

# Toward a Theory of the Malthusian Trap. Part 2

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## **Abstract**

Economic historians nowadays argue that economic growth in the world was extremely slow and unsustainable until the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century. This article traces how the efforts of many economists and historians have gradually developed the concept of the “Malthusian trap” to explain the centuries-long relative stagnation of agrarian society. In the case of traditional economies, cliometric studies generally confirm Thomas Malthus’s ideas about the compensation of the positive impact of technological progress on per capita income by population growth. Modern scholars supplement them by analyzing the social structure of the society in the Malthusian trap, as well as its inherent institutions of redistribution, and the periodic flourishings and declines of proto-industry and trade that took place in those times. The article shows the logical interrelation of these elements within the Malthusian dynastic cycle. The concept of Malthusian trap is compared with the Marxist vision of the historical process. It is shown that positive insights of the Marxist approach can be implanted in the modern theory.

*The article begins in the previous issue of Contemporary World Economy.*

### 3. Marx and Malthus: viewing from the 21st century

The assertion that the theory of economic development is a good deal predicated on the tenets of T. Malthus may elicit a shock among individuals who have been socialized within the Marxist tradition (and this is still, to some extent, the case in Russia). As is well known, in the Soviet period, the entire history of non-Marxist economic thought was presented as divided into two parts: pre-Marxist (the importance of economists of that time was assessed by whether they had prepared any rational ideas that were later adopted by Marx) and post-Marxist. It was supposed that the theories of the latter era could not be correct simply because there had already been a true, Marxist vision of the relevant issues.

Moreover, the economic concepts of the entire post-classical period (the watershed here was the works of D. Ricardo and his closest followers) were considered “vulgar” at the suggestion of Marx himself. It was assumed that their developers did not even set themselves the goal of a conscientious scientific search. Instead of building cause-and-effect constructions, they either glided over the surface of phenomena, limiting themselves to the consideration of purely functional relationships, or resorted to conscious falsifications.

Malthus did not align with this framework. He lived before Marx and shared many of Ricardo’s views, yet Marx’s assessments of him were pejorative.<sup>11</sup> The solution to this trouble was found in the assertion that Malthus is one of the earliest vulgarizers of economic science. It implied that Malthus’ theory of population, with its harsh assessments, was not merely a biased but also an unscrupulous apologetic of capitalism [Afanasyev 1988].

Marx directly polemicized with Malthus over the regularities inherent in capitalism as Marx himself observed it in the middle of the 19th century. But our study will not address their views on the sources of value formation. Malthus, like Smith before him and Marshall and many others thereafter, was ambivalent on this matter, while Marx demonstrated ideological consistency in defending the principle of determining value by labor. Nor will this study address the interrelationship between economics and demography inherent in early capitalism. (Neither Malthus nor Marx lived long enough to see the end of the demographic transition. They simply extrapolated their ideas about population dynamics into the future and both proved to be wrong. Malthus’s assertion that society would continue to have a high birth rate and, therefore, mass poverty would be inexorable did not find confirmation in reality. And Marx mistook in his prediction that the constant reproduction of surplus population in the form of a “reserve army of

<sup>11</sup> Here is a sample of Marx’s judgment of Malthus: “Malthus is characterized by a *profound baseness* of thought, a baseness which only a priest can afford, who sees in human poverty the punishment for the fall into sin and cannot do without the ‘earthly abode of sorrow,’ but at the same time, having in mind the church income he receives and using the dogma of predestination, finds it very profitable to ‘please’ the ruling classes to stay in this abode of sorrow. ...Malthus’s conclusions on scientific matters are fabricated ‘*with an eye*’ to the ruling classes in general and to the reactionary elements of these ruling classes in particular; and this means: Malthus *falsifies* science to serve the interests of these classes. On the contrary, his conclusions are *resolute, ruthless*, as far as the oppressed classes are concerned” [Marx 1978. P. 122, 125].

labor,” i.e., unemployment, would become one of the reasons for the collapse of capitalism as a system.)

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the periodization of traditional, pre-capitalist societies, and the logic both of their evolution and subsequent industrial transformation, as Marxism and Malthusianism draw them. No doubt, any periodization is based on certain criteria, which means that it is largely subjective. Generally speaking, the more periodizations there are, the better. Their totality allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the object under study.

For instance, the periodizations of the history of the world economy by K. Bucher (who distinguished between the stages of the closed household, urban, and national economies), K. Polanyi (who outlined tribal, archaic redistributive, and modern market societies), and W. Rostow (who traced the path of the economy from the stage of traditional society to the creation of prerequisites for the industrial “take-off,” the “take-off” itself, the “drive to maturity,” and the “era of mass consumption”) do not so much refute as complement each other. All of them, to some extent, emphasize a fundamental milestone in world history, namely the replacement of the agrarian economy by industrial capitalism, and seek to explain these radical changes.

If we consider in such a context the contributions to the theory of historical process made by Marx and Malthus, the former seems to have a clear advantage. He proposed a logical, and still very influential, periodization based on more or less clear criteria. In contrast, Malthus perceived no fundamental distinction between the society of his era and that of previous times. He assumed that the patterns he described were universally applicable.

The analytical framework of the Malthusian trap was developed by economists in the 20th century to retrospectively differentiate between epochs preceding and following the Industrial Revolution. This is not a literal reproduction of Malthus’s theory; rather, it is an application and reinterpretation of its rational elements. Nevertheless, the concept of the Malthusian trap remains quite amorphous. Really, it portrays a significant portion of human history as monotonous and homogeneous.

Nonetheless, more than a century and a half has passed since the appearance of Marx’s theory. Even in our country, it has long ceased to be perceived as the Sole True Doctrine. With all due respect to Marx, it is both possible and necessary to question the extent to which the approach proposed by him is consistent with the empirical facts accumulated by historical science since his death and with the new theoretical generalizations made since then.

It should be noted at the outset that the term “Marxist periodization of history” refers not to the “five-stage model” (so called “vulgar historical materialism”) but rather to the views of Marx himself, as expressed by him in the 1850s and 1860s [Vasiliev 1998]. It is necessary also to make one more important reservation. Marx’s understanding of the order in which the stages of social development succeed each other is presented only in the most general form in his main economic works, “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (1859) and the first volume of “Capital” (1867). He proceeded to outline the historical evolution of social systems, beginning with the primitive system, followed by the Asiatic mode of production, then by the ancient (slave-holding) mode, the feudal

mode, and at last, capitalism. He posited that the latter system would finally be replaced by a communist society.

However, while Marx conducted a comprehensive analysis of the capitalist system, his descriptions of the three pre-capitalist formations were somewhat confined. It is challenging to ascertain Marx's views on the internal organization of traditional societies expressed in the works published during his lifetime. Additional insights can be gleaned from Marx's draft manuscripts and letters to F. Engels. Yet those materials were not intended for a general audience and were likely to be just preliminary hypotheses.

In the 1870s and 1880s, Engels wrote extensively on the topic of pre-capitalist societies. However, his approaches do not entirely coincide with Marx's earlier calculations. This has led then to considerable debate regarding whether Engels excluded the Asiatic mode of production from his periodization of world history in his "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" (1884).

Consequently, numerous pivotal links in the theory of pre-capitalist formations were established only in the 20th century by Marxist scholars who interpreted or refined the ideas of the prophet in a particular manner. This phenomenon bears resemblance to the way in which the concept of the Malthusian trap was developed. In any case, a significant portion of Marx's understanding of pre-capitalist societies has remained opaque, and lively debates on its different points were going on among specialists until the very end of the Soviet era.

It can be reasonably assumed that Marx applied the general principles of the dialectical interaction of productive forces and production relations, and of the basis and superstructure, to pre-capitalist formations, as well as to capitalism. It implies that during the ascending phase of the formation, production relations create incentives for the progress of productive forces, and society moves forward. However, technological development eventually generates the need to change institutions. The existing production relations begin to inhibit further progressive shifts in the productive forces. Eventually, the conflict is resolved through a social revolution, during which both the economic basis and the political-legal and ideological superstructures are changed.

It is evident that this perception of the course of history was intended to demonstrate the inevitability of the future collapse of capitalism. The manner in which capitalism, through bourgeois revolutions, overcame the Middle Ages served as an empirical illustration of Marx's algorithm. Yet applying this logic to the way pre-capitalist modes of production functioned and replaced each other is much more difficult.

With regard to capitalism, the starting point of Marx's research was commodity production, and from this he deduced the relations of exploitation. These are the relations whereby capitalists appropriate surplus value created by workers. In stark contrast, in describing the socio-economic structures of the Asiatic, ancient, and feudal modes of production, Marx drew from one or another type of agricultural commune.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the Asiatic mode of production, he considered a rural commune, where arable plots were already divided among peasant families, but were not private

<sup>12</sup> "Slavery, serfdom, etc., are always secondary forms, never original ones, despite the fact that they are the necessary and consistent results of property based on the communal system and of labor in the framework of this system" [Marx 1980. P. 491].

property, and were prone to be periodically redistributed anew. Craft and agriculture coexist within the commune, so it is self-sufficient and naturally closed. The exchange of handicraft and agrarian products contributes only minimally to the development of commodity-money relations.

Such communes are united into a single whole by a despotic state. While the state nominally owns all the land, in reality, land ownership relations are highly complex. Indeed, the state as a whole (represented by the monarch), regional administrators and army officers who receive land grants from the state, the commune, and the individual peasant all have rights to the same plot of land. The institution of private property is nascent. Moreover, the very existence of private land ownership was often denied by Marx in regard to the Asiatic mode of production.

The social inequality inherent in this social system is specific. The exploiters, i.e., the stratum that appropriates a share of the harvest collected by peasants, are not private owners. Instead, they are representatives of the state apparatus. In other words, state land property is realized through a special mechanism of withdrawal of surplus product, in which land rent and tax coincide. Concurrently, the Asiatic mode of production is distinguished by the retention of a substantial role for collective labor, both at the commune and at the macrolevel. The most evident manifestation of this is an extensive irrigation construction, which was accomplished through the mobilization of a vast number of peasants by the state for public works.

It is difficult to ascertain from the context of Marx's statements whether he intended to describe the Asiatic mode of production as a universal stage of development or as a distinctive path of development in the East. Indeed, with Marx's evident Hegelian background in sight, these two interpretations do not appear to be mutually exclusive, since according to the principles of dialectical logic, the general exists not only through the particular but also alongside it.

Yet, since Marx observed the phenomena inherent in the Asiatic mode of production in both the ancient and medieval East, it is not entirely clear how to apply the analytical categories of "productive forces," "production relations," and "social revolution" to this complex phenomenon. For if the institutions of the Asiatic mode of production actually hindered the development of the technological basis of the economy, it would be difficult to understand why the social revolution did not occur, and instead the East found itself in a state of a millennia-long stagnation.

This question is particularly pertinent given that Marx also associated the existence of a slave-holding (ancient) mode of production with a certain geographical area – the Greco-Roman one. He did not provide an explanation of how the supposed revolutionary shift from the Asiatic to the ancient formation occurred. Actually, at the time Marx lived, there was no empirical material for such generalizations. The Cretan-Mycenaean culture, which was really similar to the Eastern ones, had not been discovered yet. In retrospect, it is possible to view the lengthy evolution of ancient Greek society from the decline of Mycenae to the establishment of the classical Greek civilization as a social revolution. Yet Marx's analysis primarily focused on the divergence between Greek and Roman agricultural city-state (or the polis-community) and the Asiatic commune.

The polis is a city, inhabited not only by artisans, merchants, and administrators, but also by peasants seeking refuge from military attacks behind the city walls. The cultivated land plots in the area adjacent to the city belong to peasants as private property. Nevertheless, the fundamental condition for owning a plot of land is a membership in the commune and the status of a free citizen. Conversely, every citizen was required to be endowed with a plot of land, which was considered to be a guarantee of his economic independence and thus the ability to make free, meaningful political decisions. In order to provide land to new citizens in the polis, there was a public property.

So, the polis system was based on the balance of private and state properties but with a tilt to a private one. The development of monetary relations, due to the separation of crafts from agriculture, gave new impulses to the privatization of land and its market redistribution. The polis was characterized by a democratic political system. However, there was no system of representation; rather, direct rule by the people was exercised. The members of the people's assembly constituted the people's militia, and there was no professional army in the polis.

Still, Marx's analysis of the mobilization of additional labor into prospering farms under the polis system was limited. He did not delve into the specific circumstances that led to the use of slave labor. Marx just focused on two possible variants of human enslavement: i.e., captivity and sale for non-payment of debt.

F. Tokei demonstrated the causal relationship between the polis and slavery "from the contrary." If we assume that in the polis additional labor would have been attracted through free hiring or leasing of land, it would mean that within the polis there would arise a layer of full-fledged free citizens who did not perform the function of private landowners. And that would be inadmissible because of the very foundations of the antique form of property. Then, if serf relations were practiced, it would result in the emergence of a layer of land owners who are not free citizens. (A serf acts as a co-owner of communal land; he owns the plot adjacent to the house, tools, etc.) However, this also contradicts the essence of the polis. The presence of slaves, in its turn, does not disrupt the intricate intrapolitical equilibrium, as the slave is neither a citizen nor an owner; rather, he is an object of appropriation [Tokei 1975].

Moreover, during the classical antiquity period, when slavery reached its zenith, there existed no form of slavery other than a military one. The enslavement of citizens for debt was prohibited in Athens by the reforms of Solon (6th century BC) and in Rome by the reform of Petellius (4th century BC). Nevertheless, for a considerable period, the influx of prisoners of war was almost continuous. Based on Marx's idea of the bellicose nature of the polis, R. Nureyev demonstrated that external aggression was a natural consequence of the self-discovery of the polis structure.

He posited that the ancient form of property, which entailed a relatively even allocation of land to citizens and also the political equality of community members, did not abolish social differentiation. Furthermore, after it ceased to be embodied in debt slavery, "the internal contradiction between rich and poor, between large and small landowners, and between slave owners and urban poor had to be solved at the expense of third parties, and was taken outside the polis" [Nureyev 1979. P. 41]. In times

of war, internal social contradictions receded into the background, and a successful war increased the labor resources available to the polis.

However, these same circumstances make the polis slave system unstable and unviable in the long term. S. Utchenko traced the development of tendencies inherent in the Roman polis structure that ultimately led to its demise. After the conquest of Italy and the granting of Roman citizenship to all its free inhabitants, the principle of providing land to every person was no longer respected. The participation of all citizens in the functioning of the people's assembly was no longer possible as well.

The desire to expand the polis territory and enslave more people led to further conquests. But the distribution of land in the newly acquired provinces resulted in the concentration of property, leading to a significant increase in wealth inequality within the Roman polis itself. Competition with the crops harvested in large slave-holding estates (latifundia) and with cheap food imports from the provinces undermined the economic position of the Roman and Italian peasantry. The necessity of constant warfare led to the emergence of a professional army, which, in turn, resulted in the principle of the unity of the popular assembly and the popular militia no longer applying.

Ultimately, the undermining of small private land ownership, which was the foundation of political democracy, paved the way for a transformation of the political regime. The republic was replaced by the empire, i.e., by an oligarchic mode of domination by the landed aristocracy. The system entered a state of crisis as its territorial expansion had exhausted and the flow of new slaves had dried up. The state itself perished under the blows of belligerent neighbors. However, even in the last centuries of the Roman Empire, the area of slavery was shrinking in favor of new forms of labor relations, such as *peculium* (providing slaves with opportunities to have a family and certain property) and *colonatus* (using dependent, formerly free farmers) [Utchenko 1977].

In these phenomena, the sprouts of the next formation in the Marxist order, i.e., of the feudal mode of production, are often seen. Yet even if we agree, it is still somewhat difficult to acknowledge a social revolution in the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages. A further issue is whether the evolution of the polis slave system and its subsequent decline can be regarded as an illustration of how productive forces were initially promoted by production relations and subsequently began to be constrained. In essence, this could be better described as a cyclical process, whereby the stages of "origin, blossoming, decline and demise" are identified, as such a process is usually depicted by the theory of regional civilizations.

In any case, Marx himself saw the origins of feudalism not in the transformation of late antique structures, but rather in the evolution of yet another, third, type of agricultural commune, which was inherent in the ancient Germans and which they reproduced in the territories of the Roman Empire. In other words, the genesis of the feudal system was also associated by Marx with a certain region.

Unlike the polis and like the Asiatic commune, the Germanic commune is not urban but rural. The similarity between the Germanic commune and the Asiatic one lies also in their shared naturalness. However, in the context of the Asiatic mode of production, handicraft activity often became the domain of commune's individual members. In contrast, within the Germanic commune, handicrafts are conducted within households.

Still, the primary distinction between the two types of a commune lies in the ownership of land. The land plots of the Germanic commune are privately owned, while the land remains collectively owned in the Asiatic commune.

Almost no public, collective works are practiced in Germanic communes. Community members do not live in one village; rather, they are scattered over a large territory and come together only to solve issues that are urgent for all of them. Thus, while the Asiatic mode of production was dominated by quasi-state ownership of land, and in the ancient community there was a complex balance of private and public properties, the Germanic commune is an association of private landowners. Marx points that this is already the reason for the formation of income and status inequality in early medieval society.

However, the primary source of social stratification in the emerging feudalism was a specific military-political structure by means of which the state distributed land to professional warriors, the knights, on the condition of service. In relation to the peasants, such representatives of the military elite acted as guarantors of security. In return, the peasants undertook to fulfill their duties and serve this particular lord. This is how the institution of serfdom was born.

Thus, the symbiosis of land ownership by feudal lords and peasants subordinated to them was established. It was large private landowners, feudal lords, who were the recipients of land rent. The transfer of administrative powers and land resources to the lower levels of the state administration system led to political disintegration, to what is commonly called “feudal fragmentation.”

This is the typology of pre-capitalist societies in “real” Marxism. The Marxist theory differs from the “vulgar five-stage model” in that it incorporates the Asiatic mode of production as an additional link. Marx’s periodization of traditional societies is based on the gradation of types of agricultural communes, and they correspond to this or that form of withdrawal of surplus product.

Yet the path of transitions from one pre-capitalist formation to another has remained largely unexplained in Marxism. It seems that Marx did not mean that progress in world history supposed the sequential road gone by each country from one universal stage of development to another. Marx arranged the pre-capitalist formations in this order, and not in any other, on the assumption that the path from the Asiatic mode of production to feudalism meant the gradual liberation of people, thanks to the progress of technology, from dependence on the natural environment and rigid subordination to the collective.

He associated this sequence with the gradual formation of the institution of private property. Marx posited that this process of liberation was completed under capitalism with the emergence of a combination of personal freedom for the worker, on the one hand, and economic compulsion to labor, on the other. In the future, with the transition to communism, society should be freed further from the restrictions associated with the private form of appropriation.

In other words, Marx’s pre-capitalist formations are stages of the progressive development of all humanity, not just of one country. They unfold initially as unique regional civilizations, and later some of them can draw other countries and regions into the orbit of their influence. These are not mandatory stages that every society must pass through. In individual countries, the sequence of evolution can be different, and,



therefore, Marx preferred not to talk about universal mechanisms of transition from one pre-capitalist mode of production to another.

However, it is necessary to determine right now to what extent this intellectual, creative version of Marxism agrees with what modern economic historians know about the past. Two inconsistencies concerning super-long-term trends immediately attract attention.

Firstly, the per capita GDP indicators calculated by A. Maddison for the years 1-1800 demonstrate a certain dose of growth, although in comparison with the trends observed in the 19th and 20th centuries, this growth appears to be relatively modest. Furthermore, these data challenge the basic hypothesis of steady progressive development put forth by Marx, as the tendency of per capita GDP to increase in many countries and regions was often replaced by a tendency for it to decline.

Of course, it is possible to assume that this is the very regularity according to which production relations either contribute to the development of productive forces or hinder it. Nevertheless, even here, the ends do not meet. For instance, during the 1st millennium AD in Western Europe, per capita GDP either decreased or remained stagnant. However, according to the Marxist approach, the newly-formed feudalism, the only system at that time, should have had a favorable impact on technology development.

Secondly, both figures and facts do not support the thesis that the economic leadership of Europe (the West) was consolidated as early as in the ancient, slave-holding era and remained unshakable thereafter, and that it was in this region that transitions to more advanced formations (feudalism and then capitalism) took place. That thesis assumes that the East remained in the Asiatic mode of production, was prone to cyclical fluctuations between political centralism and disintegration of the state, and experienced centuries of economic stagnation from which it could not break through.

In fact, per capita GDP in China and India was higher than in European countries both in 1 and 1000 AD. The invention of paper, gunpowder, the compass, and a variety of agricultural, metallurgical, medical, and other technologies during the 1st millennium AD testifies to China's technological leadership then.

A. Petrov demonstrated that both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages Europe had a deficit in trade with Eastern countries. Europe's ability to import products of proto-industry and spices from the East was constrained by the lack of goods it could offer in return [Petrov 1986]. A. Maddison and numerous other researchers attribute the emergence of the West as a leader in terms of per capita income and the level of technology only to the 16th century. In contrast, K. Pomeranz and other representatives of the "Californian school" argue that even in the 18th century, the East did not look backward at all.

Consequently, the fundamental principles of Marx's periodization and its implicit eurocentrism can be questioned. Moreover, analytical difficulties also arise with the characteristics of more fragmented historical epochs within the framework of the "reference" European version, i.e., with the very socio-economic formations. Even if we accept the fact that it is impossible to depict the transitions from one pre-capitalist

formation to another as social revolutions, each subsequent mode of production still must be higher in terms of the level of productive forces than the previous one, otherwise it will no longer be Marxism. Yet, this does not work either.

It is not possible to connect the emergence of ancient civilization with a higher level of technology than in the East. Modern historians have stated that a certain technological leap in ancient Greece did take place. The Iron Age began there at the turn of the II-I millennium BC, approximately five hundred years earlier than in China. The specialization in the manufacture of iron tools in Greece stimulated the general separation of crafts from agriculture, the development of commodity-money relations, and the privatization of land. But the period of the polis and classical slavery was characterized by a lack of technological advancement [Zarin 1991; Mokyr 1992].

No wonder the decline was a consequence of the use of cheap slave labor, which did not stimulate the replacement of labor by capital. Furthermore, the truly groundbreaking innovations that enabled ancient societies to prevail over their Eastern rivals were institutional ones (civil society, democracy, and protected private property rights) and the related special organization of military affairs. In other words, it can be proven that the competitive advantages of antiquity lay predominantly on the non-economic plane. It is difficult to demonstrate that they were generated by more perfect productive forces than in the East.

The Marxist tradition offers a compelling explanation for the undermining of the polis structure in Athens and Rome. However, modern historians and economists posit that in its later centuries (with the transition from the principate to the dominate), the Roman Empire was not significantly different from the Eastern despotisms. It was also a socio-political structure based on the redistribution of rent revenues through state fiscal channels [Gaidar 2005; Zarin 1991]. So, the very existence of the Roman Empire should be interpreted not as a confirmation of a higher level of ancient civilization compared to the Eastern ones, but rather as an attempt to unite Europe and the adjacent territories. This attempt failed rather quickly. In such a way of reasoning, the collapse of the empire is not perceived as a systemic, inter-formation boundary, or as a transition to a higher type of social structure. Instead, it is viewed as an analog of the cyclical crises of the Eastern states.

If the Roman Empire is a redistributive structure, it is logical that it was fragmented into separate cells corresponding to the levels of the administrative vertical. Ye. Gaidar refers to this phenomenon as “feudalism” [Gaidar 2005], while L. Vasiliev defines it as “political feudalization,” which can occur in the context of the Asiatic mode of production as well and should be distinguished from “feudalism” as a socio-economic system [Vasiliev 1998]. However, it is notable that the origins of this process were quite Eastern in Europe. The advent of these phenomena should not be regarded as an indicator that a new, higher level of development was reached in Europe in the early Middle Ages. Rather, it was a phase of the same cyclical dynamics that took place in the East.

Further, with regard to the new forms of labor relations that emerged in the late Roman era, it is important to recognize that they did not appear as a unified phenomenon. The emergence of the *peculium* can be attributed to two key factors: the undermining of the polis system and the drying up of the influx of new slaves. If military slavery was

practiced because this was the most efficient way of mobilizing labor resources for the polis, then it is logical to conclude that when the polis system of checks and balances breaks down, the low economic efficiency of slavery becomes more apparent. In light of the declining number of slaves, experiments were initiated to provide them with material incentives to work.

The colonatus, in its turn, can be interpreted as a consequence of the need to keep tax and private rent payers in certain territories against the background of a general decrease in the stock of labor resources due to a reduction in the inflow of slaves, on the one hand, and population decline because of military and political instability, associated with constant invasions of barbarian tribes, on the other. For these reasons, more and more land was released and the possibilities of migration and escape from rent obligations increased.

In this context, the ancient civilization can be considered a “social mutation” [Vasiliev 1998] or “anomaly” [Gaidar 2005] in comparison to the prevailing model of redistributive societies. It did introduce a number of novel elements to the historical record. However, as a result of the erosion of the polis structure, this anomaly was ultimately absorbed into the mainstream. The Roman Empire emerged from a distinctive social organization, the polis, but ultimately became a conventional despotism.

It is evident that not only the transition from the Asiatic mode of production to slavery, but also the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages cannot be explained within the framework of the “productive forces—production relations” paradigm. In fact, the collapse of the ancient civilization led to a lengthy (at least half a millennium) technological regression, transforming Europe into a raw material and agrarian periphery of Eurasia [Zarin 1991; Meliantsev 1996].

This raises the following question. If the dynamics of the evolution of the Roman Empire, followed by the Frankish empire of the Carolingians, were subject to approximately the same regularities that took place in the Eastern despotisms, then does it make sense to insist on the distinction between the Asiatic mode of production and feudalism? The specificity of the latter is usually seen in the following points:

Firstly, in the political fragmentation, which contrasts with the centralism of Eastern despotisms. However, it is likely that the existence of centralized redistributive empires in the West (such as those of Rome and the Frankish state) is overlooked just due to the prevalence of stereotypes. Indeed, Eastern despotisms also periodically broke down into autonomous entities and disintegrate. So, the cyclical fluctuations inherent in redistributive societies included both centralization and disintegration.

Secondly, it is commonly believed that feudalism, in contrast to the Asiatic mode of production, is a system based on private property. Yet, it should be noted that the primary source of its formation was the granting of state lands to the servile nobility (rulers and military). This occurred both in the West and in the East, and the privatization of land in peasant communities due to the separation of family farms from each other, took place as well in both parts of the world.

Thirdly, it is assumed that the salient feature of European feudalism is serfdom. However, in fact, it appeared from time to time in the East as well, if there was free land where rent-paying peasants could go. Furthermore, when land was a scarce resource, the

redistributive economy could exist without serfdom.<sup>13</sup> One of the systemic similarities between medieval societies of the East and West is the overlapping rights of the state, elite groups, and communal peasants to the same land. Such unspecified property rights could exist with or without serfdom.

Thus, it can be demonstrated that both the East and the West throughout most of pre-industrial history existed according to generally uniform laws of redistributive society. Centralization and feudalization were simply phases in its cyclical dynamics. The “anomaly” of the West diverged from the East for a period of time, but this difference was not sustained. While it did stay a legacy that gave institutional specificity to Europe, by and large, Western societies of the Middle Ages were still typologically similar to Eastern ones.

Indeed, the peculiarity of medieval Europe is not feudalization per se, but the particular instability of centralized empires and their rapid disintegration. In modern literature, this phenomenon is attributed to a number of factors, including the abundance of rivers, the absence of a single irrigation system (that was crucial to agriculture in the East), the remoteness of the region from the locations of nomads, the traditions of Roman law, the autonomy of the church, and so forth [Gaidar 2005; Zarin 1991; Meliantsev 1996; Chirot 1985].

For an individual who was adopted within the writ of the “five-stage model” and was unaware of its distinctions from Marxism in its purest form, the initial step towards “liberation from the morass” is to acknowledge that the “five-stage model” does not apply to the historical development of both the East and pre-Antique Europe. The presence of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production in “real” Marxism appears to resolve this contradiction, that is why this concept was so popular among Marxist intellectuals. But a closer examination reveals more and more inconsistencies, prompting to take the second step: to recognize the fundamental homogeneity of the East and the West both in the pre-Antique period and in the Middle Ages. This entails stating that medieval Europe is also “the East.”

Another topic to consider is the emergence of capitalism in Western Europe. This phenomenon is viewed by Marxists as a classic case of social revolution, driven by the incompatibility between the advanced productive forces and the backward production relations of the time.

It is believed that the advent of new craft technologies led to the revitalization of urban economies in Western Europe. This, in turn, caused the integration of the village into the commodity-money exchange. The production capabilities of peasant farms also increased due to the development of more advanced crop rotations. Seeking commercial gain, feudal lords preferred to transfer the peasants from *corvée* to kind and then to

<sup>13</sup> “To what extent in agrarian societies a peasant is fixed on his land depends on the circumstances, primarily on the quality of land. If it is a rare and scarce resource, there is no need to enslave the peasant by force of state power—he will not go anywhere himself” [Gaidar 2005. P. 159]. K. Pomeranz formulates the same idea somewhat more ornate: “A relatively ‘fully’ populated area is one supporting about as many people as it probably could have without a major breakthrough in technology. Such areas are likely to face looming ecological crises and be places in which elites who control a relatively scarce factor of production (land or perhaps capital as well) may be less likely to insist on binding (abundant) labor to themselves” [Pomeranz 2000. P. 355].

cash levies. The final result of these processes was the liberation of peasants from both serfdom and community control. Thus, the prerequisites for the emergence of a class of personally free wage laborers were created.

But, for this process to occur, there had to be a definitive separation of peasants from ownership of land and tools. This was done partly due to competition between peasant households themselves, which stimulated further increases in productivity but led to the bankruptcies and displacement of many producers from agriculture. It was also due to traditional noble elites taking land from the peasants in search of new sources of income. Thus, according to Marx, the rise of capitalism in a national economy begins with such an upheaval in agrarian relations. Marxism assumes that surplus labor resources waiting to be used in industry are not an attribute of the traditional economy, which existed for thousands of years, but they are a product of social differentiation associated with the development of capitalist relations.

In turn, urban merchants sought to find new avenues for profitable investment, and it led to the direct subordination of craft industries to tradesmen. The differentiation among artisans resulted in one group becoming entrepreneurs and the other becoming hired workers. The previous guild restrictions on workshops limited the realization of the full potential for production, and these were abolished, ceding a space for the operation of competitive forces. As a result of these changes, further shifts in industrial organization occurred (manufactures emerged), and the demand for mechanized technologies grew. Ultimately, this paved the way for the Industrial Revolution, i.e., the formation of the factory system, in which the workers who migrated from the countryside to the city found jobs. The struggle between entrepreneurs and traditional feudal elites for political power took the form of bourgeois revolutions.

Everything seems to be logical. However, a person equipped with the set of knowledge that historical and economic sciences have in the 21st century inevitably remains in doubts. One might inquire whether these processes of agrarian upheaval, the development of craft and manufactory, and the formation of a broad layer of landless rural inhabitants, as well as the development of market relations, the accumulation of capital, the progress of proto-industry, and so forth, were historically unique, whether they manifested in England and some other Western European countries only since the 16th century. In reality, in the preceding history of many countries, these phenomena occurred with cyclical periodicity. Why, then, did this not result in the formation of capitalism as a system?

Marx himself addressed this question, noting that the pre-capitalist forms of social organization had not yet reached their limits then. There was no separation of the mass of workers from the natural conditions of existence and from belonging to the communal collective. In other words, the level of productive forces was not yet high enough.<sup>14</sup> Yet

<sup>14</sup> This seems to be the way to understand the following statement of Marx: "...The *mere presence of monetary wealth*, and even the achievement of a kind of supremacy on its part, is in no way sufficient for this *transformation into capital* to happen. Otherwise ancient Rome, Byzantium etc. would have ended their history with free labor and capital, or rather begun a new history. There, too, the dissolution of the old property relations was bound up with development of monetary wealth, of trade, etc. But instead of leading to industry, this dissolution led in fact to the supremacy of the countryside over the city" [Marx 1980. P. 503].

modern interpretations that acknowledge the inherent imbalance between land and labor resources, as identified by Malthus, provide a more compelling explanation for why societies that have advanced significantly in the development of intensive agriculture, proto-industry, and market economy have nevertheless been presupposed to severe socio-ecological crises.

Indeed, any attentive reader of the first volume of “Capital” is likely to experience a sense of ambiguity regarding the genesis of capitalism. It is commonly assumed that the methodology of “Capital” is based on the principle of unity of historical and logical analysis. This book is thus understood to describe both the functioning of the established capitalist system and the process of its formation. However, it is unclear why, if commodity production gave rise to money in ancient times and money had an inherent tendency to self-growth, this aspiration was only realized in modern times as a result of the proletariat selling its labor to the capitalists.

Marx offers a formal explanation. In the 24th chapter of the first volume of “Capital,” he presents a detailed analysis of the process of initial capital accumulation. He argues that it was largely achieved through the expropriation of small peasant farms during the late Middle Ages. This expropriation, he adds, was often carried out through violent means. As a result, the peasants who lost their land and some artisans as well were forced to enter the labor market. Yet modern historical and economic science demonstrates that there were numerous historical periods preceding this era with presence of both accumulated capital and a significant proportion of the population ousted from agrarian or handicraft productions. But this did not result in the formation of industrial capitalism; rather, it led to a return to a predominantly subsistence redistributive economy.

It is also noteworthy that both Marx and Engels frequently referred to the “decomposition of the economic structure of feudal society” in their interpretations of the genesis of capitalism [Marx 1983. P. 727; Engels 1986. P. 190, 253]. The founders of Marxism repeatedly rejected the accusation that they derived specific practical conclusions from the laws of dialectics. They argued that, on the contrary, their elaborations on particular questions served as illustrations and confirmations of general laws. In this case, however, one is tempted to conclude that their interpretation of the capitalist genesis is based on a mere pre-supposed typology of formations. According to Marxist dialectical laws, what is called “feudalism” must, in time, cease to exist. If capitalism follows this path, its emergence can be presented as a “negation” of feudal institutions.

Against this background, the other interpretation of the transition from stagnation to MEG appears more persuasive. It treats a breakthrough not as an inevitable historical process but rather as a consequence of a unique coincidence of favorable conditions in a specific region. The most significant factor was not a fundamentally new level of technology, but rather the pluralistic socio-political structure that unfolded in Western Europe. This structure eventually provided an outlet for the positive potential of market relations, which had previously been constrained by redistributive structures, to realize. According to this understanding, capitalism and MEG emerge as a result of a complex interaction of economic, political, socio-cultural, and even geographical

factors, rather than simply according to the logic of the successive phases of economic development. These new phenomena subsequently spread around the world through the mechanisms of positive externalities, as evidenced by the works of Zarin (1991), Lucas (2004), and Chirot (1985).

It is therefore appropriate to consider the period preceding the advent of capitalism as a single entity, encompassing the diverse array of “traditional societies.” This framework does not permit the identification of a discernible trajectory of progressive development, particularly not one that is based on the logic of the interaction of productive forces and production relations.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the unfolding concept of “traditional society” represents a complex system, comprising a multitude of pathways and potential outcomes. Ultimately, the way out of the labyrinth was found by humanity only after a long search. The concept of the Malthusian trap is an economic proof of the existence of such a labyrinth. If this concept is still amorphous and imperfect, it only follows that it should be further developed, not rejected as inherently flawed.

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The endeavors of numerous scholars have led to a new understanding of the regularities that were inherent in a traditional, pre-industrial society. Judging from the current state of knowledge, the period of agrarian civilization, which spanned several millennia, cannot be divided into several successive, qualitatively different, yet universal stages of progressive development. This is not only because economic growth in the pre-industrial era was generally very slow, but also because countries that seemed to have already succeeded in creating proto-industry and market institutions were repeatedly thrown back by severe socio-ecological crises.

This mechanism of relative stagnation has come to be called the “Malthusian trap,” although it was not T. Malthus who gave its exhaustive description and interpretation. Malthus observed only the initial stages of the British Industrial Revolution and did not perceive a fundamental shift in social dynamics. He believed that the imbalances between land and labor had always existed and would persist. But it is now evident that his understanding of economic and demographic trends is relevant precisely when applied to traditional, agricultural societies.

<sup>15</sup> In the late Soviet period there appeared concepts that treated the entire array of redistributive agrarian societies as a “single pre-capitalist formation”. V. Ilyushechkin developed the theory of “pre-capitalist class society”, within the framework of which different types of surplus product withdrawal (land rent, slavery, serfdom, indentured servitude) appeared as one-order, existing in parallel production relations at approximately the same level of productive forces. According to Ilyushechkin, the differences between individual countries in antiquity and the Middle Ages consisted in different combinations of these elements, with the possible presence of a certain leading mode [Ilyushechkin 1990]. Y. Kobishchanov proposed the concept of “large feudal formation” based on the dominance of land rent seizures by both the state and private land owners. Even in antiquity, in his opinion, slavery was only a peripheral mode within the feudal economy [Kobishchanov 1992]. In fact, these concepts were attempts not only to get away from the “five-stages scheme”, but also to modernize the Marxist vision of history in general, taking into account the facts accumulated over the 20th century, and also to rid it of the most obvious logical inconsistencies without abandoning the Marxist methodology proper, including the predominant attention to distributive relations. The problem of the relationship between the factors of production (land and labor resources), i.e., the actual functioning of the traditional economy, was at best in a shadow in these studies.

Cliometric studies generally confirm that in the pre-industrial past, increases in per capita income caused by technological progress or the utilization of additional land could be offset by population growth. Still, this did not inevitably result in a convergence of living standards to the minimum of physical subsistence, but rather led to a new equilibrium, which was influenced by many factors, including the “positive and preventive checks” described by Malthus.

The newest models of the Malthusian trap pay more attention to the institutional component. Malthusian society is being perceived as a redistributive one, based on the extraction of land rent by vertical social structures. Conflicts between individual strata of Malthusian society are considered to be integral components of its socio-economic dynamics.

The incorporation of the variables of proto-industrialization and marketization into the models facilitates the elucidation of crucial nuances pertaining to the Malthusian “dynastic” cycle. The concentration of the most of labor resources in the agrarian sector, with its decreasing marginal productivity, allows us to understand why Malthusian economic growth was so slow and unstable. Conversely, the imbalance between land and labor resources and the associated conflicts between the ruling elites and the peasantry explain the periodic plunges of society into a state of turmoil, a war of all against all. Furthermore, the assertion of recurrent “proto-industrial deadlocks” elucidates the nature of the socio-ecological crisis, delineating the specific causes of cyclical regression and the disruptions in the process of sectoral and institutional diversification of the economy.

At first sight, the concept of the Malthusian trap and the materialist understanding of history proposed by Marx appear to be incompatible. It is not merely a result of differences in periodization; it also stems from the divergent value bases. Malthus perceived society as an object of God’s Providence. Marx, on the contrary, believed in the ability of people to change the world in a revolutionary way. By studying the past, he tried to confirm his thoughts about the future. However, it should be noted that the concept of the Malthusian trap was born many decades after Malthus’ death, and the “five-stage model” of formations is only indirectly related to Marx. If the distinction between the Malthusian trap and the epoch of MEG appears more realistic in the present day studies, it does not follow that the most refined elements cannot be taken from the Marxist concept and implanted into a modern theory.

Primarily, this refers to the Marxist interpretation of the ancient slave civilization as a social structure that for some time represented an alternative to redistributive, “Oriental” ones and partly determined the further historical path of Europe. The models of the Asiatic mode of production and feudalism proposed by Marx also contain many useful insights. Even if the very distinction between these stages of development is controversial from today’s perspective, both cases highlight specific mechanisms of functioning of redistributive societies, and even in connection with different regions. It can be said that the concept of the Malthusian trap has lacked such detailing. By integrating this concept with select elements of the Marxist approach, it could become possible to enhance its institutional legitimacy and to elucidate the diverse phenomena of traditional societies across different countries.



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