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THE ASIATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION: Sources, Development and Critique
in the Writings of Karl Marx (1975, Van Gorcum)

Rev. 15/01/1984 in LK's Notebook

This book is written 3 years after the EN, and is actually an extension of it, but unfortunately also a retreat. For example: the Foreword at once (xeroxed separately) denies that his notebooks contended that Engels flattened out the work of Marx. I'm also saying nothing about Marx's Notebooks on Kovalski since that has also been separately xeroxed.

Now then, whatever pressure led LK to retreat from the position that there certainly was a great difference between Marx and Engels, it is also clear at this point what he intends his own critique of KM to be: the present work is the (1st step) in the critique of the beginning of the development in the whole of political society and economy" (p.3), that is to say, he is mainly concerned with it as discipline and with showing, evidently, that political economy is not only applicable to capitalism but to other societies. If even that were true, it could not match the greater truth, that Marx was not, NOT, writing a critique of political economy, but a critique of the society that has to be uprooted because among other things it gave birth to political economy. In a word, (what is missing is revolution)

What LK is doing, therefore, outside of the great things of revealing Marx's Notebooks, is the secondary thing of sources. BUT by sources LK evidently has in mind the literature that was available to Marx, beginning with what the 17th c. wrote on Oriental society (Ch. 1).

When LK moves to Ch. 2, "From the Oriental Society to the Asiatic Mode of Production," something is very well known, like the writings by Marx on India and China in 1853, but again no word there about the revolution in China that led to the 1857-59 Grundrisse writings. On the contrary, it seems to me that LK is making a distinction between epochs on the one hand, and form -- economic-social forms -- on the other, which doesn't shed any new light and takes away something from that magnificent part in the Grundrisse. What he continues to be great in is when he shows the deeper and greater grasp and development of the whole concept of Asiatic mode of production in Marx as against 10th rate epigone spets like Wittfogel. Also (p.96) the question that the first form of property was communal.

"The epochs to which Marx made reference in the Preface to the CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY are ~~classified~~ ~~placed~~ into the discussion of the corresponding relations of production; in the Orient, the communal, in ancient Greece and Rome, the slave relation; in the medieval period of Europe, the servile and in modern capitalism, that of wage labor. The broad outlines of the scheme are then set aside, once having been set forth, and in his further analysis of the process of social production, it is the actual relations that concerned him, as opposed to the categories." (p. 96)

The footnote refers to CAPITAL, III, ch. 47, para 2.

(10) Not categories but necessary social forms, the actual relations

2 pages down, (p.98), he shows just how explicit Marx was in contrasting the relationship of labor to the soil in the Asiatic mode of production. In his notes on Kovalovski which makes LK correctly conclude, "In the Asiatic mode, the cultivator of the land is bound by custom to the community, he is not bound to the soil by his overlord."

(LK tries hard to keep up references to Karl Korsch and in this specific case (p.102, fn.) where he contrasts Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx on the question of civil society, he adds "KK adds Ibn Khaldun to this line of thought." LK is in the academic field; just as the EN was dedicated to KK, this one is dedicated to "Joseph Needham, author of Science and Civilization in China.")

On p.106, where he continues with tracing the relation of labor to the soil from the communal form of property to the Indian caste system, (fn. 2), LK writes: "Marx therefore separated ~~the~~ in the Asiatic mode of production the relations of production in agr. and the relations of production in agr. Thus he cancelled out the earlier identification of town and countryside in the Orient; the reference in Bernier was now set aside in regard to the cities of India."

The most significant part of the Ch. 2 is the excursions into history, "Historical Excurses" to which he led up the question of family and the relations of public and private sphere in Hegel. Marx differentiated the family from the society and attacked efforts to reduce the society to the family, (to identify the two, to explain the course of social history by categories of family life and relations." (109) At which point the reference is to Hegel, Phil of Right, para 261, the reference to Marx on Morgan, Phere and Maine, the Grundrisse, and the whole idea of the state and land ownership. The first time I see a reference to revolution in our period, that is to say, "the revolutionary movement in the passage from capitalism to socialism," which is a reference to the 1st discussion of the Asiatic mode of prod. in the 1920s. But again, the ~~excursion~~ seems oblivious of woman! The end result of this composition (the ref. is to the state and village community) is ~~not~~ the establishment of a category, but the critique of a human condition in the social life of the great empires in Asia... The question of the identification of community property and state property, coupled with the separation of both from private property is part of the theses." The ref. to EN p.24, ends the section of Marx's notes on Morgan, but I happened to have ~~included~~ some pages back in the same section, p.210, bottom, Marx's ref. to Plutarch 'on the lowly and the poor' and the fact that the chiefs of the gentes being in conflict with those of the masses.

Handwritten notes and signatures at the bottom of the page, including "v/s", "Laws", "a Cr.", "a Character", and "v/w".

I should have also referred to p.101 both in the fact that LK stresses Marx's emphasis on the Grundriss on "the community is the proprietor, but the community has the form of the state the overarching community of the state. Furthermore, the whole series of negations in the Oriental community: the negation of individual prop. in land, the negation of inputs from the outside, the non-distinction between rent and tax, the necessity of the village to pay taxes to the sovereign, the state therefore forces the village by extra-economic means, to pay." Again, the rel. between Grundriss and Capital, vol. 3, is stated there.

(Ref. to Marx's letter to Schweitzer on Proudhon's 1-24-65, pp. 102-8, continued in the letter to Engels, p.153.)

On p.114 right after LK begins his "Historical Excurses," and refers to Proudhon's Tokel, he once again stresses correctly that Marx had characterized the form of property ownership among the ancient Germans as ind. generic. The owner in each case is the same: ownership and mode of production are not the same.

Back in the section on 1853, p.87 especially, LK brings out Engels' question in the letter to Marx June 6, 1853 (pp. 76-7, SC) on how Marx while incorporating some of it, transformed it both on the question of just how much climate and territorial relations effected the whole question of artificial irrigation through canals and waterworks, the basis of Oriental agr. Marx changed Engels' formulation: Marx tended with a question of the means of prod. irrigated agr., Engels with a question of the form of property. Marx proceeded from the abstract to the concrete... thus the geographic or natural factor in Marx's conception, is transformed in a practical way into a cultural factor; nature is appropriated by man.

Marx did transform Engels' ref. to artificial irrigation of agr. even as Bonnier's idea of "Oriental despotism" into something totally opposite (p.10) LK does the same thing in relationship to how Marx "uses" Hegel (these pp. are being xeroxed).

Ch. 3, which is on the period 1851-1867, is well-known and need not be summarized except the reference to the critique of Rosdolsky (p.174) which is being xeroxed, and in any case I think Rosdolsky is right and LK wrong. And precisely because he is getting more and more academic and "skipping" revolution, as well as doing an awful lot of repetition from the 21 which is far far superior to this, I will skip all the way to the final Ch. 7, which is his critique.

changed
Eng's formulation
from 9. on property
to "means of prod. irrigated agr."
1853

Quasi
Stalinist
yesterdays

Ch. 7 "Principles and Critique of the Asiatic Mode of Prod." pp.286-339

Here is its division:

A. The Asiatic Mode of Prod.: A Systematic Outline

He lists 24 points, as we actually see the whole in the 24th point: "The great period of social evolutionary theory was the 19th c. in Europe when the progress of mankind was evidently proved. The weakness of the theory at the time was its simplism, its naive progressivism, its advocacy of a grand teleology which, it was proposed, aimed at the establishment of the contemporary social state of the European model...the theory was uncritical, save for the vague averments by L.H. Morgan...on the contrary, the theory of the Asiatic mode of prod. contains the theory of transition from the primitive to the civilized condition on the one hand, and the critique of the latter on the other...the theory of the Asiatic mode of prod. contains the theory of social evolution, in its important phase, the transition from the primitive life. It's at once critical of the evolutionary process, and judges its outcome. The end of the Asiatic mode of prod. is the product of colonialism; the aim of its theory is the critique of the latter." (pp.285-6)

Cr. of Colonialism

B. Modes of Production, Their Relation and Change

1. Capitalist and Asiatic Modes of Production
2. The Place of the AMP in the System of KM

LK seems not able to draw a dialectic from a chronology. Thus, though he seems a continuity from 1844 EP Ms. to the Theses on Feuerbach and from reading Kovalesky to finding Morgan's Ancient Society, instead of drawing to a logical conclusion what he had discovered in the EP of Marx in contrast to what Engels had drawn from them, he seems completely stuck: "Marx did not bring his studies in ethnology to a close, and died soon thereafter; therefore, we have no relation of the theory of the Asiatic mode of prod. and the theory of the gens. Engels simply supplanted the theory of the AMP which he expressed in the Origin of the Family, EP&S (1844)." (p.302) (Though he's very good at exposing Wittfogel, he's very wrong in arguing on the ground Wittfogel created about Marx and Engels, instead of seeing the Cold War warrior) "He (EE) did not attempt to make any synthesis in the QS. He dropped the line of inquiry of 1877 into the theory of the village commune in favor for the theory of the gens as the explanation of the origin of civilization, political society and the state." (302)

4:10
Joh. & Wittfogel
1877
Village
Commune

LK's point seems to be "the transition from the philosophic postulation of the social being of mankind, or from the social nature of humanism to the empirical evidence for its substantiation was made in the conceptions of Marx. The transition is implicit in Marx's concern with the primitive communities, their destruction in the transition to political and civil societies, the distortion of the human character in consequence of that destruction; he called attention to the continued existence of the communal life even in the civilized condition of mankind and he called for the recreation of the archaic communal relations in a society of higher form not yet achieved." (302-3) And he keeps insisting, or rather limiting himself, to social vs. individual by talking about "the social nature of mankind" (as if) that were all there was to the 1844 ms. and as if "the premise of his system of philosophic anthropology" which is a hell of a reduction of Marx's 1844 new continent of thought, was then enriched by the results of "researches in empirical ethnology..." (here begins 304-5, section C, xeroxed. Critique of Th. of AMP

14566

C. Critique of Theory of AMP

The only thing that he brings in that is "new" is the fragment that was appended to the 1957 Introduction on Greek Art, as if that were just culture. And he's certainly wrong when he says "Marx expressed the development of society as an evolutionary theory, the form of its expression was that of the economic formation of society" (309) thereby skipping both the Tai'ping Revolution and the very thing that he does quote, and that there is not a 1:1 relationship between "modes of production and art." In fact, as will see later, the idea that Marx uses not the methodology of all these new researchers, but sticks to Hegelian dialectic as developed by himself from the very start in 1843, seems not to move him from this reference to philosophical anthropology.

(Incidentally, he has a very important ftn. on Hans Kohn's ~~notion~~ idea of nationalism, but seems not really to fully understand and even more fantastically that is the very great author who took time out to compliment R&L on my analysis of deGaulle.)

On p. 322, in point 5 he does throw in the word dialectic, if not revolutionary: "The theory of evolution of human society is a dialectic; in it is posited on the one side the village community and on the other the city. Behind this parallel development lies a problem of the relation of the human individual and society that has its beginning in the writings of Marx in the 1840s." (321) And it's exactly there where instead of understanding the revolutionary dialectic of Marx both in 1840s and in 1870s, the social vs. individual is what is the red thread of LK who then ends agreeing with Marx's analysis of the Robinson Crusoes. Instead, once he shows that it is not a biological, but a social relationship that is at issue, he writes "This set of conceptions lead in the direction of the gens as the driving force of history in the theory of L.H. Morgan. The gens as Marx took up the process is not itself the driving force, its negation, its dissolution is the driving force." from the earliest scientific-materialist writings of Marx. From the two theories of humanity emerged: the determination of the human being by the mediate relation to nature through labor, and the determination of the human through relations in society. These culminate in the determination of differences in historical epochs. The two theories of mankind are united in their end result, which was the formulation of the (here we xerox p. 324)

in this context is social vs biological, not vs. individ which is social