

## The first class divisions

The development of civilisation came at a price. In his account of the rise of urban society Adams writes, 'Tablets of the sign for "slave girl" are to be found at 'the very end of the protoliterate period', about 3000 BC. The sign for 'male slave' occurs slightly later. This is followed by the first appearance of different terms distinguishing 'full, free citizen' and 'commoner or subordinate status'.<sup>55</sup> By this time 'evidence for class differentiation is all too clear'. In 'ancient Eshnunna the larger houses along the main roads...often occupied 200 square metres or more of floor area. The greater number of houses, on the other hand, were considerably smaller...having access to the arterial roads only by twisting, narrow alleys... Many do not exceed 50 square metres in total'.<sup>56</sup> Adams continues:

At the bottom of the social hierarchy were slaves, individuals who could be bought and sold... One tablet alone lists 205 slave girls and children who were probably employed in a centralised weaving establishment... Other women were known to be engaged in milling, brewing, cooking... Male slaves generally are referred to as the 'blind ones' and apparently were employed in gardening operations.<sup>57</sup>

The emergence of civilisation is usually thought of as one of the great steps forward in human history—indeed, as the step that separates history from prehistory. But it was accompanied wherever it happened by other, negative changes: by the development for the first time of class divisions, with a privileged minority living off the labour of everyone else, and by the setting up of bodies of armed men, of soldiers and secret police—in other words, a state machine—so as to enforce this minority's rule on the rest of society. The existence of slavery, the physical ownership of some people by others, is palpable proof of this development, not only in Mesopotamia but in many other early civilisations. It shows how far social differentiation had

gone since the days of kin-based societies and village communities. But slavery was of relatively minor significance in providing for the early Mesopotamian ruling class. Much more important was the exploitation of peasants and other labourers forced to provide labour to the temples and the upper classes. There were groups such as the 'shub-lugals'—'a group with a reduced status and degree of freedom, reported as labouring in gangs on demesne lands of the Bau temple or estate, pulling ships, digging irrigation canals, and serving as a nucleus of the city militia.' They received subsistence rations during four months of the year in return for labour service and were 'allotted small plots of...land from holdings of the temple or estate'.<sup>58</sup> Such groups had once been independent peasant households, but had been forced into dependency on more powerful groupings, especially the temple.

Gordon Childe summarises an edict from the city of Lagash of around 2500 BC which describes how 'favoured priests practised various forms of extortion (overcharging for burials, for instance) and treated the god's (ie the community's) land, cattle and servants as their own private property and personal slaves. "The high priest came into the garden of the poor and took wood therefrom... If a great man's house adjoined that of an ordinary citizen", the former might annex the humble dwelling without paying any proper compensation to its owner.' He concludes, "This archaic text gives us unmistakable glimpses of a real conflict of class... The surplus produced by the new economy was, in fact, concentrated in the hands of a relatively small class".<sup>59</sup>

The scale of exploitation grew until it was massive. T B Jones tells how in the city state of Lagash in about 2100 BC 'a dozen or more temple establishments were responsible for cultivating most of the arable land... About half [the crop] was consumed by the cost of production [wages for workers, feed for draught animals and the like] and a quarter went to the king as royal tax. The remaining 25 percent accrued to the priests'.<sup>60</sup>

C J Gadd notes that in the famous Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, 'The hero is represented...looking at the wall of Uruk, which he had just built, and beholding the corpses which floated upon the river; such may indeed have been the end of the poorest citizens'.<sup>61</sup>

In Meso-America the pattern was essentially similar. Even with the first civilisation, that of the Olmecs, Katz observes 'marked degrees

of social stratification', with 'pretentious burial grounds furnished with rich gifts' and 'a representation...of a man kneeling in front of another who is richly clad...a nobleman and his subordinate'.<sup>62</sup> Among the Mayas 'multi-roomed buildings or palaces' proved society was 'sharply differentiated into elite and commoner strata'.<sup>63</sup>

Why did people who had not previously exploited and oppressed others suddenly start doing so, and why did the rest of society put up with this new exploitation and oppression? The record of hundreds of thousands of years of hunter-gatherer society and thousands of years of early agricultural society show that 'human nature' does not automatically lead to such behaviour.<sup>64</sup>

The only account of human society which comes to terms with the change is that outlined by Karl Marx in the 1840s and 1850s and further elaborated by Frederick Engels. Marx put the stress on the interaction between the development of 'relations of production' and 'forces of production'. Human beings find new ways of producing the necessities of life, ways that seem likely to ease material problems. But these new ways of producing begin to create new relations between members of the group. At a certain point they either have to embrace the new ways of relating to each other or reject the new ways of making a livelihood.

Classes began to arise out of certain of these changes in making a livelihood. Methods of production were open to the group that could enable it to produce and store a surplus over and above what was needed to subsist. But the new methods required some people to be freed from the immediate burden of working in the fields to coordinate the activities of the group, and to ensure that some of the surplus was not immediately consumed but set aside for the future in storehouses.

The conditions of production were still precarious. A drought, a virulent storm or a plague of locusts could destroy crops and turn the surplus into a deficit, threatening general starvation and driving people to want to consume the stores set aside for future production. In such circumstances, those freed from manual labour to supervise production could find the only way to achieve this task was to bully everyone else—to keep them working when tired and hungry and to force them to put aside food stocks even when starving. The 'leaders' could begin to turn into 'rulers', into people who came to see their control over resources as in the interests of society as a whole. They would come to defend that control even when it meant making others suffer; they would come to

see social advance as dependent on themselves remaining fit, well and protected from the famines and impoverishment that periodically afflicted the population as a whole. In short, they would move from acting in a certain way in the interests of the wider society to acting as if their own sectional interests were invariably those of society as a whole. Or, to put it another way, for the first time social development encouraged the development of the motive to exploit and oppress others.

Class divisions were the other side of the coin of the introduction of production methods which created a surplus. The first farming communities had established themselves without class divisions in localities with exceptionally fertile soil. But as they expanded, survival came to depend on coping with much more difficult conditions—and that required a reorganisation of social relations.<sup>65</sup>

Groups with high prestige in preceding non-class societies would set about organising the labour needed to expand agricultural production by building irrigation works or clearing vast areas of new land. They would come to see their own control of the surplus—and the use of some of it to protect themselves against natural vicissitudes—as in everyone's interest. So would the first groups to use large scale trade to increase the overall variety of goods available for the consumption of society and those groups most proficient at wresting surpluses from other societies through war.

Natural catastrophes, exhaustion of the land and wars could create conditions of acute crisis in a non-class agricultural society, making it difficult for the old order to continue. This would encourage dependence on new productive techniques. But these could only be widely adopted if some wealthy households or lineages broke completely with their old obligations. What had been wealth to be given away to others in return for prestige became wealth to consume while others suffered: 'In advanced forms of chieftainship... what begins with the would-be headman putting his production to others' benefit ends, to some degree, with others putting their production to the chief's benefit'.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time warfare allowed some individuals and lineages to gain great prestige as they concentrated loot and the tribute from other societies in their hands. Hierarchy became more pronounced, even if it remained hierarchy associated with the ability to give things to others.<sup>67</sup>

There was nothing automatic about this process. In many parts of

the world societies were able to prosper right through to modern times without resorting to labour intensive methods such as the use of heavy ploughs or extensive hydraulic works. This explains the survival until relatively recent times of what are misleadingly called 'primitive' societies in Papua New Guinea, the Pacific islands and parts of Africa, the Americas and south east Asia. But in other conditions survival came to depend on adopting new techniques. Ruling classes arose out of the organisation of such activities and, with them, towns, states and what we usually call civilisation. From this point onwards the history of society certainly was the history of class struggle. Humanity increased its degree of control over nature, but at the price of most people becoming subject to control and exploitation by privileged minority groups.

Such groups could only keep the surplus in their own hands at times when the whole of society was suffering great hardship if they found ways of imposing their will on the rest of society by establishing coercive structures—states. Control over the surplus provided them with the means to do so, by hiring armed men and investing in expensive techniques such as metal working which could give them a monopoly of the most efficient means of killing.

Armed force is most effective when backed by legal codes and ideologies which sanctify ruling class power by making it seem like the source of people's livelihoods. In Mesopotamia, for example, 'Early kings boast of their economic activities, of cutting canals, of building temples, of importing timber from Syria, and copper and granite from Oman. They are sometimes depicted on monuments in the garb of bricklayers or masons and of architects receiving the plan of the temple from the gods'.<sup>68</sup>

Not only could *rulers* think of themselves as the embodiment of society's highest values—so too, in certain circumstances, could those they exploited. By the very fact of absorbing society's surplus, of having control of its means of reproducing itself, the rulers could come to symbolise society's power for those below them—to be seen as gods, or at least as the necessary intermediaries between the mass of society and its gods. Hence the god-like attributes of the pharaohs of Egypt or the priestly attributes of the first ruling classes of Mesopotamia and Meso-America.

Religious notions of sorts had existed in pre-class societies. People had ascribed to magical beings control over the apparently mysterious

processes which led some plants to flower and not others, to the years of bountiful hunting and years of hunger, to unexpected and sudden deaths. With the appearance of classes and states people also had to come to terms with the existence of social powers beyond their own control. It was at this stage that organised religious institutions arose. Worshipping the gods became a way of society worshipping its own power, of people giving an alienated recognition to their own achievements. This, in turn, enhanced the control of those who claimed to be responsible for these achievements—those who ordered about the mass of producers, monopolised the surplus in their own hands and used armed force against anyone rejecting their claims.

Once such state structures and ideologies were in existence, they would perpetuate the control of the surplus by a certain group even when it no longer served the purpose of advancing production. A class that emerged as a spur to production would persist even when it was no longer such a spur.

## **The character of the first class societies**

We usually think of class societies as based on private property. But private property is not a feature of all societies divided into classes. Karl Marx referred to an 'Asiatic' form of class society in which private property did not exist at all. Instead, he argued, the rulers were able, through their collective control of the state machine, to exploit entire peasant communities which farmed the land jointly without private ownership. He believed this picture applied to Indian society at the time of the British conquest in the 18th century. Much modern research suggests he was at least partially mistaken.<sup>69</sup> But the early history of the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Meso-American and South American civilisations does seem to fit his model.

The social surplus was in the hands of the priests who ran the temples or of the king-led administrators of the palaces. They got hold of it through their direction of certain aspects of production—irrigation and flood control works, the labour of dependent peasants on the temple or palace lands, and control over trade. But neither the priests nor the palace administrators exercised private control or ownership. They benefited from class exploitation only in so far as they were part of a collective ruling group.

At the base of society peasant production does not seem to have been based on private ownership of land, either. The communal forms of organisation of economic life which characterise pre-class agricultural societies still seem to have survived, although in a distorted form now that the majority had lost control of the surplus. People still carried out their labours on the basis of a system of reciprocal obligations to each other, organised through the remnants of the old kin lineages. So in Mesopotamia patriarchal clans (lineage groups run by the allegedly senior male) controlled the land not in the hands of the temples, while the mass of peasant producers in Mexico as late as the Aztec period (the 15th century) were organised through '*calpulli*'—lineage groups which were 'highly stratified internally',<sup>70</sup> with those at the top imposing the demands of the ruling class on the rest—and among the Incas through similar '*aylulli*'.<sup>71</sup> Archaeologists and anthropologists have often used the term 'conical clans' to describe such groups. They retained the formal appearance of the lineages of pre-class society, linking groups of nuclear families to a mythical common ancestor,<sup>72</sup> but now organised the labour of the exploited class in the interests of the exploiting class, acting as both units of production and social control.

In much of Eurasia and Africa private property was to develop among both the ruling class and the peasantry, but only over many centuries, with deep splits within ruling classes, bloody wars and sharp conflicts between exploited and exploiting classes.