

The Marxist debate on ancient societies in Italy in the 1970s. For an account of still current research positions and perspectives

Leonardo Masone
Università degli Studi di Bari, leonardomasone@yahoo.it

Abstract

Within the Marxist-inspired Italian scientific community, the last quarter of 1900 represented a long period of content-based reflection on the relevance of Marx's theory and his practical action. The result was a long multidisciplinary debate from which the sciences of Antiquity were not exempt. This contribution focuses on two important collections of essays published in Italy between 1977 and 1978, providing a brief account of the themes addressed at the time and verifying, if possible, the relevance of some of the questions raised.

Keywords: Italian Marxism, Ancient Society, Greece, Slavery, Economic-social formations

Introduction

In the mid-1970s, a new critical reflection began within European Marxism and particularly within Italian Marxism. Thinkers of great depth such as Norberto Bobbio, Paolo Sylos Labini, Lucio Colletti, Claudio Napoleoni or Maurice Godelier and Louis Althusser on the international level focused in different ways on the *status quo* of Marxist thought, elaborating considerations on its crisis thematically witnessed by the slowdown of the hegemonic thrust of the prevailing left-wing cultures in the previous decade, by the failed transition from capitalism to socialism and by that passive revolution that found its highest expression in the "marcia dei quarantamila" in Turin. The crystallization of certain positions associated with the failure to critically confront Marxism with the empirical sciences of politics also led to a discouragement within the research venues. However, following the publication edited by Valentino Gerratana of Gramsci's *Quaderni dal Carcere*¹, for a short period, many interesting conferences followed one another with the intention of relaunching Marxist theoretical research towards the last quarter century. Among the various disciplines involved, ancient science also found its place. And among the most studied collective works are certainly *Marxismo e società antica* edited by Mario Vegetti² for Feltrinelli and *Marxist Analysis and Ancient Societies* edited by the Istituto Gramsci by Luigi Capogrossi, Andrea Giardina and Aldo Schiavone³. The present contribution aims to bring to light, mainly through the sources of the time, this important debate that invested the major historians and philosophers of the ancient world and tried to trace the scientific perimeter regarding the study hypotheses concerning the societies of Antiquity.

§1. The choice of themes

In Marxist intellectual circles after 1969 there was a need to rethink specific themes of investigation and to recalibrate certain positions in order to initiate new or renewed investigations. This need was shared by several Marxist-inspired thinkers who, in addition to observing what novelties could be derived from the choices of theory, wanted to establish a foundation, or at least a common problematic horizon, for the comparison and mutual utilization of the results of their own research. Many scholars

¹ Gramsci (1975).

² Vegetti (1977a).

³ Capogrossi *et al.* (1978).

agreed on a decisive assumption: the interdisciplinary of the investigations to be conducted would only be possible by starting from a theory of the object, capable of making the different approaches complementary. From the outset, an attempt was made to focus on a subject on which concrete research on ancient societies could be initiated. Hence the study of Marxian conceptual determinations, from the analysis of the forms of the division of labour in the *Die Deutsche Ideologie* to the relationship between commodity movement and the process of valorization conceived in *Das Capital*. Elements that also required a renewed critical examination of the *Grundrisse*, in which the historiographical implications of Marx's investigation also come to light⁴.

The central problem taken as the basis of the discussion is that between theoretical Marxism and historiography with the ancient world as its object. Relations that can only be mutually beneficial if they are freed from any dogmatic residue: on the one hand, they seem to be equipped for the theoretical level, on the other hand, for the questions of conscience of historians. On the one hand, therefore, the presence of our historiographical culture in a methodological key, i.e. in terms of correspondence, demonstrated or not, between a general explanation of reality and the facts narrated; on the other hand, the need for an approach to Marx's thought capable of grasping, within the present, the specificity of historical knowledge of antiquity. In this direction, the themes that take on epistemological value concern the analysis of the slave mode of production as part of a complex process of decomposition and comparison that historicizes modern categories of political economy, including the very idea of value, and criticizes capitalist valorization. Even the most abstract categories, such as that of labour, although effective for all epochs, are valid as the product of the historical conditions that created them⁵.

All epochs of production have common characteristics: production itself is an abstraction. Therefore, if abstractions are valid in relation to certain historical conditions, their actual validity is established through comparison. Although we are in the habit of reducing the functioning of a methodology within the confines of certain cognitive operations, a fundamental caveat for the Marxist historian that can be deduced from this new course of study concerns precisely the need to unite method and research altogether. By using the tools available at the present time we increase our knowledge of the past: the conceptual itinerary thus described has as its starting point the at least apparently more accomplished phenomenal forms. A new vision therefore emerges, more dynamic in contrast to the static nature of some Marxian postures that conceived of Marx's doctrine as an empirical scheme to be applied mechanically to historical study, as attested in the debates between the end of the 1800s and much of the first half of the 1900s⁶.

However, for some followers of historical materialism, anti-philologism implied a research perspective that was less attentive to the concrete and distinct, and thus favored the discovery of similarities and uniformities between past and present. It is Gramsci himself who most sharply criticizes this historiographical tendency, which causes the individual concreteness of facts to be lost, to which philological study must turn, and presupposes the reduction of historical materialism to mere sociology, i.e. to a scheme of hypothetical and conjectural history (Q. 4, XIII, 425). According to the Sardinian thinker, theory cannot be an abstract guide to historiography, but must be a conceptual connection between narrated history and history in motion, between the past represented in its actuality and the present that produces the representation (Q. 11, XVIII, 1433). Faced with the problem of the relationship between the philosophy of praxis and historiography, Gramsci points to a solution that consists in re-composing historical knowledge within the constitution of the philosophy of praxis. The author of the *Quaderni* continues to use the concept of methodology, which

⁴ Reflection initiated in Hobsbawm (1967, 11-16); for a study on this preface, see also Di Qual (2020, 173-235).

⁵ Marx (1976, 5-37).

⁶ One thinks of the Ciccotti (1899), Barbagallo (1916) and Salvioli (1929) orientations that had prompted Momigliano (1966, 804) to speak of "Marxismo attenuato". See Mazza (1976, 100-124) who highlighted the structural distance between Barbagallo's writings and Marxism. More recently, see Taccola (2022, 139-184).

in itself lends itself to the misunderstanding of a split between theory and history. Instead, he proposes a historical methodology by discarding as metaphysical “any systematic formulation that posed itself as extra-historical truth, as an abstract universal outside of time and space” (Q. 11, XVIII, 1402).

This Gramscian idea would serve as a methodological reference for studies on the ancient world, which in Italy saw an important development precisely through the numerous essays that, in the second half of the 1970s, gave rise to the two collected works that are the subject of this article. There is, in short, a progressive discovery of Marxian work that leads one to rethink Marxism not as a complex of formulas, but as a theory open to the acquisition of new knowledge, capable of sharing and enhancing the ‘sense of history’ and scientific research. While preserving Marx’s fundamental insights into the study of ancient societies, the purpose of those essays was to initiate a process of analysis that, without altering those theoretical structures, would integrate them with the data of the most recent historical-archaeological discoveries.

§2. Marxism and Ancient Society

Already a few months before Vegetti’s editorship, the journal *Quaderni di Storia* directed by Luciano Canfora had published an important four-part article introducing the theme of the possible relationship between Marxist theories and the categories of the ancient world⁷. A preview to the more reasoned text that saw its first edition in September of the same year. That book brought together a number of contributions that had already been published and then translated into Italian by numerous scholars from different geographical areas, also bearing witness to how the topic of Marxist theories applied to the ancient social and economic panorama interested the research of the most varied academic circles.

The collection addresses an important challenge that moves simultaneously in the space of historiographic and theoretical interpretation. On the one hand, there is the interest that Marxism plays in a well-established field of disciplinary knowledge in an attempt to transform a system of knowledge, to unveil its implicit ideology, to found a new practice of cultural work. On the other hand, there is the challenge that ancient society poses to the ability to understand Marxist theory. Marx argues that the Greeks and Romans also had their own production process and thus an economy. As obvious as this assertion that gives structural priority to the economic dimension may seem, it points to the problem of the forms that this process of production determines. One of them is certainly the slave mode of production. Although Marx never explicitly states the periodization in which his research is interested, it is possible to frame his interest in that line of fracture between the ancient community and more mature slavery, which can be roughly identified in the Fourth-Century Athens and Second-Century Rome⁸. In Hellenic societies, the characteristic features are the land and the community of owners in possession of it as well as the rights of citizenship. The space is the *pòlis* within which the *chòra* is also considered. The land that the community owns is the inorganic nature of the living individual, simultaneously a means and an object of labour.

The first article was reserved for Sergej Utchenko, one of the leading Soviet historians of Antiquity⁹. The Russian scholar's already strongly suggestive assumption is that in order to study the ancient world, it is necessary to have a correct conception of the classes and class structure that slave society experienced. The problem of classes and class struggle in the ancient world has been a very significant issue within the community of Marxist historians, and the Soviet community in particular. However, Utchenko posed fundamental methodological caveats for understanding the level of the approach to historical science in the Russian Academies: there is no clear-cut position on the

⁷ Lanza, Vegetti (1977, 75-89).

⁸ Vegetti (1977b, 17).

⁹ Utchenko (1977, 69-79). This is, however, a republication of an article already published in 1957 in the French journal *La Nouvelle Critique*.

possibility of speaking of fundamental and transitory classes. Ancient society consisted of freemen and slaves. The latter belonged to the exploited and oppressed class. It is clear that neither classes nor antagonistic contradictions existed within primitive communities. The premise of the appearance of social classes according to the authoritative exponent of the Moscow school is provided by the increase in labour productivity, which gives the possibility of alienating the product, and then by the emergence of private property, which determines the development of inequalities¹⁰. In Athens, this qualitative difference was produced at the time of the revolutions of Solon and Clisthenes: the Athenian *dèmos* between the 6th and 5th centuries did not represent a homogeneous social category, comprising on the one hand small and medium-sized landowners, and on the other heterogeneous citizen elements such as merchants and artisans, workshop owners and oarsmen (Ps-Xen., *Ath.Pol.*, I, 2). If, however, in Athens the new slave-ruling group of the classical period came from the *dèmos*, the same phenomenon did not occur in Rome, because it emerged from the plebs and not within the patrician community, until the creation at the time of the Gracchi of the new class of knights¹¹. George Thomson, on the other hand, analyzed the phenomenon of slavery by following another paradigm that related instead to the commercial developments of the democratic *pòleis*. The thesis, in fact, was as follows: from the 6th century onwards, commercial growth and with it the advancement of technology led to new pockets of wealth and, at the same time, to new demands for citizenship that found greater acceptance in the new democratic constitution. But at the same time, those commercial developments demanded new labour and thus an increase in new exploited people, the slaves, who contributed to democratic developments¹². Thomson, therefore, proposed in summary a kind of pattern: commercial growth-slavery-democracy. This thesis, however, has been largely superseded by subsequent scientific studies.

However, it was the essays by Moses Israel Finley and Jean-Pierre Vernant that gave further prestige to the volume¹³. The question posed by the British nationalized American historian was already defined in the title: *Was Greek civilization based on Slave Labour?* emphasizing the wide lexical range available in the Greek language to define the slave (from the archaic *dèmos* to *dòulos*, *andràpodos*, *tetràpodos*, *oikèus* or *sòma* in the Hellenistic period), Finley works from two assumptions: at all times and in all places, the Greek world has relied on some form of slave labour to satisfy its needs, whether public or private; with very rare exceptions, there were always a substantial number of free men engaged in productive activity. Free men worked the land they owned or rented, either in their own shops or at home as artisans. On the basis of these two general considerations, the problem of slavery in ancient society can be posed. By this is meant the *status quo* a man is a possession of another man, for the law and public opinion¹⁴. After a careful analysis of *Chattel-Slavery* and *Ilotism*, the two authentic forms of Greek slavery, Finley puts forward the convincing idea that the Greek economy cannot be defined as slave-owning because the contribution of slave labour to the overall economic viability is decidedly limited and secondary. However, with the exception of politics, where no slave ever held public office in deliberative institutions, there was no productive, or unproductive, public or private activity that was not performed by slaves. After exploring these positions in great historical detail, Finley defined ancient societies, and the Greek

¹⁰ Ivi, 72-73.

¹¹ Ivi, 77.

¹² Thomson (1977, 80-100). In fact, this essay had also been published in *Studies in Ancient Greek Society* in 1955.

¹³ Finley (1977, 132-156); Vernant (1977, 187-204). The former had already seen the light in 1959 in *Historia* and the latter in 1965 in the journal *Eirene*.

¹⁴ Finley (1977, 132-133).

society in particular, as a slave society¹⁵. But this was not the only careful historical judgement that the British thinker still bequeathed¹⁶.

Vernant, on the other hand, dwells on the idea of class struggle in ancient Greece after the brilliant work of Charles Parain who instead traced its specific features in the ancient world also through the ancient sources used by Marx, from Aristotle to Diodorus Siculus¹⁷. For Marxists, indeed, the ancient world constitutes a class society that can be defined in its typical form as the slave mode of production. However, the reduction of the history of Antiquity to the rigid opposition between slaves and slave-owners runs the risk of making no real scientific contribution to the work of historians. First of all, because slavery, too, has its history, its genesis and development due to certain particular modes of land appropriation and, consequently, its extension: not all ancient societies can be called slave-owning indiscriminately¹⁸. According to Vernant, Marxists must consider slavery dialectically, in its becoming, insofar as it gives the social relations of Antiquity their own specific character: the perspective is not the same for the historian of Greece and the historian of Rome. It is possible to speak of fundamental contradiction and main contradiction because Marxist analysis, while examining each social formation as a totality, distinguishes multiple levels, each with its own structure, its own movement¹⁹. The contradictions of a social system can be located within a level or between different levels. The well-known Marxist scheme responds to this: productive forces, economic relations of production, socio-political regimes, forms of thought and ideologies. In the capitalist society studied by Marx, the class contradictions, which pit proletarians against capitalists on the socio-political level, correspond to the contradictions that pit the more collective and public character of the production processes against the increasingly private character of the ownership of these means of production. The class struggles, which are expressed in social and political conflicts and which form the concrete matter of history, coincide with what was manifested as the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, within the abstract analysis of political economy. This is why the definition of classes and class struggle must show how these human groups and their dynamics are rooted at all levels of social reality, from top to bottom, in overlapping contradictions. This correspondence of contradictions at different levels explains how, in the modern era, the working class brings in a new society. Its struggle and the eventual result of state appropriation bring about a radical transformation at the level of social relations in connection with a new advancement of the productive forces. The situation in the ancient world is different: this theoretical scheme cannot be applied to those societies *tout court*, not least because the slave class does not bring with it any new society²⁰. A hypothetical political victory of the slaves would not have called into question the relations of production or changed the forms of ownership.

Most of these historians, therefore, agreed that even if the slave revolts had taken on the character of an organized political struggle, they remained without prospects and could not have resulted in a transformation of the dissociated system of production. That is, they could not lead to a change in society.

¹⁵ Ivi, 151-156. Hypothesis confirmed by Austin, Vidal Naquet (1977, 221-222).

¹⁶ On the intellectual and scientific legacy of Moses Israel Finley, see recently Fantasia (2022, 5-40).

¹⁷ Parain (1977, 157-186). The essay by Ste. Croix that appears last in the volume also focuses on the relationship between Marx's class gate and ancient history. Cfr. Ste. Croix (1977, 289-312). According to the French archaeologist, the deepest opposition, which gave ancient societies their specific character in relation to medieval and modern societies, is the free man-slave opposition, at least since the slave mode of production became the dominant one. Cfr. Parain (1977, 168-169).

¹⁸ Vernant (1977, 187-188).

¹⁹ Cfr. Giardina (2007, 15-31).

²⁰ Ivi, 189-190.

§3. Economic-social formations, economic formation of society, social formations

On February 1978 saw the publication of another important text on Marxist studies of ancient societies. While the volume edited by Vegetti collected the international essays considered fundamental for the problematization of Marxist studies on ancient societies, the new *Marxist Analysis and Ancient Society* is characterized by the original elaboration of Marxist investigations in Italy. In all the papers, the principle that the past can be explained from the present, and not vice versa, was taken as the object of historiographic work. Schiavone, for example, spoke in this regard of a “invadenza logica, epistemica del presente rispetto al passato”²¹, highlighting how this methodological centrality is in fact the primacy of a theory that deciphers the ordered reality of modern abstractions, breaking down its internal dynamics, but also tracing its genesis. The entire investigation conducted by Marx in the *Formen*, for example, is based on the modern discovery of the split between free labour and the objective conditions of its realization. From this, the original meaning of the property of man's relationship with the natural conditions of production is reconstructed. For the German philosopher, pre-capitalist forms of property are understood as the social forms in which subjective conditions, hence producers, relate to objective conditions, hence the means of production. This is followed by a further determination of these conditions that stems from an analysis of ancient property as seen in its differential elements to modern cleavage. The forms of these natural conditions of production are twofold: the existence of man as a member of the community, and thus the very existence of the community that is constructed by him; the relationship to the land through the community, as collective land ownership that is simultaneously individual possession for the individual, while the land and its cultivation remain common²². The two terms of the comparison, however, are economic theory and economic history: the hypothetical nucleus from which the work of the scholars involved departs tends to overturn the historicist logic, and in general all forms of positivism, affirming that economic theory precedes economic history, that is, it founds it since it defines in the form of the categories of political economy the essence of the economic relations whose genesis and evolution the historian reconstructs. But this does not mean that one can elaborate such a theory without taking into account the historical materials at one's disposal. The investigation of historical materials accompanies the genesis of the theory: capital, once historically developed, creates its own conditions of existence²³. However, it is the discontinuity inherent in the formation of capital that characterizes the domination of capital itself in different historical epochs: the present landed property generated by capital is markedly different from that of the past. In the present, previous forms are broken. While acknowledging this intrinsic feature, Marx does not entirely erase the past-present nexus. Marx poses the problem of historical knowledge of the past as a specific historiographic dimension of a theory of the historical process open to the future of capitalist society, made possible by the critique of bourgeois economy²⁴. There are not a few texts in which the German philosopher articulates this close connection between theory of the present and historical analysis. The essays by Lorenzo Calabi and Aldo Schiavone focus on some of them.

The first starts precisely from the debate that began at the beginning of the decade on the notions of “economic-social formations”, of “economic formation of society”, of “social formations” determined through the definition of the social relations of production dominant in them from time to time²⁵. In fact, Calabi argues, it is initially appropriate to use such locutions rather than ‘modes of production’, not only for historical or historiographical reasons, but also because they imply a broader

²¹ Schiavone (1978, 78).

²² Marx (1976, 468-473).

²³ Ivi, 436.

²⁴ Schiavone (1978, 80).

²⁵ Cfr. Sereni (1970); Gerratana (1972); Luporini (1972); see also Redolfi Riva (2009, 111-125)

horizon within which the very concept of 'mode of production' can be placed, which in turn includes the determination of the social relations on the basis of which production is carried out²⁶. The report also sets out to investigate whether from Marx's work, from the notions he uses and from the relationship he establishes between the science of the form of value and the history of capital, it is possible to derive categories predictable in a renewed historiographical work and to deduce significant and consistent areas of research in this direction. The exact comprehension of Marx's work, as well as the correct formulation of the indications that can be derived from it for the analysis of both the present and the past, depend on the notion of 'form': no real historical crisis is in itself explained by the representation of the general form of the capitalist crisis, just as no real capitalist crisis is comprehensible if one prescind from the representation of the general form inherent in the concept of capital, or in its abstract determination of commodity, social form of labour products and form of value²⁷.

This theoretical premise, in extreme synthesis, makes it possible to affirm a decisive aspect: the dominant socio-economic forms are always subordinate to the historically changing forms of capital, and the examination of land ownership and its rents demonstrates this²⁸. It is tied to the land and to the first form of production of all societies in some way established, namely agriculture. Although a certain form of agriculture appears only sporadically in pastoral peoples (a dynamic that Marx himself takes into account), where there are stable populations, agricultural activities predominate and with them forms of land ownership organization, such as Greek and Roman or feudal societies²⁹. In all forms in which land rent dominates, the relationship with nature is predominant. In those, however, where capital dominates, the historically produced social element prevails. Land rent cannot be understood without capital, while capital survives even without land rent³⁰. Calabi, however, considers some necessary clarifications to be urgent. The reversal of the relation of domination between the natural element and the social element, dependent on the historical domination of capital, does not mean that a previously existing category or social relation historically evolves into the same category modified by its subordination to capital: seigniorial land rent and capitalist land rent are two historically heterogeneous categories, whose heterogeneity is demonstrated despite their common link to land. The dislocation of the different categories, their relationship of subordination, as well as their very identification, are therefore matters of scientific and historiographical determination from time to time³¹. However, whatever the social forms of production, workers and means of production always remain its factors. But both are such only theoretically in their state of mutual separation; in order for production to take place, they must come together³². The particular way in which this union is realized distinguishes the various economic epochs in the structure of society: in this sense, the invention of surplus workers, i.e. men without property who work, belongs only to the era of capital.

Ancient society never experienced an overpopulation crisis in the sense of surplus labour; in other words, there was never an overabundance of slaves, of whom, if anything, there was a scarcity. The most relevant points that emerged from the first two articulate speeches concerned, therefore, the criticism of a certain type of Marxist historicism in favor of a 'structuralist' perspective, in which the problem of continuity, or rather of pre-capitalist economic-social formations and modes of production, do not represent a rigid continuity in time, but rather logical-historical successions, or rather regroupings of a qualitative type within those 'complex systems' that are modes of production. Ultimately, how can one not fall back into the old vices of a dialectical Marxism, in which one thought

²⁶ Calabi (1978, 48-49).

²⁷ Ivi, 53.

²⁸ *Cfr.* Simoni (2006).

²⁹ On the relationship between classes and politics in republican Rome, *see* Schiavone (1979, 33-70).

³⁰ Marx (1976, 34).

³¹ Calabi (1978, 57).

³² Marx (1968, 41).

of a perfect linearity of the historical process, without posing the problem of the transition of pre-capitalist economic-social forms and modes of production?

Personal dependency relationships are the earliest social forms in which human productivity develops only in narrow circles. Personal independence founded on material dependence is the second historical form in which a general social replacement system, a system of universal relations and needs, comes into being. Free individuality, founded on the universal development of individuals and the subordination of their collective productivity, as a social heritage constitutes the third historical stage: the first primitive type creates the conditions for the second historical stage, the ancient one, which in turn creates the conditions for the third³³. Both patriarchal, ancient and even feudal conditions collapse with the development of trade, luxury, money and exchange value to the same extent as modern society develops in parallel. However, these historical stages are intermediate moments characterized by the imposition of the phenomenal form of exchange value on the product of labour or part of it. The question is how far this product is mediated by a social process to become a means of subsistence and how far it is directly. For Marx, the problem is to define historical systems in which exchange value plays only a collateral role with respect to use value³⁴. A problem that could only be posed in close connection with the sterilization of the modern concept of exchange value, i.e. with the procedure that reveals, behind the fetishism of commodities, human value and, behind the abstraction of exchange, the expropriation and material dependence of the formally free man. On the other hand, what are the different collateral forms of exchange value with respect to use value, how it can reach positions of supremacy of monetary wealth and trade, is a matter for historical research. Ancient man, for instance, could immediately buy a slave, but a slave with his labour could not directly buy money³⁵. This is in fact one of the themes brought into sharper focus by Mario Mazza's and Domenico Musti's contributions³⁶. In them, the perfect overlap between exchange value and use value, and the tension between the development of slave production and the movement of commercial capital appear not only as internal acquisitions of Marxian texts, but as subject matter for research within a renewed historiographical horizon. The first of the aforementioned articles aims at a systematic analysis of the succession of passages in which Marx deals with ancient slavery, from the *Die Deutsche Ideologie* to the *Grundrisse*, then finding a more organic and accomplished form in *Das Capital*, in order to reason about the exact place in the general framework of his reflections on pre-capitalist economic formations³⁷.

Some of these considerations are explored in the essay by Musti, who in the first part of his paper recalled some possibilities for developing the historical discourse on the relationship between the slave mode of production and exchange value³⁸. Underlying the Marxian analysis of capitalism is the concept of the commodity as the unifying mediating element of capital and free labour. Between capital and labour there is a dialectical relationship of reciprocity based, however, on unbalanced power relations, in which capital is such insofar as it buys labour, which in turn sells itself to the former. Mediating between the two is the concept of the commodity. This capital-commodity-labour dynamic, typical of the capitalist production model, is less easily recognized in the ancient world. Between master and slave there is not that kind of mediation just mentioned: nothing unites them, except the immediate form of possession and exploitation recognizable even in the appropriation of the slave and his labour by the master. The idea of the commodity as the unifying element of the capitalist mode of production is the mechanism that governs the Marxian conception of history; it is the point of arrival to which those elements that in previous modes of production appear to exist for

³³ Marx (1976, 88-89).

³⁴ Ivi, 169.

³⁵ Ivi, 163-164.

³⁶ Mazza (1978, 107-145); Musti (1978, 147-174).

³⁷ Mazza (1978, 107-112).

³⁸ Musti (1978, 147-164).

themselves, arranged according to a natural order, which corresponds exactly to the inverse of the capitalist one, are pushed. In capitalism, the commodity form subjects everything to itself, reversing the natural succession. In Marxist terms, the reconstruction of the economic system of Antiquity means first of all to preserve this difference. The relations prevailing in pre-capitalist forms took on different modes in comparison to capitalist ones: between man and his production; between fundamental production and trade related to the development of exchange value never considered by the German philosopher as a *nexus rerum*, i.e. as a unifying element, although it dominated in the economy of ancient communities; between trade and industry or handicrafts; between master and slave in the slave mode of production; between the dominant communities in the ancient world and those expressing different economic forms, such as Athens, a commercial *polis* par excellence that represents a separate entity from the rest of the economy of the ancient world, being an intermediate activity distinct from production³⁹. Commercial capital is presented as an abstraction because it is not yet the dominant element in ancient societies. In those communities, therefore, a class, the merchants, is generated that is no longer involved in production, but only in the exchange of products.

Moreover, profitable commercial activity does not appear to be the only factor of development. A further condition in this direction is the simultaneous change in production relations and thus the creation of the free worker who sells his labour-power. But ancient societies are also based on servile labour, hence on the inequality of men and their labour power. The slave appears as a mere tool of the master, in the performance of the services the latter imposes, in an economy that is essentially agrarian-based. He, like the serf, is an organic accessory of the land lowered to an inorganic factor of production⁴⁰. Slavery is presented as a form of immediate forced labour unlike wage labour, which is instead forced labour mediated through exchange. But it is also useful to ask how the slave relates to the development of commercial forms of capital. In this, Marx is strongly influenced by Aristotle's readings (*Pol.*, I, 1257a)⁴¹: on the one hand, the particular position of chrematistics aimed at exchange, on the other hand, the great importance of slavery, which are closely linked⁴².

Conclusion

These important discussions encapsulated in the two volumes that are the historiographic subject of this contribution found contemporary and consequent development in various national scientific journals. Among them emerged, as mentioned, *Quaderni di Storia* in which those topics covered two successive issues from December 1978 to June 1979⁴³. The debate, however, highlighted the lack of a common theoretical framework between interpreters and the various disciplines capable of unifying investigations, whereas the identification of thematic objects pertained to a common investigative design. The study of the primitive mode of production, in which the land was owned by the tribe through the various historical-economic stages up to the in-depth study of the slave mode of production, are the topics on which the various speakers spend most time. It is precisely this last theme that represents the terrain most insisted upon to build a key to the renewal of Marxist interpretations.

By setting aside the obvious question as to what the outcome of the elaboration of a new Marxist historiography of the ancient world has been (an issue that is perhaps too broad and would go beyond

³⁹ Ivi, 150-151.

⁴⁰ Marx (1976, 196).

⁴¹ *Cfr.* Polanyi (1977, 101-130)

⁴² Musti (1978, 161-163).

⁴³ One of those articles had the clear aim of taking up precisely the debate that arose from the publication of the Istituto Gramsci, *cfr.* Bretone, Canfora, Clemente, Pani, Silvestri (1978, 5-38). *Cfr.* Di Benedetto (1978, 53-98) in the same issue. The discussion continued in the following issue, *see* Vegetti (1979, 247-250), Sichirrollo (1979, 251-254), Ricci Garotti (1979, 255-258), Hemmerdinger (1979, 259-262).

the confines of this article, not least because it is probably intertwined with the crisis of Italian Marxism in the early 1980s in fields outside and broader than antiquistics), it is nonetheless appropriate to point out some internal issues about the way ancient society and its relation to slavery are conceived. For example, is it possible to speak of ancient society in the singular or of 'ancient societies'? Behind this way of conceiving of antiquity is there perhaps still a classicist and/or evolutionary bias that thinks of the ancient world in a unitary way? Based on the different approaches of the Marxist scholars cited above who proceeded in an anti-historicist manner, sometimes approaching structuralism, is it possible to think of a clear discontinuity between different social models (not only between Greece and Rome, but also between republican Rome, mature empire, and late empire), or is it still useful to think of the ancient world as a Greco-Roman world? Does thinking of antiquity only in Greco-Roman terms conceal a Eurocentric bias, which has in part slowed down the potentially productive outcomes of this kind of historiography? Would a proper elaboration of a contamination with the categories adopted by anthropology have been useful? These are questions that could be developed precisely from that 'ancient society,' in the singular, which could perhaps unveil some critical points that have prevented the further development of the debate.

Marx assigns slavery a dynamic and transitory role in the process of separating the worker from the means of production. In the form in which the slave is in a proprietary relationship only with the means of subsistence, he finds himself in the natural condition of a working subject, without having a proprietary relationship with either the land or the tools, hence not even with labour itself. Slavery is posited as a situation historically dissolved in the presence of the worker's relationship to the conditions of production that have the form of capital. In the *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, primitive social organization is presented as in separate moments, in which ownership was tribal and the division of labour is not yet really developed and is shown as an extension of the division of family roles: patriarchal chiefs, other members of the tribe, finally the slaves. In a second phase, alongside the tribal community property comes individual property, however subordinate to collective property, in which, however, the presence of slaves is a fixed feature. From those volumes and the overall debate, one of the fundamental themes that emerges in the light of the data collected is summarized in the following question: is it possible to speak of a slave economy or only of a slave society as far as the ancient world is concerned?

The history of economic processes is the history of relations between men. Here, however, some fundamental aspects must be considered: those of quantity, those of conflict and those relating to the relationship with production processes⁴⁴. The first case concerns the problem of the number of slaves: unfortunately, the lack of statistical data is a strong analytical limitation and therefore more attention must be paid to the function of slaves, the relationship with free labour and the intermediate forms between these two dimensions. As for the second case, data on conflict may represent an argument for or against the conception of slavery as an antagonistic relationship. Finally, a decisive element for understanding the slave phenomenon concerns the relationship with the set of production processes that present themselves as factors in the separation of labour: it was a question of dividing the network of slave labour productivity. The productivity of slave labour appears in Marx's eyes only secondary to the relations of production in which it takes place. Slave labour does not appear to him to be directed towards the formation of capital because it often disappears into an unproductive surplus-product, such as works of art, religious buildings, public works. Indirectly, however, the slave can contribute to the development of commercial capital to the extent that the land rent can find utilization in a field other than agriculture. Indirectly, then, slavery participates in the two economic forms that stand side by side in the Marxian vision of Antiquity, of which that based on land ownership is prevalent⁴⁵. As stated in Book II of *Das Capital*, slavery predominantly participates in natural-based economic processes, and then in the more complex forms connected with commercial development,

⁴⁴ Musti (1978, 164-ss.).

⁴⁵ Ivi, 166.

never subordinate, however, to industrial or artisanal development. On the other hand, it would be risky to focus only on the slave mode of production while avoiding clarifying the systematic context in which it is rooted. Moreover, the Athenian economy was based on production on a limited scale and thus slave labour may have been of limited importance. Or, on the contrary, was it precisely because it was based on small-scale production that servile labour was surreptitiously insinuated into all sectors of production? In any case, regardless of the reasons that would lead the scholar to opt for one or the other answer, the question that emerges from the debate of those years, i.e. whether the ancient one can be considered a slave economy or a slave society, is still topical. And a necessary starting point for historical and philosophical research.

REFERENCES

- Austin M., Vidal Naquet P. (1977), *Economie e società nella Grecia antica*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 205-230.
- Barbagallo C. (1916), *Il Materialismo storico*, Milano: Federazione italiana delle Biblioteche popolari.
- Bretone M., Canfora L., Clemente G., Pani M., Silvestri M. (1978), *Per una discussione su marxismo e studi antichi. Dibattito su "Analisi marxista e società antiche"*, in «Quaderni di Storia», 6: 5-38.
- Calabi L. (1978), *Categorie marxiste e analisi del mondo antico*, in Capogrossi L., Giardina A., Schiavone A. (a cura di), *Analisi Marxista e società antiche*, Roma: Editori Riuniti-Istituto Gramsci.
- Capogrossi L., Giardina A., Schiavone A. (a cura di) (1978), *Analisi Marxista e società antiche*, Roma: Editori Riuniti-Istituto Gramsci.
- Ciccotti E. (1899), *Il tramonto della schiavitù nel mondo antico*, Torino: F.lli Bocca.
- Di Benedetto V. (1978), *Appunti su marxismo e mondo antico*, in «Quaderni di Storia», vol. 8: 53-98.
- Di Qual A. (2020), *Eric J. Hobsbawm tra comunismo britannico e comunismo italiano*, Venezia: Edizioni Ca'Foscari.
- Fantasia U. (2022), *Un nuovo «miracolo greco»? L'economia della Grecia antica cinquant'anni dopo Finley*, in «Studi Storici», 1-63: 5-40.
- Finley M.I. (1977), *La civiltà greca si fondava sul lavoro degli schiavi?*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 132-156.
- Gerratana V. (1972), *Formazione sociale e società di transizione*, in «Quaderni di Critica Marxista», 1: 44-80.
- Giardina A. (2007), *Marxism and Historiography: Perspectives on Roman History*, in C.Wickham (ed.), *Marxist History-writing for the Twenty-first Century*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hemmerdinger B. (1979), *Marxisme et Histoire de l'Antiquité*, in «Quaderni di Storia», 9: 259-262.
- Hobsbawm E. (1964), *Preface*, in Marx K., *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, London: Lawrence & Wishart; trad. it. *Prefazione*, in Marx K., *Forme economiche precapitalistiche*, Roma: Editori Riuniti 1967, 7-67.
- Lanza D., Vegetti M. (1977), *Tra Marx e gli antichi*, in «Quaderni di Storia», 5: 75-89.
- Luporini C. (1972), *Marx secondo Marx*, in «Critica marxista», 2-3: 48-118.
- Marx K. (1939), *Grundrisse*, Mosca: IMEL; tr.it, Marx K., *Lineamenti fondamentali di critica dell'economia politica*, Torino: Einaudi 1976.
- Marx K. (1968), *Il capitale. Libro secondo*, tr. it. di R.Panzieri, Roma: Editori Riuniti, Roma.
- Mazza M. (1976), *Marxismo e storia antica. Note sulla storiografia marxista in Italia*, in «Studi Storici», vol. 2/17: 100-124.

- (1978), *Marx sulla schiavitù antica. Note di lettura*, in Capogrossi L., Giardina A., Schiavone A. (A cura di), *Analisi Marxista e società antiche*, Roma: Editori Riuniti-Istituto Gramsci, 107-145.
- Momigliano A. (1966), *Tesi per una discussione sugli studi classici in Italia e i loro problemi metodici (De Homine, 9-10, 1964, pp. 163-164)*, in Id. (a cura di), *Terzo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del Mondo antico*, I, Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 803-805.
- Musti D. (1978), *Per una ricerca sul valore di scambio nel modo di produzione schiavistico*, in Capogrossi L., Giardina A., Schiavone A. (a cura di), *Analisi Marxista e società antiche*, Roma: Editori Riuniti-Istituto Gramsci, 147-174.
- Parain C. (1977), *I caratteri specifici della lotta di classe nell'antichità classica*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 157-186.
- Polanyi K. C. (1977), *Aristotele scopre l'economia*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 101-130.
- Redolfi Riva T. (2009), *La nozione di formazione economico-sociale nel marxismo di Emilio Sereni*, in «Il Pensiero Economico», 1-17: 111-124.
- Ricci Garotti L. (1979), *Marx non è un tribunale della filosofia*, in «Quaderni di Storia», 9: 255-258.
- Salvioli G. (1929), *Il capitalismo antico (Storia dell'economia romana)*, Bari: Laterza.
- Schiavone A. (1978), *Per una rilettura delle «Formen»: teoria della storia, domino del valore d'uso e funzione dell'ideologia*, in Capogrossi L., Giardina A., Schiavone A. (a cura di) (1978), *Analisi Marxista e società antiche*, Roma: Editori Riuniti-Istituto Gramsci, 75-106.
- (1979), *Classi e Politica in una società precapitalistica. Il caso di Roma repubblica*, in «Quaderni di Storia», 9: 33-70
- Sereni E. (1970), *Da Marx a Lenin: la Categoria di «formazione economico-sociale»*, in «Quaderni di Critica Marxista», 4: 30-79.
- Sichirolo L. (1979), *Lettere alla Redazione*, in «Quaderni di Storia», 9: 251-254.
- Simoni N. (2006), *Tra Marx e Lenin. La discussione sul concetto di formazione economico-sociale*, Napoli: La città del sole.
- Ste. Croix G.E.M. (1977), *Karl Marx e la storia dell'antichità classica*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 289-312.
- Taccola S. (2022), *Categoria marxiste e storiografia del mondo antico*, Roma: Manifestolibri.
- Thomson G. (1977), *Mercato e democrazia in Grecia*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 80-100.
- Utchenko S.L. (1977), *Classi e struttura di classe nella società schiavista antica*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 69-79.
- Vegetti M. (a cura di) (1977a), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli.
- (1977b), *Introduzione*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di) (1977), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 11-68.
- Vegetti M. (1979), *Confessioni di un agente provocatore*, in «Quaderni di Storia», 9: 247-250.
- Vernant J.-P. (1977), *La lotta i classe nella Grecia antica*, in Vegetti M. (a cura di), *Marxismo e società antica*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 187-204.