
Renewing the Vision: Marxism and Anthropology in the 21st Century—Introduction

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A collection on Marxist anthropology, why now? We are at the beginning of a new millennium, looking back at a 19th-century philosophy, with no significant anniversary to lay our work on. It is more than 150 years since the publication of the Communist Manifesto, 130 years since the Paris Commune, 85 years since the October Revolution, and slightly more than half a century since the Chinese revolution. It would seem forced to make this a volume celebrating 20 something years since the Sandinista revolution, 30 something since Paris 1968, or 40 something since the Cuban revolution, and none of our essays really address the specific questions of party and state that emerged from the failed 1905 revolution in Russia. So why now? To use the popular language of contemporary finance, we believe that Marxism is at an all time low and has the possibility for good long-term growth. Call it intellectual bargain hunting.

Robert Brenner has wittily remarked that “Marxist economists are famous for having accurately predicted seven out of the last one international economic crisis” (Brenner 1998: 22). There is a strong argument for sharing Dr. Brenner’s scepticism and not claiming the many signs of renewed class struggle and social protest as an indicator of a vast and powerful re-composition of the world working class movement and a new viability for Marxism. There are always mass class struggles and the young are always restless.

As we enter the new millennium, the forces of capitalism and reaction are in ascendance. The dream of a communist society organized for human needs and not for profit is in tatters. A century of bourgeois state terror, social democratic betrayal, Stalinist retreat and appeasement, and many varieties of opportunistic devaluing of the coin of human liberation have left us with what German social theorist Jurgen Habermas has called an exhaustion of utopian energies (Habermas 1989). Political leaders in every country in the world, who barely 15 years ago were committed anti-capitalist militants are joining the bour-

geois governments of their former enemies and trading their AK 47s for elite appointments and government portfolios, while rank and file militants scramble to find legitimate ways to make a living or seek out NGOs as a compromise between politics and professionalism (Petras 1995). Everywhere individual solutions are posed to the collective social problems of daily life and everywhere economies get leaner, meaner and more competitive, pitting neighbour against neighbour.

We predict no coming upsurge. The world proletariat has been bombed, conned, and misled into doubt and aimlessness. Marxism, communism, and socialism as alternative means of organizing society have little credibility for most of the world. There is no current political, economic, or social program of the world proletariat and most of its 20th-century mass organizations are disbanded or hopelessly discredited. So why now? The answer is, because we can. This collection comes at the end of a decade and a half of hunting the corridors of anthropology meetings for co-thinkers and kindred spirits, organizing our colleagues around issues of importance to our social class, and studying the lessons of the past.

A collection on Marxist anthropology, why here? Though true, the simple answer, “because we can”, does not say enough about why *Anthropologica* is our chosen venue. There is a simple fact that many of the people we met in those 15 years have long known—the Canadian academy is one of the best homes for Marxism. After the end of the Cold War, it is difficult to imagine a better home for rigorous and independent—but still partisan—Marxism than Canada. It has a Marxist tradition that has not spiralled into post-modern doubt, nor remained enthralled with Cold War shibboleths and dogmas. It is healthy, polemical and well enough supported to provide a home for studies such as ours.

The idea for this volume has its early roots in a session, “Counter Flows: Marxist Anthropology in the New Millennium,” organized by Menzies and Marcus for the 1997 American Anthropological Association meetings. At that time we noted that between the publication in 1975 of Bridget O’Laughlin’s review article, “Marxist Approaches in Anthropology,” and William Roseberry’s 1988 review article “Political Economy,” published on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a major sea change had occurred within the social science and humanities disciplines. In an ironic (perhaps tragic is more apt?) twist, Anthropology answered Kathleen Gough’s call for “New Proposals” by a radical engagement with the “text,” simultaneously subverting and adopting Gough’s critique of anthropology as the “child of Western Imperialism” (1968: 403-407).

The aim of our 1997 session was to explore the strengths (and weaknesses) of a new-formed Marxist anthropology emerging along the margins of the academe. In a variety of ways and from divergent perspectives the participants in that session, Kim Clark, Eliza Darling, Thomas Dunk, Belinda Leach, Anthony Marcus, and Charles Menzies understood themselves as part of a project of rejuvenating Marxist-anthropology. Members of our session were part of what was then an emerging—now an active—working group, organized under the rubric of Political Economy and the Production of Culture. The working group, meeting in conjunction with the Canadian Anthropological Association since the early-mid 1990s, has provided an encouraging milieu within which an expanding cohort of Marxist inspired colleagues have been able to develop politically and professionally.

In January 2000 we hosted a conference, *Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Social Class*, at the University of British Columbia.¹ We were fortunate to be able to call upon a multi-aged group of scholars that spanned four decades of political engagement with Marxist Anthropology. Here, in the midst of established and emerging scholars, the idea for this special issue was germinated.

Returning to the questions—why here, why now?—we are compelled to confess that our project is not driven by the rising interest in labour issues on university campuses throughout the U.S., Canada, and Mexico², the massive strike waves in Europe in recent years, nor the global opposition to neo-liberalism, free trade and “the war against terrorism” which brought nearly 15 million protesters into the streets of cities across the world during one weekend in February 2003. Our project is driven by the Trotskyist idea, brought to anthropology in the 1950s and 60s by Eric Wolf (1959) and Marshall Sahlins and Elman Service (1960) of the privileges of backwardness. To trade our financial metaphor for one from football, there is an open field.

With social democrats and Greens throughout Europe imposing the kinds of privatizations that “right of centre” parties never could and stealthily rebuilding national armies, rump Stalinists recanting the left nationalism of their communist past for the ultra-right nationalism of their capitalist present and academic Marxists jettisoning the last remnants of Enlightenment universalism for the particularism of post-modern doubt it is time to return to the program of proletarian internationalism, before economic competition and inter-imperialist conflict destroy our planet and extirpate the idea of “humanity” in a frenzy of national action.

A revival of what Edmund Wilson (1972) called “acting and writing history” is long overdue. The retreat of the

structuralism of the 1970s and 1980s has made such a project more conceivable than ever. Objectivist analysis that reduces the social scientist to a Ptolemaic forecaster of glacial movements in the mode of production or development of the forces of production has been hopelessly discredited and replaced by the subjectivism of the particular. No longer certain that the contradictions of history would inevitably work themselves out and yield a new society, social scientists have come to see themselves as witnesses to “post-ideology” local phenomena, cheerleaders for culturalism, or crafters of grand, Wittgenstein-influenced deconstructive word games.

As Marxist scholars of the generation of 2000 whose god never failed us in 1939, 1956, or 1968³ we have been cursed by developing in a wasteland of doubt, despair and pessimism that leads the best among our mentors to laugh affectionately when we raise the question of praxis and social transformation. But we have also been blessed by the absence of gods. Rather than struggle to chart a course between structure and agency, history and theory, objectivism and subjectivism, or the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., we are developing in a fallow field. We can go back to the basics and do what Marxists have always done: wage an ideological battle in our own work place for a cooperative and proletarian vision. This collection is a modest attempt to renew the struggle for a proletarian centred and Marxist anthropology. We think that the field has been fallow for long enough. The time has come to start planting the old seeds of a new society in the fallow fields of the present.

We open this special issue with a review paper by Marcus and Menzies in which we explore the dynamics and particularities of North American (Mexico, United States, and Canada) Marxism and Anthropology. Our intention is to pull out the key themes and ideas that we see as critical for an engaged anthropology, a Marxist anthropology of the 21st century. As anthropologists we have a limited connection to the physical power of the working class, but we do have a public platform for exerting some small influence on the consciousness of the working class. Our opening paper is one small part of this project and is positioned to open the general debate to which the following three papers provide specific explorations.

Kim Clark contributes a paper that is of importance to those who seek to unite ethnically divided national working classes around programs of social struggle and social justice. Her attempt to view contemporary ethno-nationalist rewritings of Ecuadorian history through a Marxist lens takes account of the total social formation, including elite and popular political projects and seeks to ground contemporary struggles for indigenous self-deter-

mination in a long-view, working class history that can account for the great variety of changing alliances and shifts in the ideological landscape.

Eric McGuckin uses a Marxist method to bring anthropological literature on tourism down to earth by addressing some of the more direct questions of social inequality that emerge from the intersection of leisure, movement, and world system political economics.

Anthony Marcus’s article is based on a presentation given at University of British Columbia in January, 2000. It raises an important set of questions about how safety-net welfare systems, such as that in the United States, are based on social constructions of poverty that divide the working class and set up categories of entitlement that immiserate large sections of it. Furthermore, the most progressive academics are enlisted in the defence of these categories. As the advanced industrial economies increasingly move away from corporatist welfare systems based on national working classes and towards the US safety net system, such discussions among progressive social scientists will likely become more important to addressing the health and economic security of working classes.

We think it is worth pointing out here that these were not the only papers that we were interested in publishing. We submitted several others by co-thinkers whose work did not make it through the peer review process. We mention this only to suggest that there are more of us out there and that rekindling a Marxist pole of debate within anthropology and the social sciences is a long slow process. We second guess none of our reviewers. We might well have made the same decisions had we been doing the reviewing. In fact, we thank the reviewers for their useful and well considered commentaries. We are confident that our colleagues who were rejected will be publishing important Marxist analyses in coming years.

We have seen that there are many Marxist anthropologists scattered among the generation of 2000, and though that number could not, at present, be said to constitute a movement, we want to take this chance to predict an upsurge. To go back to Robert Brenner’s sly comment about Marxist economists, we are ready to predict seven of the next one mass radicalization. None of the people contributing to this special issue will mind being wrong six times, if we get it right the seventh. With so many excellent scholars of the generation of 2000 working on the project of Marxist anthropology we are looking forward to eventually being right and contributing in some small way to consolidating and articulating the gains of whatever utopian energies are released.

Just as early 20th-century anti-racist Boasians in Mexico and the United States served the interests of big

capital and sections of the petty bourgeoisie, by helping to consciously articulate and rationalize the ethnic and cultural changes that were occurring in the make-up of North American capitalism, we Marxists of the early 21st-century can aid in the understanding and articulation of the changes in the world workers' movement and the struggle for a socialist future. We can, in classic anthropological fashion, question everyday commonsense and ask challenging questions about the existence, strength, and consciousness of the world working class. We can be workers both challenging our own conditions of production and supporting the struggles of our class brothers and sisters. We can be intellectuals fighting against bourgeois ideology that diminishes the value of the working class in favour of individualism, obscures rationality with mystifications, views the world through the counter-enlightenment lens of human ethnic zoology, counsels passivity in face of so called human nature and naturalizes the market. We can fight for the idea that history is what you make of it.

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Notes

- 1 The conference was made possible by the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant in aid of occasional conferences, the UBC Office of the Dean of Arts, the Museum of Anthropology, and the Department of Anthropology and Sociology.
- 2 In particular it is worth drawing attention to the shutdown and occupation of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) for ten months from April 1998 to February 1999. This protest at the largest university in the Americas was explicitly over the question of working class rights to a free and easily accessible university education in Mexico. It became a prominent forum and organising pillar of Marxism in the academy and drew anthropologists in on both sides of the struggle and both sides of the US/Mexican border.

- 3 These dates refer respectively to the Stalin-Hitler pact which disoriented and disillusioned a generation of communist militants; the crushing of the Hungarian uprising and the revelations that accompanied the death of Stalin, leading communists to haemorrhage from parties around the world; and the combination of the Soviet intervention in the "Prague Spring," the betrayals of Paris 1968 by the Communist Party of France, and the eventual failure of the global social movements of the 1960s and 70s.

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