

Evolution of the concept of economic and social formation to world history

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One of the most important theoretical innovations of Marxism is a materialist theory of history. This fundamentally new approach attempted to rethink the entire history of humanity. Many modern promoters of Marxism believe that this task has been completed and successfully realized. The article will demonstrate that it is far from the case, and Marxist historians continue to face complex theoretical challenges. This article will examine the concept of economic and social formation, which traditionally occupies a central place in the materialist theory of history. A formation is a social system, all of whose elements are interconnected, and the central element is the mode of production, which is determined by the dialectical unity of productive forces and production relations.

The Marxist concept of economic and social formation did not arise out of nowhere: it is a variation of the stage approach to history. The stage approach originated in Western Europe and was first developed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Most of these philosophers associated the stages of human development with the progress of human reason, but some believed that the change in economic types

was the basis for changes in human society. In this regard, the views of A. Turgot are of particular interest. The Soviet historian V.P. Ilyushechkin noted: “Many of the ideas he [Turgot] expressed subsequently received widespread dissemination and promoted further development in science. Thus, his ideas on the social division of labor as the defining basis of estate-class division, on determination of the class division in society along economic lines by exploitative (large-scale private) ownership of the means of production, and on the need to closely link historical and sociological constructs with the data of political economy were inherited and later developed by Marxist science”.¹

The Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century envisioned history as a sequential change of stages common for all societies, but among the predecessors of Marxism were also those who adhered to relay-stage theories of history. First and foremost, this was Hegel. He conceived of history idealistically, as the self-knowledge of the world spirit through the hands of various peoples. According to his teaching, for humanity to move to a new stage of development, it is sufficient for just one people to do so. The rest may, however, continue to exist at lower stages or disappear entirely from the face of the earth. In this regard, Hegel even divided peoples into historical and non-historical. Naturally, this approach was not shared by contemporary Romantic historians, who believed that all peoples are historical, each following the same path, albeit with its own characteristics. Thus, pre-Marxist historical thought held different views on the relationship between the stages of human development and the stages of development of particular societies. Some believed that all stages were necessary for each society, while others believed that such a necessity did not exist. In their works, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels never directly compared these two models, but they were aware of their existence.

The Marxist concept of economic and social formation emerged in the mid-19th century. Studying its development is difficult due to several features of the theoretical heritage of Marx and Engels. First, having once broken with the traditions of old philosophy, they made it a rule not to construct complete theoretical systems. Although their views were marked by internal integrity, they hardly bothered to systematically expound them during their lifetimes. Second, one must distinguish between Marx and Engels’s own views and their reception by their contemporaries. Third, a number of Marx’s manuscripts, fundamentally important for understanding his teachings, were published only in the 20th century, and the ideas expressed there became the property of an entirely different period in intellectual history. The concept of social economic formation became the most important category for the stage analysis of human history in Marxism. It was thoroughly developed by Marx

1 Ilyushechkin V.P., *Teoriya stadiynogo razvitiya obshchestva (istoriya i problemy)* [Theory of Stage Development of Society (History and Problems)], Moscow, 1996. p. 29-30.

using capitalist society as a subject of study, and the general principles underlying it were actively popularized by the classics of Marxism.

Marxism is a materialist doctrine and sees the unity of human history in labor, i.e., the subject-practical activity of transforming nature into an artificial environment that supports human existence. Labor is the foundation of any social organization, but under different historical conditions, labor is carried out differently, which provides the basis for dividing human history into formations. In some formations, production relations presuppose division into conflicting classes, while in others, such a division does not exist. Therefore, formations can be divided into antagonistic and non-antagonistic. Changes in formations occur through revolution: internal contradictions accumulate within a social system, simultaneously generating the foundations of a new system. Then, a qualitative leap occurs, and a new society is being formed on the ruins of the old. History, as a process of social development, is directional; it includes progress, although it is not absolute and is accompanied by regression. Progress is always regression, only in a different sense, Engels once warned.² The criterion of progress is the development of human freedom, understood as the ability to make decisions with a knowledge ground. The pinnacle of freedom will be a social order in which workers themselves can govern society and nature in their own interests.

All these abstract propositions require concretization and an answer to the question: what formation stages does humanity pass through? This question remains a subject of debate in Marxism to this day. Marx and Engels limited themselves to rough sketches of the stages of world history. In manuscripts from 1857, which awaited publication for over a hundred years, Marx outlined the following universal schema for human history:

1. prehistory of humanity
 - a) natural dependence
 - b) personal dependence
 - c) objective [sachlicher] dependence
2. true history – the realm of freedom.

The realm of freedom is a future communism, and all other stages are societies that actually existed in human history. Natural dependence is inherent in primitive

² Engels F., *Dialectics of Nature*, Chapter Biology.

society; the era of personal dependence is associated with pre-capitalist antagonistic formations, while the system of material objective dependence corresponds to capitalism. Marx unites the stages of personal and objective dependence under the category of “economic social formation”. In this formation, labor activity is conditioned by the pressure of external necessity.³

An echo of this view is easily discernible in the famous “Preface to the Critique of Political Economy”, published in 1859 and widely known: “In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production... This social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of society to a close”.⁴ First, it is important to note that the Russian translation of this text differs both from the German original and its English translation. In the Russian text in the last sentence, it traditionally writes “bourgeois” instead of “this”. It forms the illusion that Marx ambiguously used the term “formation” and applied it uniformly to social systems of varying hierarchical orders. So, there were some misunderstandings of Marx in the Soviet and Russian scholarship tradition.⁵

Second, and most importantly, Marx outlined a consistent, progressive series of modes of production and, accordingly, formations in human history. Individual characteristics of these formations were presented in the works of Marx and Engels, but they did not provide an expanded division of history into stages. Engels slightly expanded this schema of world history: he designated primitive society, based on hunting and gathering, as the stage of savagery, equated primitive society based on agriculture with barbarism, and class societies with civilization.

Marx revealed the secret of such a meager stage scheme in one of his last works - a letter to the editors of the Russian journal *Otechestvenniye Zapisky*. Marx protested against the attempts of the populist N.K. Mikhailovsky to metamorphose his “historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche generale* [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself”. By studying the processes of social evolution in each society, taking into account its specific historical features, “and then comparing them one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon (when similar processes lead to radically different results – Yu.Sh.), but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general

3 Marx K., *Grundrisse: Notebook I – The Chapter on Money*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch03.htm>

4 Marx K., Preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

5 Volkov V.V., *Marksizm: ot autentichnosti k novym gorizontam razvitiya* [Marxism: From Authenticity to New Horizons of Development], Saint Petersburg, 2025. p. 53.

historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical”.⁶ Meanwhile, according to the unanimous opinion of Marxists of the late 19th century, Marx had adequately studied only one capitalist formation. All the others waited their turn. A stage view of human history required a great deal of scholarly research and remained a matter for the future.

The above quote is also interesting because, prior to conducting specialized research, Marx did not assert that the historical process was linear; rather, he leaned toward the opposite view. This position contrasts with his own conceptualizations in the second half of the 1850s. Nevertheless, this perception of human history became firmly established in the collective consciousness of Marx’s followers. Moreover, this linear-stage worldview rejected the understanding of capitalism as a global formation that Marx and Engels had been developing since the 1840s, replacing it with a mechanical set of capitalist systems developing at different rates in different countries. The history of each country was viewed separately from global processes, and development was perceived as a kind of race between runners running on parallel tracks, yet simultaneously in the same direction. In Russia, one of the popularizers of this approach was the “legal Marxist” P.B. Struve. Official Soviet scholarship’s negative attitude toward “legal Marxism” in general and Struve in particular did not prevent it from adopting this interpretation of Marxism.⁷ However, Marx himself provided some justification for this. In one of his prefaces to “Capital”, he asserted that a more developed country presents a less developed country with a picture of its own future, without making any additional qualifications.

Nevertheless, the decisive reason for conceptualizing history as a race between runners running on parallel tracks is unrelated to either Marx’s qualifications or P.B. Struve’s machinations. This perception of the historical process was laid down in the first half of the 19th century and developed by European Romantic historiography, which shaped grand national narratives and addressed the challenges of nation-building. The perception of world history as a mechanical aggregation of national histories, clearly evident in the works of Marxist historians both in Russia and Western Europe, merely testifies to the level of their theoretical reflection at that time.

The victory of the revolution in Russia created favorable conditions for the development of Marxism and the scientific study of world history from a materialist perspective. Soviet historians were faced with the urgent need to provide a periodization of not only global but also domestic history according to the concept of economic and social formation. Fierce debates on this issue erupted in the second

6 Letter from Marx to Editor of the *Otecestvenniye Zapisky*.

7 Kagarlitsky B.Yu., *Periferiyaya imperiya: tsikly russkoy istorii* [Peripheral Empire: Cycles of Russian History], Moscow, 2009. p. 14.

half of the 1920s and first half of the 1930s. These debates involved not only professional social scientists but also party officials, who ultimately settled the debate. Particularly challenging were the Asiatic mode of production, social relations in Kievan Rus', and Russian society from the 16th to the first half of the 19th centuries. Some historians argued that the countries of the East had a feudal system. Others categorically insisted on a distinct Asiatic mode of production. Some Soviet historians believed that Ancient Rus' had a slave-owning system, while others believed it was feudal. Three theories have been advanced regarding Russia from the 16th to the first half of the 19th centuries. The leading historian of the 1920s, M.N. Pokrovsky, argued that this was an era of merchant capitalism, whereas his opponents saw in this period either a distinct serf system or a distinct stage of feudalism.⁸

Discussions about social economic formations in Soviet scholarship had largely concluded by 1933. Thanks to V.V. Struve's research on forms of dependence in Ancient Mesopotamia, the Asiatic mode of production concept was abandoned and ancient Eastern societies were recognized as a local variant of the slave-owning system. B.D. Grekov succeeded in substantiating the feudal nature of Ancient Russian society, although proponents of the slave-owning system in Kievan Rus' persisted until the 1970s. A.G. Prigozhin demonstrated that the era of serfdom in Russia does not qualify as a separate formation, but rather a stage in the development of feudalism. Politics had a powerful influence on the subsequent development of the concept of economic and social formation. The bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state and the establishment of the Stalinist dictatorship led to the substitution of scientific knowledge with political dogmas that were not subject to revision. The results of scholarly debates on world and Russian history were canonized in a short course on the history of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), published in 1938. This work was conceived as a popular textbook on the party's history; I.V. Stalin personally participated in its editing, and the book itself was published without citing its authors, in the name of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks). There, the Central Committee proclaimed a linear, five-stage socio-economic formation scheme of world history. According to this scheme, humanity developed through five universal formations: primitive communal society, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and communism, the lower socialist stage of which the USSR entered. Some peoples, however, were able to skip certain formations; for example, the Germans and Slavs moved directly from primitive communal society to feudalism, while the Mongols moved from feudalism to socialism, bypassing capitalism. This picture of world history became mandatory for all Soviet social scientists and was actively promoted in all Stalinist communist parties worldwide.

⁸ Ocherki istorii istoricheskoy nauki v SSSR [Essays on the History of Historical Science in the USSR], Moscow, 1966. Vol. 4, p. 165-169, 273.

During the first decades of its existence, this scheme exerted a fruitful influence on Soviet historical scholarship. It enabled a transition from theoretical debates to large-scale, concrete historical studies of entire world history based on a unified theoretical foundation, fostering a significant increase in historical knowledge and the emergence of extensive generalizing works. However, by the 1950s, it became clear that new factual material no longer fit into this framework. Eastern countries posed particular difficulties. It turned out that by the beginning of the modern era, some large Eastern societies surpassed early bourgeois Europe in labor productivity, yet the prevailing type of social relations in them had changed little since ancient times and, most importantly, found no direct parallels in European history.⁹ They can be compared to feudalism, but can't be passed off as a slave system. Yet, chronologically, it does precede the ancient formation, as Marx noted when writing about the Asiatic mode of production.

A reconsideration of the approach was necessary, but the five-stage linear scheme of formations was sanctified by the Party's authority and could not simply be abolished following scholarly debate. Consequently, an abnormal situation developed in Soviet historical scholarship. The outdated scheme continued to be reproduced in scholarly, educational, and popular literature, while alternative views were confined to a small group of scholars who were unable to convey them to the broader scientific community. Alternative formation concepts, breaking with the official Soviet scheme, became the property of historians at a time when most of them no longer needed them. The collapse of the USSR, in the eyes of most historians, confirmed the non-viability of Marxism, and they ignored alternative stage ideas published in the late 1980s and mid-1990s.

Among the most interesting Soviet and Russian authors who contributed to the development of new versions of the stages theory of history, V.P. Ilyushechkin, Yu.M. Kobishchanov, V.V. Krylov, and Yu.I. Semionov deserve special mention. Kobishchanov reconsidered the composition of pre-capitalist formations. He developed a general theory of feudal formation and concluded that all pre-capitalist class societies share a common foundation, differing only in local characteristics. As a result, Kobishchanov advanced the theory of a great feudal formation, replacing the slavery-owning system, the Asian mode of production, and feudalism¹⁰. The slave-owning system in the Mediterranean countries proved to be merely a specific, hypertrophied form on par with the dominant feudal system, and the total number of social formations was reduced to four: primitive communal, great feudal, capitalist,

9 Krylov V.V., *Proizvodstvo. Vlast'. Sobstvennost'. Fursov o Krylove* [Production. Power. Property. Fursov on Krylov], Moscow, 2024, p. 34-48.

10 Kobishchanov Yu.M., *Teoriya bol'shoy feodal'noy formacii* [Theory of the Great Feudal Formation], *Voprosy istorii*, 1992, No:4-5, p. 57-72.

and communist.

Ilyushechkin came to a similar four-stage scheme, although he called the second link a single estate-class formation, based on the rent mode of production. His theoretical argumentation also differed. While Kobishchanov stressed on the nature of productive relations, Ilyushechkin paid particular attention to the nature of productive forces. According to his theory, we cannot measure the level of development of productive forces simply by the quantitative indicator of labor productivity. The qualitative uniqueness of productive forces must be taken into account, regardless of the output they provide per worker. His theory placed emphasis on the qualitative uniqueness of the technological labor process, and the differences between stages are derived from which worker functions are replaced by the means of labor. Ilyushechkin identified four “type-stages” of development of technology and the productive forces based on it: “1) primitive hand-held stone, bone and wooden tools, based on the use of only human muscle power, 2) hand-held metal and wooden tools and means of labor, based on the use of the motor power of not only humans, but also domestic animals, wind and water flows, 3) machine technology, which objectified not only the motor, but also the working function of man, and 4) environmentally friendly automatic technology, objectifying the motor, working and control-logical functions of the worker”.¹¹ They correspond to four stages of development of productive forces and four formations: primitive communal, estate-class, capitalist and communist.

Despite identifying a distinct Asiatic mode of production, Krylov was close to the first two authors. He also identified four formations: the primitive communal system, the secondary formation, capitalism (or tertiary formation), and socialism. The main characteristics of the secondary formation are the predominance of natural, rather than material, factors of production in the structure of productive forces and, consequently, the prevalence of personal dependence in exploitative relations. From Krylov’s perspective, the Asiatic, ancient, and feudal systems form three successive stages in the development of the secondary formation; simultaneously, these social stages are stages in the development of human freedom¹². This same rule applies to all formation stages.

Kobishchanov, Ilyushechkin, and Krylov sought to establish a linear-stage formation approach. However, despite their efforts, they were forced to acknowledge that significant territorial differences exist within the stages of the socio-economic formations. Therefore, regional-territorial characteristics and cultural uniqueness

11 Ilyushechkin V.P., *Teoriya stadiynogo razvitiya obshchestva (istoriya i problemy)* [Theory of Stage Development of Society (History and Problems)], Moscow, 1996, p. 205.

12 Krylov V.V., *Proizvodstvo. Vlast'. Sobstvennost'*. Fursov o Krylove [Production. Power. Property. Fursov on Krylov], Moscow, 2024, p. 216-232, 238-250.

must be taken into account in the overall picture of human development. Kobishchanov, within the framework of the great feudal formation, and Ilyushechkin, within the framework of the estate-class formation, believed it necessary to distinguish distinct regional civilizations. Krylov, however, emphasized the differences in the historical paths of the East and West within the framework of the secondary formation. Furthermore, Krylov fruitfully studied theoretical issues of the development of the capitalist formation and concluded that, as a world system, it is also spatially heterogeneous in its qualitative characteristics. The stages theory of history required spatial specification. Kobishchanov and Ilyushechkin did this by introducing additional sociocultural criteria, not being satisfied with socioeconomic foundations alone.

Semionov took a different approach and decided not to deviate from socioeconomic foundations. His formation approach is distinguished by its significant originality. He took the most radical path and developed a relay-stage concept of world history, which he later renamed the global-stage concept, although the former name more accurately conveys the new content it contains. Firstly, Semionov introduced the concept of a social organism and insisted on the need to distinguish social organisms from formations. "...The history of mankind should in no case be considered as a simple sum of the histories of socio-historical organisms, and socio-economic formations - as identical stages of the evolution of socio-historical organisms, obligatory for each of them. The history of mankind is a single whole, and socio-economic formations are, first of all, stages in the development of this single whole, and not of individual socio-historical organisms. Formations can be stages in the development of individual socio-historical organisms, or they may not be. But the latter in no way prevents them from being stages in the evolution of mankind".¹³

Secondly, Semionov proposed considering diachronic and synchronous social processes in a complex manner, or, as he puts it, horizontal and vertical connections between social organisms. Horizontal or synchronous connections are the spatial interactions of societies. To describe this, he proposed a new conceptual framework, including terms such as nests, historical arenas, historical spaces, historical zones, and systems. Previous historians had neglected the importance of horizontal connections between social organisms, and if they did consider them, they didn't include them in the overall picture of humanity's formational development. For Semionov, on the contrary, this is a very important factor. According to his theory, certain formations can only emerge as a result of such horizontal interactions.

Thirdly, Semionov introduced the concept of politaristic modes of production.

13 Semionov Yu.I., *Filosofiya istorii. (Obshchaya teoriya, osnovnye problemy, idei i koncepcii ot drevnosti do nashih dney)* [Philosophy of History (General Theory, Fundamental Problems, Ideas and Concepts from Antiquity to the Present)], Moscow, 2003, p. 486.

The essence of these modes of production is that exploitative relations can arise not only on the basis of private property owned by individual representatives of the ruling class, but also on the basis of class-wide property, which necessarily takes the form of state property. Previously, many Marxists believed that exploitative relations were linked solely to private property relations, although Engels, in *Anti-Dühring*, demonstrated that this was not always the case, citing examples from ancient Eastern societies and state-owned enterprises under capitalism. Semionov raised this argument to a higher theoretical level.

Fourth, Semionov radically shattered all notions about the total number of possible modes of production and the formations that emerged from them, introducing several dozen new terms to describe them. Without dwelling on the modes of production, we will list only the formations that can be identified from Semionov's works. The criterion for distinguishing them is the primary mode of production. In the social organisms of the primitive era, he discovered two formations: primitive communist (communal) and primitive prestige one. He then identified pre-class society, which contained elements of up to six different structures, but did not form a formation. Then the class formations come: the ancient politaristic formation, the dominate-magnarian paraformation, the serval formation, the antique politaristic-magnarian formation, the feudal-townspeople formation, the medieval politaristic-magnarian paraformation, the merchant-townspeople paraformation, the absolutist politaristic formation, the nobile-magnarian formation, the state-politarian-manor formation, the orthocapitalist formation, the neo-serval paraformation, the paracapitalist paraformation, and the industrial politaristic formation (neopolitarianism).¹⁴ In total, there are sixteen formations, not counting the future communist society, the possibility of which Semionov does not question. In addition to division by dominant modes of production, formations can be further classified by types of genesis and place in human history.

Human progress is linked to a long series of formations, some of which are the property of all humanity, while others are the property of only individual social organisms. The main line of social progress looks like this. All of humanity passed through the primitive communist (communal) and primitive prestige formations. The next stage is the ancient politaristic formation, through which not all social organisms passed, although it is a typical first stage in the evolution of class society. This system was known before Semionov as the Asiatic mode of production or the ancient Eastern system. Then, among a group of Mediterranean social organisms, the serval formation (known to us as the slave-owning system) emerged from the

14 Semionov Yu.I., *Filosofiya istorii. (Obshchaya teoriya, osnovnye problemy, idei i koncepcii ot drevnosti do nashih dney)* [Philosophy of History (General Theory, Fundamental Problems, Ideas and Concepts from Antiquity to the Present)], Moscow, 2003, p. 441-508.

dominate-magnarian paraformation, eventually evolving into the dead-end antique politaristic-magnarian formation. After this, among a group of Western European social organisms, the feudal-townspeople formation emerged. It developed into an absolutist politaristic system, which perished as a result of revolutions and gave way to orthocapitalism. For comparison, social organisms relevant to Russian history have passed through the following formations: primitive communist formation, primitive prestige formation (ancient Slavs), nobile-magnarian (Ancient Rus'), state-politarian-manor formation (Russia from the 16th to the first half of the 19th centuries), paracapitalist paraformation (Russia from the second half of the 19th to the early 20th centuries), industrial politaristic (neopolitarianism) (USSR), and again paracapitalist paraformation (modern Russia).

When looking at the main scheme of humankind's progressive development, one can see that Semionov essentially demystified Hegel. Where the German philosopher saw inexplicable leaps of the world spirit from one people to another, Semionov discovered a complex chain of social interactions. Despite its daunting complexity, his relay-stage concept allows us to describe both the progressive development of humanity as a whole and specific variants of its regional development that deviated from the main road of progress or never followed it at all. The integrity of human history is combined with its pluralism in time and space. These are the latest ideas in the socio-economic formation approach in Russian scholarship.

Today, the socio-economic formation approach to history is in crisis, at least in the republics of the former USSR. Although over one hundred and fifty years have passed since the appearance of Marx's first stage-formation schemes, the problem of constructing a generally accepted concept of human development remains far from being resolved. In the 1930s, with the advent of the five-stage socio-economic formation scheme, it was believed that a solution had been found. But it soon became clear that this was an illusion. This fact was initially recognized by a small circle of professional researchers, and later disseminated to a wider public. However, the search for new solutions did not intensify, even after the ideological factors that had hindered it ceased to be effective. Many contemporary Marxists still regard the five-stage formation scheme as a viable approach. This is especially true among social activists and promoters of Marxism.

Even more telling is that over the past quarter century, no new ideas have been advanced within the socio-economic formation approach. Ilyushechkin, Kobishchanov, Krylov, and Semionov formulated their theories back in the 20th century. There has been no broad discussion among Marxist historians about their views on world history. Of course, this can be attributed to the general crisis of historical science and the influence of postmodernism, which rejects grand narratives and orients historians toward small-scale themes that fragment the picture of history into

mosaic segments. However, for Marxist historians, this cannot be an excuse. The global picture of human development has traditionally played an important ideological and theoretical role in Marxism. Although it describes the past, the function of this description is subordinated to prognostic tasks. We answer questions about the unity of humanity, the reality of progress, and its universal significance, thereby peering beyond the horizon of capitalism and demonstrating the necessity of a communist society. Therefore, the further development of the socio-economic formation approach is our urgent task.