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ARCHANA PRASAD

The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx

Some Methodological Reflections

The development of capitalism in different parts of the world had, to a large extent, multiple trajectories, because it encountered concrete situations with pre-existing institutions and social relations that shaped the system. In other words the diverse interactions between capital and pre-capitalist social formations generated manifestations of the domination of capital and patterns of surplus extraction. Carriers of capital got into both conflict and negotiation with pre-capitalist power structures. As a result such social and economic structures either got weakened or acquired a new meaning with the penetration of capitalism.

This essay focuses on the methodological issues that arise out of the historical reality of the interaction between capital and social institutions that pre-dated its existence. It uses Karl Marx's unfinished writings on the ethnological and anthropological texts to provide some important insights into the methodologies that may be adopted to understand a dialectical phenomenon: how capital adapts and negotiates with its own concrete reality on the one hand, and how pre-existing institutions can be remoulded and reshaped by capitalism. The essay is divided into three sections. As is well known, The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx are based on the unfinished notings that Marx made on the texts of Louis

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Henry Morgan (*Ancient Society*), John Budd Phear (*The Aryan Village*), Henry Sumner Maine (*Lectures on the Early History of Institutions*) and John Lubbock (*The Origin of Civilisation*) just prior to his death in 1883. The notebooks were largely in German and were first transcribed and interpreted by Lawrence Krader in his book *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* in 1974 by the International Institute of Social History, Netherlands (Krader 1974). This version has been used in this essay. Thereafter several scholars like Kevin Anderson (Anderson 2016), Maurice Bloch (Bloch 1983) among others used these notebooks to dwell on the changes within Marx's understanding on non-Western and pre-capitalist societies. These discussions showed that before his death Marx made significant revisions in his understanding of pre-capitalist social formations, thus providing significant insights into the methods that can be used to analyse the dialectics of change in pre-capitalist structures. As the discussion in the following pages will show, these notings provide important inputs to debate on both the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist systems on the one hand, and on the transformations in the relationship between base and superstructure since the historical period on the other hand. The essay argues that the dialectical method, promoted by Marx through these notebooks, is the key to understanding the nature and transformations within pre-capitalist social formations. They also provide tools for understanding the place of pre-capitalist social organization within the capitalist system.

In the light of the above, Section I locates the ethnological notebooks in the debate on the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist social formations; Section II reviews the relationship between the base and the superstructure in the analysis of pre-capitalist societies. It illustrates how the methods of Marx's ethnological writings provide an understanding of the dialectics of change in pre-capitalist and non-Western societies. Following from the preceding two sections, Section III discusses the contemporary relevance of Marx's ethnological notebooks and

their political implications for understanding the diverse aspects of working class consciousness.

I

Early Marxist writings on the penetration of capitalism in non-Western societies generated a vigorous debate on the potential of capitalism to transform every aspect of societies (for instance see Hilton 1978). On the one hand Lenin demonstrated the potential of corporation and state led capitalism to fundamentally transform pre-capitalist societies and sow the seeds of their own opposition (Lenin 1917, 2000). On the other hand Luxemburg stressed on the necessity of the existence of pre-capitalist forms in which capitalism embedded itself in order to increase its rate of surplus extraction. The existence of pre-capitalist relations therefore co-existed with the imposition of capitalism which was embedded in these social formations. In one sense Luxemburg pointed towards the reproduction of the pre-capitalist-capitalism duality through the capitalist dynamics itself (Luxemburg 1913, 2003). Though such an analysis provided valuable insights into the survival of pre-capitalist forms in a capitalist world order, it also left the door open for liberal historians like Karl Polanyi to argue that capital had to subordinate itself to society and politics. For example, Karl Polanyi popularized the concept of 'embeddedness' where the concept of the autonomous market was a utopia and capital had to subordinate itself to religion, society and politics (Polanyi 1944, 2001).

However, this important, but one sided perspective, did not deal with the issue of how different and contradictory trajectories of development in different spheres of the political economy related to each other. Rather, the process of subordination and incorporation in transition from feudalism to capitalism was mediated by several factors as succinctly illustrated by Leo Huberman who showed that though some customs were destroyed while others survived in the

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development of capitalism, the old order had changed distinctly (Huberman 1936, 2008). The Privilege of Birth gave away to the Privilege of Business after the French Revolution. As Huberman writes, the peasant was still forced to pay taxes and carry the burden of the King, the Priest and the Nobility on his back. In some places like France, this process of transition was bloody, whereas a century ago in England, the transition was achieved through a bloodless change where the nobility itself formed an important part of the bourgeoisie. But in this process it destroyed what Huberman termed as the 'old order', thus creating a fundamental change (Huberman 1936, 2008, Ch. XIII).

Huberman's understanding is in line with Marx's own thinking in the mid-nineteenth century when he described the death of feudalism in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he spoke of the bourgeois revolution as a 'social revolution that had to leave behind the past'. As he wrote, 'The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content – here the content goes beyond the phrase' (Marx 1851-52: 6). This view was further carried forward into the understanding of the penetration of capitalism in India. As Marx wrote in the *British Rule in India* in 1853, the village community was an epitome of oriental despotism and that the British were bringing about a 'revolutionary change' by shattering the old system. Of course Marx acknowledged 'that the misery inflicted by the British on Hindostan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before', but he reminded his readers that the British, 'despite their hugely oppressive impact' were unconscious tools of change in shattering the autonomy of the oppressive village

community (Marx 1853). This short analysis of the ‘unintended’ consequence of colonialism remained blind to the incorporation and survival of caste and other social divisions within colonial capitalism. The tools for studying the survival of the residues of pre-capitalist systems and consciousness was later explained by Marx in his Ethnological Notes in the late 1880s.

An important dimension of the Ethnological Notebooks is that they emphasize the internal contradictions within pre-capitalist structures as important markers in the history of transition from one social formation to another. For example with respect to the question of community consciousness, Marx notes that the ‘individual is already alienated from nature in the primitive condition; he is alienated both from nature and his own society in the civilized state, whereby in the working out of the individuality, the parturition is painful. It is the individuality and the civilized society that is formed by parturition. . . .’ (Kradler 1974: 60.) In Marx’s perception, individuality itself gets converted into a social consciousness that represents a particular class. Hence the totalitarian power of the Asiatic despot was not an individual power of a family but a ‘class individuality’ that was embodied in the social classes that benefited from ‘Oriental Despotism’. The polarization between the Despot and the peasantry was evident in the existence of ‘Asiatic communal communities’ which were the embodiment of the ‘social labour’ that maintained the Despot and his social basis (Cited in Anderson 2016: 168-169). This central internal contradiction was also evident in Marx’s notes on Phear’s *Aryan Village* where he described the conflicts between the ryots and the zamindars (Anderson 2016: 213).

The dialectic between communal consciousness and individuality is a theme that has persisted across the history of civilization, and gets accentuated to its greatest level under capitalism. For Marx, the development of chieftainship within a tribal group represented the crystallization of an individuality which went against the collective consciousness of the society. Such

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individuality was expressed not in terms of an individual person but a social class. Thus the existence of social classes and internal contradictions was not ruled out in the pre-capitalist period, and was in fact developed to a far greater stage by De Ste Croix in his magnum opus *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Croix 1989). For Croix, the deployment of 'class' in the context of ancient Greek civilization is explained by five propositions within Marxist theory. First, 'man is a social animal', i.e. 'an animal which can develop into an individual only in society'. Second, that the 'prime task of man in society is to organize production' (including reproduction). Third, the very act of production is social and economic in character resulting in 'social relations of production'. Fourth, in all civilized societies (such as ancient Greece) there is a need to produce surplus beyond actual social needs and fifth, the extraction and perpetuation of such surplus leads to exploitation. The term 'surplus' is used by Croix to mean that part of the fruit of labour of 'man which he does not enjoy himself and the immediate benefits of which are reserved for others' (Croix 1989: 35-37). These fundamental features of ancient Greek society lay down the basis for the class analysis of ancient society which was done by Croix to show that the merciless exploitation of the peasantry in the ancient times not only led them to rebellion but also led to their indifference to the invaders who destroyed the oppressive system. Hence, the lack of cooperation of the peasantry (so to say a revolt) with their rulers was one of the main reasons for the decline and fall of the ancient Empire and this lack of support was a result of a deep rooted class contradiction.

The analysis made by Croix was supported by the method promoted by Marx in his notebooks which also provided some insights into studying the multiple histories of transition within different layers of society. For instance, in his notes on Henry Maine's *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* Marx noted that Maine's idea of juxtaposing pre-historic and historic societies in a linear trajectory of historical progress is not correct. Rather an

interaction between the ancient/primitive commune and modern peasant commune can be juxtaposed to the communal and social plan arising out of the capitalist era (Kradler 1974: 35). This important statement gives us at least three important insights into the question of transition. First, the transition from pre-capitalist to modern was not one dimensional and manifested itself in a variety of ways within different classes. Second, the opposition to capitalism was born from within pre-capitalist societies because of deep rooted structural contradictions that were aided by externalities. Third, the question of consciousness of the oppressed classes did not necessarily lead to the conclusion that all 'primitive' consciousness had to first become individualistic before it became aware of its own class as a proletariat. In other words the conversion of pre-capitalist communal consciousness to a modern peasant commune was possible if an organized attempt was made to overcome individuality.

Thus we see that the transition between modes of production, in Marx's notings, not only made important changes in his own perspective, but also showed the way for applying a more rigorous methodology for the application of historical materialism. The question of internal contradictions and their relationship with externalities also raises several questions that have been asked by Marxist anthropologists, but often answered in very simplistic terms. In fact, as the next section will show, the question of contradictions brings into focus the relationship between the base and the superstructure in pre-capitalist societies.

II

In 1958 Maurice Godelier wrote: 'A theory of modes of production is yet to be constructed; it is impossible to directly deal into a visible thread of social relations the exact nature of relations of production. Now – and we feel obliged to stress this point here once again – Marx did not establish a doctrine that was meant to

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cover all infrastructures and superstructures once and for all. He did not propose an invariable form, content and place where the relations of production might function. What he did establish was a differentiation in the functions within the causality of structures concerning the function and evolution of societies. There is no reason in denying, in Marx's name, as some Marxists do, that kinship relations sometimes involve relations of production. . . ." (Godelier 1977: 3). This statement from the French Marxist anthropologist opens the debate about the relationship between the base (what Godelier calls the infrastructure) and superstructure in a pre-capitalist society. In fact in his own work, Godelier shows the existence of community property which was largely worked through kinship. This meant that kinship itself became a part of the 'infrastructure' as they were used to regulate collective land use and labour. This was termed by Godelier as the 'lineage mode of production' where kinship relations acted as the mode of organization for circulation, exchange and production.

This analysis was further extended by Meillassoux who quoted from the unpublished chapter of *Capital* Volume 1 to surmise that the 'domestic community is the basic cell in a mode of production which is formed by a collection of such communities organized for the economic and social production and the reproduction of the, specifically domestic, relations of production' (Meillassoux 1981: 34). This conclusion influenced the understanding of the Marxist anthropologists that kinship-based societies had social parity and were self-sustaining in character. The nature of self-sustaining societies was maintained through the circulation of offsprings whose exchange was commensurate with the constraints of production. The exchange and circulation of wives was, however, more related to the material conditions of initial accumulation (or primitive accumulation) by structures of authority (mainly comprising elders) who sought to control domestic communities to their own advantage. However, the deepest contradiction of the domestic community was that it extended itself through

these processes of circulation, and the objective basis for the authority of the elders was continuously undermined. Gradually, the productive and reproductive cycles disassociated themselves from each other, the function of the elders got transformed from material to matrimonial management (Meillassoux 1981: 82-84). Though this phenomenon was in line with the general Marxist method of identifying the contradictions within social formations, Meillassoux's framework, like many other Marxist analyses of its time, tried to make a direct correlation between the material reality and social relations. The analysis implied that kinship and social relations formed part of the base and hence the division between the base and superstructure was largely meaningless in pre-capitalist formations. The separation began with the beginnings of private property and was virtually complete with the establishment of capitalism. This justified the analysis that processes of social reproduction (i.e. social distance and customary authority) continued to be the main mechanisms for surplus extraction in pre-capitalist societies.

The above mentioned dominant perspective of the Marxist anthropologists from the decade of the 1950s can be made more nuanced and complex with insights from Marx's ethnological notebooks. In his excerpts and notings from Morgan's *Ancient Society* Marx contested Morgan's basic claims that the structure of authority (which formed the basis of differentiation) was family and was intensely 'personal' in pre-capitalist societies. He further contested Morgan's claim that social rank like caste was a direct outcome of the disintegration of kinship equality or the principle of *gens*. Instead Marx located the *gens* in the realm of the abstract and caste (or social rank) in the concrete material reality. Thus the idea of *gens* (or the principle of equality) is in conflict to the concretion of caste, social rank or conquest. As Krader writes, for Marx, the transition from 'primitive' to 'civilization' is thus preceded by the transition of 'concrete *gens* to its abstraction' and then by transition from 'one concretion (that is the *gens* in its

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concrete form) to another'. Thus there are two transitions within in the community: one with the development of aristocracy and the other with the development of caste. The development of the aristocracy is a direct result of the 'quantitative increase in social property' that can only take place through factors external to the community like conquest or war that leads to the accumulation of property. On the other hand the development of caste takes place with the abstraction of the gens, which has been shorn out of its material basis (i.e. principle of equality arising out of communal property), but where the each caste is projected as a community, which in actuality is not egalitarian but projected to be egalitarian through the principle of gens (Krader 1974: 15-16).

Does such a complex paradigm explaining multiple transitions in pre-capitalist societies and the development of hierarchies within communities advance the understanding of the base-superstructure relationship? The answer is probably in the affirmative for the following reasons. As Marx shows, through a process of petrification, one might conclude that the idea of the gens becomes hegemonic when it is used by the ruling classes to justify inequities. Marx scribbles in his notes on Morgan that aside 'from locality: property difference within the same gens had transformed the unity of their interests into antagonism of its members; in addition beside land and cattle, money capital had become of decisive importance with the development of slavery!' (Cited in Krader 1974: 74). Marx's addition of cattle, land and slaves to Morgan's formulation showed that the development of accumulation in different forms was uneven in character and therefore the gens were petrified into a mechanism of mechanical solidarity. We may extend this argument to state that gens as ideological principle was used by the ruling lineages as a hegemonic tool.

In line with this argument it is also relevant to ask whether 'caste' was petrified under the capitalist system in the same manner as the 'gens' under capitalist relations? If so does this

model of petrification provides an explanation for the existence of pre-capitalist forms under capitalism? Again, the answer may lie in a more complex explanation than has hitherto been provided by many contemporary Marxist activists and scholars. Following Marx from his notings on Morgan it can be surmised that with the development of class relations, the petrification of caste was manifest in a couple of inter-related ways. The first was the use of hegemonic caste structures by structures of authority to rule by consent (Kosambi 1965). Hence, though Brahmanical and upper caste institutions may have lost their relevance in the newly emerging division of labour, their use and existence was an important condition for the social reproduction of capitalism. These ideologies thus legitimized and socialized people into processes that maintained and reproduced the structures of accumulation under capitalism. The second is the use of caste to maintain the dominance of the emerging social classes within the erstwhile community structures. In this case to the existence of the 'caste' as 'community' is a mere idea that does not reflect the concrete reality of the development of new hierarchies. Following from this, the division of labour within society is no longer caste-based though 'caste' in its petrified form acts as a condition for the social reproduction relations that are required to maintain the processes of accumulation.

III

Here, it is necessary to introduce the relationship between what Marx called the 'linear' and 'horizontal' relations and their relationship with each other. The idea of the gens gives rise to a sentiment of lateral solidarity. The development of social classes, on the other hand, represents a vertical hierarchy on the basis of which accumulation is organized. Dual hegemonic processes working through the idea of 'caste solidarity' (as mentioned in the last section) have influence over political structures of domination

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and resistance. As Marx writes, the superstructure is not merely an accidental representation of class domination; rather it has a dialectics and a 'passive method' through which the changed cultural traits infuse themselves into a new hierarchical structure. The discussion is aptly carried in the context of the development of the 'economic structure' relative to the political and juridical structure. In his notes on Maine, Marx elaborated on the opposition between different social classes in the village community. By the same measure he implied that the idea of the community itself was political and juridical because it was diffused in the population through 'a passive process' which can also be construed as an ideological process. Hence the expression of conflicting interests (especially in a capitalist society) takes the form of public versus private, rural versus urban, among others (Kradner 1974: 40, 294-296). These co-exist with specialization in the labour process and the development of social classes, each of which internalize these collectivities (which in the contemporary form may be termed as identity) and develop their own relationships vis-à-vis each other and also vis-à-vis the society. The formation and development of social classes is also mediated by these subjectivities. Thus is formed a dialectical relationship between the formation of political communities on the one hand and the development of class relations on the other. As Marx puts it, the elaboration of the individuality of each person is in itself a mirage because in actuality no individual can exist outside their social class.

The above mentioned relationship is structured through control and distribution of property which is represented in the institutional structures that develop outside the family, in particular, the birth of the State. Marx asserts that the concept of sovereignty is itself an abstraction and that the State is only 'seemingly independent', but in actuality is a one-sided elaboration of individuality of a particular class. Thus he writes in his notes on Maine; Marx elaborates the notion of the hegemonic sovereign and notes that in its abstract form, the Sovereign 'must be a

superior human being' from 'the bulk of the population'. However, the Sovereign does not reply on force but on a morality and ideology to enforce their will. In this sense the moral authority of the State in itself implies the development of the 'abstraction' of the Sovereign at variance with the material social basis of the emerging state (which is the ruling class). This is even true of despotic regimes that use ideology, religion and moral authority to hide the power of the 'physical force' that they possess (Kradler 1974: 39-40, 327-330). The rejection of Maine's celebration of the moral authority of the State has at its core, the germ of the idea of hegemonic power, which was later elaborated to a much more complex level by Antonio Gramsci.

But Marx's own method of separating the abstraction from the concrete provides a methodological tool for understanding the faultiness of the relationship between a socio-political and the economic structure. The deepening of ideological control of the mass of the workers through complex laws, religion and morality creates an apparent contradiction with the force used by the bourgeois who form the socio-economic basis of political authority. The need to context this mystification of the 'relative autonomy of the State' is therefore an important step in the preparation for struggle. This proposition, seen in the context of the earlier notion of the collectivities within classes, raises important issues about the character of identities and their potential to demystify the abstraction of Sovereignty. First, the character of the identities (or collectivities as referred to by Marx) is dependent on the way class formation is mediated by 'horizontal' factors. Seen in contemporary terms, this explains why most domestic servants are women; a large majority of the sewage workers are lower castes; and a large section of the scheduled castes are landless agricultural workers. Second, the problem of the relationship between abstract collectivities (or identity) with the development of class consciousness remains to be understood in ways that are more complex than simply positing 'identity' against class. Since

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identity itself is not an independent entity, and is ensconced in the transforming social relations of production, their character is established by the dialectical relations between materiality and its manifestation in abstract political expressions. In his excerpts from *Maine*, Marx explains that the interests of social collectivities or classes (in the material realm) and the perception of the social whole are at odds with each other, especially in relation to the State (Krader 1974: 66). This means that if the contradictions within the working class have to be resolved, the larger imagination of the social whole should reflect the interests of different sections within the working class, including some of their special needs. Such an exercise not only involves the democratization of identities, but also a deepening of socially inclusive practices within class based organizations. Of particular importance here is the development of a democratic political leadership from within sections against whom there is discrimination within the working class. Hence, the content of working class consciousness will not only be an automatic result of common economically determined demands, but will have to be worked out in relation to the conflicts arising out of the interface between the process of social reproduction of capitalism and reproduction of processes of accumulation. In other words, diverse manifestations of capitalism (arising out of the relationship between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' factors), will unveil diverse forms of working class consciousness as their opposition. The *Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* provide us the tools and a conceptual framework to make sense of this diversity.

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