

## LETTERS

### TO THE EDITOR:

It is my policy not to reply to reviews of my books, but, as editor of *Society and History: Essays in Honor of Karl August Wittfogel*, I feel a responsibility to its contributors to make an exception for Richard Hellie's review (*Slavic Review*, 39, no. 3 [September 1980]: 486–87). Hellie's egregious misstatements and ad hominem attacks on Wittfogel as a cold warrior both implicitly and explicitly impugn the scholarly integrity of all concerned.

While claiming to review only those articles dealing with the USSR (most of which he finds "stimulating"), Hellie nevertheless parades his lack of understanding of even the rudiments, let alone the complexity of Wittfogel's concepts of Oriental despotism and hydraulic society. He begins his review: "Karl Wittfogel was driven from the Soviet fold in the early 1930s for insisting that Stalin's USSR and prior Russian history had interesting similarities with Marx's theory of an above-Oriental despotism, societies in which there were no classes because class state took all the surplus." This statement is incorrect in all of its assertions. Wittfogel was not driven from the Soviet fold in the early 1930s; he was criticized for elaborating Marx's concept of an Asiatic mode of production in his 1931 book, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas*, but remained within the fold until he voluntarily broke relations with the Communist Party in 1939 because of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Not only did he make no connection between Oriental despotism and the USSR in pre-Revolutionary Russian history in the 1930s; as late as 1946 he insisted that there was none. Only in 1947, after reading in the galleys of Bertram D. Wolfe's work, *Three Who Made a Revolution*, about the debate between Plekhanov and Lenin at the 1906 Stockholm Congress on the nationalization of land, and after reading a transcript of the Stockholm Congress and the writings of Plekhanov, Lenin, and others concerning the danger of an "Asiatic restoration," did Wittfogel see the institutional relation between post-Mongol Russia and Oriental despotism. In this connection, it is also remarkable that Hellie writes: "The late Boris I. Nicolaevsky contributed Wittfogel's summary of *Oriental Despotism*, which claims that 'under the impact of Mongol rule, Russia became a marginal Oriental society.' Certainly, no one aware of the gradual development of Muscovite autocracy and the role of citizen [*sic!*] participation in that process would give credence to Wittfogel's statement."

Had Hellie bothered to read Wittfogel's article "Russia and the East: A Comparison and Contrast" and the exchanges between him, Nicholas Riasanovsky, and Bertold Spuler (*Slavic Review*, 22, no. 4 [December 1963]: 627–62), he might have avoided some of his blunders. For example, Wittfogel never claimed that there were no classes in Oriental despotism; in fact, he identified the classes and particularly the content and character of the ruling class. What he said was that there was no class struggle due to the "total power" of the state. Moreover, Hellie might also have noted that Spuler, the leading authority on the Mongols in Russia, wrote that "Professor Wittfogel is doubtless right when he designates the autocratic regime in Russia in tsarist times as a variant of 'Oriental despotism' and when he indicates the great influence of the Mongols of the Golden Horde and their linguistically Turkicized descendants, the Tatars, on the Russian system of government. A discussion on this issue is today scarcely necessary any longer."

Of the more than one hundred reviews of *Oriental Despotism*, Hellie cites one of the few negative and one of the crudest: "The Columbia scholar, E. G. Pulleyblank, noted that it was a Cold War product without academic merit. Pulleyblank's hope that it would be forgotten largely has been realized, except among recent Soviet émigrés, who find a certain fascination in Wittfogel's explanation of their misfortune." Far from being forgotten, Wittfogel's book initiated the most far-reaching international debate on the Asiatic mode of production and Marx's concept of social formations. Since the beginning of the "great debate" in France in 1962, hundreds of books and articles have been written with Wittfogel's book and theories as implicit or explicit subjects. The most extensive exchanges, both verbal and written, have

taken place in the Soviet Union, the area of the world about which Mr. Hellie is presumably knowledgeable. Obviously, they have all escaped his attention.

No less shocking is Hellie's assertion that Wittfogel's irrigation hypothesis "has been definitely disproved." On the contrary, by the mid-1950s Wittfogel's theory of "hydraulic society" was being supported by empirical research in many parts of the world—by Anouar Abdul-Malek in Egypt, Joseph Buttinger in Vietnam, Pedro Carrasco in Tibet, George P. Murdock in Africa, Edwin O. Reischauer and John K. Fairbank in China, E. R. Leach in Ceylon, Marshall D. Sahlins in Melanesia, Robert F. Gray in Tanganyika, Milan Kalous in Benin, Richard S. McNeich in the Tehuacan region of Mexico, William T. Sanders and Barbara J. Price and many others in Mesoamerica. In fact, Sanders and Price note the development of a veritable "hydraulic school" based on Wittfogel's theories. Marvin Harris's concept of "Cultural Materialism" testifies to the inspiration and influence of the same. Moreover, the late Julian Steward, who contributed to this volume and who was largely responsible for introducing Wittfogel's ideas into American anthropology, even as Pedro Armillas did in Central and South American anthropology, continued to uphold the validity of the "irrigation thesis" in Tehuacan, Mexico, Peru, and Hohokam. This is detailed and fully documented in my book, *The Science of Society: Toward an Understanding of the Life and Work of Karl August Wittfogel* (The Hague and New York: Mouton, 1978).

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#### PROFESSOR HELLIE REPLIES:

Why is it that authors responding to reviews begin with a claim that this response is a unique event? Is it a literary tactic to heighten the outrage of the assumedly mindless reader? G. L. Ulmen's first imprint is dated 1978; how resolute is his "policy"?

Wittfogel's reputation as a "cold warrior" is well founded, based on experiences ranging from his appearances before the House Un-American Activities Committee and the McCarran Internal Security Subcommittee to Ulmen's own statement that his teacher wanted to show in his works "the role [the 'Asiatic restoration'] had played and was playing in Soviet ideology and policy" (G. L. Ulmen, *The Science of Society: Toward an Understanding of the Life and Work of Karl August Wittfogel* [The Hague and New York: Mouton, 1978]). Whether "cold warrior" is a term of approbation or condemnation has not been, to my knowledge, defined by lexicographers: the victors in the 1980 national elections probably applaud one; Morning-side Heights leftists do not.

Ulmen is incensed by the fifth line of the review, as was I when I saw it. Regrettably, he failed to perceive that the offending line is gibberish because of typographical errors. The confused nature of Wittfogel's biography may be gathered by comparing Ulmen's letter with his statement in *Science of Society*: "Dr. Wittfogel told the committee that he had joined the Communist Party in Germany in 1920, but rejected its program in 1933. He has since been actively anti-Communist" (p. 568).

Most readers fail to find Pulleyblank's review "crude"—in fact it was the simplistic crudity of Wittfogel's work that forced the Cambridge Sinologist to pen his words. Pulleyblank began his review by noting that most other reviews had been favorable, but he was not intimidated by the "democratic approach" to evaluating scholarship. One can only be surprised that Ulmen has such a criterion.

Ulmen quotes Spuler, an authority on the Mongols, not on Russia, as though his were a definitive judgment. I, however, agree with Edward L. Keenan's judgment: "There is not a shred of evidence of borrowing from the 'Golden Horde' in the realm of abstraction in general, including political abstraction. Algebra and Aristotle, like the mythology of imperial power, tyranny, and despotism, came to Moscow not from Urgench of Samarqand or Sarai, but from Europe" (Edward L. Keenan, "Studying the 'Tatar Influence': Notes for Methodology," paper delivered at Claremont, California, 1968). Metonymically, one may ask Ulmen, which one of Jochi's many sons was Agapetus?