



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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ANCIENT MASHRIQ: FROM CRADLE OF CIVILISATION TO DISASTER ZONE¹

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The earliest places to develop into sedentary cultures were to be found in the present-day Mashriq (Ancient Syria and Mesopotamia) pursuant to the early agricultural revolution. The crevice at the end of the Great African rift known as the Fertile Crescent is a natural gathering ground for domesticable animals; it enjoyed regular rainfall and a variety of easily cultivable cereals. Good soil quality circa 2000 B.C. produced about the same tonnage per acre of barley as in early 1970 (Hilou, 2004).¹ The steady development of tools and modes of social organisations required regulation and the pacification of the labouring class. Measures for trade and laws to attenuate repression and limit the appetite of the clergy represent the first set of rules intended to steady the course of development, beginning with the implementation of the Code of Ur-Nammu, ca. 2100 B.C. The code addresses three vital points: the ruling on weight for trade, a limit to what the clergy could extract in tribute and, a statement ensuring the protection of the vulnerable from the transgression of the powerful. These precepts crown the notion of the 'Just Man' of the East (Al-Alawi, 2009).²

[i]n accordance with the true word of Utu, set the monthly temple expenses at 90 gur of barley, 30 sheep, and 30 sila of butter... the bronze sila-measure, standardized the one-mina weight, and standardized the stone weight of a shekel of silver in relation to one mina... The orphan was not delivered up to the rich man; the widow was not delivered up to the mighty man; the man of one shekel was not delivered up to the man of one mina (Ur-Nammu, 2100 B.C.).³

Stripped of its mystique, justice was the veil behind which despotic society pacified and regimented slave labour. Not that the code itself did relieve rulers from the pressure of rebellions- it was an era characterised by a high frequency of revolts (Hilou, 2004). The codes cum welfare measures spring in response to a history of revolts. Rebellion and the quelling of uprisings were central to the myths and beliefs of the Sumerians. In Atra-Hasis (mainly a flood myth but also with a creation story from circa 1800. B.C.), the creation of humankind replaced angel-workers who rebelled against superior angels as they no longer tolerated the harsh conditions of labouring the earth (Atra-Hasis as compiled by Lambert, 1999).⁴ In this myth, man was moulded from the flesh and blood of a revolutionary angel whose ideas initially instigated

¹ From a work, provisionally entitled Transition to Capitalism: Military routs not formal institutions.

31 MARCH 2015

the lower class of angels into mutiny. Rebellion and/or the critique of living conditions in Sumerian myth constitute an inherent characteristic of humankind.

Four centuries later, the code of Hammurabi further embellishes the Ur-Nammu demands for justice, through the inclusion of the right to trade and the protection of civil and property rights.

To bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak, and enlighten the land, to further the wellbeing of mankind. He referred to himself as the "shepherd of the oppressed and of the slaves," and ordered that "these my precious words" be written upon his memorial stone, before his image "That the strong might not injure the weak, in order to protect the widows and orphans ... in order to bespeak justice in the land, to settle all disputes, and heal all injuries (Hammurabi, circa 1750 BC).

In comparison to the Ur-Nammu code, Hammurabi's Code held the sovereign accountable for the delivery of welfare. If the tort could not be redressed by the law of equal retaliation (the *lex talionis*), the state had to compensate for the loss itself. The other side of the *lex talionis*'s an eye for an eye, is a sack of wheat for a sack of wheat. The sovereign acted as an insurance institution to indemnify losses. To avert peasant unrest, the sovereign had to protect the lower echelons of peasants from injury. Moreover, the rights of women to own property and divorce husbands - rights that women lack in some states today - assumed the position of binding laws.

To the Ancient Mesopotamians as well as the Greeks whose societies were raised by slave labour, strengthening the home front by more equitable distribution as wealth rises plasters over the fault lines of their class ordered social structures. Material circumstances and social orders were changing and concepts were evolving, but not until the time of Heraclitus was change considered eternal state. Heraclitus stood opposed to un-changeability and his dynamic concept would later challenge Plato's notion that change is a matter of appearance whereas reality is unchangeable and only penetrable by discerning the forms of thought (Ilyenkov, 1977). Later in Aristotle's Politics, a cycle of change and an organic growth schema defining development from birth, to peak and ultimate dissolution took shape. However, similarly to the Mesopotamian 'Just Man,' Aristotle's 'Rational Man,' through implementing equality, engendered a functional role to avoid collapse from within.

Equality consists in the same treatment of similar persons, and no government can stand which is not founded upon justice. For if the government be unjust everyone in the country unites with the governed in the desire to have a revolution, and it is an impossibility that the members of the government can be so numerous as to be stronger than all their enemies put together (Aristotle, Politics, book 7).⁵

However, there is a false dichotomy in contrasting the 'Just Man' of the East to the 'Rational Man' of Asia-Minor. The diachronic development of concepts would situate 'Just Man' as a predecessor of 'Rational Man'. When Alexander's armies besieged Babylon, the Babylonian king at the time was outside the city gates conducting archaeological excavations (Durant,

31 MARCH 2015

1935).⁶ That may be an amplification of the facts that Durant had employed in view of his admiration of Mesopotamian culture, but its use occurs here to highlight the differences in the levels of development between Mesopotamia and the Hellenistic world. Still, the Mashriq and Asia-Minor represented a single cultural pool and ancient Greeks regarded their science to have originated in Egypt and their alphabet in Phoenicia (Purkayastha, 2012).⁷ Bestowing upon Hellenistic culture a European identity, when political Europe had not yet appeared on the map, was carried out by latter-day Europeans to justify colonial expansion (Purkayastha, 2012).⁸

By the twentieth century, the reading of history moved away from personal heroism and divine intervention to a study of the actual material circumstances and ideological impetus they impart upon the present. For Christopher Hill history has to be rewritten in every generation, because although the past does not change, the present does; and new questions of the past influence the present (Hill, 1975).⁹ Cultures transcend national identities, yet no effort is being spared to patent and subjugate knowledge to accumulation requirements. Greece had sunk under fictitious debt, yet little did it matter for Europe, which perversely touts its debt to the Hellenistic heritage. By the same perverse nationalist logic, a worse level of neglect applies to the present human disaster in the Mashriq to which each of the world nationalisms owes a good part of its culture. In modern times, cultural debt qua humanity's shared cultural heritage, although real, is insignificant when compared to fictitious financial debts. To simplify (at some cost to content), fictitious capital is the excess credit that does not have a commodity counterpart in the real economy (Fine, 2010);¹⁰ as in all the debts that cannot be repaid and serve as instruments to extort the working population by austerity. Fictitious ideas are taken to be real and bear non-fictitious effects upon the lives of the majority - as if they are a god-like fetish that rules over people. The fetishism predominant under the present historical stage blights culture (Althusser, 1964).¹¹ Christopher Hill talked about ideas that need to be rescued to influence the present positively: the new-old idea that has to be resurrected is the unity of historical development.

When the general law is the realisation of the social contradiction as opposed to the quantitative similitude of elements in a given phenomenon, unity does not negate diversity. Put differently, unity is the law of motion and is both progenitor and the general condition in which diversity does not contravene the universal, but reasserts it. Let us consider one significant departure that existed between the Greco-Romans and the East: the slavery of the East, patriarchal slavery differed from the slavery of the Greco-Romans or commodified slavery; the former produced a surplus product, while the latter produced a variant of surplus value (Emmanuel, 1972).¹² The attribute of man as commodity in Western forms of slavery that originated in Greece is thought to have been one of the reasons that facilitated the early emergence of capitalism in Europe (Bettelheim, 1970).¹³ However, the differentiated attribute on its own (the different slave institutions) is a datum and does not explain social movement from one stage to another. On its own, it is only a fact unrelated to the whole and not a law of motion nesting in a social contradiction. These slave-mode differences are instantiations of the 'genus'¹⁴ *qua* class relationships and are predicated by the more general antinomy of class contradictions and modes of appropriation. They reaffirm the different class relations and inter-relations under different stages of history and their corresponding material conditions.

That the East had lagged behind Europe in moving toward capitalism in spite of the fact that eastern commerce had flourished is an oft-debated problematic. Keeping in mind that the map of Europe keeps changing and that history is not a sports race with a beginning and an end, the

31 MARCH 2015

central point remains that European conquests (as in the realisation of class by violent appropriation) hold primacy in explaining the rise of capitalist relations in Europe over differences in the attributes of forms of social organisation (as in differences in institutions of slavery) between European and Eastern modes of productions. As early as the twelfth century, the rise of European naval supremacy pushed Islamic traders out of the western Mediterranean (Edwards 2008).¹⁵ Of the many reasons behind the decline of the East, the devastation over land by the Mongols, the declining population from about the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, and, more decisively, the expulsion from the seas by the Europeans, reaching a climax in the battle of Lepanto in 1571, curtailed the transition of eastern merchant capital into productive capital. European imperialist conquests, beginning prior to the onset of capitalist relations, and direct plundering, raised the wealth of European merchant capital, limited the expansion of Eastern merchants, and gave birth to capitalist production relations. The East can have the best institutions on display, but if it loses the trade platform by war, its merchant capital cannot grow into industrial capital.

In a heterogeneous, self-differentiating and inter-related world, the issue of whether the East has failed in comparison to Europe is a misplaced problematic. European capital through its colonial and class linkages extends to the East. The East through its labour, raw materials and underdevelopment by colonial diktat reaches the West. Although capitalism was a world-system nurtured relation by the sixteenth century, its strength established by the violence of European ‘voyages of discovery’ allowed Europe to undermine eastern industrialisation (Emmanuel, 1972). As the social classes cross national or geographic boundaries, the attributes of their forms of social organisation become, necessarily but not exclusively, similar (as in the replication of institutional development).

At any rate, the high rate of financialisation has homogenised much of world capital in the modern age. The lines of demarcation that set real concepts apart from hallucinatory forms of thought are the class lines that crisscross national boundaries. Where the corresponding space or the referent that defines a concept in reality vis-à-vis another ends, is where the ideological inclination becomes apparent. So when Bernard Lewis posits that Islam (for him it is most of the East) has become poor, weak and ignorant, Michael Neumann responds with relevant data showing that poverty and underdevelopment are not exclusive characteristics of Islam or the Eastern world, but are shared across cultures (Neumann, 2003).¹⁶ Obviously, the former author holds an unsubstantiated view that omits the interrelatedness of cultures, while the latter upholds both a factually substantiated and fuller concept of culture.

In mainstream social science with reified concepts of West and nation state, Bernard Lewis is not alone; his ideas are methodologically at the core of received discourse. Variants of the unadulterated “us” concepts, especially the nation state, were and remain the drivers of global accumulation. The underlying trope is an “us and them” divide, a language that rips diverse social characteristics from their holistic context, objectifies them, and omits unity. But ‘the truth is the whole’—to use an expression of Hegel—carries with it, in turn, the inescapable necessity of refusing to accept as a datum or to treat as immune from analysis, any single part of the whole. (Herbert Marcuse speaking of Paul Baran, 1966).¹⁷ It is not just an issue of no nation is separate and above the rest, it is an issue of constructing the initial concept of nation (or man) in its cross-national class composition. With two world wars and several other wars to its credit in the twentieth century, including no less, unjustifiable poverty levels in contrast to immense

31 MARCH 2015

wealth, the 'West' (that is if it could be separated only in the mind) carries more guilt on its consciousness (Neumann, 2003). The guilt is equally shared by the one-sidedness of mainstream social science that reproduces the ideological conditions for wars with concepts whose referent is not borne by the facts, especially as of late, with cultural superiority functioning as racial supremacy.

From its onset on world stage, the crisis of capitalism, its genocide of the natives and slavery, had outdone its progressive moments. Given the fetishism attendant upon social relations, social processes under capitalism seldom adhere to welfare requirements; modern history happens against the wishes of the many and its progress or its endogeneity of technology is eclipsed by its endogeneity of violence. When one borrows the term endogenous to characterise a social relationship, as in the objective market signals allocating resources, endogeneity becomes the equivalent of systemic. As such, it cannot be superseded within the prevailing system; the system itself has to change for instances like technology and violence to come under direct popular control. The intertwined condition of war and technological advance has an objective and uncontrollable momentum of its own that the organised dimension of capital would not want to harness for social ends.

The realisation of particular politics in the sovereign in ancient Mesopotamia was immediate and determined by adherence to faith in the prevailing myth. All are religiously alienated in the sovereign until a new crisis cum myth deposes the god-king. In modern society, particular politics are realised in an indirect way by intermediate agencies, psychological factors, the mass media, language, images prevalent in a society, and any other agencies (Marcuse, 1966); one may also add in a Mashriq context, sectarian identities that thwart the realisation of the labouring class in the structure of power. The modern alienation of particular politics in the sovereign is multi-layered and subsumed under the ideological vortex of capital, but it is also not free of myth. Alienating conditions of existence morph the grounds for consciousness into a good versus evil process as distinct from a worldly understanding of value circuits and value relations (Sorel, [1908] 1999).¹⁸ In the interrelated whole, the production of knowledge *qua* culture, itself attendant on technological advance, is also subject to market diktat. Most knowledge is a form of intelligence asset that serves to invert the real image of the material reproduction of capital. With the rise of aristocratic nations, constructive alternatives that grasp the historical moment and rupture historical continuity are few and far between. Violence, as in wars of encroachments exercised under social relationships alienated by the medium of commodity exchange, is the necessary predicate of accumulation.¹⁹

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