

About the Author and This Book

CYRIL LEVITT

Lawrence Krader (1920–1998) was an American philosopher and anthropologist whose fields of interest included ethnographic and ethnological studies of Central Asia including those of the Altaic-speaking peoples of the Steppes. He was the world's leading expert on the ethnological notebooks of Karl Marx, which he transcribed from the original notes and published under the same title in 1972. As a philosopher he studied with Morris Raphael Cohen at the City College of New York (CCNY) and at the University of Chicago, served as a research assistant to Alfred Tarski at CCNY and, while in Chicago, studied for a year with Rudolf Carnap. Before his enlistment in the US Merchant Marine during World War II he was influenced by Franz Boas and his students at Columbia University and developed an interest in anthropology. He received his doctorate in that discipline from Harvard University in 1954. From 1972 to 1982 he was the Director of the *Institut für Ethnologie* at the *Freie Universität zu Berlin*.¹

The focus of this book concerns an aspect of the question of periodization in human history. There have been many attempts to classify stages, epochs, cultures and civilizations from the time of the ancient Greeks down to the present in Western thought and in many indigenous non-Western traditions as well. Krader's interest in this issue can be traced back at least to the time in which he worked as an assistant to Karl August Wittfogel at the Far Eastern and Russian Institute at the University of Washington in the late 1940s.² Wittfogel had been concerned

with the specific configuration of ancient Chinese society as an Oriental despotism which he argued was centred around the state control and management of hydraulics, irrigation and the supply of water. Wittfogel also believed the concept of Oriental Despotism applied to Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, classical Greece and Rome, the Moghul Empire and the Incas in Peru before the Spanish conquest. And he argued that contemporary Soviet and Chinese communist regimes conformed in many ways to the paradigm of Oriental despotism. Krader preferred to follow a line different from both that of Wittfogel and of orthodox Marxism with its fixed stages of human development. Through his empirical work on the Altaic-speaking peoples of the Central Asian Steppes and his prodigious efforts in transcribing, editing and introducing Marx's ethnological notebooks, Krader counterposed the concept of the Asiatic mode of production (to which Marx had turned his attention in the 5 or 6 years prior to his death) to Wittfogel's notion of Oriental or hydraulic despotism.³ It can be argued that Krader was no less critical of Marxist orthodoxy than Wittfogel but he used Marx as the basis for his critique of Marxism, not unlike Karl Korsch, another one of his senior colleagues whose work, *Marxism and Philosophy*, employed the same critical approach. But Krader's use of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production was more developed and nuanced than that of Marx as it was informed by a century of empirical work, including his own. He was able to apply the concept to most of the societies which Wittfogel had seen as hydraulic despotisms. But his focus was not primarily on the state's totalitarian control and management of vital resources but rather on the movement from the communal to the civil condition, which includes the formation of a division of the community into social classes, the very beginnings of a parcelling out of the private and public spheres and of the formation of the state. In doing this he called attention to the question of the form and substance of labour as a key element in the transitional communal-social form of production, a label which removes the ethnocentric and geocentric focus of Marx's original concept.⁴

Krader's extensive work on the Asiatic mode of production was related to the problem of the periodization in human history in an important way, for it represented the transition from a communally organized mode of life without systematic class distinctions, with the means of production in common, with a rudimentary division of labour based on age and sex, without a state and hence without a separation of a private and public sector. In other words, it was not a civil condition of society.⁵

Having spent several decades elucidating features of the Asiatic mode of production, in this current book he addressed the beginnings of capitalism in Central Europe. If the transition from the communal to the communal-social formation of society represented a major break in human history for Krader, the development of

capitalism in Europe represented a transition from feudalism, arguably a uniquely European phenomenon (with the possible exception of Japan), to capitalism with its beginnings in Europe but its ultimate extension to the international economic order. Krader knew his Marx and he appreciated Marx's work even as he recognized deep contradictions, false steps and incomplete thoughts, which Krader increasingly took up in his various publications. His first posthumously published book *Labor and Value* (Krader, 2003) was an ambitious attempt to reconcile objective theories of value from Aristotle to Marx, with the subjective theories of the British and Austrian schools. The reader of this current work will appreciate Krader's recognition and critique of Marx's understanding of the beginnings of capitalism in Europe, as indeed he also recognized and criticized the contribution of the other great writers on the origins of capitalism. And here and there Krader ventures into the territory of those who looked more broadly at the origins of capitalism from the 14th to the 16th century in Europe. But his true focus was narrower than all of Europe.

In writing this book he was primarily interested in the beginnings of capitalist development in the mostly German-speaking areas of Central Europe. The argument that he has made in the pages that follow is based on the writings, illustrations, drawings, engravings and other evidence from that early time. Furthermore, he provides a substantial review of most of the leading 19th and 20th century thinkers who occupied themselves with the question of the beginnings of capitalism in Europe. Krader was also careful to distinguish sporadic appearances of capitalist elements from their later systematization from the 14th to the 16th century. With regard to his primary focus, that is, the beginnings of capitalism in *Central Europe*, he elaborated in some detail on specific areas of economic life—mining, metallurgy, metal working and smelting, coinage, clock-making, shipbuilding and maritime navigation, printing and publishing, as well as trade, commerce and credit. These branches of industry and commerce were strongly influential in German-speaking Central Europe in the beginnings of capitalism, at first sporadically, and then systematically. But even in these few industries and in trade and commerce, the development and systematization of capitalist forms and relations were complicated and mediated. No one individual, no one theory, no one element can encompass the beginnings of development of which Krader writes: "We consider the historical course of this development as complicated and take a position against those who have tried to simplify it." At the same time, the thinkers whom Krader extensively cites contributed something to our understanding of the complexity of the beginnings of capitalist development and systematization.

There is an odd symmetry between this work on the beginnings of capitalism in Central Europe and his numerous books and articles on the Asiatic mode of

production. The development of the Asiatic mode of production, or the communal-social form of economic formation, constituted the foundation for civil society almost everywhere. In this sense it was a series of indigenous developments among indigenous peoples in different parts of the world largely unconnected with one another in time and space. The beginning of the development of capitalism in Central Europe was part of what was later to become a global phenomenon, originating first in Europe.⁶

In the Festschrift in honour of his 75th birthday, Krader (1995) denied that he had ever been a Marxist. His criticisms of Marx, especially in his first two posthumously published works, *Labor and Value* (2003) and *Noetics* (2010) are more sharply critical of Marx in different ways. In *Noetics* especially, his reconsideration of the theory of nature in relation to the human order, represents a break with materialism, or rather a reformulation of the relation of the material order to other orders of nature.⁷ In this current book, reference is made to the advancement of Krader's thinking regarding nature and materialism in his 2010 posthumously published work in comparison to the position taken in this volume.

In addition to the problem of periodization in human history to which this book is a contribution, it has also taken up the matter of the form and substance of freedom from the tradition of Goethe, Hegel, Marx, and other classical thinkers. For Krader, as for these other thinkers, the advance of capitalism as a system related to the development of formal freedom, concretely with political freedom and equality in law, in the freedom of the individual and the class of social labour to contract with the agents of capital for the sale of their labour power, in the freedom to move from location to location, from one employer to another. In the development of these formal freedoms, the forces pushing for their realization encountered resistance not only from the feudal authorities, the Church and other institutions tied to the old order, but from the organizations of labour themselves—the guilds in their various forms and constellations. But Krader refers to the question of the substance of freedom which had not been realized in the course of capitalist development but does not speculate further about it. He simply follows Goethe who lamented that it had not been attained in the new order and allowed himself to dream about its realization by millions at the conclusion of *Faust*. One of Krader's achievements in this volume is to have clearly distinguished between form and substance with regard to the freedom of social labour. It is a book that can be appreciated and enjoyed as a clarification of our understanding of the complexity of the beginnings of capitalism in Central Europe, by extension to Europe as a whole and ultimately to the contemporary international order.

Notes

1. For further biographical information on Krader please consult: D. Schorkowitz (1995, pp. xi–xxiv) L. Krader (2010, pp. xi–xxiii); S. Sander, C. Levitt, and N. McLaughlin. 2017; C. Levitt and S. Sander (eds.) (2017, pp. 3–53); and ‘Reply to Krader in Context’ in this volume.
2. Although his interest in evolution in general can be traced back to his many trips in his youth to the Museum of Natural History in the City of New York.
3. “The history of the formation of the civil society and the state among the ancient Aztecs and Incas, the Yoruba and Asanti, the ancient Greek, Slavic and Germanic peoples, Mongols and Turks, follows the same course, which at first led to the development of the Asiatic mode of production among them. The opposition of the interests of the individual and the collectivity is the means of dissolution of the latter. Civil society and the state issue forth not from the dissolution of the ancient gentes, clans and village communities, but from the opposition between the class-individuals and the communal forms, which continue to exist long after civil society and the state have been formed.” L. Krader (1979), *A Treatise of Social Labor*, p. 184. On the notion of class-individuality see Marx’s interpolation to Henry Sumner Maine’s ‘Lectures on the Early History of Institutions’ in Krader (1972, p. 329).
4. In his book, *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, Krader (1975, p. 114) explicitly criticized Wittfogel’s identification of the Oriental society with modern communist states on account of the state’s ownership of the land as follows: “The argument is based upon the identification of the relation of ownership and the mode of production. This is the error of taking *pars pro toto*, the part for the whole. The fact that the State owned all the land in the Oriental society and in modern socialist countries is a superficial analogy; the modes of production of the two systems are totally different: in particular, the relations between labor and capital.” He continued his critique of Wittfogel in a long footnote on the following page of that same book: “K. A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, made the hydraulic interpretation of the Oriental society into the central one; thereby he focused his attention on the category of the despotism, the political side of the problem, as opposed to the category of the society as a whole ... He further made the categories of despotism and totalitarianism into economic structures ... He proceeds from the State to the society and thence to the political economy.” (op. cit., p. 115n)
5. It should be noted that the Asiatic mode of production is an economic formation and not a society. For Krader, a large variety of different societies have been identified with this organization of production. Nevertheless, those societies in which the Asiatic mode of production prevails are those in which we can discover the beginnings of the parceling out of social classes, the formation of the state and the first appearances of the elaboration of a public and private sphere, however weak the latter development might be. For Krader, it has to be emphasized, the focus on the so-called Asiatic mode is justified insofar as it represents the transitional form of economic organization in those societies which are in the process of development from the primitive communal to the civil condition of the humankind.
6. Max Weber’s thesis developed out of a concern with regard to capitalism’s geographical home in Europe rather than in China which in the 16th century was more advanced in science and technology than Europe. This led Weber to look for a ‘spiritual’ impetus for capitalist development in the Protestant Reformation, more narrowly, in the psychological impact of Calvinist theology on its followers which in turn greatly impacted their economic behavior. Krader did not

gainsay Weber's thesis but he did not consider it the major force in the beginning of capitalist development.

7. For further discussions of these matters please see: C. Levitt and S. Sander (eds.). *Beyond the Juxtaposition of Nature and Culture: Lawrence Krader, Interdisciplinarity, and the Concept of the Human Being*. Peter Lang Publishers New York 2017.