THE ARAB NATION: Some Conclusions and Problems

Samir Amin

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

The following article is excerpted from a chapter of Samir Amin's la Nation arabe.* *This piece raises some crucial questions about theory and its relationship to revolutionary practice in the Arab world.*

In the first part of this article Amin is mainly concerned with defining the concepts of nationalism and Arab unity in relation to the historical specificity of the Arab world. He argues that the rise of nationalism was not connected to the rise of a national bourgeoisie, as it was in Europe. Indeed, Amin holds that the Arab world has never contained a national bourgeoisie due to the region's particular social formations and modes of production. The failure of such a bourgeoisie to emerge, he claims, can be traced back to the pre-capitalist Arab world.

Although Amin's definition of nationalism is sketchy, he presents a novel interpretation. Amin disagrees with those who subscribe to the view that all nationalisms, by their very nature, are reactionary and thus must be combatted. Nor does he agree with those who adhere to a stage theory of political struggle, according to which it may be necessary at a specific stage of national liberation struggle to align with national or petty-bourgeois classes and regimes to advance the struggle towards socialism. Rather, Amin asserts that there is only one brand of nationalism which is truly progressive: he calls it "proleterian nationalism." He admits that "proleterian nationalism" has yet to fully materialize in the Arab world, and does not clearly define the character of this nationalism.

In his discussion of nationalism and Arab unity Amin is implicity leveling an attack on those revolutionaries who have a large audience in the Arab world. They subscribe to a stage theory of struggle, and have demonstrated a strong willingness to align with regimes, which propound a nationalist ideology which is distinctly not revolutionary nationalism in order to mask their efforts to consolidate their petty bourgeois class interests. Amin chides the Arab left for its theory and practice which, he claims, has failed to study properly class and state formations in the Arab world in different historical periods. For instance, today in Egypt certain factions on the left call for an alliance with the Egyptian "national bourgeoisie" to destroy "feudalism," which they claim still persists. Amin suggests that if the left had carefully analyzed the nature of pre-capitalist social relations and the transition to capitalism in Egypt, it would discover that a "national bourgeoisie" could not arise in Egypt, and that "feudalism," if it ever existed, is long deceased.

Similarly, such an analysis reveals that the existing Arab regimes, which claim to be the vanguard of Arab nationalism, are petty-bourgeois and their existing economic structure is state capitalism. He believes that the left has seriously misunderstood and thus misinterpreted the development of state

Samir Amin,* la Nation arabe nationalisme et luttes de classes. *(Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1976) The excerpt is taken from chapter 5. The book has been translated into English by Michael Pallis, and is being published by Zel Press, London. It is distributed in the U.S. by Monthly Review Press.

and class formations in the Arab world because it has failed to properly investigate the nature of the pre-capitalist Arab world and its transition to capitalism. Although Amin does not discuss this transition, his remarks are suggestive of a "proper" way to analyze this period. For Amin, if the left in the Arab world would heed his suggestions, then it could develop a clearer and better defined program for revolutionary action.

In the second part of this article, Amin embarks on a study of the Arab world in its pre-capitalist stage. Explicit here is his understanding that an analysis of the nature of underdevelopment and class formation in the modern period must delineate the social formation and dominant modes of production in the period preceding the penetration of capitalism. The question is not merely academic: Contemporary political theory and practice must be grounded in an accurate appraisal of the class forces and formations which arose with the impact of capitalism on a particular type of pre-capitalist society. Indeed, the question takes on a real immediacy as leftist movements in the Arab world attempt to deal with the problem of the "traditional sector" (rural, tribal etc.), which has obviously been transformed by capitalism but yet fails to exhibit all the earmarks of capitalist relations, particularly in relations of production. The Communist Party of Sudan, for example, is developing an analysis of a political strategy for this "traditional sector." Amin implicitly asserts that the nature of the contemporary Arab world is informed by the impact of "imported" capitalism on the pre-capitalist or "tributory" mode of production.

With this assertion, Amin enters the ongoing debate on the nature of underdevelopment. Although it is not possible here to reproduce the debate with any depth or refinement, a brief survey may help to situate Amin's approach. Four positions, each having ramifications for the theory and practice of the Arab left, can be outlined. First is the view of underdevelopment as a stage in the development process. Development will proceed as it did in Europe (with perhaps some blockage or retardation thanks to indigenous factors); the underdeveloped regions are on the slow road to socialism via capitalism. This position, in its* reductor ad absurdum, *would have the Arab left promote capitalist development as a necessary stage. While this analysis is losing credibility, the strategy of alliance with the "national bourgeoisie" and the promotion of "national capital"—still very prevalent—is based to some extent on this position.*

An alternative analysis of underdevelopment places emphasis on the workings of the "world-system." As proposed by Frank and Wallerstein, this position (with variations) asserts that the level of integration within the capitalist "world-system" is such that capitalism is the *mode of production in underdeveloped regions, that it is foolhardy to talk of "traditional sectors" or pre-capitalist modes. The emphasis on dependency and integration constitutes a salutory attack on traditional theories of underdevelopment. It discards the nation that underdevelopment in a homegrown phenomenon arising from political backwardness or ideological weakness, and contests the idea that underdeveloped societies are fragmented by an airtight division between a "modern" and a "traditional" sector. But when confronted with the specific problem of a seemingly "traditional" sector (which is in no way isolated from the rest of society, but yet has special features), the "world-system" theory gives little guidance for political practice.**

This problem of specificity is addressed in a third position, the theory of a "colonial mode of production." Here an attempt is made to define the particular features of capitalism as it comes into contact with pre-capitalist societies in the Third World. Proponents of the "colonial mode of production" (by and large Indian marxists) are concerned with their specific situation, though they do claim that the "colonial mode of production" defines numerous Third World economic systems. Hamza Alavi, the major conceptualizer of this made, argues that in the period of transition of capitalism, which corresponds to the era of colonialism for much of the Third World, it is more accurate to define the connection of feudalism to capitalism as "hierarchical structural relationship within a single mode of production" (the "colonial mode of production"), than it is to speak of "two separate and antagonistic modes of production within a single social formation." Feudalism and capitalism are linked in an* indissoluble unity *by the "unified structure of imperialism, which includes both the centre and the periphery, joined in a single formation." Posing a new "mode," however, is fraught with difficulties of definition—is it transitional? transitional to what?, etc.*

A fourth position, defined as the "modes of production" approach shares this concern with specificity. In brief, its proponents (Rey, Meillassoux and Poulantzas among others) utilize the concept of articulation *to analyze the relations between capitalism and the pre-existent mode of production. The articulation (or relations of linkage and effectiveness) of capitalism with a pre-capitalist mode—whether feudalism or, in Amin's scheme the tributory mode—transforms the pre-capitalist mode. This mode is first reinforced, then undermined, and finally eliminated as capitalism becomes dominant and then all pervasive. Underdeveloped societies are in a period where capitalist penetration is undermining and otherwise transforming pre-capitalist modes, but has yet to eliminate them entirely. The third and fourth positions recognize the importance of studying the pre-capitalist society, for current reality is born of the interaction of capitalism with what existed before Western penetration. This analysis also provides a starting point for a study of the "traditional" sector, which has been transformed by capitalism but is not yet capitalist in any real sense.*

Amin clearly is concerned with the articulation of different modes of production. His previous work, however, was strongly influenced by the dependency school (Frank). His concept of "unequal development" which focused on the effect of the center (the developed capitalist regions) on the periphery (the underdeveloped Third World) shared the world-system emphasis. The logic of "unequal development" is that the development of the center breeds, and indeed requires,

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**The delineation of these positions is largely drawn from Aidan Foster-Cater, "The Modes of Production Controversy,"* New Left Review, *no. 107, January-February 1978.*

**The world-system approach has also come under sharp theoretical attack. Brenner, in "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of NeoSmithian Marxism"* (New Left Review *September-October 1977) asserts that the world system scheme, in its reliance on the abstract process of capitalist expansion, fails to focus on the productivity of labor as the essence and key to economic development, which is bound, in turn, to historically specific class structures of production and surplus extraction. In other words, the world-system approach sees the market and the need for profit maximization as determining class structure in the periphery, rather than seeing the potential for profit in itself as dependent on class structure.*

**Hamza Alavi, "India and the Colonial Mode of Production,"* The Socialist Register 1975. *pp. 160-197.*

the underdevelopment of the periphery. This occurs, for example, by extraverting the economies of the periphery, transmitting the price structure of the center to the periphery, and creating an unequal international division of labor.

In the following selection, by shifting his focus to pre-capitalist modes, Amin actually contributes to the "modes of production" debate. His discussion of the pre-capitalist Arab world and the "tributory mode of production" raises a call for Arab leftists to study their own pre-capitalist history. He believes that an analysis of this history is central to today's theory and practice; he suggests that contemporary class formations are indeed the product of the articulation of capitalism with the tributory mode of production. He is challenging the left to reexamine many of its long-held theories: that the Arab world was "feudal" and the remnants of a "feudal" class remain; that a national capitalist class exists and can be a progressive ally; that political activity should be directed exclusively to the sphere of modern industry. Ultimately Amin is arguing for specificity; he is arguing against the wholesale adoption of European categories and models; he is arguing for the development of a political theory and practice strongly rooted in an understanding of the pre-capitalist Arab world and the particular features of capitalist penetration.

— PK & JT

THE HISTORY OF THE ARAB WORLD AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

We must now pose the problem of nationhood in new terms. The mystical and mysterious basis for nationhood proposed by bourgeois science gets us nowhere, and neither does Stalin's reduction of this social reality to the modern capitalist world. On the contrary, the history of the Arab world gives specific scientific contours to the concept of nationhood, which tie in with the general hypothesis of *Unequal Exchange*. The proposition concerning the definition of this social fact which we call nationhood leads to the following formulations. Firstly, the nation is a social phenomenon which can appear at every stage of history: it is not necessarily and exclusively correlative to the capitalist mode of production. Secondly, the nation appears when there exists not only the elementary conditions of geographical contiguity, reinforced by the use of a common language, (which does not exclude variants of dialect), but also a social class which controls the central State apparatus and ensures economic unity in the life of the community; this class need not necessarily be the capitalist national bourgeoisie. Thirdly, the phenomenon of nationhood is a reversible process: it can develop and grow stronger or, on the contrary, it can weaken and fade away, according to whether the social class in question reinforces its unificatory power or loses it altogether. In the latter case the society can regress into a formless conglomeration of more or less related ethnicities. These ethnicities can reform as one or several nations if history again allows a social class to fulfill the unificatory functions which allow one to distinguish between a nation and an ethnicity.

If applied to Arab history, these theoretical formulations shed a great deal of light on the contradictory aspects of the national question in this part of the world. In this sense the Arab world has only been a nation during short periods of its history; on the other hand, some, but not all, of its constituent regions were already nations when they were Arabized (Egypt, for example). After the decline of the Arab nation, some regions became autonomous nations, while others did not attain this national stage and remained conglomerates of ethnicities. The social class which undertook Arab national unification was that of the merchant-warriors. Indeed, the social formations of the pre-colonial Arab world were not feudal but commercial, that is to say that the main surplus on which the Imperial State, the civilization and the material life of its ruling classes were based was not mainly drawn from the agricultural product of the local peasants, but from the profits of long-distance trade. Let us be quite clear: the issue is not that of the origin of the State but rather of the nature of that State during the imperial stages of its centuries of greatness.

A series of major historical events brought about the national regression: the crusades and the shifting of the commerical center of gravity from the Arab to the Italian cities, the fall of Baghdad under the assault of the Mongols in the 13th century, then the Ottoman conquest in the 16th, the shift of Mediterranean trade to the Atlantic during the same period, and consequently the direct link Europe established with Eastern Asia and Black Africa, thereby depriving the Arabs of their traditional role of intermediary.

The disappearance of the Arab nation gave new life to other nations. Because the Egyptian oasis constitutes a peasant formation, Egypt has always retained a certain autonomy, even during the Arab nation's greatest period. While this world as a whole lost its nationhood and became a conglomerate of peoples during the 13th and 14th centuries, Egypt asserted itself again as an autonomous nation.

The social class which undertook this renaissance was not that of the merchant-warriors but the landowning bureaucratic aristocracy. Under Ali Bey in the 18th century, and especially under Mohammed Ali in the 19th, this class gave a national character back to Egypt and not just that of a geographical reality. The other attempts at constituting a nation—notably those in Morocco, in Tunisia, in Algeria under Abdel Kader, in Sudan with Mahdism, in Yemen and in Lebanon—were not very far-reaching, not only because in some cases they fell prey to foreign attacks (for example in Algeria and the Sudan) but also and especially because the level of development of the local (agricultural) productive forces was not sufficient to ensure a surplus adequate enough to establish the class which attempted to build up the nation. The fate of the dominant class was thus dependent mainly on its ability to draw on foreign surplus through international trade, and consequently was never independent of circumstances external to the society. These attempts at nationhood therefore remained embryonic and unfinished, while in Egypt a thousand year old nation, whose fate was not tied to foreign relations, was reborn. In Syria and Iraq, where Arab feeling has always been lively, the attempts at throwing off the Ottoman yoke in the 19th century were incomparably weaker than in Egypt: the Syrian commercial class, which was once so flourishing, had become feeble, the landowning bureaucratic aristocracy was impoverished by the re-desertification of Mesopotamia, and the peasantry was locked in by the closed horizons of their isolated mountain holdouts...

With the integration of the Arab world into the capitalist system, as a dominated and oppressed region, do we see the birth of a new social class which could pretend to national hegemony, that is to say could unify the economy and centralize power? And in which context: that of States or that of the Arab whole? The vicissitudes of the internal politics of the various States, particularly of Egypt, Iraq and Syria from the 1920s prove that the new (latifundist and commercial) bourgeoisie engendered by integration into the capitalist system could not pretend to this hegemony, neither in terms of the various States, nor *a fertirri*, in terms of the Arab world as a whole.

Indeed this class was not the one which ensured the economic and political unity of the country. These functions were fulfilled by the dominant imperialism of which this class is nothing but the appendage. The weakness of this class is thus that of the Arab (Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi) nation and of the Arab 'nation'. The first Palestinian war (1948) brought the point home. It was not the implacable power of Zionism's penetration which opened up the possibility of its establishment; rather it was the weakness of the Arab nations (or nation).

The new social classes which took over from the latifundist and commercial bourgeoisie following the defeat of 1948 were not noticeably more capable of assuming a real national hegemony, either in terms of States or in terms of the Arab area as a whole. Indeed State capitalism replaced latifundist and commercial capitalism by three sets of measures: firstly, an agrarian reform which replaced the old aristocracy with a class of kulaks, thereby widening the internal market; secondly, a program of public nationalizations which expropriated both the dominant foreign capital and the big local bourgeoisie associated with it; thirdly, a program of public industrialization made possible by the wider market created by the first two measures. A set of measures of this kind does not necessarily consitute a stage of transition towards socialism. For that to be the case, these measures would have to be associated with an effective form of popular power and a letarian ideology. Then, and only then, agrarian reform becomes a first step towards the mobilization of the whole of the peasantry, especially the poorest (and most numerous) layers of the latter, and not an end in itself which must be stabilized as soon as kulakization is completed. Then, and only then, the planned industrialization and agricultural development are not based on the partial widening of the market made possible by kulakization; or simply on the transfer to the State of profits which until then were appropriated by foreign capital and its associated private local capital (the transfer which established the economic base of the new bureaucracy). Failing the above, the model of accumulation described is in every way analogous to that of capitalist accumulation, and can hardly be called socialism, since it leaves the masses outside of its system. It is then just development for a minority, albeit a widened one; a minority made up of the class of kulaks and of the bureaucracy, which has become a State bourgeoisie. But this program offers no development to the broad masses. It is thus incapable of really mobilizing the latter, of constituting itself by their democratically organized everyday will. One could invoke the Western bourgeois revolution as evidence of the possibility of a capitalist road to development which excluded the masses. But to do so would be to assume that history can reproduce itself, to forget the subtle transformations which imperialism has brought about. Integration into the imperialist system has already created a specific situation different to that which characterized today's advanced capitalist countries when they were going through their industrial revolution. In the Third World integration has proletarianized and impoverished the broad masses, without managing to integrate them into the system of capitalist accumulation: there has been no extension of wage labor keeping pace with the disintegration of pre-capitalist society; there has been no constant improvement in wages; integration failed to achieve all this in the Third World precisely because of domination by an already existing imperialist system. This is the sense in which the capitalist road is closed and in which socialism is an objective necessity in the underdeveloped countries. The fact that it was not the proletariat which exercised hegemony during the changeover in the Arab world removes any possibility of Statist rule being a possible transition to socialism. From then on, the new State capitalism, which benefits only a minority of the new classes, must accept to remain trailing along in the wake of a system which dominates the world. This dependence, renewed and deepened in comparison with that of the old latifundist and commerical bourgeoisie, manifests itself at all levels: that of technological dependence, that of the privileged classes' pattern of consumption, that of ideology.

Is Arab nationalism doomed to failure; is the Arab nation condemned to remain a chimera? In fact, the negative reveals the positive: the incapacities of the dependent State bourgeoisie reveals the necessity for a proletarian outcome. But where does nationalism come into this?

Not all the social formations known to history necessarily imply a nation; it is only those which are based on a mode of production which demands a centralization of political power and economic organization which do so. The formations of feudal Europe are typical examples of cases where the absence of political and economic centralization reduces an ethnicity (be it Germanic or Italian or French) to a non-national conglomerate of regions. On the other hand, the formations of ancient Egypt and China, where centralization was essential to the major works which had to be undertaken, were able to create nations. The formations based on major trade have also often engendered nations, as is borne out by the case of ancient Greece (despite the absence of a centralized political authority) or by that of the Arab world. Similarly, in Europe, when the absolutist monarchies united territories into nations, they had to base themselves on the merchants of the mercantilist period; the examples of England and France are typical.

The capitalist mode of production brings about a level of nationhood which is far more intense than those which existed in pre-capitalist social formations, because the centralization of economic power is itself greatly intensified, by the creation of an internal market for labor, capital and merchandise. This doubtless explains why marxists have tended to think of the phenomenon of nationhood as a concomitant of capitalism—especially as in Europe the old pre-capitalist socity, feudal society, had not been a national one.

The Third World's necessary transition to socialism will also have to create this internal market—but not in the forms, or with the content, of the capitalist market: this difference, according to our analysis, is precisely the one which separates State collectivism from socialism. Nonetheless this market must be capable of integrating people, of integrating them more fully than that of a Third World capitalism which can only be dependent, and thus limited, State capitalism. The vehicle for this integration, for its proletarian content, remains the nation: a nation of proletarians (as opposed to a proletarian nation). To the trotskyists, socialism is purity and nationalism a deviation. In fact, in real social terms, both Vietnam and China demonstrate the existence of a proletarian nationalism. They even show that proletarian nationalism is the only kind which still has the strength which bourgeois nationalism once had, and that the only socialist revolutions of our time take place where nationalism does not figure as an autonomous tendency which is juxtaposed, albeit allied, to socialism, but where socialism is also nationalism. In a world which capitalism has unified and hierarchized, the oppression of the proletariat and proletarianized masses of the dominated periphery is not just social oppression, it is also national oppression. The complete fusion of socialism and nationalism then becomes the precondition for the liberation of oppressed peoples. Were this liberation to be generalized, it would close one chapter of history and open another: that of the transcendence of nations in a socialist universe.

The necessary and possible national hegemony of the proletariat, in a revolution which is both national and social is one thing, and nationalism as an ideology is quite another. Nationalism as an ideology expresses the hegemony of the petty bourgeoisie, the effective domination of the movement by this class. There is no historical fatality about this. The strength of the petty bourgeoisie is tailor-made according to the weaknesses of the proletariat.

In the last analysis it is thus Arab communism, in its weaknesses, which is responsible for the petty bourgeois hegemony. That communism in the Arab world originally developed in petty bourgeois circles is neither an anomaly (it happens this way as a rule in the Third World) nor a latent vice. But Arab communism could not move beyond this stage without a correct theory. And a correct theory is one which understands that only the proletariat can liberate a country oppressed by imperialism, and that the revolution must be led by that proletariat; a theory which grasps that while that revolution's first task is to bring about democratic change, this is not a stage which is distinguishable by the class nature of the powers that carry it out from the next stage, socialist revolution. This is the true lesson of China and Indochina. Instead, Arab communism eventually accepted, although not without reticence, a theory and a practice which in the last analysis was a theory of stages, a theory which either straightforwardly allowed the petty bourgeoisie to retain their leadership of the national stage, or, which amounts to much the same thing, accepted to place the party of the proletariat under the petty bourgeois banner. Communist and nationalist petty-bourgeois thus came to lose their distinct visions of the future, and were reduced to the same common denominator, State socialism. The revisionist conception of marxism necessarily had to lead to such an outcome. It is only now that the Arab communists are beginning to develop the first elements of a critical analysis of the situation. But an analysis, however correct, is not enough. Without a revolutionary practice, theory is condemned to degenerate. What is needed today is a break with the petty bourgeois milieu, with its lifestyles and with its limited forms of political action, in order to undertake another kind of action, among the proletarianized and popular masses, especically the rural ones. In this case, practice is more important than theory, for a fundamentally correct practice (action within the struggle of the revolutionary classes which are the motor of history) helps the re-evaluation of partially false theory—but this does not work the other way round. Were it to break with revisionism, Arab communism could implant itself among the proletarian and pauperized masses of the Arab world. Its nature would necessarily change, for it would then have to assimilate itself to the history of its people, their culture and their traditions (as happened in East Asia), in order to discover the road towards socialist revolution. It would cease to be a foreign ideology stuck onto a national reality, an avatar of European history and of Europe's domination over the Arab world. It would finally become capable of settling the national problems, both political and cultural, and the problems of the socialist transformation of society.

THE QUESTION OF FEUDALISM IN THE ARAB WORLD AND THE FAILURE OF ARAB MERCANTILISM

The Unequal Development Thesis

According to our Unequal Development thesis, when a mode of production is necessarily overtaken by a more evolved mode which allows for greater development of the productive forces, this takes place not in the center of the first mode, not in those societies where that mode is most firmly established and effective, but on its periphery, among the weak links of the system; in other words among the less advanced societies, where that mode is less firmly established.

This thesis of ours contrasts with a vision which we shall call both mechanistic and linear, which attributes a universal character to a supposed succession of five modes of production (primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism). This later thesis admits that it is possible for backwards societies to accelerate and even to jump a stage of the general evolution. But it does not conceive of the possibility that a supérior stage could actually be initiated and flourish first in a more backwards society. Europe's move from barbarism to feudalism, skipping over the stage of slave society, has been explained in such terms. As for the Russian revolution, which took place in a relatively backward country, Stalin supported the idea of 'socialism in one country' without worrying too much about the theoretical implications of this conclusion for historical materialism; Trotsky, on the other hand, believed that the fate of socialism depended on revolution in the advanced countries.

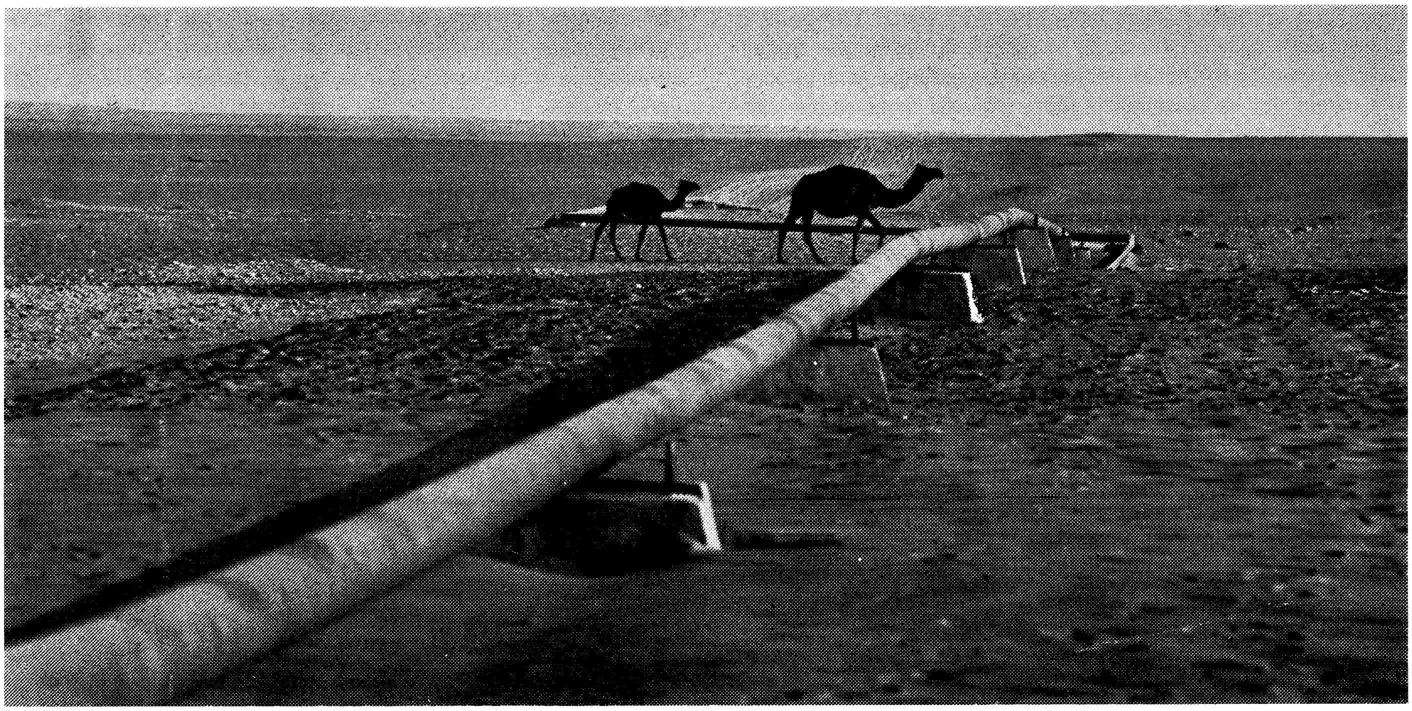
The Unequal Development thesis recognizes that history has a meaning and, in the last analysis, attributes the general direction of historical movement to the development of the productive forces. Neither capitalism nor socialism are the products of chance. The pre-capitalist relations of production had to be overthrown and capitalist relations of production established, thus making it possible for the productive forces to leap forwards, which then in its turn makes it necessary to establish socialist relations of production. But this thesis does *not* recognize that, from this, one can deduce the necessity of a universal model of evolution which would impose itself everywhere by some process of destiny . . .

The essence of our thesis is that the tributory mode is the most general form of pre-capitalist class society; that slavery is the exception, not the rule, and that, like the pure merchant mode, it is marginal; that feudalism is a peripheral form of the tributory mode and that, precisely because it was an immature form, still stamped by characteristics of its original communal society, it was fated to go beyond itself more easily, thereby ensuring Europe's particular destiny. Let us dwell briefly on each of these points.

The tributory mode defines both relations of domination, (State governing class and governed peasants) and relations of exploitation (extortion of surplus in the form of tribute). The transparency of these relations of exploitation implies that relations of domination dominate the society, that the key instance ideologized in the society is the political one. Such a mode, in its finished form, is very stable. It can thus absorb developments in the means of production without bringing into question the relations of production (the set of relations of domination and exploitation). This should remind us that the thesis which argues that the relations of production are mechanically determined by the level of development of the means of production is not a marxist thesis but a product of vulgar communism, however disguised by the addition of stylistic clauses about the dialectical relationship between these two instances. In fact the type of progress of the productive forces is not a neutral inert factor; it is guided by the relations of production. For instance, the finished tributory mode, as in Egypt and China, proved capable of orienting the progress of the productive forces towards fantastic improvements in irrigation techniques, in building (financed by agricultural progress) and in communications (roads, postal service), thereby reinforcing the tributory mode itself. True, tributory relations of production limit the development of the productive forces. This was obvious both in China and in the Arab world, where the central authority imposed limits on the corporations. In feudal Europe, the weak link of the tributory societies, the central authority was less powerful—and therefore free towns not yoked to feudalism, and new relations of production, the embryos of capitalism, could apppear. These new relations were eventually to allow the bourgeois revolution to accumulate forces and to overthrow all other relations of production, in order to establish new onces capable of carrying the level of development of the productive forces to a higher stage. Elsewhere, within the stronger links of tributory society, no similar process was possible and the development of the productive forces could not go beyond a certain level. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same thing is going on today, in terms of the birth of socialist relations of production. . .

It is quite true that the laws discovered by historical materialism are universal: the concepts of mode of production or ideology do not apply only to specific societies; the relations which link the social elements to which these concepts refer thus also have a universal importance. But these laws operate in differing contexts. The results to which they lead are thus also specific to each case: contradictions always have several evolutionary paths, as opposed to a single road mapped out in advance for the whole of human history. The Unequal Development thesis emerged primarily from our observations on the various forms in which socialism is making its way in the contemporary world. In the capitalist system, which has reached the imperialist stage characterized by the division of the world into dominant centers and dominated peripheries, the socialist transformation of the world begins by revolutions in the periphery. It begins where the capitalist relations are less developed, where the development of the productive forces thus makes the transcendence of capitalist relations even more urgent than in the center, and where, consequently, that transcendence meets with less serious difficulties in the attempt.

On the basis of this first example of unequal development, which we are living today, we went on to ask ourselves whether the same had not been true when pre-capitalist relations


Aramco's pipeline near Riyadh

were finally displaced by the birth of capitalism. Of course, the lessons of the contemporary world cannot be mechanically applied to the past. Capitalism is the first world system and one cannot talk of center and periphery when one is describing the pre-capitalist systems. We thus came round to the idea that new definitions were called for in the case of the respectively autonomous central and peripheral systems of the pre-capitalist world. We concluded that the most suitable way of using the terms was as follows: the central systems were those which were based on the pre-capitalist mode of production *par excellence*, in its most evolved and finished form, the tributory mode. As for the feudal mode it seemed to us to be a poorer and less finished—let us say, peripheral—form of this tributory mode.

Europe, after the barbarian invasions, was far less evloved than the East or the Mediterranean; it was therefore feudal, just as Japan was feudal compared to tributory China. But this backwardness allowed it to progress faster and more freely. The more evolved Arab world, on the other hand, stagnated. Is this conceptual equipment sufficient to explain the facts, to explain the apparition of capitalism in Europe on the one hand, the abortion of Arab mercantilism on the other? Our answer is: yes. True, if capitalism had not appeared in Europe, humanity would doubtless have discovered it anyhow. But this is not the point. Historical materialism explains history, it accounts for the transformations which have effectively taken place, for failures and successes, that is to say for the manner in which societies have or have not surmounted their contradictions. In other words historical materialism accounts for facts—it does not replace them with a philosophy of history or deal in what would have happened if . . .

Before going into the question of the abortion of Arab mercantilism, we must ask ourselves if it is acceptable to talk about the Arab world in general, whether it can be characterized as a whole. We must remember that we are dealing with an area which stretched over a considerable distance, which is heterogenous in terms of population and in terms of natural conditions, made up as it is of both impoverished deserts and very fertile and densely populated oases, etc. This history of the millenium which starts with the Muslim conquests and ends with the Arab world's integration into a world system dominated by Europe is hardly more homogenous, especially as this millenium in some cases has historical roots going back several thousand years. Why should we expect that this slice of human history can be globalized by looking, for instance, for a mode of production characteristic of all its component areas and all its historical periods? Are we wasting our time? Would we not be better occupied in characterizing each region in each period, without trying to pick out constants which will quite probably be the mere products of our own bias? Despite the dangers of such generalizations, we are going to take the risk. Let us first point out that such objections apply to every region of the world: Europe, from the barbarian invasions to the 19th century, is not homogenous either, nor is the contemporary capitalist world. Nonetheless, one can talk meaningfully about European feudalism, and of the dominant mode of production, in an effort to charaterize ten centuries of history north of the Mediterranean. Historical materialism is meaningful only if it enables one to go beyond the specific monograph, if it supplies us with concepts which help us grasp the processes whereby societies—all and any societies—are transformed in their essential respects. The unity of a region or or a period by no means always seems obvious to those who live it: it is only afterwards that this unity can be seen in the action of the dominant tendencies. Medieval Europe has a specific meaning for us today, as it certainly did not for the 11th century knight. Let us look at the problem from another angle: the contemporary question of Arab unity demands a historical investigation into the roots of that unity, if any. Is Arab unity only the fruit of modern imperialist domination? Is it only a vague cultural aspiration? In our opinion, this unity very definitely does have historical roots. The point is therefore to discover them, to bring out the dominant characteristics specific to that millenium of pre-colonial Arab history. We would not be materialists if we situated these characteristics only in terms of ideology and culture (Islam, the Arabic language) without understanding that these features could not be what they are were it not that this world has a certain specificity in terms of social formations. We are not talking about mere simplification or denial of differences in time and space. But these differences, which we recognize, are linked to the main specific and dominant tendencies which they both modify and are modified by. This process of abstraction is precisely the scientific contribution of historical materialism. Furthermore, the process by which the pre-colonial Arab world is generally qualified as feudal, by simple analogy with Europe, is a perfect example of false abstraction. It stems from a reduction of universal history to a mechanical model of stages which Marx never stopped protesting against. It allows one to understand neither the reasons for the appearance of capitalism in Europe, nor the tendency towards Arab unity as opposed to the inverse tendency towards national differentiation in Europe.

THE ARTICULATION OF THE TRIBUTORY MODE OF PRODUCTION WITH THE MERCANTILE RELATIONS IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ARAB WORLD

In calling the pre-colonial Arab formations mercantile, we have deliberately adopted a provocative terminology. For it is quite obvious that this area of the world, just like all others before the advent of capitalism, was mainly made up of farmers, and exploited farmers at that. Our thesis is as follows: firstly, these agrarian modes of production were either tributory modes (in the wealthier regions) or communal modes (in the poorer and isolated regions), but rarely, if ever, the feudal mode, which appeared only during the decadence of the Arab world; secondly, that the mercantile relations were grafted onto these agrarian modes and were articulated with them in a particular way, sometimes dominating the agrarian relations and sometimes dominated by the tributory mode. It is this second aspect of Arab history which gives it its specific characteristics.

The significant facts on which our thesis is founded are the following:

First, the productivity of agriculture south of the Mediterranean was generally much lower than to the north. This is borne out by the practically exclusive use of the classical swing-plough in the Arab world, while in Europe the introduction of the deep plowshare and mould-board soon resulted in decisive qualitative progress. This inferiority of the Arab world was compensated for by the natural fertility of the irrigated areas. This was the case in Egypt, occasionally in Iraq, and also in this or that privileged area at particular times (Andalucia, Cape Bon, the smaller plains of Syria). Nonetheless, the labor productivity of most of the Arab peasantry (excluding Egypt) remained mediocre and stagnant, while in Europe an early start in the 11th century led to the flourishing of the so-called agricultural revolution from the 15th to the 18th century, preceding, and paving the way for the industrial revolution.

Secondly, the productivity of agriculture in the Arab world remained more or less static, in periods of greatness as in periods of decadence. This is very different from what went on in European history. In the Arab world, the periods of prosperity were characterized by an extension of the irrigated zones, the acreage of which varied by factors of 1:2 in Egypt and at least 1:10 in Iraq. On the whole, fluctuations in population followed the same pattern in the irrigated areas, but techniques hardly changed at all: in Egypt, for instance, from distant antiquity to the 19th century, agricultural technique was always based on flood-irrigation and the swing-plow. In Europe the growth in population was steady, slow at times and accelerating at others, in proportion to the progress of agricultural productivity; in the Arab world the fluctuations in population were sudden and viiolent.

Thirdly, the Arab world's periods of greatness coincide with the periods of flourishing trade. Of course, the great strides made by commerce did not benefit the Arab world as a whole. In the Mashreq the trade routes passed through Syria, which with Iraq, was the main beneficiary (indeed, this is the period when the centre of the Caliphate was situated in the area: first in Damascus, then in Baghdad). When the Turco-Mongol invasions ravaged the area, the trade routes shifted towards the south and the Red Sea, to the great benefit of Egypt under the Ayubids and Mameluks of the 12th and 14th centuries. In the Maghreb, the trade routes shifted from west to east, from the Moroccan Tafilalt to Tunis and Tripoli in Libya, and there was a corresponding shift in the main center of prosperity, both in the Maghreb and in the sub-Saharan Sahel. However this does not yet tell us which was cause and which was consequence: was the autonomous progress of agriculture the basis which made the commercial developments possible or was it the growth of trade which induced agricultural progress in its wake? Our interpretation of the facts inclines us to choose the second hypothesis, precisely because the agricultural progress was more extensive (expansion of irrigated acreage and of population) than intensive (increases in productivity).

Fourthly, what was the relative importance of the surpluses drawn by the ruling classes from the exploitation of the peasantry and from the profits of commerce (and of manufacture or artisan production)? Again, we must clarify what we understand of the meaning and nature of recorded facts. The specialists have not yet finished their inventories of Arab finances at different periods of this long history and for each of its regions. The fact that, on the whole, the revenue drawn from ground rent (including taxes) was quantitatively predominant proves nothing: until the advent of capitalism every human society was predominantly agrarian, and, from the first village chiefdoms to the greatest empires, the main source of funds for the ruling class remained the exploitation of peasants. But one must go beyond this rather obvious point. One must enquire whether the rent extracted from the peasants was merely enough to feed the ruling class and its direct servants, or whether this rent was adequate enough to allow for secondary circuits of manufacture (artisans, workshops, etc.) to be grafted onto it. It is not enough to ascertain the relative importance of these secondary circuits (measured, for example, in terms of a proportion of the urbanized population); one must know whether, in their turn, these secondary circuits made it possible—by means of commercial exchange—to draw on surplus generated by foreign agriculture. One must know how the mercantile relations were articulated with the agrarian relations, whether the flourishing of the former was merely the consequence of progress in agriculture, or whether, on the contrary, the progress in agriculture was induced by a growth in commercial prosperity, in which case the mercantile relations would have exercised a domination over the whole of the system. Direct statistics tell us little at this level, for what is needed is an in-depth analysis of prices, formation of revenues, the causal mechanisms determining the system, etc. The problem is analogous to that posed by the theory of Unequal Exchange in contemporary society. Our thesis is that the same approach is relevant to Arab history: one can only understand the towns in their periods of greatness by reintegrating the Arab world into a larger whole, within which the surplus circulated and became concentrated in a particular way.

Our thesis, however, does not imply that the appearance of the State in this area of the world was the outcome of commerce. Here, as elsewhere, the State's appearance was bound up with the internal formation of classes and with the exploitation stemming from the latter. And here, as elsewhere, material production was largely agricultural, at this state of development of the productive forces. The exploitation on which the appearance of the State was founded could thus only be that of the peasant producers, in one way or another. But there are States and States: a district chiefdom is hardly the same thing as an empire covering thousands of miles, including millions of inhabitants, containing prosperous towns in which a numerous population is concentrated.

Once we have grasped the origin of the State in the area, and the modalities of the internal exploitation of the peasants on which it was based, we are only just beginning to broach the question, for the production of the majority of peasants in the area remained mediocre (except in Egypt, and, occasionally, in Iraq). The fact remains that in some periods enormous towns, which were among the most prosperous in history developed, while in other periods the same areas were brought low by decadence, without there being any significant change in agricultural production. Generally speaking, the peaks of civilization in the Maghreb and the Mashreq were characterized by a very pronounced urbanization which absorbed up to a third or even a half of the population of the area, which is quite exceptional historically. On the other hand, Egypt retained a predominantly rural economy which was more stable. Not that there were no towns in Egypt: on the contrary, there were a great many small and medium sized towns, with very solid links to rural regional territories with which there was considerable and stable exchange; there were also some large ones—Alexandria and Cairo—but these were capital cities grafted onto empires which stretched beyond the confines of Egypt. We have taken all these nuances into account.

What our thesis suggests is simply that one cannot truly appreciate the nature of a social system in all its reality, if one isolates that system from the larger whole into which it is integrated. As far as the Arab world is concerned, one cannot ignore the role played by the various regions which make it up, in the overall Europe-Mediterranean-Western and Southern Asia-Sudan system. Of course one must inquire into the generation of the surplus in each part of the whole. But one must also ask how that surplus circulated and how it eventually came to be concentrated in certain places at certain times within the area as a whole. To avoid this problem is to avoid an essential aspect of reality. And this is where the problematic of long-distance trade comes in.

Who today would dare to explain the wealth of the Gulf Emirs only in terms of the exploitation of nomads and oil industry workers, without taking into consideration the world capitalist system into which those States are integrated? Who would venture to deny that the prosperity of Great Britain was linked to the exploitation of its empire and that the decline of the latter has played its part in the decline of the old metropolis? Who would dare to account for the wealth of the Netherlands by concentrating exclusively on the exploitation of its peasantry, without taking into account the role of the mercantilist trade the Dutch once controlled? To ignore the problematic of the circulation of the surplus is effectively to reduce historical materialism to a simple dogma according to which reality is contained in each morsel of the totality; a dogma which would make it acceptable to study each society in isolation. This dogmatism has always exercised a certain attraction: it ties in with the keen typologist's love of classification and with the idealist attempt to force reality into simple pre-determined schemata. If we wanted quotes to prove that this concern is no part of the marxist method, we could easily find hundreds of pages in which Marx talks of trade in terms reaching far beyond the elementary mechanisms of exploitation.

One can understand nothing about the Arab world if one does not grasp these issues as a whole. Especially at the level of ideology, it is important to assess whether the surplus was drawn from the local exploitation of the peasantry or from the exploitation of trade by which a surplus generated elsewhere was transferred to the Arab world. Who would venture to reduce all the precapitalist societies to a single, supposedly feudal, model, to ignore the specificities of their ideologies and to ask no questions about the nature, origin and consequences of these specificities? When we speak of trading formations, as opposed to peasant formations, we are seeking to accentuate three specificities, both in terms of their economic base (the circulation and centralization of the surplus within a system considered as a whole) and in terms of their ideology.

But why not accept to define the special merchant character of the Arab world in terms of its civilization, its making a distinction between an area's civilization and its nature as a social formation? Because this distinction is sterile. It stems from a reduction of the concept of formation to an economic level, which involves lumping together all the other features of that society, its ideologies, politics, religions, cultures, original traits, etc., in a catch-all concept of civilization, superimposed on the economic. For us, historical materialism must account simultaneously for the whole of a society's characteristics, including those which are traditionally confined within the ambit of the study of civilizations. As it happens, the merchant character of the Arab world has deep roots in the social formation. By integrating the trade relations into the formation, one comes to understand not only the mode of surplus circulation but also the particularities of the superstructure: the merchant ideology. Our method allows us to deal with both the issue of Arab unity and the divergent paths in the respective evolutions of European and Arab history.

What then was the essential nature of the Arab formations, feudal or otherwise? And how was the merchant character of this formation articulated with its agrarian base? What are the specificities, what are the dominant features and at what level are they situated: at the base, in the superstructure, or both?

The root of the problem lies in the pseudo-marxist bad habit of confusing (precapitalist) landowners and feudalists, a simplification which has little to do with Marx.

The feudal mode of production belongs to a vast family of tributory modes of production, all characterized by the division of the population into working peasants (in some cases organized in village communites, in others not) and landowning masters, and correspondingly characterized by the division of the social product into peasant means of subsistence and tribute (generally in kind) drawn by the ruling class. From this first very abstract approach, we can now move closer to the concrete, as Marx did in his analysis of the capitalist mode.

The tributory modes of production were sometimes articulated with long-distance trade, notably in cases where the tribute was adequate enough also to feed other producers (artisans), a part of those products could then be exported, thereby enabling the importation of luxury goods for the ruling classes. In such cases the trade was carried out by merchants, not by capitalist businessmen. Such was the case of feudal Europe. But long distance trade does not itself necessarily draw tribute in this way. For the merchants can be intermediaries between tributory societies which have practically no direct contact with each other, and these merchants can live off the profits they draw from their role as intermediaries. Such was largely the case of the Arab merchants. In formations of the first type the tributory (feudal) mode of production is dominant, while the simple petty-merchant mode (artisans) is articulated with long-distance trade on the basis of this dominant mode. In formations of the second type, the tributory mode of production was generally not dominant; it was so only in the brief moments when the general prosperity led to the enhancement of irrigable land, as happened during the three centuries of Abassid greatness in Iraq and Syria. It ceased to be dominant whenever agriculture fell back on isolated peasant areas, during the long centuries of decadence.

It was thus only during the periods of Arab greatness—which are also the periods of Arab unity—that the tributory (not the feudal) mode of production became dominant. Even then, and precisely because in this case the surplus drawn from the peasantry was small, the tributory mode of production remained limited in its geographical extension as in its intensity, to Egypt and Iraq. Entire regions of the Arab world remained the realm of free peasantries organized into communities. In other areas the tribute remained light, at least in absolute terms. This is the reason for the constant precariousness of Arab feudalism, and for its dependence on the central authority (hence the frequent links between the fief and State service, and the general absence of hereditary principle). The central authority therefore based its wealth and its power less on tribute drawn from the peasants than on profits from long distance trade. When this trade began to disappear, Arab society regressed, and the distinguishing characteristics of feudalism emerged: a falling-back onto impoverished countrysides (except in Egypt), the emergence of the hereditary principle as applied in feudal relations, and the corresponding weakening of central authority. At the time of the colonial conquests, the Arab world presented just such a picture of impoverished feudalism.

Let us recapitulate. The preponderant mode of production in Arab agriculture is the tributory mode, not the feudal mode which only appears in periods of decadence. The merchant relations had a dominant effect on these formations, and this manifested itself in the fact that these relations were the motor of prosperity which promoted tributory agricultural development when times were good, but were grafted onto feudalism when times were bad. The particularities of Egypt,

Tunisian factory

which was always more stable than the rest of the Arab world, were not capable of negating those features which characterized Arab history globally and determined its course. We have here a first explanation for the abortiveness of the Arab formation's evolution towards capitalism.

The question of Arab mercantilism's failure

The question of Arab trade's failure to evolve towards capitalism presents no real problem; bourgeois historiography has created a false issue. This historiography begins by confusing money and capital, commerce and capitalism; it then discovers evidence of capitalism everywhere, in ancient China, in the Greek and Roman world, or among the Arabs, and asks itself why only European capitalism succeeded. Religion (Protestantism, in Weber's view) or race (Germanic superiority or, more subtly, the inheritance of the Greeks) turn out to be the only way out of this blind alley.

Money and trade, in fact, appeared well before capitalism. They appeared as soon as the producers disposed of sufficient surplus and when the division of labor allowed for the exchange of products in which this available surplus could be incorporated. Indeed the bulk of the exchanges, in pre-capitalist society, notably the exchanges between small producers within the same society (peasants and artisans in the same village) took place without any intermediaries, or indeed money, coming into it, at all. However, as soon as a significant fraction of the surplus was centralized in the hands of powerful privileged classes (feudalists, royal courts, etc.) that fraction could be used in long distance trade, that is in the exchange of products, especially luxury products, between different societies. A merchant intermediary could then draw profit from his monopoly position in this contact. This profit, drawn as it was from the difference in subjective values (social utilities appreciated differently) in two societies which were relatively unaware of each other thus does not fall under the laws of profit from commercial capital. For, here again, Marx insists on the role of commercial capital in the equalization of the rate of profit in the capitalist mode of production. The profits of capitalist commercial capital come from the redistribution of surplus value (a form of surplus specific to capitalism) generated within society; a transformation of surplus value in its form as profit. The profits of pre-capitalist commercial trade stemmed from the transfer of surplus operated between one society and another. The function of this long distance trade was fulfilled by specialized strata, often by classes or ethnicities ('people-classes'), such as the Jews in medieval Europe, or by societies which had developed mainly on this basis, such as Phoenicia, Greece, the Manse, the Italian cities and the Arab world at its height.

The concentration of monetary wealth in the hands of these merchant social groups was not capitalism and could not naturally lead to capitalism. The appearance of capitalism requires a disintegration of the precapitalist mode of production, which engenders a proletarianization, a separation of the producers from their means of production, thereby paving the way for a free labor market.

Why did the concentration of monetary wealth in the Arab world not lead to the disintegration of the pre-capitalist modes of production in the countrysides, and thus lead to capitalism? Apparently favorable circumstances were characteristic of that world, as is clearly reflected in Muslim law. The monetary form of ground rent had become standard centuries before. The Arabs also had free labor, and wage-labor was frequent in the towns and even in certain countrysides. One could even talk about a proletariat and a lumpen proletariat, without fear of anachronism. Surely all this should have led to capitalism?

Two theses have been advanced to account for the blockage of evolution; each contains a part of the truth. The first of these theses states that at the very moment when favorable conditions had accumulated to the point of preparing for a qualitative change—an industrial revolution—there was a brutal modification of the trade circuits which put an end to the ongoing process. This modification must naturally be attributed to the Turco-Mongol invasions. But this thesis—which is very popular in the Arab world—is debatable. Whatever the extent of destruction, especially in Iraq and Syria, the trade circuits should surely have been re-established under Ottoman rule when peace had been obtained. In fact, the trade circuits shifted southwards, to the advantage of 13th and 14th century Egypt. True, the constant threat from outside contributed to the militarization of the Arab world. But was the militarization an obstacle to the prosperity of trade? The alliance of warriors and merchants has been noted elsewhere; why not here? Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that the change resulted in a sudden drying-up of the accumulation of money and the collapse of the merchant world, which entered into a long periode of decadence. Did not the same misfortunes ruin the Italian cities? In the end, it was Northwest Atlantic Europe, England and France which were to inherit from this long process of maturation, and to ruin the hopes both of their ancient Arab and Italian precursors, and even of their immediate predecessors, the Spanish and the Portuguese.

The second thesis lays more stress on the exceptionally favorable characteristics of the European world's internal relations, as opposed to the internal relations in other parts of the world, even strongly mercantilized ones such as, among others, the Arab world and China. Only Europe (and Japan) had a truly feudal mode of production. The point is that this feudal mode of production is particularly liable to disintegration under the pressure of the development of merchant relations, since in the feudal mode power is not centralized but scattered among the various feudal masters of the land. Under these conditions, the mercantilization of the product and of rent leads to the rural populations rapid exclusion from access to the relative surplus; in other words to a massive and rapid proletarianization, as happened most strikingly in England, where the majority of the population was proletarianized between 1750 and 1815. In the Arab world, on the contrary, the majority of the peasantry remained outside the system or on its edges, in areas whose isolation was reinforced by poverty. Except in Egypt; but even in Egypt the central authority remained, as it did in China, infinitely more powerful than its equivalent in feudal Europe. And this powerful authority, which is characteristic of the tributory mode in its finished form, kept the peasants on the land by means of an agrarian policy specifically geared to that end. Indeed this opposition between the feudal mode—which we can call peripheral—and the tributory mode in its finished form has been attributed to the barbarian origins of feudalism, the roots of which lie in the Germanic communitarian modes: this opposition is most probably the first major manifestation of the law of Unequal Development.

Still thanks to these specific characteristics of the feudal mode, Europe (and Japan) were to benefit from exceptional conditions on the level of the organization of political power. In Europe the kings, in order to counterbalance the power of the feudalists, were forced to support the merchant world; the latter had in fact already managed to establish itself firmly in free towns not subject to feudal authority which was almost purely rural. Nothing similar happened elsewhere. The greater power of the central authority (if not at the level of the whole Arab empire, then certainly at the level of each of the countries which made it up) procluded the growth of free towns. There were, of course, craft corporations, associations of merchants and artisans. These groups had even been known to have some share in the government of the Arab towns. But there were no free towns which escaped totally from feudal power and feudal law, as happened in feudal Europe. The Arab corporations were never the masters of the cities.

All the historians insist on the close surveillance which was kept on these corporations, both in the Arab world and in China. For the social force which threatened the central authority was not that of the feudalists—who did not exist, since the landowning aristocracy was an urban aristocracy of functionaries—but that of the merchants. And when the central authority in the Arab world weakened to the point of being incapable of operating in some areas, decadence had already set in: commerce was ruined and the peasantries quickly took the opportunity to assert their local autonomy.

What really needs explaining is thus not so much the Arab (or Chinese) failure, but Europe's (or Japan's) success, a success which stems from the peripheral character of the feudal mode. The failure of Arab mercantilism is no mystery. Of course, had Europe not become capitalist as quickly as it did, then doubtless the operating contradictions within other societies (Arab, Chinese, Indian, etc.) would have been resolved by the emergence of capitalist relations based in those societies.

But this is a side issue.

The thesis which we accept situates the nature of social laws on the level we have described, and thus allows one to understand how the precocious appearance of capitalism in Europe was related to the singularities of feudalism. The distinguishing features which separate the development of a European world economy, as it emerged from the 16th century onwards, on the one hand, from the expansion of earlier tributory empires, on the other, highlight the singularity of the transition to capitalism and thereby force us to reflect on fundamental issues of historical materialism. The geographical expansion of other societies had never taken this form. The centralized tributory Chinese State integrated newly colonized southern regions as ordinary provinces, which were brought under a single system of extraction of centralized surplus, drawn off by a bureaucracy of prebendaries. European expansion, on the contrary, created the first real periphery on the basis of an unequal specialization of labor. The empire was a political unit, while the European world system is an economic system; in other words the links which join the different parts of the latter are economic links, not necessarily or mainly political links. This is no fortuitous coincidence: rather it reveals essential aspects of the way the relations between the base and the superstructure operate in the different modes of production.

These conceptual classifications have enabled us to gain a better understanding of the nature of European feudal society, of the reasons behind the particular forms taken by its expansion, and of the original genesis of capital. If feudal Europe was not an empire, it is because the feudal mode is a peripheral and unfinished form of the tributory mode. The origins of the (feudal) dismemberment of State power and non-centralization of surplus can be traced back to the way in which the Roman Empire was overtaken by barbarians who had only just progressed beyond the communal mode. The primitive forms of the tributory mode are thus more flexible than the finished forms: it was backwards Europe, not the advanced East, which developed the capitalist transcendence of the tributory mode. This manifestation of Unequal Development gives the lie to the thesis of a continual linear development of the productive forces which would supposedly determine the successive modes of production.

Thus precapitalist trade could only bring about the rapid formation of the capitalist mode where it was grafted on a peripheral mode, namely feudalism. Had it been grafted onto the tributory mode, it could easily have aborted; in that case, in the absence of a rapid appearance of capitalism in Europe and its subsequent extension to a dominated Arab world, the course of history would doubtless have been both longer and very different.