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MARXISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY



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**MARXISM AND
ANTHROPOLOGY**

The History of a Relationship

MAURICE BLOCH

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The History of a Relationship

MAURICE BLOCH

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Preface

Marxism has recently become for anthropologists a new source of obscurity as a result of recent work which is difficult and barbarously phrased. On the other hand anthropological topics, which have always had a major place in Marxism, are often just as difficult as Marxist writings to understand and evaluate for those with a more general interest. Neither of these problems seems unsurmountable, and it is the purpose of this book to explain the history of the developing relationship between Marxism and anthropology, in a way which the non-specialist should find accessible, as well as to contribute something to ongoing debates. Any technical term used here, whether from Marxism or anthropology, is explained in the body of the text, and the index will enable the reader to refer back to these explanations.

Because this book is part of a series, I have concentrated mainly on those topics which principally concern pre-capitalist and pre-feudal societies. It does not seem to me that a reader principally interested in capitalism, or imperialism, or the theories of such Marxist writers as Althusser or Gramsci would turn to a book such as this, and so I have kept discussion of these topics to a minimum.

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M.B.

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1. Anthropology and the Work of Marx and Engels

The area of study in the social sciences which has gone under the name of anthropology in English-speaking countries has traditionally concentrated on primitive peoples. Anthropology as an organized subject goes back to the mid-nineteenth century (Fortes 1969:6, following Kroeber) and was closely associated with the study of evolution. Cultural and social anthropology was then concerned with the evolution of human society and culture. Inevitably the early history of anthropology became closely allied to the history of Darwinian evolutionary theory and many controversies which now seem obscure relate to the burning debates surrounding the concept of natural selection. None the less, anthropology soon became an independent academic study, first by amateurs, and later by university researchers. In time, academic anthropology became less directly associated with evolutionary ideas, and it tried to establish itself as a respectable, if not conservative, branch of the social sciences. How then did this apolitical, academic subject come to play such an important part in the development of Marxism?

Marx was, as Engels stressed in his funeral oration, first and foremost a revolutionary, and so the importance which he attached to the study of pre-literate peoples, the traditional field of anthropology, might at first seem strange. In fact, his intense interest, an interest which he passed on to Engels and other revolutionary Marxists, is neither accidental nor peripheral: it is one indication of the difference between Marx's thought and that of other revolutionaries, whether his predecessors or his contemporaries. It is one indication of why he has had such unique influence on the history of mankind.

Marx was not the first to denounce the wretched condition of the working class in capitalist countries, nor was he the first to point out the apparent anomaly that those who produced the wealth, the workers, were the poorest while those who were apparently useless drones, the capitalists and their associates,

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were the richest. However, he was the first who did not underestimate the power and the complexity of the system which had produced such a state of affairs. Because of this, Marx took as one of his main tasks the understanding of how this system came into being, and this was in order to discover why this system had such power over the minds of those who operated it, whether exploiters or exploited. This is what made Marx so different from his socialist contemporaries. At the same time as he was engaged in more political work, Marx attempted to rewrite the history of mankind for the use of the oppressed, so that they would be able to understand the nature of the oppression to which they were subjected, and how it had come about. For Marx this historical work was also political, because he believed that understanding the workers' condition through the study of history would enable them the better to fight it. Anthropology had a place in this scheme because for Marx it was the study of the early history of mankind.

This rewriting of history was not so much a matter of starting again, but of making use, for a new purpose, of knowledge which was already available, whether in the work of philosophers like Hegel, economists like Ricardo, biologists like Darwin, or anthropologists. This new use meant a severe criticism of the earlier knowledge, since Marx believed that the studies he was using had originally been made for exactly the opposite purpose to his; they had been made in order to justify the oppression which Marx saw as the core of the capitalist system. This was particularly true, Marx felt, of economists, but he was to show that it was also true of some anthropologists.

Naturally Marx started by explaining the historical mechanism and inner working of the social system which dominated the condition of the working class at the time when he wrote on capitalism. This is where he devoted most of his energies. However, in order to expose the nature of capitalism, Marx first had to show that capitalism is not based on some eternal immutable truth, as presented by economists, but is the product of a long history. For example, the law of supply and demand, as it operated in nineteenth-century England, he argues, was not simply a matter of eternal logic, nor were such rights as that of private property self-evident truths, but rather they were the product of particular historical circumstances. Those circumstances had brought about the capitalist system and had also created the concepts on which it was based. In showing capitalism and capitalist values to be the

creation of a moment of history Marx negated the transcendental claim of capitalism to be the only possible natural system for civilized man, and in this way challenged the basic precepts of capitalism. Marx's challenge to capitalism therefore took the general form of demonstrating the general forces which govern the history of man, and demonstrating how historical processes produce systems of institutions and ideas of such complexity that their origin can only be discovered with great theoretical effort and by examination of the historical evidence. That is what led Marx to history and then to anthropology as, in the course of his work, he pushed his analyses ever further backwards in the evolution of human society. In part Marx saw this task as paralleling what had been done by Darwin for biological evolution. In this Marx was similar to many of his contemporaries, such as Spencer or Comte, but he was also very different from them, for he did not believe that the same laws apply to biological evolution as apply to human societies. Above all he differed from them because his purpose was always primarily political.

Because Marx and Engels saw the reanalysis of history and anthropology as an essential part of their political activity, they gave an ever-growing importance to the study and understanding of pre-capitalist societies. As this work proceeded they began to include discussions of ever-earlier periods, and therefore they moved more and more into the field of anthropology. At first in *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*, both relatively early works, their interest mainly concentrated on feudalism, the period in European history which comes immediately before capitalism. At this stage they hardly mention tribal society. By 1858, however, ten years after *The Manifesto*, their historical horizon had already been pushed further back. Marx was then preparing the elaborate drafts for *Capital*, which have been published in English under the title *Grundrisse* (1973), or *Foundations*, an important part of which forms a separate book in English under the title *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. This contains a much lengthier and more important consideration of tribal social organization, as well as of classical and oriental societies. From then on, the references to pre-capitalist systems become more and more numerous in the work of Marx and Engels, but it was really from 1880 on, when Marx was shown the work of the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan that he and Engels gave a major place to the study of tribal societies.

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Marx's last three years, and much of Engels's work from then on, almost seem to be dominated by anthropological concerns. We know in part of this intensive study of the work of anthropologists from Marx's notes, published by L. Krader under the title *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* (1972). This work, however, only really came to fruition in Engels's famous book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, a book which although written after Marx's death was extensively based on his notes. This book, discussed in detail in the next chapter, follows in part the work of Lewis Henry Morgan. It incorporates information about pre-literate society into the wider theoretical edifice which Engels and Marx had been building all their lives. It is the first Marxist book in which anthropological data predominate.

Anthropology thus played a central role in the development of Marxism but it would be totally misleading to think of Marx and Engels as early anthropologists. This is because the anthropology which they used and reinterpreted was part of a much wider work which went beyond and across any disciplinary boundaries. There is no barrier between Marx's and Engels's anthropology and their history, nor is there a barrier between their history and anthropology taken together and their politics. In order to understand the significance of the anthropological work they used, therefore, we must ask, what was the role of this work in the wider context of their writings and politics? Why were they interested in those topics which they chose to emphasize, and why did the work of certain authors, especially that of Lewis Henry Morgan, gain such prominence in their thinking?

In order to answer this last question it is necessary to look briefly at the type of anthropological work available to Marx and Engels at the time they were writing.

Marx's and Engels's search for theories of the evolution of society was not difficult in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Anthropology had in fact developed as the science of the evolution of human society and many early anthropological works take the form of natural histories of mankind. These histories, it was believed, could be constructed by looking at the available information on primitive peoples, past and present, whether from archaeological remains, from classical accounts of early institutions, such as those given by Tacitus concerning the German tribes of Roman times, or early Greece and Rome themselves, or, most importantly, from the reports of travellers, explorers,

colonists, and missionaries, describing contemporary primitives. These reports amassed in Europe in ever-increasing numbers from the sixteenth century on. One of the first such histories was written by the French writer and philosopher Montesquieu in the middle of the eighteenth century under the title *The Spirit of the Laws*. This was an attempt to explain the evolution of law in terms of the nature of government, which itself was explained by a variety of other factors, such as climate and population density. Montesquieu's own work was not entirely new since it was based on classical models, but it started a growing tradition both in France and in the other main centre of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Scotland. From the first, these universal histories represented both scientific advances and political and religious challenges. That was because they tended to imply that beliefs, laws, and principles were not based on eternal unchanging principals but were aspects of the type of society in which they occurred. Furthermore because these societies change and evolve it was natural that morals and laws should also change according to the social and economic system. This tradition of writing natural histories of human societies continued to develop with individual and idiosyncratic additions throughout the nineteenth century in a number of different countries.

From 1860 on, however, a dramatic increase in the number of such works occurred; a veritable explosion of major publications took place which owed a great deal to the excitement aroused by *The Origin of Species*. It is in the light of these publications and the furore caused by Darwinian evolutionary theories in general that Marx's and Engels's historical work on pre-capitalist societies must be seen. Indeed, Marx saw his work very much in this light and at one time proposed to dedicate *Capital* to Darwin, who refused, horrified as he already was by the religious and political repercussions of what he had written. For Marx, however, these political and religious implications were what was central. Evolutionary theory gave a natural origin to human institutions instead of the supernatural origin which was the received and legally sanctioned view in much of nineteenth-century Europe, and if institutions and ideas had a natural historical origin they could be changed in changing conditions.

The theory of natural selection meant that natural species could be explained in terms of the conditions necessary for their survival, and it seemed a small further step to explaining human

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social systems in such terms; that is, in terms of the ways by which human beings gained their livelihood and reproduced. This was very much the implication which was drawn from Darwin's work by those anthropologists who published immediately after *The Origin of Species*, so that they enthusiastically talked of natural selection and the survival of the fittest in their outlines of human history. Marx's attitude is more complex.

On the one hand Marx saw Darwinism as a materialist explanation of man, and he sought theories of the evolution of human societies which similarly explained the process in terms of the changing nature of human production and reproduction. This evolution of human society could explain what mechanisms had produced the ideas, principles, and processes which governed capitalism, why these had come about, why they had strength, and, ultimately, where their weakness was.

On the other hand, if Marx, like most of the anthropologists of his time, saw the study of human society as the continuation of biological evolution, he did not, as they did, believe that human historical processes were the same as the processes of natural selection. Throughout his work Marx stresses how different man is from animals, because he acts in terms of ideas and concepts which are formed in his mind, and therefore human history is of a different kind to natural history. Marx pours scorn on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers, such as the utilitarians, who believed that ideas and values had no real significance but were a mere reflection of natural conditions. For Marx, as for Hegel and Kant, the German philosophers who greatly influenced him, ideas could not be brushed aside and the unique character of humans as thinking animals was central to all his work. This meant that Marx had to develop a theory which recognized the intellectual nature of man, but which – and in this he was different from Hegel and Kant, who did not believe that there could ultimately be a material origin to ideas – could account for the peculiar history of mankind and for the growth of ideas and their power in natural terms.

The answer which Marx gave to this problem resembles that given later by Durkheim. Marx concluded that the purely abstract philosophical debates which had characterized such discussions, in Germany, at least, were fruitless. Rather, Marx argued, the nature of man could only be revealed by seeing man in society, in history, and in politics. There was no point in imagining him

outside of his context, because out of this context he was not, in any useful sense, man.

Marx's attitude to the numerous anthropological works which came out between 1860 and 1880 was therefore in part one of shared enthusiasm for evolutionary theory, but also in part one of suspicion. This suspicion had two causes: he felt that many of the anthropologists underrated the significance of thought, and secondly he suspected the political motives of at least some of them.

In 1861 two books were published, both of which influenced Marx and Engels. The first was a study by the British lawyer Sir Henry Maine called *Ancient Law*. This examines the development of classical and early Indian law in terms of the famous generalization that law and, by implication, society evolves from 'status to contract'. In early societies relationships between people are governed by such things as their gender, their age, and their family relationships (these Maine called status relations), while in more advanced societies they are governed by contractual arrangements which are not concerned with the status of those involved, but only with the matter which brings the individuals together. Marx accepted this general point implicitly though he nowhere discussed it in full (Kradner, 1972:36) and it was to offer a framework to much of his later writing. He was later to become suspicious of Maine's motives, however, as he was to see in the glorification of contract a subtle justification of the legal institutions of capitalism, and he was to see in Maine's insistence on the primacy of the monogamous family an attempt to prove that this institution was beyond historical change.

In the same year the Swiss scholar, J. J. Bachofen, published *Das Mutterrecht*, (Mother Right), a book showing that matriliney, the tracing of descent through women, and matriarchy, the dominance of women in society, as well as the cult of female goddesses, preceded the patriarchy and the patriliney we find in Biblical and Classical societies. This idea was accepted with varying degrees of caution by many nineteenth-century anthropologists and ultimately was wholly endorsed by Engels, who, in the preface to the fourth edition of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, gave warm praise to Bachofen. Bachofen and Maine were soon followed by J. F. McLennan, a Scotsman whose work in part coincided with that of Bachofen and Maine but which developed much more the study of kinship systems.

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This focus on kinship had an influence on both Marx and Engels which culminated in their enthusiasm for Lewis Henry Morgan whose two principal books had a decisive effect on their later work.

Morgan was an American lawyer whose involvement in anthropological theory was gradual, originating in his political and ethnographic interest in American Indians. He realized the importance of kinship systems for the Indians and how for them most social relationships were seen in terms of who was the child of whom and who was married to whom. His fascination with these systematic orderings of society by kinship was such that he undertook a massive comparison and classification of as many systems of kinship terms as he could find from around the world, terms such as 'cousin', 'uncle', etc. This immense task formed the basis of his first major work: *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1870) and was incorporated in his later and much more ambitious book *Ancient Society* (1877), which established a series of stages through which mankind was supposed to have proceeded. These stages were based on productive technology. For example, hunters and gatherers were placed low while irrigated cultivators were placed high, then these activities were linked directly with such institutions as rules concerning property, the status of women, the type of government, and the kinship system. In this, *Ancient Society* resembled the other evolutionary schemes for the history of mankind which we have just noted. However, *Ancient Society* also differed from earlier work because of the high quality of the scholarly work on which it was based, because of the sympathy of the writer for primitives, and because it not only defined stages but in many cases suggested mechanisms which explained why one stage should change to another.

This last element, perhaps more than any other, is crucial for understanding why Marx and Engels attached so much more importance to the work of Morgan than they did to the work of the other evolutionist anthropologists whom they read. Morgan seems to suggest, however tentatively, reasons why one stage should change into another, in the idea that the processes of evolution themselves lead to the destruction of the stages they produced. This theory came close to some of the central ideas which Marx had developed for capitalism.

Marx's exposition of capitalism was not just an attempt to

show its nature and its temporary character, it also showed how capitalism has an inner dynamic which brings about its development, its fruition, and ultimately its destruction. All of Marx's and Engels's work attempts to isolate dynamic processes implied in the social forms which they were studying. Marx argues in many places, but most clearly in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, that the source of the destruction of the capitalist system would come from the fact that the social system which itself had been created in order to work the factories and markets of capitalism would become increasingly incompatible with the technological requirements of these factories and markets, and that ultimately this incompatibility would lead to revolution. This theory was elaborated at length by Marx for capitalism but he also assumed that similar phenomena would occur in non-capitalist systems.

Morgan was the only one of the nineteenth-century anthropologists who, like Marx, was interested in what led to the transformation of one social system into another, and in what led to the breakup of past systems. The reason Morgan sees for the passage of society from one stage to another – and this is what is most stressed by Engels in his restatement of Morgan's theory in *The Origin* – is a social break due to the fact that the various subsystems stop working in gear, and come into conflict with each other. At such a point, the system implied by the technology of production – the kinship system, the system of property allocation, the political system, and the State – come into contradiction with each other, and in this way lead to the end of one stage and the appearance of another. For example, when discussing the passage from matriliney to patriliney, Engels (p. 119) echoes Morgan's formulation in the following way: 'Thus, on the one hand, in proportion as wealth increased (as a result of the domestication of animals) it made the man's position in the family more important than the woman's, and on the other hand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow, in favour of his children, the traditional order of inheritance. This, however, was impossible so long as descent was reckoned according to mother right. Mother right, therefore, had to be overthrown'. Here we have the notion that as the system of technology (the domestication of animals and the formation of herds) develops, it becomes incompatible with the social system, especially the system of inheritance and familial authority. This growing incompatibility,