all alliances with the national bourgeoisies of countries considered underdeveloped, allowing in particular to legitimize the counterrevolutionary crushing of all independent workers' insurrections. This

was particularly dramatic in the case of the Shanghai Commune in 1927. But this alignment behind warring bourgeois factions also greatly contributed to the successive and systematic disasters of "national liberation." This perfidious pattern of prior and methodical defense of a "bourgeois revolution," which must always be completed and/or made "permanent," preferably in its democratic form, also served "Russian imperialism" and its armed wings of the Guepeu and the KGB to crush revolutionary movements in Spain in the 1930s, as in many other countries. We will also decipher how Stalin, as the personification of counterrevolution, had to expressly differentiate himself from Lenin's reiterated fear that Russia, still revolutionary, would degenerate into a "semi-Oriental" despotism, the "Asiatic" form of a capitalist renaissance.

*«It is easy to understand why Stalin excluded the concept of an Asiatic mode of production from the Marxist heritage and why, after his death, communist theorists remained silent on Marx's idea of Russia's " semi-Asiatic " conditions and on Lenin's fear of an "Asiatic restoration" in Russia. The most worrying element of all is, of course, the idea of an Asiatic restoration. » K. Wittfogel : Le despotisme oriental, nouvelle préface de 1977, p.11, éditions de minuit, Paris, 1977.*

## What is the AMP?

In the non-linear but schematic succession of different types of society, the Asiatic variant corresponds to one of the variants of the secondary form, along with the classical and Germanic variants. The primary form is that of primitive communism, the tertiary that of feudalism, and the quaternary that of capitalism. The Asiatic secondary form thus coincides with a society in **transition** but relatively stable, capable of maintaining itself for centuries thanks to the combination of collective works of general interest (irrigation, walls, dams, etc.) and small local hereditary agricultural units. This is the specificity of what would be known as **Asiatic despotism**.

*«The concept of the Asian mode of production refers to a **specific and original** mode of production that cannot be confused with either the ancient slave mode of production or the feudal mode of production. The very essence of the Asian mode of production is the combined existence of primitive communities in which common ownership of land prevails and which are organized, still partly on the basis of kinship relations, by a **state power** that expresses the real or imaginary unity of these communities, **controls** the use of essential economic resources, and **directly appropriates** a part of the labor and production of the communities it dominates.» M. Godelier: The notion of the "Asian mode of production" and Marxist models of social evolution.*

It was clearly Marx and Engels who provided the first theoretical elements in an attempt to explain what had hitherto been described as Oriental despotism, particularly in relation to the Ottoman Empire. This notion was probably developed between 1853 and 1858 and appears in the preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: "In general terms, the Asiatic, the ancient feudal, and the modern bourgeois modes of production may be described as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society." K. Marx, Works, Volume I, p. 1821, Gallimard.

But it is above all in the "Grundrisse" ("Forms Prior to Capitalist Production", Volume I, p. 410) where this notion takes off to characterize new types of society that Marx and Engels had encountered in their ethnological studies (Morgan). They later returned to these issues in

their debate with Véra Zassoulitch on the unsystematic nature of the succession of different types of society. The transition to capitalism was even considered a **non-obligatory stage** in the establishment of a classless society.

*«In this Western movement, it is a question of the transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property. The Russian peasants, on the contrary, are transforming their common property into private property. The analysis in Capital, therefore, offers no reasons either for or against the vitality of the rural commune, but the special study I have made of it, and for which I have sought materials in the original sources, has convinced me that this commune is the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia; but for it to function as such, it would be necessary first to eliminate the deleterious influences that assail it from all sides, and then to provide it with the normal conditions for its spontaneous development.»* K. Marx: Reply to Vera Zassoulitch, March 8, 1881<sup>1</sup>.

As we know, the race was won at the end of the 19th century by the vigorous development of capitalism in Russia, which completely submerged and destroyed the "Obshchina": the remnants of peasant village communities. The same thing happened, as Rosa Luxemburg reminds us in her "Introduction to Political Economy," in Africa, particularly in Kabylia. Similarly, Marx identified certain types of society in which communal forms of property and collective conditions of production could be combined and dominated by a higher unit that appropriated a portion of surplus labor to finance major projects of general interest, such as irrigation and the development of the media. In this type of society, he also notes the absence of antagonistic social classes, where a large mass of agrarian communities (without private appropriation of land) is exploited by representatives of the state, officials, bureaucrats, and members of the clergy, who do not own the means of production. This exploitation essentially takes the form of corvée and tribute, so it is neither slavery nor servitude.

One could tentatively consider that in the "dependent" social formation (AMP.), the fundamental social relationship is that between the "despot" and the quasi-free peasant. On the "tributary" social formation (MPA), the fundamental social relationship can be that between the "despot" and the quasi-free peasant. These different elements have been identified in the East, as well as in Mexico and Peru (pre-Columbian societies), and can constitute **very stable societies** because they are fixed between two complementary structures, one local and still communal, and the other constituting a central despotic power. This is a way of life considered ancient due to its "astonishing stagnation" (Engels). Historically, only **external factors** such as wars, conquests, or colonization can shake this type of "Asiatic" society.

*«The absence of landed property is the key to the entire Orient. It is the basis of political and religious history. But what is the reason why the Orient has never achieved landed property, not even of the feudal type? I believe that it depends essentially on the climate, linked to the conditions of the soil, especially in the great desert areas that extend from the Sahara, through Arabia, Persia and Tatarstan, to the highest plateaus of Asia. Here, artificial irrigation is the primary condition of agriculture, and it is the responsibility of the communes, the provinces or the central government. In the Orient, the government has only had three departments: finance (to plunder the country), war (to plunder the country and the neighboring countries) and public works to ensure reproduction. »* F.

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<sup>1</sup>On the website : <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1881/03/km18810308.htm>

Engels: Letter to Marx from June 6, 1853, Marx-Engels, Correspondance Tome III, p.384-385, social editions, Paris, 1972.

It is important to emphasize this critical and non-linear perspective in the current ideological context, in which the vision of a "Eurocentric" Marx is polarized by new postmodern and "decolonizing" tendencies. The global history of the transitions from classless societies (including the very diverse societies of the MPA) to the cycle of class societies, up to the global establishment of capitalism, remains to be clarified in order to better understand the entire process of MPC domination.

*"To raise the question of the historical existence of MPA is to reconstruct the various processes by which inequality was introduced into classless societies."* Jean-François Bert: Thinking about Marx with anthropology<sup>2</sup>.

The opposition within the Second International (and later within the Comintern) between the defenders of "civilizing colonization," such as the European bourgeoisie, and the defenders of support, however critical, for the emerging bourgeoisies of the underdeveloped countries weighed heavily against the possibilities of uniting the proletariat through its struggles throughout the world and in adopting a global vision of the "world economy."

*«In 1907, the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International showed a majority acceptance of colonialism; only a radical minority denounced the evils of colonial expansion, but most often stopped at pointing out the risks of war posed by the combination of militarism and colonialism. Armies are the work of death, and the colonized, like the workers, are victims of capitalist plunder; the price paid is the same: blood and gold. »* René Gallissot : Colonial socialism, national socialism of the dominant countries. *Le socialisme contraint par le nationalisme*, L'Homme & la Société, n° 174, 2009<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, following the ideas of Marx and Engels, the MPA, with all its variants, can be considered an authentic economic and social formation that does not correspond to the model of the succession of modes of production in Europe with slavery and serfdom, but rather allows us to better understand the transition of so-called primitive societies, such as pre-Columbian societies, certain African societies, or those of the Mediterranean basin, directly under capitalist domination. This type of society historically avoids having to endure the horrors of slavery and serfdom before experiencing the much worse effects of capitalism through colonization and/or "national liberation."

*«In serfdom, the slave's labor for himself and his forced labor for the master are clearly separated from each other by time and space. In the slave system, the part of the day in which the slave merely replaces the value of his subsistence, when in fact he works for himself, appears to be nothing but labor for his master. All his labor takes on the appearance of unpaid labor. The opposite is true of wage labor: even surplus or unpaid labor has the appearance of paid labor. Here, the property relation conceals the slave's labor for himself; here, the money relation conceals the wage laborer's gratuitous labor for his capitalist. »* Karl Marx: *Le Capital*, book I, Chapitre XIX, p.384, social editions, Paris, 1976.

For Marx, the relevance of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production meant that it was

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<sup>2</sup>In: Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels: Three Letters on the Asiatic Mode of Production (June 1853), Éditions de la Phocide, Strasbourg, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> On the website: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-homme-et-la-societe-2009-4-page-75.htm>

necessary to analyze the transition from the "tribal collectivity" to first-class societies. In this sense, it was in complete contradiction with the Stalinist vulgate, according to which the bourgeois revolution must necessarily follow feudalism and is the insurmountable condition for a possible proletarian revolution. Stalinism thus resumes the old position of the Mensheviks before 1917, for whom the proletarian revolution could not be unleashed before the establishment of the Constituent Assembly and the full advent of democracy. The misery of revisionism, even in reverse!

### **Oriental despotism according to Karl Wittfogel<sup>4</sup>**

It was in 1957, with the publication of his great work, "Oriental Despotism," that K. Wittfogel revived the controversy surrounding not only the importance of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production, but above all its operational use in the analysis of Stalinist capitalism, both Russian and Chinese, to demonstrate that the basis of their particular capitalist development lay in large state-owned projects, primarily hydraulic, which gave rise to a "totalitarianism" embodied by an all-powerful sovereign. To control the waters, these societies relied on a hierarchy of officials with a general perspective (at the level of an entire river basin, for example) that brooked no local questioning of global decisions. The enormous surplus revenues generated made it possible to build enormous defensive structures, roads, temples, and sumptuous palaces... The state then became stronger than society, because it was the state that generalized forced labor in the form of "**generalized slavery**," as opposed to the private slavery of classical antiquity.

*«There are a certain number of societies-such as those of Pharaonic Egypt or Imperial China-in which the ruling class is not defined by its place in the relations of production, but by its role as a state apparatus that benefits from the surplus of peasant labor. The formation of such social strata can be historically explained by the "response," under certain well-defined conditions, to the problems posed by the organization of large-scale works, and in particular irrigation and drainage works, in the flooded or flooded valleys of semi-arid countries. K. Wittfogel calls this type of human activity, which requires men more than technicians, drivers more than engineers, hydro-agriculture, and sometimes heavy agriculture. Both the Grand Canal of China and the pyramids of Egypt were built by multitudes.»* Pierre Vidal-Naquet: History and Ideology: Karl Wittfogel and the Concept of the "Asiatic Mode of Production".<sup>5</sup>

This model allowed Wittfogel to develop a critical analysis of the development of so-called communist regimes, identifying an objective basis for their capitalist development "from above," as had already been the case in Bismarck's Germany and Tsarist Russia. For the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the state was virtually the sole agent of development.<sup>6</sup>

*"The State is the sovereign owner, and its sovereignty is nothing more than centralized national ownership."* K. Marx : Capital, Volume III, Section 6, p.710, Social Editions, Paris, 1976.

This mode of capitalist development occurs when the national bourgeoisie is too weak or too cowardly to carry out its own political revolution. It is also in this sense that colonialism and

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<sup>4</sup>«Le Maitron», on the website: <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article217167>

<sup>5</sup>In: Annales. Economies, societies, civilizations. 19th year, No. 3, 1964. pp. 531-549.

<sup>6</sup>We now write about this question in the text: "Etat et capital: a consubstantial rapport" in the review Matériaux Critiques N°2, also on the site: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsites/textes>

the intervention of foreign capitalist powers have been the necessary elements to overthrow the long-standing stability of these transitional societies. This was the case in the 19th and 20th centuries in declining imperial China, where extraterritorial zones, concessions of territories that were not colonies, were granted and administered by foreign powers in major Chinese cities, including ports. Thanks to these territorial concessions, the capitalist powers enjoyed great economic and political advantages, dismantling what remained of imperial unity and power by fragmenting and nibbling it away (in addition to other royal colonies such as Hong Kong and Macau)<sup>7</sup>.

Added to this was the "gunboat policy," which reinforced this process by forcibly opening to international trade and imposing unilateral clauses on a China that was increasingly losing sovereignty to France and Great Britain, but also to Germany, Russia, the United States, and Japan. This type of aggressive policy was exemplified in Robert Wise's famous 1966 film, "The Gunboat Gyang Tse" (original title: *The Sand Pebbles*), which shows foreign intervention during the internal clashes (between warlords, nationalist factions, the "communist" party, bandits, etc.) that followed the chaotic establishment in 1912 of the first Republic of China (led by Sun Yat-sen). Returning to Wittfogel's contributions, it is important to underline that his vision of a sovereign despotic State functioning as coordinator of the work of the entire population in relation to large hydraulic works and structures resembles a "**generalized State slavery**" (Idem, p. 455), which in fact corresponds, for pseudo-socialist countries, to the generalization of State wage slavery. This social relationship is complemented by political terror exercised over all the subordinate classes and by a system of forced labor camps where wages are reduced to the minimum necessary for physiological reproduction.

*«The history of ancient oriental societies demonstrates, in the most concrete terms, that regimes of fierce exploitation can function perfectly well within the framework of state ownership, and that exploitation itself may well have its roots not in the private appropriation of the means of production, but in the monopolization of the tasks of directing social life by a bureaucracy possessing the "secrets of the wisdom of the Ancestors" ... or of "Marxist-Leninist Science" ...»* P. Souyri: *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in China*, Christian Bourgois éditeur, Paris, 1982.

For revolutionary Marxists, this prevalence of wage labor is simply an admission of the capitalist nature of all different forms of bourgeois domination, regardless of their ideological veneer. It is this global reality of wage labor that determines the demand for a purely proletarian revolution as a condition for the dictatorial transition to a classless, laborless society. The new centrality of the East—including China, India, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan—and the shift of potentially warlike inter-capitalist conflict toward this region give the discussion about the MPA a renewed programmatic importance.

*«The characteristic features of the AMP can be found in the growing power of an omnipresent bureaucracy, and these features of the AMP have supported the rise of capitalism in China. The political authorities are therefore tasked with suppressing any dissent that might question this growing*

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<sup>7</sup>The countries with territorial concessions in China were: Great Britain (Canton and Tientsin), Japan (Hanchow, Hankou (Wuhan) and Tientsin), France (Canton, Hankou, Shanghai and Tientsin) and Italy (Tientsin). Thirteen concessions had ceased to exist, with Great Britain having returned four in 1929 and 1930 (Amoy, Hankou, Kiukiang, Chinkiang), and Belgium having returned its only concession, in Tientsin, in 1930.



*dualism and the resulting rise in inequality. This is why it is possible to speak of a "hybrid mode of production" or a "social formation," to use an expression that Lenin, reusing a term from Marx with a different meaning, proposed to designate a society with a juxtaposition of different modes of production, more or less developed and more or less dominant within it.» Mylène Gaulard, Marx in Beijing: The Roots of the Crisis in Capitalist China, p.47, Demopolis Publishing, Paris, 2014.*

This link between the remnants of the AMP and the dominant CMP can play a role in the critical understanding of the emerging powers of current capitalism, which have not followed the same historical path as "European" or "American" capitalism. Thus, some parts of the world have passed directly from pre-capitalist societies to mature capitalism without having to endure the supposedly obligatory succession of different types of society. As L. Trotsky so aptly pointed out in the introduction to his History of the Russian Revolution, there are no obligatory intermediate stages when the material conditions are met to skip them, because one is furthermore forced to do so: "Savages abandon the bow and arrow and immediately take up the rifle, without traveling the distance that separated these different weapons in the past..."<sup>8</sup> This homogenization is the historical work of capitalism that allows for the globalization of the conditions of exploitation and survival, but also their possible revolutionary overthrow.

*«The bourgeoisie has played an eminently revolutionary role in history. (...) In short, instead of exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions, it has introduced exploitation that is open, direct, and shameless.» Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, p. 11, Marxist Science Publishing, Paris, 1999.*

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*Translated by IsaCR.*

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<sup>8</sup>On the website: <https://www.marxists.org/francais/trotsky/livres/hrrusse/hrr01.htm>

-> « A propos du concept de bureaucratie », Matériaux Critiques N°10, sur le site : [https://matériauxcritiques.wixsite.com/mon\\_site/textes](https://matériauxcritiques.wixsite.com/mon_site/textes)

Schematic representation of the succession of forms of social production.

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