

Historical Materialism--Lessons from the History of Mexico

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Part 2: How and Why Classes and the State Emerged

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Looking back in history, we can see that, as Marx described, among peoples all over the world the historical development of production led sooner or later to the emergence of classes--and the state as an instrument to enforce the rule of one class over others. (Now, it's not the case that literally no early communal societies survived without class divisions and a state--there are even some remaining today--but increasingly this has become a "marginal" phenomenon in a world dominated by class-divided societies and by ruling classes of exploiters.)

To illustrate this, I want to briefly discuss how this process took place in Mexico, particularly in the ancient Olmec society over several thousand years ago, which was centered in Veracruz. Now, in getting into this and showing how classes developed (or at least some of the basis for how they developed) in these ancient Mexican civilizations, I want to make clear that when we discuss this we are in no way overlooking, and certainly we are not excusing or justifying, the horrendous crimes perpetrated by the Spanish and other colonialists in the Americas. Sometimes backward people say, "Well, you know what's the big deal about slavery in America. Africans had slaves there too." Or they say: "What's the big deal about what the Spanish did in the Americas? You know, the Aztecs, the Incas, they brutally exploited people." This is true, but this in no way justifies or rationalizes or can provide any kind of an excuse for the even more horrendous oppression and exploitation and even genocide that was carried out by the European colonialists. And it is very important to keep this in mind when we're discussing the development of exploiting classes and states and some of the brutality that was carried out in these ancient societies as they developed into class societies. This was brought home to me again recently in some reading I was doing.

When I first entered college (many years ago now!), I had a very deep hatred for a lot of oppression and injustice, and I really felt that even extreme measures were justified to put an end to this. But I didn't have a revolutionary understanding and I was not even a political activist. I had a lot of militant sentiments and I supported a lot of movements and struggles going on, but I hadn't yet become actively involved myself. At the same time, I was really into poetry.

One of my favorite poets was John Keats, who was an early 19th-century romantic poet from England. Poets like Keats were called "romantic" poets because, among other things, they rebelled against the excesses of the industrial revolution in places like England and the horrors of child slavery and all this kind of stuff--you can see this in Charles Dickens' novels, including things like *A Christmas Carol*. Their literature was a form of protest against this, and I especially liked Keats because he was really down on organized religion and would really slam into it in his poetry in all kinds of ways. But also, frankly, I just thought his poetry was beautiful; I found it had a lot of evocative imagery that to me called to mind all kinds of ideas, emotions, and so on--just thought it was really beautiful. And one of my favorite poems by Keats was called "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Chapman was this English guy who had done a translation of the ancient Greek poems of Homer, who wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*--all these adventures; some of them are actually pretty gripping stories, and people who read ancient Greek, which I don't, have told me these epic poems by Homer are very beautiful in the original language. But, anyway, Keats had read this new translation by Chapman of these epic poems of Homer, and it moved Keats to write about it.

At the time, I really liked this poem. Then recently I got a book on Keats, a biography, and as I was reading it, I came across this poem again. And there were some lines that jumped out at me--which, many years ago, when I first read them, went right by me and I didn't really see the significance of them. As I said, people like Keats had a lot of positive qualities in terms of their rebellion against the excesses of the industrial revolution and so on, but they weren't Marxists, they didn't have a scientific understanding of society and history, they didn't stand with the proletariat in any kind of thorough way--and they didn't really have a correct understanding at all about European colonialism. And so I was reading through this poem and it really struck me when Keats uses this imagery comparing himself at a certain point to "stout Cortez." This stopped me cold, because I really used to like this poem, and I'm reading it and it gets to this part where he's talking about how he felt when he first read this new translation of Homer, and he compares himself first to an astronomer who sees a new planet coming into view through a telescope, and then he compares himself--and this is the part that really stopped me in my tracks--he compares himself to Cortez and his fellow Conquistadores.

This is how Keats described his feeling as he read this translation of Homer:

*"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
when a new planet swims into his ken
or like stout Cortez when with eagle-eyes
he stared at the Pacific and all his men
looked at each other with a wild surmise
silent upon a peak in Darien."*

Now what is he talking about here? Darien is what today we call the Isthmus of Panama, it's in Central America. He's describing the time when Cortez's men first landed in the Americas and they're awestruck at what they're seeing-- the ocean, the mountain they're

standing on. But if we freeze that moment in time and we think all that we know that was done to the people after Cortez and his men descended from that mountain and descended upon the people, we can have an understanding that's very different from the one that Keats has, and we cannot of course compare ourselves to so-called "stout Cortez" and his men.

This really struck me when I went back and read these poems--there's always a process of learning and deepening our understanding of things. So, this is another way of getting at the fact that nothing can justify or excuse what "stout Cortez and his men," and those who followed them, did. And I think it's very important to have that as a background, particularly in looking at what happened in the ancient Olmec society in Mexico and examining this from the standpoint, and with the method, of historical materialism.

Class Divisions in Ancient Olmec Society

This process of class differentiation, of division into exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed, happened in Mexico long before the Conquistadores came (and in other parts of the world it happened long before any conquests by major powers from Europe, such as the Greeks under Alexander the Great or later the Roman Empire). The differentiation of classes--the emergence of class divisions, of exploitation, and of the state as an instrument of the exploiting classes--let's look at how this developed, or some important aspects of how this developed, in the ancient Olmec society in the area of Veracruz in Mexico. This is several thousand years ago. And going back even before that there were largely gathering and hunting societies throughout different parts of Mexico which were not characterized by class divisions and didn't have a state. And one of the things that happened in the intervening years (before the development of the ancient Olmec society) is that partly through the hunting activity of the people themselves and also through changes in the climate, many of the game that these gatherer-hunter societies depended upon--including things like the horse and so on--much of this game actually died out or was killed off. And as a result of this, people were forced to change their way of life.

They began to develop settled agriculture, and one of the first instances of this that we know of from history is in this area of the Coatzacoalcos River in Veracruz where the Olmec civilization appears to have first developed. Now, many people talk about the importance of land, but one of the things to understand about land is that all land is not equal. That's something that comes up in any society where there is private ownership of land--some land is better than other land, some land is more fertile than other land and can grow better crops and have a better output. And this is particularly true of land that is located by rivers, because then there is more natural irrigation and the soil is more fertile; and, in addition, the people who live there also have the advantage of catching fish and game that are in the river or come to the river. So what you had developing in this ancient Olmec civilization was that those people who got land that was located closer to the river--through force or trickery, or just through luck, or a combination of all this--they began to acquire more: a polarization developed in which they got the better part of

the deal. And they became the "haves" and others became the "have-nots"--class divisions began to develop. And they also began to develop means of repression--and organized religion, and so on--to enforce and justify their favored position and their ability to increasingly exploit those who started out, for whatever reasons, with less favorable land.

Along with this, when you have a settled society, there's a lot of administration that has to go on--regulation of different inter-relations between people. You see this in the Bible when these people wandering through the desert finally settled down in what they called their "promised land"--and viciously attacked, slaughtered, and expelled the other people who were already living there--when you got all the "Mosaic Law" to try to regulate the relations among the people in a different way than when they were wandering in a nomadic life through the desert. So, for these reasons, you start getting a state. You have some kind of administration to regulate relations among people, but if those relations are beginning to be exploitative relations then that gets built into the administrative structures and the *state* emerges as an instrument of the rule of the more favored over the less favored, the exploiters over the exploited. And, at the same time, those people who are beginning to devote more of their time and effort to being state functionaries have a more favored position as a result of that--they have more access to the levers of power. And when you mix that together with this differentiation of people with more favorable and less favorable land, and so on, you get a ruling class that emerges. And, again, it brings forth organized religion as well as the state to reinforce its rule.

If you look at the artifacts and archaeological discoveries from this area in Veracruz where the ancient Olmec society arose, you see the clear indications of this in many different ways--in the ruins of administrative buildings, in the burial sites, in the pottery, statues, and other art works, and so on. These are reflections of a situation in which class differentiation and the state emerged--this is one illustration of a process that happened all over the world at different times, in different particular ways, but more or less for the same fundamental reasons.

For example, what I described happening in relation to this river, the Coatzacoalcos River in Veracruz, is very similar to what happened in ancient Egypt along the Nile even before the time of the Pharaohs. Largely because, once again, some land that was closer to the Nile was more favorable than other land, the same kind of class differentiation developed there.

Making the Past Serve the Future

And I remember, for example, years ago when I first went to China--back in the early '70s, when it was a socialist country, with Mao's leadership--they showed us a lot of the sites of ruins and remaining art work and actual existing structures from early civilization in China. One place where they made a point of taking us was the tombs of the emperors of the Ming dynasty. They told us about what had been discovered, buried there, in those Ming Tombs--all the riches that were buried. (I remember pretty clearly that they buried

servants of the emperors, along with the emperors themselves, and they buried the many wives and concubines of the emperors with them as well. Now, I don't think they had an election and decided to do that! That was an act of the state, and they had a religion--or a set of metaphysical beliefs akin to religion--to reinforce that.)

It was very interesting--what did our Chinese comrades emphasize in showing us this? They didn't emphasize: look what a glorious civilization China is--it's existed for thousands of years--even during the time when Europe was much less developed, China had a very advanced civilization. That's not what they drove home to us. Now, they did bring out that Chinese civilization was very old, and that this idea that somehow peoples outside of Europe were living in a more backward state for thousands of years was nonsense and reactionary, chauvinist propaganda. But the main thing they emphasized, and explained to us in great detail, was the tremendous amount of forced labor that went into building these tombs, along with the people who were entombed with the emperor. That is what they emphasized--the suffering the peasants went through, where every family was forced to give up a member of the family to work on constructing things like these tombs for the emperors. The peasants had to carry logs for hundreds of miles to build some of these structures, and they carried rocks and other parts of the structure hundreds of miles, working like dogs over generations.

In emphasizing this, what the Chinese comrades were driving home was that the Ming Tombs, like the pyramids in ancient Egypt or in Mexico, were all built with forced labor under terrible conditions of exploitation and oppression (even though there were also some more privileged skilled laborers who worked on the Egyptian pyramids, for example). And, to take another important example from history, the Temple that was built in ancient Israel, under Solomon, was also built with forced labor--although the Bible can't seem to make up its mind whether Jews were forced to do part of this labor, or whether it was done only by foreigners, in conditions of virtual if not actual slavery.

The point the Chinese comrades were driving home when they explained this history to us (the history of things like the Ming Tombs) was this: look not to the past but to the future--and make the past serve the future--the proletarian revolution and the future for humanity that it represents. This was powerfully expressed in a line from a poem by Mao: To find true heroes one must look to the present time. He was talking about the masses of people in this era carrying forward the greatest revolution in the history of humanity--the proletarian revolution and its goal of communism. He was stressing that, from the standpoint of the proletariat, the "glorious past" was not so glorious, and was in fact horrendous for thousands of years for the masses of exploited and oppressed people; but now we are on the threshold of putting an end to all this, and that will bring forward a kind of heroism never before experienced in the world. This was the point that Mao was making in this line from this poem: to find true heroes one must look to the present age.

All this is an illustration of the basic truths and basic principles that Marx repeatedly stressed in his writings. It is an illustration of Marx's basic analysis that all of the development of production throughout human history, and the class struggle it gives rise to, necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat and that in turn the dictatorship of the proletariat is only the transition to a classless society--communism.

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