

AP World History: Modern

Summer Assignment

1. Read *A People's History of the World* up to p. 139 and take notes in any format with which you are comfortable. (I like Cornell notes myself, but I won't say you have to use them.) There will be an assessment over this material in August. As you are taking notes, apply the following Historical Thinking Skills and underlying questions:
 - Comparison
 - How is one development like/unlike another development from the same time period or a different time period?
 - Why did an event or development affect different groups in different ways?
 - Contextualization
 - What was happening before or during or continued after an event happened that might have had an influence?
 - What was happening at the specific place where an event occurred? In the country as a whole? In the larger region? In the world?
 - How does a specific event relate to larger processes? How do larger processes shape a specific event?
 - Causation
 - What were the reasons an event happened? What factors contributed to a specific pattern or trend? What prompted a certain person or group to act or react in a certain way?
 - What resulted from a particular event, pattern, or action? What were the short-term effects? What were the long-term effects?
 - Which cause seemed to be the most significant? Why? Which effect seemed to be the most significant? Why?
 - How might the chain of cause and effect have changed and at what point? What causes were contingent on previous effects? What individual choices made a significant difference in the lead-up to a particular event or trend? Was there a moment of chance that influenced the chain of events?
 - Continuity and Change over Time
 - What changed within a specific time period? What remained the same?
 - What can explain why some things changed while others did not?
 - Which continuity or change seemed to be the most significant? Why?
 - Periodization
 - When discussing a period of history, what are the specific dates chosen to begin and end the period? Why were these dates chosen?
 - What are the common characteristics of a time period identified by historians?

These are the skills on which you will be assessed in August.

Please let me know if you have any questions. You can reach me at shawn.voshell@dmschools.org. I look forward to seeing you in August! Have a great summer!

Chris Harman is the editor of *International Socialism* journal (www.isj.org.uk) and a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party in Britain. He is the author of many articles, pamphlets and books including *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After*, *Explaining the Crisis*, *Economics of the Madhouse*, *How Marxism Works*, *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918 to 1923* and *Revolution in the 21st Century*.

Introduction

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished
Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?
Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished
Did the masons go? Great Rome
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom.
Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song
Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis
The night the ocean engulfed it
The drowning still bawled for their slaves.

The young Alexander conquered India.
Was he alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not have even a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his armada
Went down. Was he the only one to weep?
Frederick the Second won the Seven Years War. Who
Else won it?

Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?

So many reports.
So many questions.

'Questions from a Worker who Reads' by Bertolt Brecht

The questions raised in Brecht's poem are crying out for answers. Providing them should be the task of history. It should not be regarded as the preserve of a small group of specialists, or a luxury for those who can afford it. History is not 'bunk', as claimed by Henry Ford, pioneer of mass motor car production, bitter enemy of trade unionism and early admirer of Adolf Hitler.

History is about the sequence of events that led to the lives we lead today. It is the story of how we came to be ourselves. Understanding it is the key to finding out if and how we can further change the world in which we live. 'He who controls the past controls the future,' is one of the slogans of the totalitarians who control the state in George Orwell's novel *1984*. It is a slogan always taken seriously by those living in the palaces and eating the banquets described in Brecht's 'Questions'.

Some 22 centuries ago a Chinese emperor decreed the death penalty for those who 'used the past to criticise the present'. The Aztecs attempted to destroy records of previous states when they conquered the Valley of Mexico in the 15th century, and the Spanish attempted to destroy all Aztec records when they in turn conquered the region in the 1520s.

Things have not been all that different in the last century. Challenging the official historians of Stalin or Hitler meant prison, exile or death. Only 30 years ago Spanish historians were not allowed to delve into the bombing of the Basque city of Guernica, or Hungarian historians to investigate the events of 1956. More recently, friends of mine in Greece faced trial for challenging the state's version of how it annexed much of Macedonia before the First World War.

Overt state repression may seem relatively unusual in Western industrial countries. But subtler methods of control are ever-present. As I write, a New Labour government is insisting schools must stress British history and British achievements, and that pupils must learn the name and dates of great Britons. In higher education, the historians most in accord with establishment opinions are still the ones who receive honours, while those who challenge such opinions are kept out of key university positions. 'Compromise, compromise', remains 'the way for you to rise.'

Since the time of the first Pharaohs (5,000 years ago) rulers have presented history as being a list of 'achievements' by themselves and their forebears. Such 'Great Men' are supposed to have built cities

and monuments, to have brought prosperity, to have been responsible for great works or military victories—and, conversely, 'Evil Men' are supposed to be responsible for everything bad in the world. The first works of history were lists of monarchs and dynasties known as 'King Lists'. Learning similar lists remained a major part of history as taught in the schools of Britain 40 years ago. New Labour—and the Tory opposition—seem intent on reimposing it.

For this version of history, knowledge consists simply in being able to memorise such lists, in the fashion of the 'Memory Man' or the *Mas-termind* contestant. It is a *Trivial Pursuits* version of history that provides no help in understanding either the past or the present.

There is another way of looking at history, in conscious opposition to the 'Great Man' approach. It takes particular events and tells their story, sometimes from the point of view of the ordinary participants. This can fascinate people. There are large audiences for television programmes—even whole channels—which make use of such material. School students presented with it show an interest rare with the old 'kings, dates and events' method.

But such 'history from below' can miss out something of great importance, the interconnection of events.

Simply empathising with the people involved in one event cannot, by itself, bring you to understand the wider forces that shaped their lives, and still shape ours. You cannot, for instance, understand the rise of Christianity without understanding the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. You cannot understand the flowering of art during the Renaissance without understanding the great crises of European feudalism and the advance of civilisation on continents outside Europe. You cannot understand the workers' movements of the 19th century without understanding the industrial revolution. And you cannot begin to grasp how humanity arrived at its present condition without understanding the interrelation of these and many other events.

The aim of this book is to try to provide such an overview.

I do not pretend to provide a complete account of human history. Missing are many personages and many events which are essential to a detailed history of any period. But you do not need to know about every detail of humanity's past to understand the general pattern that has led to the present.

It was Karl Marx who provided an insight into this general pattern. He pointed out that human beings have only been able to survive on

this planet through cooperative effort to make a livelihood, and that every new way of making such a livelihood has necessitated changes in their wider relationships with each other. Changes in what he called 'the forces of production' are associated with changes in 'the relations of production', and these eventually transform the wider relationships in society as a whole.

Such changes do not, however, occur in a mechanical way. At each point human beings make choices whether to proceed along one path or another, and fight out these choices in great social conflicts. Beyond a certain point in history, how people make their choices is connected to their class position. The slave is likely to make a different choice to the slave-owner, the feudal artisan to the feudal lord. The great struggles over the future of humanity have involved an element of class struggle. The sequence of these great struggles provides the skeleton round which the rest of history grows.

This approach does not deny the role of individuals or the ideas they propagate. What it does do is insist that the individual or idea can only play a certain role because of the preceding material development of society, of the way people make their livelihoods, and of the structure of classes and states. The skeleton is not the same as the living body. But without the skeleton the body would have no solidity and could not survive. Understanding the material 'basis' of history is an essential, but not sufficient, precondition for understanding everything else.

This book, then, attempts to provide an introductory outline to world history, and no more than that. But it is an outline which, I hope, will help some people come to terms with both the past and the present.

In writing it, I have been aware throughout that I have to face up to two prejudices.

One is the idea that the key features of successive societies and human history have been a result of an 'unchanging' human nature. It is a prejudice that pervades academic writing, mainstream journalism and popular culture alike. Human beings, we are told, have always been greedy, competitive and aggressive, and that explains horrors like war, exploitation, slavery and the oppression of women. This 'cave-man' image is meant to explain the bloodletting on the Western Front in one world war and the Holocaust in the other. I argue very differently. 'Human nature' as we know it today is a product of our history, not its cause. Our history has involved the moulding of different human

natures, each displacing the one that went before through great economic, political and ideological battles.

The second prejudice, much promulgated in the last decade, is that although human society may have changed in the past, it will do so no more.

An adviser to the US State Department, Francis Fukuyama, received international acclaim when he spelt out this message in 1990. We were witnessing no less than 'the end of history', he declared in an article that was reproduced in scores of languages in newspapers right across the world. Great social conflicts and great ideological struggles were a thing of the past—and a thousand newspaper editors and television presenters agreed.

Anthony Giddens, director of the London School of Economics and court sociologist to Britain's New Labour prime minister, repeated the same message in 1998 in his much hyped but little read book, *The Third Way*. We live in a world, he wrote, 'where there are no alternatives to capitalism.' He was accepting and repeating a widespread assumption. It is an unsustainable assumption.

Capitalism as a way of organising the whole production of a country is barely three or four centuries old. As a way of organising the whole production of the world, it is at most 150 years old. Industrial capitalism, with its huge conurbations, widespread literacy and universal dependence on markets, has only taken off in vast tracts of the globe in the last 50 years. Yet humans of one sort or another have been on the earth for over a million years, and modern humans for over 100,000 years. It would be remarkable indeed if a way of running things that has existed for less than 0.5 percent of our species' lifespan were to endure for the rest of it—unless that lifespan is going to be very short indeed. All the writings of Fukuyama and Giddens do is confirm that Karl Marx was right about at least one thing, in noting that 'for the bourgeoisie there has been history and is no more'.

The recent past of our species had not been some smooth upward path of progress. It has been marked by repeated convulsions, horrific wars, bloody civil wars, violent revolutions and counter-revolutions. Times when it seemed that the lot of the mass of humanity was bound to improve have almost invariably given way to decades or even centuries of mass impoverishment and terrible devastation.

It is true that through all these horrors there were important advances in the ability of humans to control and manipulate the forces

of nature. We have a vastly greater capacity to do so today than a thousand years ago. We live in a world in which natural forces should no longer be able to make people starve or freeze to death, in which diseases which once terrified people should have been abolished for ever.

But this in itself has not done away with the periodic devastation of hundred of millions of lives through hunger, malnutrition and war. The record of the 20th century shows that. It was the century in which industrial capitalism finally took over the whole world, so that even the most remote peasant or herder now depends to some degree on the market. It was also a century of war, butchery, deprivation and barbarity to match any in the past, so much so that the liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin described it as 'the most terrible century in Western history'. There was nothing in the last decades of the century to suggest things had magically improved for humanity as a whole. They saw the wholesale impoverishment of the former Eastern bloc, repeated famines and seemingly endless civil wars in different parts of Africa, nearly half Latin America's people living below the poverty line, an eight year war between Iran and Iraq, and military onslaughts by coalitions of the world's most powerful states against Iraq and Serbia.

History has not ended, and the need to understand its main features is as great as ever. I have written this book in the hope that it will aid some people in this understanding.

In doing so, I have necessarily relied on the efforts of numerous previous works. The section on the rise of class society, for instance, would have been impossible without the writings of the great Australian archaeologist V Gordon Childe, whose own book *What Happened in History* bears reading over and over again, even if it is dated in certain important details. Similarly, the section on the medieval world owes a big debt to the classic work of Marc Bloc and the output of the French Annales school of historians, the sections on the early 20th century to the works of Leon Trotsky, and on the later 20th century to the analyses of Tony Cliff. Readers with some knowledge of the material will notice a host of other influences, some quoted directly and mentioned in the text or the end notes, others no less important for not receiving explicit acknowledgement. Names like Christopher Hill, Geoffrey de Ste Croix, Guy Bois, Albert Soboul, Edward Thompson, James McPherson and D D Kosambi spring to mind. I hope my book will encourage people to read their work. For readers who want

to follow up particular periods, I include a brief list of further reading at the end of the book.

Dates are not the be-all and end-all of history, but the sequence of events is sometimes very important—and sometimes difficult for readers (and even writers!) to keep track of. For this reason, there is a brief chronology of the major events in a particular period at the beginning of each section. For a similar reason, I include at the end of the book glossaries of names, places and unfamiliar terms. These are not comprehensive, but aim to help readers of any one section to make sense of references to people, events and geographical locations dealt with more fully in others. Finally, I owe thanks to many people who have assisted me in turning a raw manuscript into a finished book—to Ian Birchall, Chris Bambery, Alex Callinicos, Charlie Hore, Charlie Kimber, Lindsey German, Talat Ahmed, Hassan Mahamdallie, Seth Harman, Paul McGarr, Mike Haynes, Tithi Bhattacharya, Barry Pavier, John Molyneux, John Rees, Kevin Ovenden and Sam Ashman for reading all or parts of the manuscript, noticing numerous inaccuracies and sometimes forcing me to reassess what I had written. None of them, needless to say, are responsible either for the historical judgements I make at various places, nor for any factual errors that remain. I owe special thanks to Ian Taylor for editing the manuscript, and to Rob Hoveman for overseeing the production of the final book.

Part one

The rise of class
societies

Chronology

4 million years ago

First apes to walk on two legs—*Australopithecus*.

1.5 million to 0.5 million years ago
Clearly human species, *Homo erectus*, tools of stone, wood and bone. Early 'old Stone Age'.

400,000 to 30,000 years ago
Neanderthal humans in Europe and Middle East—signs of culture and probable use of language.

150,000 years ago
First 'modern humans' (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), probably originated in Africa. Live by foraging (in small nomadic groups without classes, states or sexual oppression). Middle 'old Stone Age'.

80,000 to 14,000 years ago
Modern humans arrive Middle East (80,000 years ago); cross to Australia (40,000 years ago); arrive Europe (30,000 years ago); establish Americas (14,000 years ago). Late 'old Stone Age'.

13,000 years ago
Climate allows some humans to settle in villages a couple of hundred strong while continuing to live by foraging. 'Middle Stone Age' (Mesolithic).

10,000 years ago
First agricultural revolution. Domestication of plants and animals. Neolithic ('new Stone Age'). More advanced tools, use of pottery. Spread of village-living. First systematic war between groups. Still no division into classes or states.

7,000 years ago
Plough begins to be used in Eurasia and Africa. Agriculture reaches NW Europe. 'Chieftainships' among some groups, but no classes or states.

6,000 to 5,000 years ago
'Urban revolution' in river valleys of Middle East and Nile Valley, some use of copper.

5,000 years ago (3000 BC)
States emerge in Mesopotamia and 'Old Kingdom' Egypt. First alphabets, bronze discovered, clear division into social classes, religious hierarchies and temples. First pyramids in about

2,800 BC. 'Bronze Age'. Tendency for women to be seen as inferior to men.

4,500 to 4,000 years ago (2500 to 2000 BC)
Growth of city states in Indus Valley. Sargon establishes first empire to unite Middle East. Building of stone rings in western Europe. Probably Nubian civilisation south of Egypt.

4,000 years ago (around 2000 BC)
'Dark Age'—collapse of Mesopotamian Empire and of Egyptian 'Old Kingdom'. Iron smelted in Asia Minor.

4,000 to 3,600 years ago (2000 to 1600 BC)
Rise of 'Minoan' civilisation in Crete. Revival of Egypt with 'Middle Kingdom' and of Mesopotamian Empire under Hammurabi. Urban revolution takes off in northern China. Mycenaean civilisation in Greece.

3,600 years ago (1600 BC)
Crisis in Egypt with collapse of 'Middle Kingdom' into 'second intermediate period'. 'Dark Age' with collapse of Cretan, Indus and then Mycenaean, civilisations. Disappearance of literacy in these areas. 'Bronze Age' in northern China with Shang Empire.

3,000 years ago (1000 BC)
Uxum civilisation in Ethiopia. Growth of Phoenician city states around Mediterranean. 'Urban revolution' in 'Meso-America' with Olmec culture and in Andean region with Chavin.

2,800 to 2,500 years ago (800 to 500 BC)
New civilisations arise in India, Greece and Italy. Meroe in Nubia.

2,500 to 2,000 years ago (400 to 1 BC)
Olmec civilisation of Meso-America invents its own form of writing.

2,000 years ago (1st century AD)
Rise of Teotihuacan in Valley of Mexico—probably biggest city in world—despite having no use of hard metals. Deserted after about 400 years. Followed by rise of civilisations of Monte Alban and of Mayas in southern Mexico and Guatemala.

Prologue

Before class

The world as we enter the 21st century is one of greed, of gross inequalities between rich and poor, of racist and national chauvinist prejudice, of barbarous practices and horrific wars. It is very easy to believe that this is what things have always been like and that, therefore, they can be no different. Such a message is put across by innumerable writers and philosophers, politicians and sociologists, journalists and psychologists. They portray hierarchy, deference, greed and brutality as 'natural' features of human behaviour. Indeed, there are some who would see these as a feature throughout the animal kingdom, a 'sociobiological' imperative imposed by the alleged 'laws' of genetics.¹ There are innumerable popular, supposedly 'scientific' paperbacks which propagate such a view—with talk of humans as 'the naked ape' (Desmond Morris),² the 'killer imperative' (Robert Ardrey),³ and, in a more sophisticated form, as programmed by the 'selfish gene' (Richard Dawkins).⁴

Yet such Flintstones caricatures of human behaviour are simply not borne out by what we now know about the lives our ancestors lived in the innumerable generations before recorded history. A cumulation of scientific evidence shows that their societies were not characterised by competition, inequality and oppression. These things are, rather, the product of history, and of rather recent history. The evidence comes from archaeological findings about patterns of human behaviour worldwide until only about 5,000 years ago, and from anthropological studies of societies in different parts of the world which remained organised along similar lines until the 19th and earlier part of the 20th century. The anthropologist Richard Lee has summarised the findings:

Before the rise of the state and the entrenchment of social inequality, people lived for millennia in small-scale kin-based social groups, in which the core institutions of economic life included collective or common ownership of land and resources, generalised reciprocity in the distribution of food, and relatively egalitarian political relations.⁵

In other words, people shared with and helped each other, with no rulers and no ruled, no rich and no poor. Lee echoes the phrase used by Frederick Engels in the 1880s to describe this state of affairs, 'primitive communism'. The point is of enormous importance. Our species (modern humans, or *Homo sapiens sapiens*) is over 100,000 years old. For 95 per cent of this time it has not been characterised at all by many of the forms of behaviour ascribed to 'human nature' today. There is nothing built into our biology that makes present day societies the way they are. Our predicament as we face a new millennium cannot be blamed on it.

The origins of our species go much further back into the mists of time than 100,000 years. Our distant ancestors evolved out of a species of ape which lived some four or five million years ago in parts of Africa. For some unknown reason members of this species gave up living in trees, as do our closest animal relatives, the common chimpanzee and the bonobo (often called the 'pygmy chimpanzee'), and took to walking upright. They were able to survive in their new terrain by cooperating more than any other species of mammal, working together to make rudimentary tools (as chimps sometimes do) to dig up roots, reach high berries, gather grubs and insects, kill small animals and frighten off predators. The premium was on cooperation with each other, not competition against one another. Those who could not learn to adopt such forms of cooperative labour, and the new patterns of mental behaviour that went with them, died out. Those who could survive and reproduced.

Over millions of years this resulted in the evolution of a mammal whose genetic inheritance was very different to that of other mammals. It lacked the highly specialised physical features which enable other mammals to defend themselves (large teeth or claws), to keep warm (thick fur) or to flee (long legs). Instead, early humans were genetically programmed for extreme flexibility in response to the world around them—by being able to use their hands to hold and shape objects, being able to use their voices to communicate with each other, being able to investigate, study and generalise about the world around them, and being able, through long years of child rearing, to pass on their skills and learning. All this required the growth of large brains and the ability and desire to socialise. It also led to the development of a means of communicating with each other (language) qualitatively different to that of any other animals, and with it the ability to conceptualise about things which were not immediately present—that is, to become

conscious of the world around them and of themselves as beings within it.⁶ The emergence of modern humans, probably in Africa some 150,000 years ago, was the culmination of this process.⁷

Over the next 90,000 years groups of our ancestors slowly spread out from Africa to establish themselves in other parts of the globe, displacing other human species like the Neanderthals in the process.⁸ By at least 60,000 years ago they had reached the Middle East. By 40,000 years ago they had made their way to western Europe and also somehow managed to cross the band of sea separating the islands of south east Asia from Australia. By 12,000 years ago, at the latest, they had crossed the frozen Bering Straits to reach the Americas, and were scattered across every continent except Antarctica. The small groups which established themselves in each location were often almost completely isolated from each other for many thousands of years (melting ice made the Bering Straits impassable and raised the sea level to make the passage from south east Asia to Australia difficult). Their languages grew to be very different and each accumulated its own set of knowledge and developed distinctive forms of social organisation and culture. Certain minor hereditary characteristics became more marked among some than others (eye colour, hairiness, skin pigmentation and so on). But the genetic inheritance of the different groups remained extremely similar. Variations within each group were always greater than variations between them. All of them were equally capable of learning each other's language, and all had the same spread of intellectual aptitudes. The human species was separated into widely dispersed groupings. But it remained a single species. How each grouping developed depended not on anything specific about its genetic make up, but on how it adapted its manipulative skills and forms of cooperation to the needs of making a livelihood in its particular environment. It was the form taken by this adaptation which underlay the different societies which emerged, each with its own distinct customs, attitudes, myths and rituals.

The different societies shared certain common, fundamental features until about 10,000 years ago. This was because they all obtained their food, shelter and clothing in roughly the same way, through 'foraging'—that is, through getting hold of natural produce (fruit and nuts, roots, wild animals, fish and shellfish) and processing them for use. These societies were all what are normally called 'hunting and gathering'—or, better, 'foraging'—societies.⁹

Many survived in wide regions of the world until only a few hundred years ago, and the remnants of a few still exist at the time of writing. It has been by studying these that anthropologists such as Richard Lee have been able to draw conclusions about what life was like for the whole of our species for at least 90 percent of its history.

The reality was very different to the traditional Western image of such people as uncultured 'savages',¹⁰ living hard and miserable lives in 'a state of nature', with a bitter and bloody struggle to wrest a livelihood matched by a 'war of all against all', which made life 'nasty, brutish and short'.¹¹

People lived in loose-knit groups of 30 or 40 which might periodically get together with other groups in bigger gatherings of up to 200. But life in such 'band societies' was certainly no harder than for many millions of people living in more 'civilised' agricultural or industrial societies. One eminent anthropologist has even called them 'the original affluent society'.¹²

There were no rulers, bosses or class divisions in these societies. As Turnbull wrote of the Mbuti pygmies of Congo, 'There were no chiefs, no formal councils. In each aspect of... life there might be one or two men or women who were more prominent than others, but usually for good practical reasons... The maintenance of law was a cooperative affair'.¹³ People cooperated with each other to procure the means of livelihood without either bowing before a great leader or engaging in endless strife with each other. Ernestine Friedl reported from her studies, 'Men and women alike are free to decide how they will spend each day: whether to go hunting or gathering, and with whom'.¹⁴ Eleanor Leacock told of her findings: 'There was no... private land ownership and no specialisation of labour beyond that of sex... People made decisions about the activities for which they were responsible. Consensus was reached within whatever group would be carrying out a collective activity'.¹⁵ Behaviour was characterised by generosity rather than selfishness, and individuals helped each other, offering food they had obtained to other band members before taking it themselves. Lee comments, 'Food is never consumed alone by a family: it is always shared out among members of a living group or band... This principle of generalised reciprocity has been reported of hunter-gatherers in every continent and in every kind of environment'.¹⁶ He further reports that the group he studied, the !Kung¹⁷ people of the Kalahari (the so called 'Bushmen'), 'are a fiercely egalitarian people, and they have evolved a series of important

cultural practices to maintain this equality, first by cutting down to size the arrogant and boastful, and second by helping those down on their luck to get back in the game'.¹⁸ An early Jesuit missionary noted of another hunter-gathering people, the Montagnais of Canada, 'The two tyrants who provide hell and torture for many of our Europeans do not reign in their great forests—I mean ambition and avarice... not one of them has given himself to the devil to acquire wealth'.¹⁹

There was very little in the way of warfare, as Friedl notes:

Contests for territory between the men of neighbouring foraging groups are not unknown... But on the whole, the amount of energy men devote to training for fighting or time spent on war expeditions among hunter-gatherers is not great... Conflicts within bands are normally settled by the departure of one of the parties to the dispute.²⁰

Such evidence completely refutes claims by people such as Ardrey that the whole prehistory of humanity, from the time of *Australopithecus*—the first ape-like animal to walk on two legs—through to the emergence of literacy, was based on the 'killing imperative', that 'hunter-gatherer bands fought over water holes which tended all too often to vanish under the baking African sun', that we are all 'Cain's children', that 'human history has turned on the development of superior weapons... for genetic necessity', and that, therefore, only a thin veneer of 'civilisation' conceals an instinctive 'delight in massacre, slavery, castration and cannibalism'.²¹

This is of immense importance for any arguments about 'human nature'. For, if such a nature exists, it was moulded by natural selection during the long epoch of hunting and gathering. Richard Lee is quite right to insist:

It is the long experience of egalitarian sharing that has moulded our past. Despite our seeming adaptation to life in hierarchical societies, and despite the rather dismal track record of human rights in many parts of the world, there are signs that humankind retains a deep-rooted sense of egalitarianism, a deep-rooted commitment to the norm of reciprocity, a deep-rooted... sense of community.²²

From a very different perspective, Friedrich von Hayek, the favourite economist of Margaret Thatcher, complained that humans have

'long- submerged innate instincts' and 'primordial emotions' based on 'sentiments that were good for the small band', leading them to want 'to do good to known people'.²³

'Human nature' is, in fact, very flexible. In present day society it enables some people, at least, to indulge in the greed and competitiveness that Hayek enthused over. It has also permitted, in class societies, the most horrific barbarities—torture, mass rape, burning alive, wanton slaughter. Behaviour was very different among foraging peoples because the requirements of obtaining a livelihood necessitated egalitarianism and altruism.

Hunters and gatherers were necessarily intensely dependent on one another. The gatherers usually supplied the most reliable source of food, and the hunters that which was most valued. So those who specialised in hunting depended for their daily survival on the generosity of those who gathered, while those who specialised in gathering—and those who were temporarily unsuccessful in the hunt—relied for valued additions to their diet on those who managed to kill animals. The hunt itself did not usually consist of an individual male hero going off to make a kill, but comprised a group of men (sometimes with the auxiliary assistance of women and children) working together to chase and trap a prey. At every point, the premium was on cooperation and collective values. Without them, no band of foragers could have survived for more than a few days.

Linked to this was the absence of male supremacy over women. There was almost always a *division of labour* between the sexes, with the men doing most of the hunting and the women most of the gathering. This was because a woman who was pregnant or breastfeeding a child could only take part in the hunt by exposing it to dangers, and thus threatening the reproduction of the band. But this division did not amount to male dominance as we know it. Both women and men would take part in making key decisions, such as when to move camp or whether to leave one band and join another. The conjugal unit itself was loosely structured. Spouses could separate without suddenly jeopardising their own livelihood or that of their children. Missing was the male supremacism which is too often assumed to be part of 'human nature'.²⁴

Finally, there could not have been the obsession with private property that we take for granted today. The normal size of foraging bands was always restricted by the need to find enough food each day in the area of the camp. Within that area, the individual members

were continually moving from one source of plant food to another, or in pursuit of animals, while the band as a whole had to move on every so often as the food supplies in a locality were used up. Such continual movement precluded any accumulation of wealth by any band member, since everything had to be carried easily. At most an individual may have had a spear or bow and arrow, a carrying bag or a few trinkets. There would be no concept of the accumulation of personal wealth. The material conditions in which human beings lived conspired to produce very different societies and very different dominant ideas to those taken for granted today.

The history of humanity over the last few thousand years is, above all, the history of how such very different societies and sets of ideas developed. That history is woven out of the actions of innumerable men and women, each attempting to make decent lives for themselves, their companions and their loved ones, sometimes accepting the world as it is, sometimes desperate to change it, often failing, sometimes succeeding. Yet through these interminable, interlinking stories two things stand out. On the one hand, there is the cumulative increase in humanity's ability to extract a livelihood from nature, the overcoming of the primitive material conditions which were part of 'primitive communism'. On the other, there is the rise of successive forms of organisation of society that oppress and exploit the majority of people to the benefit of a small, privileged minority.

If we trace these parallel sets of changes we will be able see, eventually, how the world we face at the beginning of the 21st century arose. It is a world in which wealth can be produced on a scale undreamt of even by our grandparents, yet also a world in which the structures of class rule, oppression, and violence can seem as firmly entrenched as ever. A billion people live in desperate poverty, billions more are plagued by insecurity, wars and civil wars are endemic, and the very bases of human life are at risk from uncontrolled technological change. The dominating question for everybody ought to be whether it is possible to use the wealth to satisfy basic human needs by getting rid of the oppressive structures, to subordinate it to a society based upon the values that characterised the lives of our ancestors for the hundreds of generations of primitive communism.

But first, we have to look at how class rule and the state came into being.

The neolithic 'revolution'

The first big changes in people's lives and ideas began to occur only about 10,000 years ago. People took up a new way of making a livelihood in certain parts of the world, notably the 'Fertile Crescent' region of the Middle East.²⁵ They learned to cultivate crops instead of relying upon nature to provide them with vegetable foodstuffs, and to domesticate animals instead of simply hunting them. It was an innovation which was to transform their whole way of living.

The transformation did not necessarily lead these people to have an easier life than their forebears. But climatic changes gave some of them a very limited choice.²⁶ They had grown accustomed, over two or three millennia, to life in areas where conditions had been such as to provide bountiful supplies of wild plant food and animals to hunt—in one area in south east Turkey, for instance, a 'family group' could, 'without working very hard', gather enough grain from wild cereals in three weeks to keep them alive for a year. They did not need to be continually on the move like other peoples.²⁷ They had been able to live in the same places year after year, transforming their former rough camps into permanent village settlements numbering hundreds rather than dozens of people, storing foodstuffs in stone or baked clay pots, and accumulating a range of sophisticated stone tools. For a period of time greater than from the foundation of ancient Rome to the present day, they had been able to combine the low workloads typical of foraging societies with the advantages of fixed village life.

But then changes in the global climate prevented people obtaining an adequate livelihood in this way. As conditions in the Fertile Crescent region became drier and cooler, there was a decline in the availability of naturally occurring wild grains and a fall in the size of the antelope and deer herds. The hunter-gatherer villages faced a crisis. They could no longer live as they had been living. If they were not to starve they either had to break up into small groups and return

to a long-forgotten nomadic way of life, or find some way to make up for the deficiencies of nature by their own labour.

This path led to agriculture. People had accumulated immense amounts of knowledge about plant life over hundreds of generations of living off wild vegetation. Now some groups began to use this knowledge to guarantee food supplies by planting the seeds of wild plants. Observation taught them that the seeds of certain plants were much more fruitful than others and, by selecting such seeds, they began to breed new, domesticated varieties which were much more useful to them than wild plants could ever be. The regular harvests they obtained enabled them to tether and feed the more tame varieties of wild sheep, goats, cattle and donkeys, and to breed animals that were tamer still.

The first form of agriculture (often called 'horticulture') involved clearing the land by cutting away at woodland and brush with axes and burning off the rest, then planting and harvesting seeds using a hoe or a digging stick. After a couple of years the land would usually be exhausted. So it would be allowed to return to the wild and a new area would be cleared for cultivation.

Obtaining a livelihood in this way involved radical changes in patterns of working and living together. People became more firmly rooted to their village settlements than ever before. They had to tend the crops between planting and harvesting and so could not wander off for months at a time. They also had to work out ways of cooperating with each other to clear the land, to ensure the regular tending of crops (weeding, watering and so on), the storing of harvests, the sharing of stocks, and the rearing of children. Whole new patterns of social life developed and, with them, new ways of viewing the world, expressed in various myths, ceremonies and rituals.

The transformation is usually referred to as the 'neolithic revolution',²⁸ after the increasingly sophisticated 'neolithic' (meaning 'New Stone Age') tools associated with it. This involved a complete reorganisation of the way people worked and lived, even if the process took place over a prolonged period of time.

The archaeological evidence from the Fertile Crescent shows people living in small villages as separate households, although it does not tell us what the basis of these households was (whether, for instance, they were made up of separate couples and their children; of a mother, her daughter and their spouses; or of a father, his sons and their wives).²⁹

There was still nothing resembling class and state authority until many thousands of years after the first turn to agriculture. In the 'late Urbaid period' (4000 BC), 'significant differentiation' in 'wealth was almost entirely absent', and even in the 'protoliterate period' (toward 3000 BC), there was no indication that 'the processes of social stratification had as yet proceeded very far'.³⁰ There was no evidence of male supremacy, either. Some archaeologists have seen the existence of clay or stone statuettes of fecund female figures as suggesting a high status for women, so that men found it 'natural' to pray to women.³¹ However, one significant development was that weapons for warfare as well as for hunting became more prevalent.

The pattern seems to have been very similar to that in horticulture-based societies which survived into more recent times—in a few cases right through to the 20th century—in various parts of the world. These societies varied considerably, but did share certain general features.³²

Households tended to be associated with cultivating particular bits of land. But private property in land as we know it did not exist, and nor did the drive of individuals or households to pile up stocks of personal possessions at the expense of others. Instead, individual households were integrated into wider social groupings, 'lineages' of people, who shared (or at least purported to share) the same ancestry. These provided individuals and households with clearly defined rights and obligations towards others to whom they were related directly, or linked through marriage or through 'age group' associations. Each was expected to share food with the others, so that no household would suffer because of the failure of a crop or because it had more young children to bring up than others. Prestige came not from individual consumption, but from the ability to help make up for the deficiencies of others.

Many core values remained much closer to those of hunter-gatherer societies than to those we take for granted in class societies. Thus, an early 18th century observer of the Iroquois horticulturalists noted, 'If a cabin of hungry Iroquois meets another whose provisions are not entirely exhausted, the latter share with the newcomers the little which remains to them without waiting to be asked, although they expose themselves thereby to the same dangers of perishing as those whom they help'.³³ A classic study of the Nuer noted, 'In general it can be said that no one in a Nuer village starves unless all are starving'.³⁴

Once again, the explanation for such 'altruism' lay in the requirements

of obtaining a livelihood. It made sure, for example, that households with lots of labour but few mouths to feed provided assistance to those which had lots of mouths but little labour—especially those with many young children.³⁵ Children represented the future labour supply of the village as a whole. Such 'redistributional' mechanisms towards the biggest families were necessary if the group was to be protected from dying out.

Under hunting and gathering, the need to carry children on the daily round of gathering and on the periodic moves of the whole camp had led to very low birth rates. Women could not afford to have more than one child who required carrying at a time, so births were spaced every three or four years (if necessary through sexual abstinence, abortion or infanticide). With a fixed village life based on agriculture, the child did not have to be carried once it was a few months old, and the greater the number of children, the greater the area of land that could be cleared and cultivated in future. The premium was on larger families. The change in the method of production also had a profound impact on reproduction. Populations began to expand. Although the rate of growth was small by present standards (0.1 percent a year),³⁶ it quadrupled over two millennia, beginning the climb which took it from perhaps ten million at the time of the neolithic revolution to 200 million at the beginning of capitalism.

There were other big changes in horticulture-based societies compared with those of hunter-gatherers. A big dispute in a band of hunter-gatherers could be solved simply by the band splitting or by individuals leaving. This option was hardly open to a group of agriculturalists once they had cleared and planted their land. The village was larger and depended on a more complex, organised interaction between people than did the hunter-gatherer band. At the same time it faced a problem which hunter-gatherers did not—it had stocks of stored food and artefacts which provided a motive for attacks by armed raiders from outside. War, virtually unknown among hunter-gatherers, was endemic among many horticultural peoples. This gave a further impetus to formal decision-making mechanisms designed to exercise social control—to councils made up of senior figures in each lineage, for example.

People have made the move from hunting and gathering to farming in several parts of the world, independently of each other, in the ten millennia since—in Meso-America (present day Mexico and Guatemala), in the Andean region of South America, in at least three distinct parts

of Africa, in Indochina, in the Highland valleys of central Papua New Guinea, and in China.³⁷ In each case, changes occurred similar to those in Mesopotamia, although the different plants and animals available for domestication had an important impact on exactly how and to what degree. The evidence refutes any claim that some 'race' or 'culture' had a special 'genius' which led the rest of humanity forward. Rather, faced with changes in climate and ecology, different human groups in different parts of the world found they had to turn to new techniques to sustain anything like their old way of life—and found their ways of life began to change anyway, in a manner they could hardly have expected. In each case, the loose band gave way to life in villages, organised through strongly structured kin groups, rigid norms of social behaviour and elaborate religious rituals and myths.³⁸

A typical example of the independent development of agriculture was in Highland Papua New Guinea. Here people began domesticating and cultivating a variety of crops in about 7000 BC—sugar cane, certain varieties of bananas, a nut tree, the giant swamp taro, edible grass stems, roots and green vegetables. With cultivation they turned, as elsewhere, from nomadic or semi-nomadic hunter-gathering to village life. Their social organisation was centred on egalitarian kinship groups, and there was no private ownership of land. People continued to live like this, in valleys remote and virtually impenetrable from the coast, undisturbed by outside intrusion until they were 'discovered' by Westerners in the early 1930s.

Many early societies did not turn to agriculture. Some put up resistance to what they saw as needless drudgery when they could make a comfortable living through hunting and gathering. Others lived in environments—such as California, Australia and southern Africa—which provided neither plants nor animals that were easy to domesticate.³⁹ The groups which inhabited these regions for millennia had little choice but to subsist by hunting and gathering until contact with outsiders provided domesticated species from elsewhere.⁴⁰

Once agriculture was established in any part of the world, however, it proceeded to spread. Sometimes the success of a people in adopting agriculture encouraged others to imitate them. So the arrival of crop species from the Fertile Crescent seems to have played a role in the rise of agriculture in the Nile Valley, the Indus Valley and western Europe. Sometimes the spread of agriculture was the inevitable result of the spread of peoples who already practised it as

their populations grew and some split off to build new villages on previously uncultivated lands. It was in this way that Bantu speakers from west Africa spread into the centre and eventually the south of the continent, and Polynesians from south east Asia spread across the oceans to Madagascar off the African coast, to Easter Island (only 1,500 miles from the South American coast) and to New Zealand.

The existence of an agriculturist society often changed the lives of the hunter-gatherer peoples who came into contact with it. They found they could radically improve their livelihoods by exchanging products with nearby agriculturists—fish, game or animal skins for grain, woven clothing or fermented drinks. This encouraged some to turn to one aspect of agriculture, the breeding and herding of animals, without also cultivating crops. Such 'pastoralist peoples' were soon to be found in Eurasia, Africa and the southern Andes of South America, wandering the land between agricultural settlements—sometimes raiding them, sometimes trading with them—and developing characteristic patterns of social life of their own.

On occasions the spread of crop raising and herding led to one final important change in social life—the first differentiation into social ranks. What anthropologists call 'chieftainships' or 'big men' arose, with some individuals or lineages enjoying much greater prestige than others, and this could culminate in the establishment of hereditary chiefs and chiefly lineages. But even these were not anything like the class distinctions we take for granted, with one section of society consuming the surplus which others toil to produce.

Egalitarianism and sharing remained all-pervasive. Those people with high status had to serve the rest of the community, not live off it. As Richard Lee notes, there were the same 'communal property concepts' as in hunter-gatherer societies: 'Much of what tribute the chiefs receive is redistributed to subjects, and the chiefs' powers are subject to checks and balances by the forces of popular opinion and institutions'.⁴¹ So among the Nambikwara of South America, 'Generosity is . . . an essential attribute of power', and 'the chief' must be prepared to use the 'surplus quantities of food, tools, weapons and ornaments' under his control to respond 'to the appeals of an individual, a family or the band as a whole' for anything they need.⁴² This could even result in the leader having a harder time materially than those under him. Thus, among the New Guinea Busama, the clubhouse leader 'has to work harder than anyone else to keep up his

stocks of food... It is acknowledged he must toil early and late—"his hands are never free from earth, and his forehead continually drips with sweat".⁴³

The 'New Stone Age' turn to agriculture transformed people's lives, spreading village living and warfare. To this extent it was indeed a certain sort of 'revolution'. But society still lacked most of the elements we take for granted today: class division, the establishment of permanent state apparatuses based on full time bureaucrats and bodies of armed men, the subordination of women—none of these things had arisen. They would not do so until there was a second series of changes in the ways people gained a livelihood—until what Gordon Childe called the 'urban revolution' was superimposed on the 'neolithic revolution'.

The first civilisations

Civilisation, in the strict sense of people living in cities, goes back just over 5,000 years. The first indications of it are the great edifices found in very different parts of the world—the pyramids of Egypt and Central America, the ziggurats (staged tower temples) of Iraq, the palace of Knossos in Crete, the fortress at Mycenae in mainland Greece, and the grid-planned 4,000 year old cities of Harappa and Mohenjodero on the Indus. For this reason the archaeologist Gordon Childe baptised the change 'the urban revolution'.⁴⁴ The remains are stunning enough in themselves. Even more amazing is the fact that they were built by peoples who a few generations previously had known nothing but a purely rural life based on fairly rudimentary agriculture. Now they were in possession of elaborate construction skills, capable of quarrying, transporting, erecting and carving huge chunks of rock, and then decorating them with elaborate artistic works—even, in certain cases (the Mesopotamian, the Egyptian, the Ethiopian, the Chinese and the Meso-American), of developing scripts with which to describe how they behaved and felt. In Eurasia and Africa they also learnt at this stage to obtain copper and tin from rock oxides, and some time afterwards to fuse them into a harder metal, bronze, for making ornaments and weapons—hence the often used terms for the period, the 'Copper' and 'Bronze' Ages.

None of this could have happened without a prior change in the way in which people made their livelihood, a change that was initially centred on agriculture. The earliest forms of agriculture, using fairly elementary techniques and involving naturally found varieties of plants and animals, could lead over generations to slow increases in agricultural productivity, enabling some peoples to gain a satisfactory livelihood while continuing to enjoy considerable leisure.⁴⁵ But conditions were by no means always as idyllic as is suggested by some romanticised 'noble savage' accounts of indigenous peoples. There were many cases in which the growth in food output did little more

than keep abreast with the rise in population. People were exposed to sudden famines by natural events beyond their control, 'droughts or floods, tempests or frosts, blights or hailstorms'.⁴⁶ The history of the pre-Hispanic peoples of Meso-America, for example, is one of years in which they found it easy to feed themselves interspersed with unexpected and devastating famines.⁴⁷

There were only two options if such groups were to maintain their settled way of life. One was to resort to raiding other agriculturists for food, so that warfare became a growing feature of such societies. Stone battle axes and flint daggers became increasingly common, for instance, in the later stages of the neolithic revolution in Europe. The other option was to develop more intensive and productive forms of agriculture. There was a premium on technological innovation. Farming groups which undertook it could survive the threat of famine. Those which did not eventually died out or fell apart.

Innovation could mean simply improving existing crop varieties or learning to fatten domesticated animals more effectively. But it could also mean much more far-reaching changes. One was the discovery, in Eurasia and Africa, that large domesticated mammals (initially oxen, much later horses) pulling a shaped piece of wood—a plough—through the soil could be much more effective in breaking up the ground for sowing than any hand-held hoe. Another was the building of dams and ditches to protect crops from flooding and to channel water to areas of land that would otherwise become parched and infertile. Then there was the collection of animal dung as fertiliser to avoid exhausting the soil and having to clear new land every few years. Other techniques discovered in one part of the world or another were the draining of marshland, the digging of wells, the terracing of hillsides and the laborious cultivation and then transplanting of rice seedlings (in southern China).

These new techniques, like all human labour, had a double aspect. On the one hand they provided people with additional means of livelihood. Groups which previously had only been able to produce enough for subsistence could begin to produce a surplus. On the other hand, there were changes in people's social relations.

The new techniques depended upon different forms of cooperation between people. The use of the plough, for instance, encouraged an increased division of labour between the sexes, since it was a form of heavy labour not easily done by women bearing or nursing children.

The building and maintenance of regular irrigation channels required the cooperation of dozens or even hundreds of households. It also encouraged a division between those who supervised work and those who undertook it. The storing of food encouraged the emergence of groups responsible for maintaining and supervising the food stocks. The existence of a surplus for the first time permitted some people to be freed from agricultural activities to concentrate on craftwork, preparing for warfare or exchanging local products for those of other peoples.

Gordon Childe described the transformation which occurred in Mesopotamia between 5,000 and 6,000 years ago as people settled in the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. They found land which was extremely fertile, but which could only be cultivated by 'drainage and irrigation works', which depended upon 'cooperative effort'.⁴⁸ More recently Maisels has suggested people discovered that by making small breaches in the banks between river channels they could irrigate wide areas of land and increase output considerably. But they could not afford to consume all the extra harvest immediately, so some was put aside to protect against harvest failure.⁴⁹

Grain was stored in sizeable buildings which, standing out from the surrounding land, came to symbolise the continuity and preservation of social life. Those who supervised the granaries became the most prestigious group in society, overseeing the life of the rest of the population as they gathered in, stored and distributed the surplus. The storehouses and their controllers came to seem like powers over and above society, the key to its success, which demanded obedience and praise from the mass of people. They took on an almost supernatural aspect. The storehouses were the first temples, their superintendents the first priests.⁵⁰ Other social groups congregated around the temples, concerned with building work, specialised handicrafts, cooking for and clothing the temple specialists, transporting food to the temples and organising the long distance exchange of products. Over the centuries the agricultural villages grew into towns and the towns into the first cities, such as Uruk, Lagash, Nippur, Kish and Ur (from which the biblical patriarch Abraham supposedly came).

A somewhat similar process occurred some two and a half millennia later in Meso-America. Irrigation does not seem to have played such a central role, at least initially, since maize was a bountiful enough crop to provide a surplus without it in good years.⁵¹ But vulnerability

to crop failures encouraged the storage of surpluses and some form of co-ordination between localities with different climates. There was a great advantage for the population as a whole if a specialised group of people coordinated production, kept account of the seasons and looked after the storehouses. Here, too, storehouses turned, over time, into temples and supervisors into priests, giving rise to the successive cultures of the Olmecs, Teotihuacan, the Zapotecs and the Mayas, as is shown by their huge sculptures, magnificent pyramids, temples, ceremonial brick ball courts and elaborately planned cities (Teotihuacan's population rose to perhaps 100,000 in the early centuries AD).

In both the Middle East and Meso-America something else of historic importance occurred. The groups of priestly administrators who collected and distributed the stockpiles belonging to the temples began to make marks on stone or clay to keep a record of incomings and outgoings. Over time pictorial images of particular things were standardised, sometimes coming to express the sound of the word for the object they portrayed, until a way was provided of giving permanent visual expression of people's sentences and thoughts. In this way writing was invented. The temple guardians also had time and leisure to make detailed observations of the sky at night, correlating the movements of the moon, the planets and the stars with those of the sun. Their ability to predict future movements and events such as eclipses gave them a near magical status. But they also learnt to produce calendars based on the moon and the sun which enabled people to work out the best time of the year for planting crops. Such efforts led to mathematics and astronomy taking root in the temples, even if in the magical form of astrology. As Gordon Childe put it, 'The accumulation of a substantial social surplus in the temple treasuries—or rather granaries—was actually the occasion of the cultural advance that we have taken as the criterion of civilisation'.⁵²

Once writing had been developed by the earliest civilisations in Mesopotamia and Meso-America, it was adopted by many of the peoples who came into contact with them, using their own variants to write in their own languages. It spread at great speed across the Middle East some 5,000 years ago, and on into central, eastern and south Asia, north east Africa and Mediterranean Europe. It was used by all Meso-American civilisations from the Olmecs on. There were, however, civilisations which managed to develop to a high degree without writing—most significantly those in South America, which used

markings as an aid to memory without ever moving on to transcribe the spoken word.

There is only room here to provide a few examples of the transition to intensive agriculture and urban life. It happened in several different parts of the world as people took up new ways of gaining a livelihood. There were also many instances of agricultural societies going at least part of the way in this direction, reaching a level where hundreds or even thousands of people could be mobilised to construct imposing stone edifices—as with the stone temples of the third and fourth millennium BC in Malta, the stone circles of western Europe (of which Stonehenge is the best known), the giant statues of Easter Island and the stepped platforms of Tahiti.⁵³ Sometimes the move towards 'civilisation' would be influenced to some degree by developments elsewhere.⁵⁴ But this does not alter the fact that the processes leading to the formation of towns and cities, and often to the invention of writing, began independently in several different locations because of the internal dynamic of society once agriculture advanced beyond a certain point. This makes a nonsense of any claim that one group of the world's people are somehow 'superior' to others because they arrived at 'civilisation' first.

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'.⁵⁵ 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'.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

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'.⁵⁸ 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'.⁵⁹

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'.⁶⁰

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'.⁶¹

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'.⁶² Among the Mayas 'multi-roomed buildings or palaces' proved society was 'sharply differentiated into elite and commoner strata'.⁶³

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.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵

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'.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷

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'.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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',⁷⁰ with those at the top imposing the demands of the ruling class on the rest—and among the Incas through similar 'ayllullu'.⁷¹ 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,⁷² 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.

Women's oppression

Women everywhere lost out with the polarisation of society into classes and the rise of the state. There was a shift in their status, described by Frederick Engels more than a century ago as 'the world historic defeat of the female sex'. From being co-decision-makers with men, they were thrust into a position of dependence and subordination. The exact nature of the subordination varied enormously from one class society to another, and from class to class in each society. But it existed everywhere that class existed. So universal did it become that even today it is usually treated as an invariant product of human nature.

The change was rooted in the new relations that grew up between people with the production of a surplus. The new intensive production techniques tended to prioritise men's labour over women's for the first time. Gathering, the main source of nutrition for hunter-gatherer societies, had been fully compatible with childbearing and breastfeeding. So had early forms of agriculture based on the hoe. But heavy ploughing and herding of cattle and horses were not. Societies in which women did these things would have low birthrates and stagnating populations, and lose out to societies which excluded most women from these roles. Gordon Childe pointed out long ago that among 'barbarians', purely agricultural peoples, 'whereas women normally hoe plots it is men who plough. And even in the oldest Sumerian and Egyptian documents the ploughmen really are males'.⁷³ He suggested, 'The plough...relieved women of the most exacting drudgery, but deprived them of the monopoly over the cereal crops and the social status which it conferred'.⁷⁴ Key decisions about the future of the household or lineage became male decisions, since it was males who would implement them. Other changes which accompanied the growth of the surplus had a similar impact. Women could engage in local trade, and there were cases of women playing a part in warfare. But long distance trade and serious soldiering became

male monopolies. Warriors and merchants were overwhelmingly male—and, as they increasingly exercised control over the surplus, ownership and power tended to become male prerogatives. The break up of the old clan lineages accentuated the trend. The individual adult woman was no longer part of a wider network of relationships which gave her some say over the use of productive means and some protection against arbitrary treatment. Instead, she became simply a 'wife', a subordinate in a strange household.⁷⁵ Ruling class women were increasingly treated as one more possession of a male controller of the surplus, valued as an ornament, a source of sexual pleasure or as a breeder of heirs. They would be protected from hardship and external dangers, but also cocooned from any interaction with the wider social world. Life was very different for women in agricultural or artisan households. They still had a productive role and were engaged in endless toil. Nevertheless, it was their husbands who controlled relations between the household and the rest of society, imposing on the women and children the measures needed to ensure the household's survival (including successive pregnancies for the wife).⁷⁶ Among the exploiting and the exploited classes alike there was literally 'patriarchy'—rule of the father over the other members of the household. Its imprint was soon to be found in all ideologies and all religions. Female gods and priestesses increasingly played a secondary role, surviving as mother figures or symbols of beauty rather than as active participants in the creation and organisation of the world.

Women's roles were not changeless or uniform across all classes and societies. Women's oppression among the peasantry took a very different form to that among the aristocracies—and a different form again among slaves who, whether male or female, were not allowed to live in households of their own. Widows were common everywhere, because of relatively high death rates among young adults, and often ended up running a peasant or artisan household, or even a kingdom, very much as a man would. In some societies women were denied all rights—in others they were allowed to own and inherit property, and to initiate divorce proceedings. The fact that women were everywhere oppressed did not mean that their oppression was everywhere the same, as the 'patriarchy' theories so common among feminist academics in the 1980s implied. It did, however, mean that their position was inferior to what it had been under primitive communism.

The growth of the first exploiting classes further influenced the

whole development of society. The methods used by the exploiters to buttress their rule began to eat up a major portion of society's resources. Expenditures on servants, on professional police or military forces, on building huge temples, palaces or tombs to celebrate their powers, necessitated further exploitation and oppression of the masses—and further justified exploitation and oppression as the only way to keep society going. There was also an added incentive for external warfare as a means of grabbing the resources of other societies. Yet endemic war caused further suffering for the mass of people. It also encouraged the emergence of ruling classes and states among neighboring peoples, as they came to accept that only the centralisation of the surplus into a few hands could provide them with the means of defence.⁷⁷ Overall, however 'functional' for society as a whole the rise of a ruling group may once have been, beyond a certain point it became a drag on society. This was shown dramatically by events in the Middle East, the Indus Valley and the eastern Mediterranean between 1,000 and 1,500 years after the rise of the first civilisations.

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 Saqqara⁷⁸ 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'.⁷⁹ 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'.⁸⁰

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.⁸¹

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.⁸²

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'.⁸³

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'.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶

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'.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸

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.⁸⁹

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'.⁹⁰

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'.⁹¹ 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.⁹² 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.⁹³

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.⁹⁴

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'.⁹⁵

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'.⁹⁶

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.⁹⁷

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.

Chronology

1000 to 500 BC

Spread of iron making, weapons and tools across Asia, Europe, and west and central Africa. Phonetically based scripts in Middle East, Indian subcontinent and Mediterranean area.

Clearing and cultivation of Ganges valley in India, new civilisation, rise of four caste system, Vedic religion.

Phoenician, Greek and Italian city states. Unification of Middle East into rival empires based on Mesopotamia or Nile. Emergence of a small number of 'warring states' in China.

600 to 300 BC

Flourishing of 'classical' civilisations. Confucius and Mencius in China. The Buddha in India. Aeschylus, Plato, Aristotle, Democritus in Greece. Class struggles in Greece.

Conquest of Middle East by Macedonian armies of Alexander and of most of Indian subcontinent by Mauryan Empire of Ashoka.

Struggles between Plebeians and Patricians in Rome. City conquers most of Italy.

300 to 1 BC

Disintegration of Mauryan Empire in India, but continued growth of trade and handicraft industry. Hindu Brahmins turn against cow slaughter.

First Ch'in emperor unifies north China. Massive growth of iron working, handicraft industries and trade. Building of Great Wall and of canal and road systems. Peasant revolt brings Han Dynasty to power.

Rome conquers whole Mediterranean region and Europe south of Rhine. Spread of slavery and impoverishment of peasantry in Italy. Peasants support Gracchus brothers, murdered in 133 and 121. Slave revolts in Sicily (130s) and in Italy under Spartacus (70s). Civil wars. Julius Caesar takes power 45. Augustus becomes emperor 27.

AD 1 to 200

Peak of Roman Empire. Crushes revolt in Palestine AD 70. Paul of Tarsus splits new sect of 'Christians' away from Judaism.

Discovery of steel making in China. Extension of Han Empire into Korea,

central Asia, south China, Indochina. Confucianism state ideology.

Spread of peasant agriculture and Hinduism into south India and then to Malay peninsular and Cambodia. Indian merchants finance great Buddhist monasteries, carry religion to Tibet and Ceylon.

AD 200 to 500

Chinese Han Empire disintegrates. Collapse of urban economy, fragmentation of countryside into aristocratic estates, loss of interest in 'classic' literature. Buddhism spreads among certain groups.

Gupta Empire unites much of in India in 5th century, flowering of art and science.

Growing crises in Roman Empire. Technological and economic stagnation. Trade declines. Slavery gives way to taxes and rents from peasants bound to land. Peasant revolts in France and Spain. Increased problems in defending empire's borders. Rise of cults of Osiris, Mithraism and Christianity.

Constantine moves capital to Greek city of Byzantium (330), makes Christianity the empire's official religion. Persecution of pagan religions, other Christian beliefs and Jews. Rise of monasticism. Division of empire. Loss of England to empire (407). Alarick's Goths sack Rome (410).

AD 500 and after

'Dark Ages' in western Europe. Population falls by half. Collapse of trade, town life and literacy.

Eastern empire survives to reach peak under Justinian in 530s-550s, with building of Saint Sophia cathedral, then declines.

Collapse of Gupta Empire in India. Decline of trade, towns, use of money and Buddhist religion. Agriculture and artisan trades carried out in virtually self contained villages for benefit of feudal rulers. Ideological domination by Brahman priests. Full establishment of elaborate hierarchy of many castes. Decline in literature, art and science.

Continued fragmentation of China until rise of Sui Dynasty (581) and then T'ang Dynasty (618) see revival of economy and trade.

Chapter 1

Iron and empires

The second great phase in the history of civilisation began among the peasants and pastoralists who lived in the lands around the great empires, not in the states dominated by the priests and pharaohs. It depended on the efforts of people who could learn from the achievements of the urban revolution—use copper and bronze, employ the wheel, even adapt foreign scripts to write down their own languages—without being sucked dry by extortion and brainwashed by tradition.

There were societies across wide swathes of Eurasia and Africa which began to make use of the technological advances of the 'urban revolution'. Some developed into smaller imitations of the great empires—as seems to have been the case with Solomon's empire in Palestine, described in the Old Testament. Others were much less burdened, at first, with elaborate, expensive and stultifying superstructures. There was greater freedom for people to innovate; and also greater incentive for them to do so.

The adoption of these techniques was accompanied by concentration of the surplus in the hands of ruling classes, much as had happened in the original urban revolutions. But these were new ruling classes, from lands with lower natural fertility than those of the early civilisations. Only if they encouraged new techniques could they obtain a level of surplus comparable to that of those civilisations.

They could then take advantage of the crises of the ancient civilisations, tearing at them from the outside just as class tensions weakened them from within. 'Aryans' from the Caspian region fell upon the decaying Indus civilisation; people from south east Europe, speaking a related 'Indo-European' language, tore at Mycenaean Greece; a little known group, the 'Sea People', attacked Egypt; the Hittites captured Mesopotamia; and a new Chou dynasty ousted the Shang from China.

In Mesopotamia, Egypt and China the essential continuity of civilisation was unaffected and empires soon re-emerged, revitalised by new

techniques. The conquest of the Indus and Mycenaean civilisations led to the complete disappearance both of urban life and of literacy. Yet external incursion was not wholly negative even in these cases. It played a contradictory role. On the one hand, the conquerors destroyed part of the old productive apparatus—for instance, the irrigation works that allowed the Indus cities to feed themselves. On the other, they brought with them new technologies, such as the ox-drawn plough which made possible the cultivation of the heavy soil of north India's plains. There was an expansion of peasant production, and eventually a much larger surplus than previously in the region.

The most important new technique emerged around 2000 BC in the Armenian mountains—and several hundred years later in west Africa.¹ This was the smelting of iron. Its slow diffusion transformed production and warfare.

Copper and its alloy, bronze, had been in use since the early stages of the urban revolution. But their production was expensive and depended on obtaining relatively rare ores from distant locations. What is more, their cutting edges were quickly blunted. As a result, they were ideal as weapons or ornaments for the minority who controlled the wealth, but much less useful as tools with which the mass of people could work. So even the workers on the pyramids, tombs and temples often used stone tools a millennium and a half after the urban revolution, and copper and bronze implements seem to have been little used by cultivators.

Iron ore was very much more abundant than copper. Turning it into metal required more elaborate processes. But once smiths knew how to do so, they could turn out knives, axes, arrowheads, plough tips and nails for the masses. The effect on agriculture was massive. The iron axe enabled cultivators to clear the thickest woodlands, the iron-tipped plough to break up the heaviest soil. And the relative cheapness of the iron spear and iron sword weakened the hold of the military aristocracies, allowing peasant infantry to cut down knights in bronze armour.

By the 7th century BC new civilisations based on the new techniques were on the ascendant. The Assyrian Empire stretched from the Nile to eastern Mesopotamia, welding an unprecedented number and diversity of peoples into a single civilisation, with a single script for the different languages. A new civilisation began to develop in northern India, with the regrowth of trade and the building of cities

after a lapse of nearly 1,000 years. A handful of kingdoms began to emerge in northern China out of the chaotic warfare of 170 rival statelets. And around the Mediterranean—in Palestine, Lebanon, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy and north Africa—city states grew up free of the extreme political and ideological centralisation of the old Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires.

New productive techniques were matched by scientific advance and ideological ferment. There had been a growth in certain areas of scientific learning, especially mathematics and astronomy, in Bronze Age Mesopotamia and Egypt. But these advances were based on the persistence of priesthoods which, over two millennia, were increasingly cut off from material life, their findings embedded in complex and abstruse religious systems. Renewed advance depended on breaking with these. It came, not in the centres of the old civilisations—the Mesopotamian cities of Ashur and Babylon or the Egyptian cities of Memphis or Thebes—but in the new cities of northern India, northern China and the Mediterranean coast.

The new and reinvigorated civilisations shared certain common features as well as the use of iron. They saw a proliferation of new crafts; a growth of long distance trade; a rise in the importance of merchants as a social class; the use of coins to make it easy even for lowly cultivators and artisans to trade with each other; the adoption (except in China) of new, more or less phonetically based, alphabets which made literacy possible for much wider numbers of people; and the rise of 'universalistic' religions based on adherence to a dominant god, principle of life or code of conduct. Finally, all the new civilisations were, like the old, based on class divisions. There was no other way of pumping a surplus out of cultivators who were often hungry. But there were considerable differences between the civilisations. Material factors—environment, climate, the pool of already domesticated species, geographical location—affected how people made a livelihood and how the rulers took control of the surplus. These, in turn, influenced everything else that happened.

Ancient India

The 'Aryan' invaders who destroyed the Indus civilisation in around 1500 BC were originally nomadic herders, living on milk and meat and led by warrior chieftains. They had no use for the ancient cities, which they ransacked and then abandoned. Neither did they have any use for the written word, and the script used by the old civilisation died out.

At this stage they practised a 'Vedic' religion, which reflected their way of life. Its rituals centred on the sacrifice of animals, including cattle, and its mythology, conveyed in long sagas memorised by 'Brahman' priests, told of the exploits of warrior gods. The mythology also came to embody a doctrine which justified the bulk of the surplus going to the warrior rulers and priests on the grounds that these were 'twice born' groups, innately superior to other people. But the fully fledged system of classical Hinduism, with its four hereditary castes, did not crystallise until there was a change in way people gained a livelihood and, with it, a transformation of the Vedic religion into a rather different set of practices and beliefs.

The slow spread of iron technology from about 1000 BC initiated the change in the way of life. The iron axe made it possible to begin to clear and cultivate the previously jungle-ridden Ganges region, providing the warrior rulers and their priestly helpers with a much larger surplus. These groups encouraged the spread of agriculture, but also insisted that the cultivators deliver to them a portion, perhaps a third or even half, of each village's crop as tribute. Compliance with their demands was brought about by force, and backed the religious designation of the ordinary 'Aryans' as a lower caste of *vaisyas* (cultivators) and conquered peoples as a bottom caste of *sudras* (toilers). Caste arose out of a class organisation of production in the villages (although one not based on private property), and its persistence over millennia was rooted in this.

But, even as class in the countryside was giving rise to the nation

of a simple division of humanity into four castes, further changes in the ways people made a livelihood were complicating the issue. The very success of the new agricultural methods in providing a growing surplus for the rulers also led to the growth of non-village based social groups. The rulers wanted new luxury goods and better armaments, and encouraged crafts like carpentry, metal smelting, spinning, weaving and dyeing. There was a spread of trade across the subcontinent and beyond. As with the earlier urban revolutions, clusters of artisans and traders began to settle around the temples and military camps and along trade routes, until some villages had grown into towns and some towns into cities. Some of the warrior leaders were able to carve out kingdoms for themselves. By the 6th century BC, 16 major states dominated northern India; one, Magadha,² had swallowed up the others by 321 BC to form an empire across most of northern India east of the river Indus (bordering the Greek Empire established by Alexander the Great, which ruled the lands west of the river).

The rise of this 'Maurya' Indian empire gave a further boost to urban development. It secured land trade routes to Iran and Mesopotamia in one direction and to the kingdoms of northern China in the other. Sea routes connected it to Arabia, Egypt, east Africa and South East Asia. It was a key link in an emerging world (or at least 'old world') trade system. A Greek emissary believed the Magadhan capital, Pataliputra, to be the most impressive city in the known world. He estimated the Magadhan army to consist of 6,000 elephants, 80,000 cavalry and 200,000 infantry.³ The figures are undoubtedly an exaggeration. But the fact that he believed them gives some idea of the scale and splendour of the empire.

The Maurya monarchy obtained the enormous surplus this required by 'an unprecedented expansion of economic activity by the state', with 'state control of agriculture, industry and trade', and monopolies in mining and in the salt, liquor and mineral trades. It was in a position to equip soldiers with metal weapons and to provide tools and implements for agriculture and industry. Its taxes financed a huge standing army and 'a vast, numerous bureaucracy', reaching right down to the village level, with groups of villages having 'an accountant, who maintained boundaries, registered land... and kept a census of the population and a record of the livestock', and a 'tax collector who was concerned with each type of revenue... Providing further support for the whole structure was an elaborate system of spies'.⁴

The Maurya state was not, in its early years, purely parasitic, and undertook some measures which were positive for society as a whole. It used some of the huge surplus for 'the development of the rural economy'—founding new settlements, encouraging *sudras* to settle as farmers with land granted by the state,⁵ organising irrigation projects and controlling the distribution of water. It discouraged the emergence of private property in land and banned its sale in an effort to prevent local notables hogging the surplus produced in these new settlements.

The spread of settled agriculture, the rise of trade and cities, and the emergence of powerful states brought enormous changes in people's lives and, of necessity, in their attitudes to the world around them and to each other. The old gods had proclaimed, in spiritual terms, the merits of herding and fighting. New ones now began to arise who stressed the virtues of cultivation. There was also a changing attitude to a central resource of both the old and the new way of making a livelihood—cattle.

Previously, people had valued cattle as a source of meat. Now they were the only motive power for ploughing heavy land and had to be protected. Even if a peasant family was starving, it had to be prevented from killing the only means of cultivating the next year's crop, and of providing the warriors and the priests with an adequate income. Out of this need emerged, after a period of religious turmoil, the seemingly irrational veneration of the cow and the ban on cattle slaughter which characterises modern Hinduism.

The development of urban life added to the religious flux. The new occupational groups of artisans and traders were very often hereditary groups, if only because the easiest way to learn complicated techniques was to study them from an early age in the family home. The knowledge of each craft or trade was embodied in customary lore which was tied in with its own rituals and presided over by its own gods. The religion of the Brahmans could only dominate the mind-set of all the craft and trade groups if it found a place for these gods and, similarly, fitted the practitioners of the new skills into the increasingly rigid and hereditary four-caste system of warriors, priests, cultivators and toilers.

A revolution in social behaviour necessitated a revolution in religious doctrine and practices. As people from different social groups tried to come to terms with the contradictions between new realities and old beliefs, they did so in different ways. Scores of sects arose in

6th century north India, each rearranging elements of the traditional beliefs into its own particular pattern, often clashing bitterly with each other and with the established Brahman priests. Out of these emerged religions that survive to the present day.

The best known of these sects were to be the Jain followers of Mahavira and the Buddhist followers of Gautama. They had certain points in common. They opposed blood sacrifices and animal slaughter. They counterposed *ahimsa* (non-killing) to warfare. They rejected caste distinctions—their founders were not Brahmans. They tended to stress the need for a rational understanding of events and processes, in some cases dispensing with the old tales of godly adventures and exploits to such an extent as to border on materialism and atheism.

Such doctrines fitted the society which was emerging. They protected its supply of draught animals and expressed the distaste of the cultivators, artisans and merchants at the wanton destruction of war. They appealed to the resentment of economically thriving members of these social groups at being discriminated against by the increasingly trenchant caste rules of the Brahmans. They also appealed to some of the rulers (the emperor Ashoka, 264-227 BC, even converted to Buddhism, supposedly through remorse at the carnage of his greatest military victory). The repudiation of caste distinctions could aid monarchs in their struggle to stop the upper castes in each locality diverting the surplus into their own pockets. It could gain backing from the new social groups of the towns for the empire. Even the doctrine of non-violence could help an already successful conqueror maintain internal peace against possible challengers. A 'universalist' system of beliefs suited a 'universal' monarchy.

The empire did not last long, falling apart soon after Ashoka's death. The huge army and bureaucratic apparatus put too much strain on the empire's resources. Communications were still too primitive for any emperor to curb the power of local notables indefinitely. But this time the disintegration of the empire did not bring the collapse of civilisation. Agriculture and trade continued to expand. Roman coins circulated in south India and ships carried goods to and from the Roman world, Ethiopia, Malaya and south east Asia. Indian merchants were 'the entrepreneurs in the trade supplying the luxury foods of the Graeco-Roman world'.⁶ The artisan crafts flourished. 'Cloth making, silk weaving and the making of arms and luxury items seems to have made progress', and 'perhaps in no other period had a money

economy penetrated so deeply into the life of the common people in the towns and suburbs.⁷ Such economic expansion made possible the formation of another, less centralised, empire, that of the Guptas, half a millennium after the collapse of the first.

Patronage of learning and the arts now came from merchants and their guilds as well as from royalty. Their donations financed magnificent religious monuments, immaculate cave carvings and Buddhist monasteries. There was an exchange not merely of goods, but also of ideas with the Graeco-Roman world. Philosophers on the Ganges would have some knowledge of debates in Athens and Alexandria, and vice-versa. Many commentators have seen the influence of Buddhist religious notions on early Christianity, while a version of Christianity got a minority hearing in certain coastal Indian towns in the early centuries AD.

Scientific inquiry flourished alongside religious mysticism. 'The highest intellectual achievement of the subcontinent' was in mathematics.⁸ By 200 BC 'detailed geometry' was making possible the calculations for arcs and segments of chords. Romano-Greek science made its influence felt in southern India, but mathematicians went beyond 'Ptolemy's method of reckoning in terms of chords of circles' to 'reckoning in sines, thereby initiating the study of trigonometry'.⁹ This was followed by the perfection of the decimal system, the solution of certain indeterminate equations, an accurate calculation of the value of π by Aryabhata, and, by the 7th century AD at the latest, the use of zero, something unknown to the Greeks and Romans.

Just as there was the beginning of a world system in trade, there was also the beginning of a world system in ideas. The Hindu religion spread with the clearances of the forests to south India, and then to the Malay peninsula and Cambodia. Merchants carried their Buddhism with them to the island of Ceylon, through the Himalayas to Tibet, along the trade routes to China and eventually to Korea and Japan. Meanwhile, advances in mathematics in India became part of the foundation of Arab learning, which in turn was essential to the European 'Renaissance' 1,000 years later.

Yet in India itself there was a loss of cultural momentum from the 6th century onwards. The subcontinent fragmented into warring states, while successive invaders caused devastation in the north west. The material base of society, the means by which people could obtain a livelihood, was simply not advanced enough to sustain enormous

and expensive imperial superstructures. The successor monarchs found it increasingly difficult to preserve their realms, keep internal peace, maintain roads and provide security for traders. There was a decline in the level of trade, in the wealth of the merchants and in Buddhist influence. Some of the great monasteries survived, but were increasingly cut off from the wider society which had given rise to them, until their impact in distant China was greater than in the various Indian kingdoms.

There was what has been called a 'feudalisation' of society—a growing fragmentation into almost self contained village economies. This occurred as kings found no way to pay officials except with a share of the surplus extracted from local cultivators and made land grants to those, usually Brahmans, who supervised the clearing and tilling of forest areas. Most craftspeople found they could only survive by practising their skills in the villages for a direct share of the local produce. Production for local use increasingly replaced production for the market.

There was still some growth of output as agriculture spread to new areas, and even a slow but significant advance in agricultural methods. But this took place within a framework increasingly under the influence of the Brahmans, since they alone had a network of people based in every village. Culture was increasingly their culture and this, as Romila Thapar has noted, 'led to intellectual constriction', as 'formal education' became 'entirely scholastic'.¹⁰

The Brahmans had adopted elements from Buddhism—in particular, they had taken up vegetarianism as a sign of their own holiness and banned the eating of beef completely. But they strengthened their old stress on caste distinctions, slotting each occupational and tribal group into its own place in an elaborate and supposedly unchanging hierarchy. Tribal outsiders to the cultivator communities became 'outcasts'—groups forced to live in degrading conditions on the outskirts of villages, confined to the most lowly and unclean occupations, their mere touch a source of pollution to the high castes.

What had been a region of rapid change and intellectual ferment for centuries became characterised, for close to 1,000 years, by inward looking villages, religious superstition, and fragmented, warring, parasitic kingdoms. One product was the fully formed system of a multitude of castes encountered by Muslim and European conquerors in the next millennium.

The first Chinese empires

European historians have traditionally seen world history as starting in the Middle East and then passing through Greece and Rome to Western Europe. But a civilisation emerged in northern China which surpassed any in Europe, survived in one form or another for over 2,000 years and was responsible for some of humanity's most important technical advances.

The Ch'in Empire, founded in 221 BC, ruled over more people than the Romans ever did. It had 6,800 kilometres of roads (compared with the 5,984 kilometres of the Roman Empire), built to common design so as to cope with chariots and carts of standard axle width. It was able to put an estimated 300,000 people to work on the 3,000 kilometres of the first Great Wall,¹¹ and up to 700,000 on constructing the first emperor's tomb, with its 'army' of life-size terracotta soldiers. Canals linked the great rivers, creating an internal waterway system without parallel anywhere in the world.

The empire was the culmination of centuries of economic and social change. Some people had turned to agriculture at about the same time as in Mesopotamia, growing millet and domesticating pigs and dogs in the north, learning the very different techniques required to grow rice and domesticate buffalo in the Yangtze River valley further south.

Cities and states arose after 2000 BC built by people using neolithic techniques. By the end of the 17th century BC metal workers had learnt to combine tin and lead with copper to produce bronze, and aristocratic warriors were using weapons made from it to carve out a kingdom for the Shang Dynasty on the Yellow River in northern China. It seems to have been dominated by an aristocracy that combined military, priestly and administrative roles. It was a class society, practising the sacrifice of servants at royal funerals, but private property does not seem to have developed at this stage.¹² Under the Chou Dynasty, from the 11th century BC, kings delegated much of their

power to 100 or so local rulers in a system often described as 'feudalism' (making parallels with Medieval Europe),¹³ although some historians claim what existed was a version of Marx's 'Asiatic society', not feudalism, since texts relate that the organisation of agriculture was not based on individual peasant plots. Rather, administrative direction regulated 'common peasants in their daily life'—not just their work, but also their 'marriages, festivals and assemblies'.¹⁴ The peasant was told each year what crop to plant, when to sow and when to harvest. He could be ordered to leave his winter home for the fields, or to leave the fields and shut himself up in his home.¹⁵ In any case, the history of the Chou Dynasty was one of almost incessant warfare between the rival lords.

Over the centuries, the multitude of mini-states coalesced into a handful of large ones as technical change made it possible to wage war more effectively. The number of chariots increased, there were new techniques of siege warfare, and the sword and crossbow enabled conscripted peasant footsoldiers to stand firm against charioteers for the first time. Such warfare, in turn, provided rulers with an incentive to pursue further technical advance. During the 4th and 3rd centuries BC (known as 'the age of the warring states') these rulers initiated the clearing of the northern plain and river valleys, the draining of marshy regions and the spread of irrigation, often on a massive scale. An iron industry also grew up, organised on a scale unmatched anywhere else at the time, with the large scale production from moulds of cast iron tools and weapons—not just swords and knives, but 'spades, hoes, sickles, ploughs, axes, and chisels'.¹⁶

New agricultural methods increased output: intensive farming based upon deep ploughing with oxen; the use of animal dung and human 'night soil' as fertiliser; the cultivation of wheat and soya beans as well as millet; the planting of leguminous crops to restore the fertility of the land; and an increased understanding of the best times for sowing.¹⁷ The surplus grew ever larger.

Jacques Gernet notes, 'The age of the warring states is one of the richest known to history in technical innovations', with the 'development of a considerable trade in ordinary consumer goods (cloth, cereals, salt) and in metals, wood, leather and hides. The richest merchants combined such commerce with big industrial enterprises (iron mills and foundries, in particular), employed increasing numbers of workmen and commercial agents, and controlled whole fleets of river

boats and large numbers of carts... The big merchant entrepreneurs were the social group whose activities made the biggest contribution to the enrichment of the state... The capitals of kingdoms... tended to become big commercial and manufacturing centres... The object of the wars of the 3rd century was often the conquest of these big commercial centres'.¹⁸

But rulers could only successfully embrace the new methods if they broke the power of the old aristocracy. 'Parallel with technological change in agriculture... were socio-economic changes' and 'political reforms in several states'.¹⁹

The Ch'in state could eventually conquer the others because it implemented these changes most systematically. It relied on a new central administrative class of warriors and officials to crush the old aristocracy. These gave the key role in cultivation to the individual peasant nuclear family, allowing it to own the land, pay taxes and contribute labour directly to the state rather than to the local lord. 'It was the new productive force of the small farmers that supported the new regime'.²⁰

This was a social revolution, the replacement of one exploiting class by another, from above. It was a revolution carried through by armies, which exacted an enormous toll. One classic account claimed, probably exaggeratedly, that there were 1,489,000 deaths during 150 years of war from 364 to 234 BC.²¹ The last few years of pre-imperial China were 'a monotonous recital of military campaigns and victories', with one victory allegedly involving the beheading of 100,000 men.²² The establishment of the empire was accompanied by the deportation of no fewer than 120,000 of the old 'rich and powerful' families.²³

The transformation was not just the result of the initiative of a few rulers deploying powerful armies. The changes in technology and agriculture had set in motion forces which the rulers could not control and often did not want.

As the surplus produced by the peasants grew, so did the demand of the rulers, old and new, for luxury goods, metal weapons, horses, chariots, bows and armour for their armies. The peasants needed a constant supply of tools. All these goods could only be supplied by ever greater numbers of craft workers, operating with new techniques of their own, and of merchant traders operating between, as well as within, the individual states. Standardised metal weights and then coins circulated, further encouraging people to trade.

The influence of the merchants was demonstrated when the richest of them became chancellor to the future emperor in 250 BC, was granted land comprising 100,000 households and surrounded himself with an entourage of 3,000 scholars.²⁴

Cho-yun Hsu goes so far as to suggest, 'In the years of turmoil from the 5th to the 3rd century BC, there was the strong possibility of developing a predominantly urban-centred social life rather than a rural based agrarian economy. Large and prosperous market centres flourished and the urban mentality of profit making... predominated'.²⁵

The German-American historian of China, Karl Wittfogel, argued, while still a Marxist in the 1930s, that there were similarities between China in this period and Europe during the later stages of feudalism almost 2,000 years later.²⁶ China could have been transformed by the merchant 'bourgeoisie' into a new society based overwhelmingly on production by wage labourers for the market. Instead, it fell under the dominance of the bureaucracy of the state, which succeeded in channelling the surplus away from both the merchants and the old aristocracy and concentrating it in its own hands. The merchants supported the state in its struggle against the aristocracy, only to see themselves robbed of the fruits of victory by the state bureaucracy.

Certainly, the state repeatedly attacked the merchants under both the Ch'in Dynasty and its successor, Han (from 206 BC to AD 220). The first Han emperor, for instance, 'forbade merchants to wear silk and ride in carriages... Neither merchants nor their children and grandchildren were allowed to serve in the government'.²⁷ The state took control of two of the key industries, salt and iron, to ensure, as a Han document tells, 'the various profits of salt and iron are monopolised [by the empire] in order to suppress rich traders and rich merchants'.²⁸ Higher taxes were levied on trading profits than on agriculture, and the wealth of merchants who tried to evade the taxes was confiscated. During the 54 year rule of the emperor Wu (141-87 BC) 'the merchants' properties were forcibly seized by the imperial power. In order to survive the merchants often had to establish ties with the bureaucrats or even the court'.²⁹

Often protection of the peasants was the hypocritical excuse for such attacks. Document after document from the period complained that commerce and industry were ruining the peasantry, causing repeated famines and rural unrest and, at the same time, providing merchants with the means to threaten the state. This in turn, created

dangers from an impoverished class. According to the emperor Wang Mang in AD 9, 'The rich, being haughty, acted evilly; the poor, being poverty stricken, acted wickedly'.³⁰

The centuries in which these different exploiting classes jostled with each other for influence were necessarily also centuries of intellectual ferment. The members of different classes tended to see the world in different ways. Rival philosophical and religious schools emerged as different social groups attempted to come to terms with the changes taking place around them.

Confucius (born in the 6th century BC) and his 4th century BC follower Mencius advocated a respect for tradition and ritual combined with honesty and self control. In subsequent centuries this was to become the conservative ideology of the supposedly enlightened administrators, who kept society running on traditional lines while living a very comfortable life. In Mencius's time it did, however, imply a repudiation of the methods of greedy princes. The repudiation went even further in the case of Motzu, who lived some 60 years after Confucius. He established a sect which sought to establish, by authoritarian means, an egalitarianism based on common frugality, opposed to selfishness, luxury and war. By contrast, the current later to be called Taoism preached that individual salvation lay not in collective action, but in learning techniques which helped the individual to withdraw from the world and master it. Versions of Confucianism and Taoism were to vie with Buddhism for people's minds through much of later Chinese history, while egalitarian sects were repeatedly to emerge to express the bitterness of the poor.

But the immediate victor in the ideological battles of the last centuries BC was a different current, usually called 'legalism'. This laid the central stress on the strength and bureaucratic functioning of the state itself. It insisted that the state's officials should only be concerned with fulfilling its laws, without being sidetracked by concerns with personal virtue preached by the followers of Confucius and Mencius.

Legalism justified the role of the administrators as the embodiment of the general good. It also fitted in with the merchants' stress on rational calculation and fear of arbitrary political decisions, which would disturb their money making. Its maxims were popularised, for instance in hymns for the masses which portrayed the administrator and the state's edicts as the essential safeguard for society as a whole.

The rulers did not depend simply on intellectual persuasion to win acceptance of their totalitarian view of the world. They also did their best to ensure people were not presented with any alternative. The first emperor decreed the burning of all books which referred to the old traditions: 'There are some men of letters who do not model themselves on the present, but study the past in order to criticise the present age. They confuse and excite the people... It is expedient that these be prohibited.' People who dared to discuss the banned books 'should suffer execution, with public exposure of their corpses; those who use the past to criticise the present should be put to death together with their relatives'.³¹

At first, the increased power of the state did not prevent continued advance in trade and artisan production—indeed, they benefited from government measures such as the building of roads and canals, and the extension of the empire into south China, central Asia, Indochina and the Korean peninsula. There were further important technological advances: steel was being produced by the 2nd century AD (a millennium and half before it appeared in Europe); the world's first water-wheels were in operation; and the wheelbarrow, which enabled people to move more than twice their own weight, was in use by the 3rd century AD (1,000 years before its arrival in western Europe).

But the independence of the merchants-entrepreneurs as a class was curtailed. They were unable to establish themselves as a force with their own centres of power, as they were in the cities of late Medieval Europe. Instead, they were increasingly dependent on the state bureaucracy.

The peasants' lot scarcely improved after the measures taken against the merchant class. Taxes to the state ensured they lived scarcely above the breadline when harvests were good and fell below it, into famine, when they were not. At all times life consisted of almost endless drudgery. The soil of the north China plain demanded continual attention between planting and harvesting if it was not to dry out or become infested with weeds or insects.³² Yet between a third and a half of the produce passed straight into other hands.

It should never be forgotten that all the 'wonders' of the empire—the Great Wall, the canals, the emperors' tombs, the palaces—involved millions of hours of labour and were of decreasing benefit to society as a whole. After the first emperor heard from a magician that he could

achieve immortality if he stayed aloof from other men, 'He ordered 270 palaces to be furnished with banners, bells, drums and beautiful women, and to be linked by walled or roofed roads... Anyone revealing his presence would suffer death.'³³ On one occasion, when he believed there was an informer in his entourage, he put 460 men to death.³⁴

Such waste had to be paid for by maintaining pressure on the peasantry. There were repeated peasant rebellions. While uprisings of the lower classes against their rulers are rarely mentioned in the records of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, India or Rome, they occur again and again in the case of China.

One such uprising had precipitated the collapse of the Ch'in Dynasty. The story goes that the rebellion was started by a former hired labourer, Chen Sh'eng, who was leading 900 convicts to a prison settlement. Fearing punishment for being late, he reasoned, 'Flight means death and plotting also means death... Death for trying to establish a state is preferable.' The rebellion 'led to widespread killings',³⁵ a wave of panic at the imperial court, the execution of the emperor's main former adviser and, eventually, the assassination of the emperor. After four years of turmoil one of the rebel leaders marched on the capital and seized the throne, establishing a new dynasty, the Han.

The masses had played a key role in the uprising. But they did not benefit from its outcome. The new empire was scarcely different to the old. It was not long before it, in turn, faced risings. In AD 17 peasants hit by floods in the lower valley of the Yellow River rose up behind leaders such as a woman skilled in witchcraft called 'Mother Lu'. They were known as the 'red eyebrows', because they painted their faces, and they set up independent kingdoms under their leaders in two regions.

Such rebellions set a pattern which was to recur repeatedly. The extortions of the imperial tax system and the landowners would drive the peasants to rebel. Revolts would conquer whole provinces, complete with provincial capitals, and even threaten the imperial capital, until they were joined by generals from the imperial army, government officials who had fallen out with the court, and certain landowners. Yet successful revolts led to new emperors or new dynasties which treated the mass of peasants just as badly as those they had replaced.

This was not just a matter of the corruptibility of individual leaders.

The peasants could not establish a permanent, centralised organisation capable of imposing their own goals on society. Their livelihood came from farming their individual plots and they could not afford to leave them for more than a short period of time. Those who did so became non-peasants, dependent upon pillage or bribes for their survival, open to influence from whoever would pay them. Those who stayed on their land might dream of a better world, without toil, hardship and famine. But they depended on the state administrators when it came to irrigation and flood control, the provision of iron tools, and access to goods which they could not grow themselves. They could conceive of a world in which the administrators behaved better and the landowners did not squeeze them. But they could not conceive of a completely different society run by themselves.

However, the rebellions did have the cumulative effect of weakening the Han Empire. It lasted as long as the whole of the modern era in western Europe. But it had increasing difficulty controlling the big landowners in each region. The imperial administration had no way of raising the resources to sustain itself and its empire other than by squeezing the peasants. It could not prevent periodic revolts. In AD 184 a messianic movement, the Yellow Turbans, headed by the leader of a Taoist sect, organised some 360,000 armed supporters. Generals sent to put down the rebellions were soon fighting each other, adding to the chaos and devastation.

Amid the burning down of the capital, the pillaging of whole areas of the country and the disruption of trade routes there was sharp decline in the urban centres, which further disrupted life in the countryside. Rival landowners were soon dominant in each locality, taking political and economic power into their own hands as they ran estates, took over the organisation of peasant labour to maintain canals, dams and irrigation works, and began to collect the taxes that had previously gone, at least in theory, to the state.³⁶ The cultivators continued to produce crops under the new economic arrangements and many of the crafts and industries persisted—although, directed to satisfy purely local demands, they could hardly flourish. A long period of technological advance came to an end and so too, for the next three centuries, did the Chinese Empire, replaced by a proliferation of rival kingdoms.

In some ways the period has similarities to what happened in India in the 5th century AD and to the collapse of the western Roman

Empire at about the same time. But there was an important difference. The essential continuity of Chinese civilisation was not broken and the ground was laid for a much more rapid revival of the economy and urban life than was to occur in India or Rome.

Nevertheless, the very political structures that had once done so much to promote technological advance and economic expansion could now no longer do so, resulting in a partial breakdown of the old society. The old bureaucratic ruling class could not keep society going in the old way. The landed aristocracy could only oversee its fragmentation. The merchants were unwilling to break with the other privileged classes and put forward a programme of social transformation capable of drawing behind it the rebellious peasants, adopting instead the quietist Buddhist religion from India. There was not mutual destruction of the contending classes, but there was certainly mutual paralysis.

The Greek city states

The third great civilisation to flourish 2,500 years ago was that of ancient Greece. Alexander the Great carved out an empire which very briefly stretched from the Balkans and the Nile to the Indus in the late 4th century BC at the very time that Magadha's rulers began to dominate the Indian subcontinent and Ch'in's to build a new empire in China. Notions which arose in Athens and developed in Greek Alexandria were to exercise the same sort of influence over Mediterranean and European thinking for the next two millennia as ideas developed in Magadha in India and by Confucius and Mencius in China.

Yet there was little to distinguish the peoples living on the islands and in the coastal villages of Greece in the 9th century BC from the cultivators anywhere else in Eurasia or Africa. The Mycenaean past was all but forgotten, except perhaps for a few myths, and its fortress palaces had been allowed to fall apart. The villages were cut off from each other and from the civilisations of mainland Asia and Egypt. The people were illiterate, craft specialisation was rudimentary, figurative art was virtually non-existent, life was harsh and famines frequent.³⁷

The forces at work fusing these people into a new civilisation were similar to those in north India and north China—the slow but steady spread of knowledge of iron working, the discovery of new techniques in agriculture, the growth of trade, the rediscovery of old craft skills and the learning of new ones, and the elaboration of alphabets. From the 7th century BC there was steady economic growth and 'a marked rise in the standard of living of practically all sections of the population'.³⁸ By the 6th century BC these changes had given rise to city states capable of creating magnificent edifices like the Acropolis in Athens and, by their joint efforts, of defeating invasion attempts by the huge army of Persia. But the circumstances in which the economic and social changes took place were different in two important respects from those in China and, to a lesser extent, India.

The Greek coastal settlements soon had more direct contact with

other civilisations than was the case in China and India. Phoenician sailors had traded along the Mediterranean coasts for centuries, bringing with them knowledge of the technical advances achieved in the Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires. Then, from the 6th century BC, there was direct and continual intercourse between the Greek cities and the successive empires of the Middle East through trade, the employment of Greek mercenaries in imperial armies and the residence of Greek exiles in the imperial cities. Such contacts gave an important boost to the development of Greek civilisation. For instance, the Greek alphabet developed directly out of the Semitic script used by the Phoenicians.

The Chinese and Indian civilisations flourished in fertile river valleys and on broad plains, where agriculture could be highly productive once the forests were cleared. By contrast, the expansion of Greek agriculture was limited by the mountainous terrain. A surplus was obtained by the use of new techniques from the early 8th century BC. But beyond a certain point this would have begun to dry up if different responses had not been adopted from those in India and China.

The shortage of land encouraged the cultivators to take to the seas and colonise fertile coastal areas further along the Mediterranean—on Aegean and Ionian islands, around the Black Sea and Asia Minor, in southern Italy and Sicily, even along the coasts of Spain and southern France. The expansion of trade which accompanied this colonisation in turn encouraged the development of the crafts at home—so that Athenian pottery, for example, was soon to be found throughout the Mediterranean region. What had begun as isolated communities of cultivators and fishermen had turned by the 6th century BC into a network of city states, which fought each other but which were also bound together by trade and, with it, by a common alphabet, mutually intelligible dialects, similar religious practices and joint festivals, of which the Olympic Games is the best known.

The relative unproductiveness of the land had one other very important side effect. The surplus output that could be obtained after feeding a peasant family and its children was quite small. But it could be increased considerably by working the land—and later the mines and large craft establishments—with a labour force of childless adults. The enslavement of war captives provided precisely such a labour force. Here was a cheap way of getting hold of other humans to exploit—the

cost of a slave in late 5th century BC Athens was less than half the wage paid to a free artisan for a year's work.⁴⁰

Slavery had existed for a very long time in the old civilisations. But it was marginal to surplus production, with the slaves concentrated on providing personal services to the rulers while agriculture and the crafts were left to semi-free citizens. Now, in Greece—and soon on a much greater scale in Rome—slavery became a major source of the surplus.

Significantly, the one major Greek city state which did rely upon the exploitation of a serf-like peasantry, Sparta, was centred on a relatively fertile inland area.⁴¹ Here a ruling class of full citizens who took no part in agriculture or artisan labour lived off the tribute delivered to them by the 'Helot' cultivators. But here, too, was a ruling class which boasted of its austere mode of life, indicating an awareness of the limitations on its way of obtaining the surplus.⁴² The exception seems to prove the rule for the other Greek states.

It is sometimes argued that slavery could not have been central to these states because slaves did not constitute anything like a majority of the population.⁴³ But as G E M De Ste Croix has pointed out in his marvellous study, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, their proportion in the population and even the contribution of their labour to the overall social product is not the issue. What matters is how important they were to producing the surplus, for without this there could be no life of idleness for the ruling class, no freeing of writers and poets from relentless physical toil and no resources for marvels like the Acropolis. The ruling class owed its position to the control of land cultivated mainly by slaves, to such an extent that the classic Greek writers and philosophers saw the ownership of slaves as essential to a civilised life. So Aristotle could lump the master and slave as the essential elements of the household alongside the husband and wife, father and children, while Polybus speaks of slaves and cattle as the essential requirements of life.⁴⁴

Slave revolts do not punctuate the history of Greece in the same way that peasant revolts occur in the history of China. This is because the character of Greek, and later Roman, slavery made it very difficult for the slaves to organise against their exploiters. They were overwhelmingly captives from wars waged across the Mediterranean, the Balkans, Asia Minor and even southern Russia.⁴⁵ They were deliberately mixed together in the slave markets so that those living and

working next to each other, coming from different cultures and speaking different languages, could only communicate with difficulty through the Greek dialect of their masters. And the master could usually rely on other Greeks to help punish rebellious slaves and hunt escapees. So while the Spartans' Helot serfs in Messenia could organise together, eventually rising up and liberating themselves, the slaves proper could not. For most of the time, opposition to their exploitation could only take the form of passive resentment. This resentment was itself an important factor in Greek and, later, Roman history. It meant the direct producers had very little interest in improving their techniques or the quality of their output, and it discouraged improvements in labour productivity. Furthermore, the need to keep the slaves in their place formed the background to whatever other decisions politicians or rulers might make. But the slaves were rarely in a position to intervene in the historical process on their own behalf.

However, a different class struggle did play a central role in the history of classical Greece. This was the struggle between the rich landowners, who farmed their land with relatively large numbers of slaves while keeping well clear of anything approaching manual labour themselves, and the mass of smaller farmers and artisans. These might sometimes own one or two slaves, but would work beside them on the land or in the workshops.

When the Greek city states first emerged they still displayed the imprint of their past. Kings came from lines of traditional chieftains, and the kinship lineages played an important role in determining people's obligations and behaviour toward each other. Society was still held together by customary notions about rights and obligations rather than by formal codes of law. Those landowners who grew rich from the expansion of trade and the growth of slavery increasingly challenged such patterns of behaviour. They resented the privileges of the old ruling families on the one hand and their traditional obligations to the poor on the other. This was 'a world of bitter conflicts among the elite... played out at every opportunity, disputing boundaries, disputing inheritance, putting up competitive displays at funerals'.⁴⁶

The outcome in many states was the overthrow of the kings and the establishment of 'oligarchies'—republics ruled by the wealthy. In these the new rich used their position not only to displace the old rulers, but also to squeeze as much surplus as possible out of those below them.

They taxed those with smaller landholdings to pay for state expenditures—for instance, on the navy—that were in their own interests. Relatively frequent harvest failures meant that many peasants could only pay these taxes and keep themselves alive by getting into debt to the rich, who would eventually use this as a justification for seizing their land and often even their very persons as 'bond slaves'. Courts manned by the oligarchs were only too happy to give judgments against the poor.

The oligarchic republics were soon shaken by the resulting bitterness of wide sections of their citizens. In many of them ambitious men, usually themselves from the upper class, were able to exploit the bitterness to take political power into their own hands as 'tyrants'. They would then upset the rich by dealing out various reforms to help the mass of people. But they would not and could not end the division into classes.

In some states, most notably Athens, the pressure from below resulted in even more radical changes—the replacement of both oligarchy and tyranny by 'democracy'. The word, taken literally, means 'rule of the people'. In reality it never referred to the whole people, since it excluded slaves, women and resident non-citizens—the *metics*, who often accounted for a large proportion of the traders and craftsmen. It did not challenge the concentration of property—and slaves—in the hands of the rich, either. This was hardly surprising, since the leadership of the 'democratic' forces usually lay in the hands of dissident wealthy landowners, who advanced their own political positions by taking up some of the demands of the masses. But it did give the poorer citizens the power to protect themselves from the extortions of the rich.

So in Athens debt-slavery was banned from the time of Solon (594 BC) onwards, law-making power was invested in an assembly open to all the citizens, and judges and lower officials were chosen by lot.

Such restraints on its power caused immense resentment among the upper class—a resentment which found reflection in some literary and philosophical circles. It was claimed that democracy was the rule of the mob, that those members of the leisured class who conceded rights to the lower classes were unscrupulous careerists (hence the word 'demagogue'), and that the only hope for the future lay in breaking the shackles of popular control. Such is the tone of the plays of

Aristophanes and the political writings of Plato, and it was probably the norm among Socrates and his followers.⁴⁷

The upper classes did not simply express verbal resentment. When they could they staged an armed seizure of power, a full counter-revolution, if necessary murdering those who stood in their way. They were able to attempt such things because their wealth gave them military means not open to the ordinary citizens. The key military units were the 'Hoplite' section of the infantry, which included only those citizens with landholdings large enough to pay for the requisite armour and weapons. So the history of many Greek cities was one of continual struggles, often successful, by the richer landowners against democracy. The partial exception was Athens, where democracy survived for some 200 years. This was because the city's dependence on trade gave a vital role to its navy, which was manned by the poorer citizens. Even the rich, who resented democracy, usually felt compelled to placate the poorer citizens. Two attempts to impose oligarchic rule, in the aftermath of defeat in the Peloponnesian War with Sparta, were shortlived.

This 30 year war in the late 5th century BC had intertwined with the class battle over democracy within many of the city states. It arose out of a struggle between Sparta and Athens for influence over other city states. Sparta had built an alliance of states around the Peloponnese—the southern Greek mainland—to protect its borders and its subjection of the Helots. Athens was dependent on its sea routes for trade and had a sea-based alliance of coastal towns and islands, exacting regular payments of tribute from its allies which it used to help finance state spending, especially on its navy. But the war was about more than just which of the alliances would dominate. It also came to involve rival conceptions of how society should be organised. In Athens and its allied states there were many in the upper classes who at least half-welcomed Spartan successes in the war as an excuse to overthrow democracy. For some, Sparta became the focus of their counter-revolutionary aspirations, a model of how a privileged minority should deprive everyone else of any rights,⁴⁸ much as fascist Italy and then Nazi Germany did for sections of the ruling class across Europe in the 1930s.

The social upheavals and class tensions which characterised the rise of Greek civilisation during these two or three centuries are the background to the great achievements of Greek literature, science and

philosophy. It was a period in which people found themselves forced to question old certainties. The power of the poetry ascribed to Homer (in reality, oral sagas written down for the first time in about 700 BC) came from the depiction of people struggling to come to terms with their destiny in a period of social flux. The tragic tension in the plays of Aeschylus came from the way characters could not resolve the clash between rival moral codes, reflecting old and new ways of ordering society. The rival schools of classical Greek philosophy arose as thinkers sought to find a new objective basis for arriving at truth, the goals of human life and rules for human behaviour. 'Sophists' and 'sceptics' came to the conclusion that all that was possible was to knock down each argument in turn. Plato argued that the destruction of each succeeding argument by another (a process known as 'dialectic') led to the conclusion that truth must depend upon a realm outside direct human experience, accessible only to a philosophic elite, who should run society in a totalitarian fashion. Aristotle, after studying under Plato, reacted against this by putting the stress upon positive empirical knowledge of the existing physical and social world, which he saw as constituted out of four basic 'elements' (water, fire, air and earth). Democritus in the 5th century BC and Epicurus at the end of the 4th century BC developed a materialist view of the world as constituted out of indivisible atoms.

The Greek city states, unencumbered by the gross bureaucracies of the Mesopotamian, Assyrian and Persian empires, were able to show a greater dynamism and to command the active allegiance of a much greater proportion of their populations when it came to war. This explains the ability of combined Greek states to hold back invading armies early in the 5th century BC. And 150 years later it was to enable an army built by the Greek-influenced kingdom of Macedonia in the north to establish its power briefly over not only the Greek city states but also, under Alexander the Great, the two historic empires of Egypt and the Middle East. Alexander's empire fell apart after his death, but Greek-speaking dynasties continued to reign over rival Middle Eastern and Egyptian empires. Greek advances in science and philosophy, which had grown out of the achievements of the old civilisations in these regions, now made further advances within them. It was in the Greek-Egyptian city of Alexandria that the Greek school of science, mathematics and philosophy reached its next peak. Around 300 BC Euclid formulated the basic theorems of

geometry. Soon afterwards Eratosthenes calculated the diameter of the Earth as 24,000 miles. Around 150 BC Hypharcus began to work out trigonometric means of calculating distances, and arrived at a relatively accurate result for the distance of the moon from the Earth. Claudius Ptolemy built on Hyparchus's ideas 300 years later and developed a model of motion of the planets and stars. Although showing them as moving round the Earth, it enabled reasonably accurate calculations to be made of their paths. Overall, Alexandrian science and mathematics made an important contribution to further advances in India, China and, from the 7th to the 12th centuries AD, in the Arab world. However, its findings were virtually unknown in Europe for more than 1,000 years.

Meanwhile, the remnants of Alexander's empire around the Mediterranean were soon absorbed into a new empire, that built by the rulers of Rome.

Rome's rise and fall

'The glory that was Rome' is a refrain which finds its echo in most Western accounts of world history. The rise of Rome is portrayed as the high point of the ancient civilisations, its eventual decline as a historic tragedy. So one of the great works of the European Enlightenment, Edward Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, begins, 'In the 2nd century of the Christian era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth... The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury'.⁴⁹

From one angle Roman civilisation was impressive. A small town in Italy rose to rule the whole Mediterranean area—Egypt north of Aswan, all of Europe south of the Danube and Rhine, Asia Minor and Syria, and Africa north of the Sahara. The western part of its empire lasted some 600 years, the eastern part 1,600. Everywhere the rulers of the empire oversaw the construction of public buildings and temples, stadiums and aqueducts, public baths and paved roads, leaving a legacy that was to impress subsequent generations.

Yet the civilisation of the empire as such added very little to humanity's ability to make a livelihood or to our accumulated stock of scientific knowledge or cultural endeavour. It was not characterised by innovation in the same way as early Mesopotamia and Egypt, classical Greece or the last half millennium BC in India and China. Ste Croix goes so far as to insist that, apart from 'two or three contributions in the realm of technology', the Romans only surpassed their Greek predecessors in two fields: first, in the practice of ruling, of creating structures capable of holding together a great empire; second, in the theory of 'civil law', concerned with the regulation of property and inheritance (as opposed to Roman criminal law, which remained arbitrary and oppressive).⁵⁰ This is an exaggeration. Certainly, Roman engineering and architecture is impressive, with its viaducts, amphitheatres, temples

and roads. But in most fields the main impact of the Roman Empire was to spread across central and western Europe the earlier advances made in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece. It added very little to them. What is more, the very basis on which the empire was built ensured its eventual collapse, leaving nothing in the west but the memory of the achievements it had borrowed from elsewhere.

The earliest period of Rome in many ways resembles that of the Greek city states, from which it adopted and adapted its alphabet. At first, it was probably a society of agriculturists organised through lineages rather than a state (even in historical times its population was grouped into 'gens', supposed lineages, and 'tribes') out of which a hereditary ruling class (the 'Patrician Order') developed. It was strategically placed on the last crossing on the River Tiber before the sea, through which north-south and east-west trade routes passed. Income from trade (probably from charges on passing traders) added sufficiently to the surplus from agriculture to enable a village of mud-daubed wooden huts to develop into a prosperous town by the late 6th century BC, 'with houses of wood and brick, monumental temples, a well-engineered sewage system and imports of the finest Attic vases'.⁵¹ For a period Rome was under the domination of the Etruscan state to its north—a literate society whose non-Indo-European language possibly originated somewhere north of the Black Sea. The Romans threw out the Etruscans at the end of the 6th century (in 509 BC according to Roman tradition), established a republic and embarked on a long process of military expansion. This passed through various phases over the next 400 years: a league with various other Latin-speaking cities; the incorporation of these into the Roman republic; the conquest of the rest of central Italy; a series of wars with Carthage for control over southern Italy and the former Phoenician colony in north Africa; the conquest of northern Italy and Greece; and, finally, the occupation of all of Europe north to the Rhine and Danube, and the annexation of the former Greek empires in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt.

Each stage of this expansion was spearheaded by infantry conscripted from the independent landed peasantry—at first from those farming land within the border of the city of Rome, and then also from those with land in other Italian cities who had been granted Roman citizenship. But if the peasantry bore the brunt of the fighting, it did not control the army or gain from the victories. For unlike Athens, Rome was in no sense a democracy.

The republic and the class wars

The constitution of the early republic gave a monopoly of power to a hereditary elite of 'Patrician' families. The Senate, the consuls chosen each year to implement policy, the judges, the *quaestor* administrators and the *praetors* responsible for law and order were all Patricians. There was an assembly, which had the nominal right to elect magistrates and decide on questions of war and peace. But 98 of its 193 votes went to the highest class, and the delegates from the 'Plebeian' small peasants had no say if these were unanimous in their view, while the propertyless Romans, known as the *proletarii*, had only one vote between them.

The leading families used their political control to increase their already substantial landholdings at the expense of the peasantry, pushing them into debt, taking their land and relying on the judges to find in favour of the Patricians. What is more, as commanders of the armed forces, they ensured they took the lion's share of conquered land after each military victory. The bitterness caused by such behaviour boiled over into two great waves of class struggle.

The first began only 15 years after the founding of the republic.

The Roman historian Sallust gave a graphic account of how the class divide drove the lower orders to rebel:

The Patricians treated the people as slaves, made decisions concerning their execution and flogging, drove them from their lands. Crushed by these cruel practices and above all by the load of debt occasioned by the necessity to contribute both money and military service for continual wars, the common people armed, took up position on Mons Sacer and on the Aventine and acquired for themselves tribunes of the people and some legal rights.⁵²

Sallust was writing more than 400 years after the event, and some modern historians doubt the accuracy of his account. But there were certainly recurrent struggles for more than a century against arbitrary treatment by Patrician officials. 'Secession'—sitting down *en masse* and refusing to serve in the army—seems to have been the favourite tactic and to have won the Plebeians their own elected representatives, 'tribunes', to protect them against oppression from the magistrates.⁵³ The tribunes provided such protection by literally stepping between the magistrates and their intended victims,⁵⁴ knowing that the Plebeians had

sworn a collective oath to lynch anyone who touched a tribune.⁵⁵ They 'stood to the official state magistrates almost as shop stewards to company directors,' according to Ste Croix,⁵⁶ and over time became an integral part of the constitution with the power to arrest and imprison state officials. A last great struggle in 287 BC, a result of debts afflicting half the population, ended the formal powers of the Patricians and opened all offices up to Plebeians.⁵⁷

Later Roman writers like Dionysus and Halicarnassus were to praise the 'moderation shown in the struggle of the orders, which contrasted with the revolutionary bloodshed familiar to Greek cities'.⁵⁸ But the Plebeians did not gain nearly as much from the victory as the lower classes sometimes did in Greece, and Rome did not become an Athens-type democracy. As Brunt points out, only a thin layer of well to do Plebeians gained anything substantial with the lifting of the bar on them holding office.⁵⁹ The 'greater measure of democratic control' supposedly granted to the mass of Plebeians 'was to prove to be an illusion':

Plebeians had been admitted to office. But by giving up their monopoly, the Patricians perpetuated for themselves a share of power. A new nobility arose to which only a few Plebeians were admitted, and which was to be as dominant as the Patricians had been... The old social conflicts were to reappear, but it was harder for the poor to find champions once the political aspirations of the rich Plebeians had been satisfied.⁶⁰

This was not to be the last time in history that the interests of well to do leaders of a struggle were to prove very different from those of their followers.

One factor which persuaded the poor to acquiesce in this arrangement was the conquest of new lands by the republic. Some of the poorer peasants were settled in the new territory, relieving their plight for a time. But the wars of conquest were soon to cause the condition of most peasants to deteriorate even further. Most of the loot from conquest went to the rich: 'Very large sums flowed into private hands in Italy from abroad... The great bulk went to men of the upper and middle classes'.⁶¹ Much of it went on luxury consumption, but some went into further expanding the landholdings of the rich, so raising the price of land and encouraging moneylenders to dispossess indebted peasants. At the same time, increasing numbers of peasants were being driven into debt, since long spells of conscription in the legions prevented them

from cultivating their land to pay rents and taxes.

Sallust wrote of the early 1st century BC:

A few men controlled everything in peace and war; they disposed of the treasury, the provinces, the magistracies, honours and triumphs; the people were oppressed by military service and by want; the booty of war fell into the hands of the generals and few others; meantime parents or little children of the soldiers were driven out of their homes by powerful neighbours.⁶²

But this was not all. The wars also produced a massive new labour force for the rich to exploit, as captives were enslaved. After the third Macedonian War, for example, 150,000 prisoners were sold as slaves.⁶³ Big landowners could buy slaves cheaply and use them to cultivate their *latifundia* estates at low cost—thus 'Cato's slaves received a tunic and a blanket every year and ate no meat'.⁶⁴ It was much more expensive to employ a landless Roman peasant with a family to raise, so those who lost their land found it difficult to get anything other than temporary, seasonal work.

The slave population grew massively until, by the 1st century BC, there were two million slaves—compared with a free population of 3.25 million. The bare figures understate the importance of slavery to the economy, since the bulk of the slaves were adults, while the free population included many children. What is more, at any point in time one in eight adult male citizens would be in the armed forces.⁶⁵

If slaves became a major, possibly *the* major, labour force in the republic, this did not mean the mass of citizens benefited from their presence. Slave labour led to the impoverishment of free labour, as shown by the way the numbers of the free population stagnated or even fell as the Roman state went from strength to strength. Brunt relates how 'the poor could not afford to marry and, if married, to raise children. Families were limited by abortion and infanticide, if not by contraception'.⁶⁶ Many children abandoned by poor parents would end up in the slave markets: 'The impoverishment of so many Italians was itself a function of the huge importations of slaves'.⁶⁷ A H M Jones came to the same conclusion: 'The vast import of slaves increased the destitution the Italian peasantry'.⁶⁸ Such class polarisation bred a new wave of civil conflicts—a wave much bloodier than the previous clashes between Plebeians and Patricians.

Tiberius Gracchus won a tribuneship in 133 BC. He was an aristocrat worried by the increased poverty of the mass of peasants, and was motivated partly by concern for the military security of the republic. He could see that the peasant backbone of the Roman army was slowly being destroyed by the influx of slaves, while a formidable slave revolt in Sicily had highlighted the dangers in this way of organising agriculture: 'Though he spoke with great emotion and probably with sincerity about the plight of the poor who had fought for their country, the interest of the state was probably uppermost in his mind; it was to this that he subordinated the interests of his own class'.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, his programme excited the poorer peasants and infuriated the major part of the rich senatorial class. It involved distributing large areas of public land farmed by the big landowners to the poor. The rural poor flooded into Rome to back his proposal, covering the walls of the city with placards and ensuring it was passed by the republic's assembly. The senators were horrified. They waited until the peasants had left Rome for the harvest and then took action. A body of senators insisted Tiberius was 'betraying the constitution' and clubbed him to death. His followers were executed.⁷⁰

The repression did not stop the seething discontent among the poor farmers, and history repeated itself ten years later. Tiberius's brother Gaius was elected tribune and dominated Roman politics for the next three years, with support from the peasantry and some backing from a layer of the new rich, the *equites*. The consul (supreme magistrate) Optimus distributed arms to the Senate's supporters and used 3,000 mercenaries from Crete to murder Gaius and execute up to 3,000 of his supporters.⁷¹ Such were the glorious, 'civilised' traditions of the Roman Senate.

The Roman poor revered the Gracchus brothers as martyrs, making daily offerings at their graves, and both Tiberius and Gaius do seem to have been motivated by genuine feelings for the sufferings of the masses.⁷² But their programme was essentially aimed at strengthening the Roman state and enhancing its ability to exploit the rest of the empire. They seem to have half-grasped that slavery, while enriching the big landowners, was weakening the base of the economy. However, their answer was certainly not to appeal to the slaves to free themselves and restricted the role of the poor peasants to that of a pressure group within the existing constitutional setup. It did not even have much to offer the urban poor of Rome. As result, the Senate had

only to bide its time and could then dispose of the brothers in the bloodiest manner.

The murder of Gaius Gracchus subdued the poor. But it did not deal with their class bitterness, which played a decisive role in shaping the history of the 1st century BC, and in the transformation of the Roman republic into the Roman Empire. This was a period in which different factions within the ruling class engaged in bloody manoeuvres to gain control of political power and of the wealth from the conquered territories. The resentments of the poor on the one side, and the class excesses of the senatorial elite on the other, provided them with weapons to use against each other. Sallust, who lived through the period, described it as a time of 'frequent riots, party strife and eventually civil war...during which a few powerful men...were attempting to rule masquerading as champions of the Senate or the people'.⁷³

In 108 BC Marius became consul, with the backing of the *equites*. According to Sallust he was 'the darling of all the artisans and rustics whose hands furnished their only wealth'.⁷⁴ An attempt to push through a land distribution bill led to bitter fighting: 'Violence rose to a new level... All the respectable elements in society appeared in arms with their retainers',⁷⁵ and lynched Saturninus, an ally abandoned by Marius. Two decades later it was the turn of Sulpicus, another ally of Marius, to control Rome briefly and to be killed after an army led by Sulla occupied the city on behalf of the great senatorial families. When the army withdrew another ally of Marius, Cinna, retook it and controlled Italy for two years. 'The forum ran with blood' as he sought to bend the senate to his will. But for all his promises, he 'paid little attention to popular rights' and did nothing about the increasing poverty of the masses.⁷⁶ Sulla was able to return with the support of the nobility, Cinna was killed by his own soldiers, and a reign of terror was inflicted on all those who had put up resistance. Even the dissidents among the rich suffered as Sulla posted lists of 'proscriptions'—individuals whose killing merited a financial reward—including 40 senators and 1,600 *equites*.⁷⁷ Finally, in 64 BC Cataline, a former Sulla henchman facing bankruptcy, tried to restore his fortunes by raising the standard of popular revolt. He paraded in public with a motley throng of Sulla veterans and peasants. This time it was the consul (and writer) Cicero who took decisive and bloody action to preserve

the existing order, organising a select band of wealthy youth to arrest and execute Cataline's leading supporters.

Cataline's rebellion was the last based on a call to the poor peasants to take up arms. But the bitterness against the rich persisted. Indeed, it began to infect the poor of the city. Their conditions of life were atrocious and their livelihoods insecure. They lived in tenements 60 to 70 feet high, squeezed together in a density seven or eight times that of a modern Western city, their homes in constant danger of collapsing or catching fire, and with no water and no access to the sewers. Many could only look forward to seasonal labouring work in the docks in the summer and faced near-starvation in the winter.⁸⁰ The very misery of their condition had prevented them joining the disaffected peasants in the past. Often they depended on the bribes handed out by rich senators and had taken the Senate's side in general elections. Now, however, they began to back politicians or ambitious generals who promised them subsidised corn. Violence became common in the decade after Cataline's defeat. Mobs burned down the Senate house and killed the rich in the street in 52 BC after the murder of a politician, Clodius, who had given the poor free grain.

This was the background against which Julius Caesar marched his army across the Italian border and took power in 49 BC. The senatorial rich lost the ability to run the empire, not to the poor, but to a rich general from an aristocratic family who had killed or enslaved a million people in his conquest of Gaul.

The years of the great social conflicts between Roman citizens also witnessed the biggest slave revolt in the whole of the ancient world, the uprising led by Spartacus.

Rome had already known more slave revolts than Greece, probably because the slaves were concentrated on a much greater scale. Sicily was swept by a slave revolt in 138-132 BC, for example. It involved tens of thousands of slaves—partly herders and partly agricultural slaves—but they 'received some support from the local free population who were delighted to see the suffering of the rich'.⁸¹ Indeed, while the slaves tried to keep order on farms they hoped to cultivate for themselves, the free population engaged in looting. The pattern was repeated in 104-101 BC.

The revolt of Spartacus was on a bigger scale than these and threatened the very centre of the Roman Empire. It began in 73 BC with the escape of 74 gladiators. Over time they were joined by up to

70,000 slaves who beat off successive Roman armies and marched from one end of the Italian peninsula to the other. At one point they threatened Rome and defeated an army led by the consuls. But instead of trying to take the city, Spartacus marched to the southern-most point of Italy, in the hope of crossing to Sicily. His forces were betrayed by pirates who had promised them boats and were then penned in by a Roman army which sought to stop them moving north again. Part of the slave army managed to break out of the trap, but suffered a devastating defeat. Spartacus was killed, though his body was never found,⁸² and 6,000 of his followers were crucified.⁸¹ Roman writers claimed 100,000 slaves died in the crushing of the revolt.⁸²

The revolts in ancient Rome inspired champions of the oppressed for two millennia. The Gracchus brothers were hailed as an example by the extreme left in the French Revolution of 1789-94. Karl Marx described Spartacus as his favourite historical figure, and the German revolutionaries led by Rosa Luxemburg in 1919 called themselves the Spartakusbund.

But neither the peasant revolts nor the slave rebellions succeeded in breaking the hold of the great landowners over the Roman Empire, and the reason lay in the character of the rebellious classes themselves.

The peasants could protest, and even rise up, against the extortions of the rich. They could flock to rich leaders who seemed to have some programme for reform of the state. But they could not arrive at a political programme of their own which went beyond the call for land redistribution and annulment of debts to suggest a reorganisation of society in its entirety. For the surplus they produced was too little to maintain a civilisation on the scale of Rome. That surplus had to come either from the slave system or from the pillage of empire. The dream of a return to a peasant-based past was natural, but it was unrealisable.

The urban masses were equally incapable of taking the lead in a revolutionary reorganisation of society. They were even less central to production than the small peasants. The most impoverished were dependent on casual labour. Others were artisans in luxury trades, whose livelihoods depended on supplying the needs of the rich. There were many slaves in Rome. But their conditions were often more favourable than those in agriculture, and many could hope to join the high proportion of the capital's population who were free if they were attentive enough to their owners.

Finally, although the rural slaves were central to production, they found it all but impossible to go beyond heroic rebellion to formulate ideas of a different sort of society. They came from everywhere in the Mediterranean and spoke a mass of different languages. Denied the chance to have families, they also had little chance to pass traditions of resistance from one generation to another. The way they were united in production—chained under the whip of a slavemaster—provided no model of how to reorganise society on a different basis. Instead, their dreams were of establishing new kingdoms or, as with Spartacus, of escaping from the Roman Empire to freedom somewhere else. Why Spartacus threw away the opportunity to try to seize Rome is one of the great mysteries of history. Part of the explanation may be that he could not conceive of reorganising Roman society and did not want to end up merely running the old order.

The empire: stagnation and collapse

The riots, revolts, rebellions and civil wars did not lead to a revolutionary reorganisation of society, but they did radically change the political superstructure by which the landed rich dominated the rest of society. The Senate came to depend on generals and their armies to maintain the poor in their place. But the strongest general was then able to dominate the Senate. The civil wars over social questions ended only to be replaced by civil wars between generals: Marius and Cinna against Sulla; Pompey against Julius Caesar; after Caesar's death, Brutus and Cassius against Mark Antony and Octavian (Caesar's nephew); and, finally, Octavian against Mark Antony.

Eventually, the rich—old and new alike—felt that allowing Octavian (now called Augustus) to establish a *de facto* monarchy was the only way to re-establish political stability. Augustus was able to use the memory of the decades of social conflict for his own ends. He offered security to the rich while posing as the friend of Rome's urban poor by providing them with cheap, or even free, corn—paid for from a small fraction of the vast tribute that flowed in from the conquered lands.

The emperors, concerned not to provoke open rebellion in the provinces, did clamp down on the worst forms of personal profiteering by the senatorial elite. They also resorted to occasional acts of terror against independent-minded members of the old landed

families, while lavishing wealth and prestige on members of their own entourage.

The older senatorial families saw this as a barbarous assault on traditional values. The names of Nero and Caligula have been associated ever since with random terror and irrational violence, and there is a long tradition of opponents of arbitrary, dictatorial rule seeing the senators who opposed Caesar and Augustus as great defenders of human freedom against tyranny. The early leaders of the French Revolution draped themselves in togas and saw themselves as taking up the heritage of Brutus. Yet the imperial power did no more than unleash against a few members of the aristocracy the barbarity it had traditionally shown to conquered peoples, slaves and rebellious members of the Roman lower classes. Aristocratic talk of *libertas*, as Syme points out, amounted to a 'defence of the existing order by individuals... in enjoyment of power and wealth'.⁸⁵

The poor certainly did not see the senators as standing for freedom. Josephus, writing in the middle of the 1st century AD, reported that while the rich resented the emperors as 'tyrants' and their rule as 'subjection', the poor regarded them as restraining the 'rapacity' of the senate.⁸⁴ The poor may have been misled by the demagoguery and cheap corn of Caesar and his successors. But they had good reason to hate the senatorial class. After all, this class had butchered anyone who had stood up, however hesitatingly, for their rights. Cicero, often regarded as an exemplar of the civil virtues of the senatorial class, had organised such murders and referred to Rome's poor as 'dirt and filth', 'the starving contemptible rabble', 'the dregs of the city' and, when they showed any radical tendencies, 'the wicked'.⁸⁵

For all their rhetoric about 'liberty', the rich could not manage without an emperor to keep the empire intact and the lower classes in their place. After Augustus, the rich would sometimes connive to overthrow an individual emperor. But their alternative was not a new republic, only a different emperor.⁸⁶ Indeed, the rich prospered during the first two centuries of rule by emperors even more than they had in the past. This period (sometimes called the 'Principate' by historians to distinguish it from the 'later Roman Empire') saw a great influx of luxury goods such as silk, spices and gems from the east, the spread of large estates throughout Italy and into some provinces, and huge rent flows to the senatorial class.⁸⁷

The wealth was not restricted to the Roman rich. The provincial

rich were able to share in it, increasingly becoming integrated into a single imperial ruling class: 'The provincial communities were far more prosperous than under the republic',⁸⁸ although 'it is doubtful if the peasantry of the provinces shared in the increased wealth of the empire', since they paid the same rate of tax as the rich landowners.⁸⁹ Out of the new-found security and increased wealth of the provincial rich there developed an empire-wide culture, based on shared religious cults (including emperor worship), ceremonial games, languages (Latin in the west, Greek in the east) and literature. This was the period in which cities were rebuilt on a lavish scale from one end of the empire to the other, with 'temples for the worship of the gods, theatres, stadia and amphitheatres, gymnasia and baths, markets, aqueducts and fountains, besides basilicas for the administration of justice and council chambers and offices for the magistrates. Cities took great pride in their buildings and vied with one another in architectural splendour, laying out magnificent paved streets, lined with colonnades and adorned with triumphal arches'.⁹⁰

In later centuries people would look back on this as the 'golden age' of the empire. Gibbon writes:

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed between the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus [from AD 98-180].⁹¹

Yet the stability imposed from above rested, as had the republic before it, on the pillaging of the peasantry and the subjection of the slaves. It may have regularised such practices, but it had not eliminated them. The picture of life in the empire provided by the 2nd century satirical novel *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius is very different to Gibbon's. It describes the conditions of slaves working for a baker:

Their skin was striped all over with livid scourge-scars; their wealed backs were crusted rather than clothed with patchwork rags; some had no more covering than a bit of apron and every shirt was so tattered that the body was visible through the rents. Their brows were branded, their heads were half shaved, irons clanked on their feet, their faces were sallow and ugly.⁹²

Apuleius tells how a 'wealthy and powerful... landlord... was never called to account' by the law for the way in which he harassed a poor neighbour—slaughtering his cattle, stealing his oxen, flattening his corn and employing a gang of thugs to throw him off his land.⁹³

The world Apuleius satirised was not one of prosperity and joy, but of insecurity, injustice, torture, robbery and murder. For all the civilised veneer, the emperor's might was symbolised by the 'games' at the Coliseum, where gladiators butchered each other and prisoners were torn apart by animals.

The empire might have been stable, but major problems at the base of society were unresolved. The economy was overwhelmingly rural, although the ruling class and its civilisation were centred on the cities: 'Trade and manufactures played a very limited role in the economy... The basic industry was agriculture, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the empire were peasants and the wealth of the upper classes was, in the main, derived from rent.' Agricultural output produced 20 times as much revenue as trade and industry.⁹⁴

There were a few cities in which trade or manufactures played a predominant role. This was true of Alexandria, through which passed Egyptian grain on its way to Italy and luxury goods coming from Arabia and India by sea. Here some industries did grow substantially—glass making, weaving and the manufacture of papyrus—and some merchants acquired great wealth.⁹⁵ But most cities were centres of administration and ruling class consumption, not trade and industry. The roads constructed for military purposes were unsuited to transporting heavy loads—unlike the canals and roads built in China at the time—and so moving goods by land was extremely slow and costly. A 300 mile journey doubled the cost of wheat, for example. Long distance trade was restricted to the most expensive luxury goods, and inland cities depended for the great bulk of their provisions on the surrounding land and their own craftsmen based in small workshops.

The cities were parasitic on the rural economy rather than a source of innovation that increased productivity. The great landowners who lived in the cities looked to increase their incomes by squeezing the cultivators harder rather than by investing in new tools and land improvements. The slave gangs who worked most of the land in some regions, especially in Italy, had no incentive and little opportunity to engage in more productive methods, although occasionally they could bring knowledge of the more advanced techniques used in one part of

the empire to another. The incentive for peasant proprietors working the land was hardly any stronger, since any increase in production was likely to be taken from them in rents to the landowner or taxes to the state. So although there was some advance in production methods, it was very limited. Labour saving innovations were put to use very slowly. The waterwheel, first mentioned in 25 BC, was scarcely used for two centuries because donkey mills, or even human-drawn mills, fitted more easily the use of slave labour⁹⁶—a considerable contrast to the proliferation of water mills in China during the same period.

All the time, the economic strength of the empire was being undermined by the very factor which had been so important initially—the massive level of slavery. The flow of new slaves began to dry up as the wars of conquest which had brought the empire into being came to an end, and slaves became expensive. Landowners had to worry more about the lives of their 'property'. Some turned to breeding a new generation of slaves. But this meant worrying about providing for 'unproductive' mothers and children, which undercut the huge cost advantage slaves had once had over free labour. Others found it was cheaper and easier to let their land at high rents as smallholdings to tenants who would not require supervision and who would bear the costs of maintaining their families. In this way, slavery began to decline in importance.

The result was that, while the luxury consumption of the rich and the cost of maintaining the empire remained as great as ever, the extra surplus which slavery had provided under the republic was no longer available. The ruling class could only continue as they had in the past if ever-greater pressure was applied to the peasantry, replicating across the empire the excessive exploitation which had already ruined the Italian peasants. Taxation, which had accounted for only about 10 percent of the peasant family's produce under the republic, accounted for a third by the 6th century⁹⁷—and the peasants had to pay rent to the landowner on top of this.

Ste Croix points out that Roman records from the late 2nd century AD onwards refer to 'disturbances' in various provinces of the empire—sometimes amounting to full-blown peasant uprisings, sometimes restricted to increased brigandage by deserters from the army, impoverished peasants and escaped slaves. From AD 284 through to the mid-5th century there are periodic reports of *bacaudae* peasant rebels in Gaul and Spain.

We have no way of knowing how important such rebellions were. What is certain is that they were a symptom of growing impoverishment, discontent and insecurity, especially in the border areas of the empire. There were increasing instances in these regions of peasants abandoning land which provided them with no livelihood once they had paid rent and taxes. The state increasingly passed legislation binding peasants to the land or to particular landowners as '*coloni*', effectively serfs. But such legal subjection gave them even less reason to support the empire against 'barbarian' incursions.

These incursions became increasingly prevalent and costly to deal with. The emperors became ever more reliant on massive and expensive mercenary armies—numbering 650,000 by the 4th century AD.⁹⁸ But the cost of this put an even greater burden on the cultivators, leading to further disaffection and flight from the soil. At the same time, successful military commanders were strongly tempted to use their legions to seize the crown. As civil wars weakened the empire, mutinous legionaries even pillaged Rome itself.

The empire entered into a cycle of decline in the west. The military seizures of power became ever more frequent, the barbarian invasions ever more daring. In AD 330 the centre of the empire moved from Italy to the Greek-speaking city of Byzantium, from where the rulers found it difficult to control the west, and soon rival emperors ruled each half. Meanwhile, the fringes of the empire, like Britain, passed out of Roman control. Emperors sought to hang on to the rest by bribing 'barbarian' (usually Germanic) peoples who settled inside the frontiers. But as the barbarian leaders became Romanised they aspired to the power of the Roman rulers and resorted to the traditional Roman means of achieving it—conquest. The Goth Alarick led his forces to sack Rome. The Frank Clovis took control of Gaul. The Ostrogoth Theodoric made himself emperor of Rome, and the Visigoths established a Romanised kingdom in Spain.

The vicious circle of decline fed back into the very means of obtaining a livelihood. The wars and civil wars wrought havoc on agriculture. Trade declined, as merchants feared to venture far from cities. Taxes and rents were increasingly taken in kind rather than in cash, with the state providing for its own needs and those of its numerous employees by direct levies on the producers. The result was a further decline in trade and in the position of the merchant and artisan classes. Cities began to encounter problems provisioning themselves,

while towns and villages were driven back on their own resources. The peasant producers had no protection against the powerful landowners, who began to exercise direct political and military power over them. Paying tribute for 'protection' to a local bully was often the only way of warding off the attention of rapacious outsiders. It was a pattern copied by tribal peoples from the north and east who settled within the empire.

In short, the integrated economy of the empire, based on slavery, gave way in the west to a new economy of localised, almost self contained rural units based on serfdom. Slavery did not pass away completely. The use of slave labour persisted until around the year AD 1000 on some of the larger landholdings,⁹⁹ where landowners, compelled by the decline of the towns to live on their estates, found it a very effective way to pump as much surplus as possible out of the cultivators. But it no longer provided the basis for sustaining a civilisation or an empire. The attempts to do so, with the brief reunification of the eastern and western empires under Justinian in the mid-6th century and the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire by Charlemagne almost 250 years later, soon fell apart. The material base was just not strong enough to sustain such a superstructure.

The rise of Christianity

There was one great survivor of the crisis of the western Roman empire after AD 400. This was the religion which had arisen from very small beginnings over the previous centuries to become the official ideology of the empire—Christianity. By the time of the 'barbarian' invasions every town in the empire had its church and priests, every province its bishop, all organised into hierarchies centred on Rome and Byzantium, where church power and imperial power interacted, with emperors laying down the line on the finer points of church doctrine.

Christianity had not started off as the ideology of an empire. Virtually nothing is known about its supposed founder, Jesus of Nazareth. There is not even any definite proof he was a historical rather than a mythical figure. Certainly the proof is not to be found in the Christian New Testament. It claims his birth was in Bethlehem in the Roman province of Judaea, where his family had gone for a census during the time of Augustus. But there was no census at the time stated and Judaea was not a Roman province at the time. When a census was held in AD 7 it did not require anyone to leave their place of residence. Similarly, the New Testament locates Jesus's birth as in the time of King Herod, who died in 4 BC. Roman and Greek writers of the time make no mention of Jesus and a supposed reference by the Jewish-Roman writer Josephus is almost certainly a result of the imagination of medieval monks.¹⁰⁰ Even the first authenticated reference to Christians, by Tacitus writing in about AD 100, does not mention Jesus by name but simply uses the Greek word *christos*, used for any supposed messiah.

We know as little about the beliefs of the early Christians as we do about the life of their supposed founder. The New Testament gospels are full of contradictory statements. In places, especially in Luke, there are powerful expressions of class hatred. For example, the rich man goes straight to hell, while the poor man, Lazarus, goes to the

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'bosom of Abraham'.¹⁰¹ Jesus preaches, 'It is easier for the camel to go through the eye of the needle than for the rich man to enter the Kingdom of God'.¹⁰² And Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount declares, 'Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger, for ye shall be filled... But woe unto you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation; woe unto ye that are full, for ye shall hunger'.¹⁰³ By contrast, elsewhere the message is one of reconciliation between rich and poor. So Matthew has Jesus preach, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven... Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled'.¹⁰⁴ The parable of the 'talents' (coins) suggests a rich man is praiseworthy for rewarding a servant who is given three talents and invests them profitably, while punishing a servant who has only one talent and fails to earn interest by lending it to a banker. It warns, 'He that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away'.¹⁰⁵

Similarly, there are passages which seem to preach resistance to the existing rulers and passages which encourage subjection to them—as where Jesus tells people to pay their taxes to the Romans, saying, 'Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, give unto God that which is God's'.¹⁰⁶ Finally, there are contradictions between passages which call for obedience to the rules of the Jewish faith ('the Law') and passages which urge a breach with them.

Karl Kautsky's classic Marxist work *The Foundations of Christianity* suggested almost 90 years ago that the contradiction arose from attempts by later Christian writers to play down what he called the 'communist' ideas of a 'proletarian' group. Some of Kautsky's arguments on this score are open to doubt.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the tone of many passages in the earliest gospels, Mark and Luke, is one of rebellion against the empire which later adopted the religion.

To understand how this can be, it is necessary to look at the conditions in which Christianity emerged and spread.

Jerusalem in the first half of the 1st century was one of the larger cities of the Roman Empire—Pliny the Elder described it as 'by far the most illustrious city of the Orient'. But it was also one of the most tumultuous. The city's splendour had arisen from its position close to important trade routes and, later, as a religious centre attracting wealth from all over the empire. But the lands around it—Judaea, Samaria and Galilee—were far from rich. They suffered, as did all the Roman provinces, from the extortionate levels of taxation required to pay

tribute to Rome and to provide Roman governors with their expected fortunes. There was 'extensive...evidence of poverty'.¹⁰⁸

This led to considerable hostility to the Romans and to a Jewish upper class which collaborated with them. Jewish kings had, after all, invited in the Romans in the first place (in 139 BC) and since then had relied upon Roman help in their internecine wars with each other.¹⁰⁹

There were repeated riots in Jerusalem and recurrent outbreaks of 'banditry' in the country areas, especially Galilee. Sometimes these would take on a religious coloration. Thus there was a near uprising against King Herod as he was dying, and 3,000 Jews are said to have died when his son Archelaus put down a rising, with a further 2,000 crucified. There was guerrilla war in the countryside of Galilee led by a certain Judas who called himself 'King of the Jews', and at the time of the Roman census of AD 7 two men 'aroused the people to rebellion...and general bloodshed ensued', according to Josephus.¹¹⁰ Again, 40 years later, the prophet Theudus roused support by proclaiming himself a messiah (*christos* in Greek) and was beheaded. The Roman rulers dealt similarly with 'a band of evil men who had godless thoughts and made the city restless and insecure' as they 'incited the people to insurrection...under the pretext of divine revelation'. Soon afterwards 'a false prophet from Egypt...succeeded in having himself accepted as prophet because of his witchcraft. He led...30,000 persons...out of the desert to the so called Mount of Olives in order to penetrate into Jerusalem, and attempted to overthrow the Roman garrison'.¹¹¹ 'Hardly had this rebellion been put down when...a few wizards and murderers joined forces and gained many adherents... They passed through the entire Jewish land, plundered the houses of the rich, slaying them that dwelled therein, set fire to the villages and harried the land'.¹¹² In all these clashes, class hatred among the Jewish poor of the Jewish upper classes merged with hatred of the Roman forces of occupation.

Class differences found expression in different interpretations of the Jewish religion. The rich, who spoke Greek and collaborated with the Romans, tended to favour the Sadducee school associated with hereditary priests, said by Josephus to 'deny that souls are immortal and that there is to be any reward or punishment after death' and to be 'cruel and severe both with regard to their fellow countrymen as well as towards strangers'. By contrast, the non-hereditary religious scholars,

who came from a range of social backgrounds,¹¹³ tended to favour the Pharisee school. This insisted on strict adherence to the Jewish 'Law' (the rituals and dietary rules of the Old Testament), objected to upper class collaboration with the Romans, and held that 'the soul... is immortal... the souls of the good will enter into new bodies, while those of the wicked will be tormented by eternal suffering'.¹¹⁴ A third school, the Essenes, attempted to escape what they saw as the evils of society by establishing monastic-type communities in the countryside, where they lived without private property. They also rejected slavery as unjust—a position more radical than the Christians were to hold. Finally, the Zealots combined religious faith with political agitation against the Roman presence.

Jerusalem, then, was a cauldron in which competing religious notions gave expression to different class feelings and attitudes to Roman rule during the period in which Jesus was said to have preached. But that was not all. Its religion had adherents in every great city of the empire, so the doctrinal arguments had repercussions elsewhere. For the Jews had long since ceased to be a people living in just one small land. Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors had deported the ruling classes of the Jewish states of Israel and Judaea to Mesopotamia half a millennium before. Many had not returned when the Persian emperor Xerxes restored Jerusalem to them, but had been happy to prosper in new homes. Large numbers of other Jews had left Palestine to settle elsewhere in the Mediterranean region, for the same reason that so many Greeks had settled overseas—they wanted a better life than the not very fertile soil of their one-time homeland could provide. Still others were involuntary settlers—enslaved during the wars that beset the region, they ended up wherever their masters took them.

By the beginning of the 1st century AD there were large Jewish populations in virtually every Roman city, 'ranging from 10 to 15 percent of the total population of a city'.¹¹⁵ They made up a high proportion of the population of Alexandria, so that the Greek city in Egypt was also very much a Jewish city. They also had a noticeable enough presence in Rome for Julius Caesar to have sought their favour.

The Jews of this diaspora maintained an identity as a separate community through their religious belief in a single invisible god, their dietary rules and their observance of a day of rest. These customs stopped them simply melting into the populations around them. They were also expected to pay regular amounts for the upkeep of Jerusalem—which

accounted for much of its wealth—and to visit the city when they could for the Passover festival. The rules about diet and the sabbath would have been slightly onerous, in the sense of making it more difficult to socialise and work with the wider non-Jewish population. But their communities survived, focused on their synagogue meeting places—probably for similar reasons that immigrant communities are focused on churches or mosques. The ties of a religion which bound a group together not only in prayer but also in diet and behaviour would have been a benefit to people seeking to stay afloat in the atomised world of the city, where life even for the prosperous trader or artisan was precarious and for the groups below them desperate.

However, the Jewish communities did not simply survive. They attracted others to them. 'Proselytes'—converts to Judaism—were very common in this period. The Alexandrian Jew Philo told, 'All men are being conquered by Judaism... barbarians, Hellenes... the nations of the east and west, Europeans, Asiatics'.¹¹⁶ So attractive was Judaism in the Greek and Roman cities that a special category of believers emerged, the 'God fearers'—non-Jews who attended synagogue but who were not prepared to undergo circumcision and to abide by all the biblical rules.

It was not just the sense of community that attracted them. The central religious idea of Judaism, monotheism—the belief in the one invisible god—fitted the situation of the urban dwellers. The pagan religions in which there were many gods, each associated with a particular locality or force of nature, made sense to the country dweller for whom the local village or clan was the centre of social existence. But the urban traders, artisans and beggars had repeated contact with a very large number of people from different localities and in different occupations. An anonymous, all-embracing deity could seem to provide support and protection in such multiple encounters. That is why there were trends towards monotheism in all the great civilisations of antiquity—the rise of Buddhism in India and China, and the worship of a single 'good' god (involved in an eternal battle with evil) in Persia.¹¹⁷ Even Roman Paganism tended to worship a sun-god more powerful than the others. Furthermore, in its Pharisaical form, Judaism combined monotheism with the promise to its adherents that however hard their suffering in this life, they had something to look forward to in the next.

Such was the popularity of Judaism that it bound together millions

of believers in all the trading centres of the Roman Empire, providing a network of contacts and communication stretching across thousands of miles.¹¹⁸ All the religious disputes and messianic speculations occasioned by the situation in Jerusalem were transmitted along this network. To people in each Roman city they would not have seemed distant arguments about the situation in Palestine, since the suffering of Palestine was just one example of the suffering of the lower classes and the conquered provinces right across the empire.

Judaism was thus on its way to becoming the universal religion of the urban masses of the empire. But it faced two obstacles. The first was its rules about diet and circumcision. The phenomenon of the God-fearers shows that many of those attracted to the religion were not prepared to go all the way in adopting its rules. The second was Judaism's promise to its believers that they were 'the chosen people'. This clearly clashed with the reality of Roman domination. Jews in Palestine might plan for some great uprising to overthrow Roman rule. But the Jews in the diaspora, everywhere a minority, were in no position to rebel and did little or nothing when the Jews of Palestine did rise up in AD 70. The defeat of that rising made it even harder for people to take literally Judaism's promise that its adherents would take over the world. The religion could only prosper to the extent that it replaced promises of what would happen in this world with promises of what would happen in the next.

Christianity emerged as a version of Judaism. Many passages in the gospels suggest that, at first, it hardly differed from some of the other prophetic sects of the time. In places, the gospels echo the Pharisees in calling for obedience to 'the Law', echo the Zealots in their call to 'take up the sword', and echo the Essenes in their call to abandon the family for a superior way of living. In a passage rarely quoted by today's Christian advocates of the family, Luke reports Jesus saying, 'If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.'¹¹⁹ The accounts of Jesus riding into Jerusalem to acclamations as 'king of the Jews' or driving the money-lenders from the temple bear a remarkable similarity to Josephus's account of the actions of other prophets.¹²⁰

But Christianity had no special reason to prosper as one Jewish sect among many. It took Saul of Tarsus, a Greek-speaking convert from Phariseism, who lived outside Palestine and worked as a travelling

artisan, a tentmaker, to grasp that there was an enormous audience for new religious ideas in the cities of the empire. He consciously set out to reach people half-attracted to Judaism but put off by the stringency of its rules. On conversion, he changed his name from the Hebrew 'Saul' to the Roman name 'Paul'. In the face of resistance from 'Judaic Christians' based in Jerusalem, he insisted the new religion had no need of the old circumcision and dietary rules, while an increased emphasis on the resurrection of the dead meant that salvation no longer depended on the victory of the defeated Jews of Jerusalem.

Finally, Christianity incorporated emotive elements from other religious cults which were flourishing at the time. The notion of the redemption of the world by the death and rebirth of a god was already found in many popular religions, such as the Adonis, Osiris and other fertility cults (the rebirth of a dead and buried god signified the onset of spring just as Easter came to symbolise it for Christians). The story of the virgin birth found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew (which contradicts Matthew's claim to trace Jesus's ancestry back through Joseph, his father, to the Jewish king David) brought to Christianity an element from the popular Egyptian mystery cult of Osiris, who was supposed to have been born of a virgin cow. The image of the 'Holy Mary' bears remarkable similarity to the role played by the goddess Isis in the Egyptian religion, addressed as 'most holy and everlasting redeemer of the human race...mother of our tribulations'.¹²¹ It does not require much rewriting to make this into a Christian prayer to 'the mother of God'.

The early Christians, then, took the elements which were already leading Judaism to reap converts, dropped the strict rules which deterred people and added popular motifs from the mystery religions. It was a winning combination. This does not at all mean that the early Christians were cold, calculating manipulators of emotive symbols they did not believe in. Far from it. They were driven to the religious life by greater than usual sensitivity to the insecurities and oppression of life in the empire's cities. Precisely for this reason they could sense the elements in other religions which would synthesise with their residual Judaism to give some meaning to the anguish of those around them. The New Testament credits the apostles with 'speaking with tongues'—in ecstatic speeches which gave expression to their innermost feelings. It was in precisely such a state that they were most likely to synthesise a new religious vision out of elements from older ones.

Who was the audience for the new religion? It was not, in the main, made up of the poorest people in the empire, the mass of agricultural slaves, since early Christianity (unlike the Essenes) did not oppose slavery on principle. Saint Paul could write that a slave should stay with his master, even if they were 'brothers in Christ'. It was not made up of the peasantry, either, for religion spread outside Palestine through the towns—certainly that is what the Acts of the Apostles tells us.

The audience seems to have been the mass of middling town dwellers. This was a layer well below the ruling class families who made up only about 0.2 percent of the population.¹²² The ancient city, like many present-day Third World cities, contained a vast mass of small traders, craftspeople, petty clerks and minor officials—a broad layer merging into the lumpenproletariat of beggars, prostitutes and professional thieves at the bottom and into the very thin stratum of rich merchants and higher officials at the top. This whole layer would have felt oppressed to a greater or lesser degree by the empire, but would usually have felt too weak to challenge it openly. Christianity offered a message of redemption, of a new world to be brought from on high, that did not involve such an open challenge. At the same time it preached that even if its message did lead to individual suffering—martyrdom—this would speed up salvation.

The poorer artisans and tradespeople could certainly be attracted to such a message—especially since, like the Jewish synagogue, it brought them into a social milieu which could help them cope with some of the material uncertainty of this world without necessarily having to wait for the next. There were also some better off people who were attracted. One study identifies '40 persons' sponsoring 'Paul's activities', 'all persons of substance, members of a cultivated elite'.¹²³ Such people could finance the preaching of the apostle and provide the early Christian groups with meeting places in their houses.¹²⁴ Paul went out of his way to woo them: 'It is significant that Paul, although he knew the majority of his converts came from among the poor, personally baptised only people from the higher strata'.¹²⁵ Christianity may have been a religion which appealed mainly to the poor, but from very early on it tried to combine this with an appeal to those who were richer. As time went on, it even attracted some people of real power and wealth who felt discriminated against by the senatorial elite—wealthy traders, independent women of wealth,

freedmen (ex-slaves and children of slaves) who had prospered, and officials in the emperor's own household who came from lowly backgrounds.¹²⁶

The New Testament was compiled in the 2nd and 3rd centuries from earlier writings which expressed the changing beliefs of Christianity as the sect expanded. This explains the contradictions to be found on virtually every page. Yet these contradictions helped it to appeal across class lines. There was the sense of revolutionary urgency, of imminent transformation, that came from the experience of the Jewish rebels in Palestine before the destruction of Jerusalem. The most bitter resentment could find an outlet in the vision of the apocalypse, which would witness the destruction of the 'whore of Babylon' (easily understood to mean Rome) and the reign of the 'saints', with the high and mighty pulled down and the poor and humble ruling in their place. Yet by projecting the transformation into the future and into a different, eternal realm, the revolutionary message was diluted sufficiently to appeal to those whose bitterness was combined with a strong fear of real revolution. The trader or workshop owner with a couple of slaves had nothing to fear from a message which preached freedom in the brotherhood of Christ rather than in material terms. The rich merchant could be reassured that the 'eye of the needle' was a gate in Jerusalem which a camel might just find it possible to get through.¹²⁷ The well-to-do widow or independent wife of a rich Roman could be attracted by biblical passages in which Paul insists women and men are 'one' in the sight of God, while the Christian husband could be reassured that in this world his wife had to service him, 'That the head of every woman is man'.¹²⁸

The Christian message provided consolation for the poor. It provided a sense of their own worth to those of the better off who were despised for their humble origins. And it provided a way in which the minority of the rich who were revolted by the world around them could discharge their guilt while keeping their wealth.

The very growth of what was initially a small sect brought about more growth. Like Judaism, Christianity provided a network of contacts for any artisan or trader visiting a city. Its weekly gatherings provided the poor with a sense of prestige from mixing with those wealthier than them, and the wealthier with a chance to exchange business news with each other. Growing within the framework of the trade routes and administrative centres which held the Roman Empire together, over time

it became the shadow of that empire—except that through the trade routes it could spread to regions which the empire rarely or never touched (Armenia, Persian Mesopotamia, Ethiopia, south Arabia, even southern India).

The growth of the religion was accompanied by its bureaucratisation. The first apostles preached without anyone exercising control over what they said, and relied upon the willingness of local supporters to provide them with food and lodging as they went from city to city. But as the number of preachers and supporters grew, collecting funds and administering the group became a major preoccupation in each city. So too did the danger of 'false prophets' who abused people's hospitality.

The solution for the local groups was to centralise fundraising and administration in the hands of 'deacons' who were overseen by 'presbyters' and bishops. 'Within two generations', writes Chadwick in his history of the church, a hierarchical organisation had grown up with 'bishops, presbyters and deacons at the top' rather than apostles and prophets.¹²⁹ At first, election of the bishops was in the hands of ordinary Christians. But it was not long before the preachers alone had a say. At the same time meetings of bishops began to determine what was correct doctrine and who was entitled to preach it.

This process was hastened by a great controversy over Christian doctrine—the question of 'Gnosticism'. It arose from an issue of interpretation which must seem obscure to anyone without religious belief—where evil came from. But it had profound practical consequences. Christian theology held that there was only one god, who had created everything. This meant he must have created evil as well as good—a disturbing conclusion for believers who always bracketed 'God' and 'good' together. The response of orthodox Christianity has usually been to try and dilute the problem by placing lots of intermediaries between God and evildoing (fallen angels, demons, disobedient humanity). When this does not carry conviction, it declares that the very fact God knows the answer to this problem while we do not shows how much greater is his understanding than ours.

There was, however, a more logical answer. This was to say that there was a continual struggle in the universe between two principles, one of good and one of evil. This was the answer posed, at least partially, by the Gnostics. Spirit, they said was good, the material world and the human body were evil. Christians could only be pure if they

freed their souls of bodily concerns. This was not a completely original conclusion—it is implied by many passages in the New Testament. But it had implications which were bound to worry the church authorities. If the mind alone was pure, then the only good Christians were those who turned their backs on the material world—ascetics who starved themselves and lived in rags. This was hardly the recipe for winning the whole of humanity to the gospel, or for raising funds from rich people for the local church. Worse, however, some Gnostics came to an even more radical conclusion. If the mind was pure, then it did not matter what the body did, since anything it did was impure. Their slogan became 'to the good, everything is good'. It permitted them to live as luxuriously as they wanted, to despoil the goods of others (especially the rich) and, most horrifying of all to the church elders, to engage in free love.

The struggle over the issue raged through the Christian congregations for decades and was only resolved by the bishops asserting that they alone, as successors to the apostles, could pronounce on issues of doctrine.¹³⁰ The argument erupted again in the 3rd century when a Syrian, Mani, began to build a religion ('Manicheism') from elements of Gnostic Christianity, Buddhism and Persian Zoroastrianism. For a time it even won over Augustine of Hippo, later the dominant figure in mainstream Christian thought.

In the struggle against such 'heresies' the church bureaucracy moved on from controlling administration to controlling the doctrine which the organised churches were allowed to follow. In doing so, it made it more difficult for contradictions in the Bible to provide a focus for rebellious sentiments which might upset wealthy elements aligned with Christianity.

If Christianity was the slightly dissident shadow of the Roman Empire, the church hierarchy was turning into a shadow bureaucracy—a second empire-wide administrative structure standing alongside the first. But it was a shadow bureaucracy which could provide services to the population of the cities that the empire could not. Its 'intense sense of religious community' enabled it to remain moored in every town through the crisis of the late 3rd century.¹³¹ 'During public emergencies such as plague or rioting, the Christian clergy were shown to be the only unified group in the town able to look after the burial of the dead and to organise food supplies... To be a Christian in 250 brought more protection from one's fellows than to be a Roman citizen'.¹³²

By this time there were only two things which could disrupt the growth of the church's following and influence—repression from the state or dissent from within.

Apologists for Christianity always make much of its survival in the face of persecution and repression. Martyrs who died for their faith are saints as much as those who supposedly worked miracles. But the repression of the church in its early years was intermittent. The few supposed Roman Christians of the time suffered under Nero as scapegoats for the burning of Rome. But that wave of repression did not outlast his own early demise. From time to time other Christians were imprisoned or even faced execution at the hands of hostile provincial governors, usually for refusing to take part in imperial cults. But much of the time the imperial authorities tolerated the parallel organisation that was growing beneath them, with 3rd century emperors like Alexander Severus and Philip the Arab even favourable to the church.

However, by the late 3rd century the church had attained a degree of influence which meant it could no longer be ignored. The emperors had the choice of destroying the parallel organisation or cooperating with it. Maximus felt it was time to clamp down on a network of influence that reached right into the imperial bureaucracy. Diocletian, emperor after 284, went further. He was persuaded that Christianity threatened the unity of the armed forces and responded by knocking down the cathedral opposite his imperial palace in Nicodemia, issuing an edict for the destruction of all churches, ordering the arrest of all clergy and threatening the death penalty to anyone who would not sacrifice to the gods. There was a wave of persecution in the eastern empire.

However, it was too late for such measures to be effective. The ruler of the west, Constantius, took only token measures to enact Diocletian's decrees, and his son Constantine opted to win the church to his side in his battle for supremacy in the western empire in 312. He began to regard himself as a Christian—he had been a sun worshipper—and the Christians certainly began to regard him as one of themselves. They were not worried by Constantine's own behaviour, although he had a son drowned in a bath, executed his wife, and put off being baptised until his deathbed in order to 'sin' freely. With the persecution over, the Christians were now in a position to persecute non-believers and dissident groups within their own faith.

The years of the final winning over of the empire were also years in which new heresies affected whole sections of the church. But once the imperial administration had thrown in its lot with the church bureaucracy, any threat to that bureaucracy was a threat to itself. Having embraced Christianity, Constantine was soon deposing and exiling bishops who would not abide by his rulings.¹³³ His successors followed the same path, creating havoc as they backed one side and then another, so that the Egyptian bishop Athanasius was removed and reinstated five times. Only the emperor Julian abstained from the controversy. He tolerated all forms of Christian worship in the hope that the rival groups would destroy each other while he set about reviving Paganism.

This final phase of the Christian takeover of the empire also saw the birth of the important phenomenon of monasticism. The very success of the church led to continual dissidence from people who felt it had abandoned its original message of purity and poverty. Bishops were now powerful figures, living in palaces, mixing much more with those who ran the empire than with the lowly people who filled the churches. A movement began, initially in Egypt, of people who felt they could only earn redemption by following a path away from the earthly success of the bishop. They would leave the towns for the desert, where they would live on bread and water brought to them by sympathisers, dress in rags and reject any sexual activity. Known as *anchorites*, these hermits believed that by deliberately entering upon a life of suffering they were saving themselves from sin, in much the way that Jesus had saved the world. Their behaviour earned the respect of other believers, who felt they were closer to the message of the gospels than the well-housed bishops.

The movement was potentially subversive. It threatened to throw up heresies in which prophets could use the words of the gospels to unleash hatred against the empire and the rich. Yet it was not long before it had become incorporated in the existing system. Some of the hermits were soon congregating close to each other for reasons of convenience, and it was only a short step from this to accepting that their sacrifice should involve labouring together under strict discipline. Basil of Caesarea turned this into a discipline of ideas as well as labour, subordinating individual self sacrifice to a higher authority. It was not long before his successors were directing their fervour into physical force against those with different Christian ideas.¹³⁴

However, monasticism had another longer term consequence. With their large, religiously fervent labour forces, the monasteries had a degree of protection from the disorders that accompanied the decline of the empire in the west. They became havens in which scholars could find security as the empire collapsed around them. While secular libraries burned, some monastic libraries survived, their keepers regarding it as a religious duty to copy by hand page after page of sacred—and sometimes profane—texts. At the same time the monasteries also became places where those lacking religious enthusiasm could pass a time protected from the chaos of the world, with ordinary peasants increasingly doing much of the labour and leaving the monks free to pursue a life of prayer and scholarship, or plain idleness. In any case, what had begun as islands of religious devotion, intended as a rejection of a corrupt society, became a powerful force in the post-imperial west within a couple of centuries. The network of religious establishments, sustained by the surplus from the exploitation of their own labour forces and coordinated by the hierarchy of bishops with the pope at the top, became a powerful participant in the scramble for wealth and privilege across western Europe for the next 1,000 years.

Part three

The 'Middle Ages'

Chronology

AD 600 to 900

'Dark Ages' in Europe. Collapse of trade. Failure of attempts by Franks to re-establish Roman-type empire (Charlemagne in 800-814). Invasions by Norsemen (800-900).

Feudalism in India. Collapse of trade. Dominance of *brahmans* and caste system in villages.

Crisis of Byzantine Empire, loss of Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Balkans. Technical and economic stagnation.

Mohammed takes Mecca (630). Islamic Arab armies conquer most of Middle East (mid-640s), reach Kabul (664), Spain (711). Abbasid revolution in 750 gives some political influence to merchants. Growth of trade and handicraft industry. High point of Islamic culture, translation of Greek texts, advances in science, mathematics, great Islamic philosophers.

Centre of Chinese civilisation moves towards rice growing areas of Yangtze. Revival of industry and trade, flourishing of Buddhism, advances in technology. Growth of civilisations in west and coastal east Africa.

10th and 11th centuries

Recovery of agriculture and trade in Europe. Use of more advanced techniques. Serfdom replaces slavery.

Muslim Abbasid Empire loses economic momentum and splits up. Rise of mystical and magical forms of Islam. Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt.

Byzantium conquers some of Balkans, but continued technical stagnation.

West African civilisations adopt Islam and Arabic script.

High point of Chinese civilisation under Sung Dynasty (960-1279). Invention of paper, printing, gunpowder, mechanical clocks, compass, growth of influence of merchants.

12th and 13th centuries

Crisis of Islamic Mesopotamia.

Chinese Empire splits in two (Sung and Chin).

Mongol pastoralists ravage Eurasia from Poland to Korea. Sack Baghdad (1258). Conquer China (1279).

West European 'Crusaders' attack

Islamic Empire from west. Capture Jerusalem (1099-1187), sack Byzantium (1204).

Conquest of north Indian heartland by Islamic peoples from central Asia. New growth of trade, use of money.

Growth of agricultural output, population, trade and handicraft industries in Europe. Spread of water-mills, building of cathedrals, rediscovery through contact with Islamic Spain of Greek and Latin texts, first European universities. Use of techniques discovered in China. Rise of Italian city states. Dante (born 1265) writes in Italian.

Slave-soldiers (*mamlukes*) seize power in Egypt.

Rise of Mali kingdom in west Africa. Timbuktu a centre of Islamic scholarship.

14th century

Great crisis of European feudalism. Famine, black death, revolts in Flanders, France, England, Wales, northern Italy. Rival popes. Hundred Years War between England and France.

Hunger and plague in China. Red Turbans rebellion against Mongols in China, founding of (Chinese) Ming Dynasty. Revival of agriculture. Ottoman Turks begin to conquer Asia Minor.

Building of Great Zimbabwe. Aztec people found Tenochtitlan.

15th century

Renewed economic growth in China, fleet sails thousands of miles to east coast of Africa.

Aztec Empire in Mexico. Incas conquer whole Andean region after 1438.

Rise of Benin in west Africa.

Slow economic and population recovery in western Europe. Decline in serfdom. Spread of market relations. Printing. Renaissance in northern Italy. Improved shipbuilding and navigation techniques. Portuguese sail down west African coast, reach Cape. Spanish monarchs conquer Moorish Granada (1492). Columbus crosses Atlantic (1493).

The centuries of chaos

The 5th century was a period of break up and confusion for the three empires which had dominated southern Eurasia. There was a similar sense of crisis in each, a similar bewilderment as thousand year old civilisations seemed to crumble, as barbarians swept across borders and warlords carved out new kingdoms, as famine and plagues spread, trade declined and cities became depopulated. There were also attempts in all three empires to fix on ideological certainties to counter the new insecurity. In Roman north Africa, Augustine wrote one of the most influential works of Christian doctrine, *City of God*, in an attempt to come to terms with the sacking of the earthly city of Rome. In China, the Buddhist doctrines elaborated almost a millennium before in India began to gain a mass of adherents, especially among the embattled trading classes. In India new cults flourished as Hinduism consolidated itself.

The similarity between the crises of the civilisations has led some historians to suggest they flowed from a global change in climate. But to blame the weather alone is to ignore the great problem that had beset each of the civilisations for centuries. It lay in the most basic ways in which those who worked the land made a livelihood for themselves and everyone else. Advances in agricultural productivity were nowhere near comparable to those associated with the spread of ironworking a millennium before. Yet the consumption of the rich was more lavish and the superstructure of the state vaster than ever. A point was bound to be reached at which things simply could not go on as before, just as it had with the first Bronze Age civilisations.

The crisis was gravest for the Roman world. The flourishing of its civilisation had depended on an apparently endless supply of slaves. The result was that the imperial authorities and the great landowners concerned themselves much less with ways of improving agricultural yields than their equivalents in India or China. The collapse was correspondingly greater.

The period which followed in Europe is rightly known as the 'Dark Ages'. It saw the progressive collapse of civilisation—in the sense of town life, literacy, literature and the arts. But that was not all. The ordinary people who had paid such a price for the glories of Rome paid an even greater price with its demise. Famine and plague racked the lands of the former empire and it is estimated that the population halved in the late 6th and 7th centuries.¹ The first wave of Germanic warriors to sweep across the former borders—the Goths and Franks, the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes—began to settle in the Roman lands and soon adopted many Roman customs, embracing the Christian religion and often speaking in Latin dialects. But behind them came successive waves of conquerors who had not been touched by Roman influence in the past and came simply to loot and burn rather than settle and cultivate. Huns and Norsemen tore into the kingdoms established by the Franks, the Goths and the Anglo-Saxons, making insecurity and fear as widespread in the 9th and 10th centuries as it had been in the 5th and 6th.

Eventually all the conquerors did settle. The majority had, in fact, been cultivators in their lands of origin, already beginning to use iron for tools as well as for the weapons that enabled them to defeat 'civilised' armies in battle. Their societies had already begun to make the transition from primitive communism towards class division, with chieftains who aspired to be kings, and aristocrats ruling over peasants and herders who still had some remaining traditions of communal cultivation. Had Roman agriculture been more advanced and based on something other than a mixture of large, slave-run *latifundia* and the smallholdings of impoverished peasants, the conquerors would have successfully taken over its methods and settled into essentially Roman patterns of life. We shall see that this is what happened with successive waves of 'barbarians' who carved out empires in China and its border lands. But Roman society was already disintegrating as its conquerors swept in, and they simply added to the disintegration. Some of the conquerors did attempt to adopt Roman agriculture, cultivating huge estates with captives from war. Some also attempted to re-establish the centralised structures of the old empire. At the end of the 5th century the Ostrogoth Theodoric proclaimed himself emperor of the west. At the end of the 8th, Charlemagne established a new empire across most of what is now France, Catalonia, Italy and Germany. But their empires fell apart at their deaths for the same reason

that the original Roman Empire fell apart. There was not the material base in production to sustain such vast undertakings.

Soon the cities were not only depopulated but often abandoned and left to fall apart. Trade declined to such a low level that gold money ceased to circulate.² Literacy was confined to the clergy, employing a language—literary Latin—no longer used in everyday life. Classical learning was forgotten outside a handful of monasteries, at one point concentrated mainly on the Irish fringe of Europe. Itinerant, monkish scholars became the only link between the small islands of literate culture.³ The books which contained much of the learning of the Graeco-Roman world were destroyed as successive invaders torched the monastic libraries.

Such was the condition of much of western Europe for the best part of 600 years. Yet out of the chaos a new sort of order eventually emerged. Across Europe agriculture began to be organised in ways which owed something both to the self contained estates of the late Roman Empire and the village communities of the conquering peoples. Over time, people began to adopt ways of growing food which were more productive than those of the old empire. The success of invaders such as the Vikings was testimony to the advance of their agricultural (and maritime) techniques, despite their lack of civilisation and urban crafts. Associated with the changing agricultural methods were new forms of social organisation. Everywhere armed lords, resident in crude fortified castles, began simultaneously to exploit and protect villages of dependent peasants, taking tribute from them in the form of unpaid labour or payments in kind. But it was a long time before this laid the basis for a new civilisation.

China: the rebirth of the empire

The Chinese Empire, like the Roman Empire, fell apart in the face of economic breakdown and famine within, and incursions by 'barbarians' from without. The 4th century was marked by droughts, plagues of locusts, famine and civil wars, a splintering into rival empires, and political, economic and administrative chaos. Something like a million people abandoned their homes and farms, fleeing south from the north China heartland to the Yangtze and beyond. They left a region of devastation and depopulation, where much land had fallen out of cultivation and productive life had reverted to self sufficient farming, with little trade and a decline in the use of money.⁴

Yet the term 'Dark Ages' is not appropriate for what followed. Life was extremely hard for the great mass of peasants, and a countless number died from hunger and disease. But civilisation did not collapse. The agricultural devastation of the north was soon offset by the vigorous and sustained expansion of rice cultivation in the Yangtze region. This replenished the surplus needed to sustain flourishing cities and, with them, a literate elite. While western Europe turned in on itself, southern China was opening up trade routes with south east Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Iran. In the north, rival 'barbarian' dynasties fought for control. But they were dynasties which recognised the benefits of Chinese civilisation and embraced Chinese culture.

What is more, the 'barbarians' did not simply learn from China. They had some things to teach the old civilisation. Their artisans and herders had been able to develop certain techniques precisely because their societies had not been weighed down by the costs and traditions of empire. These techniques now flowed into China—'methods of harnessing horses, use of the saddle and stirrup, ways of building bridges and mountain roads, the science of medicinal plants and poisons, seafaring, and so on'.⁵ Such innovations opened the way

for increased wealth and an increased surplus. For example, the horse had been used previously in warfare and for speedy communication. But the old methods of harnessing half-strangled it and made it virtually useless for pulling heavy loads or ploughs, tasks that were left to the much slower oxen. The new techniques from the northern steppes began to change this.

The collapse of the central empire was not wholly negative in terms of intellectual development, either. The wars destroyed libraries and irreplaceable manuscripts. But the weakening of old intellectual traditions made space for new ones. Buddhism began to gain influence, brought to China by merchants who trod the long trade routes through Tibet and on through Samarkand to Iran, or who sailed from southern China to southern India. Indian, Iranian and Greek influences began to make an appearance in Chinese art, so that some Buddhist statues show the impact of Hellenic styles. Gernet goes so far as to speak of a 'golden age of medieval civilisation', an 'aristocratic world animated by intense religious fervour and permeated by the great commercial currents which flowed along the trails of central Asia and the sea routes to the Indian Ocean'.⁶ Certainly, this was all very different from the European Dark Ages.

At the end of the 6th century the empire was reunited, first under the Sui and then under the T'ang Dynasty. Military victory over their enemies enabled the new emperors to extract a surplus from the mass of the population sufficient to undertake enormous public works. Two new capitals, Loyang and Ch'ang-an, were built. Loyang's walls stretched nine kilometres east to west, eight kilometres north to south, and enclosed a rectangular city of 25 crossing avenues, each over 70 metres wide. Canals 40 metres wide and several hundred kilometres long linked the Yellow, Wei and Yangtze rivers, enabling rice from the south to feed the northern cities. Several hundred kilometres of the Great Walls were rebuilt along the north west frontier, and military campaigns extended the empire's influence east into Korea, west as far as the borders of India and Persia, and south into Indochina.

There was an administrative structure run by full time scholar-officials, some recruited by a system of examinations. It began to act as a counter-balance to the landowning aristocrat class, and tried dividing the land into small peasant holdings so as to ensure the surplus went to the state as taxes, not to the aristocrats as rents.⁷ State monopolies of salt, alcohol and tea added to its revenues.

The state was powerful, closely policing life in the cities, and Confucianism—with its stress on conformity and obedience—was dominant within the state bureaucracy. But growing trade brought ideological influences from all over Asia. Buddhism grew enormously in importance, 'Nestorian' Christianity (condemned as a heresy in Rome and Byzantium) had some impact, and Manicheism and Zoroastrianism found adherents. The coastal commercial cities of the south contained numbers of foreign merchants—Malays, Indians, Iranians, Vietnamese, Khmers and Sumatrans. Canton even had Shi'ite and Sunni mosques for its Muslim merchants. Chinese influences also radiated in all directions—with Buddhism and the Chinese language and literature spreading to Korea and Japan, and knowledge of paper-making passing through Samarkand to Iran, the Arab world and eventually, after many centuries, to Europe.

The T'ang Dynasty lasted three centuries, but then went into crisis. There were repeated quarrels at the top between the bureaucrats and courtly circles. Some rulers encouraged Buddhism, while others tried to smash it. The costs of sustaining the luxury lifestyles of the ruling class, the public works and an enormous empire soared. The state's revenues suffered as the class of small farmers went into sharp decline with the rise of large estates worked by tenant farmers and wage labourers.

Meanwhile, the plight of the mass of peasants went from bad to worse. In one region 90 percent of the peasants were reported to be 'living from hand to mouth'.⁸ There was a growth of banditry and 'frequent rural riots, in which peasants participated'. In the 870s a wave of rebellion broke out, threatening the whole empire.⁹ An insurgent army undertook a great march from north to south and back again to capture the imperial capital, Ch'ang-an, in 880.¹⁰

However, it did not win a victory for the hard-pressed peasantry. Most of its members were not peasants—who were loath to leave their plots for any period of time—but people who had drifted away from the land, while its leaders came 'partly from the rural gentry and partly from the impoverished classes'. Its leader, Hung Ch'ao, 'had even been selected as a local candidate for the [civil service]... examination'. In a matter of days, the army and its leaders were following different paths. The rank and file fighters joined forces with the local poor and looted the world's most prosperous city: 'The markets were set ablaze and countless people slaughtered... The most hated officials were

dragged out and killed.' By contrast, Hung's ambition was to establish a stable regime with himself as emperor. He revived the imperial system, removing from the state administration only the highest officials, leaving old aristocrats in key positions and taking vicious measures against any of his followers who complained. When someone wrote a poem ridiculing the regime on the gate of a ministerial building, Hung's deputy 'killed the officials serving in the department, plucking out their eyes, and hung up their bodies; he executed the soldiers who had guarded the gate, killed everybody in the capital who could compose poetry and employed all other literate people as menials. In all, more than 3,000 people were killed.'

Having turned against his own followers, Hung was unable to keep the throne. An imperial general retook the city from the remains of the demoralised rebel forces a year later. But the rebellion marked the effective end of the T'ang Dynasty, which lost any real power as rival generals fought over the empire. It fell apart into five rival states ('the five dynasties') for half a century, until it was reunited under a new dynasty, the Sung.

The rebellion was similar in many ways to those that had brought down the Ch'in Dynasty in 206 BC and had help break apart the Han Empire after AD 184. There were to be other rebellions in the course of Chinese history, often following a similar pattern. A dynasty established itself and embarked upon ambitious plans of palace building, and canal and road construction; it attempted to ward off threats from pastoralists along its northern and western borders with expensive fortifications and foreign wars; it extended its power, but pushed the mass of the rural population to such levels of poverty that rebellions erupted which broke the imperial power apart; then some rebel leader or imperial general established a new dynasty which started the whole cycle again.

The rural poor never gained the benefits of victory. Scattered across the length and breadth of the countryside, tied to their individual plots of land, illiterate, knowing little of the outside world, they could rebel against acts of oppression by the existing state, but they could not collectively counterpose to it a new state in which they ruled as a class. Instead, they looked to create a state in the image of the existing one, but under a 'good' rather than a 'bad' emperor. It meant that even in victory they set up new rulers who treated them much as the old ones did.

This process even became incorporated into the ruling ideology, with the notion of the legitimacy of a dynasty depending on 'the mandate of heaven', which periodically would pass from one dynasty to another.

Yet the recurrent pattern does not mean Chinese society was 'changeless', as many Western writers used to claim. As dynasties came and went there were cumulative changes, involving the gradual introduction of new techniques into productive activities and, with them, important changes in the relationships between different groups in society.

Leading the world

China continued to undergo a great economic transformation. The owners of large landed estates, worked either by tenant farmers or wage labourers, sought to increase their incomes by investment in new farming implements and milling machinery, and by methods which enabled them to obtain more than one crop a year from their land.¹¹ There was continued migration from the north to the rice-growing areas of the Yangtze Valley and the south. There was a sharp rise in agricultural productivity, and a corresponding growth in the surplus that the rich could use to buy various luxuries.

Trade networks began to connect farmers to local markets, and local markets to provincial cities, which grew in size and importance. More boats than the world had ever seen plied the 50,000 mile network of rivers and canals, carrying not just luxuries for the rich but also bulk products. Money played an increasing part in the transactions of all sections of society and banknotes began to be used as well as coins. The number of traders grew, and some became very rich. The cities grew until the Sung Dynasty's capital, K'ai-feng, enclosing an area 12 times the size of medieval Paris, probably had a million inhabitants,¹² and the city of Hang-chou, in the Yangtze Valley, anything between one and a half million and five million.¹³

Industries grew as well. In K'ai-feng, 'arsenals served the country as a whole... at a time when military technology was developing rapidly'; a textile industry grew up, based on resettled workers from 'Szechwan and the Yangtze delta'; and the iron and steel industries became 'highly organised enterprises dependent on more sophisticated techniques, great investments in equipment and large numbers of workers', under the control of both the government and 'private iron masters'. Workshops 'produced articles of luxury for the imperial family, high officials

and wealthy businessmen', but also 'building materials, chemicals, books and clothing'.¹⁴

There was considerable technological innovation. Pit coal was substituted for charcoal in metallurgy, water-driven machinery was used for working bellows, and explosives were employed in the mines. The quantity of iron produced in 1078 exceeded 114,000 tons—it only reached 68,000 tons in England in 1788.¹⁵ There was an unprecedented expansion of ceramics and porcelain-making—a technique not discovered in Europe for another 700 years. Gunpowder was in use by 1044—240 years before the first European mention of it. By 1132 it propelled rockets from bamboo tubes and by 1280 projectiles from bronze and iron mortars.¹⁶ New naval technologies—'anchors, rudders, capstans, canvas sails and rigid matting sails... watertight compartments, mariners' compasses'—enabled Chinese ships to reach the Arabian Gulf and even the east coast of Africa.¹⁷ Some could carry 1,000 people, and Chinese map-making was far ahead of not only that of Europe, but also the Arab Middle East.

Finally, advances in book production permitted the creation of a literature aimed at a sizeable middle class audience for the first time in history. Printing from engraved blocks was already taking place in the 9th century. There appeared works on the occult, almanacs, Buddhist texts, lexicons, popular encyclopaedias, manuals of elementary education and historical books, as well as classic works, the complete Buddhist writings, printed promissory notes and practical manuals on medicine and pharmacy.¹⁸ By the 11th century moveable type existed, based on the fitting together of individual characters, although it was not used for large-scale printing until the 15th century—probably because the large number of Chinese characters did not make it any quicker or more economical than block printing. In any case, China possessed printed books half a millennium before Europe, and the written word ceased to be the prerogative of a literate elite or of those who dwelt in the great monasteries. Schools, both state-run and private, multiplied, especially in the new economic heart of the country, the lower Yangtze region. As one Chinese writer who lived in this region at the time wrote, 'Every peasant, artisan and merchant teaches his son how to read books. Even herdsmen and wives who bring food to their husbands at work in the fields can recite the poems of the men of ancient times'.¹⁹

The growth of trade and industry was matched by a growth in the

prosperity, size and influence of the merchant class, so that some historians even refer to it as a 'bourgeoisie'. Twitchett writes that by the late Sung period there was 'a wealthy, self-conscious urban middle class with a strong sense of its own identity and its own special culture'.²⁰ What is more, there was an important shift in the attitude of the state towards the merchants. Previous dynasties had seen the merchants 'as a potentially disruptive element' and kept them 'under constant supervision'.²¹ Curfews had prevented anyone going on the streets of the cities after nightfall, markets had been confined to walled city areas under tight state supervision, and merchants' families had been barred from positions in the state bureaucracy. Now many of these restrictions fell into disuse. By the early 11th century one high official could complain of the lack of 'control over the merchants. They enjoy a luxurious way of life, living on dainty foods of delicious rice and meat, owning handsome houses and many carts, adorning their wives and children with pearls and jade, and dressing their slaves in white silk. In the morning they think about how to make a fortune, and in the evening they devise means of fleecing the poor'.²²

The new urban rich began to use their economic power to exert influence over the imperial bureaucracy:

The examination system now became a route by which increasing numbers of men from outside the circle of great families could enter the higher levels of the imperial government... The new bureaucrats were increasingly drawn from the families who had benefited most from the commercial revolution...the rich merchants and the wealthy landowners.²³

Only a few hundred men would pass the national examinations,²⁴ but they were the apex of a huge system. By the 13th century there were some 200,000 students in government schools and thousands more in private and Buddhist schools, all of whom dreamed of getting to the top. A good number came from merchant families.

Lost centuries

The merchants were still far from running the state, even if they were an increasingly important pressure group. Most large-scale production was still under state control, even when profitable activities—such as operating state-owned ships—were contracted out to merchants. The

state itself was run by bureaucrats trained as scholarly officials, whose ideal was the country gentleman.²⁵ This was also the ideal for the merchant's son who obtained an official position. The result was that, just as the Sung Empire was reaching its peak, new signs of crisis began to appear.

What historians usually call 'neo-Confucianism' was the dominant ideology within the state. It stressed the need for rulers and administrators to follow an orderly routine, based upon mutual respect, which attempted to avoid both the violent actions of aristocratic warrior classes and the ruthless profit-making of merchants. It set the tone of the studies to be undertaken by anyone who aspired to a post in the state bureaucracy and it suited a conservative social layer whose ideal was a life of scholarly leisure rather than the hurly-burly of ruthless competition and military turmoil.

It also accorded with the approach of the early Sung emperors. They blamed the collapse of the previous T'ang Dynasty on expensive policies of military expansionism, so they cut the size of the army and relied on bribery to buy peace from border states. This approach was expressed through semi-religious notions about the harmony of nature and society. But it contained a rational, pragmatic core. It was a way out of the long years of crisis that had gone before.

Many Western writers have concluded that the dominance of neo-Confucianism blocked the path of capitalist advance in China. They have seen its hostility to 'the spirit of capitalism' as keeping Chinese society stagnant for millennia. Others have emphasised the 'totalitarianism' which supposedly stopped Chinese economic development.²⁶ But, as we have seen, in the Sung era Chinese society was far from stagnant. Non-Confucian ideas (Buddhist, Taoist and Nestorian) not only existed but were found in print. And officials who in theory stood for Confucian pieties in practice behaved very differently. Patricia Ebrey, for instance, has shown how a widely distributed Sung advice manual for the gentleman class, Yüan Ts'ai's *Precepts For Social Life* contradicted many neo-Confucian tenets. The writer 'assumed one's goal in business was profit', and expressed 'business-like attitudes', so that 'those fully committed to...neo-Confucianism would have to abstain from most of the activities [he]...describes'.²⁷

There was a gap between the prevalent neo-Confucian ideology and the activities of the merchant class. But it was a gap that class could tolerate so long as the economy was growing and it was becoming

richer and more influential—just as the first European capitalists hundreds of years later were prepared to work with monarchic states and accept their official ideologies so long as these did not impede the making of money.

The peculiarity of China which weakened the ability of the merchants and wealthier tradesmen to transform themselves into a full-blown capitalist class was material, not ideological. They were more dependent on the officials of the state machine than was the case in 17th and 18th century Europe. For the state officials were indispensable to running a major means of production—the massive canal networks and irrigation works.²⁸ This gave the Chinese merchants little choice but to work with the state machine,²⁹ even though that state was absorbing an enormous proportion of the surplus and diverting it from productive use—spending it on the luxury consumption of the court and the top officials, and on bribing the border peoples.

This was a period of great prosperity for the gentry-officials and the rich merchants alike.³⁰ It was also a period of grinding poverty for the peasants. In the 11th century Su Hsün wrote:

The rich families own big chunks of land... Their fields are tilled by hired vagrants who are driven by whips and looked upon as slaves. Of the produce of the land, half goes to the master and half to the tiller. For every landowner there are ten tillers... The owner can clearly accumulate his half and become rich and powerful, while the tillers must daily consume their half and fall into poverty and starvation.³¹

The 'Confucian' ethics of the gentry-officials certainly did not extend to those who toiled for them. Yüan Ts'ai's *Precepts For Social Life* refers to peasants and artisans as 'lesser people', speaks of 'perversity on the part of servants, their tendency to commit suicide', suggests how they should be beaten, and advises treating them as domesticated animals.³²

The historian John Haegar writes, 'By the end of the southern Sung, much of the countryside had been impoverished by the same forces which had sparked the agricultural and commercial revolution in the first place'.³³

But before any symptoms of internal crisis could mature—and any clash of interests between the merchants and the officials come to the fore—an external crisis tore the state apart. In 1127 an invasion from the north cut China in half, leaving the Sung in control only of the

south. In 1271 the whole country fell to a second invasion.

The first invasion did not fundamentally alter conditions in the north. The conquerors, the Jürchen, were a people already organised in a state patterned on Chinese lines and ran their half of China, the Chin Empire, with Chinese-speaking officials. Effectively there were two Chinese empires for almost 150 years.

The second invasion was much more serious. It was by Mongol armies which had spread out from their central Asian homeland in the previous century to rampage west to central Europe and south into Arabia and India, as well as east into China and Korea. Mongol society was dominated by military aristocrats who owned vast nomadic herds. They were superb horsemen and had the wealth to acquire up to date armour and armaments. The result was a military combination that few armies could withstand.³⁴ But they had little administrative structure of their own. For this they depended upon the services of peoples they had conquered.

In China the Mongol rulers called themselves the Yüan Dynasty and relied upon sections of the old officialdom to run the empire. But, not trusting them, they kept key positions in their own hands and contracted out the profitable business of collecting taxes to Muslim merchants from central Asia, backed up by military detachments. This broke apart the social arrangements that had resulted from—and further encouraged—a level of technological and economic advance such as the world had never known.

The economic problems that had been slowly growing in the Sung years, especially the impoverishment of the countryside, now came to the fore. Prices began to rise from the 1270s onwards. The poverty of the northern peasantry was made worse by the further spread of big estates.

Chinese society continued to be advanced enough to amaze foreigners. It was the Mongol court in Beijing that so impressed the Italian traveller Marco Polo in 1275. The vast stretch of the Mongol presence from one end of Eurasia to the other also played an important part in spreading knowledge of Chinese technical advances to the less advanced societies of the west. But China itself had lost its economic dynamism, and the poverty of the peasantry caused repeated revolt, often led by religious sects or secret societies—the 'White Lotus', the 'White Cloud', the 'Red Turbans'. Finally, the son of an itinerant agricultural worker who was a Red Turban leader, Chu

Yüan-chang, took the Mongol capital Beijing and proclaimed himself emperor in 1368.

There was a steady recovery from the devastation of the last Mongol years under the new empire, known as the Ming. But there was no recovery of the economic dynamism. The early Ming emperors consciously discouraged industry and foreign trade in an effort to concentrate resources in agriculture, so that they were less developed in the early 16th century than they had been in the 12th. In the meantime, other parts of Eurasia had learned the techniques the Chinese had pioneered, and had begun to build flourishing urban civilisations of their own—and armies and navies to go with them.

Byzantium: the living fossil

The collapse of the Roman Empire in western Europe was not the end of the empire as such. Emperors who described themselves as Romans still reigned in the city of Constantinople (present day Istanbul) 1,000 years after the Goths sacked Rome. The empire today is usually called Byzantium, but the emperors and their subjects regarded themselves as Romans, although their language was Greek. Through much of that 1,000 years the splendour of Constantinople—with its luxurious royal palaces, its libraries and public baths, its scholars acquainted with the writings of Greek and Roman antiquity, its 300 churches and its magnificent St Sophia cathedral—stood out as the one redoubt of culture against the poverty, illiteracy, superstition and endless wars that characterised the Christian lands of the rest of Europe.

Even in the 12th century, when western Europe was reviving, Constantinople's population was greater than that of London, Paris and Rome combined. The city fascinated the elites of the neighbouring Muslim empires, although 'Baghdad, Cairo and Cordova [Cordoba] were each larger and more populous than Constantinople'.³⁵

Yet Byzantine civilisation added very little to humanity's ability to make a livelihood or to its knowledge in those 1,000 years. In every sphere it relied on advances already known to the old Roman Empire—and already known to the Greeks of the 5th century BC.

St Sophia cathedral,³⁶ completed in the mid-6th century, was the most magnificent building in Europe at the time. But it also marked the end of any advance by Byzantine architects.³⁷ The innovative techniques employed were not used again, and later architects did not know how to keep it in full repair. Byzantine literature was characterised by a deliberate rejection of originality, with 'a striving to emulate the style of classical models and to serve scrupulously a set of pedantic rules... No literary value was attached to originality of content, freedom of invention, or freedom in the choice of subject matter'.³⁸ The obsession with imitating the past meant the language

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of official society was the 'classic' Greek of 1,000 years before, not the very different version employed in the life of the city: 'When making a formal speech, the orator would shrink from referring to any object in everyday use by its familiar name'.³⁹ Byzantine art was characterised by 'a process of continuous limitation' until it became nothing more than propaganda, either for the imperial power or for the church.⁴⁰

There were a few advances in technology. Alchemists stumbled upon new methods for handling metals, although 'scientific mineralogy was all but destroyed by the superimposition of occult practices'.⁴¹ There were improvements in the manufacture and handling of glass, and a microscrew permitted accurate measurements. There were improvements in writing materials, particular with the acquisition of knowledge from China on how to make paper. The 'Byzantines knew several simple machines (levers, rollers, cog wheels, wedges, inclined planes, screws and pulleys) which were used mainly as parts... of capstans, treadwheels, scooping machines, weightlifters and catapults'.⁴² Yet these advances seem to have been employed only in two limited fields—to provide luxuries for the ruling class (such as a mechanical singing bird made by Leo the Mathematician for the royal court) and for military purposes. Even in the military field, the Byzantines advanced very little beyond the knowledge acquired in Alexandria a millennium earlier.

There was not even a limited advance in science. A few manuscripts survived which detailed the discoveries in mathematics and astronomy of Greek Alexandria, but only a handful of scholars ever took them seriously. Mainstream thinkers relied on interpretations of the Book of Genesis in the Bible for their understanding of the physical world and saw the world as flat, not round.⁴³

Above all, there seems to have been virtually no advance in the techniques used to gain a livelihood by the vast majority of the population who worked on the land. 'The methods and instruments' of cultivation 'showed little or no advance on ancient times'.⁴⁴ Tilling was still performed by a light plough pulled by oxen, fields were not manured systematically, and the harnesses employed until the 12th century choked animals so that two horses could only pull a load of about half a tonne—several times less than is possible with modern harnesses. The result was that however hungry the peasants were, the surplus available to maintain the state and provide for the luxuries of

the ruling class did not grow. This simple fact lay at the basis of the stagnation of so much of the rest of Byzantine society. It had survived the crisis which destroyed the old Roman Empire in the west. But no new ways of producing had emerged and no new class which embodied those new ways. So it could not escape the same pressures which had led to the great crisis of the west in the 5th century.

The empire had survived in the east, basically because this was the area of most abundant agriculture. After Constantinople became the imperial capital in 330, successive emperors were able to keep control of Asia Minor, Syria, the Balkans and the all-important grain-producing Nile Valley—which now supplied the needs of Constantinople as it had previously supplied Rome. The economies of the empire's provinces were in the hands of large local landowners, running virtually self contained estates, which in Egypt 'came to resemble miniature kingdoms, equipped with police, courts of justice, private armies and elaborate postal and transport services'.⁴⁵ But the imperial army was sufficiently powerful and tightly enough organised to keep them providing the funds the empire needed.

This structure virtually collapsed barely 50 years after Justinian's final attempt to reconquer the west and the completion of St Sophia in the 6th century. The armies, the spate of public building and the luxuries of the court and church depended on all the wealth of the empire draining to the top. The continued impoverishment of the peasants and discontent among the less wealthy inhabitants of the provincial cities led to 'savage clashes between rival factions in all the cities of the empire'.⁴⁶ The empire and the church alienated vast numbers of people by their attempts to impose religious conformism. The bishops, 'backed by the violence of the monks', ensured 'Paganism was brutally demolished' by attacks on temples.⁴⁷ There were repeated attacks on the Jews and bloody persecution of adherents of the 'Monophysite', 'Arian', and Nestorian interpretations of Christianity (which, between them, had near-majority support). There was little support for the empire when it was attacked in the early 7th century by Persian and then Arab-Islamic armies in Syria and Egypt, and by Slav peoples in the Balkans. It was reduced to a rump consisting of Constantinople itself and part of Asia Minor, with a few towns, a much reduced population in the capital, and a general decay in the level of literacy and learning.

The truncated empire was just able to survive because its rulers

reorganised the economy so as to provide for its defence. They attempted to dismantle the large estates and to settle whole armies as smallholding peasants in frontier areas. This system, they believed, would provide them both with militias to defend the empire and with a sure tax base.

They were able to hold the core of the empire intact in this way and even, by the 10th century, to recover some of the Balkan lands inhabited by the Slavs. But they could not overcome the basic weaknesses of the system, and Constantinople was in decline again by the mid-11th century. The empire rested on an inbuilt contradiction. The aim was to build an independent peasantry which could be taxed. But taxation continually drove the peasants to abandon the land to those who were wealthier and more powerful.

The smallholding peasants faced 'the annual invasion of a cruel and rapacious body of tax collectors, accompanied by a posse of soldiers... Defaulters were summarily flogged and their goods distrained'.⁴⁸ Sometimes they would be jailed and tortured—and in 12th century Cyprus hungry dogs were set on them. Yet even in the best of times they lived on the edge of insolvency. It only required a bad harvest for the most industrious peasants to be forced to sell their land and flee. So peasants could end up welcoming subordination to some powerful landowner as a form of 'protection'. Significantly, when there was a peasant rising in 932, it was led by an imposter who claimed to be the son of a great aristocratic family.⁴⁹

The imperial bureaucracy did succeed in preventing the urban masses ever organising independently. The merchants and artisans were organised into guilds under state control, which rigorously limited their profits. This 'delayed the growth of a strong native bourgeoisie',⁵⁰ so that when openings for trade did emerge they were taken up by foreign merchants whose activities increased the weaknesses of the empire.

A class of free wage labourers could not develop either, because of the persistence of slavery in the cities. From the 9th to the 11th centuries, 'the great victories...flooded the markets with cheap human merchandise. It was not until the hard facts of military defeat, closed markets and declining wealth had stopped the sources of slaves in the 12th century that slavery began to die out and give the free worker...economic power'.⁵¹

The other side of the splendour of Constantinople and the wealth

of its rulers was the poverty of masses of its inhabitants. Vast numbers lived in squalid tenements or huts, with many sleeping outdoors even in the coldest winters. But, lacking an independent economic base, the poor could not act as an independent force. They could cause brief mayhem by rioting. But even their bitterness was all too easily manipulated by groups with very different interests to their own. So the huge 'Nike' riot early in Justinian's reign, which went on for a fortnight and led to the burning of half the city, was utilised by aristocratic forces opposed to Justinian's taxes on them. From then on emperors were careful to provide cheap grain for the urban masses, and riots were normally in favour of the emperor and against his enemies.

There was even an institutionalised form of rioting which deflected the urban masses from raising class demands of their own. This was the organisation into rival Green and Blue 'factions' of groups of spectators at the various games in the Hippodrome arena. Several hundred youths from each side would occupy special seats, dressed in elaborated clothes in their own colours, cheering and booing appropriately and coming to blows, which would, on occasions, lead to large-scale bloodshed and rioting. Troops would sometimes have to be used to restore order, but the sponsorship of the factions by various dignitaries, including the emperor and empress, ensured that far from endangering the empire the system merely served to let off steam.⁵²

It was only when the system of providing cheap corn broke down in the 12th century that riots reflecting the class interests of the urban dwellers began to occur. Interestingly, it was then that various 'guilds' and associations of artisans and tradesmen played a role.⁵³

Byzantium survived as a last bastion of Graeco-Roman culture because the imperial bureaucracy was run by a layer of literate Greek speakers. But it was a group that lived off the production of others rather than contributing to or organising it. It therefore prided itself on its remoteness from the material world, and was afraid of any class emerging whose closeness to production might lead to it diverting some of the surplus into its own pockets. It is this which explains the sterile, pedantic character of Byzantine culture. It also explains the strength of superstitious and magical beliefs among all social groups. The priests were usually at least half-illiterate, and their message relied upon simplified stories of the saints, tales of miracles, and faith in the magic of holy relics. Where Paganism had provided people

with local gods, Christianity now provided them with local patron saints. The cult of the mother goddess became the cult of the Virgin Mary. Fertility rights became Shrove Tuesday carnivals and Easter ceremonies.

Along with the superstition went the most barbaric practices. By the 8th century 'we find mutilation of the tongue, hand and nose as part of the criminal system... The church approved of this because the tongueless sinner still had time to repent'.⁵⁴ In the cities the austere moralism of the church meant there was 'rigorous seclusion of women. No respectable woman ever appeared in the streets unveiled'.⁵⁵ But there was also prostitution on a massive scale.

The fundamental weakness of Byzantine civilisation was shown early in the 13th century when Constantinople fell to a band of thugs and adventurers from Europe. The participants in the Fourth Crusade found the city a better prize than their intended destination of Jerusalem. They pillaged it and then ruled it as a feudal kingdom. They were driven out in 1261, but the renewed Byzantine state was a pale reflection of its former self and finally fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

A certain sort of civilisation had been preserved for 1,000 years. But the only contact of the supposedly cultivated ruling class with the masses who did the work was via the tax collector on the one hand and the barely literate rural priests on the other. Such a civilisation could be no more than a living fossil, passing on the achievements of one epoch to another, but adding nothing itself.

No class capable of revolutionising society and giving a free rein to the forces of production had ever developed in Graeco-Roman society. The Dark Ages were the result in western Europe; 1,000 years of sterility were the result in the Balkans and Asia Minor.

The Islamic revolutions

The stagnation of Byzantium after Justinian's time did not just lead to the sterility of the rump Roman Empire. It also led to a series of dramatic upheavals elsewhere in the Middle East which did contribute something to humanity's stock of knowledge and techniques—and also produced one of the great world religions.

The starting point was the unlikely venue of Mecca, a trading town in the generally barren lands of the Arabian peninsula. The area was dominated by nomadic pastoralists who used the camel (domesticated about 1000 BC) to travel from oasis to oasis with their herds, and to engage in a certain amount of trade and looting. They were organised into clans, loosely linked in tribes run by assemblies of clan elders, which fought each other and launched periodic raids on settled peoples beyond the edge of the desert.

But there were also settled cultivators around the oases and in some of the coastal regions—especially in the south,⁵⁶ where there was a civilisation at least 1,000 years old which maintained contact with the equally old Ethiopian civilisation just across the Red Sea. Some of the nomadic families also began to settle in trading centres as they acquired wealth, using camel caravans to carry luxury goods between the Roman Empire and the eastern civilisations. Mecca was one such settlement and had become a thriving town by the beginning of the 7th century.

The traditional values of the nomadic clans centred on the courage and honour of the individual man and his clan. There was no state, and obligations were to one's kin group, not to society at large. Assaults, murders and robberies were regarded as infringements on the family or clan, to be dealt with through retaliation and blood feuds. Religion was a matter of identification with an individual deity which would travel with the tribal group—rather as the Ark of the Covenant travelled with the 'Children of Israel' in their Old Testament wanderings through the desert.

Such values did not provide any easy way to deal with tensions and conflicts which arose as some of the nomads took to a settled life. Long-established peasants and townspeople had long broken with them. Christianity flourished in southern Arabia, and many oasis cultivators had converted to Judaism or one of the varieties of Christianity. In a town like Mecca the mingling of nomads, merchants, artisans and peasants was matched by arguments between the different religious viewpoints. These were arguments which had practical implications, since the old values and gods ruled out the establishment of any single code of law or behaviour which overrode loyalty to clan and tribe.

The crisis was heightened by what was happening in the two great empires bordering on Arabia, Byzantium and Persia. Persia had briefly seized Egypt and Syria from Byzantium at the end of the 6th century, bringing to an end 900 years of Graeco-Roman domination. But Persian society itself was in deep crisis, caused by its landed aristocrats neglecting the Mesopotamian irrigation systems that had allowed cities to flourish. The ravages of war made things worse. In both empires there was mass impoverishment and social unrest.⁵⁷ The whole world seemed to be in a state of chaos.

This was the world in which Mohammed, a Meccan orphan from one of the less important trading families, grew up and attempted, not very successfully, to make a living as a merchant. He experienced the chaos of the world around him as mental turmoil, in which none of the conflicting worldviews and values seemed to make sense. He felt driven to try to bring some coherence to his own life and to the society in which he lived. He had a series of religious visions in which he believed God (*Allah* in Arabic) spoke to him. These moulded the various religious conceptions he had come across into a new pattern. He recited the words to others, who wrote them down as the Koran, and gradually built up a group of followers, mainly younger members of the different Meccan merchant families.

The message Mohammed preached had much in common with the Christianity and Judaism of the Arabic cultivators and townspeople. It opposed a single god to the many competing gods of the nomadic herders. It substituted belief in 'universal' obligations to all fellow believers for the old clan and tribal codes. It appealed to the poor by praising protection against arbitrary oppression, but did not spurn the rich providing they showed charity. It also, like early Christianity, had

a certain appeal to urban women (there were wives in Mohammed's group whose husbands were bitterly hostile to it). Although it assumed women were inferior to men (accepting, for instance, the veiling of women prevalent in the Byzantine Empire), it preached that men, as their 'superiors', had to respect rather than mistreat women, and it gave them certain property rights.

Its purely religious aspect involved the incorporation of a range of biblical myths and religious practices from both Jews and Christians. But in one important respect the message differed from the versions of Christianity of the time. It was not simply a set of beliefs or rules for moral behaviour. It was also a political programme for reforming society, for replacing the 'barbarism' of competition, often armed, between tribes and ruling families, with an ordered *umma* community based on a single code of laws.

This political aspect of Mohammed's teaching led to clashes with the ruling families in Mecca, to the enforced emigration of his group to the town of Medina, and to his eventual return with an army to Mecca in AD 630 to begin to establish a new state. He was successful because he was able to build a core of young men committed to a single worldview, while forming tactical alliances with groups whose purpose was very different—with townspeople and cultivators who merely wanted peace, with merchant families who relished the profits a powerful Arab state would bring them, and with tribal leaders hoping for loot from fighting for his cause.

The new state was well positioned to take advantage of the twin crises of the great empires. Mohammed died in 632, but his first two successors, or 'caliphs', Abu Bakr and Umar—longtime disciples from merchant families—also knew how to combine religious principle and political pragmatism. They deflected the energies of feuding pastoralist tribes and clans into attacks on the wealthy cities of the two great empires and in the process discovered how weak those empires were. One by one their cities fell to Arab armies—Damascus in 636, the Persian capital of Ctesiphon in 637, the Egyptian city called Babylon (now part of Cairo) in 639, and Alexandria in 642. Within ten years Mohammed's followers had created a massive empire out of the lands of the historic civilisations of the Middle East.

The successes were, in part, a result of very clever use of the fighting potential of the pastoralist tribes. The Islamic commanders saw that, moving through apparently impenetrable deserts at speed, cavalrymen

on camels could hit the cities in the bordering empires unexpectedly and with great force. They could use the vast space of the desert much as the gunboats of the old British Empire used the oceans, striking at will against defending armies which could only move at a fraction of their speed,⁵⁸ or as modern armed forces use paratroops to hit distant objectives at will.⁵⁹

But the successes were also a testimony to how hated the rulers of the old empires were by their own peoples. The Jews and the 'un-orthodox' Christians who often made up the majority of the urban population welcomed the Arab armies, especially as the Muslim conquerors did not at first seek to create new state structures or convert populations to their religion. Rather, they left intact the bulk of the old administrations and respected the beliefs of Christians, Jews and Persian Zoroastrians alike. All that they demanded was the payment of regular taxes as tribute, and the confiscation of lands belonging to the state and those aristocrats who continued to resist their rule. The mass of the population found conditions less oppressive than under the old empires.

A Jewish writer told how 'the creator has brought the Kingdom of Ishmael [ie the Arabs] in order to save you from wickedness', while a Syriac Christian historian said, 'God...delivered us out of the hands of the Romans by means of the Arabs...to be saved from the cruelty of the Romans and their bitter hatred to us'.⁶⁰

The immediate beneficiaries of the conquest were the leaders of the Arab tribal armies and the leading families of Mecca. They shared the booty of conquest between them, so that within a few years they constituted an Arab aristocracy—an extremely wealthy but very thin upper caste, living in newly built barrack towns on the edge of the desert, exacting tribute in the form of taxes from the population, but leaving the existing landowners and officials to run the lands of the old empires.

However, there was continual friction within the victorious armies, with some of the Arab tribes feeling they had lost out in the distribution of the fruits of victory. The frustrations grew in the 640s until they erupted into a civil war which left its mark on the whole history of Islam. After the murder of the second caliph, Umar, by a slave in 644, power had passed to Uthman, an early supporter of Mohammed but also a member of the most powerful Meccan merchant family. This further increased the bitterness. He was murdered in 656. The

choice of Mohammed's cousin and son in law Ali as caliph led to open warfare between rival Muslim armies, until he was killed by some of his own followers, known as the Khariyites, who objected to his attempts to conciliate his opponents. Power passed to a cousin of Uthman, who established a hereditary dynasty known as the Umayyads, after their family name.

The victorious family was associated in many eyes with the vices which Mohammed had preached against. Ali and his son Husein (murdered by an Umayyad army in 680) became martyrs to all those who harked back to Mohammed's own time, regarding it as a model of purity that had since been corrupted. Again and again in subsequent Islamic history the cry for a return to the time of Ali or of the first two caliphs has been a call for revolt against the existing state of affairs from one social group or another. It still motivates many 'Islamic fundamentalist' organisations today.

For the time being, however, the Umayyads oversaw the consolidation of the empire, establishing its capital in Syria. The Arab armies resumed their advances to take Kabul and Bukhara in the east and to reach the Atlantic in the west. This brought still more wealth to the Arab aristocracy of former tribal leaders and former merchants. They lived in great luxury in the garrison cities, spending vast sums on building palaces for themselves. Beneath them other members of the Arab armies were exempt from taxes and received pensions from the booty and tribute of conquest.

Urban classes and religious revolt

The unification of a vast area into a single empire gave an enormous boost to the trade in luxuries. Merchants, shopkeepers, clerks and artisans flocked to the garrison cities, settling in growing suburbs around their walls and providing for the needs of the Arab rulers, their palaces, their armies and their administrators. Mostly they were non-Arabs, but were attracted to the religion of their rulers—which was, after all, not all that different from the monotheistic religions that had dominated the old empires. But the Arab Muslims were not keen to extend to newcomers their religious right to tax exemption and a share in the tribute. So new converts were designated *mawali* and excluded from the privileges of the Arabs, who regarded themselves

as the only genuine Muslims.

By the time the Arab Empire was a century old, the non-Arab Muslims were the majority in the cities of the empire and the key to its industries and trade, which the Arab merchants had abandoned to become a new aristocracy. They were also of growing importance as administrators. But they were still discriminated against.

Dissident Muslim groups who called themselves *Shi'atu Ali*, the party of Ali (or Shi'ites for short), found a ready audience, as did the Kharijites who believed Ali also had succumbed to compromise and corruption. Just as a section of the urban classes in Mecca had once found in Mohammed's teaching a worldview which enabled them to fight against a disagreeable social order, so now the urban classes found that teaching equally useful in the fight against the state established by his lieutenants. It was a rallying cry for the creation of a new order which would remove the oppression that cramped the further development of those classes.

Some historians see the conflicts which arose as setting Persians against Arabs.⁶¹ But in fact the Persian upper class supported the Umayyads, while the discontented included many Arabs:

The surviving Persian aristocracy cooperated with the Arab state as long as the state recognised its privileges. On conversion it exchanged its Zoroastrian for a Muslim orthodoxy. The Islamised Persian townfolk and peasants exchanged their Zoroastrian for Islamic heresies directed against the aristocracy, both Arab and Persian.⁶²

As class tensions increased, there were a series of revolts headed by various *mahdis* ('guided ones'), who preached the birth of a new religious and social order. These were defeated. But then in the mid-8th century there was renewed quarrelling among the leaders of the Arab armies.

A descendent of Mohammed's family along the 'Hashemite' line, Abu-I-Abbas, exploited the situation for his own advantage. He gave the go-ahead to one of his family's freed slaves, Abu Muslim, to undertake religious and social agitation in south western Persia. Abu Muslim worked in secret, building support until conditions were ripe for a popular rising. One after another the west Persian cities declared their support by raising the Abbasid banner—which was black, a colour associated with the millenarian groups. Abu Muslim marched

to the Euphrates, where he defeated a major Umayyad army. Such 'extensive and successful revolutionary propaganda' paved the way for Abu-I-Abbas to defeat the Umayyads, put the whole family to death and establish a new dynasty, the Abbasids.⁶³ Those of the poor who expected liberation were soon disappointed. The Abbasid rulers quickly turned on their own 'extremist' supporters, executing Abu Muslim and several of his companions. Yet this was more than just a change of dynasty.

In his history of Islam, Bernard Lewis goes so far as to claim it was 'a revolution in the history of Islam as important... as the French or Russian revolutions in the history of Europe'.⁶⁴ Some historians even refer to it as a 'bourgeois revolution'.^{64a} Certainly, the Abbasids used the mobilisation of mass discontent to push through a complete reorganisation of imperial rule. Previously the empire had been run by an exclusively Arab military aristocracy, whose origins lay in war and conquest for tribute. Under the Abbasids, Islam became a genuinely universal religion in which Arab and non-Arab believers were increasingly treated the same and in which ethnic origins were not central—although there were still rich and poor. There was a 'new social order based on a peace economy of agriculture and trade and with a cosmopolitan ruling class of officials, merchants, bankers and the *ulama*, the class of religious scholars, jurists, teachers and dignitaries'.⁶⁵ Symbolic of the change was the shift in the court to a grandiose new capital, Baghdad, in the most fertile irrigated area of Mesopotamia and on an important trade route to India, only a few miles from the ruins of the old Persian capital, Ctesiphon.

The Abbasid revolution opened the way to a century or more of economic advance. The great river valleys of Mesopotamia and the Nile flourished, producing wheat, barley, rice, dates and olives. The imperial rulers repaired the irrigation canals of Mesopotamia, and crop yields seem to have been high.⁶⁶ Cotton cultivation, introduced from India, spread all the way from eastern Persia to Spain. The trade of the empire was vast. Merchants travelled to India, Sri Lanka, the East Indies and China, giving rise to the settlements of Arab merchants in the south China cities. Trade also extended from the Black Sea up the Volga into Russia—with hoards of Arab coins found even in Sweden—through Ethiopia and the Nile Valley into Africa and, via Jewish merchants, into western Europe.

Alongside the expansion of trade there was the emergence of

something approaching a banking system. Banks with head offices in Baghdad had branches in other cities of the empire, and there was an elaborate system of cheques and letters of credit,⁶⁷ which did away with merchants having to carry large sums of gold or silver from one end of the empire to the other. It was possible to draw a cheque in Baghdad and cash it in Morocco. Koranic injunctions against lending money for interest meant that many bankers were Christians or Jews—although, as Maxime Rodinson has pointed out, Islamic businessmen were not slow in finding ways around the rule.⁶⁸

Artisan-based industries also flourished—mainly textiles, but also pottery, metalwork, soap, perfumes and paper making (learned from China). The flourishing of commercial life and the cities was reflected in literature and thought, where the 'upright merchant' was held 'as the ideal ethical type'.⁶⁹ The famous stories of the *Arabian Nights* portray 'the life of a bourgeoisie of tradesmen and artisans with its upper layer of wealthy businessmen, corn merchants, tax farmers, importers and absentee gentlemen farmers'.⁷⁰

It was in this period that religious scholars began compiling authoritative collections of the sayings of Mohammed (the 'Hadiths') and formal codes of Islamic law (the 'Shariah'). Today these codes are often presented in the West as expressions of pure barbarism as opposed to the allegedly 'humane' and 'civilised' values of some 'Judaic-Christian tradition'. But in the 9th and 10th centuries the codes represented, in part, the values of traders and artisans who sought to free themselves from the arbitrary rule of imperial officialdom and landed aristocrats—and did so in ways that stood in marked contrast to what prevailed in 'Christian' Byzantium, let alone in the developing feudal system of western Europe. As one scholarly history of Islam puts it, the Shariah law was built on 'egalitarian expectations of relative mobility...which maintained its autonomy as against the agrarian empires'. Tradesmen and artisans could look to 'the reconstitution of the whole society on more openly structured, more egalitarian and contractual bases, appealing to Islam for legitimation'.⁷¹

Overall this was one of those periods of history in which the clashes of values produced by rapid changes in society led to a flourishing of intellectual inquiry. There was not yet a single orthodox interpretation of Islam, and rival schools battled for people's minds. The lower classes of the towns were attracted to the various Shia heresies—views which repeatedly led to attempted revolts against the empire.

Meanwhile poets, scholars and philosophers flocked to Baghdad from all parts of the empire, hoping to receive the patronage of some wealthy courtier, landowner or merchant. They translated into Arabic the works of Greek, Persian, Syriac (the language of ancient Syria) and Indian philosophy, medicine and mathematics. Philosophers such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (usually known in the west as Avicenna) sought to provide a rational account of the world, building on the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. Mathematicians such as al-Khwarazmi, al-Buzjani and al-Biruni combined and developed the heritage of Greece and India. Astronomers constructed astrolabes and sextants and measured the circumference of the Earth.

Parasites and paralysis

The Muslim Empire certainly provided a sharp contrast, not just to Dark Age Europe but also to stagnating Byzantium. Yet it suffered from grave faults which meant it never matched the dynamism, innovation and technical advance of China.

First, the flourishing town life and culture was not matched by a corresponding advance in the techniques of production. The Abbasid revolution created space for the expansion of trade and enabled the urban middle classes to influence the functioning of the state. But real power remained with groups which were still essentially parasitic on production carried out by others. The royal court increasingly adopted the traditional trappings of an oriental monarchy, with vast expenditures designed to feed the egos of its rulers and to impress their subjects. State officials expected to make enormous fortunes from bribes and by diverting state revenues into their own pockets. Even merchants who enriched themselves by trade would see speculation in land ownership or tax farming as more fruitful than investment in improving production.

The urban industries were overwhelmingly based on small-scale production by individual artisans. There was little development of bigger workshops using wage labour, except in a few industries run by the state rather than by private entrepreneurs. It was not long before state officials were encroaching on the profits from trade too. Their attempts to control speculation in vital foodstuffs expanded into efforts to monopolise trade in certain commodities for themselves.

The advances in the countryside during the first few Abbasid decades soon disappeared. Once the irrigation systems had been restored to their old level, there was a tendency for the state funds needed to maintain them to be diverted to other purposes and other pockets. Land increasingly passed into the hands of large landowners only interested in the short term profits needed to maintain an ostentatious lifestyle in Baghdad. They exerted ever-greater pressure on the cultivators and introduced slave labour on the large estates. As in ancient Rome, peasants not only lost their land but also saw the market for waged labour contract. And the slaves did not share the interest of the peasant proprietor in the long term fertility of the soil.

An ever more elaborate ruling class 'superstructure' weighed increasingly heavily on a countryside in which production ceased to rise. As an important study of agriculture in successive Mesopotamian civilisations notes, the dominant urban classes 'exhibited little concern for agricultural advancement. Instead, their preoccupation with court intrigues and corruption, and their involvement in civil wars, further sapped the resources of the peasantry. Short sighted attempts to maintain or enlarge tax revenues through corrupt and predatory tax farming practices further aggravated conditions'.⁷²

Natural conditions—especially the harm that salination (salt deposits) could do to the soil—meant that even with the most careful tending it would have been difficult to raise the output of the land much above the levels achieved centuries before. Now neglect led to devastating collapse. There was a 'cessation of cultivation and settlement in what had once been the most prosperous areas under the control of the caliphate'.⁷³ By the early 13th century an observer could report:

All is now in ruins, and all its cities and villages are mounds... None of the sultans was interested in construction and building. Their only aim was to collect taxes and consume them.⁷⁴

The economic decline of its heartland resulted in a political fragmentation of the Islamic Empire, which further encouraged the economic decline. As revenues from the land fell, the imperial court tried increasingly to finance itself at the expense of the merchants and handed responsibility for the finances of the provinces to governors, who rewarded themselves from the proceeds. It was not long before

the governors were virtually independent in their own regions.

At the same time, attempts by the caliphs to reduce their dependence on potentially rebellious Arab troops backfired. Turkish peoples from central Asia increasingly acted as mercenaries or as *mamlukes*—privileged groups of slaves fulfilling military functions for the imperial household. Over time, the leaders of such troops became powerful enough to make and break the caliphs themselves, until the caliphs were no more than a nominal presence formalising decisions made by others.

By the 11th century the empire had fallen apart. Spain, Morocco and Tunisia had long been separate kingdoms. Eastern Persia was ruled by dynasties which owed no more than titular respect to the caliphs in Baghdad. Insurgents belonging to the Ismaili fragment of Shi'ism had established a rival caliphate over Egypt, Syria, western Arabia and the Sind region of India. Their newly built capital, Cairo, with its magnificent Al Azhar mosque, rivalled Baghdad as a centre of Islam in the 11th century, and their government was a focus for the revolutionary aspirations of dissident Muslims all the way from Egypt to Samarkand—although in time it faced a revolt by its own dissident Ismailis, which gave rise to the Druze sect that still survives in Lebanon.

The fragmentation of the Islamic world did not, in itself, lead to immediate overall economic or cultural collapse. Baghdad declined and was eventually sacked by a Mongol army in 1258, but Egypt continued to prosper for two centuries, and Islamic culture flourished as scholars found rival courts competing to sponsor their efforts all the way from Cordoba in the west to Samarkand and Bukhara in the east.

Many of the problems which had beset the empire were soon afflicting its successor states. They flourished because they were capable, for a period, of putting an existing productive mechanism back to work and of engaging in long distance trade. This was not the same as applying new methods of production that could raise society as a whole to a higher level. In Egypt the economies of the prosperous administrative and trading cities of Alexandria and Cairo were still parasitic on the villages of the Nile Valley and Delta. Food and other raw materials flowed in from the countryside as taxes to the rulers and rents to the landholders. But little in the way of more advanced tools or help in improving production flowed back from the cities to the villages, where life was barely different to what it had been 1,000 years before. Eventually this parasitism was bound to undermine the

economies of the cities themselves. By the 12th century parts of the Egyptian domain were weak enough to fall prey to the Crusaders, a bunch of robbers gathered under the direction of religious fanatics and coming from a western Europe with a lower level of civilisation than the Islamic empires. The Crusaders' successes were testimony to the first advances of western Europe out of its backwardness at a time when the Middle East was stagnating. In the next century only a seizure of power by the leaders of the *mamlukes*, the Turkish military slaves, stopped Egypt falling, like Persia, to the Mongols.

By this time the great period of Islamic culture and science was over. As Islam increasingly penetrated the countryside—for centuries it had been a mainly urban creed—it became dependent on the popularity of 'Sufi' movements of ascetics and mystics, some of whom were venerated after death as 'saints'. In effect, a hierarchy of magical and miraculous lesser gods was reintroduced into what was a supposedly monotheistic religion. Rational debate became a thing of the past as a system of religious schools, the Madrasas, taught a single orthodoxy—especially directed against the Shia heresies—and a religious establishment sought to impose it on society as a whole. Learning came to mean knowing the Koran and the Hadiths rather than developing an understanding of the world. This increasingly stifled independent thought and scientific advance. By the beginning of the 12th century the poet and mathematician Umar Khayyam could complain of 'the disappearance of the men of learning, of whom only a handful are left, small in number but large in tribulations'⁷⁵—although the Arabic cities of Spain remained a beacon of learning for scholars from 13th century Europe, and it was there that Ibn Khaldun developed ideas in the 14th century which anticipated the findings of the French and Scottish thinkers of the 18th century Enlightenment.⁷⁶

The rise of Islamic civilisation in the 7th and 8th centuries was due to the way that the Arab armies and then the Abbasid revolution united an area from the Atlantic to the Indus behind a doctrine which made the trader and the artisan as important as the landowner and the general. It was this which had enabled products, technical innovations, artistic techniques and scientific knowledge to travel from one end of Eurasia to the other and real additions to be made to the heritage of the ancient empires of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome, of classical India and of contemporary China. But by the same token, the decline of Islamic civilisation from the 10th century on was

due to the limitations of the Abbasid revolution. In reality it was only a half-revolution. It allowed the traders and artisans to influence the state, but it did not give them control over it.

Balancing between the urban classes and the great landowning classes, the state machine became all-powerful. It sucked in taxes from all classes, rewarded its generals and bureaucrats with vast estates, absorbed the surplus which might otherwise have been used to develop the productive base of society, and eventually drove vast numbers of the peasant producers below the level of subsistence necessary for them to keep toiling, so that total output sank. This in turn restricted the market for the merchants and manufacturers, giving them little incentive to move from reliance on artisan production to some rudimentary factory system. There was a cramping of further technological advance—even printing was not introduced into the Muslim world, although merchants who had been to China knew about it—and the mass of people remained sunk in poverty and superstition. Civilisation was restricted to a relatively thin layer of the population, and it began to wilt as the economic conditions that sustained them deteriorated.

The Islamic empires were repeatedly shaken by revolts—rebellions by those who identified with the murdered revolutionary leader Abu Muslim, rebellions by those who saw one or other descendant of Ali as representing a pure Islam corrupted by the caliphs, rebellions by townspeople, rebellions by peasants, the great 16 year Zanj rebellion of black slaves in the southern salt marshes of Mesopotamia in the 9th century,⁷⁷ and the Ismaeli rebellion that brought to power the rival caliphate in Egypt.

Yet none of these rebellions was any more capable of showing a way out of the impasse than the revolts of ancient Rome or the peasant revolutions in China. They gave expression to enormous discontent, usually in a religious form. But they did not and could not begin to present a project for reorganising society on a new basis. The means by which the mass of people made a livelihood had not advanced enough for that to be possible.

The Islamic civilisation, like that of the T'ang and Sung periods in China, was important in producing the seeds of further development. But the crushing weight of old superstructures prevented those seeds taking root—until they were transplanted to a primitive region of Eurasia where such a superstructure barely existed.

The African civilisations

The European colonists of the 19th and early 20th centuries described Africa as 'the Dark Continent'. According to them it was without civilisation and without history, its life 'blank, uninteresting, brutal barbarism', according to a Professor Egerton of Oxford University.⁷⁸ So strong were their prejudices that the geologist Carl Mauch, one of the first Europeans to visit the site of the 12th century city of Great Zimbabwe, was convinced it could not be of local origin, but must of been built by some non-black people from the north as a copy of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.⁷⁹ The Tory historian Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote in 1965, 'There is only the history of the European in Africa. The rest is largely darkness'.⁸⁰

Yet all the processes which led to the rise of civilisation in Eurasia and the Americas occurred in Africa too, and not just once but several times. Egypt is the most obvious example. Although certain aspects of its civilisation were probably influenced by contact with Mesopotamia, its roots lay in independent developments in southern Egypt, among peoples from the west and south who settled in the Nile Valley.⁸¹ The Greek historian Herodotus referred to the Kushite civilisation of Nubia (from the Nile above Aswan), which briefly conquered Egypt early in the first millennium BC, and which developed its own phonetic script. The Romans knew of the Axum civilisation of Ethiopia, which embraced Christianity early on, was in close contact with southern Arabia (some of Mohammed's early followers fled there to avoid persecution in Mecca) and also developed its own alphabet. Traders from India, the Muslim empires and even China were in contact with cities all along the east African coast south to Mozambique. One of them, Ibn Battuta, described Kilwa in present-day Tanzania in 1331 as 'one of the most beautiful and well constructed towns in the world'.⁸² Hasan al-Wazzan (better known by his Italian nickname Leo Africanus), an exiled Moor from Granada, described crossing the Sahara from Morocco to visit

some two dozen kingdoms along the River Niger in the early 15th century. He wrote that Tambo (Timbuktu) was a city of many thousands of people, with 'many magistrates, learned doctors and men of religion', where 'there is a big market for manuscript books from the Berber countries, and more profit is made from the sale of books than from any other merchandise'.⁸³ Other civilisations arose in the forests of coastal west Africa, where the city of Benin made an enormous impression on the first Portuguese to visit it, and across a wide belt of central Africa from the kingdom of the Kongo in northern Angola to Buganda in present day Uganda.

The sequence by which each of these civilisations arose is essentially the same as that which occurred in the case of the Eurasian and American civilisations. In particular regions people evolved forms of cultivation which provided them with a sufficient surplus for there to be the beginnings of a polarisation within old communal structures between chiefly lineages and others. Then some of these chiefly lineages crystallised into ruling classes which exploited the rest of society, while among the mass of the population specialised groups of artisans and traders emerged alongside the mass of peasants and herders.

Sometimes these developments received a push from the impact of other civilisations. Egypt clearly influenced Nubia; southern Arabia (where towns already existed in 1000 BC) probably influenced Ethiopia just across the Red Sea; Indian and Arab traders had an impact on the east African coast. But this could only happen because tendencies had already arisen independently, capable of taking advantage of such influence. Traders only visited places such as the east coast because there were already complex societies with something to trade.

The most important changes in the ways the various peoples of Africa made a livelihood occurred completely independently of outside influences. This had to apply to the domestication of plants, if only because the crops grown in the ancient civilisations of Eurasia and the Nile Valley would not grow in the tropical and subtropical climates of most of sub-Saharan Africa. African peoples developed forms of agriculture of their own. It also applied, much later, to the production of iron. Metalsmiths in west Africa learned to smelt iron ores about the same time as knowledge of how to do so was spreading across Eurasia in about 1000 BC. But the techniques they used were rather different,

indicating independent development.⁸⁴

Agriculture and iron together transformed the face of sub-Saharan Africa. The number of Bantu-speaking peoples from west Africa, who first adopted these methods, grew over the centuries, leading them between 2000 BC and AD 500 to displace many of the hunter-gatherers who had originally been predominant in central and southern Africa. Those peoples with a substantial agricultural surplus or well positioned for trade began to undergo the transition to class divisions and town living, usually at some point after AD 500. Trade brought the east coast towns into contact with the other civilisations of the Indian Ocean. The west African towns became part of a network of trade which stretched to the Nile and Egypt on the one hand and through the Sahara to the Maghreb. Such contacts enabled them to shortcut the long process of developing their own script by adopting that of the Arabs—and with it the Islamic religion, which fitted the atmosphere of urban life more than the old 'pagan' beliefs.

Indigenous developments had produced, in order, the Egyptian, Nubian and Ethiopian civilisations. By the 15th century other civilisations existed right across the continent, from coast to coast, even if sometimes interspersed with so called 'primitive' peoples living in pre-class societies. They were connected to the world system of trade via Islam long before Europeans landed on their coasts (indeed, one explanation of the decline of ancient Zimbabwe lies in an international decline in the price of the gold it exported in the 15th century).⁸⁵

The peoples of Africa did end up as the victims of the emerging world system—so much so that their civilisations were all but erased from the historical record by a racist ideology that treated them as 'sub-human'. But the reasons lie in an accident of geography.

Eurasia stretches from west to east. There are vast belts of land which share essentially the same climate and, therefore, are suitable for growing the same sort of crops—wheat, barley and rye grow all the way from Ireland to Beijing, and rice grows from Korea and Japan to the Indian Ocean. There are also few natural barriers preventing the spread of domesticated animal species. Horses, cows, sheep and goats can thrive virtually anywhere, apart from the occasional desert region. So advances in farming could spread relatively rapidly, since they involved people learning from neighbours who farmed under similar conditions. Successive hordes of humans were also able to sweep from one end of the continental mass to the other, sometimes bringing

destruction, as with the Huns or Mongols, but also bringing knowledge of new techniques.

By contrast, Africa runs from north to south and has several different climatic belts. Crops which flourish in the Maghreb or in Egypt will not grow easily in the savannah region, while crops which will grow there are useless in the tropical region towards the equator.⁸⁶ Therefore, local improvements in farming techniques were rarely of more than regional importance until revolutionary new methods of transport enabled them to leap climatic barriers. There was also a huge natural barrier to the southward spread of cattle rearing—the tsetse fly in the central African region. Farming folk with domesticated cows had great difficulty reaching the lands in southern Africa which were ideally suited to cattle. Deep sea navigation was impossible from the west coast until the 15th century, because nowhere in the world had the naval technology to cope with prevailing winds. The east coast was easily accessible, but it was not easy for people to make the journey up into the highlands inland. And the Sahara, cutting the continent in two from the Atlantic to the Nile, was an obstacle to all but the most determined travellers even after the introduction of the domesticated camel in about AD 500.

Backward peoples in Europe—such as the British, the Germans or the Scandinavians—could eventually, even in the Dark Ages, gain knowledge of technical innovations and agricultural improvements from China, India or the Middle East. They could feed off advances made right across the world's greatest land mass. The civilisations of sub-Saharan Africa had to rely much more on their own resources. They were relatively isolated, in a continent half the size and with about one sixth of the population of Eurasia. It was not an insuperable barrier to the development of society, as the record of successive civilisations shows. But it placed them at a fatal disadvantage when eventually they were confronted by rapacious visitors from the formerly backward region of western Europe, which had been more easily able to borrow and develop technologies from the other end of Asia.