COMMUNICATION

MORGAN’S INFLUENCE ON ENGELS: THE QUESTION OF ASIATIC SOCIETY

Guram Koranashvili

Since I have examined Morgan’s influence on the views of Marx [1], I shall now turn to the heritage of Engels of the period we are interested in. At the beginning of the 1880s Engels strenuously studied (but for three months only) primitive history on the basis of which his Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State was written. In corroboration of their view that Engels abandoned his own and Marx’s views, V.N. Nikiforov, B.F. Porshnev and others consider only Engels’ famous Origins. They almost totally ignore his writings of 1880–1883. For the present let us examine Engels’ The Frankish Period (written in 1881–1882) [2].

By that time Engels (though indirectly, through Marx) knew Morgan’s fundamental principles about gentile order. Thus Engels described the ancient social life of Germanic tribes (before their migration to the Roman territories) as based on the gentile order, which began to disintegrate after their migration to the western Roman Empire. He described the new situation as follows:

The people thus disintegrated into an association of small village communities, between which there was either no economic connection, or hardly any, for every mark was self-sufficient, it produced enough to satisfy its own needs and moreover, the goods which the various marks in the neighbourhood produced were almost invariably the same. Hardly any exchange could therefore take place between them. And since the people consisted entirely of small communities, which, although they had the same economic interests, the continued existence of the nation depended on a political authority which was not based on these communities but confronted them as something alien and exploited them to an ever increasing extent [3].

It is pertinent to mention here the situation typical in Eastern society, for Engels explicitly compared the fortunes of further developments in the West and East. The form of the state of this period, Engels remarked, is a function of the form of community. For the Asiatic Aryan people and the Russians, the state arises when private property in land has not yet been established and land is thus cultivated with joint forces or, at least, it is given to separate families for temporary use. Under such conditions the state power takes the form of despotism. On the conquered Roman territories arable land and hay-mowing had already constituted private property — allodium. And on the basis of allodium arose quite another social and political system.

From the moment of the origin of the allodium — that is, freely alienable property in land, the rise of big land commodification was only a question of time. Engels considered only those economic and social conditions wherein the genesis of Germanic class society took place. In this situation only large land proprietors could form the ruling class; and thus the political state took the form of an aristocracy [4].

The problem of the character of Eastern society is touched upon in the letter of Engels to E. Bernstein (August 9, 1882). In Engels’
opinion, from Ireland to Russia, and from Asia Minor to Egypt a specific form of exploitation of the peasantry exists, that is historically rooted in the period of the Assyrian and Persian kingdoms. Corresponding to this form of exploitation in the West, is that of merchant and jurist (not of the slaveowner, feudal lord or capitalist!) Engels contends, and then he adds, the satrap – alias pasha – is the main figure of oriental exploitation [5].

The theme of ancient Asiatic society also appears in Engels’ letter to K. Kautsky (written February 16, 1884, on the eve of The Origin) [6]. Here he notes that primitive communism (the term is used in the broad sense, including Asiatic society) represents a far-flung base for exploitation and despotism. Java, India, and Russia are concretely named as examples of this type of society. In this connection, Engels’ criticism of so-called “state-socialism” must be mentioned; in the very form that the Dutch founded as a basis for the exploitation of Javanese inhabitants who lived in rural communities.

Thus, at the beginning of the 1880s the evidence distinctly shows that Engels’ understanding of ancient Eastern social systems had remained essentially unchanged. No other reconsiderations in The Origin, which is considered by some authors to be the final result of the development of Engels’ ideas (as well as those of Marx) about Eastern society, evidence his abandoning an hypothesis of Eastern society.

In the introduction to the first edition of The Origin Engels speaks of the increase in the productivity of labour, the development of private property and exchange, and contends that classes and the state have resulted from these processes. But he in no way implies that analogous processes underlie the origin of classes and state everywhere, including the Oriental peoples. But high development of commodity production and private property (in land) – premises which underlie class and state in the Greco-Roman world – “are spread” by authors everywhere. If, among the Greeks and Romans, the decay of the gentile order took place under the conditions and as a result of the development of commodity-monetary relations, does that tell us anything about the economic basis for the rise of classes and the state in ancient Egypt or China? Of course not. Nevertheless, it is precisely this wrong-headedness, so widespread among Soviet historians, that accounts for the origin of class and state in the East as the result of the high development of commodity production, dissolution of the rural communities, and development of private property in land. Their efforts, of course, would have been correct had they proceeded from direct historical evidence, but instead they reasoned a priori, having no connection with the historical facts, nor with the heritage of the classics of Marxist thought.

But let me return to The Origin. It begins with the periodization of culture following Morgan’s work. For the student of Oriental history the application of this scheme to the countries they study is a serious problem [7]. For example, the middle stage of barbarism is characterized as the epoch of transition to agriculture and cattle-breeding (copper, bronze, and even industry are considered to be secondary) or, using modern terminology, as the period of neolithic revolution. The people in such cultures were considered by Engels to include the Indians of MesoAmerica and the Ancient Peruvians, in no way yielding to the ancient civilizations of Asia. What is more, the iron industry in The Origin is connected only with the high stage of barbarism, which, according to Engels was first represented by the Greeks of the heroic epoch and the Romans of the Royal period. Space does not allow us to dwell on the fact that in the history of the ancient East, iron remained practically unknown for a long time. According to Engels, the growth and prosperity of civilization were connected with the high development of commodity production, the spread of money in