

## The first 'Dark Ages'

No one who has seen the pyramids, temples, palaces or enormous statues of the first civilisations can fail to be impressed. Not only were there these monumental buildings. Just as impressive were stone houses that kept out the wind and rain—even, in some cases, with water supplies and sewerage systems. What is more, the people who built these did so without the knowledge of hardened metals, using tools elaborated out of stone or wood and sometimes copper or bronze.

The impact on the people who lived in and around these cities must have been even greater. The pyramids of Giza or Teotihuacan, the ziggurats of Ur or Uruk, dominating the skyline even more than the Empire State Building or the Eiffel Tower, would have been ever-present symbols of the power, the permanence and the stability of the state. They allowed the ruling class to believe its power was as eternal and unquestionable as the movement of the sun and the stars, while reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and insignificance among the mass of people.

Yet if the pyramids, the statues and sometimes the buildings endured, the societies which produced them sooner or later entered deep crisis. The city states of Mesopotamia were involved in incessant warfare with each other before succumbing in around 2300 BC to a conqueror from the north, Sargon, who welded the whole Fertile Crescent into a great empire which fell prey to other conquerors after his death. The 'Old Kingdom' Egypt of the pyramids of Giza and Saqqara<sup>78</sup> fell apart in a century and a half of civil war and massive social disruption (the so called 'first intermediate period' of 2181 to 2040 BC). The Indus cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-dero were abandoned after more than a millennium in around 1500 BC. About 100 years later it was the turn of the civilisation of Crete, exemplified by the magnificent palace at Knossos, to fall apart—to be followed soon after by the Mycenaean civilisation which dominated mainland Greece. And just as

the rise of civilisation was replicated in Meso-America, so was the record of sudden collapse. People abandoned, in turn, Teotihuacan, Monte Alban and the southern Maya centres, leaving whole cities as empty monuments to bewilder, in turn, the Aztecs, the Spanish Conquistadores and ourselves.

There has been much historical speculation as to what caused each of these crises of early civilisation. But underlying the different attempts at explanation, certain factors stand out.

First, there is the record of ever-greater expenditure of resources by the ruling class on itself and its monuments. The temples, the palaces and the tombs grew ever more extensive over the centuries, the opulence of upper class lifestyles ever greater, the effort that went into extracting the surplus from the cultivators ever more intense, the trade networks bringing rare products over enormous distances ever longer.

In Egypt the surviving texts show the state administration to have been 'mainly concerned with facilitating the transfer of produce' to the various centres which made up the 'court', and with supervising construction work rather than with maintaining the agricultural system', so putting 'serious pressures on the agricultural surplus'.<sup>79</sup> The picture in Mesopotamia seems to have been very similar, with the added pressure of war between the different city states as well as with pastoral peoples around the fringes of their civilisation.

The growth in the power and wealth of the ruling class drove the living standards of the mass of people down to the minimum necessary for survival—and sometimes even lower. So although the craftspeople working for the temples or palaces developed new techniques, particularly in the use of copper and bronze, 'the peasant masses from whom...the surplus...was gathered could hardly afford the new equipment. In practice, the cultivators and quarrymen of Egypt had to be content with neolithic tools. Wool in Sumer was still plucked, not shorn. Even in the Indus cities chert [stone] knives are common enough to suggest a shortage of metal tools'.<sup>80</sup>

The ever-greater absorption of resources by the ruling class was accompanied by a massive slowdown in the growth of humanity's ability to control and understand the natural world. Gordon Childe contrasted the massive advances made by comparatively poor and illiterate communities in the early period leading up to the 'urban revolution' with what followed the establishment of the great states:

The two millennia immediately preceding 3000 BC had witnessed discoveries in applied science that directly or indirectly affected the prosperity of millions and demonstrably furthered the biological welfare of our species...artificial irrigation using canals and ditches; the plough; the harnessing of animal motive-power; the sailing boat; wheeled vehicles; orchard-husbandry; fermentation; the production and use of copper; bricks; the arch; glazing; the seal; and—in the early stage of the revolution—a solar calendar, writing, numeral notation, and bronze... The 2,000 years after the revolution produced few contributions of anything like comparable importance to human progress.<sup>81</sup>

The advances which did occur ('iron, water wheels, alphabetic writing, pure mathematics') were not made inside the 'great civilisations', but among 'barbarian peoples' on their periphery.<sup>82</sup>

Bruce Trigger contrasts the early dynastic period in Egypt (3000-2800 BC), which 'appears to have been a time of great creativity and inventiveness' with the period after, when 'control by scribes and bureaucrats' discouraged change in methods of production, so that 'development ceased'.<sup>83</sup>

The sheer scale of the exploitation of the mass of the population—an exploitation that grew in direct proportion to the growth in the magnificence of the temples, palaces, tombs and ruling class lifestyles—ensured stagnation of the means of providing a livelihood for society as a whole.

That section of society which had been freed from daily toil in the fields no longer had any interest in furthering humanity's control over nature. 'Many of the revolutionary steps in progress—harnessing animals' motive power, the sail, metal tools—originally appeared as "labour saving devices". But the new rulers now commanded almost unlimited resources of labour...they saw no need to bother about labour saving inventions'.<sup>84</sup> Rulers who reinforced their power over the masses by encouraging superstition—the Sumerian kings and Egyptian pharaohs claimed god-like powers for themselves—had no interest in encouraging scientific endeavour among society's small literate minority of priests and full time administrators. These were stuck with the body of knowledge developed early in the urban revolution, treating it with almost religious reverence, copying texts and transmitting established ideas, but no longer attempting new lines of enquiry. Not for the last time in history, science degenerated into scholasticism and

scholasticism into magic as the centuries proceeded.<sup>85</sup> The literate elite ended up holding back rather than advancing humanity's control over nature.

A ruling class that had arisen out of advances in human productive powers now prevented further advances. But without such advances its own rapaciousness was bound to exhaust society's resources, until the means of livelihood became insufficient to provide for the mass of the population. At that point it only required a slight change in climate for people to starve and society to shake to its core. This happened in Egypt at the end of the 'Old Kingdom', when a fall in the level of the Nile floods caused difficulties with irrigation. Willey and Shimkin suggest similar 'over-exploitation' by the ruling class brought about the collapse of the 'classic' Mayan civilisation of Meso-America about 1,200 years ago:

A growing upper class, together with its various retainers and other members of the incipient 'middle class', would have increased economic strain on the total society... Malnutrition and disease burdens increased among the commoner population and further decreased its work capacity... Despite these internal stresses, the Maya of the late classic period apparently made no technological or social adaptive innovations... In fact, the Maya elite persisted in its traditional direction up to the point of collapse.<sup>86</sup>

## **Class struggles in the first civilisations**

The impoverishment of the exploited classes responsible for feeding the rest of society necessarily brought a clash of interests between the different classes.

The basic class divide was that between the ruling minority and the mass of dependent peasant cultivators. The growing exactions of the rulers must have caused clashes between the two. But, to be honest, we know little about these. In so far as tomb paintings or temple inscriptions depict the mass of people, it is as people bowing down to and waiting on their 'superiors'. This is hardly surprising—it has been the preferred way of depicting the masses for ruling classes throughout history.

Nevertheless, a number of archaeologists and historians suggest

the collapse of Egypt's Old Kingdom involved a 'social revolution', quoting a later text known as the 'Admonitions of the Ipuwer', which imagines a situation in which 'servant girls can usurp the places of their mistresses, officials are forced to do the bidding of uncouth men, and the children of princes are dashed against the wall'.<sup>87</sup> In a somewhat similar way, the collapse of the Meso-American civilisations of Teotihuacan, Monte Alban and the southern Mayas is often ascribed to peasant revolts.<sup>88</sup>

But the tensions that arose were not just between the rulers and the exploited peasants. The evidence from all the early civilisations points to growing fissures within the ruling class.

In Mesopotamia and Meso-America the first ruling classes seem to have been the priests of the temples. But kings began to emerge in Mesopotamia alongside the priesthoods as secular administration and warfare became important, and a non-priestly aristocracy with its own estates (and dependent peasant cultivators) rose alongside those of the temples and the royal palace. Similarly, in Meso-America the warrior elite seems to have enjoyed growing power.<sup>89</sup>

In Egypt the kings were dependent on regional priests and governors for administering the 500 miles of the Nile Valley and ensuring the continual flow of food, material and labour to the royal capital. Land grants used to buy the loyalty of such groups enabled them, over the centuries, to siphon off a chunk of the total surplus for themselves and to exercise a degree of power independent of the central monarch. One sign of this was the way in which priests and civil administrators began to build lavish tombs imitative of the pharaohs, even if considerably smaller.

The rise of new exploiting groups alongside the old had a double effect. On the one hand, it meant an ever larger layer of people living off the surplus and put increased pressure on the cultivators. On the other, it meant challenges could arise to the monolithic power of the original rulers, from people who themselves controlled resources, armed power or the dissemination of ideas. So it seems the collapse into crisis of Old Kingdom Egypt was, in part at least, a result of provincial governors and chief priests putting their own interests above those of the central monarchy—leading, according to Kemp, to 'civil war... among men whose aspirations were of a thoroughly traditional nature'.<sup>90</sup>

The splits within the ruling class were accompanied by the growth of new subordinate classes. Specialist groups of craft workers—

carpenters, stonemasons, leather workers, weavers, workers in metals—had begun to appear as increased agricultural productivity allowed some people to be freed from working in the fields. The concentration of a growing surplus in the hands of the ruling classes gave an added impetus. The priests and kings demanded an ever growing supply of luxury goods for themselves and their attendants along with ever more elaborate temples, tombs and palaces. But this meant concentrating around the palaces, tombs and temples the skilled labour which could make such things. A whole new class of artisans grew up as part of the core population of the new cities.

Typical were those who built the pyramids of Giza and carved out the tombs in Egypt's Valley of the Kings. 'Contrary to popular belief' these 'were not constructed by slaves, nor...by men who were subsequently put to death in order to protect hidden royal treasures'.<sup>91</sup> The forced labour of large numbers of peasants may have been used to move huge chunks of rock. But writings from the middle of the 2nd millennium BC in Thebes (present day Luxor) show the quarrying, carving and carpentry to have been the work of skilled craftsmen. They lived in a special village of stone houses and were paid sufficient wages in the form of grain, oil and fish to keep a family of ten—giving them an income about three times that of the average land worker. Their eight hour day left many with time to improve their living standards by doing additional private work, and some were skilled enough to be among the very few people able to read and write. They were not completely free. They were subject to arbitrary acts of oppression from the scribes and foremen in charge of them and, on at least one occasion, those deemed 'surplus' to the requirements of the pharaoh's vizier were compelled to undertake forced labour.<sup>92</sup> But in 1170 BC, backed by their wives, they took part in history's first recorded strikes when their rations were late and their families faced hunger.<sup>93</sup>

These were not wage workers in the modern sense, since they were not free to choose who they worked for, were paid in kind and depended for their livelihood on the centralised distribution of goods by the state. This limited their ability to act independently of the state or to develop views which challenged it. Significantly, they worshipped the gods of the royal class and deified kings as well as favoured gods of their own. Nevertheless, geographical concentration and literacy had given an oppressed and exploited class the confidence to

challenge the rulers of a kingdom a millennium and a half old. It was a portent for the distant future, when there would be such a class hundreds of millions strong.

A trader class began to develop alongside the artisan class in most of the early civilisations. Trade had already taken place in pre-class societies: flints mined in one place would be used hundreds of miles away, for instance. Now it grew in importance as the emerging ruling class sought luxuries and raw materials for the building of temples and palaces. Many of these could only be obtained if individuals or groups were prepared to make long, arduous and often dangerous journeys. Such people were scarcely likely to be from the pampered ranks of the ruling class itself. They were either from the exploited cultivator class or from outside the cities, especially from the pastoralist groups who roamed the open lands between the urban centres. As trade grew in importance, so did the traders, beginning to accumulate enough wealth to be able exert pressure of their own on the ruling class. A point was eventually reached when towns and cities began to develop which were run by the trading merchant classes—like the city of Sippar in the Fertile Crescent.

But the trading class mostly existed on the margin of the wider society, even if the margin grew over time. As with the artisans, there is little indication of the merchants developing a view of their own as to how society should be run.

The result of the underdevelopment of the artisan and merchant classes was that when society entered great crises there was no social group with the power or the programme to fight to reorganise it. The existing ruling class was no longer capable of developing human control over nature sufficiently to ward off widespread immiseration and starvation. But there were no other groups capable of doing so either. The mass of cultivators could rise up against their exploiters. But their response to starvation was to consume the whole harvest, leaving nothing to sustain the structures of civilisation—the towns, the literate strata, the groups caring for the canals and dams.

The result can be seen most clearly in the case of the civilisations which collapsed—Crete and Mycenae, Harsappa and Mohenjo-dero, Teotihuacan, Monte Alban and the Mayas. The cities were abandoned, the flowering cultures all but forgotten, as the mass of people returned to the purely agricultural life of their ancestors half a millennium or more before.

Karl Marx wrote in his famous Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, at a time when little was known about any of the civilisations we have discussed:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness... At a certain stage in their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations which have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution.<sup>94</sup>

But such an epoch could have more than one outcome. As Marx noted in the *Communist Manifesto*, class struggles historically could end 'either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the mutual ruin of the contending classes'.<sup>95</sup>

These cases confirm his account. A ruling class which once played a part in developing the 'forces of production' did indeed become a fetter on their subsequent growth, leading society as a whole into a period of social upheaval. But because a class did not emerge which was associated with new, more advanced ways of carrying out production and capable of imposing its will on society as a whole by overthrowing the old ruling class, the crisis did not lead to a further growth of the productive forces. Instead, there was the 'mutual ruin of the contending classes' and a reversion, quite literally, to 'barbarism', to societies without towns, literacy or advanced techniques.

## Conquest and change

The histories of Egypt and Mesopotamia do not fit as neatly into Marx's pattern. In these cases a re-establishment of order and the old rhythms of social life followed a period of a century or more of

disorder, civil war and famine. Shifts of power within the ruling class (from priests to warriors in Mesopotamia, from Memphis to Thebes in the case of Egypt), combined with an influx of wealth from foreign conquest in Mesopotamia's case and an improvement in the level of the Nile in Egypt's, were enough to overcome the immediate economic crisis and get society proceeding along basically its old lines for several hundred years more. But the fundamental causes of the crisis were not removed. The societies still lacked the innovative push of the early years of the urban revolution, still could not develop new ways of providing a livelihood except at the slowest pace, and were still prone to new catastrophic crises. In Mesopotamia conquerors emerged (either from existing cities or from the pastoralists around the periphery of the region) who established great, centralised empires and held them together by marching their armies from one urban centre to another to crush any resistance to their rule. But this further exhausted society's resources and drained the imperial coffers until the central ruler opted to allow local aristocracies to maintain 'order' in their patches, and to absorb much of the surplus. The result was to weaken the defence of the whole empire, leaving it open to seizure either by a rebel military leader from within or by a conqueror from outside.

Hence the succession of conquerors whose march through the history of the Fertile Crescent is detailed in the Old Testament—the Amorites, Kassites, Assyrians, Hittites, Medes and Persians.

Egypt was protected by the deserts from military incursion from outside for several hundred years. But this did not prevent another great crisis, the 'second intermediate period' around 1700-1600 BC. Now foreign influences were at work with a vengeance. In the north the 'Hyksos' people—almost certainly from Palestine—established themselves as pharaohs, while in the south the Nubian kingdom of Kush exercised hegemony. Both Palestine and Nubia were the location of fast-developing societies at a time when Egypt was stagnating. Significantly, the Hyksos made use of technical innovations not previously adopted in Egypt, especially the wheel. The Egyptian rulers who threw out the Hyksos and established the 'New Kingdom' in 1582 BC were only able to do so by adopting these innovations and, it seems, allowing a greater leeway for the development of artisan and merchant groups.

Childe claimed that both 'the rejuvenated civilisations of Mesopotamia and Egypt differed from their parents most significantly in the

greater prominence of their middle class of merchants, professional soldiers, clerks, priests and skilled artisans, no longer embedded in the "great households" but subsisting independently alongside these'.<sup>96</sup>

Certainly there is a sharp contrast between the stagnation that characterises the later Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom on the one hand and the dynamism of the early centuries of the New Kingdom on the other. This was a period of foreign conquests by the pharaohs into Palestine and Syria and south into Africa. The conquests brought a flow of new raw materials and luxury goods. At the same time the domestic surplus was now large enough to provide for the most elaborate tombs and luxurious palaces, not only for the pharaohs but also for chief priests and regional officials. Underlying this seems to have been a spurt in the development of production. Bronze—with its harder, less easily blunted cutting edge—increasingly replaced copper. Horse-drawn wheeled vehicles were mainly used in warfare, but also speeded up internal communications. For the peasant, irrigation became easier with the introduction of the *shaduf*, a pole and bucket lever that could raise water a metre out of a ditch or stream.<sup>97</sup>

Foreign invasion had shaken up the Egyptian social structure just enough to allow improved means of making a livelihood to break through after close on 1,000 years of near-stagnation. It suggests that in certain circumstances, even when an emerging social class based on new relations of production is not strong, external force can overcome, at least temporarily, the suffocation of social life by an old superstructure.