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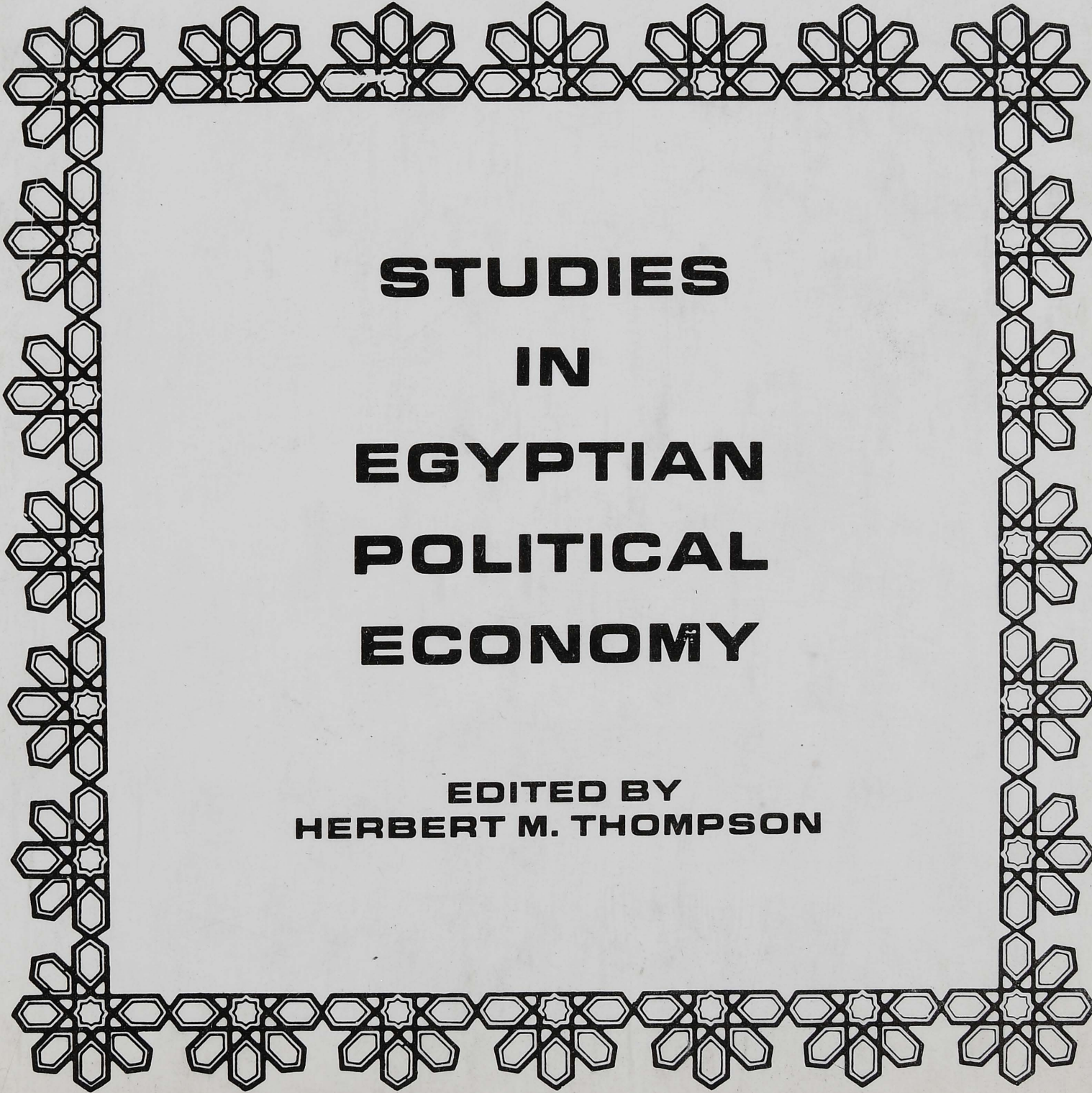
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CAIRO PAPERS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE



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STUDIES IN EGYPTIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

EDITED BY
HERBERT M. THOMPSON

Political Economy, Monolithic or Eclectic?
An Epilogue and a Forecast

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Editor, Cairo Papers

If political economy as a discipline is defined in terms of social scientists who examine historically and cross-culturally the nature, dynamics, modes of development and transformation of political economies in their wider societal context, then this discipline is defined in terms of its subject-matter, its focus of study and the residual 'knowledge' from prior studies. If so, then any historian, sociologist, anthropologist, political scientist, economist, or even social psychologist could be said to be a political economist to the extent that he or she examines political economies in being, in development, and in transformation. Such studies from the members of any of the standard social science 'disciplines' in academia would contribute to the growing body of knowledge about political economies. Ostensibly, the focus of each would be on how work is organized socially for the purpose of want provision, and on the structures of power and authority, the class or other social formations as functions of the organization of work for livelihood, and how these change.

Within this broad conception of political economy as a discipline, no one would be excluded on the basis of what traditional discipline

constituted his or her formal training and by the same token none would be excluded because of his or her perspective or frame of reference. That is, positivists, Weberians, Marxists (orthodox or new), rationalists, structural-functionalists and so on would be classifiable as 'political economists' insofar as their focus of study was more or less consistently riveted on this subject-matter in its wider context.

The point here is that given this concept of political economy it is not one's prior discipline, nor even one's ideology or perspective that decides who is a political economist or what constitutes a contribution to political economy; it is one's focus and its persistence. If this is the case, then the body of 'knowledge' which results from this broad conception of the field - even its descriptive content where the focus, for example, is the rise, development, fall of feudalism - will be (as it is) a conflicting mosaic of different 'truths'. One need only compare the feudalism of Perry Anderson (1974) with that of Marc Bloch (1974) (two different transformation theorists) to see these contradictory 'truths' about what feudalism 'was' (descriptively and prototypically) about the conditions necessitating its origin, development and its spatial diffusion in Europe East and West, above and below the Danube. For Anderson, feudalism was a dialectical process of an unfolding of that which lay latent in the situation following the Roman slave mode of production. It was seen as a dialectical unfolding, and the invasions of armed hordes into central Europe, as into Eastern Europe north of the Danube, were seen as 'brakes' to retard the development of

feudalism in some areas of Europe. For Bloch, however, these same invasions were described as primary causes of feudal land tenure, the latter's social and political formations (vassals in hierarchy of fiefs as related to serfs). What else would cause feudalism when the latter is defined as a military caste founded on agriculture for reasons of defense (Kennedy, 1970)?

In the subject-matter definitions, the resultant body of 'knowledge' cannot hope to be other than what it is now: the contradictory residues from the studies of all and sundry scholars who contributed to it as Marxist revisionists, as neo-Marxists, as Weberians, as pragmatists, as positivists, as phenomenologists, and so on. Each of these orientations practises its own rules of what to include and exclude from observation (under 'relevance'), from analysis, generalization, and interpretations. Any contrastive analysis of how first Marx, then Durkheim described the conclusion that the descriptive, and explanatory results we see in Marx and Durkheim are remarkably dissimilar.

The usual academic disciplines in social science, as disciplines, are singularly unimportant in explaining this mosaic or patchwork quilt of knowledge I have briefly instanced here. Of major importance, however, is the fact that nearly everyone of the usual academic disciplines social science has its Weberians, its Durkheimians, its Marxists, its Kantians, its neo-phenomenologists, its positivists and structural functionalists. These, not sociology; these, not anthropology; these, not economics; these, not political science; these, not history or histori-

ography are the roots of all the primary differences to be found throughout the literature of social science. Factions and schools of thought exist within each traditional formal 'discipline' as do the controversies and issues. For this reason no formal discipline is homogeneous in its theory, its methodology or in its data taken as descriptive content. The same state of affairs runs throughout all the literature of 'psychology' and social psychology as well.

The present condition under eclecticism seems to be one of the discord without dialogue between these different schools of thought or inquiry. If Lazarsfeld, a sociologist, agrees with Samuelson, an economist it is not because the former is a sociologist and the latter is an economist. It is because both are positivists.

If political economy is defined in terms of a single set of concepts of society, solidarity, and change (say historical materialism), and if the methodology is in some sense 'dialectical,' then it is not the subject-matter or focus which is the classifying agent but rather a single world-view. Thus, no Weberian (who may be in sociology, or anthropology, or any other 'discipline') could be classified as a political economist except as he or she were to undergo conversion. The same may be said for Parsonians or structural functionalists generally. If political economy is defined within the verstehen frame of reference of, say, Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, or Max Weber with a major emphasis on symbols, and patterns of meanings in history, then obviously no Marxist would classify as a political economist except as one would

convert to historical relativism. In either case, the residue of 'knowledge' would be roughly homogenous since only one school of thought would be involved in the production of this knowledge. In such a case where one persuasion was the classifying agent, then all outside knowledge could not consistently be allowed an entrance into the 'discipline'.

This is all by way of saying that the problem of multiple but divergent 'truths' in social science as a whole is not going to be solved either by the eclecticism we find in this issue of the Cairo Papers in the paper given by Dr. Enid Hill or in the monolithic position given in the paper by Dr. Berbert Thompson. This problem may have some hope of solution by defining the divisive issues between these various perspectives (partly classified by Dr. Hill) and by cutting across diverse perspectives to do so. But eclecticism in methodology is no solution at all, and this is what we see advocated by Dr. Hill. The problem for political economy is to resolve these methodological issues.

What sparked this epilogue was a certain irritation concerning the position taken by Dr. Thompson and a directly opposite position taken by Dr. Hill. On the one hand there appear in eclecticism no rules of exclusion and one simply opts for one or another methodology as purposes dictate (Hill). This results of course in added chaos in the body of knowledge. On the other hand, to define political economy in terms of a single methodology of historical materialism (Thompson) is to practice several rules of exclusion with reference to what other divergent schools

take to be the relevant descriptive and analytical variables. The end result for social science as a whole is exactly the same: a failure to develop criteria by which, through research or practice, these divisive issues may be resolved, and a continuation of social science knowledge in its present condition - that of greatly divergent descriptions and explanations of allegedly the same phenomena.

In the next volume of the CAIRO PAPERS there will appear a three-fold joining of issues, or an attempt to do so. The plan is to present a critique of each of the two methodological positions taken in the present issue of the CAIRO PAPERS and to indicate two key issues which must be resolved in the study of political economies: the first is the problem of how we initially conceptualize society as a whole; the second is the problem of the determinative status of cultural phenomena in explaining the emergence, development and transformation of any mode of production and its social formations. This will be followed by rejoinders from Dr. Thompson and Dr. Hill with the view towards finishing the presentation with a jointly written summation which would also present, hopefully, the outlines of an alternative methodology which is neither eclectic nor exclusively particularistis.

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