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“Marxism and the Study of Pastoralists”

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MARXISM AND THE STUDY OF PASTORALISTS

Daniel Bradburd

It will be sufficient to speak of original property in land, for among pastoral peoples property in such natural products of the earth as, e.g., sheep is at the same time property in the pastures they pass through. In general, property in land includes property in its organic products. Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 89.

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted.... The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure.... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents...the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. *Otherwise, the application of the theory to any period of history would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree.* F. Engels, letter to Bloch, September 1890. Quoted from R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, pp. 79-80.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore some of the benefits and problems associated with attempting a marxist analysis of pastoral peoples. To anticipate my later discussion, I will argue below that: 1) there are no particular *pastoral* marxist problematics; though 2. marxist analysis has been particularly useful in clarifying the nature of property and its implication among pastoralists; and 3. marxist analysis is of greatest use in helping us understand pastoral societies undergoing the transition to capitalism (which may include all pastoralists in the anthropological literature). Let me now move through these points in greater detail.

MARXISM, PASTORALISM, AND THE TRANSITION TO CAPITALISM

Marxism, as we know, is both a theoretical and a practical framework for the apprehension and transformation of capitalist society and a method and theory for understanding social formations in general. While there is certainly ample disagreement among marxists about just what *the* proper means of marxist analysis may be, there seem to be several points of consensus as well.¹ In a very basic sense, these include the presumption that, at least in

the last instance, the determinant base of a social formation lies in the relationships among men and women engaged in the practical activity of the production of the material needs of their existence and of their social reproduction as well. This presumption is moved beyond a simple vulgar materialism both by the recognition of a dialectic through which the history men create impinges upon them, and through the recognition that the productive process is by no means simply materially defined-- hence the qualifying phrase in the last instance-- but is itself a social process in which the use and distribution of both the means of production and of the product of the labor process are constrained by social relations, the social relations of production, that are pre-eminently relationships among men and women. Indeed, it is one of the great triumphs of marxist analysis to have shown that relations to property are not-- as they may appear in bourgeois society-- relations of people to things, but are instead relations among people which mediate relationships to things.

The vehicle for the comparative analysis of the relations of people to each other and to the means of production is the *abstract* analytic category MODE OF PRODUCTION. Modes of production are particular combinations of forces of production (here taken to mean raw materials, instruments of production, and an organized form of labor) on the one hand and relations of production--the historically constituted social relations determining access to both the means of production and the ends of the production process-- on the other.

There is, I should note here, considerable controversy over the exact nature of "modes of production" and what does or does not represent a distinct analytic unit. For myself, I think that the dominant element in a mode of production is clearly the relations of production (as, for example, the case of capitalism and socialism --with largely identical means of production-- seem to demonstrate).² Within this view, I generally hold with those, including I think Marx himself, who view capitalism as a mode of production defined not by the material base it entails but in terms of its significant social relations of production: that is, the coming together of what Marx-- ironically -- called "free labor" with capital-- accumulated surplus value-- to produce commodities. Thus, in *Capital*, as Marx seeks to examine the rise of capitalism, he discusses it in chapters in which -- under the rubric of "primitive accumulation"--he seeks to describe how free labor comes to exist, and how it comes into its confrontation with capital.

And now, reader, you may well ask yourself, "What does this have to do with pastoralism?". My answer is straightforward. There are no pastoral societies extant today (including those within the Soviet Union) that have not felt the effect of the advancement of capitalism (see, for example, Frank, Wallerstein, and, in perhaps its strongest recent statement, Wolf 1982 for discussion of this view). Given the logic of capitalist production, this expansion has been inevitable. Given that expansion, the outcome for local populations generally follows predictable paths. And, the outcomes of the process of expansion and growth that Marx described for Scotland in the early 18th century are, in fact, quite reasonable descriptions of the processes that have had their impact on all traditionally non-capitalist peoples, *including pastoralists*, in the 20th century.

This, of course, hardly means that all societies emerge as though they had been stamped out by a capitalist cookie cutter: the particular historical conditions that hold as peoples are drawn into the world market have very significant effects on the outcome of that expansion. Nonetheless, there are regularities: the populations in question are, after all, being integrated into a particular kind of world economy, one with a particular logic and particular needs.

The value of marxist analysis for understanding pastoral societies in the late 20th century is precisely that it provides an analytic framework that clarifies, indeed reveals, the logic of the forces that have an impact on pastoral peoples. We can, I think, see this quite clearly in works with an explicitly marxist orientation, such as my own (Bradburd 1980), or Peter Rigby's (1981, 1983), and we can also see it in works that describe the same process from a less explicitly marxist framework: e.g. Lois Beck's work on th Qashqa'i (1980) or Thomas Barfield's on 'Central Asian Arabs'(1981). Without wishing to go into detail here, what we find, over and again, are the institution of wage labor, significant development of private property, alienation of some portion of the population from direct access to the means of production, and a radical transformation in the relations of production such that entities clearly recognisable as similar to--if not yet actually-- 'free labor' and 'capital' come together in the production of commodities. This coming together leads to a second series of fairly regular processes, including increased capitalization of the production process, increased differentials in wealth, the settling of both the rich and poor, and, ultimately, something that--the world over--looks very like intensive, capitalist stock production. Analyses of these processes that fall outside the framework of marxist analysis, in my opinion, generally fail to situate problems of modernization correctly, and hence they fail to see the events in any particular society as reflections of more than local conditions. In making this point I am rephrasing Talal Asad's perhaps over strong statement that from the perspective of marxist theory, and within the problematic of understanding the relations of local peoples to the larger system in which they are embedded, pastoralism ceases to be an interesting or significant analytic category, for we are merely looking at a particular manifestation of the development of the international division of labor (1979). In essence, what I am saying here is that if we wish to understand societies undergoing the transition to capitalism, we must use an analytic framework that enables us to understand capitalism, and that is not bourgeois economics.

MARXISM, PASTORALISM, AND PRE-CAPITALIST ECONOMIC FORMATIONS

Given the above, if we suspend all disbelief and assume that we are in fact dealing with pre-capitalist economic formations (PCEF) and not economies articulated with the capitalist world market, then what have we? First, looking at the pastoralist literature I think it is quite clear that we have at least two different sets of societies. On the one hand, we have non-stratified pastoral societies as in East Africa; on the other hand, we have North

African, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian pastoral peoples many of whom are quite clearly either state-like themselves(e.g. the Bakhtiari [Digard 1973]) or through long contact with highly stratified state systems have become economically differentiated. I will therefore discuss the problems of these two groups separately, beginning with non-stratified societies.

Non-stratified Precapitalist Pastoral Formations

In looking at the marxist literature on nonstratified pastoral peoples-- and that essentially means the works of Pierre Bonte and Peter Rigby--I was struck by the rather involuted nature of their exposition and analysis. I hasten to add that I am not blaming them for this, or casting invidious comment on their work, for I think that the difficulty of their work (both as it reads and as stands as a research problem) lies in the very nature of the problem they confront: the marxist analysis of PCEF. Specifically, the difficulty they confront is that of justifying and performing a marxist analysis of non-capitalist, non-stratified social formations. The difficulty here lies with Marx, for it seems clear that his own analysis of PCEF is under-developed. Thus, rather than having the example of Marx's analysis-- as we have for capitalist society-- we have only bits pieces of Marx's thoughts on PCEF and the example of his method which we must turn to as a rather incomplete guide for building a coherent theory of PCEF, pastoralist or otherwise. In effect, in navigating this territory, one is entering difficult terrain with a very incomplete map.³

Perhaps the most prominent problem we face here is the problem of base and super-structure. It is a feature of capitalism as a mode of production that the economic order of capitalism apparently manifests itself as a readily isolable element: rents are rents, taxes are taxes, and relations of production that are essentially economic control access to "free labor" and means of production that are themselves commodities. We can, therefore, look at an economy that is-- well-- it is an economy. Hence, when we wish--as we should-- to concern ourselves with the totality of the social formation and make the assumption that the 'economy' is in the last instance determinant, we have relatively little difficulty in isolating the economic and examining its relationship with those other elements of the social order that are "the superstructure." In capitalist society

the productive forces appear to be completely independent and severed from the individuals and to constitute a self-subsistent world alongside the individuals (Marx 1947:65).

Alas, it is quite clear that this doesn't work very well for PCEF. There we are faced with relations of production--pre-eminently part of the base-- that are not purely economic relations but are within the domain of kinship or religion. That is, they are "superstructural." But of course if kinship is both superstructure and base (that is, both that which we are to explain and that which ultimately explains), then we have a lot of explaining to do.

The problem in our problematic is apparent when we look at analyses-- whether they are of pastoralists or not. Consider analyses of non-stratified

pastoral societies such as Rigby's of the Maasai or Ilparakuyo or Bonte's of Nilo-Hamitic peoples. In both cases, searching through Marx's works for a non-stratified mode of production, the authors come to the notion of "the Germanic Mode of Production." But there are some immediate problems with the use of the Germanic mode (which, I would note, is a concept that is hardly elaborately developed in Marx's work). Specifically, in Marx's work, while the community exists in the GMP, it exists as the collectivity of individual units of production and consumption (households presumably) that are themselves property holding entities. Communal property, to the extent that it exists, is a residual category. Given this, the authors face two very real problems: the first is the semi-theoretical question of just how the community is, in fact, defined: just what is the armature that links the isolated productive units. In addition, there is a second more empirical problem. Whatever the status of the GMP for non-pastoral peoples-- i.e. a truly egalitarian community in which rights over property are vested directly in the producing unit rather than the community (and, it seems, over which the community has no control), both Bonte and Rigby recognise that this is an absurdity for pastoralists for whom free access to pasture a communal resource which must -- for ecological reasons-- remain undifferentiated, is a *sine qua non* of their adaptation. As a result, we have a not quite Germanic, perhaps a Pastoral-Germanic Mode of Production. And, in fact, what we really seem to have is quite a headache; indeed one we have created for ourselves.

As I indicated at the outset, the notion 'Mode of Production' does not have an uncontroversial history in its general application to PCEF. Here again, too, I would stress that a mode of production is an abstract analytic category. On the ground we have social formations: real people living real lives under real historical circumstances. As complex realities, social formations may, for example, manifest several Modes of Production at the same time. More importantly though, if we do not wish to trivialize our analytic categories, it seems to me that we do not want too many Modes of Production. Thus, where we have egalitarian, segmentary, or age set based societies engaging in pastoral production on the one hand, agriculture on the other, and perhaps, agro-pastoralism somewhere else, we must ask ourselves, "Do we wish to lump them on their similarities or split them on their differences?" This is not a trivial question. There are clearly aspects of pastoral production that differ from agricultural production, just as there are aspects of pastoralism and agriculture that are different from hunting and gathering. At the same time, we must recognize that if we allow ourselves pastoral, agricultural, hunting and gathering, and other types of Modes of Production based on differences in the forces of production alone, the concept Mode of Production loses force as an analytic tool. My own inclination is to avoid fine subdivision, and, moreover, to use as the distinctive feature for discriminating between Modes of Production, relations rather than forces of production. Thus, within a domestic, lineage, feudal, Asiatic or other mode of production we can identify and deal with the differences between pastoralists and other peoples *not by calling them different Modes of Production*, but rather by specifying how particular factors in the production process (forces, means, organization, etc.) must entail particular solutions to their ordering by the dominant relations of production. Thus to turn very briefly to the shadow debate between Salzman (1980) and Asad (1979) over

the specificity of pastoral production, both are right. Asad is correct in arguing that, from the broad perspective of Mode of Production analysis, and particularly from within the perspective of what is happening to both pastoralists and settled peoples under the advance of the world market, pastoralists and peasants are indistinguishable. At the same time, Salzman is also correct in noting that at the local level, there are profound differences between pastoral production and other forms of production (differences which, I might note, were far more salient before the rise of capitalism) and the claim for the similarity of pastoralists and peasants obscures the issue. My point is that both these views can be correct and that we must be concerned with both levels of analysis if we wish to know anything of pastoralists, or indeed of the real lives of anyone else in the world.⁴

Now, I have implicitly criticised my colleagues for worrying too much about abstract theory construction and not keeping their eye close enough to the ground. This does not, however, vitiate the value of their work; it merely makes it unnecessarily cumbersome. For indeed, if we set aside the discussion of the Germanic Mode of Production, we find that over and over again the actual analysis *very effectively* deals with the salient problems. Thus, almost by definition an approach that asks questions about access to the means of production-- in this case, pasture and animals--highlights the peculiar problematic of pastoralism: the disjunction between the private ownership of animals and the communal control of pasture. This fact merely noted in passing prior to marxist studies of pastoralists emerged as a salient and significant fact in marxist analysis. Consider, if you will, where it takes Bonte.

Recognition that there are two levels of access to resources leads Bonte, quite rightly, to enquire how the community is constituted if 'communal appropriation' actually takes place at the level of the individual proprietor. From this, he branches his enquiry in two directions. On the one hand he explores the implications of individual production, the potentials for accumulation of surplus and the differential distribution of wealth within nominally non-stratified societies (hence, I think, his examination of the works of Rey and Meillasoux on settled populations). This, in turn, brings him to examine the ways in which surpluses are, in fact, re-distributed throughout the societies in question. Were he to stop here, this would on its own be an interesting analysis. However, he moves beyond this. Confronting the problem that the economic --the base-- is not radically separated from the superstructure nor are relations of production purely economic, Bonte is able to show how kinship, religious, and political structures (in this case, lineages, fetishized production and exchange, and age sets) operate at multiple levels to integrate these societies. Indeed, it is specifically by recognising that these 'institutions' do not function solely as superstructures, but are intimately linked to both the production of goods and also the reproduction of the community which they define that Bonte enables us to understand their efficacy and why age grades, exchanges, and lineages work as they do. To cite just one specific example, note how Bonte is able to show us how social relationships with manifest economic content--stock associations--come to be fetishized by Nilotic pastoralists: they see these relationships as the products of the circulation of cattle among men, reversing

the reality of an artifact of circular relations among men. Clarification of the 'fetishised' view, which is complemented by a view that the relations of men to cattle are mediated and indeed dominated by 'God,' permits us to see how the actual basis of community formation is mystified, and how men are alienated from understanding the social construction of their reality.

This, of course, is a highly synoptic view of Bonte's work; still, I believe one can see here its strength as a means of bringing together as a unified whole the factors that dominate these East African systems, from their ecology to their ideology. And, having said that, I must add that Bonte seems overly diffident in dealing with the question of kinship and why it has a dominant role as a relation of production. He must, I think, have been aware of Godelier's argument:

[W]e may suppose as far as kinship is concerned, that in primitive societies the living labor force counts for more than accumulated labor... Now the reproduction of life in all societies is carried out in the form of kinship relations. One would thus seek the basic reasons why kinship should operate as relations of production--and thus dominate--in a condition of productive forces: that is, as a relation between dead and living labor (1979).

Thus he should have little concern with why kinship acts as a relation of production.

Stratified Precapitalist Systems

Having dwelt on marxist studies of non-stratified pre-capitalist economic formations at length, I will only briefly consider stratified systems. Specifically, I will note that the marxist framework of analysis contains two notions of stratified pre-capitalist Modes of Production that would seem to have considerable power in the analysis of pastoralism. These are Feudalism and the Asiatic Mode of Production. While there is great debate within marxist circles about the nature of these terms and the usefulness of their application (for example the debate over whether Feudalism is a legitimate category for analysis outside of Europe or, whether the Asiatic Mode of Production has ever, or could ever have really existed), I think Marx's use of these terms shows us that they (or perhaps such similar conceptions as a "Tributary Mode of Production" [Wolf, P. Anderson]) have analytic value. Specifically, they provide a framework for examining and comparing non-capitalist forms of stratification; they call our attention to relations of production, forcing us to consider how access to the means of production and to product are determined; and they invite consideration of the ways in which different forms of agricultural (and pastoral) production might engender different forms of appropriation of surplus. Moreover, and this is particularly true in Southwest Asia, they enable us to understand the manner in which tribal polities consolidated their hegemony and emerged as rulers of nation states and empires. Thus, for example, in an unjustifiably little known work, Helfgott (1977) has quite effectively used a marxist analysis to examine

the nature, and the historical development, of tribal polities in precapitalist Iran.

CRITIQUE AND AUTO-CRITIQUE

In the preceding discussion, I have set out what I think are the very real accomplishments and strengths of marxist studies of nomadic pastoralists, and I have, at the same time, attempted to point to some problems I see in the application of marxist analysis to pastoralism (and, by extension, to other pre-capitalist economic formations). During this consideration of our studies of pastoralists, I have raised problems that I see as "problems of real people living within a real history." As I reviewed the marxist literature on pastoralism--including I would stress my own-- I was dismayed to realise that with the one very notable exception of Peter Rigby's excellent article "Pastors and Pastoralists (1981), there are virtually no discussions of pastoralism in which we get closer to people than to: forces, modes, and means of production; living and accumulated labor; the transition to capitalism and articulations of all of these highly abstract analytic constructs in a variety of ways. In short, our view of pastoralism is highly abstract, and in a way it is highly mechanical. Not necessarily vulgar, but lifeless, reified. As we do these analyses, to be sure, we gain insight into the fundamental nature of pastoralism *qua* pastoralism. We comprehend it as a form of appropriation of nature, and we understand its implications for the social formations built upon it. But, somehow, I think that we are also missing something vital. We are missing the placing of these systems, and the people within them, in their history. And in so doing, we are I think failing our analysis of these societies. It is for that reason that I began this paper with my long epigraph from Engels, and it is for that reason as well that I will close it with a brief discussion of Rigby's work. For, I would hold this up as a model to us. On the one hand it contains the formal analysis of how, if you will, relations of production are fetishized as the herd, the mediator between man and nature--and the object and result of human labor, comes to be seen as a reflection of God's goodness and the proper conduct (among themselves and to God) of men. And this is, I stress, an excellent analysis. What makes this piece particularly strong, however, is that Rigby is able to take this essentially static analysis and embed it in a real history comprised of real people who experience and react to the spread of missionary activity which itself has particular, concrete characteristics. And, as a result, we understand not only the place of religion in the pre-contact social order, but also the way in which missionary contact unfolded, and to a significant--though by no means complete degree-- why it was rejected. And this, after all, seems to be the goal we must be seeking in anthropological inquiry; for it is we alone who, as anthropologists, by the very nature of our discipline have the peculiar opportunity and responsibility to deal with people as people.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding discussion, I have outlined my perhaps peculiar views of the accomplishments of and problems inherent in marxist examinations of pastoralism and pastoralists. I will conclude with the briefest summary. I feel that marxist analysis of pastoral social formations has been responsible for a significant clarification of both the nature of pastoralist production, and the ways in which that pastoral production, in both general and concrete cases, determines and is influenced by the other elements of the social formations in which it is embedded. At the same time, I feel that this analysis has largely been formal, and essentially ahistorical. Thus, to the degree that marxist analysis, historical materialism, has a mission of understanding the historic processes of social transformation leading to the rise of capitalism and ultimately socialism, our task has barely begun, and perhaps not so very well begun at that.

This slow beginning is, I feel, particularly unfortunate, for all contact with current pastoralists--and, quite likely, all anthropological contact with pastoralists in the recent past--has been and will be with people who are enmeshed in the historical process of the transition to capitalism. And if we, as anthropologists who study pastoralism, do not capture this process, an important moment of human history will have vanished. For those of us who consider ourselves marxist anthropologists, I feel that this problem is intensified, for I remain convinced that we have the best tools to effectively describe and explain the processes that are unfolding in the societies we study.

NOTES

- 1) For a marvelous and unusually witty example of the internecine conflict, see E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*.
- 2) This, I hasten to add, is not a mere abstruse point of theoretical infighting, it is a point that will emerge as being of some importance when I turn directly to the consideration of pastoralists.
3. See Wolf (1982) and Rodinson (1974) for non-dogmatic attempts at dealing with this problem.
- 4) Returning to the work I cited above, E.P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*, it is precisely this claim for the non-exclusion of real people and the understanding of history as entailing the daily lives of real people that leads Thompson to his critique of Althusser and his followers. In this regard, I call the reader's attention to the text of Engel's letter of September 1890 to Bloch which I have used above as an epigraph.

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