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**Book review: *The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production*, by
Stephen P. Dunn**

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Capital & Class 2013 37: 499

DOI: 10.1177/0309816813505282d

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Polanyi K (1944) *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Author biography

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Stephen P. Dunn

The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production, Routledge: London, 2012; 154 pp: 9780415618625, £28 (pbk); 9780415616218 (hbk) £70

Reviewed by Cemal Burak Tansel, *University of Nottingham, UK*

Originally published in 1982, *The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production*, by the late anthropologist Stephen P. Dunn (1928-1999), has received a reprint as part of the Routledge Revival series. Since its initial publication, the book has held a unique location in Anglophone academy, since it catalogues the Soviet debate on Marxist theory of history in relation to the Asiatic mode of production (AMP) from 1929 to 1975. Predominantly based on primary sources in Russian, Dunn's book painstakingly charts the isochronal resurgence of the debate over half a century, and astutely reveals the vicissitudes of theoretical, historical and occasionally political positions taken by its participants.

As the author makes clear in the preface, the book deals exclusively with the literature written by Soviet authors on the topic. In lieu of treating the study of this body of work merely within the confines of intellectual history, Dunn locates them within a broader framework dealing with the fundamental questions concerning Marxist theory of history. The main theoretical preoccupation, in the author's own words, is 'whether the historical process is to be regarded as single or double or multiple, as determined by one force, or by two related forces, or by a congeries of unspecifiable factors' (p. xii).

The starting point of Dunn's chronicle is the transactions of a meeting held in Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad) by the Association of Marxist Orientalists at the Ehlukidze Oriental Institute in 1931. Published as '*Diskussia ob Aziatskom sposobe proizvodstva po dokladu M. Godesa*' (A Discussion on the Asiatic Mode of Production According to the Report of M. Godes), the proceedings reveal the extent to which contemporary Soviet scholars were divided on both the theoretical position of the AMP in Marxism and its empirical credibility. In this first section, Dunn retraces the original transactions in Russian and offers a verbatim summary of the various positions taken by the 'Aziatchiki' and 'anti-Aziatchiki'.¹ The line of contention is the categorisation of 'ancient societies', which the Aziatchiki camp classifies as the historical site of the manifestation of the AMP. The opposing anti-Aziatchiki perspective leans towards a heuristic rejection of Marx's use of the term (but not an outright rejection of the outline Marx provided in the 'Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*', which includes the AMP [Marx 1987 [1859]: 263]) and attempts to relocate ancient societies as social formations operating on variants of

feudalism. Illustrative of the pro-Aziatchiki position, Dunn quotes extensively from S. I. Kovalev, who effectively argued that the patterns of landownership in 'India, ancient China, and the states of the ancient Near East' were different from Marx's description of feudalism as a mode of production comprising 'dispersed' or 'noncollective' landownership (p. 19), hence these societies cannot be understood as 'feudal' in the sense that Marx used the term. For Kovalev, the AMP not only corresponds to historical evidence, but it also prevents the degradation of Marxist theory of history into 'a circular conception of the historical process' (p. 23).

The discussion proceeds with an overview of the anti-Aziatchiki line defended by inter alia Mikhail Godes, S. M. Dubrovskii and Evgenii S. Iolk. Dunn evades linear interpretations of the anti-Aziatchiki arguments as exclusively political and vindictive reprisals and balances their presentation with rich but equally controversial theoretical and historical opposing claims. Political innuendos and factional invectives crop up frequently, but the provided account suggests that the anti-Aziatchiki position was marred by analytical deficits as much as it was limited by political parochialism. Dunn's critical analysis of anti-Aziatchikis like Dubrovskii, who defended the abolition of the AMP in favor of a two-stage feudalism ('feudal' and 'serf' social orders), exemplifies the dilemma of the concept's detractors: on one hand, there was a clearly stated allegiance to Marx as the ultimate authority from which the lineage of modes of production is adopted and whom, at least on one occasion, explicitly placed the AMP in the outline of his theory of history. On the other hand, the rejection of the AMP was pursued to the extent that the conceptual lacuna which emerged from its eradication was filled with extant concepts in Marx's scheme. In the context of the 1930s debate, this role was played predominantly by feudalism. On Dubrovskii's two-stage feudal interpretation, Dunn argues that the former 'tried to eliminate the Asiatic mode of production by rechristening it as feudalism, and to legitimise this procedure by rechristening what had previously been called feudalism as the "serf" social order' (p. 25). Yet the stronger argument did not win the day. By the mid-1930s, the feudal interpretation of societies which were once affiliated with the AMP prevailed, and the AMP as a concept was 'authoritatively removed from the Soviet-Marxist theoretical canon' (p. 7).

While the terminological onslaught of the AMP ensued in the 1930s, the pyrrhic victory of the anti-Aziatchiki front was transformed under the theoretical and empirical pressures exerted by the critics of the Dubrovskii line. Of note in this 'interregnum' period is the interventions of V. V. Struve, Igor M. D'iakonov and A. I. Tiumentev. Struve's initial attempts to shift the universal pre-capitalist mode from feudalism to slaveholding (or slave mode of production) dealt the first major blow to the unstable equilibrium reached at the end of the first debate. 'If we say that everything is feudalism', claimed Struve, 'then we get a feudal porridge in the literal sense from Babylon up to Napoleon' (p. 44). The slave mode of production thesis was reinforced by the contributions of Tiumentev and D'iakonov later on, yet the ghost of the AMP never left the room, forcing the participants to revisit its tenets without actually using the term. By the early 1960s, Dunn notes that 'the slaveholding interpretation of ancient Eastern society was progressively undermined without being formally repudiated' (p. 71).

The final part of the book examines the revival of the AMP starting from the Seventh International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnographic Sciences held

in 1964. The congress witnessed the concrete resurfacing of the AMP as a concept with the circulation of papers by Maurice Godelier and Jean Suret-Canale. According to Dunn, the AMP's resurgence – despite the fact that most of the Aziatchiki perished in Stalin's purges (Fogel 1988: 61) – 'fundamentally changed the character and the parameters of Marxist debate, as it occurred in the Soviet context' (p. 79). Consistent with the book's scope, Dunn does not discuss the non-Soviet dimension of the AMP debate that took place in the 1960s and 70s (most notably in the pages of *La Pensée*, but also in national contexts like China, India and Turkey), but the works of the Soviet participants from K. K. Zel'in to G. A. Melikishvili are explored in detail. Dunn's verdict is that, in the Soviet literature, the Aziatchiki position 'in its new guise, had won the debate in all respects except that of terminology' (p. 123). Yet his more subtle conclusion, at least to my mind, is that the resurgent debate did not fully succeed in providing a historically documented and theoretically sustainable framework of the AMP, as he states that 'the sequence of precapitalist social orders remains on the agenda, awaiting new evidence or new ideas, and that what we are now seeing is a natural pause, with no resolution' (p. 122).

Given the form the mode of production debate took after the original publication of the book, it can be safely stated that the pause Dunn referred to, naturally or unnaturally, lingers on.² While many contemporary scholars have withdrawn from the AMP for the same reasons that some Soviet scholars did – inability to build on Marx's initial edifice, mounting evidence against the established original tenets of the concept and the ossification of some auxiliary premises like the central location of hydraulic state, etc. – Marxist theory of history has struggled to fill its place and consequently to situate the developmental trajectory of non-Western societies (ancient, early modern or even modern ones) into the conventional mode of production scheme. Revisiting the Soviet debate via Dunn's insightful study should caution us against (1) reconstructing and universalising existing frameworks in a way that they would also accommodate the non-West (e.g. John Haldon's [1993] variant of the tributary mode of production); and (2) ignoring the specificity of different economic, social and political arrangements in their totality by collapsing them into strictly economic categories (e.g. Bertkay 1987). As noted by Dunn in the book, the pitfalls of both approaches were masterfully recognised and refuted by M. D. Kokin in 1931:

The struggle for the purity of Marxist-Leninist theory in Oriental studies has to be conducted on two fronts. First of all, against those who try to fit the history of the development of the Eastern colonial and semi-colonial countries in under the course of development passed through by the European countries in their history; and secondly, against those who speak of an absolute peculiarity, of an 'exceptionality' of the countries of the East and against those who thereby nourish the evaluation of the East as a region of 'exoticism' – as an area into which civilisation must be 'imported'. (p. 33)

The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production is an essential reference book for scholars and students of Marxist theory of history. Beyond its immediate significance as a documentary record of the Soviet debate, Dunn's incisive analysis carries important pointers and implications for broader research agendas based on historical materialism.

Endnotes

1. Some of these contributions, including key arguments of Mikhail Godes, Liudvig I. Mad'iar, M. D. Kokin and Evgenii S. Iolk, were published in English; see Bailey and Llober (1981).
2. Wickham (2005) and Banaji (2010) offer two impressive exceptions to the ongoing 'silence' on the conceptualisation of the pre-capitalist modes.

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Author biography

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Bill Lucarelli

The Economics of Financial Turbulence: Alternative Theories of Money and Finance, Edward Elgar: Cheltenham, 2011; 183 pp: 9781849808781, £67 (hbk)

Reviewed by Miguel D. Ramírez, *Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut, USA*

The stated aim of this interesting and concise book is to provide an alternative heterodox explanation for the 2007-9 financial meltdown and global economic slump. Utilising both Marxian and Keynesian theories of the credit cycle and endogenous money creation, it argues that the ascendancy of finance in recent decades was the driving force behind the rise of neoliberal ideology and, under the guise of the efficient markets hypothesis, paved the way (via the widespread deregulation of finance) for the onset of the most severe economic and financial crisis since the Great Depression. In the author's estimation, the magnitude and duration of the current crisis and the immediate (Keynesian) response by the leading capitalist governments to counter its devastating aftermath has laid bare the ideological bankruptcy of the neoliberal agenda that has held sway over economic theory and policy since the early 1980s. In order to avoid future economic disasters, the author calls for a 'restoration of full employment