Remarks on the Class Struggle in Ancient Greece[1]

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Editors' introduction:
By way of introducing this article we summarise some extracts taken from a recent discussion of Vernant's early work on his election to a chair at the College de France, published in Raison Presente (1975). The article published here is based largely on Vernant's early work on the economy and class structure of ancient Greece. In his more recent work he has been increasingly concerned with the analysis of ancient Greek myth. His work on Greek society and culture began in 1948 with a thesis on Plato's concept of labour. He was writing this within a relatively traditional philosophical framework but his aim was to undertake a Marxist reading of Plato's philosophy. Seeking to avoid a schematic or simplistic Marxism, Vernant thought that the only way to understand Plato's concept of labour was in terms of the intersection of two lines of analysis:

1 the status of labour in Plato's Athens with all the complexities that that implies, i. e. in terms of the socio-historic conditions of the 4th century BC
2 how Plato's notion of labour was articulated within his total philosophic system.

This was Vernant's starting point. But, influenced by L. Gernet and I. Meyerson he came to realise that this was not the best nor the most interesting way to approach the problem.

What had to be considered was not the 'notion' of labour in the work of any particular philosopher, nor the socio-historic context of labour, but what Vernant has called the 'category of labour'. This involves looking at labour in the classical Greek world in all its dimensions: technical, economic, social, political and intellectual.

In the course of this work he realised that what he had called the category of labour appeared in a very different guise in Classical Greece. He was confronted in particular by a fundamental opposition between two aspects of labour - the labour of artisans and the labour of agriculturalists. Agricultural labour was conceptualised not only in terms of the cultivation of the soil, but also as cult of the divinities of the earth. He was then led to consider the status of the economic in societies in which the economy cannot be separated from other aspects of social life, e. g. politics or religion.

But at the same time ancient Greece presented not only evidence, in early texts such as the poems of Homer, Hesiod or even Solon, of a state of society in which the spheres of economics, politics, morality etc could not be dissociated, but also evidence of the subsequent development of differentiated institutions with specialised vocabularies,

activities, organisation and intellectual frameworks (art, medicine, philosophy, mathematics etc). In his first book, Les Origines de la Pensée Grècque, Vernant discussed the emergence of what we call forms of rational thought from myth: he was led to stress here the dominant role of the establishment in the 8th-7th centuries of the system of the city-state. This raised the problem of the 'dominance of the political' in Greek society. Of course this dominance must be explained, and economic factors play the most important part in this explanation: but the Marxist cannot pass directly from economic facts to intellectual developments: he must always trace his analysis through the mediation of the political level.

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In his study on the problem of class struggle in Classical Antiquity[2] Charles Parain tried to define the specific characteristics of forms of social life which, in the period between pre-Homeric Greece and Imperial Rome, underwent profound changes. They also present marked spatial variations. Parain is well aware of this diversity in the historical material. He is, however, interested in a more abstract level of analysis, and attempts to define the fundamental characteristics which gave a unique structure to this whole period of human history in the Mediterranean West, and which constitute a particular mode of production.

For Marxists the ancient world is a class society which in its typical form can be defined as a slave mode of production. But does it follow inevitably that the whole history of Classical Antiquity can be seen in terms of an opposition between the two conflicting classes of slaves and slave owners? If Marxist theory has to be reduced to such a brief, rigid and anti-dialectical formula it will scarcely be capable of illuminating the work of historians.

First of all, slavery has its own history. Its birth and development are inevitably linked to certain modes of land appropriation. As a result its spread, its importance and its forms (in the family, agriculture, manufacturing, state administration) are not the same in different places nor at different times.

Thus all ancient classical societies cannot be classified indiscriminately as slave societies. Several of Marx's texts themselves underline the point that the spread of slavery within ancient civilisations undermines and ultimately destroys the forms of property characteristic of the ancient city. In Capital for example Marx states: "Peasant agriculture on a small scale and the carrying out of independent handicrafts ... form the economic foundation of the classical communities at their best, after the primitive form of ownership of land in common had disappeared, and before slavery had seized on production in earnest."[3] Marxists should therefore consider slavery dialectically as a process, both insofar as it determines the specific characteristic, after a certain stage, of the social relations of antiquity, and insofar as, in the process of its development, it destroys the original forms which these social relationships assumed in the context of the city.

Historians of ancient Greece and of Rome will not therefore have exactly the same perspective. As far as Greece is concerned the perspective again will not be the same for the whole of antiquity. During the archaic period, when the city developed its original structure, maintaining its patriarchal character, while the classical age and the subsequent period of dissolution were marked by the expansion of servile labour in different branches of economic life.

These preliminary comments can be usefully supplemented by reference to Parain's work. He underlines the difference between a fundamental contradiction, which corresponds to the specific character of a mode of production in its typical form, and the principal or dominant contradiction which indicates which social groups have actually been opposed at any definite moment in history in the concrete context of a particular situation. But there is a fundamental and essential problem which goes beyond this question of vocabulary which I want to discuss very briefly, less in order to try to answer the question than to try to define it better, and locate its multiple implications.

We can talk of basic and primary contradictions only because Marxist analysis, while seeing each social formation as a whole, distinguishes within it various levels, each with its own structure and dynamic. Contradiction in a social system can exist within any one level or between different levels. The well known Marxist schema corresponds to this: productive forces, economic relations of production, socio-political relationships, forms of thought and ideology. In capitalist society the class contradictions which, at the socio-political level, oppose the workers and the capitalists, correspond to the contradictions which at the base of society oppose the increasingly collective form of the process of production (forces of production) to the means of production (relations of production). Class conflict, manifested in the social and political conflicts which are the concrete material of history, coincides with what is seen, in the abstract analysis of political economy, as the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist mode of production.

This is why the definition of classes and class conflict must show how these human groups and their evolution are rooted, at all levels of social reality, in contradictions which, in general terms, coincide. This correspondance of the contradictions at different levels explains why within the working class there is the possibility of a new society. Its struggle, its political victory and its takeover of the state all entail, according to Marx, a radical transformation of social relations, and thus a new advance at the level of the productive forces. To demonstrate that the situation in the ancient world was not the same, and that this clear-cut theoretical model cannot be applied directly to ancient societies, it is enough to note that the slave class did not carry within itself the possibility of a new society. The political victory of the slaves, if such a hypothesis had ever been meaningful, would not have undermined the relations of production nor changed the way in which property was held.

All historians agree that even when slave revolts took the form of an organised political or military struggle (something which never occurred in the Greek city states) they had neither programme nor prospects and could not have brought about a transformation of the social system of production. They were incapable of changing the society because the fundamental contradictions developing between the forces of production and the relations of production, which were eventually to threaten their articulation, were not completely expressed in the antagonism between the slaves and their owners at the level of social and political conflict.

To grasp the complex interplay of the antagonism between social groups in antiquity historians, whether Marxist or non-Marxist, must first define more precisely the various contradictions active in the ancient economy, locate them within society as a whole and specify, as far as possible, their hierarchy and their relative importance during the different periods of ancient history. Marx has given some indications of the contradictions which seemed to him to be fundamental in the earliest period, when the Polis was established. According to him,[4] we have to deal with an opposition between two forms of land ownership, the co-existence of which constituted the uniqueness of the Greco-roman city state. The first was state land-ownership - originally communal; the second, private property in land which was originally obtained through the medium of state appropriation. It was this dual land-tenure system which made the landowner a citizen, and turned the old village cultivator into a town dweller. The destruction of the equilibrium between these two forms of land-holding to the advantage of the latter - i. e. the gradual consolidation of private land-holding within the framework of the city-state - seems to be the necessary condition for the development of slavery and a monetary economy. Essentially Marx based his analysis on Niebuhr's work on Roman history. Historians of the archaic economy of Greece who are not necessarily working in a Marxist framework, are currently concerning themselves with the same issues. Recent work[5] suggests the possibility that there were two different forms of citizen land tenure in the ancient Greek world. On the one hand there was family property belonging to a household (oikos) and not to individuals, who had no right to dispose freely of their patroa (ancestral possessions) outside the family by sale. Even in city states like Athens, it appears that up to the last third of the fifth century most land-holdings (and certainly those around the urban area which, properly speaking, was what was meant by the term 'city-land') retained their character as inalienable family possessions, allotments (kleroi), each belonging to one of the households making up the state, and not a private individual. On the other hand, alongside these inalienable land holdings (sometimes co-existing with them in the same state, but localised in more outlying regions) there may have been areas where ownership was further developed and where it was easier to buy and sell land.

A detailed study of land law with its various forms and historical changes is indispensable since, thoughout this period, while the economy remained essentially an agricultural one, class struggles were rooted in problems connected with land tenure. In the beginning the city (asty) was opposed to

the country (the demoi) as the place where a certain kind of landowner lived (in Athens the Eupatridai). These landowners monopolised the state, controlling both political offices and military functions. It was only later (in Athens, from the sixth century onwards), that the area within the city walls came to provide a framework for independent industrial and commercial activity which was entirely cut off from agriculture. It was this situation that prompted Marx to write: "The history of classical antiquity is the history of cities, but of cities founded on landed property and on agriculture."[6] In the same text he defined economic life at the beginnings of the city state in this way: "Concentration in the towns, with the land as territorium; small-scale agriculture working for direct consumption; manufacture as a domestic side-occupation of wives and daughters (spinning and weaving) or independent in specific branches (smiths ...) only."[7] The city state can thus be defined as a system of institutions which allows a privileged minority (the citizens) exclusive access to landed property within a definite area. In this sense the economic base of the Polis was a particular form of land appropriation.

The later development of slavery, the separation of artisan manufacturing from the domestic economy, the growth of a limited market sector both within and, to use Marx's own term, in the interstices of these agricultural societies, the spread of money - all these phenomena indicated that new contradictions were becoming dominant. These contradictions could arise only in conditions specific to the city state. But, at the same time, their development challenged the structures within which they had evolved. For Marx, the generalisation of slavery, and the spread of domestic exchange and maritime commerce, along with the establishment of commercial production and the concentration of land ownership in fewer hands, broke down the forms of land tenure and the socio-political structures which characterised the city-state. At its apogee, the community in effect depended 'on the preservation of equality among its free self-sufficient peasants', using surplus not for market production but for the communal interests (real or imaginary) of the group which made them simultaneously citizens and landowners: war, politics and religion.[9] Conversely, we can characterise the Hellenistic period, when the nature of Greek social and political life was no longer defined by the traditional framework of the city-state, in terms of the following factors: expansion of slavery, uninterrupted circulation of money throughout the Mediterranean basin, and growth of the role of the market (though in antiquity commodity production always remained limited to certain sectors and in general terms dependent on agriculture).[9]

It is therefore fairly easy to see why industry and commerce, which were to become increasingly important in economic life, developed in every case more or less on the periphery of the city-state, being somehow extraneous to the civic community. Those who were occupied full-time in such activities and played the main part in maritime commerce, banking and commercial production were typically non-citizens (metics).

Marx wrote:

> "In classical antiquity, manufacture appears already as a corruption (business for freedmen, clients, aliens) etc. This development of productive labour (not bound in pure subordination to agriculture as a domestic task, labour by free men for agriculture or war only, or for religious observances, and manufactures for the community - such as construction of houses, streets, temples), which necessarily develops through intercourse with aliens and slaves, through the desire to exchange the surplus product etc, dissolves the mode of production on which the community rests, and, with it, the objective individual, i. e. the individual defined as Roman, Greek, etc.[10]

Marx's brief references to the antagonisms within the relations of production in the city state anticipate and clarify the most recent research done on the ancient economy.[11] Following F. Oertel and R. Laqueur, Erb has emphasised that the basic driving force in ancient Greece was, in Greek terms, the opposition between oikonomia and chrematistike. Oikonomia referred to the agrarian economy based on the family, upon which the city state as such was constructed. This system corresponded to a political ideal of autarchy and was supported by primitive artisan production which provided for minimum needs. Chrematistike referred to an economy which developed out of the growth of the city state with its need for a food supply and for financial resources, particularly as a result of the demands of warfare. The growth of maritime trade, credit, banking and bottomry loans (providing capital and insurance for traders) were all manifestations of chrematistike. On the one hand there was a very short-range agricultural economy which was inward-looking and autarkic in character and was associated with craft or activity geared to consumption rather than production (sic), or to satisfying the needs of the political community (war and the city population). On the other hand there was a wider economic system with active, developed and outward-looking commerce, and maritime exchange. This system was built up essentially for personal gain. As M. I. Finley remarks,[12] one of the most striking characteristics of the Greek economy is that to a very great extent land and money continue to be organised in two separate spheres. This fundamental cleavage is characteristic of economic development in the ancient world.

Marxists should bear in mind these features of economic history if they wish to analyse, in each period, the concrete manifestations of class conflict and the economic structures which determined their form. In a note in Capital Marx replies to an objection made against The Critique of Political Economy. It is certainly true, so the criticism went, that in modern society, which is ruled by material interests, all development of social, political and spiritual life is dominated by the mode of production of material life and derives, in the last analysis, from economic structures. But this was not so in the Middle Ages "when catholicism reigned" nor in Athens or Rome "where politics reigned". Marx's reply is interesting for two reasons. On the one hand he does not make the least attempt to deny that politics ruled over social existence in ancient times. He tries to show

why this was so, and why it was within the framework of political life that class conflict took shape and was acted out, just as it was within the framework of political life that Greek civilisation created in philosophy, science and the arts its distinctive ways of thinking. On the other hand Marx clearly shows us in what area of economic reality the fundamental contradiction of antiquity was to be found - the contradiction which gives us the key to the general process of development. Having observed that antiquity could no more live by politics than the Middle Ages by catholicism, Marx wrote: "On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played the chief part. For the rest, it requires but a slight acquaintance with the history of the Roman republic, for example, to be aware that the key to its history is 'the history of landed property'." (author's emphasis).[13]

As far as archaic and classical Greece are concerned, excluding the Hellenistic and Roman periods, I would say that Marx's formulation appears to have perfectly defined the area in which the fundamental contradiction emerged and developed. I believe, with him, that it concerns the structures of landed property. To use Parain's terminology again, the principal contradictions at the beginning of the city state opposed a class of landowners, of the type of the Eupatridai, living in the city, controlling the state and undertaking its military functions, to the village farmers who made up the rural demos. Later on, as a direct result of the social evolution which has been outlined, the principal contradictions shifted with the emergence of new antagonisms, resulting from the development of the division of labour.

With this in mind one should emphasise the decisive importance for a state like Athens of the shift which occurred in the second half of the fifth century. It was at this point that the whole social and economic equilibrium upon which the regime of the Polis rested, was called into question. Three roughly defined characteristics which gave the social life of the ancient city state its special character were equally affected. These were, firstly, the unity of town and countryside (the built-up area was initially and in principle only the centre which united the countryside because it contained all the public buildings in which the communal life of the group was centred; private interests and individual family households were distinct from this); secondly, the unity of citizen and soldier (military duties being shared by and exclusively reserved for citizens, and appeared as an integral part of political duties); thirdly, the close bond between citizenship and land ownership. Towards the end of the fifth century there was a whole series of changes which were to have decisive effects. The countryside had been devastated by war and fields and rural farms deserted; at the same time in the town a truly urban milieu had already developed, a city existence whose way of life, occupational patterns and mentality now made a clear contrast to the old traditions of rural dwellers. At the same time, in response to the demands of war, mercenaries reappeared and professional military leaders began to gain power. Finally, land ceased to be inalienable as

in the past. It was drawn into the sphere of the monetary system from which it had previously been separated, and was also granted more easily to non-citizens as a reward for their services.[14] There is an additional significant factor: at about the same time the influence of a new commercial form of law began to be felt which had been elaborated for the purposes of maritime trade and contained a notion of contract which was relatively modern in inspiration and which, contrary to all Greek legal custom, made use of written documents.[15] We might say, following Louis Gernet, that the economy - in the sense that we nowadays give to this term - had done its work.[16] From the fourth century onwards everything was to be measured by money. But now we are talking of the fourth century, the period of the collapse of the city state, not the seventh or the sixth, the eras during which it was founded and consolidated. Moreover, we are referring to Athens, a maritime and commercial city state, and not to the whole of Greece. Finally, although Aristotle wrote: "We call goods (chremata) all things whose value is measured in money", it is still true that even when he reflected upon economics, he continued to set his face stubbornly against the commercial way of thinking.[17] Was this a biased attitude, or a false perception of the economic realities of his age? On the contrary, I believe, with Marx, that Aristotle was a faithful recorder of the social world of his period. In Aristotle's time, the largest sector of economic life remained outside the market economy. This was particularly true since there was no paid labour force.[18]

What was class struggle like in fourth century Greece? Claude Mossé has recently studied the different aspects and ramifications of this question for fourth century Athens.[19] She has demonstrated very usefully the difficulties involved in such a study. We can here only refer the reader to the picture she has painted of class relations and their evolution through the phase of the collapse of the classical Polis.

Clearly class struggle has never (at any time in history) taken a simple form. But Marx believe, apparently correctly, that in ancient times it was far more complex in character. There are various reasons for this complexity, some of which Claude Mossé has clarified. I would like, as a working hypothesis, to note what seems to be essential in this context. The conflicts which towards the fourth century involved the different social groups within the framework of the city-state, were neither baseless nor purely ideological: they were rooted in the economy of these societies. Human groups came into conflict because of their material interests. But these material interests did not derive either directly or exclusively from the position which individuals occupied in the process of production. They were always a function of the position which these individuals occupied in political life, which played the dominant role in the system of the Polis. In other words, the economic function of different individuals - which determined their material interests, fashioned their social needs and oriented their social and political behaviour in alliance with or in opposition to other groups - was mediated via political status.

A few very simple examples will be enough to make this clear. Between a metic and a citizen, both in charge of a manufacturing establishment with 15 or 20 slaves, or active in maritime commerce, or dealing in bottomry loans, there was no difference in economic status, i. e. in their position in the process of production. Nevertheless it would be impossible to consider them as members of the same class. Between them there were antagonisms and conflicts, including conflicts of interest. The institutions of the Polis system gave privileges to all citizens, to which non-citizens could not hope to aspire (some of which were economic, like easy access to land). The solidarity which drew all the citizens of the same city together and which made them a relatively united group, in opposition to non-citizens, despite their internal divisions, no doubt reflected their common interest. But this community of interests among the citizens of a single city, and divergence of interests between citizens and non-citizens, can be understood only when the mediating role played by the structures of the state has been taken into account. These points can be made more precisely through a second example.

Claude Mossé has demonstrated that it would be rash to speak as though a commercial and industrial class were opposed to a landowning class even in the fourth century (and a fortiori rasher in the case of earlier periods). Certainly in Athens there existed a category of traders who were only traders - true middlemen - in addition to all those who sold part of the production of their agricultural and artisan labour directly. But these middlemen were generally engaged in retail trade: small shopkeepers with booths or stalls in the agora. In contrast, all the evidence about the large fortunes of those whom we call (with Parain) the slave-owning entrepreneurs indicates that they almost always had real property in addition to their workshops, their cash and their funds out on loan. Given the importance assumed by land-holding in terms of civic status it is highly unlikely that a citizen who controlled huge financial resources was not a landowner as well. If he did not have land at the outset we can be sure that he would buy it, since land carried both prestige and intrinsic worth and endowed the citizen with a dignity, importance and status which monetary wealth could not provide.

We have to remember, moreover, what happened to most of the profits of the slave-owning entrepreneur in the city-state system. There was no industrial capital in Antiquity. Profits were not reinvested in business. Technology remained primitive since the basic productive force was the human labour of the slaves. Under these conditions the greater part of the entrepreneur's surplus returned to the civic collectivity in the form of liturgies, filling the treasury and paying for the communal expenditure of the state. This included the costs of civic and religious festivals, military expenses and the construction of public buildings. Marx has demonstrated that in societies where the productive forces are at an early stage of development and commercial production is still limited, money has neither the same role nor the same forms as in a more developed economy. While monetary circulation remains confined to coins, and money itself conserves its local and political character

(functioning as money of account and currency - as an instrument of circulation[20] - and not yet as credit[21] or universal money[22]) wealth can only be accumulated in the domain of mere monetary circulation and specifically in the form of hoarding: 'The activity which amasses hoards is, on the one hand, the withdrawal of money from circulation by constantly repeated sales, and on the other, simple piling up, accumulation.'[23]

Although it is true that in Antiquity everyone hoarded - hoards were scattered and dispersed over a whole area and not centralised in banks as nowadays[24] - this continuous and widespread practice of taking money out of circulation was compensated for by a counter movement which Marx analysed as usual from both an anthropological and an economic viewpoint. Because economic facts are to Marx relations between men (relations which endlessly transform themselves) their study must be accompanied by what one might call a comparative typology of economic behaviour.[25] The hoarder who tries to save his money by hiding it, by burying it, who accumulated it incessantly, is the same man who is driven to show it off in front of others and spread it before the public.[26] A lot of money found its way back into circulation in the form of conspicuous consumption and in the city state, where personal indulgence was in principle forgidden, this took the form of generous gifts to the civic community. A certain redistribution of the surplus between the citizens took place through the intermediary of the city state, whose treasury paid the salaries of legal and political positions which were available to everyone, and even financed some cash gifts to the poorest in the community.

One can understand therefore why Parain and Clause Mossé interpreted the class struggle between citizens as a conflict between rich and poor. At first sight such a formulation is surprising, and hardly seems to be Marxist in spirit. Membership of a class depends neither on property nor on income-levels, but on a man's place in the system of production. How can a Marxist therefore speak of a class of rich men or a class of poor? Yet if this formulation appears to be inapplicable to contemporary society, nevertheless it seems to be the only one which accurately defines the situation which existed during the decline of the Greek city state. At that time conflicts between citizens all revolved around the same problem: who should benefit from the redistribution of surplus by means of the institutions of the city state? The mass of citizens, whatever the diversity of their economic status, were polarised into two opposing camps. Those who had nothing, or very little, sought to use the structures of the state to tax the rich as much as possible, while the owners - whatever the origins of their fortunes - were determined to resist.

Within this general model, where should we situate the conflict between the slaves and their free owners? What form did the struggle of the former take and how much influence did it have on social evolution? On the factual level, one observation must be accepted without hesitation by the Greek historian, at least as far as concerns the archaic and classical periods, to which this analysis is limited. The opposition between slaves and their owners never emerged as the principal contradiction. In the social and

political struggles of this period, with their violent clashes, the slaves never once appear as a unified social grouping; they never acted as a class playing its own role in the succession of conflicts which were a permanent feature of the city states. No wonder, since class struggles were generated and acted out within a socio-political framework from which slaves were by definition excluded. Throughout this period the slaves' opposition to their masters was never directly expressed in terms of social and political struggle.

In this respect, we need to consider what exactly is implied by the formula of Aristotle, a witness to whom Marx paid particular attention. Aristotle saw the slave as a 'living tool'. In other words, to the Greek mind, the humanity of a man was inseparable from his social nature; and man was social insofar as he was a political being, i. e. a citizen. Because he was outside the city state, the slave was outside society, and therefore outside humanity. He had no identity apart from being a productive instrument. There is a dialectical connection between this image of the slave, reduced to the simple condition of a living tool, and the minor role actually played in history by the slaves. As long as the system of the classical city state remained alive - in its economic structures, in its institutions and in its ways of thinking - the slaves could not form an active, unified social force, a united body of man intervening on the historical stage to direct the course of events in a way which reflected their interests and their aspirations. Furthermore, it is known that the slaves as a whole were not as unified a group as we are sometimes led to imagine. In addition to the variety of their ethnic origins, and the differences of language, which in themselves raised obstacles, it is evident that considerable differences in their actual conditions of work lay behind their apparently uniform jural status. What did domestic slaves like those presented in New Comedy, or the slave who ran an artisan business for, and in the name of, his master, have in common with those who sweated in chains in the mines of Laurion? What was there in common between an agricultural slave, a tutor in a wealthy family, or an employee of the state administration?

Does this mean that the opposition between the slaves and their masters did not play a crucial role in the evolution of ancient societies? Not at all. But this opposition did not take the form of an organised struggle occurring at the level of the social and political structures. It came out in individual expressions of revolt; sometimes, when external conditions or the vicissitudes of war permitted it, by mass escapes; but it was always a question of escaping from the condition of enslavement, and not of changing the social system to the advantage of the group of which the slave felt himself to be a member. In fact the collective opposition came into play, and had a decisive effect, in other terms: it was at the level of the forces of production that the slaves, as a whole and as a social class, manifested resistance to their masters - the same forces of production of which the slaves were precisely the central factor in the economic and technical context of ancient Greece. At this level, as the use of slave labour became general, the conflict between the slaves

and their owners became the fundamental contradiction of the slave mode of production. In this system, in which overall technical progress was blocked or at least markedly held back, the spread of slavery was clearly the only way to develop the forces of production. But at the same time, the slaves' opposition to their masters, their resistance, their inevitable reluctance to perform the tasks allotted to them, impeded progress and imposed tighter and tighter limits on output. Moreover, when it came to increasing productive capacity, multiplying the numbers of slaves could not be continued indefinitely without endangering the stability of the social system as a whole. Thus we can say that, after a certain point, the conflict between the slaves and those who used them became the fundamental contradiction of the system, even though, as Parain pointed out, it did not emerge as the principal contradiction.

These preliminary remarks have been both too long-winded and inadequate. But they were above all intended to remind ourselves that we cannot take the conceptual apparatus which has been developed out of a study of contemporary society and apply it directly and without modification to the ancient world. Arguing against classical economics, Marx asserted the historical character of the economic categories which he distinguished in his study of modern society; it was in modern society that they acquired the developed form we recognise today. Marx believed that these categories provided keys to an understanding of social development as a whole. But he stated at the same time that they are not timeless. They have not always existed. One must therefore avoid projecting them purely and simply on non-capitalist societies, in which they will perhaps not be found, or in which they have taken forms very different from those which they have assumed under industrial capitalism. To the same extent, whenever we use the notions of class and class struggle in application to the ancient world, we should beware of anachronism and remain faithful to the historical spirit of Marxism.

NOTES

1 This text is a translation of the contribution of J. P. Vernant to a conference organised by the Centre d'Etudes de Recherches Marxistes in Paris on the problems of class conflict in classical antiquity. The French version was published in Eirene, IV, 1965, pp5-19 and reprinted with some changes in J. P. Vernant, Mythe et Société en Grèce Ancienne, Paris, Maspero, 1974.
2 Ch. Parain, 'Les caractères specifiques de la lutte des classes dans l'Antiquité classique', La Pensée, no. 108, April 1963.
3 K. Marx, Capital, Vol. I, p316, Lawrence & Wishart, 1974
4 K. Marx, Grundrisse. See the section on 'Forms which precede capitalist production' (English translation by Martin Nicolaus published by the Pelican Marx Library, 1973).
5 A. J. V. Fine, 'Horoi. Studies in Mortgate, Real Security and Land Tenure in Ancient Greece', Hesperia, suppl. IX, 1951; L. Gernet, 'Horoi', Studi in Onore di Ugo Enrico Paoli, 1955 pp345-353; 'Choses visibles et invisibles', Revue Philosophique, 1956, p83; G. Thomson,

'On Greek Land Tenure', Studies Robinson 2, pp840-57; N. G. L. Hammond, 'Land Tenure in Attica and Solon's seisachtheia', Journal of Hellenic Studies 81, 1961 pp76-98; J. Pecirka, 'Land Tenure and the Development of the Athenian Polis', Geras. Studies presented to George Thomson, Prague, 1963 pp183-201; D. Asheri, 'Laws of Inheritance, Distribution of Land and Political constitutions in Ancient Greece', Historia 12 1963 pp1-21. (See now also M. I. Finley, 'The Alienability of Land in Ancient Greece', Eirene, VII 1968 pp25-32; also in Finley, The Use and Abuse of History, London 1975)

6 Grundrisse, p479.

7 ibid pp475-6.

8 ibid p476.

9 The limited scale of production for the market throughout antiquity (and especially in archaic times) seems to us to have been disregarded by some Marxists, who have, in our opinion, over-estimated the spread of exchange value in Greek social life and the hold which the category of commodities had on their minds. It may be useful to quote some texts: 'But the production of commodities does not become the normal, dominant type of production until capitalist production serves as its basis' (Capital, Vol. 2 p30); 'In 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 ever nearer and nearer to their dissolution.' (Capital Vol.1 p83); 'Had we gone further, and inquired under what circumstances all, or even the majority of products take the form of commodities, we should have found that this can only happen with production of a very specific kind, capitalist production' (Capital Vol. 1 p166); 'It is only from this moment (the capitalist period) that the produce of labour universally becomes a commodity' (Capital Vol. 1 p167n); 'Aristotle is aware of the fact that the different things measured by money are entirely incommensurable magnitudes. What he seeks is the oneness of commodities as exchange values, and since he lived in ancient Greece it was impossible for him to find it' (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, translated into English by S. W. Ryazanskaya, edited by Maurice Dobb; published by Lawrence & Wishart 1971); 'There was, however, an important fact which prevented Aristotle from seeing that, to attribute value to commodities, is merely a mode of expressing all labour as equal human labour, and consequently as labour of equal quality. Greek society was founded upon slavery, and had, therefore, for its natural basis, the inequality of men and of their natural labour-powers. The secret of the expression of value, namely that all kinds of labour are equal and equivalent, because, and in so far as they are human labour in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice. This, however, is possible only in a society in which the great mass of the produce of labour takes the form of commodities, in which, consequently, the dominant relation

between man and man, is that of owners of commodities. The brilliancy of Aritotle's genius is shown by this alone, that he discovered, in the expression of the value of commodities, a relation of equality. The peculiar conditions of the society in which he lived, alone prevented him from discovering what, "in truth", was at the bottom of this equality' (Capital Vol. 1 pp65-6). M. Vernant also refers readers to pages 338, 344 and 346 of the 'Introduction à une critique de l'Economie politique' translated into French by Molitor.

10 Grundrisse pp494-5; cf. F. Tokei op cit p18.

11 Cf. E. Will, 'Trois quarts de siècle de recherches sur l'économie antique', Annales, E. S. C. 1954 pp7-22.

12 M. I. Finley, Studies in Land and Credit in Ancient Athens, 500-200 B. C., 1952 p77.

13 Capital Vol. 1 pp85-6.

14 Cf. J. Pecirka op cit pp194ff.

15 Cf. L. Gernet, Droit et Société en Grèce ancienne, Paris, 1955; particularly: 'Le droit de la vente et la notion du contrat en Grèce d'après M. Pringsheim', and 'Sur l'obligation contractuelle dans la vente hellenique', pp201-36.

16 L. Gernet, 'Choses visibles et choses invisibles', Anthropologie de la Grèce antique, Paris 1968 p410.

17 Cf. the study by Karl Polanyi, 'Aristotle discovers the economy', in Trade and Market in the Early Empires, Glencoe 1957 pp44-94.

18 In Antiquity labour power was not a commodity; there was no labour market, only a market for slaves, which is entirely different. 'The slave' wrote Marx 'does not sell his labour power to the owners of slaves any more than the bullock sells his labour to the peasant. The slave is sold, including his labour power, once and for all to his owner.' In this sense, the slave, like the bullock or like a tool, remains, in the performance of his productive activities, outside the general system of social exchange, just as he is, as far as civic life is concerned, outside society. Not only is the labour power of the slave not a commodity, but the product of his labour may not be either, if, for example, it is directly consumed by his owner. For the product to become a commodity, the owner must decide to sell it in the market. But even in this case, the labour of the slave, not being a commodity, does not assume the abstract form of a general rule. It is not an 'overall equivalent' in the context of the circulation of commodities as a whole: it is a particular 'service' rendered by the slave to his owner. To borrow Marx's own terms in Capital: 'Here the particular and natural form of labour, and not, as in a society based on the production of commodities, its general abstract form, is the immediate social form of labour' (Vol. 1 p82). The formulation Marx applied to statute labour (corvée) in the middle ages is completely valid for slave labour. 'It was the distinct labour of the individual in its original form, the particular features of his labour and not its universal aspect that formed the social ties at that time' (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971 p33).

19 Claude Mossé, La Fin de la democratie athenienne, Paris, 1962

20 'Coined money assumes a local and political character, it uses different national languages and wears different national uniforms, just as does money of account. Coined money circulates therefore in the internal sphere of circulation of commodities, which is circumscribed by the boundaries of a given commodity and separated from the universal circulation of the world of commodities' (Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy p107). On the role and significance of the coinages of the city states, cf. E. Will 'De l'aspect ethique de l'origine grècque de la monnaie', Revue Historique, 1954, pp209ff; 'Reflexions et hypothèses sur les origines du monnayage', Revue Numismatique, 1955 pp5-23; also C. M. Kraay, 'Hoards, small change and the origin of coinage', Journal of Hellenic Studies, 1964 pp76-91.

21 'Credit money belongs to a more advanced stage of the social process of production and conforms to very different laws' from money in circulation (Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy p116).

22 'Just as in theory gold and silver as money are universal commodities, so world money is the appropriate form of existence of the universal commodity... They are realised as embodiments of universal labour time in the degree that the interchange of the products of concrete labour becomes world-wide... As money develops into international money, so the commodity owner becomes a cosmopolitan' (ibid pp151-2).

23 ibid pp132-3; see also pp125ff and p134, where Marx notes that the role played by hoarding was all the greater because 'exchange value had not yet penetrated all relations of production'.

24 'In countries which have purely metallic currency or are at an early stage of development and production, hoards are extremely fragmented and scattered throughout the country, whereas in advanced bourgeois countries they are concentrated in the reservoirs of banks' (ibid p137).

25 'The never-ending augmentation of exchange-value, which the miser strives after, by seeking to save his money from circulation, is attained by the more acute capitalist, by constantly throwing it afresh into circulation' (Capital Vol. 1 p151).

26 '... and although at certain stages of production the commodity owner hides his treasures, he is compelled to show to other commodity-owners that he is a rich man, wherever he can safely do so. He bedecks himself and his house with gold' (Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy p134).

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