
Community, State and Questions of Social Evolution in Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*

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Abstract: Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* were among the last of his writings. They comment upon class and state formation in a range of precapitalist contexts. The argument presented here is that after *Capital*, Marx turned to problems of class formation in socialism, examining the conflict between communities of producers and state agendas, on the one hand, and the entrenchment of bureaucracies and state functionaries, on the other. The commentaries distance Marx from state theories of social evolution: certain social forms may persist and change in opposition to the state, at the same time defending more egalitarian practices.

Keywords: ethnological theory, Marxism, primitive communism, social evolution, state formation, precapitalist social formations

Résumé: *Les Carnets ethnographiques* de Marx sont parmi les derniers de ses écrits. Ils commentent la formation des classes et des États dans un ensemble de contextes précapitalistes. La position présentée ici est qu'après *Le Capital*, Marx s'est tourné vers les problèmes de formation des classes dans le socialisme; il a examiné le conflit entre les communautés de producteurs et l'ordre du jour des États, d'une part, et la résistance des bureaucraties et des fonctionnaires de l'État, de l'autre. Ces textes nous font voir un Marx qui abandonne les théories de l'évolution sociale dépendante de l'État: certaines formes sociales peuvent perdurer et changer en opposition à l'État, et ainsi maintenir des pratiques plus égalitaires.

Mots-clés : théorie ethnologique, Marxisme, communisme primitif, évolution sociale, formation des États, formations sociales précapitalistes

And yet for all its economic and military power, and its near monopoly of the ideological apparatus, the capitalist state has not succeeded in eradicating innumerable pockets of communalism, in the Third and Fourth Worlds and some in the very belly of the beast itself. (Richard Lee, 1992: 84)

Despite our seeming adaptation to life in hierarchical societies, and despite the rather dismal record of human rights in many parts of the world, there are signs that humankind retains a deep-rooted egalitarianism, a deep-rooted commitment to the norm of reciprocity, a deep-rooted desire for ... the sense of community. All theories of justice revolve around these principles, and our sense of outrage at the violation of these norms indicates the depth of its gut-level appeal. That, in my view, is the secret of primitive communism. (Richard Lee, 1992: 90)

Karl Marx's last writings were concerned with a study of precapitalist social formations, both primitive communist and class-based. *The Ethnological Notebooks* were written during 1880-82, that is, in the period just prior to his death in 1883. Frederick Engels used parts of the *Ethnological Notebooks* in drafting his 1884 *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Engels, 1972). Over the years other parts have been translated, but not until 1974 was the entire work transcribed by Lawrence Krader (Marx, 1974).

Why look into the *Ethnological Notebooks* today? I was drawn to reconsider them as a result of a graduate exam in sociology, where a well-known senior social theorist was trying to drub the candidate into embracing a stage model of social evolution. The candidate, a single mother returning to school after a decade, resisted his characterization of primitive societies as passé, albeit lamentably so. I became annoyed at his badgering and intervened with a quick and intentionally silencing rejoinder about Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, which he had never attempted to read. Beyond eschewing the

notion of necessary stages of social evolution, I pointed out, Marx over and over again pointed to the viability of communal forms as lived in particular societies. Over and over again he showed how they pose inherent opposition to state forms of control and therefore are targeted in repeated attempts by state agents to prevent their reproduction as communally organized.

Walking with me after the exam, the relieved graduate student exclaimed, "I didn't know how to say it, but every day of my life I see how important creating a circle of sharing and caring is in getting by. If societies that are organized that way are no longer viable, then neither are we." Like that woman and millions of other mothers and care-engaged people, I am deeply implicated in practices at home and at work that must address on a daily basis the consequences of different ideologies of kinship and questions of transformative work versus labour.¹ Time and again students in my courses emphasize the importance of kinship and community as the most compelling dynamics that either deflect or reflect what is a terrifying insecurity; in their discussions, kinship and community are at times present the most immediate and devastating of a range of oppressive relations or pose the most sustaining resistance to them. At least a third of our students at the University of California, Riverside (UCR) are the first people in their families to attend college. These students understand the slender thread that education provides in constructing a modicum of economic security in the midst of volatile economic cycles. They rely on networks of sustaining relationships to obtain that security with the clear and present understanding that they will owe their prosperity to others.

Social evolution as a theory passes in and out of academic fashion: in the past decade it has enjoyed a resurgence, following the "triumph" of capitalism in the wake of a collapsed socialist bloc. In this new variation, social evolution is facilitated through the state and expressed in unfettered capitalist commerce across national boundaries: neoliberalism is its credo and global communications technology its metaphor of interconnection. Proponents presume that globalized capitalism in this new phase will result in higher standards of living for more people, greater democratization, and therefore, social and cultural progress. A proliferation of neoliberal economic and social policies has accompanied the post-Cold War shift in corporate accumulation strategies.

As the welfare supports of the earlier phase of industrial capitalism erode under these new policies, and as the international lending agencies force poorer countries to impose ever more austere conditions on their

people, the global search for jobs appears more and more to transform citizens of one country into guest workers or in some instances, modern-day slaves. The implications of guest worker models of labour flows can be seen vividly in the rhetoric of the apartheid-era South African state. Prior to his tenure as Prime Minister, Peter Botha declared that unemployed blacks were "superfluous appendages" without a viable role to play in the country. Working blacks were defined as "labour units": categorically kinless and metaphorically robotic. With that chilling reminder of the fascist tendencies of capitalist states, more than ever before we need to appreciate what structures and practices sustain people as more than the expendable labour units that neoliberal economics would have the vast majority of us become.

Around the world grass-roots opposition to such policies takes a myriad of forms. Across the organizations and protests is a connecting thread: women and men, children and youth are demanding basic security and a rehumanization of daily life. Sometimes the call is to bolster existing communities and families: often this has a conservative agenda, disguised as family preservation, of defending patriarchal forms and practices. But sometimes the call is to remedy the conditions and ideologies that have turned intimate institutions and relations into locations of violence.

While many of these movements make demands of the state in specific ways—as for city services, educational access, cessation of militaristic repression—, none argue that either states or the corporations they serve are loci for human emancipation. Although some romanticize iconic notions of "the people" or "the community," the more feminist of these movements are keenly aware of the ways that gender hierarchies permeate familial and community structures, with injurious consequences (see, for example, the case studies in Waller and Rycenga, 2000).

From Borneo to Chiapas there are efforts to defend communal rights to land. In Kenya and South Africa, mothers exiled from their marital lineages because legal changes have converted what were lineage wives' use-rights to husband's private property (Okeyo, 1980), or dispossessed because they have been infected with HIV by their husbands, are demanding that their patterns of sharing and care giving be socially valued. These women are clear that some customary usage should be defended, but other traditions have become so distorted by the context of capitalist legal and labour policies that they compromise the very survival of the communities that espouse them.

The resilience of communal forms in the face of overarching structures of domination was a central issue

in Marx's examination of literature on precapitalist societies. The final writings of Marx's corpus focused on the relationship of communities to the state in various precapitalist contexts. Considering this continuity of concern, the Marx of the *Notebooks* appears as consistent with the Marx who authored the *Grundrisse* (1857) and other earlier efforts. Louis Althusser (1969) argued that there was an earlier, more Hegelian Marx who could be distinguished from the author of his later, supposedly more scientific and revolutionary writings, but this argument overlooks the *Notebooks*. Certainly Marx's last writings suffer from the admittedly inadequate and poorly researched sources he was forced to consult, a problem he bemoaned repeatedly in his notes. But I do not think this constitutes grounds for dismissal, particularly if we are trying to discern the trajectory of his thinking about social transformation.

We are confronting a situation where state policies and a genomic imperium in the name of scientific understanding are simultaneously exacerbating and naturalizing the racialization that accompanies the neoliberal phase of capital accumulation. Capitalism in its "globalization" dress relies on innovations in communications technology, the capacity to ravage environments on an unprecedented scale, and the strangulation of alternative political forms. In this setting we can appreciate all the more how Marx in his *Notebooks* repeatedly rejects a number of theories current in his time, notably racial ranking and social evolution in the sense of necessary and sequential stages, especially stages based on subsistence and techno-environmental sophistication. But I would like to go further and risk skittering along the razor's edge of intentionality to pose this question: Why would the author of the foremost analysis and critique of the structure and operation of capitalism turn, after completing that three-volume opus, to the examination of earlier forms of societies, when his explicit aim in undertaking the study of capitalism was its dismantling?

Marx against Social Evolutionism

Marx was not Tolstoy, with the peasantry posed as a simpler and more natural counterpoint to the alienated lesser nobility and urbanized elite. Marx was a revolutionary, not a primitivist. But we can see in his notes, letters and commentaries Marx's rejection of organic models of society and particularly of state societies. In contrast to the many of the sources he uses and subsequent characterization of Marx as a social evolutionist, there is no portrayal of peoples living in classless social formations as being backward, less intelligent, or less developed cognitively.² Instead, based on his critical

reading of a number of evolutionist scholars, he shows an effort to associate particular forms of authority, kinship, use-rights and subsistence strategies as historically rather than evolutionarily linked configurations.

Put a different way, when he uses the term "evolution," it is couched very carefully as historical transformation and "earlier" only in the sense of temporal priority. Marx uses the term "archaic" in the *Ethnological Notebooks* to indicate temporality, not civilizational ranking. Indeed, connotations of backwardness are rejected explicitly: the "unfreedom" of the communal group is everywhere presented as security. Every instance of "freeing up"—as with the shifts in marriage rules from Mosaic to Levitical law—is tied to changing property relations, reduced authority of women, and growing social oppression (see, for example, Marx, 1974: 137).

The first part of the *Notebooks* concerns so-called primitive societies, while the second part focusses on different forms of precapitalist class societies and state formation. In the first part there are detailed sections on kinship and social organization taken from Lewis Henry Morgan (Morgan, 1963), J.F. McLennan (McLennan, 1876), and Sir John Lubbock (Lubbock, 1870), as well as a range of early travellers' accounts of the Americas and the southern Pacific Islands. Marx adopts the categories of Morgan—savagery, barbarism, and so on—but appears more concerned with particular configurations and dynamics of kinship, labour and work relations, technology and decision-making processes than with the author's typology. As a result Morgan's classification scheme becomes historically specific and analytical, rather than evolutionary in a progressive sense. Marx identifies certain transformations as possible, but nowhere does he postulate a necessary transition. One looks in vain for any "motors" or "triggers" of social change, such as population increase, pressure on productive resources, technological innovation or the like.

Marx presents certain changes marking dramatic shifts in social organization or political economy, but these are historically determined. Radical change is the result of contradictions emerging between human agency and structural processes, on the one hand, and within the structures of polity and economy, on the other. He notes, for instance, that communal property cannot coexist indefinitely with patriarchal family relations because of the fundamental opposition the latter poses to the other; similarly, "common usage" or custom cannot persist unchallenged alongside state-associated law (see also Diamond, 1974). Where archaic forms persist, Marx does not depict them as "vestiges" or cultural lags, but fundamentally as evidence of resistance to the

penetration of state-associated institutions. For example, Marx does not present the replacement of “common usage” by legal codes and judicial structures as evidence of societal evolution in the sense of progressive change. Instead, law is intrinsically repressive:

Customary law...is not obeyed, as enacted law is obeyed....The actual constrain [*sic*] which is required to secure conformity with usage is conceivably small....[Laws, to the contrary, come from] *an authority external to the small natural group* and forming no part of it,...wholly unlike customary rule. They [laws] lose the assistance of superstition (par exemple Christian Religion. Roman Church?), probably that of opinion, certainly that of spontaneous impulse. The *force at the back of law* comes therefore to be *purely coercive force* to a degree quite unknown in societies of the more primitive type. (Marx, 1974: 335; emphasis in the original)

Marx rejects the pervasive 19th-century classification of societies by racial typologies. In his notes on works by Sir Henry Maine and John Budd Phear, time and again he rails in parentheses about the pseudo-science inherent in such racial classification schemes: “The devil take this ‘Aryan’ cant!” (Marx, 1974: 324) and “...Aryan (! again this nonsense!) race...” (Marx, 1974: 335). He also rejects the notion of differential intelligence accruing to those in one type of society versus another.

In several places he scorns the ideological character of most ethnographic accounts of the time. His parenthetical remarks on one passage from Lubbock illustrate the point. Lubbock refers to a friend of Reverend Lang, who

...tried long and patiently to make a very intelligent Australian understand (sollte heissen make him believe) his existence without a body, but the black never would keep his countenance...for a long time he could not believe (“he” is the intelligent black) that the “gentleman” (i.e., d. Pfaffen Lang silly friend) was serious, and when he did realize it (that the gentleman was an ass in good earnest), the more serious the teacher was the more ludicrous the whole affair appeared to be (Spottet Lubbock seiner selbst u. weiss doch nicht wie).³ (Marx, 1974: 349)

The *Notebooks* underscore one central dynamic in the known historical transformations of communal societies: the emergence and persistence of non-producing classes and alienable use-rights, bolstered perforce by emerging, coercive state structures. In the *Notebooks*

Marx is concerned with variations and patterns in communal societies and with variations in precapitalist state societies, read not as typologies, but as historically specific configurations that might share certain features. In the class-based social formations, he seems particularly focussed on the relationship of sovereign and state functionaries and institutions to local communities. The sections on states make distinctions with regard to property, labour, political and religious ideologies between the precapitalist states emerging from the Mesopotamian region (Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, Rome), those societies colonized by Roman-derived states (the Germanic tribes, Ireland), and what Marx calls the “great states” known in the 19th century in Asia (India, Ceylon, China) and Mesoamerica (Aztec). Marx’s commentaries focus on studies by Phear (Phear, 1880), Maine (Maine, 1861), and John Austin (Austin, 1832) and use the studies to argue forcefully that, contrary to the beliefs of those scholars, the state is fundamentally parasitic. Nowhere in the *Notebooks* does Marx discuss the state as a progressive force in human evolution, or as a force in ameliorating social problems.

In his discussions of the state, Marx focusses on the local level, from daily and seasonal routines, to variations in diet and expenditures, kinship dynamics and rituals of social reproduction. These arrangements are then contrasted in content, even if forms seem similar, to the bureaucratic, religious and legal structures imposed from above. Moreover, Marx denies the integrative functions of the state, and the effectiveness of state ideologies in providing coherence to most precapitalist class societies. We find no successful propaganda machine here, no consensus of the ruled: to the contrary we find contradiction, power struggles within the elites and between state and communities, and coercion. The “tax-taking” character of most of the “great states” precluded deeper penetration by state-sponsored edicts and ideological structures. The “particular commands” of the Sovereign did not constitute law, but “...a sudden, spasmodic, and temporary interference with ancient multifarious usage left in general undisturbed” (Marx, 1974: 334). Where coherence became judicially and legislatively defined, as in the Roman Empire, Marx comments:

...the process was spread over many centuries...a vast and miscellaneous mass of customary law was broken up and replaced by new institutions...It (the Roman Empire) devoured, brake [*sic*] into pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet. (Marx, 1974: 335)

In one place Marx notes a function of a precapitalist state that at first appears to have improved local conditions. Phear discusses the intervention of the Bengali state in times of food scarcity, distributing stores to villages facing famine. Marx's commentary on this passage includes his point that, in order to make ready this distribution, all available means of transportation in the region had to be impressed into state service, sometimes weeks in advance of the projected scarcity, and thereby exacerbating the problem (Marx, 1974: 266). The other factor in periodic scarcity in this social formation was the commodification of food staples, which Marx identifies as entwined with class formation. Speculation in food grains is a consequence and a symptom of class relations. First, the cultivators (*ryots*) had to provide part of the harvest to state-associated functionaries (*Zamindaris*) to reaffirm and retain use-rights to land. These officials would either siphon off a portion of these taxes for their own use, or require labour service of subjects on their own use-plots. Harvests would then be available for sale, where sale became necessary because of exactions from the peasantry. Second, the *ryots* had to settle debts with interest; money-lenders (often petty officials) claimed portions of the harvest regardless of the cultivators' consumption needs (Marx, 1974: 256). In short, Marx dismisses Malthusian explanations of food shortages. Marx insists that the famines described by Phear as caused by nature and as occasions for state beneficence were politically caused or at the very least exacerbated by the interference of class and state dynamics.

The common assumption that Marx was scornful of the peasantry, seeing them solely as ignorant or reactionary—a decontextualized reading of the “sack of potatoes” metaphor in his and Engels' *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)—simply cannot be born out in the *Notebooks*. Instead, one finds a decidedly mixed reaction, keyed to the specificities of the particular society and time. On the one hand, as repository of the “customary usage” deemed by Marx to be less oppressive when associated with the absence of the state or class relations, the “local natural group” is also more egalitarian than the rest of the society. But on the other hand, it also is affected by shifts in property and labour, and can come to be ordered through “superstition.” While he adopts the term “superstition” from Phear, Marx puts on it a decidedly different spin than Phear's. Judging from his parenthetical remarks, as Marx uses it, superstition refers to belief systems as they are parodied by, but do not encompass the state-promoted ideology; the formal qualities of those beliefs are presented

back to the villagers as traditional religion. Superstition, in other words, reveals a powered, dialectical relationship between state and community rather than a timeless and unchanging local beliefs.

There is no essentialized “peasant” here, either as reactionary or heroic. Oppression may permeate the local group, but it is not due to traditions rooted in the communal shell of previously autonomous villages. His marginal notes on Phear's description of an essentialized and ahistorical Bengali peasant show this:

A husbandman of the present day is the primitive being he always (!) has been....He is the greatest enemy of social reform [? wäre nicht enemy of getting himself the rent to pay the Zemindarees, old or young!] and never dreams of throwing off the trammels which time or superstition has spun around him. He will not send his son to school for fear [and a very just one, too!] of being deprived of his manual assistance in the field....The *ryots* too poor (!), too ignorant, too disunited among themselves to effect...improvement.” (Marx, 1974: 257; Marx's emphasis)

Marx here portrays the constraints on agency posed by class relations and the state, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the constraints on collective action. Contradictions between communal ownership and private use-rights, and class formation within the community create internal disunity. The passage anticipates debates nearly a century later on the role of the peasantry in social revolution. Eric Wolf appears to adopt Phear's position that extreme poverty among peasantries is inimical to revolutionary action (Wolf, 1968). Marx's exclamation point and emphasis on disunity might have served as a cautionary note, as more recent grass-roots movements throughout the world bear witness.

In a section on Maine's 1875 treatise, Marx challenges Thomas Hobbes for assuming that human nature is inherently competitive, and the English analytical jurists Bentham and Austin for claiming as scientific what is projection. Marx criticizes Maine for casting the Roman patriarchal family into prehistory (Marx, 1974: 324). Each author presents a classification scheme that Marx argues merely echoes the reigning political ideology of the particular time (Marx, 1974: 328-329). Marx's concern with “science” can be read as needing to ground social theory in empirically informed research. At the same time, this empirical grounding demanded continuous, critical evaluation of analytical terms used. Throughout the *Notebooks* Marx deconstructs terms used by other authors, as we have seen in his deployment of “superstition” and “evolution.”

The *Ethnological Notebooks* appear to some as a scholastic exercise, or as an indication that toward the end of his life, Marx was “slipping a bit,” as one rather orthodox Marxist told me. Yet the *Notebooks* show the same kind of attention to historical contingencies and local dynamics that informs his response to a letter from Vera Zasulich (1881). Zasulich writes with some urgency:

...In one way or another, even the personal fate of our revolutionary socialists depends upon your answer to the question. For there are only two possibilities. Either the rural commune, freed of exorbitant tax demands, payment to the nobility and arbitrary administration, is capable of developing in a socialist direction, that is, gradually organising its production and distribution on a collectivist basis. In that case, the revolutionary socialist must devote all his strength to the liberation and development of the commune.

If, however, the commune is destined to perish, all that remains for the socialist, as such, is more or less ill-founded calculations as to how many decades it will take for the Russian peasant's land to pass into the hands of the bourgeoisie, and how many centuries it will take for capitalism in Russia to reach something like the level of development already attained in Western Europe....You would be doing us a very great favour if you were to set forth Your ideas on the possible fate of our rural commune, and on the theory that it is historically necessary for every country in the world to pass through all the phases of capitalist production. In the name of my friends, I take the liberty to ask You, Citizen, to do us this favour. (quoted in Shanin, 1983: 98)

Marx writes several drafts prior to sending his lengthy reply two months later. In his drafts and his final reply (see Shanin, 1983: 100-126), he details the historically unique qualities of the local collective villages (*mir*) and of local communal forms elsewhere. He also discusses the process of expropriation of the peasantries and the political and social dynamics that underwrote capitalist development in countries of Western Europe. Marx weighs what would be necessary to create capitalism in Russia, without at any time saying this would be either desirable, or that the Western European countries somehow provide a model to be emulated:

If capitalist production is to establish its sway in Russia, then the great majority of peasants—that is, of the Russian people—will have to be transformed into wage-labourers, and hence be expropriated through the prior abolition of their communist property. But in

any event, the Western precedent would prove nothing at all [about the “historical inevitability” of this process]....

He goes on to eschew any notion of a necessary stage of capitalist expropriation and development in Russia:

However, the situation of the Russian commune is absolutely different from that of the primitive communities in the West [in Western Europe]. Russia is the only European country in which communal property has maintained itself on a vast, nationwide scale. But at the same time, Russia exists in a modern historical context: it is contemporaneous with a higher culture, and it is linked to a world market in which capitalist production is predominant.

[It is therefore capitalist production which enables it to achieve results without having to pass through its....]

Thus, in appropriating the positive results of this mode of production, it is able to develop and transform the still archaic form of its rural commune, instead of destroying it. (I would remark in passing that the form of communist property in Russia is the most/modern form of the archaic type which has itself gone through a whole series of evolutionary changes.)

If the admirers of the capitalist system in Russia deny that such a combination is possible, let them prove that Russia had to undergo an incubation period of mechanical production in order to make use of machinery! Let them explain to me how they managed, in just a few days as it were, to introduce the machinery of exchange (banks, credit companies, etc.) which was the work of centuries in the West. (quoted in Shanin, 1983: 102-103)

He talks about the historical typologies of communal forms of property, outlines how as a result of state policies and capitalist markets, the Russian *mir* has come to combine communal ownership with private use-plots and mixed labour forms, and how this set of contradictions, constructed through state intervention as well as commerce and changing production, threatens the continuity of local communities.

What threatens the life of the Russian commune is neither a/ historical inevitability nor a theory; it is state oppression, and exploitation by capitalist intruders whom the state has made powerful at the peasants' expense. (Shanin, 1983: 104-105)

In another draft he outlines the prototype that what he calls “archaic” forms create for the removal of the more oppressive forms of private property:

Also favourable to the maintenance of the Russian commune (on the path of development) is the fact not only that it is contemporary with capitalist production [in the Western countries], but that it has survived the epoch when the social system stood intact. Today, it faces a social system which, both in Western Europe and the United States, is in conflict with science, with the popular masses, and with the very productive forces that it generates [in short, this social system has become the arena of flagrant antagonisms, conflicts and periodic disasters; it makes clear to the blindest observer that it is a transitory system of production, doomed to be/ eliminated as soc(iety) returns to finds it in a state of crisis that will end only when the social system is eliminated through the return of modern societies to the “archaic” type of communal property.

He calls for better comprehension of historical transformations in particular locations and an appreciation of the ways the structure of the communal forms afforded less oppressive daily conditions than those of the wider feudal or later, capitalist forms:

But at least we should be thoroughly acquainted with all the historical twists and turns. We know nothing about them. (c) In one way or another, this commune perished in the midst of never-ending foreign and intestine warfare. It probably died a violent death when the Germanic tribes came to conquer Italy, Spain, Gaul, and so on. The commune of the archaic type had already ceased to exist. And yet, its natural vitality is proved by two facts. Scattered examples survived all the vicissitudes of the Middle Ages and have maintained themselves up to the present day—e.g. in my own home region of Trier. More importantly, however, it so stamped its own features on the commune that supplanted it (a commune in which arable land became private property, while the forests pastures, waste ground, etc., remained communal property), that Maurer was able to reconstruct the archaic prototype/ while deciphering the commune [of more recent origin] of secondary formation. Thanks to the characteristic features inherited from the prototype, the new commune which the Germans introduced into every conquered region became the only focus of liberty and popular life throughout the Middle Ages. (quoted in Shanin, 1983: 107-108)

Moreover, he cautions Zaslach and her Marxist audience about the political agendas of various writers and the barely disguised colonialism associated with economic determinism and the “inevitability of capitalism arguments”:

One has to be on one’s guard when reading the histories of primitive communities written by bourgeois authors. They do not shrink [from anything] even from falsehoods. Sir Henry Maine, for example, who enthusiastically collaborated with the English government in its violent destruction of the Indian communes, hypocritically tells us that all the government’s noble efforts to maintain the communes succumbed to the spontaneous power of economic laws! (quoted in Shanin 1983: 107)

What, then, is the future of these village communities?

But does this mean that the development of the “agricultural commune” must follow this route in every circumstance [in every historical context]? Not at all. Its constitutive form allows of the following alternative: either the element of private property which it implies gains the upper hand over the collective element, or the reverse takes place. Everything depends upon the historical context in which it is situated...Both solutions are a priori possibilities, but each one naturally requires a completely different historical context. (quoted in Shanin, 1983: 108-109).

The *Ethnological Notebooks* and Critical Anthropology in North America

It is in the spirit of Marx’s call for careful ethnohistorical accounts that we can situate one strand of North American anthropology. Stanley Diamond (Diamond, 1974; 1975), Eleanor Leacock (1954; 1963; 1972), Richard Lee (1992), and Tom Patterson (1981) have pointed to the importance of ethnological writings by Marx and Engels, as well as their ethnographic methodology as in Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1887 [1844]) and the “Enquête Ouvrière” (1880). These authors point out that in Marx there is an abiding concern with discerning conditions and societal structures and processes that facilitate emancipation and those that underwrite and reproduce forms of oppression. Rather than dividing Marx’s writings into an earlier phase more imbued with German Romantic philosophy and a later phase more focussed on political-economic transformations (see Althusser, 1969), Diamond and Krader emphasize the continuity of Marx’s attention to the primitive commune as a model, at a different level of socio-economic integration, of an emancipatory future (see Diamond, 1975: 1-6; Krader, 1975: 5, 6).

This view lends itself better to an anthropology concerned with human liberation, not one that celebrates the entrenchment of neoliberal structures, anticommunist states, and a “global interdependence” that never

questions the rights of corporations, the echoes of fascism in so-called democratic forms, or the virulent effects of the normal operation of the political economy on many millions of people. What this tradition in anthropology includes is advocacy for the efforts of indigenous peoples in their efforts to defend a way of life that is structurally and in practice, deeply opposed to capitalism. Leacock and Lee, for instance, worked closely with the Innu of Labrador to oppose military overflights that wrecked havoc with hunting efforts (see Leacock and Lee, 1982).

Lee in particular has argued on the basis of painstaking and long-term ethnographic research that people living in communal societies enjoy a "safety net" of pooled resources, sharing, and widespread care-giving that ventures far beyond any dream of social welfare in state societies. In addition, Lee and Leacock reintroduced and defended the use of the term "primitive communism" to describe such social formations at a time when Cold War politics and neoliberal forms of postmodern discourse made reference to the Marxist tradition in anthropology the occasion at best for looks of tolerance for the poignantly passé (Lee, 1992; Leacock and Gailey, 1992). But despite a number of specious attacks on his ethnology, Lee remained among a handful of anthropologists who opposed South Africa's recruitment of San men in its war against the anti-apartheid forces of the Southwest African People's Organization (SWAPO) in Namibia. In the post-apartheid era, he continues to work with the San around issues of HIV, poverty in the areas subject to reservations, and generally how communal values and practices can address the face of various development agendas and the racial politics that are a legacy of apartheid. This kind of engagement is far from stubborn clinging to some ossified relic of outdated theory. As in the *Ethnographic Notebooks*, Lee's effort is to discern in local communal relations confronting powerful and sometimes coercive economic and political processes, the dynamics that might help produce or reproduce unoppressive social relations and relative health and prosperity.

Marginalization of the *Notebooks*

While in the face of experience with anti-communist forces in and outside the academy we can readily comprehend why mainstream scholars have ignored the *Ethnological Notebooks*, we nevertheless need to ask why they have attracted little attention among Marxist researchers. Some reasons are readily apparent: the commentaries are in fact notes rather than essays and

therefore somewhat cryptic. Compounding this frustration is Marx's habit of conversing with himself and the authors he reads in five languages. At times reading the *Notebooks* makes one feel like the street cop in "Blade Runner," having to grapple with a "City-speak" agglomeration of phrases drawn from English, German, French, Greek and Latin in order to make sense of the surroundings.⁴ Perhaps these difficulties are sufficient explanation. However, International Publishers, the provider of so many of Marx's writings translated into English, had the subsidies and infrastructure at the time of its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s to accomplish this, and yet it did not develop such a project. Another reason for delayed publication is the absence of an explicitly framed narrative argument. Nevertheless, one can discern arguments in the selection of passages, authors and commentaries, and there is ample precedent for publishing notes by major authors that can be combed by subsequent scholars.

Despite their obscurity in subsequent Marxist scholarship, we can ask more intriguing questions: Why was he taking notes on those particular sources, and those particular passages? It helps, of course, to have a certain familiarity with the volumes on ancient legal systems, histories of archaic civilizations, and what passed for ethnography in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But if we have learned anything from the last quarter century of literary criticism, it is that reading author's intentionality is at best a creative act, at worst, projective folly. So I have tried to frame the notes chronologically: they were written after Marx and Engels' commentaries on the failure of the Paris Commune (1871) and in the same period as Marx's correspondence with Vera Zasulich, working in Russia. In the *Notebooks* I think we can trace elaborations on his discussion of the fatal lack of communication between the Communards and rural areas, and the relative isolation of French peasant communities, articulated almost uniquely through state vectors. We also can see a defense of historical specificity, a multiplicity of possible outcomes for a given set of dynamics, and otherwise indications of the importance of organizing, that is, of concerted human agency in determining particular pathways of change.

Many Marxist scholars have commented that Marx never addressed the problem of the transition to socialism. I do not think of Marx as a utopian philosopher and so I would not expect him to have much sympathy with the construction of blueprints. Still, throughout Marx's works is the concept of *dialectical return*. This concept provides us with a clue to one of

the purposes of the anthropological explorations in the *Notebooks*; the letter to Zasulich underscores the point. Clearly Marx's concept of communism involves recapitulating the kind of absence of private property and classless division of labour characteristic of primitive societies while utilizing the technologies and more widespread communication capabilities developed under capitalism. The nature of the state is central, both with regard to the historical transformations from the earlier communal societies to class-based ones, and the potential obstacles to achieving communism involved in socialist transitions.

Marx's abiding scorn for the state as a vehicle for human emancipation is, I think, at the heart of the marginalization of *The Ethnological Notebooks* in 20th-century Marxist scholarship. Despite their wish to counter the vicious international politics of U.S. Cold Warriors, it was not possible for many more ethnographically grounded scholars to ignore the repressive quality of most of the socialist bloc states regarding local communities and the question of ethnicity in general. To do so did not mean that one upheld an imaginary capitalist West as less racist, less homophobic and less repressive, particularly if one conceived of corporate policies as an invisible branch of the state.

It becomes impossible, reading the *Notebooks*, to view socialism as a telos. Socialism would be beneficial only insofar as it facilitated the achievement of a dialectical return to the communal societies of the past. But as a source of taxation, conscription and surveillance it could not be defended, even as Marx vilified the imperialist policies or domestic repression characteristic of the capitalist state societies he analyzed. As he argued in relation to the Paris Commune (1871), "But the working class cannot simply lay hold on the ready-made state-machinery and wield it for their own purpose. The political instrument of their enslavement cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation" (196). He went on to describe the kind of representational, accountable, and democratic governance structure that the Communards devised in Paris as a model for the nation.

The sections on the "great states" in Asia focus on the dynamics in a tribute-based mode of production, although the term is not used as such (see Krader, 1975). Marx discusses the layering of use-rights, the absence of real private property, and the contrast between the assertion of ownership by the "Sovereign" (read state) and the everyday possession and use by direct producers, organized for the most part in custom-oriented communities. The basic determination of what was to be pro-

duced was shaped by demands of the state in the form of tax-goods or labour service, but the production process was largely governed by ideologies of kinship and reciprocity, better understood by the producers than by agents of the state. The state apparatus is depicted as a growth on top and at the expense of the local communities. Marx states explicitly that the state "in all forms is an excrescence of the society" (Marx, 1974: 329).⁵

The question of class formation in socialist states can be seen in a framework of dialectical return. Socialist states, where they emerged, would exhibit contradictions associated with divisions of labour, property relations, and social relations that parallel, at a different level of technical and productive capacities, earlier tribute-based states. If we consider any transition through socialism this way, the fundamentally unoppressive conditions found in primitive communism appear both as history and potentiality. Socialism would represent the rejection of private property at the root of the contradictions in capitalist relations of production. As in capitalism, in socialism the production process is largely collective, socialized.

But in socialist societies, the state claims resources on behalf of the citizenry. The state as property owner has a direct parallel in the assertions of tribute-based states throughout the ancient world. The "excrescent" state becomes, as in the "tax-taking" state societies of the precapitalist past, the basis of social contradiction. Producers in theory might own the means of production, but the degree to which they actually control the labour process and products of their labour become sites of political struggle. We have seen in the actions of the early Solidarity movement in Poland⁶ that this effort to actualize the rhetoric of worker control in the face of de facto state control can lead to the collapse of the state. We also can see that this does not necessarily lead to communism, but can result in capitalist relations and the erosion of social welfare. But Marx never saw pathways of development as inevitabilities. Always we come back to the importance of organization and the values and practices of actual, historically situated people.

The class relations in socialist settings differ markedly from those in capitalist ones. Private accumulation occurs as graft or corruption, because the privileged classes are state-associated. While private accumulation is not an automatic result of state-associated class formation, it can be. The tax-farming of archaic states can find a parallel in settings where agents enjoy a degree of autonomy in their positions and a surrounding global system that provides and incentive, the skimming or extortion destined for Swiss bank accounts. In

contrast to capitalism, wealth is a result of, rather than a basis for, class formation.

Indeed, most of the 20th-century socialist states had been, prior to capitalist colonization or partial penetration, variations of the tribute-based mode of production, the “tax-taking” societies discussed by Marx as surviving in the 19th century primarily in Asia. For example, in his letters to Zasulich Marx holds that the village-community structure had not been eliminated in Russia, although commodity production was fostering rapid class formation. Capital penetration was contributing to the dissolution of what had been a community without internal class divisions, but the resilience of the older communal form was not inevitable.

If we take these so-called Asiatic states, that is, pre-capitalist, “tribute-paying” social formations as a model, then classes in socialist transitions derive from relative control over labour and resources, rather than ownership per se. In the tribute-paying formations, state representatives and retainers took their income from their official positions that (in theory) could not be inherited. Whatever wealth was accumulated was expended on life-style, or had extremely limited arenas of investment, since the state or sovereign claimed most venues. Over time the tendency could be seen in pre-capitalist China or the principalities in India, for the bureaucratic elites to reproduce themselves as such, with some mobility possible for the more prosperous levels of the peasantry, or for those linking their reproductive potential to the state (military exploits, concubinage and the like). The political dynamic between villages and the state in these societies was a struggle over the relative determination of production, including the distribution of product. For instance, Marx emphasizes that within the Bengali ruling class, “the contest for power...was mainly a struggle for command of the *kachari tabils*,” that is, the regional structure that administered the extraction of products and labour service, as well as accounting (Marx, 1974: 284).

Pressures for deconstructing the state apparatus and bureaucratically defined class formation would depend not only on socialized production, but also of the communal dynamics that persist in reproductive spheres and are enacted in daily life. In other words the relations of pooling resources and technical rather than social divisions of labour, the nets of “sharing and caring” the UCR graduate student invoked, when combined with the transformed labour relations, provide an alternative to the ideology of state as collective will.

Throughout the *Notebooks*, Marx reviles in unambiguous ways the self-serving presentation of state-

associated classes as necessary for societal prosperity (Marx, 1974: 329). He does not confuse the collectivities organized for purposes of extracting goods or labour—military units, work groups ordained by the state—with communal forms (Marx, 1974: 334). Reading the *Notebooks* it appears impossible to hold socialism up as a guiding light. Unoppressive conditions were presented only in the context of his discussions of “primitive” communal societies. He presents political struggle—not simply technical innovation, novel property relations, or systems of labour alone—as pressing internal contradictions in a particular social formation toward transformation. The outcome of transformation is nowhere shown as predestined or as merely a logical outgrowth of existing structures. This dependence on human agency provides another clue as to why the *Notebooks* fly in the face of Second International agendas.

Marx identifies the partial dissolution of communal relations as one consequence of emerging class differences, themselves due to a myriad of conditions involving both contradictions in structure and human action. The layered social formations, such as those in Asia or Russia, that had interfered the least in the communal relations of the “local natural group” would in Marx’s view, require the least intensity of action to remove the primary sources of oppression. Fully capitalist societies would therefore be less likely to foster socialist transformations, since communities are—except as rear-guard efforts and on the margins—effectively dissolved. In capitalist settings, the hegemony of state ideology is the most effective because it appears simultaneously as natural and as individual choice. For those Marxists insistent that capitalism is a necessary stage on the road to socialism, the *Notebooks* stress that it is not, and that socialism involves a different set of oppressive relations and structural contradictions that can be glimpsed through an appreciation of dynamics in precapitalist, tribute-based states.

The emphasis on forces of production as the motor of social change and the insistence on socialism as a necessary precursor to communism—major tenets of the Second International—stand in contrast to the commentaries and concerns of the *Notebooks*. While the Second International stressed the forces of production as marshalling in a socialist society, where for an indeterminate time the state would act on behalf of the working class, Marx in the *Notebooks* stressed struggle between communities and the state over control of resources and labour. Where voices of the Second International called for the need to replace forms of

community associated with earlier social stages, and the need to construct the “new man” through state agendas, Marx in his discussions of the “great Asian” states stressed the proclivity of state agents to defend state interests at the expense of local dynamism and viable kin communities, even if they had been distorted through the taxation/conscription impositions of state. Where the Second International stressed that socialism was a necessary stage prior to the withering away of the state that would usher in communism, Marx in the *Notebooks* discussed the ways in which local communities tried to retain practices despite state intervention, some of which could be characterized as communist. To develop a critical Marxism that included the *Notebooks* through the Soviet-approved publishing venues such as International Publishers would be to encourage criticism of the USSR on a non-Cold War basis. This was not feasible in the Cold War context, or in the context of Soviet state agendas. The transcription, prepared through the monumental efforts of Lawrence Krader, was published by one of the Dutch houses that subscribe so steadfastly to the need for primary texts in research.

The Ethnological Notebooks provide a final chapter to Marx’s work, one that shows the importance of local community relations in shaping long-term resistance to oppressive conditions. In efforts to ensure the continuity of a net of sharing and unalienated work (including caring), we create an emancipatory vision, episodically enacted under conditions people do not control in their daily lives. In sum, it is not surprising that a complete translation of the *Notebooks* has yet to appear. The difficulties of translation are obvious, but they are insufficient to explain the 120-year silence. But Marx’s characterization of class formation in state-dominated control of property might well explain the reluctance on the part of adherents to the Second International—the development of the productive forces advocates who parallel their modernization counterparts of the right—to hear the *Notebooks’* messages. Taken together, Marx’s call for the empirical study of historically transformed tribute-based states and his notion of dialectical return give us a way of framing problems of class formation in postcolonial states in general, and now the neoliberal colonization of the former socialist bloc. The Cold War may have strangled almost all of the socialist experiments, but the kind of capitalist development, mafia and warlord activities, and fascist states it spawned in their wake require an appreciation of state-associated classes as a vehicle of accumulation.

Grass-roots movements throughout the world today that oppose the neoliberal policies of the post-Cold War are not for the most part linked to an explicit socialist agenda. What we can learn from the anti-militarist efforts of international feminist groups like those discussed in *Frontline Feminisms* (Waller and Rycenga, 2000), is a call for more or less egalitarian dynamics within groups pressing for sustainable and livable futures, the coordination of familial and community priorities with those oriented toward national and international claims, and the creative use of some traditions to inform practice and the subversion of other customary usage that has oppressive consequences.

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Notes

- 1 Ulysses Santamaria discusses Marx’s notion of work as transformative activity, in contrast to labour, which was alienated (Santamaria, 1992). As such, it is much closer to the sense of work found in Richard Lee’s discussions of foraging. Santamaria’s careful treatment poses a powerful critique of the ways both socialist and capitalist proponents extol the virtues of labour productivity as social good. Feminists coming from Marxism as an intellectual home have eschewed the distinction of reproductive and productive labour as rendering what gets called “women’s work” invisible (see, e.g., Hartman, 1992 [1981]; Sargent, 1986).
- 2 Indeed, Marx reserves accusations of stupidity and backwardness for those against whom he is arguing.
- 3 Loosely, “Lubbock makes a fool of himself without even realizing it” (my translation).
- 4 I do not read Greek, for instance, and perforce have skipped those passages.
- 5 The comment is made in a passage criticizing Maine, Austin, and Bentham:

[Maine ignores das viel Tiefere: dass d. scheinbare supreme selbständige Existenz des *Staats* selbst nur *scheinbar* und dass er in allen Formen eine *excrecence of society* is].

[Maine ignores the real difference: that the apparently paramount, autonomous existence of the *State* remains only an *appearance* and that it in all forms is an *excrecence of society*.] (my translation)

- 6 The initial demands of Solidarity were printed in the U.S. only in *Monthly Review* and the *Village Voice*. The demands at the outset were not anti-socialist, unless one considers demands consistent with communism to be anti-socialist. The global context of U.S. Cold War policies and the international lending apparatus that supported them played a decisive role in shaping the transformation of the movement.

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