

# Asiatic Mode of Production: Considerations on Ancient Egypt

*Andrea Zingarelli*

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<sup>1</sup> – 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

3 Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 1–20.

4 Krader 1975, p. xii; Bailey and Llobera 1981, p. 23. O'Leary 1989, p. 132, points out the many ideological and theoretical goals that Marx and Engels pursued in their publications on the subject.

mode of production<sup>5</sup> is found in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and the formulations associated with the Asiatic mode are found in the section of the *Formen* that Marx worked on between 1857–8 in preparation for *Capital* and *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.<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

Another difficulty lies in the fact that studying the Asiatic mode of production is like trying to raise the dead<sup>9</sup> given that the notion was denied, declared

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5 Also, in *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'.

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

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. 462 ff.

8 Godelier 1977, p. 33. The French edition of this book was published under the title *Sur les sociétés précapitalistes* by Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1970.

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.

anti-Marxist and officially banned in the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> It was later misused by Wittfogel in his monumental<sup>11</sup> *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* in order to emphasise the hydraulic feature of the societies where the Asiatic mode of production came into existence,<sup>12</sup> and to propose that when said mode exists in non-hydraulic societies it must have been copied or imposed by a hydraulic society.<sup>13</sup> Wittfogel's critique was aimed at Marxist historiography and to some extent at the concept of mode of production, but above all it was a critique of the Soviet system.<sup>14</sup> Wittfogel kept the geographical determinism, underscoring political-administrative aspects, and eliminated the socio-economic phenomena, which are only addressed in piecemeal descriptions. The problem was that this idea of the hydraulic society was a vehicle for the transmission of a crude and simplified notion of the Asiatic mode of production.<sup>15</sup>

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- 10 Godelier 1977, p. 9. For the preceding period, see esp. Sofri 1969, pp. 81–103. In Tiflis, May 1930, several scholars discussed the Asiatic mode of production and the extension of this category to the modern East. During the Leningrad debate some months later (1931) – at the behest of the Association of Marxist Orientalists – the failure of the Chinese revolution of 1927 was ascribed to Asiatic stagnation, thus questioning that position and the theoretical concept behind it; participants supported the feudal or the slaveholding interpretation, Bailey and Llobera 1981, p. 52. For a detailed and complex analysis of the arguments brought to bear in that debate see Dunn 1982, esp. pp. 7–37. Some scholars continued to hold that it was possible to consider the Asiatic mode of production for Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. See Sofri 1969, pp. 117 ff. Stalin does not mention it in his *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (published as part of *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*) of 1938. However, some English-speaking Marxists continue to mention it, such as Namboodiripad 1952. A recently published essay by the same author values the points Marx made in the *Formen* regarding India, Namboodiripad 2010, pp. 23–31.
- 11 Published in 1957 by Yale University Press, New Haven. The edition we used is by Vintage Books, New York, 1981. Bartra 1975, p. 28, remarks on the number of pages: 450, the number of chapters: 10, subchapters: 58 and subtitles: 193. Bartra 1975, pp. 21–37, devotes part of this book to discussing the theory of hydraulic societies and the historical cases he cites are from ancient Mexico; this section was originally published in the review *Tlatoani*, 21 in 1967. For a review, see Vidal-Naquet 1964.
- 12 It is remarkable that, as O'Leary 1989, p. 139, notes, Wittfogel's subtitle to one of his chapters is 'Marx, Engels and Lenin Accept the Asiatic Concept'; given that Marx created the notion, the idea that he would accept it is less than generous.
- 13 Godelier 1977, p. 148.
- 14 See Sofri 1969, pp. 133–47, esp. p. 135.
- 15 Zamora 1997, p. 17. O'Leary 1989, p. 141, explains that it was mostly orthodox Marxists who agreed with Wittfogel on some issues.

Based on empirical evidence and passages in Jones and Volume 1 of *Capital*, Struve – a Soviet scholar who was removed from the traditional European schools – denied the existence of the Asiatic mode of production but proposed the existence of a dual exploitation related to two different social groups: the agricultural and the slaveholding exploitation.<sup>16</sup> The discussion on the slaveholding social order in ancient societies was central in Soviet historiography, although by the late 1940s the review *Vestnik drevnei istorii* – Journal of Ancient History – already considered that the bulk of the working population in the Near East were peasants. The latter publications were written under the influence of the *Formen*, which were available at the time in the USSR.<sup>17</sup>

Later, Hindess and Hirst attempted to prove that the concept of Asiatic mode of production had no place in the Marxist theory of modes of production.<sup>18</sup> The authors made it emphatically clear that it is a theoretical notion and that it must be constructed based on general Marxist concepts (productive forces, relations of production, etc.) and not based on the writings of Marx about Asia; that is to say, in their view one must build on what is written in *Capital* rather than taking into consideration the journalistic articles and the letters on Asia.<sup>19</sup> The authors assume that the basic form of pre-capitalist rent is the feudal rent as labour rent, rent in kind and rent in money, questioning Marx's postulate on the coexistence of rent and tax in Asiatic states, an issue we will address below.

For his part, Anderson found theoretical and methodological inconsistencies in the understanding of the Asiatic mode of production.<sup>20</sup> In particular, the author points at the notion of the self-sufficient village with its own communal property as the main empirical flaw in Marx's construction. The fundamental elements of the self-sufficient village are isolation and distance from the affairs of state. Anderson also points out that the presence of a powerful and centralised state presupposes a highly developed class stratification, while the pre-eminence of village property implies a social structure that is practically pre-classist or classless. The author insists that the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the village communities is incompatible in practice with the

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16 Mandel 1971, p. 120.

17 Dunn 1982, p. 66. The title of Dunn's book is almost identical to the title of chapter 9 in the aforementioned *Oriental Despotism* by Wittfogel: 'The Rise and Fall of the Theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production'.

18 Hindess and Hirst 1975, p. 3.

19 Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 180–1.

20 Anderson 1979, pp. 487, 489.

importance of public irrigation works carried out by the state. In his view, the combination of a strong and despotic state with egalitarian village communities is intrinsically improbable.

Wickham has questioned the Asiatic mode, stating in no uncertain terms that it has no analytical validity whatsoever. He argues that it is very rare to find autarkic villages next to a state that collects taxes, owns all the land and carries out large-scale public works. Wickham also considers that the political and legal components of the concept are too specific. Thus, for this author feudalism would also encompass the East, since all class societies experiment with some form of land property and coercive extraction of rent.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Dunn<sup>22</sup> seems to suggest that the hypothesis of the Asiatic mode of production was abandoned by Marx in his later years and must not be considered as a 'full member' in the sequence of social orders. Moreover, in Dunn's view any revival of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production will depend on data and considerations not endorsed by Marx and Engels. This author, however, positions himself as neo-Asiatic, supporting the idea of a pre-feudal stage instead of a slaveholding social order.

For his part, Banaji<sup>23</sup> considers that the bi-polar model of village communities and a powerful state fails for three reasons: (1) The self-sufficiency of villages is a myth (he refers only to India); (2) The notion that the Asiatic sovereign did not confront powerful landowners and that there was no significant type of class formation is not true despite the fact that this was claimed by Richard Jones and implied by Marx; (3) The issue of the absence of private property of land is based on the repetition of the central doctrine of Orientalist tradition without any kind of in-depth analysis. In any case, Banaji proposes the characterisation of Asiatic regimes under the tributary mode rather than the feudal

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21 Wickham 1994b, p. 49. In Asia, state taxes would have coexisted with more typical feudal relations, those in which landowners extract rent from their tenants; thus the state would always have an antagonistic relationship with said extraction.

22 Dunn 1982, pp. 85–6.

23 Banaji 2010, pp. 17–19. He makes a distinction between his perspective and that of Haldon by pointing out that the latter considers that the difference between tax and rent is purely formal since both are modes of surplus appropriation, and thus variations of a common mode of production: the tributary mode. It is worth noting that Haldon has developed the concept of tributary mode in greater depth than other scholars. As we shall see below, the name of tributary mode was also used by Amin in the sense of common mode of production, and Amin himself remarks that the term was probably used by Jiro Hoyakawa, a Japanese Marxist, in 1934.

mode, although he does establish a difference between tax and rent and between European feudalism and the Asiatic systems.<sup>24</sup>

So far, the perspectives against the Asiatic mode of production range from the invalidity of the concept from its very formulation to the idea that it ceased to constitute a part of the thought of Marx and Engels in their later writings. Indeed, for some Marxists the Asiatic mode of production was nothing more than a display of euro-centric arrogance on the part of Marx and Engels, a theoretical and methodological mistake based on the incorrect interpretation of Asian history that was later abandoned by the authors.<sup>25</sup>

The work of Childe, carried out in the 1940s and 1950s, is an exception in an era in which the Asiatic mode of production was not even mentioned.<sup>26</sup> Especially noteworthy is his publication of *Man Makes Himself*,<sup>27</sup> where he salvages some of the theses of the Asiatic mode of production, such as the transition from simple agrarian communities to states with professions and classes.<sup>28</sup> According to Blackledge, Childe showcases the concept of the Asiatic mode of production in contrast with the prevailing tendency since it was banned.<sup>29</sup>

It was Maurice Godelier who understood that this mode of production was situated in the transition from a classless into a class society.<sup>30</sup> Godelier recognises the unity of contradictory elements in the exploitation by a minority – a superior community exploiting particular communities – which exhibits the ultimate form of classless societies in the form of village communities together with a nascent form of class society.

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24 Banaji 2010, p. 22.

25 Tan 2000, p. 1.

26 Harris 1994, pp. 31–2.

27 Childe 1936.

28 Bartra 1975, p. 23, considers that Wittfogel's description of the process by which the nuclei of hydraulic societies emerge is taken from Childe.

29 Blackledge 2006, p. 101, also refers to *What Happened in History*, where Childe develops the structural contradictions of Asiatic states in an attempt to explain the rise and fall of the slave mode of production associated with states such as Athens and Rome (Childe 1942). This author 2006, pp. 97–103, cites Childe's authority on the Asiatic mode when analysing modes of production and social transitions.

30 Godelier 1971, p. 7. Originally published by the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Marxistes (Paris, 1964) as *La notion de 'mode de production asiatique' et les schémas marxistes d'évolution des sociétés*. In English, see Godelier 1978. Godelier posits that Marx and Engels revisited the general hypothesis according to which human history is the transition from a classless into a class social organisation. He cites Marx's letter to Weydemeyer of 5 March 1852, in Marx 1983, p. 58. Also in this line of thought, Bartra 1975, pp. 87–8 and 110–12.

We can certainly view the Egyptian state as a pristine state<sup>31</sup> since it exists autonomously from the beginning, born of the transition toward political forms<sup>32</sup> from a classless society – labelled with the misnomer of ‘primitive’ – in which the surplus extraction is either absent or non-systematic and with a prevalence of familial and communal forms of organisation.<sup>33</sup> The problem of this transition has been addressed in an effort to understand how the state comes to take on certain controls, in particular that of land ownership<sup>34</sup> and how the proto-states of Upper Egypt extended their domination over large swaths of the Egyptian territory starting from their mythical bases.

Godelier made the concept of the Asiatic mode of production extensive to Egypt in the Valley of the Nile late in the fourth millennium, as well as to different eras and societies in Europe (Etruscan or Creto-Mycenaean royalty), in black Africa (the kingdoms of Mali and Ghana, the royalty of Bamun and Cameroon), and in pre-Columbian America (Central American and Andean civilisations).<sup>35</sup> Indeed, starting in the 1960s, with the emphasis on the *Formen*, the West revived the concept of the Asiatic mode of production in studies on pre-Columbian America, black Africa and China, which lead to the proposal of other denominations such as communal-exploitative mode or village despotic mode.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the 1960s ushered in new writings on the Asiatic mode of production, and revived the debate among English, French and Soviet Marxists. Hobsbawm

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31 According to Zamora 1997, pp. 12–13, it is possible that Marx even gave the Asiatic mode of production a certain historical location: the Asiatic Near East of the first cities, communal water works, temples and palaces. Although that could possibly include pharaonic Egypt, it would exclude China and India, who belong to the group of early riverside civilisations, but are located further East.

32 According to Krader 1975, p. 9, this would be one of the directions pointed at by the theory of the Asiatic mode of production: the transition ‘[f]rom primitive economy to political economy and from primitive society to political society’.

33 According to the *Formen*, there are various alternative paths for development in the transition away from this primitive communal system: the *Oriental way*, the *ancient way*, the *Germanic way* and the *Slavic way*. He thus broadens the range of class societies: ancient slaveholding societies, feudal societies and *bourgeois* societies; the latter type is limited to Western and Central Europe and described in *The German Ideology* and the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx 1964, p. 32.

34 As Wickham 1994b, p. 62, remarks, it is hard to say how the state came to take control of all the land, but it is certainly related to the circumstances of conquest.

35 Godelier 1971, p. 43.

36 Chesneaux 1964, pp. 33–55; Zamora 1997, pp. 31–2, calls it the neo-Asiatic mode; Dunn 1982, p. 103, also assigns this denomination to anti-slaveholding arguments.

wrote the introduction to the first English edition of the *Formen*,<sup>37</sup> and at the same time George Lichtheim published an article analysing the Asiatic mode of production.<sup>38</sup> Various books and articles on the subject were published in the section of Asiatic and African studies of the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Marxistes<sup>39</sup> and *La Pensée*.

The arguments of Amin merit a more detailed review because, though briefly, they deal specifically with Egypt<sup>40</sup> and follow Marx in their treatment of state centralisation as an imposition of nature, ecology and the large-scale hydraulic works as well as for the purpose of surplus extraction from the peasantry.<sup>41</sup> Amin even points to the persistence of the relative autonomy of the village community and small families. With the four river valleys in mind (Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and the Yellow River Valley), Amin concludes that irrigation allows for more productivity and population density, which results in identical civilisations. The tributary form – that theocratic-bureaucratic class-state – emerges from the communities and imposes itself as organiser. Thus far, there are no major differences aside from the denomination of tributary form.

Amin adds to these considerations an interesting note on the rapid decline of the village community and its near disappearance, a question also addressed by Marx in the *Formen*;<sup>42</sup> nevertheless, the village community would persist as a family community, but ceding the legal property of the land to the superior community as the state becomes more powerful.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, Amin analyses the despotism of the class-state in terms of its 'consideration of the common interest' and 'organisation of useful works'.<sup>44</sup>

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37 Marx 1964.

38 A lucid review of Marx's alleged changes with respect to the Asiatic mode of production is in Lichtheim 1963, pp. 86–112.

39 For example, Suret-Canale 1961, p. 101, posits that it is possible to find similarities between the Asiatic mode of production and the mode of production prevailing in Africa. See also Suret-Canale 1964. The Hungarian scholar Tokei gave a lecture on the Asiatic mode of production in June 1962 at the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Marxistes.

40 To a large extent, he equates Egypt to China, Amin 1976, pp. 20–1, 24 and 27.

41 For an in-depth analysis of Amin with respect to Egypt, see Campagno 2003.

42 Marx 1964, pp. 82–3. For example: 'Production itself, the advance of population (which also falls under the head of production), in time necessarily eliminates these conditions, destroying instead of reproducing them, etc., and as this occurs the community decays and dies, together with the property relations on which it was based. The Asiatic form necessarily survives the longest and most stubbornly'.

43 Amin 1976, p. 53.

44 He seems to posit the idea of a dominant class with regard to the state, Amin 1976, pp. 19–20 and 23.

Amin's benevolent view of the dominant class is remarkable, especially with respect to the peasantry. Indeed, Amin posits that this society is despotic for groups like free craftsmen and servile production, but 'not with respect to peasants'. Despotism is only verifiable when an external force (the Barbarian invaders) appropriate the state or when 'the state disappears to the benefit of feudal autonomies which then begin to resemble feudal Europe'.<sup>45</sup>

In a departure from Marx, Amin states that the Egyptian village community is not much more restrictive than those of medieval Europe. However, later on he establishes an ethical division between the feudal lords who oppress their peasants without control and the Oriental state which is benevolent toward peasants. Amin holds a clear position with regard to the excellence of Egypt and China as models (achieved tributary formations) and the failed attempts at imitation by other regions (peripheral capitalist formations). Feudal Europe belongs in this last category, although the lack of centralisation liberates merchant sectors and the expansion of trade coupled with the disintegration of feudal relations will give rise to capitalism. That is to say, the great, rich, resilient and benevolent tributary formation of ancient Egypt could not have given rise to a system as prejudicial as capitalism.

On another note, the field of research on the Near East undertook an attempt to revisit the notion of the Asiatic mode of production evoking the articulation of two modes of production: the palace (or temple) mode and the village mode. This bisectorial model had been previously introduced in the 1950s by the Russian scholar Diakonoff,<sup>46</sup> although it was published in the West at a later time. Diakonoff belonged to the so-called School of Leningrad,<sup>47</sup> and along with some colleagues he emphasised this two-part model based on land property rights and the notion of freedom in a legal sense.<sup>48</sup> In his studies on Oriental Antiquity,<sup>49</sup> Mario Liverani revisited the bisectorial model based on a paper

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45 Amin 1976, p. 53.

46 Diakonoff 1974. Sometime earlier, Diakonoff had discredited the views of a slaveholding social order that prevailed in the studies of ancient Russian societies; however, as pointed out by Dunn 1982, p. 75, he departs from the fundamental notion of the Asiatic mode of production when he considers that taxation does not constitute exploitation.

47 On Struve's influence on Diakonoff, see Dunn 1982, pp. 45–62.

48 Zamora 1997, p. 23. Also see Zamora for an in-depth analysis of the postulates of the School of Leningrad and the ideas held by other scholars on Oriental societies and the Asiatic mode of production after 1930.

49 It is unfair to overlook the works of orientalist such as Zaccagnini 1989; or the publications of the *Société Jean Bodin*, but that would constitute a separate undertaking.

published in 1976 titled 'Il modo di produzione',<sup>50</sup> and in subsequent works he brought together different historiographical positions, which led to a more widespread acceptance for scholars of the field.<sup>51</sup>

The work of Ciro Flamarion S. Cardoso, who published several studies on the Asiatic mode of production,<sup>52</sup> is an exceptional case in the research on ancient Egypt. In his studies, Cardoso makes use of Marx and Engels's ideas and concludes that although the concept cannot be understood in the terms under which it was conceived, it is still valid in order to explain the functioning of ancient societies and constitutes 'one of the pertinent forms in which to inquire into the history of these societies'.<sup>53</sup> The present study subscribes to Cardoso's view on this issue.

## I

Let us begin, then, by treating as valid the terms under which Marx detects in the *Formen* the presence of a unit identifiable as a state and the persistence of communal forms,<sup>54</sup> and by stating the pre-eminence of the relations of appropriation and exploitation, regardless of other intermediate, secondary, subordinate, subsidiary and derived forms that can be found together with that dominant mode.

When observing the functioning of the ancient Egyptian state and its persistence through pharaonic history, we perceive that statehood is manifest in the different spheres; indeed, it is hard to find spaces where the mark of the state is absent. Thus, this *all-encompassing unit* exists at the beginning of pharaonic history, and it is worth noting that it appears to be the superior and effective proprietor,<sup>55</sup> appropriating the labour of those individuals who own plots of

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50 Liverani 1976.

51 Liverani 1975.

52 Cardoso 1982, pp. 14–25, 1986, 1988, ch. 1 and 3 and critical vocabulary, 1990.

53 Cardoso 1990, pp. 13–14.

54 Anderson underscores that the *Formen* present as a new and decisive element the idea that, in Asia and other parts, self-sufficient villages held communal property of the land, and that this was veiled by the official affirmation that all land was state property, which Marx would label a year later as the Asiatic mode of production. We can agree with Anderson in that this is a decisive element, however, as we shall see below, Marx wrote in 1853 about the *village system*. Anderson 1979, p. 477, himself notes that Marx never confirmed this 'new conception' in his finished and published works.

55 Marx 1966, p. 453: '[T]he owner may be an individual representing the community, as in Asia, Egypt, etc.'

land in the village communities. This dominant mode of production would define the general guidelines of the totality: the Asiatic mode of production. The largest share of surplus labour belongs to the state and the ruling elites in the form of taxes and compulsory *corvée*. This would be the dominant form in which the power to dominate and to exploit articulates itself within the social whole and what permits its reproduction.

In this way, the state is the main recipient of the surplus production of immediate producers: land rent is perceived in the form of taxes.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the state or state institutions confront immediate producers as landowners, and in this sense there is a convergence of tax and rent.<sup>57</sup> Although they doubt its existence, Hindess and Hirst<sup>58</sup> call this mode of appropriation tax/rent couple, considering that it corresponds to a division of labour between producers and non-producers as well as to the absence of private property and of a ruling class that is not subsumed into the state. The authors also develop a series of deductions based on the relations contained in such a mode of appropriation, although they wonder whether those elements allow for an articulated combination of productive forces and relations of production. They conclude that they do not. The authors emphasise that such a mode of appropriation would require two different types of productive forces, the ones implied in independent peasant cultivation and the ones implied in communal cultivation. In their view, such an articulation would be arbitrary and this leads them to believe that the productive forces corresponding to the tax/rent couple did not exist. Of note is the emphasis on demonstrating the determinism of productive forces and the insistent denial of a mode of appropriation other than the general form of all state taxation. This denial leads to the notion that the tax/rent couple does not imply an exploitative mode of appropriation. In agreement with Anderson, the authors consider that it is impossible for a state to impose forms of production without giving rise to classes.

It is clear that the closed articulation proposed by Hindess and Hirst leads them to erroneously propose differences with regard to the division of labour and the cooperation among members of a commune, as well as the regulation of large-scale enterprises, something that independent peasants could not undertake in the authors' view.<sup>59</sup> The forms of communal property may vary in

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56 So much so that in Ramesside Egypt the term *shemw* is used to name both the harvest and the harvest tax; indeed, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the terms used for the different qualities of soil and the terms used for royal taxes.

57 Marx 1966, pp. 555–6.

58 Hindess and Hirst 1975, p. 192.

59 Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 194–6.

their historical presentation or even in their evolution, but not in their content, which is the relationship between the cultivator or direct producer and the land.<sup>60</sup> In the *Formen*, Marx himself points to individuals working independently in a plot of land assigned by the community as labouring in a form of communal property. Even though Marx underscores the collective nature of property for the sustenance of the communal entity, its survival is dependent on the fiscal pressure and the stronger or weaker control by the state bureaucracy, as well as on the contradictory relationships within the communities. Indeed, later (after Morgan),<sup>61</sup> Marx remarked on the dualism of certain communities – the so-called ‘agricultural community’ – which have both communal property of the land and parcellary exploitation by individual families.<sup>62</sup> In a letter responding to an inquiry by Zasulich written in 1881, Marx lays out the possibilities and conditions of Russian communes, and he refers to the decadence of primitive communities and to their different types, stating that they were all based on the natural kinship of their members, hence the existence of individual possession of plots of land, and that ‘[a]lthough arable land remains communal property, it is divided periodically between the members of the agricultural commune, so that each cultivator tills the fields assigned to him on his own account and appropriates as an individual the fruits thereof, whereas in more archaic communities production took place communally and only the yield was shared out’.<sup>63</sup> This primitive type of cooperative or collective and parcellary production is the contradictory expression of the development of these agricultural communities. In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels also dealt with the problem of the origin of classes and the state in the primitive community,<sup>64</sup> briefly

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60 Krader 1975, pp. 127–8.

61 Krader 1972. On reviewing the book *Ancient Society* by Morgan, Marx made comments with respect to village communities and integrated other works about India and earlier civilisations. At that time there was a debate on the persistence of those Oriental communes in tsarist Russia. See O’Leary 1989, pp. 128–9. Although some authors like Dunn 1982, pp. 85–6 hold that after Morgan and the consideration of further evidence, Marx abandoned his theory on the Asiatic mode of production, others such as Melotti 1977, p. 11, hold that those same ideas are expounded in Volume III of *Capital*, published by Engels in 1894, after Marx’s death.

62 See Godelier 1977, pp. 87–8.

63 Marx 1989, p. 351.

64 ‘The more the products of the community assumed the commodity form, that is, the less they were produced for their producers’ own use and the more for the purpose of exchange, and the more the original spontaneously evolved division of labour was superseded by exchange also within the community, the more did inequality develop in

mentioning the delegation of functions on certain individuals acting under the control of the agricultural commune and to the transformations that created the conditions for the emergence of classes.<sup>65</sup>

To a large extent, agricultural production in ancient Egypt originated from peasant and/or village organisation,<sup>66</sup> which in turn had its own conditions for reproduction that were increasingly encroached upon by the state over time.<sup>67</sup> The perception of this encroachment is nuanced by the irregular and erratic nature of the interventions and by the fact that agricultural villages were relatively isolated in the hinterland for part of the year, which allowed for the existence of a strong local identity<sup>68</sup> and a self-sufficient economy.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about those villages<sup>70</sup> or about the peasants

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the property owned by the individual members of the community, the more deeply was the ancient common ownership of the land undermined, and the more rapidly did the commune develop towards its dissolution and transformation into a village of smallholding peasants. For thousands of years Oriental despotism and the changing rule of conquering nomad peoples were unable to injure these old communities; the gradual destruction of their primitive home industry by the competition of products of large-scale industry brought these communities nearer and nearer to dissolution': Engels 1987, pp. 150–1.

- 65 In general, the notion of Oriental Despotism does not depart from arguments previously set forth by Marx, although Engels 1987, p. 168, is interested in explaining their evolution toward forms of production such as those based on slave labour.
- 66 Hoffman 1979, p. 17, characterises pharaonic Egypt as a 'village farming society'; Cardoso 1986, p. 16, n. 17 and 25–6, takes up Hoffman's idea, but also emphasises the principles of 'village community organisation'. For his part, Eyre 1999, p. 35, holds that 'Egypt was probably always a village society'. 'The domestic and peasant spheres probably had their own forms of organisation of productive processes and space, as well as agricultural practices and techniques that were almost assuredly different from those employed by the institutional sector, with which they maintained certain relations determined by state taxation'; Moreno García 2004b, p. 30.
- 67 Authors such as Menu and Harari 1974, p. 125, posit the centralised administrative organisation under one royal family as a function of two forces: economic *dirigisme* and the persistence of communal structures. Also, Janssen 1979b, pp. 507–8, considers the economic structure of ancient Egypt on the basis of two spheres; a local subsistence economy: village peasants and craftsmen made most of the goods necessary for subsistence and could exchange through barter with their neighbours. A second sphere of state redistribution rests on this basis of subsistence economy.
- 68 Eyre 2010, p. 291.
- 69 Eyre 1999, p. 36.
- 70 Eyre 1999, p. 35; Moreno García 2001, p. 429. Cardoso 1986, p. 10, warns against some authors' view of a 'real dis-balance' and suggest it is actually a 'dis-balance of sources'.

themselves aside from the relationships (including religious relationships) they established with state institutions which demanded that they relinquish part of the production and/or perform compulsory labour. Nonetheless, there is recognisable evidence of joint forms of labour, shared properties<sup>71</sup> and the regulation of justice in local councils, namely, communal or clannish modes of functioning<sup>72</sup> that survive in relation to labour, property and the administration of norms and standards.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, considering the importance of funerary and divine cults in that social formation, it can be surmised that during the Old Kingdom the crown assigned village lands and populations for the purpose of maintaining those cults. It would indeed appear that, at least during the Old Kingdom (ca. 2686–2125 BC),<sup>74</sup> the royals controlled religious centres in different regions and the pharaohs participated in religious activities.<sup>75</sup>

Royal decrees formalised these acts. Decrees could also be used to bestow immunity on lands dedicated to the funerary cult of certain individuals with the aim of assigning all the resources obtained therein to sustaining the cult. This implied that the state gave up the tax revenue and that the affected population was released from fulfilling personal obligations. However, such exemptions were subject to revocation and the goods deposited in temple warehouses could be utilised by royal envoys on official missions.<sup>76</sup>

The Coptic decrees illustrate the creation of a foundation<sup>77</sup> and the exemp-

71 For example, the Berlin papyrus 10470 of the Twelfth–Thirteenth Dynasties registers a slave woman as shared property of the village, Smither 1948, pp. 31–4.

72 The organisation of work in *phyles* registered during the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom, by which the labourers were divided into groups, each with a totemic name, seems to preserve ancient forms of organisation from prior times: Roth 1991, pp. 142 ff.

73 Cardoso 1986, p. 19, resorts to iconographic sources and texts from the second half of the third millennium to describe villages and their characteristic traits.

74 The artificial division between kingdoms and empires derives from a nineteenth-century convention dividing pharaonic history in empires/kingdoms – Reich – which began with Bunsen, a Prussian scholar, and was adopted in the twentieth century. Whatever the case may be, and despite the fragmentation of the sources, it is beyond discussion that state power, especially the central power, was the most visible entity in terms of organisation, bureaucratisation and appropriation of agricultural surplus during certain periods of pharaonic history.

75 Moreno García 2004b, pp. 32–4. For a different view, see Kemp 2006, pp. 60 ff.

76 Moreno García 2004b, p. 39. Moreno García 1996, pp. 161–5. See text on the tomb of Herkhuf at Qubbet el-Hawa, Strudwick 2005, p. 333; *Urk.* I, 131: 4–7.

77 Decree from Koptos (Koptos G) establishes the creation of a dominion for the maintenance of the cult of a royal statue. Due to the damaged condition of the papyrus, it is not

tion it received from the king.<sup>78</sup> Such foundations were in the orbit of the *per-shena*,<sup>79</sup> an administrative centre of the royal dominions, or of another dependency of the royal dominions.<sup>80</sup> According to Moreno García,<sup>81</sup> the *per-shena* was a building dedicated to agricultural tasks that housed labour<sup>82</sup> and means of production and was attached to state temples or agricultural facilities. By means of these decrees, the palace made sure that the economic activity of the temple was not affected. Thus, local temples in certain nomes became hubs of institutional agriculture and therefore of local power.<sup>83</sup>

From these and other royal decrees it can be gleaned that village chiefs were obliged to provide labourers to insure the cultivation of the crown's agrarian exploitations,<sup>84</sup> the compulsory *corvée*:

You shall divide the land of this *per-shena* together with the village chiefs<sup>85</sup> and the local councils,<sup>86</sup> of the fields under *corvée* and of *sened*-works.

*Urk.* I, 294: 15–16

A king's advice to his son to take care of the men of influence in the village, and his recommendation to find and earn the loyalty of a leading man among the villagers who will protect the king's son, attests to the direct relationships that

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possible to ascertain whether the decree was issued by Pepi II during the Sixth Dynasty or by one of his successors, Strudwick 2005, pp. 114–15; *Urk.* I, 288–95.

78 Decree from Koptos (Koptos D), Strudwick 2005, pp. 112–13.

79 'Arbeiter': *Lexicon der Ägyptologie* (LÄ) I, 371, 'Arbeitshaus': LÄ I, 377 and 'Domänen': LÄ I, 118. Faulkner translates it as 'labour establishment', Faulkner 1991, p. 90.

80 For example, the *per-djet* estates acted as its subsidiary holdings, Papazian 1999.

81 Moreno García 1994, p. 41.

82 Moreno García 1998; Allam 2004.

83 This allows us to think of the evolution from the *per-shena* of the Old Kingdom to the *per-shena* of the New Kingdom in terms of an increasing organisation of economic activity first by the palace and then by the temples. Also, the temple-based economy of the New Kingdom may have its origins in the Old Kingdom: '[w]hen the Great Household of the king relinquished active control of the economy in favour of the temples', Papazian 1999.

84 Moreno García 2004a, p. 17.

85 The term *heka* can mean 'governor' or 'ranking man', but it is mostly used in reference to local leaders, Eyre 1999, p. 40; Faulkner 1991, p. 178. For a specific analysis, see Piacentini 1994.

86 *Djadjat* are local councils in a collective sense. The term has been translated as 'magistrates, assessors', Faulkner 1991, p. 319.

could arise between royals and village chiefs.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, it is also a testimony of the hierarchical differences occurring within the village through external action and of the mediation of chiefs in the relationship between the villagers and the pharaoh.

On the other hand, according to the Gebelein papyri the villagers were listed in registers<sup>88</sup> and could be summoned to perform a variety of tasks for the pharaoh<sup>89</sup> such as temple or waterway construction, military service or a mining expedition.<sup>90</sup> In turn, several villages could be under the control of a senior officer as is attested to in an inscription on the Metjen mastaba of the Fourth Dynasty:

And he was promoted to govern Per-desu and the villages under its control.

Labour demands were probably imposed on the communities rather than on individuals, although it is difficult to ascertain whether regular recruitments were established for labour in royal projects.<sup>91</sup>

In all probability, the relationship between state institutions and villages was not an immutable or harmonious one, and this was also true for the different institutional actors who were in charge of organising agrarian production in all its stages. Similarly, one cannot assume the existence of a monolithic, permanent and centralised efficiency. That said, can we really doubt that the state and its institutions directed the exploitative relationship over agrarian villages?

On reviewing the historical process of this economic-social formation it becomes evident that the crown and the temples advanced over village lands and that in some regions<sup>92</sup> they intervened in the organisation of the agricultural space.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, as mentioned before, the Old Kingdom witnessed

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87 Helck 1977, p. 6.

88 Posener-Krieger finds close to three hundred names, but it is not possible to ascertain whether they are the whole of the population, Posener-Krieger 1975, p. 215; Eyre 1999, p. 36, n. 20.

89 A majority are agricultural labourers, although other specific occupations are mentioned, such as baker, brewer, herdsman, measurer of grain, sealer of the granaries, and 'nomads', among others, Troy 2002, p. 11.

90 Posener-Krieger 1975, p. 212; Parra Ortiz 2011, p. 178.

91 Eyre 2010, p. 302.

92 Especially in the Delta, also in Elephantine.

93 During the Fourth Dynasty, the crown undertakes the incorporation of the Delta, and later

the establishment of royal agricultural facilities in the rural sphere.<sup>94</sup> Certain types of fields, the *akhet*, which were dedicated to grain cultivation, were attached to those royal facilities and were associated to taxes and compulsory *corvée*. State forms appear to extend over uncultivated lands<sup>95</sup> as well as over older communal forms, giving rise to an internal contradiction in the latter case.<sup>96</sup> Notwithstanding the internal contradiction, the global unit in these regions no longer *appears to be* the proprietor of the land; 'it has acquired real dominion even though the communities persist within it'.

We shall review this problem by analysing the historical development of the *whyt* villages.<sup>97</sup> This type of village was far removed from the institutional space and refers to the clan-family<sup>98</sup> during the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2055–1650 BC).<sup>99</sup> We have more data on the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BC) since this type of village is mentioned in an inscription (in Mes)<sup>100</sup> dealing with a dispute over lands in Southern Memphis, although the village is named after the first proprietor of the lands. Thus, some of these communities were known by proper names, and it appears that the families lived therein and the village was

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of a region in Middle Egypt, as areas for the production of goods by ploughing up virgin soil and exploitation, Parra Ortiz 2011, p. 147.

- 94 Moreno García 2004a, p. 17. We owe this analysis to Moreno García. In Upper and Middle Egypt, the crown established the Hwt, agricultural and administrative centres that controlled land, labourers and animals, and constituted the bases for state taxation, Parra Ortiz 2011, pp. 184–5. Royal chapels were founded in different localities with land and rents at the disposal of the crown, Moreno García 1996, and 2001.
- 95 Eyre points out that these rural communities could be populated with war prisoners or immigrant groups, and that being royal domains they provided for the king and the royal administration or for royal officials, Eyre 1999, p. 35.
- 96 Zamora 1997, p. 4. For Godelier 1971, p. 45, the internal contradiction is the unity of communal and class structures.
- 97 On the term *whyt*, see Gardiner 1947, 205\*; *Wb.* I, 346 and 258, 5.6, Erman and Grapow 1971, from now on *Wb.*
- 98 Redford states that 'wahyet "clan, family" was applied to those small hamlets or encampments of kin groups', Redford 1993, p. 8; see also Spiegelberg 1904, p. 150; Franke 1983, pp. 219 ff.
- 99 In the Execration Texts, *whyt* were referred to as clans or *aAmw* 'asiatics' from Byblos. See Helck 1971, p. 53. In Story of Sinuhe, *wHyT* is written in several forms, although the determinative of people or man in plural is kept in all words (Berlin Papyrus 3022, 28, 86, 94, 113, 130, 239 and 240). And for other short references, see Mazar 1990, p. 185.
- 100 Loret discovered the text and published it in 1901, pp. 1–10; see Moret's interpretation 1901, pp. 11–39; Gardiner 1905; Gaballa 1977; Allam 1989.

named after the first individual who owned the lands. These practices came about in the context of a process of colonisation of the Fayum region.<sup>101</sup>

However, a tax document from the reign of Ramesses v<sup>102</sup> registers almost thirty *whyt*,<sup>103</sup> many of them also bearing proper names or referring to the occupations held by the inhabitants.<sup>104</sup> The evidence allows us to infer that these villages were within temple estates or royal lands. Some of them were located in royal landholdings (*khato* lands), which are named in text B of the Wilbour Papyrus.<sup>105</sup> The village population<sup>106</sup> could be obliged to work these *khato* lands – lands belonging to the crown – and during the New Kingdom the documentation attests to an atypical occurrence related to the *nemehw*,<sup>107</sup> in which said *nemehw* or independent holders associated to the villages pay the state a compensation in gold.<sup>108</sup>

While during the Middle Kingdom the *whyt* are only associated with the village in its familial or clannish sense, later they are to be found in colonised areas or in crown and/or temple dominions. During the New Kingdom, thousands of agricultural estates and religious-administrative centres were attached to the most important temples such as the Amon and Karnak temples.

Whether the villages were based on bonds of kinship or within the domain of an institution, the state's relationship with those villages was one of taxation.<sup>109</sup> So much so that periods of crisis corresponded to an improvement in

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101 The location of the Neshi village could link it to internal military colonisation of the area from the beginning of the New Kingdom. Eyre 2004, pp. 161–2, points to the colonisation cycles registered for that area during different periods of pharaonic history.

102 Gardiner 1941–52; Menu 1970; Katary 1989; Janssen 1986. Review and summary of I.A. Stuchevsky, *The Cultivators of the State Economy in Ancient Egypt during the Ramesside Period* (in Russian), Moscow: Nauka, 1982.

103 From Gardiner 1948, pp. 74–5.

104 For example, village of Sinuhe (*Wilbour* A 79, 17; 87, 31; 97, 32); village of Merek (*Wilbour* A 35, 23); village of the soldiers (*Wilbour* A 35, 45, 36, 12); village of Tamarisk (*Wilbour* A 12, 12; 15, 40; 20, 28; B 15, 20, 21), etc.

105 Village of Iryt (*Wilbour* B 11, 27; 12, 33); village of Amenmose (*Wilbour* B 20, 16); village of Nesh (*Wilbour* B 9, 22.24).

106 On population distribution by occupation in different areas as *per* the papyrus, see O'Connor 1972, pp. 692–5.

107 On the complexity of the term *nemehw*, see Zingarelli 2010b, pp. 89–90; David 2011; Moreno García 201b.

108 We will revisit this when we analyse the property of the *nemehw*.

109 This communal fiscal responsibility that delegates functions to local magnates or middlemen is not easily visualised, according to Eyre 1999, p. 45. Nevertheless, as we have pointed

living conditions, as Moreno García points out, which could be related to the disappearance of tax-collecting palace bureaucracies leading to more freedom for peasants to organise productive activities.<sup>110</sup>

Since Egypt was a territorial state, we must doubtlessly consider the relationship between the central dominant class that governed in certain historical junctures and the regional and local elites that disputed that power. The history of centralisation and decentralisation of state politics reflects that struggle. On the other hand, regionalisation created a complex constellation of political-religious institutions that depended on the central government to a larger or lesser extent. Although the role of provincial temples and sanctuaries as representatives of state authority has recently been questioned,<sup>111</sup> the formation of regional elites is beyond doubt as evidenced by the ancient administrative divisions (nomes)<sup>112</sup> and the clientelar networks.

On the other hand, from the beginnings of state organisation to the Fifth Dynasty, the intervention of the royal family was felt in that its members held the highest offices, including that of visir.<sup>113</sup> The close relationship between the sovereign and his officials became less so as the number of officials increased and individuals unrelated to the royal family came to have access to high posts. The bonds were tightened by different types of compensation, such as the usufruct of royal lands that could later revert to the king.<sup>114</sup> Another mechanism used by the earlier dynasties was the marriage of princesses to senior officials in order to sustain through kinship the higher offices of the administration.<sup>115</sup>

The great population centres – which often belonged by right of inheritance to the king,<sup>116</sup> hence the term of ‘royal camps’<sup>117</sup> that Marx used in reference to

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out, it is the villages and not the individuals that bring offerings to the tombs of the Old Kingdom, Eyre 1999, p. 47.

110 Moreno García 2004a, p. 44.

111 Moreno García 2004b, p. 32, n. 6.

112 On the alleged reform dissolving nomes and the replacement of nomarchs for local mayors, see Franke 1991.

113 Baud 1999, pp. 170 ff.; Lupo 2011.

114 More on this topic later.

115 Parra Ortiz 2011, p. 149.

116 Throughout pharaonic history, settlements of different types and hierarchies were established by the king, and they developed as pyramid cities or were associated to them. We have opted not to develop this aspect due to its complexity and its subsidiary relationship to our argument. See Lupo 2007.

117 Letter from Marx to Engels, London, 2 June 1853, Marx 1983, pp. 330 ff.

them – became nome capitals.<sup>118</sup> Toward the end of the Old Kingdom, a governor could control several nomes and be acknowledged as a great potentate in the context of the emergence of local potentates and leaders of military troops.<sup>119</sup>

However, the state had not disappeared, rather it had become fragmented. Even on the regional level, the relationship between the villages and the nomarchs or regional leaders was maintained. The nomarchs, for example the Thebans during the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2160–2055 BC) assumed royal titles and control of local temples. In the waning years of the Old Kingdom, the provincial elites reproduced the royal style in statuary, chapels or mastabas, which were consecrated as spaces for cult and became objects of deification.<sup>120</sup>

In some way, this historical process had its correlate in the funerary sphere to the extent that although initially the benefits of the funerary cult applied to the king, they were later extended to the members of the royal family, state officials and priests in separate sections of the pyramids. During the First Intermediate Period, the individual pyramid disappeared and a family group belonging to the local elite could be buried in a mastaba.<sup>121</sup>

The rhetorical statements of those rulers emphasise their role as protectors of the people and boast of having alleviated the effects of famine. The ideological content of those statements is linked to individual action and not to being at the king's service. This legitimation before those who are dependent on him introduces a new social type in the rhetoric of the inscriptions, that of the patron, he who can change destiny and save the people from misfortune.<sup>122</sup>

The integration of the local elites into the state apparatus and into the culture and values of the palace, and vice versa, is reflected by the inclusion of those rhetorical statements in the written production of the Middle Kingdom.<sup>123</sup> This validates to a certain extent Assmann's statement regarding the

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118 Greek name for the *spAt*, districts or administrative divisions. On the importance of nome capitals especially during the New Kingdom, see O'Connor 1972, esp. pp. 687 ff.

119 Moreno García 2011a, pp. 188–9.

120 Moreno García 2004b, pp. 34–5; Moreno García 2011a, p. 190. See, for example, Heqaib of Elephantine, Habachi 1985.

121 Seidlmayer 1990, p. 403.

122 Assmann 2005, pp. 69 and 118–32.

123 The written production refers to political and social unrest while maintaining that royalty and certain values associated to that institution are necessary. Given that the king is synonymous with order, this apparent contradiction found in literary accounts reflects political arguments disguised as fiction, Zingarelli 2010a, esp. pp. 211–15.

'rhetoric of motives'<sup>124</sup> to explain and justify the acts of the dominant class and governing policy to newly incorporated literate elites.

Notwithstanding the above, during the Middle Kingdom the bureaucratic structure became larger and more specialised on the basis of a tax system, which was in turn based on production estimates for land and waterways. Similarly, the system of compulsory labour organised by the state was maintained but with the mediation of chiefs and representatives from villages and towns. Those who did not comply with those obligations were severely punished, and we know that those who helped labourers to flee were sent to border fortresses like Askut in Nubia.<sup>125</sup>

Concomitantly with this greater bureaucratisation, the central government became more visible in the different regions and there was an increase in the obligations it was owed. Paradoxically, part of the local control was delegated to local leaders in villages and towns. Temples and pious foundations assumed the collection of grain per person in each of the plots of land in the district and in turn paid taxes to the crown, although certain institutions could be exempted from such payment.

In spite of this, some individuals emphasised their own initiatives and economic practices<sup>126</sup> in what can be termed private autobiographies, but at the same time the protagonists of these texts held titles associated to a religious institution, for example that of priest of Mentuhotep.<sup>127</sup>

The social range of characters portrayed in fictional and non-fictional texts<sup>128</sup> became wider, giving rise to a schematic and taxonomic view of social differentiation. Authors from the past century<sup>129</sup> interpreted this phenomenon as revelatory of a democratic age featuring a middle class of craftsmen and merchants, among other occupations. Later on, even the existence of a type of *bourgeoisie*<sup>130</sup> was suggested for the case of the society of the Middle Kingdom. The idea for the emergence of such a middle class at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom was based on funerary evidence and considered other textual and iconographical references.<sup>131</sup> The grave goods of the necropoleis of this

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124 Assmann 2005, pp. 146–9, esp. 148.

125 Callender 2000, p. 161.

126 Diego Espinel 2011, p. 232.

127 Petrie 1925, pl. XXIII; Lichtheim 1988, p. 69.

128 For example, a contrast is established between small – *nedyes* – and great – *wrw*.

129 See esp. Wilson 1951, pp. 123–4; Hayes 1961, p. 45. Previously also Erman 1894, p. 101, and Hall 1924, p. 318.

130 Loprieno 1988, p. 87.

131 Richards 2005.

period show a high degree of wealth in the tombs of individuals who did not belong to the pharaonic administration, and other secondary burial sites attest to the existence of clientelar networks around local magnates.

The concepts of middle class and *bourgeoisie* are anachronisms,<sup>132</sup> but it is pertinent to inquire into the extent of social differentiation in this period. The incorporation of social categories that hardly fit the description of village population or high bureaucratic or state elite is understandable in a society that was becoming fairly complex. We accept that the evidence is ambiguous, and that in general the cultural texts show that the self-awareness of the middle sectors appears to have been dependent on the literate elites and sub-elites that name them and esteem their existence.<sup>133</sup> This does not negate the existence of a class identity defined by labour exploitation<sup>134</sup> and the status that invariably presents itself as a category in pre-capitalist societies.

We have already mentioned the view held by several authors (Anderson,<sup>135</sup> Hindess and Hirst),<sup>136</sup> for whom the Asiatic mode of production is unacceptable given that the existence of a state without classes is an impossibility. Notwithstanding that, Hindess and Hirst made a significant contribution to the notion that the state and the political level develop the contradiction between economic structure and ideological superstructure in the transition from a classless to a class society. However, they sidestep that contradiction and discuss the terms of class domination within the state through conquest, arguing in particular that no form can explain the existence of a state reflecting the appropriation of the surplus through tax/rent.<sup>137</sup>

The binary opposition between state and communities is the manner in which the dominant mode of production expresses itself, although it would be illusory to deny the differentiation and social intersections occurring not only

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132 Meaning the notion of a middle class as an ascending class associated to universal processes and to modernisation, democracy, *bourgeoisie* and liberalism: Visacovsky and Garguin 2009, pp. 13 and 21–2. This approach presents problems from the point of view of interpretation, sources, and methodology, which are rooted in larger historiographical discussions pertaining to the modern world.

133 Evidence of a 'subelite', that is, people 'lying somewhere between the small ruling elite and the rest of the population' begins to emerge from the archaeological record, Parkinson 2002, pp. 64–5; Richards 2005, p. 15.

134 I want to thank Astarita for this personal observation.

135 Anderson 1979, pp. 487 ff.

136 Their argument is based on the irreconcilable class antagonism implied by the existence of the state according to Lenin in *The State and Revolution* and Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Hindess and Hirst 1975, p. 198.

137 Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 198–9.

within the framework of the villages but also in the agricultural holdings of the king and the temples; the same applies to contradictions within and between the dominant classes: the royal family, nobles or palace officials, members of the temple, priests and other officials such as scribes,<sup>138</sup> men of arms and among provincial families.

In this regard, Haldon makes a sensible suggestion on the contradiction between the interests of the 'state' (the ruler, the bureaucratic elite, the dominant aristocratic faction in the court or in the provinces) and other factions of the dominant class in relation to the control of surplus appropriation and its distribution.<sup>139</sup> However, those contradictions do not directly affect the mode of labour exploitation, and above all they do not affect the forms of property, a question we shall address in the next section.

## II

In a letter dated 6 June 1853, Engels posits that the absence of land property is the key to understanding all of the East.<sup>140</sup> One of Marx's postulates was that there was no private property of land, but he acknowledged the private possession and use of land.<sup>141</sup> Much later, in *The Frankish Period* published in 1882, Engels holds that the form of state power is conditioned by the form of the communities, and that therefore the Asiatic mode of production appears when the land is tilled by the communities or assigned to different families without becoming private property and the power of the state is despotic.<sup>142</sup>

More subtly, Marx remarks in the *Formen* that the all-encompassing or superior unit appears as superior or sole proprietor (the *unity* is the real owner)

138 De Melo Tunes 1990, p. 61.

139 Haldon 1993, p. 146, makes this point when addressing the question of the autonomy of tributary states.

140 Letter from Engels to Marx, London, 6 June 1853, Engels 1983, pp. 335 ff.

141 Sofri 1969, p. 28, argues that Marx had some uncertainty about this postulate. Also in Marx 1966, p. 555: '[N]o private ownership of land exists, although there is both private and common possession and use of land'.

142 In 1884, when writing *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels focused on the evolution of Western societies in particular, because he linked the emergence of the state to private property and the monogamous family. Furthermore, Engels himself stated that he wanted to verify Morgan's theory for pre-history and for Europe's ancient history. For another explanation of Engels's abandonment of this idea, see Godelier 1971, pp. 27–35.

in most of the fundamental Asiatic forms. ‘The real communities only as *hereditary* possessors’ and ‘the individual is then in fact propertyless or property – i.e., the relationship of the individual to the natural conditions of labour and reproduction, the inorganic nature which he finds and makes his own, the objective body of his subjectivity – appears to be mediated by means of a grant [*Ablassen*] from the total unity to the individual through the intermediary of the particular community’.<sup>143</sup>

The empirical solution to the problem of the property of land in terms of the Asiatic mode of production became a matter of establishing whether the documents of a given economic-social formation registered private forms of property. The oversimplified argument that ‘there is private property, therefore there is no Asiatic mode of production’ permeated published papers and discussions on this topic without categorial complexity and theoretical rigour.

It is possible to state that dominant relations and means of production may correspond to political and institutional forms and to forms of property within a certain mode of production. In the Asiatic mode, surplus labour is extracted in the name of a god or the king from the labourers of the communities or from the labourers of state lands. These features, which may be common to different social formations, are present as constitutional structural features in ancient Egypt from the very origins of the state.

Can we explain within the same mode of production the extraction of surplus labour in a productive unit based on personal bonds and the same extraction in funerary communities or domains belonging to a temple or to the crown?

Everything seems to indicate that the exploitation and dependency of peasants under the Asiatic mode of production is different from the forms of submission and exploitation of peasants in, say, the feudal mode. Egyptian cultivators could possess plots of land in the communities or even in lands attached to institutions, and they had to deal with officials or middlemen from their community or village, all in the name of the pharaoh. These relationships were impersonal, and mediated by violence at the time of tax collection,<sup>144</sup> by

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143 Marx 1964, p. 69. Also Marx 1966, p. 555: ‘The state is then the supreme lord. Sovereignty here consists in the ownership of land concentrated on a national scale’.

144 The *Satire of the Trades*, a literary text from the Middle Kingdom, Lichtheim 1975, pp. 184–93, highlights the advantages of being a scribe as opposed to the difficulties of having any other trade and/or activity; it sings the praises of being a scribe; the adversities that peasants face in their agricultural labour are exaggerated, as well as the actions of the state as represented by the scribe and his assistants who arrive with ‘clubs and sticks’ to collect the grain. The source reflects institutionalised violence toward the peasant in the first place,

cooperation or by paying tribute to the god. Even so, it is a matter not just of the mode of appropriation (personal or impersonal), but also of the specific form that exploitation takes in the different forms of property, which evidently lead to differentiated social and economic practices.

But let us return to the issue of private property and the mystical determination of its presence or absence in the so-called Asiatic societies, especially in ancient Egypt. In our view, Marx suggests in the *Formen* that private property did not develop in the so-called Asiatic societies because the proprietor of the land was the state and the state and religious institutions belonging to what he called the superior community. In pharaonic Egypt there are documents attesting to the existence of communal lands, personal holdings of the pharaoh, lands belonging to the crown, lands belonging to royal foundations, lands belonging to the treasury and other divisions of the central government and lands belonging to temples, all forming a complex and juxtaposed network of properties, with a prevalence of one type of property or another according to the period.<sup>145</sup>

Notwithstanding the above, the acquisition of 'private' fields existed from the very beginnings of pharaonic history although (1) it was often juxtaposed to lands belonging to the crown, to temples or to funerary foundations, and (2) it was generally a donation from the king or the village/town. It is undeniable that some individuals could manage certain properties, which attests to the existence of forms that coexisted with the dominant mechanism for extraction. So much so that in land transactions (some carried out with equivalents during the New Kingdom)<sup>146</sup> the value of the plots of land is very low, a situation derived from the dominant mode of production that supported direct subsistence.

Let us analyse then the forms under which those individual properties present themselves and the relations of production established around them. The lands are granted to high-ranking officials as a reward for their performance and they could be royal donations for the purpose of funerary cults.

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then toward his family. In spite of the document's bias, the dominant mechanism seems to be the collection of peasant rent by state officials. The New Kingdom version in Blackman and Peet 1925, pp. 284–98; Lichtheim 1976, pp. 168–75. Moreno García 2004a, pp. 42 and 54, warns that using this type of document presents a complex challenge due to its rhetorical and didactic nature, and resorts to using administrative sources.

145 Menu's arguments that the pharaoh's property was the only one that could be disposed of is based on legal aspects, Menu 1982, p. 1.

146 Land transactions with equivalents, see Baer 1962, pp. 25–45; Zingarelli 2010b, pp. 94–6.

The lands are granted by the landlord (the crown) to a class of lords that is indistinguishable from the state or its institutions. Those who own the lands are at the same time state officials or depend on the state's religious or funerary institutions. In other words, during the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom there is a supreme landlord, that is to say, the sovereignty over land is concentrated on a 'national' scale. During the New Kingdom, the great temples (an adjunct of the state in Kemp's view)<sup>147</sup> fulfil the same function of supreme landlords.

As stated above, a type of land possession was granted to royal officials as a reward for their services. These types of estates are known to us through the biographies of the officials themselves, which underscore the fact that they received a reward from the king.<sup>148</sup> Metjen's biography, dating to the Fourth Dynasty, states that he received from the king fields of different sizes as rewards for his work as ruler of various centres in Lower Egypt, and that he inherited from his mother 50 arouras, acquiring besides 200 arouras with people from the king. The same document registers the founding of domains under his control, especially the fourth/fifth nome and the second nome in Lower Egypt. In any case, lands related to funerary cults were transmitted, granted and inherited, creating foundations devoted to providing offerings and maintaining the cult.<sup>149</sup>

Confronted with this evidence, let us consider two questions related to the creation of private holdings. The first question relates to the inheritability of land. We note that in general the land had to remain undivided, it was only transmissible from parents to children, and according to the available information it could not be ceded to a third party, probably because essentially it continued to be the property of the pharaoh.

The second question, related to this last statement, is that the king assigned the lands based on an individual's functions. Did the lands revert to the crown when the beneficiary of a reward was replaced by another in the same post?

A disposition found in the decree of pharaoh Neferirkare of the Fifth Dynasty allows us to partially answer this question:

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147 Kemp 1972, p. 676.

148 *Urk.* I, 1–5; Goedicke 1970, pp. 5–20; Strudwick 2005, pp. 192–4.

149 Another example of a donation: a certain Sabni of Elephantine (Sixth Dynasty) received 11 hectares of land after carrying out a mission in Nubia, *Urk.* I, 140; Strudwick 2005, p. 338; and Ibi of Deir el-Gabrawy (Sixth Dynasty) received a field of about fifty hectares linked to a *hwt*, *Urk.* I, 145; Strudwick 2005, pp. 364–5.

(And with regard to) any noble, royal acquaintance, or person concerned with reversionary offerings (28) who shall act counter to this decree of my majesty (29a) which has been registered in the Great Mansion. (29b) (his) house, land, people, and everything he owns shall be taken away and he shall be put into compulsory labour.<sup>150</sup>

Even granting that this is a royal law, it establishes that individuals who receive properties do not have sovereignty. There are no large holdings that give rise to large rents. The historiographical tendency is to think of great concentrations of land coupled with an increase in servile relationships linked to feudal property. Similarly, there is a tendency to confuse feudalism with aristocracy; in Egypt, it is possible to identify an aristocracy that is essentially a state aristocracy.<sup>151</sup>

The epistolary sources related to Hekanakhte,<sup>152</sup> a funerary priest<sup>153</sup> linked to a pious foundation devoted to the cult of the statue of a senior state official<sup>154</sup> as well as the head of a large family<sup>155</sup> pose a series of questions related to property and land leases. Described by Wentz<sup>156</sup> as a gentleman farmer, according to Eyre it could be considered that he belonged to a class of notable rural middlemen<sup>157</sup> who begin to show up in the sources during the first period of state fragmentation. In some ways, these documents provide information on

150 *Urk.* 1, 170–2; Strudwick 2005, pp. 98–101.

151 Moreno García 2008, p. 108, rightly points to the absence of a true hereditary landed aristocracy whose interests might collide with those of the state. The nobility is what it is by virtue of its functions, it is created, maintained and brought down by the state, which does not confront any counterpower standing between the state itself and the village communities that could take over certain fiscal, military or ideological sovereign functions and hold on to them over time.

152 James 1962; Baer 1963; Allen 2002. Other references in the footnotes below.

153 *hem-ka*, 'servant of the ka'. On one occasion he refers to himself as *bak n per djet*, 'servant of the funerary domain', Cardoso 1993, p. 107.

154 It was found in Meseh's tomb in the Theban necropolis, one of the four small tombs in the northernmost section of Deir el Bahari in Thebes, Winlock 1922. The owner was probably a dependent of Ipi, the visir of Nebhepetre-Mentuhotep, Goedicke 1984, p. 3. Perhaps of the visir of Thebes named Ipi, Diego Espinel 2011, p. 231. However, Goedicke 1984, p. 12, doubts he was *hem-ka*, 'servant of the ka' of the funerary cult of the visir, since the source does not explicitly say so.

155 Moreno García 2004a, pp. 86ff., notes the importance of the extended family in social organisation, see also Moreno García 2004a, pp. 191–7. For a different view, see Cardoso 2009, p. 90.

156 Wentz 1990, p. 58.

157 Eyre 1999, p. 48.

the household and the large family as the basic unit of rural organisation.<sup>158</sup> Certainly, it can be said that the centre of this extended domestic system mentioned in the documents would be what Hekanakhte calls ‘my property’, which included the adjacent fields tilled by him, his family and other labourers. Other fields attached to his property were leased out to peasants in exchange for monthly rations in grain and clothing. He probably received these fields as a perpetual endowment in return for his duties.<sup>159</sup> There are remarkable references to costs, seed reserves, maximising the extension of cultivated land, household weaving, clothing sold, and so on.

There is no evident relationship between the properties mentioned by Hekanakhte and the foundation where he serves as priest, nor is it readily apparent whether the rents obtained from production allow for something more than the mere subsistence of the family and its dependents. The documents do mention, perhaps with some exaggeration, situations of extreme poverty; the family and their dependants go hungry during a bad year.<sup>160</sup> However, these households of the sub-elite were linked to state organisation in a manner that is difficult to define. In fact, this type of funerary domain (*per-djet*) functioned as subsidiary holdings<sup>161</sup> of the *per-shena* or administrative centre mentioned above, and of the royal domains in times of political centralisation. In his letters, Hekanakhte refers to himself once as *bak n per djet*, ‘servant of the funerary domain’,<sup>162</sup> and in ledgers the *per-shena* appears mentioned among the places where supplies are available.

Nevertheless, Hekanakhte appears as administrator of his own holdings, laying down guidelines, giving orders on how to care for people and crops, handling parental and economic relationships. The ledgers register supplies that were available in different households, villages and in the *per-shena* itself. Therefore, these forms of individual property could be juxtaposed with the

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158 Eyre 1999, p. 49.

159 Allen 2002, pp. 149 and 178. Receiving a modest stipend for his services, the farmer would have remained dependent on his own land and upon the land he administered for the mortuary cult, Grajetzki 2009, p. 151; Allen 2002, pp. 105–6.

160 The metaphor of hunger appears in the biographies that are contemporary to these sources. See, for example, the inscription of Ankhtifi at Moalla: Vandier 1950; Lichtheim 1975, pp. 3–12, 83, 85–6; Serrano Delgado 1993, pp. 85–9.

161 See, for example, the *djadjat nt per djet*, ‘council of *per-djet*’, which functioned as both an administrative organisation and a tribunal in the large areas of the Old Kingdom, Menu 2004b, p. 180.

162 According to Goedicke, *per djet* must not be interpreted as the domain thus identified, but as *per* ‘house’ and *djet* ‘eternally’, Goedicke 1984, p. 81.

production of villages and local associations, linking people with bonds of patronage and dependency.<sup>163</sup>

However, this type of patronage does not give rise to a hereditary landed aristocracy whose interests, although they could conflict with those of the crown, could hardly be expected to dispute the primacy of the central state.<sup>164</sup> That is to say, the appearance of this type of property did not transform the dominant forms of exploitation of the communities and the royal domains. Indeed, according to sources of the period, by the New Kingdom most (two thirds) of the lands belonging to smaller temples, funerary holdings and even entire villages had been brought under the aegis of the great temples. In summary, the major institutional landowners were the temples,<sup>165</sup> who received income from the product of large holdings, rents from leaseholders of temple land and rents for services hired from other institutions. The relationship between the crown and religious institutions is evident in the fact that the latter were led by senior officials who were often palace dignitaries or officials of the crown. In turn, the latter could own small fields within the jurisdiction of the temples or of the crown.

Other plots of equal size (between two and three arouras) could be associated to a local entity or to different professional categories (soldiers, stable grooms, women), and such plots were hereditary and generally inalienable.<sup>166</sup> However, they could be sub-leased. Evidently there was a strong link between land division and taxes on crops.

Based on Herodotus, Menu notes that such land divisions and the adjudication of temple lands to private individuals was the work of Ramesses II, who established a system of rewards for officials that replaced previous systems. Later sources mention annual income received by the Theban temples, their treasuries, warehouses and storehouses.<sup>167</sup>

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163 Eyre 2010, p. 302.

164 Moreno García 2008, p. 108. Nevertheless, Moreno García finds that considering the state as a distant institution without influence in local affairs is problematic; he highlights a model that contains within itself the notions of decentralisation, delegation of power and clientelism. In other words, he points out the risk of falling into what he deems to be an old historiographic tradition that opposes the fragility of Oriental state formations with the persistence of villages and rural conservatism. For further reading on the theoretical questions and historiographical positions, see Moreno García 2008, esp. pp. 99–106.

165 Papyrus Harris and the above mentioned Wilbour papyrus supply information on the administration of temples and their properties, Grandet 1994.

166 About the zone prevalence of different categories, see O'Connor 1972, pp. 693–5.

167 Papyrus Harris records temple endowments of ca. 2680 sq. km, Grandet 1994, pp. 91–101.

In summary, in contrast with earlier periods, this era presents more evidence of land owned by private individuals, whose origins were in royal grants or family inheritance. Let us first consider the types of royal donation or transference. The evidence on donations allows us to state that senior officers of the crown or military men were rewarded with lands since the Eighteenth Dynasty. It must be considered that the fields varied in size and were located in different regions:<sup>168</sup> there is a categorical difference between the 154 arouras granted to an official (Chief of the Royal Harem)<sup>169</sup> specifically stating that those lands belong to a temple in Giza and the 16 arouras in a village and waterway close to Qantir granted to reward a military man.<sup>170</sup>

This latter type of grant given to military men can also be found in biographical inscriptions<sup>171</sup> in which the beneficiary underscores that he was granted 'people, livestock and fields' in his own village or town. In Middle Egypt we find landowners who are mentioned as military men in the Wilbour papyrus,<sup>172</sup> although this may be related to the above-mentioned process of colonisation of said region.<sup>173</sup>

In general, lands were granted to the gods,<sup>174</sup> or the king granted lands dedicated to the cult of a royal statue.<sup>175</sup> A priest could manage the land, and he was obliged to make a ritual offer of one ox per year to the statue. The holding consisted of a certain number of arouras managed by the same priest, and other persons could be hired to manage the remaining fields.

We previously referred to independent holders (*nemehw*) in lands belonging to the crown (*khato*), who paid a compensation directly to the treasury toward the end of the Ramesside period. The connection between independ-

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This represents more than half of the arable land of Upper Egypt, Eyre 2010, p. 303; 'Papyrus Harris also records donations of 3,000,000 *khar* of grain to the temple of Karnak, and 309,950 *khar* to Medinet Habu and the minor temples of, Haring 1997, pp. 412–4.'

168 Thebes, Nubia, Giza, Qantir and Memphis.

169 Stela Cairo JE 28019. Zivie 1976, pp. 177–82, 273–4, pl. 13; Meeks 1979, p. 663, from Ay reign. Also Berlin Stela 14994, from Thutmose I's reign, records the 150 arouras given to a military man, Nekry, Schulman 1964, p. 98, no. 80; Meeks 1979, pp. 661–2.

170 Stela Cairo JE 88879, from Ramesses III, Meeks 1979, p. 664; Schulman 1988, pp. 22–4.

171 *Urk.* IV, 1–10; Loret 1901; Lichtheim 1976, pp. 12–15.

172 Katary 1989, p. 69.

173 Eyre 2004, p. 161.

174 Montu, Amon-Ra, Mnevis, Horakhty, Amon and one to the sphinx's temple in Giza.

175 An inscription of Pennut's tomb in Aniba, dated in Ramesses VI's realm, Steindorff 1935, pl. 101 shows regulations taken by this pharaoh in favour of his own statue: Inscription on Stela Stuttgart, Menu 1998, p. 140.

ent holders (*nemehw*) and villages must be considered in the light of the forced labour in lands belonging to the crown to which villagers were subject, and the sources underscore that independent holders were exempt from such labour in exchange for a payment in gold. In addition, however, the Stela of Israel<sup>176</sup> explicitly remarks on a certain contrast: 'He (the king) has let *nemehw* return to villages' and 'he has let officials/nobles – *srw* – retain their possessions'.<sup>177</sup>

It seems therefore that the *nemehw* owned small plots of land in the context of villages, and that, in some manner undisclosed by the sources, they were able to obtain gold to pay the tax in order to be exempted from the *corvée*. They have been identified<sup>178</sup> with the parcel holders found in the papyrus Wilbour and in other sources of the period,<sup>179</sup> but it does not appear possible to subscribe to such an identification based on the available information.

Secondly, family inheritance is acknowledged in legal documents or wills that were unknown in earlier periods. The will of a woman who calls herself *nemehyt*, 'of the pharaoh's land',<sup>180</sup> enables the conclusion that the fields belonging to this category of individual could be inherited<sup>181</sup> by the individual's children. This right to decide over the property she inherited from her father, from her first husband and a part of what her second husband accumulated seems to support the hypothesis that the inheritance remained in the nucleus of the family. Incidentally, this was a family of the elite and linked to the necropolis.

It is worth noting that local councils such as the *kenebet*<sup>182</sup> intervened in these events, attending to questions related to rights and property disputes as

176 Stela of Israel, line 16 = Cairo 34025 vs.: Spiegelberg 1897, pp. 1–25, pls. 13–4; Lacau 1926, pp. 52–9, pls. 17–19; Kitchen 1981, pp. 12–19; Lichtheim 1976, pp. 73–8.

177 See Römer 1994, pp. 412–51, regarding this contrast.

178 Gardiner 1948, p. 206; Janssen 1986, p. 363; Menu 1970, p. 30.

179 Janssen 1986, p. 363, called those little owners: 'virtual proprietors' or 'private owners', whose rights over the land may have been the same as that of private proprietors, even when the land belonged theoretically to the pharaoh.

180 Naunakhte's will (Papyrus Ashmolean Museum 1945.97) from Ramesses v, Černý 1945, pp. 29–53; Théodoridès 1966, pp. 31–70; Allam 1973, pp. 268–74, no. 262; Kitchen 1983, pp. 236–40; Mc Dowell 1999, pp. 38–40, no. 14.

181 *imyt-per*, literally, 'what is at home'. Ein Testament machen, *Wb.* I, p. 73; see Seidl 1939, p. 58; Théodoridès 1970.

182 During the New Kingdom, the disputes on property rights were under the jurisdiction of *kenebet* which, although mainly judicial, also had administrative functions and dealt with the countless cases of rights and disputes over property. Also, there were central councils (*Great kenebet*), in the New Kingdom, whose functions were both judicial and administrative.

well as fulfilling administrative functions. There is also an increase in the number of references in written documents, land registers and cadastres, personal lawsuits and often in decisions of the oracle pertaining to lawsuits involving fields.

Did this type of economic-social practice reinforce the private nature of property? We believe that the nature of the sources needs to be analysed in order to distinguish the type of property and the aspects involved in its transference. In general, what we find is a system of family tenure, and although there is no explicit specification regarding how the families came to own the fields, it can be inferred that they originated as royal favours or rewards in view of the titles held by the men in those families: a male nurse of the royal son, in favour of his wife and children,<sup>183</sup> or the scribe of the royal offering table who went to court with documents to prove his and his brothers' rights on some arouras.<sup>184</sup> It must be taken into account that such fields could be part of the tenure system of the temples and that a payment had to be made for priestly rituals. Other examples refer to the practice of adopting the wife as a daughter or the adoption of slaves in order to keep the property within the family.<sup>185</sup>

Based on this evidence, Eyre posits the creation of 'certain types of disposable (i.e. private) property in land, as a vital feudal device'.<sup>186</sup> This author considers that 'entail provides security of tenure, but then complex social tensions over property rights come into play'. Documents allow us to recognise social tensions resulting from property rights of different families and descendants.<sup>187</sup>

In summary, we encounter forms of individual property, which could be deemed private property, during the New Kingdom, but this type of property does not develop; it does not engender proper feudal forms. Godelier's idea that

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183 This case is laid out in a monument – on a stelophorous statue – given the subject's link to royalty. = Stela Cairo 34016, *Urk.* IV, 1065–1070; also Théodoridès 1970; Spalinger 1984, esp. p. 633.

184 Papyrus Berlin 3047, year 46 of Ramesses II, Helck 1963, pp. 65–73; Baer 1962, pp. 36–9; Kitchen 1979, pp. 803–6; Katary 1989, pp. 223–5.

185 Papyrus Ashmolean Museum 1945.96, known as Adoption Papyrus. Gardiner 1940, pp. 23–9; Théodoridès 1965, pp. 79–142; Allam 1973, pp. 258–67, no. 261; Cruz-Urbe 1988; Allam 1990, pp. 189–91; Eyre 1992.

186 This kind of land property might have been close to private property, resulting in certain types of availability of the land, Eyre 1994, pp. 112–13.

187 *Ibid.*

certain forms of the Asiatic mode of production could lead to certain forms of feudalism<sup>188</sup> cannot be corroborated in this process of transformation of property relations in this economic-social formation.

In other words, we do not encounter a landed monopolist class, and we do not encounter great landowners exercising non-economic coercive powers in order to impose control, neither in an informal manner nor through the public or private system of justice. Indeed, it could be argued that we encounter the opposite of what would constitute a feudal system as defined by Hindess and Hirst<sup>189</sup> and even Wickham.<sup>190</sup> Even though we do find forms of rent, a majority of those rents appear in juxtaposition with state (or temple) forms of property, or with the village or town forms of property. During the New Kingdom, it is possible to refer to individual forms of property that contradict the dominant forms.

### III

In the *Formen*, Marx states:

[C]ities in the proper sense arise by the side of these villages only where the location is particularly favourable to external trade, or where the head of the state and his satraps exchange their revenue (the surplus product) against labour, which they expend as labour-funds.

This thesis becomes irrefutable in the face of the compelling evidence available for social formations such as the one analysed herein. In particular, it can be legitimately argued that the availability of surpluses and the accumulation that allowed the class of officials to obtain goods – for example, funerary goods – above and beyond what was granted by the king arose from the state sphere itself and became evident in the ‘metropolitan’ centres where the elites resided.<sup>191</sup> In Thebes during the New Kingdom, for example, the craftsmen of the necropoleis were the ones who generated resources and amplified

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188 Godelier 1971, p. 47.

189 Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 18–19.

190 Wickham 1994a, p. 10.

191 However, exceptions can be found in cemeteries such as Abydos, Riqqa and Haraga, which present us with ‘[b]urial practices of the population outside of royalty and the highest elite, specifically in the twelfth dynasty’, according to Richards 2005, esp. p. 174.

the circulation of goods, but what allowed them to do so was their dependency and the rations they received from the state. It is possible that the very possibility of economic accumulation, as well as a certain prestige, derived from their articulation with state institutions. Thus we arrive at the conclusion that the Egyptian state as distributive state (among the dominant class and high-ranking officials) negates accumulation on the part of an elite of officials, but at the same time enables such accumulation as a side-effect of its functioning. Furthermore, the observation of the interstitial circulation mechanisms of this period shows merchants operating with surpluses derived from the dominant classes. In the words of Marx, this type of private accumulation would be found in the 'pores of the ancient world'.<sup>192</sup>

An analysis of the circulation of funerary goods, especially during the New Kingdom, shows that most of the goods and the access to luxurious burials were within the orbit of the state, a matter of no small importance in a culture with such a developed culture of death as pharaonic Egypt. Nevertheless, the demands of the elites are recognisable in the different periods of pharaonic history. During the New Kingdom, however, there was an increase in the circulation of goods and people, which gave rise to processes of appropriation of the circulation and the exchanges with metallic equivalents in cities like Thebes and around Deir el-Medina.<sup>193</sup>

The sources from the New Kingdom present economic agents such as merchants or *shutyw* that offer alternatives to the dominant mechanism. These economic-social relationships cannot always be included in the state distributive circuit. Such merchants were often agents of the temple, but they could also act on behalf of military leaders, singers of Amon and other officials. These situations seem to have been functional to a complex system of economic relations in which the state had the monopoly of control mechanisms, but these did not operate in only one direction.

How to explain the appearance of these forms of economic circulation?

In the field of Egyptology, the answers to this question are rooted in theory, either economic anthropology theory or economic theory. In the first case, the Egyptian economy is understood as a complete otherness; in the second case, it is viewed as a primitive version of a modern economy. The principle

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192 Marx 1964, p. 40.

193 The village of the labourers, *set maat*: 'place of truth'.

of redistribution that Karl Polanyi<sup>194</sup> proposed as an integration mechanism has been the template for understanding the economy of pharaonic Egypt. The problem is that the scope of this principle is limited to the possibility of describing the economy, but it does not allow for an analytical understanding of said economy, confusing forms of production with forms of circulation. The principle's validity, however, resides in the fact that it permits us to understand that in ancient societies the economy *appears* to be subjected to a political unit and not to atomised individual decisions.<sup>195</sup>

Some explanations, such as Kemp's in *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*,<sup>196</sup> suggest the combination of an institutional redistributive aspect with individual or private demand. However, in our view the power of private demand would not come from 'individual' power but rather from accumulation processes generated by state surpluses.

To explore how those processes arise, we must look into the state economy, especially that of the temples located in the area of Thebes. Those temples had control of the main resources; the productivity of the lands under their administration was remarkable, as well as the volume of storage<sup>197</sup> and transport.<sup>198</sup> Certainly, as stated above, the temples had a significant role in the administration of land and tax collection. For example, we know that the temples of the western shore were responsible for paying out rations for various types of labourers and specialised craftsmen. Sources of the period reflect a certain amount of conflict between sectors that are expressed in the historical phenomenon of discontent due to lack of payment of the rations.<sup>199</sup> This unusual procedure is remarkable in that it includes economic demands as well as a challenge to the bureaucratic order.

Paradoxically, besides making a living with the rations handed out by the temples, craftsmen developed pseudo-private practices in the sphere of domestic and craft production that are manifested in transactions with productive animals (oxen), pack animals (donkeys) and funerary objects (sarcophagi,

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194 Polanyi 1957, pp. 250–6.

195 Godelier 1989, pp. 224–5.

196 Kemp 2006, p. 304.

197 P. Turin 1895 + 2006 = Turin Taxation Papyrus, Gardiner 1948, pp. xiii–xiv, 35–44; 1941, pp. 19–73; 127–85; Pleyte and Rossi 1869–76, pls. 65, 100, 155; 156; 157; vs. pl. 96; Katary 1989, pp. 169–82.

198 Amiens Papyrus, Gardiner 1948, pp. vi–vii, 1–13; 1941, pp. 37–56, pl. 7; Katary 1989, pp. 184–92. Other sources related to transport of grains in Katary 1989, pp. 192 ff.

199 Edgerton 1951, pp. 137–45; Eyre 1979, pp. 80–91; Janssen 1979a, pp. 301–8; Frandsen 1990; Janssen 1992.

steles, statues) or objects of daily use (furniture) that are registered in ostraca.<sup>200</sup> It can be gleaned that specialised villagers obtained individual benefits from these exchanges.<sup>201</sup> This is not due to the action of the subjects, nor to the aggregate of their actions, but to the logic of social functioning.<sup>202</sup>

It cannot be overlooked that the basis of the surplus was the supply of goods by the state. Commercial growth in Deir el-Medina depended on the state infrastructure for its development, thus inhibiting an entirely free production. The internal market arose from the surpluses of households and craftsmen. Indeed, the testimonies from Deir el-Medina suggest the existence of commercial growth in which goods derived from household and craft production were added to rations. Unfortunately, there is no comparable quantitative information to assess the amounts of such exchanges, although individual officials could acquire various goods at the same time. The individual appropriation of goods is reflected in purchases with equivalents, though they are not universal equivalents. Officials could probably dispose of goods received as royal rewards or even goods derived from accumulation in their properties.

In any case, in metropolitan centres we detect a process of circulation of goods that exceeds domestic production, as well as social and economic relations derived from the availability of surpluses. Although preceding eras presented some isolated forms of this type, most of the exchanges were barter exchanges, i.e. goods were exchanged for other goods, and those goods were recognisable extensions of domestic activities and/or close to village/town activities, activities of officials and/or linked to religious or funerary institutions like temples.

Although value patterns had been used since the Old Kingdom, it is worth considering that there was an increase in the movement of goods during the Ramesside period and metal value patterns were applied, as in Deir el-Medina.

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200 Janssen 1975; Cooney 2007; Zingarelli 2010b, pp. 53–67.

201 These incomes could be even higher than wages, Lesko 1994, p. 21. Cooney 2006 proposes that Deir el-Medina artisans worked in 'informal workshops', where they produced an income in the private sector. She affirms on p. 44 that they could have worked within formal hierarchical specialisations, using their reputation to gain customers and to have access to materials. She bases her thesis on what she calls internal workshop records. Thus, according to Cooney, contextual and circumstantial evidence of work organisation points to work in a given place rather than individual work. However, numerous transactions allow us to recognise individual goods exchange making reference to partial work (painting, decoration, pigment purchase).

202 Astarita 2000a, p. 22.

Let us consider then that these measure units were proto-money<sup>203</sup> and, even though there was no coin corresponding to a currency form, in some exchanges general equivalents were used but not universally.

The metal circulation first implied the introduction of these metals by the state and secondly their subsequent use in the internal circuit as equivalents, even though they were not always physically present in the transactions. One of the possible ways by which officials and military men could obtain metals, especially gold and silver, was through rewards since the Eighteenth Dynasty.

In addition, the robbed precious metals were gold and silver and the main goal was to exchange them for productive goods such as grain and animals. This circulation process was in agreement with the exchange practice in equivalents carried out in Deir el-Medina. The greed for gold, silver and even copper and bronze should not only be considered as a way of getting luxury goods, but it should also be taken into account in the general economic process at the end of the Ramesside period.

In summary, centralised administrative intervention did not prevent individual appropriation of goods in the circulation circuit, nor did it avoid certain accumulation mechanisms. However, these occurred in the metropolitan centres where the elites resided. The fact that this circulation arose from the availability of surpluses in the spheres in which the dominant groups operated is not exceptional. The monarchy's economic *dirigisme* was compatible with processes of private accumulation and exchange. As stated before, the state negates private accumulation, but enables it as a side-effect of its functioning, which is dominant.

The historical existence of money and trade cannot be linked to a modern phenomenon. The resulting force in a commercial society cannot be assigned to the markets of the dominant classes in a society whose mode of production was based on the primary appropriation by the so-called superior community. Still, during the New Kingdom it is possible to detect commercial development that implies the use of proto-money. Marx referred to these as antediluvian capital categories. They appear to reflect certain social and economic relations corresponding to other modes of production, but they are false expressions of private accumulation given that their origin derives from state property or from incomplete forms of individual property.

On the other hand, land exploitations linked to the temple during New Kingdom presented differentiated extractive forms related to slaves, most of

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203 Janssen 1975, p. 546, considered that in some respects units like *seniw*, *deben* and *khAr* were in fact money.

whom were appropriated in the course of wars of conquest. Although these social changes did not replace previous forms, they did create new forms of bondage. The exploitation of slave labour could not become the dominant relation of production due to the absence of fully-fledged private property of land and the permanent availability of farm labourers through the *corvée*. Slave labour filled interstitial gaps in Egyptian labour and agrarian exploitation without becoming the sustaining base of the dominant classes.

The sources reveal forms of property of slave labourers in the villages/towns, especially in relation to conflicts between town leaders and other state officials, as in the case of a foreman demanding slave girls from a town mayor. The sources also describe<sup>204</sup> transactions involving the rent of slaves for some days at very high prices in metal equivalents, and even transactions for a period of ten years.<sup>205</sup> Although the labourers probably belonged to the village/town or to individuals,<sup>206</sup> members of institutions participated in the transactions, for example, the shepherd of a temple (literally, 'house'). We agree with Navailles and Neveu,<sup>207</sup> who suggest that the institutions (the pharaoh, the temples, the village) owned the slaves and assigned them nominally to certain individuals. Thus, the slaves could work successively for a number of days for one or another temporary owner; the concession could be renewed monthly, annually, or even for a period of ten years, which would justify the high values stipulated in the transactions. It is also possible to detect the inheritability of the rights over the labour days of certain families.<sup>208</sup>

The exchange of slaves and plots of land is a phenomenon especially related to circulation, and it is significant that it is only recorded for metropolitan areas such as Thebes, Kahun, Gurob and other important cities. This process of incorporating labour into the circulation process is limited and secondary with respect to the sphere of production and appropriation of surplus human labour by the dominant classes.

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204 Kahun papyri of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Griffith 1898; Gardiner 1906.

205 Ostrakon Gardiner 123, Allam 1973, p. 177, no. 174; Černý and Gardiner 1957, p. 16, pls. 54–54a, no. 1; Kitchen 1981, pp. 219–20.

206 See Théodoridès 1968.

207 Navailles and Neveu 1989.

208 See Hieratic Ostrakon 51, 2; also known as Ostrakon Gardiner 90 and Ashmolean Museum 90, from Ramesses II, Allam 1973, pp. 68–9, no. 165; McDowell 1993, pp. 23–5.

## IV

For Marx, the Asiatic state was despotic.<sup>209</sup> He did not state this without empirical knowledge or evidence, as has been suggested, but was influenced as a man of his time by concepts of state government.<sup>210</sup> The category of the despotic or despotism is rooted in the values of the Enlightenment<sup>211</sup> for or against the absolute monarchies of Europe.<sup>212</sup> Hence the denomination of despotic for monarchies based on royal power that did not accept other types of power. Moreover, the development of the concept of despotism coincides with its extension to Eastern monarchies as a whole.<sup>213</sup> In the East, the despot as a person also becomes fused with the superior community, and he receives concessions as father of many communities, for his glory and that of the god.<sup>214</sup> In the case of Egyptian royalty, the despot's dominion over territories, property, people and even villages is based on mythical foundations. The most evident political form of this mode is the centralised monarchy that Westerners perceive as despotic. The Egyptian king, whom the Greeks called pharaoh or 'greatest house', is himself a god or the son of the sun god Ra, and his power encompasses earthly and divine territories. This mythical discourse is not devoid of the violence of the state represented by the figure of the king who is depicted slaughtering or crushing the enemy, but also infusing his sub-

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209 It has been noted that he refers to the state and to the despot as an individual, that is, he equates both terms, Zamora 1997, p. 12, n. 1.

210 O'Leary 1989, p. 83, points to the differences Marx established between Asiatic despotism and modern states, as well as to his criticism of Hegel.

211 Nonetheless, Marx questions Montesquieu's theory of despotism, arguing that it is not possible to distinguish between monarchy, despotism and tyranny, O'Leary 1989, p. 84.

212 Hobbes is the first one to recommend despotic power as a normal and adequate form of sovereignty. Based on Anderson 1979, p. 463.

213 Anderson 1979, pp. 463 ff., carries out a remarkable analysis of the origins of the notion of despotism associated with Asia, starting with Aristotle. Later, spurred by the proximity of Turkish power, the notion appeared with the rebirth of political theory during the Renaissance, and the voyages of the Enlightenment allowed for a more systematic formulation. Sawyer 1977, pp. 5 ff., also analyses how this idea of Oriental despotism was already present among the Greeks. In his *Politics*, Aristotle states that 'For Barbarians being more servile in character than Hellenes, and Asiatics than Europeans, do not rebel against a despotic government'.

214 'Part of its surplus labour belongs to the higher community, which ultimately appears as a *person*. This surplus labour is rendered both as tribute and as common labour for the glory of the unity, in part that of the despot, in part that of the imagined tribal entity of the god', Marx 1964, p. 70.

jects with life if he deemed it convenient. This political form corresponds to the dominant relations of production and persisted over millennia, although the expressions of legitimacy varied<sup>215</sup> and new myths to support the divine power of the king were developed.<sup>216</sup>

Marx did not develop the political and social forms of despotism;<sup>217</sup> rather he referred to 'Asiatic despotism' or 'Oriental despotism' when describing India under English domination.<sup>218</sup> He barely uses the term in the *Formen* because he focuses on Asiatic forms of property, but he describes and ascribes these forms to what he terms Oriental despotism. That is to say, certain political, extra-economical forms characterised as despotic correspond to certain relations of production and property.

Returning to 1853, a time when Marx contributed to the Republican periodical *New York Daily Tribune*<sup>219</sup> in the US,<sup>220</sup> he stated that in Asia there were three departments of government: of finance, or the plunder of the interior; of war, or the plunder of the exterior; and the department of public works. And although in view of climate and territorial conditions he does mention that Oriental agriculture is based on artificial irrigation through waterways and water-works, he also notes that 'As in Egypt and India, inundations are used for fertilising the soil in Mesopotamia, Persia, &c.; advantage is taken of a high level for feeding irrigative canals.'<sup>221</sup> When comparing with the Occident, he finds that oriental governments were in charge of organising public works. Note that this circumstance coupled with the concentration in small centres that brought

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215 We have already mentioned the importance of political literature during the Middle Kingdom. On the relationship between literature and politics during the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, see Posener 1956. On the discussion over the use of the term 'propaganda' in relation to these written documents with political content, see Baines 1996, esp. p. 354. Also Assmann 1999, pp. 1–15.

216 See, for example, the theogamies of the New Kingdom, Campbell 1912 and Naville 1896.

217 He was interested in describing the economic and social features, rather than the political system, O'Leary 1989, p. 132.

218 However, O'Leary 1989, pp. 83–4, points out that the early works of Marx 1843–4 present the notion of despotism in a rather polemical sense, without differentiating between feudal monarchy and Oriental despotism. Sofri 1969, pp. 19–20, for his part, considers that at the time Marx had a Hegelian view of Asia.

219 Until the mid-1850s this was a leftist *whig* newspaper. Later it became an organ of the Republican Party.

220 These articles were written over several years and focused esp. on the political, military and social impact of British imperialism in India and China. 'The British Rule in India', published in June of 1853, is particularly relevant, Marx 1979, pp. 125–9.

221 Marx 1979, p. 127.

together agriculture and crafts gave birth to the social system called the *village system*. This system gave each of the small groups its own autonomous organisation and distinct way of life, and was destroyed by the steam engine and English trade. This is what Marx wanted to stress and assess with respect to India under British domination: the contradiction between these rural units/communities which he considers 'industrious, patriarchal, harmless and idyllic' but featuring static, vegetative life lacking dignity which in turn provided a solid base for oriental despotism, biased by superstition and deprived of all historic change.<sup>222</sup> Marx justifies the change that comes through England, and although he acknowledges her miserly interests, he concludes that '[w]hatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution'.<sup>223</sup> The idea of England's double mission, both destructive and regenerative, is present in this article by Marx. Nevertheless, there is not just one way of dissolution for 'primitive' communal property, as Marx himself said regarding India.<sup>224</sup>

At the same time, in their correspondence, Marx and Engels exchanged ideas on the East. In the letter dated 2 June 1853 – based on the description of the military system of Eastern cities written by François Bernier in *Voyages contenant la description des états du Grand Mogol* – Marx underscores that the army has to follow the king, who is the sole proprietor of all the land. He also emphasises that the basic form of all Eastern phenomena – in Turkey, Persia and the Indostan according to Bernier – must be found in the absence of private property of land, as analysed above.<sup>225</sup> On 6 June 1853, Engels writes back saying that indeed the absence of private property of land is the key to understanding all the East,<sup>226</sup> and he proposes ecological and climatic motives to explain

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222 For an in-depth development of this topic, see Sofri 1969, pp. 25–39. Sofri explains the reasons for Marx's interest in India at the time, and the lesser amount of space devoted to the history of, for example, China. Sofri 1969, pp. 76–7, believes, and we agree, that it would be a mistake to think that 'Marx saw the China and India of his time as concrete examples of the "Asiatic mode of production"', even if they had some of its distinctive traits. In the chapter on the historical considerations of commercial capital in Volume III of *Capital*, he refers to communal property in China and India.

223 Marx 1979, p. 132. According to Sofri 1969, p. 70, thirty years later, Marx thought it possible that the revolution and autonomous progress would come at the hand of Russian village communes. In the 1850s, Marx believed in the Industrial Revolution and capitalism destroying the communes of India, while in the 1880s he had arrived at the conviction that capitalism could be skipped.

224 Marx 1965, p. 56, n. 31.

225 Marx 1983, pp. 330 ff.

226 Engels 1983, pp. 335 ff.

such an absence.<sup>227</sup> Artificial irrigation is the primary condition of agriculture, and it is the concern of the communes, of the provinces and the central government. Here he points out – and Marx reproduced the statement a few days later in his article for the *New York Daily Tribune* – that there are three departments of government: of finance, or the plunder of the interior; of war, or the plunder of the exterior; and the department of public works. In his response dated 14 June 1853, Marx explains Asia's stagnation as due to the public works of the central government and the division of the empire in villages with their own separate organisation, although he also counts on the existence of a few large cities. Marx was searching for an explanation of the fundamental reason for British domination and the arrival of industry to the East, and he found it in the stagnation of Asiatic despotism. With regard to the first condition, Marx underscores the stagnation deriving from the public works of the central government, but he omits Engels's suggestion regarding the role of communes and provinces in artificial irrigation. Regarding the second condition, the presence of self-sufficient communities based on the unification of agriculture and manufacturing in the household will be developed in the *Formen* and become a central notion of his discourse. Moreover, in the *Formen* Marx will revisit the absence of legal property in Oriental despotism (that Engels had mentioned in his letter of 6 June 1853) and the existence of communal property containing conditions for reproduction and surplus production.<sup>228</sup> Perhaps the difference, not a small one, with the content of the *Formen* is that in his correspondence and in his journalistic article Marx was interested less in explaining certain features of the Eastern societies, and more in the dialectical definition of forms preceding the development of capitalism.<sup>229</sup>

In *Capital*,<sup>230</sup> Marx revisits the importance of regulating the Nile floods and the need for observation and astronomical calculations, an activity in the hands of the priests, who were in turn the administrators of agriculture.<sup>231</sup>

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227 Godelier 1977, p. 36.

228 As I understand it, Hobsbawm posits that scholars who did not know the *Formen* pointed to the Oriental system as characterised by the absence of private property derived from excessive centralisation, public works and irrigation based on Marx's letters and articles on India. Hobsbawm notes that in the *Formen* Marx posits the idea of manufacturing and agricultural unity in the villages, Marx 1964, pp. 33–4. A different view can be found in Soriano Llopis 2007, p. 25.

229 O'Leary 1989, p. 102.

230 Marx 1965, p. 357.

231 Marx 1965, p. 360, n. 6.

There is a certain tension in Marx's postulates of 1853 regarding the conditions and the organisation of production in the villages<sup>232</sup> and the organisation attributed to the state in what pertained to great irrigation works. This could be explained up to a point, especially if we focus on the *Formen*, where Marx remarks on the presentation of government public works with respect to the 'water conduction sustained by nature appropriation through collective conditions'.<sup>233</sup> Evidently, in the *Formen* Marx understands the importance of, for example, aqueducts built by the state in that they imply the appropriation of village work: 'communal conditions for real appropriation through labour, such as irrigation systems (very important among the Asian peoples), means of communication, etc., will then appear as the work of the higher unity – the despotic government which is poised above the lesser communities'.

With regard to this, if we think only of ancient Egypt, the Nile's natural irrigation of arable land over several weeks created natural basins along the river and allowed for the planting of wheat, barley and flax around the month of October. This implies that peasant communities had the ability to maintain the waterways in working condition and regulate the opening and closing of the levees that allowed for water circulation.<sup>234</sup>

Having said that, state control over the Nile's floods and the flooded areas seems to have been crucial for the calculation of taxes.<sup>235</sup> This is perhaps the reason why the texts note in detail the different types of land and yields, attesting to a rich and complex lexicography related to types of soil, especially in the land surveys used for establishing taxes.<sup>236</sup> Likewise, scribes and priests developed certain types of knowledge, astronomical calculations and measurements that contributed to those surveys.

However, the state intervened in the conditioning of fields<sup>237</sup> and local communities supplied the necessary labour to carry it out. The increase in the area of arable land through artificial irrigation<sup>238</sup> seems to have been an option

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232 Recall that he avoids Engels's proposition on the role of communes and provinces in the matter of irrigation.

233 Based on O'Leary 1989, pp. 97–8.

234 Moreno García 2004a, p. 46.

235 Moreno García 2004a, pp. 45–6.

236 Moreno García 2004a, p. 51.

237 Reflected ritually in a very early depiction of a king opening an irrigation waterway, i.e. a ritual of inauguration: Scorpion macehead, ca. 3000 BC.

238 It has been suggested that Sesostris II planned to convert an area of marshlands into arable land, and that the project included a levee and waterways connecting the area with Bahr Yusef. This correlates with the funerary monuments built in the region. See

from the beginning of the pharaonic dynasties,<sup>239</sup> although it did not entail the construction of massive water-works or complex waterway systems allowing for permanent rather than a seasonal irrigation,<sup>240</sup> a type of work that only becomes identifiable in the Greco-Roman period and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>241</sup> As Eyre points out, ‘the conversion of this wild landscape into a disciplined artificial irrigation regime was the work of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.’<sup>242</sup> Some officials note in their biographies having carried out the construction of waterways, and during the first period of state fragmentation local men underscore their intervention in the construction of waterways,<sup>243</sup> irrigation canals<sup>244</sup> and cisterns<sup>245</sup> as well as in the use of water to enclose fields and higher ground.<sup>246</sup> It is not possible to establish a relationship of direct causation between ‘hydraulic agriculture’ and the logic of politics and social relations,<sup>247</sup> but neither is it possible to overlook the productivity and agricultural organisation in relation to the state, especially in areas with less propitious natural conditions.

Quite differently, Karl Wittfogel’s thesis is based on Oriental/hydraulic despotism<sup>248</sup> as a system requiring *managerial* control. Thus, the state apparatus derives its power from the need for continuous administration and control of the waterworks.<sup>249</sup> Discussing in depth the problem of hydraulic despotism in the terms proposed by Wittfogel would exceed the purposes of the present chapter, but suffice it to say that, as Krader points out, it focuses on despotism, i.e. the political aspect of the problem.<sup>250</sup>

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Callender 2000, p. 152, who accepts that the works were done but is not sure about the role of Sesostris II. Anyway, there is no firm evidence that such irrigation works were carried out, Diego Espinel 2011, p. 236.

239 Butzer 1976, p. 20.

240 Cardoso 1986, p. 13.

241 Moreno García 2004a, p. 47; Eyre 1999, p. 34 and 2004, pp. 157–76.

242 Eyre 2010, p. 292.

243 Griffith 1889, p. 11, pl. xv.

244 Griffith 1889, pl. xv.

245 Berlin Stela 14334, Andreu 1991, pl. 2, fig. 1; Roeder 1913, p. 122. Florence Stele 6365, Varille 1935–8, pp. 554–5; Bosticco 1959, pp. 24–5, pl. 18.

246 Moreno García 2004a, p. 48. Also Eyre 1999, p. 34.

247 Butzer 1976, p. 110.

248 On the flaws of the hypothesis of hydraulic causation and an analysis of ancient Egypt, see Cardoso 1982, pp. 14–25.

249 Hindess and Hirst 1975, p. 217; O’Leary 1989, p. 140.

250 According to Krader 1975, p. 115, n. 53, Wittfogel takes the issue one step further, converting the categories of despotism and totalitarianism into economic structures, as parts of

For his part, Godelier proposes a mode of production in which the aristocracy has state power at its disposal and insures the bases of class exploitation by appropriating a part of the product of the communities, although he insists on the existence of large-scale works which in turn condition the presence of a bureaucracy and an absolute, centralised power bearing the vague and antiquated name of despotism.<sup>251</sup> Notwithstanding the above, Godelier elaborates a typology of the various forms of the Asiatic mode of production with or without large-scale works, with or without agriculture, stressing the emergence of a primary class structure of ill-defined contours and the regular appropriation of the labour of the communities, as well as the development of productive forces in these civilisations, as attested to by the domination of man over nature through the use of metal, new forms of architecture, calculus, writing, etc.<sup>252</sup>

The importance of supervision and intervention in irrigation seems to be due to the accumulation the state derived from it and tax policies. Large works such as great architectural projects can be carried out to the extent that the state can provide resources obtained through surplus appropriation and its administration, and above all by the state's ability to marshal human labour, which is especially remarkable in times of political centralisation.<sup>253</sup> As Bard said, starting with the first dynasties of pharaonic Egypt, the monument was 'a symbol of the enormous control exercised by the crown'.<sup>254</sup> When the state became fragmented in times of decentralisation known as 'intermediate',<sup>255</sup> the great works and building projects disappeared and it seems as if the resources were managed at a local and regional level.

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managerial and semi-managerial systems. See Bartra 1975, p. 23. See Sofri 1969, pp. 133–47, for a discussion of Wittfogel's book and criticism of his thesis.

251 Godelier 1971, pp. 43–4.

252 Godelier 1977, p. 152; 1971, pp. 44–5.

253 As Jones explains, 'in moving the colossal statues and vast masses, of which the transport creates wonder, human labour almost alone was prodigally used. The power to direct those masses is the origin of those titanic works'. Jones 1852, pp. 77–8. Marx 1965, pp. 228–9, cites this paragraph to explain the efficacy of simple cooperation.

254 Bard 2000, p. 81.

255 General bibliography on intermediate periods: First Intermediate Period ca. 2160–2055 BC: Seidlmayer 2000, pp. 108–36; Franke 2000, pp. 526–32; Moreno García 2011a; Willems 2010, pp. 81–100. Second Intermediate Period ca. 1650–1550 BC: von Beckerath 1965; Bourriau 2000, pp. 185–217; Ryholt 1997.

## V

The most complex aspect to revisit is the qualifier of 'Asiatic', perhaps because Asia evokes an abstraction linked to certain negative traits, such as despotic, closed and stagnant, to express the singularity of Eastern processes as distinct from those of the West.

Nevertheless, as Said remarked, Orientalism is 'not an airy European fantasy about the Orient but a created body of theory and practice in which for many generations there has been a considerable material investment'.<sup>256</sup> Academic discourse included Egypt in that Orient because its history was more linked to urban and state development in the Ancient Middle East than to the African substrate of which it is also part.<sup>257</sup> Born in Europe, the historic construction of 'Ancient Near East' includes diverse regions and societies, and quite often the joint and global vision has let its particularities fall by the wayside. Paradoxically, it is through linguistic studies and archaeological explorations carried out in large part by Europeans, especially during the past century, that we have a body of academic knowledge called the 'Orient'. In any case, it is not a matter of stating, like Said, that for Marx it was easier to illustrate his theory using the collectivist Orient as a prophetic statement, or to reduce the attention he gave the Orient to the requirements of Western redemption.<sup>258</sup> There is, however, a problem in the Asiatic category due to the weight it gives to geographical factors in historical development<sup>259</sup> and because it is the only notion of a mode of production that is linked to a certain space.<sup>260</sup>

Godelier proposed abandoning the denomination of Asiatic since the phenomenon of the transition from a classless to a class society is recognisable in different historical times and spaces.<sup>261</sup> However, the works of Marx and Engels refer to Asia in general, although at times they mention Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan, Tartary, Arabia, Malaysia, the Isle of Java, China, India, the Hindustan, Mesopotamia and Egypt, but also the American civilisations of Mexico and Peru.<sup>262</sup> The criticism based on the geographical restriction<sup>263</sup> does not appear

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256 Said 1977, p. 6.

257 Cervelló Autuori 1996, pp. 33ff.

258 For a critique of Said's position, see Ahmad 1992, pp. 221–42.

259 On Hegel's influence and a critique of the notion of the Western spirit as inclined to change and development, see Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 203–6.

260 Sawyer 1977, p. 2.

261 Godelier 1971, pp. 41–2.

262 Marx 1964, p. 70.

263 Chesneaux 1983, p. 110; Godelier 1971, pp. 41–2; Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 185–7.

justified given that Marx himself in the *Formen* did not limit the Asiatic form to certain spaces and pointed out the complexity of the transformation and dissolution processes of the ancient relations according to the different historical and geographical circumstances, indicating that the notion was not as limited as has been suggested.<sup>264</sup>

On the other hand, the emergence of feudalism has been historically associated with Europe and in this sense there is an acknowledgement of the singularity of the West with respect to the development of capitalism.<sup>265</sup> As Goody points out, the idea of the singularity of the West appears in relation to the 'curse' of capitalism. This author questions the perspectives that address the issue citing Western rationality, Western trade and the links between such phenomena as 'modernisation', 'industrialisation' and 'capitalism' itself. Goody admits that binarism is a presence in worldviews, but he resists the creation of false comparative assessments of the East and the West.<sup>266</sup>

Neither can we solve the problem by acknowledging in the Orient a feudal mode of production coexisting with other modes; in this case it could not claim for itself any kind of singularity and would still be on a level of development prior to that of the 'West'. As we have noted for the case of pharaonic Egypt, one of the spaces that Marx counted as part of the orient, it is viable to analyse that ancient state in terms of the Asiatic mode of production. The extension of this mode to historical spaces understood as Oriental is a matter that has to be understood in terms of a certain Western tradition. Nevertheless, the geographic restriction was absent in Marx's own interpretation; when Marx thought of the transition from 'primitive' or classless societies with a primitive or communal mode of production into class societies, into pristine states, he located the phenomenon in the orient because in fact the first states emerge in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India, although later they also emerged in America. Thus, the Asiatic form was closest to the primitive community; it was an early form related to the ancient form and the Germanic form. However, Marx notes that the Asiatic form has undergone historical and geographical variations.<sup>267</sup> This leads to the proposition that Marx's elaborations on the Asiatic mode in the *Formen* deal with a complex process of relations between the superior community and village communities that is associated with the early 'Oriental' states, hence its name, notwithstanding the fact that those relations can be found in other geographical spaces and historical times.

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264 Marx 1964; Sofri 1969, pp. 46–8.

265 Goody 1996, p. 3.

266 Goody 1996, p. 10.

267 Sofri 1969, pp. 43–54.

## VI

As argued above, in the Asiatic mode of production the logic of the state is pre-eminent and the relationship with the villages features extractive and exploitative forms. This first relation of appropriation defines the mode of production, whose constitutive elements are related to forms of property. Thus, the *Formen* highlight the fact that the state appears as the superior or sole proprietor to whom the surplus of the villages is due (although each peasant family can cultivate its own plot of land), and who benefits from the common labour carried out to exalt the despot or the divinity.

The analysis of this economic-social form detects village forms of property tied to the strong local identity and the self-sufficiency of the economy, as well as in consequence of shared property, the requirements of direct labour and the surrender of surplus labour for state institutions. However, there is an increasing encroachment on the part of the state through the creation of agricultural facilities in different regions of the Old Kingdom and the rising pre-eminence of the temples until they become the largest landowners during the New Kingdom, especially of holdings located in political and administrative centres. The implied or apparent property of the state becomes real and effective property. Thus, in some regions village property ends up being juxtaposed with those institutional holdings.

The transformation of these bonds with the communities does not affect their essential features based on agricultural production and manufacturing, although there is a visible differentiation and hierarchisation of village leaders, local elites and funerary institutions, each with its own functioning logic but somewhat limited by the state.

There is a visible continuity in the state, which maintains a political form and mechanisms of exploitation and domination that correspond to the dominant mode of production. The non-collapse of the pharaonic state and the persistence of its functioning forms over millennia have led to the characterisation of these societies as stagnant, unmoving. Indeed, there is identifiable political, economic and social change, but it does not undermine the dominant mode of appropriation and exploitative mechanisms of the state.

The so-called intermediate or transitional periods bring to the fore the conflicts among regional elites and allow for the identification of intermediate social categories and class contradictions, as well as expressions of status manifested during political crises that reflect a certain fragmentation of the state. Such crises do not undermine the dominant relations of production. As mentioned before, clientelar relations and the logic of the patron are to be understood as practices coexisting with the logic imposed by the state itself.

Thus, according to the *Formen*, the individual is then in fact propertyless or property appears to be mediated by means of a grant [*Ablassen*] from the total unity. In fact, sources of pharaonic Egypt document the granting of lands from the king to senior officers in retribution for their functions and services from the Old Kingdom onward. Familial forms of property appear in different periods of pharaonic history, juxtaposed with funerary and religious foundations. The emergence of a type of individual property indicates the coexistence of relations adjacent to the dominant forms of property but they do not give rise to a landed hereditary aristocracy that can challenge the dominance of the centralised state. That is to say, the appearance of this type of property did not transform the dominant forms of exploitation over the communities and the dominions of the crown. The fundamental explanations for royalty and the king's function as integrator of nature and the cosmos emanate from mythical-political contents corresponding to said forms.

The postulates of 1853 are in line with the above, alluding to the village system as a feature of Asiatic societies and also to the absence of private property. However, the references to the village system and to the absence of private property have a reduced analytical exposition as compared with the *Formen* due to the type of publication for which they were meant (*The New York Daily Tribune* and *Letters*) and because they treat India or the Orient as a whole, stressing the survival of those features in contemporary societies. The only aspect that is mentioned exclusively in the writings of 1853 is the question of artificial irrigation as a condition of agriculture and a certain geographical determinism in the explanation of the absence of private property due to ecological and climatic reasons. This feature has been overestimated, leading to an identification of hydraulic despotism with the Asiatic mode of production, when in reality the *Formen* emphasise the communal conditions for real appropriation through labour, such as aqueducts among other works like means of communication, etc., which appear as works of the superior entity above the communities. The sources of pharaonic Egypt note the existence of irrigation works on a local and state level, but above all they reflect state supervision and intervention in the irrigation works linked to its fiscal policies. Moreover, village dwellers could be summoned to carry out different kinds of labour for the pharaoh, such as temple or waterway construction, military service or a mining expedition.

In order to explain the emergence of forms of exchange derived from individual accumulation and from circulation processes that can even allow for transactions in proto-money, one must note the availability of surplus among the dominant classes, especially in cities of administrative or religious importance. Marx's argument in the *Formen* highlights that the royals and their senior

officials exchanged their revenue – surplus product – in the cities. These processes occur in Egypt during the New Kingdom, especially in Thebes and Deir el-Medina, the village of craftsmen that manufactured funerary goods for the elite. Also during this period we witness the exchange of small plots of land and slaves for equivalents at a low value; senior officials intervene in these transactions, although through intricate relationships with temples or households. The revenues of the empire routed to temples and donated to senior officials gave rise to a larger availability of surpluses within the dominant classes.