

Primitive communism and the origin of social inequality

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How did social inequality come into being? Some argue that it has always been present, that it represents an inevitable and natural state of affairs. Therefore, inequality as a social phenomenon does not require explanation. Others, from Rousseau to the present, believe that the causes of social inequality cry out for explanation. One way to approach this seeming paradox is to explore the concept of primitive communism, or the communal mode of production – the notion that there was a period of human history before the rise of the state during which private property was unknown and inequalities of wealth and power were minimal. Many anthropologists would undoubtedly accept the broad validity of this notion, judging from its prevalence in introductory textbooks. Yet few would be prepared to explore the implications of this acceptance, and fewer still would be prepared to embrace the rubric of primitive communism.

Primitive communism is a simple concept, yet the very words evoke uneasiness and embarrassment, containing two of the most loaded terms in Western ideology. Yet that fact doesn't explain why the concept is an embarrassment to so many who profess Marxism. Nevertheless, I will argue that without the concept of a communal mode of production, an attempt to account for the development of social complexity in

prehistoric sedentary societies is doomed to mystification and failure. The very title of the seminar on which this book is based, "The Development of Political Systems in Prehistoric Sedentary Societies," was designed to sidestep the issue of social inequality. For that matter, even the issue of social complexity is not directly addressed. Is there a theoretical possibility of a complex society without inequality? Or a hierarchical society without complexity?¹ No doubt there is, but in practice the very criteria we employ archaeologically to determine social complexity (differential burials, presence of imported and/or luxury goods, house types, settlement hierarchies) are in fact indices of social inequality.

This chapter is divided into four parts. First, I attempt to formulate a theory of social change that can be applied with equal facility to state and nonstate, to communal and hierarchical societies. Second, I explore the concept of primitive communism to determine what it does and does not mean. Third, I develop an argument for the origin of social inequality (and social complexity) from a communal baseline, and finally, I seek to comprehend communalism's underlying dynamic.

A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

As for most Marxists, for me the concepts of mode and relations of production are central, but unlike many Marxists I have been acutely aware of the absence in Marxist thought of a theory of historical dynamics in preclass societies.² Marx and Engels wrote before the appearance of anthropology as a discipline, and their works offer few guidelines for the analysis of simpler societies, a lacuna epitomized by the fateful opening lines of the Communist Manifesto: "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle." Although Engels amended that formulation,³ it was left to later scholars – Luxemburg, Kautsky, Leacock, Diamond, Godelier, and especially Cabral – to correct and amplify the relevance of Marxist theory for all societies and not just class-divided ones.

The goal shared by all materialist theories of social change is to account for directional change, without recourse to vitalist, essentialist, racialist, metaphysical, or other teleological forms of explanation. The basic starting-point of any Marxist analysis of the concrete is the concept of *mode of production*, "an articulated combination of relations and forces of production, structured by the dominance of relations of

production" (Hindess and Hirst 1975:190–11). Central to mode of production has been the analytical division of the totality of social life into the economic base or infrastructure, and all the remainder (variously defined), the superstructure. What the mode of production concept does, simply and brilliantly, is to plug the property relation (or the "property connection," as Marx would say), an aspect of the superstructure, into the economic base or culture core. To put it another way, it puts politics into the economic base, and it defines a mode of articulation between base and superstructure.

Politics, ideology, religious beliefs, and culture have been variously attributed by Marxists to infrastructure or superstructure, and much debate has raged over their placement. Much of this continuing debate is rendered beside the point when we turn to the concept of *social reproduction*. Social reproduction resolves the base–superstructure debate by showing that ideology functions as both base and superstructure through the medium of relations of production and reproduction. In *Lenin and Philosophy*, Althusser drew attention to Marx's comment in 1868 that "every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year" (1971:247). At least three analytically distinct forms of behavior need to be considered under the rubric of social reproduction: (a) the reproduction of labor power, (b) the reproduction of life, and (c) the reproduction of the conditions of production.⁴

In a capitalist mode of production, *reproduction of labor power* occurs on a daily and generational basis. Daily reproduction of labor power involves the provision of food, clothing, rest, and emotional support for the workers, the task of restoring their depleted capacity for work, while generational reproduction of labor power involves child rearing and child care, the work involved in producing the next generation of workers.

Biological reproduction (the reproduction of life) is the aspect we usually think of when we use the term reproduction. It is closely related to generational reproduction of labor power. Engels emphasized the twofold character of his and Marx's theoretical framework. Biological reproduction, "the production of human beings," was regarded as being of equal import to production of the means of subsistence as crucial determining factors in history (see, for example, Engels (1972 [1884]:71–72).

The reproduction of the conditions of production in its strict sense can refer to the reproduction of the instruments of labor: tools, factories,

roads, banks, and other preconditions for the continuation of production. But it quickly becomes clear that the concept must necessarily expand to include a much broader field: schools, churches, hospitals, and governments. In fact the entire economic infrastructure and the political and ideological superstructure of society can be regarded as constituting conditions necessary for the continuation of production. Thus, this third element in the concept of social reproduction extends it to cover a very broad field of social life indeed.

Social reproduction is or could be *the* central concept in social theory. All social processes can be viewed as forms of social reproduction. This definition of social reproduction makes it virtually coterminous with the concept of *culture*. I would argue that social reproduction offers more analytical leverage than the culture concept. Culture has a static quality, like a map or blueprint. Social reproduction is dynamic: forms of social life and of meaning constantly reproducing themselves through the acts of people. Further, large-scale social change, as we shall see, always manifests itself initially as a crisis in social reproduction.

Now we have to consider the following question: If social formations are strictly in the business of reproducing themselves, how, then, does change occur? The answer is, and this is a crucial point, it doesn't, at least not always. If *environmental and demographic conditions* are stable, it is possible and indeed probable for social formations to reproduce themselves with relatively little *directional* change for long periods. The layout of some !Kung San camps in the 1960s appear indistinguishable from later Stone Age living sites of five hundred years ago. Twentieth-century agricultural settlements in parts of southwest Asia look remarkably similar to their counterparts in the second millennium B.C.⁵

Such conditions probably obtained much of the time in some parts of the world. Life went on, social formations were reproduced, and the life of the children was very much like the life of their parents. But stability of conditions doesn't always obtain. Populations grow, environments degrade, peoples impinge on their neighbors, technologies evolve: all of these processes create pressures for directional change. And at points in history the cumulative pressures for change become so intense that radically different social/technological forms may emerge. The origin of the state was one of these; the earlier agricultural revolution was

another. Our task is to specify the conditions for stability or change, and in the case of the latter to understand the different kinds and magnitudes.

REPRODUCTION, CHANGE, AND EVOLUTION

The totality of social processes can be usefully considered under three headings: social reproduction, social change, and social evolution. These terms are commonplace in anthropological discourse; my task here is to assign to each a much more restricted meaning.

Social reproduction, as we have seen, is the reproduction of social life and institutions on a daily, annual, and generational basis. It includes biological, social, and ideological components. *Social change* involves expansion of life *within* a mode of production. Directional change, involving the exploration of the possibilities of a given mode of production, takes many forms, including expansion of production, increase of the scale of society, geographic radiation of a people or a mode of life and its adaptation to new local environments, and, of course, the development of social complexity. Change can be expressed in an increased diversity of life ways, of customs, of religious ideas, based on a single mode of production; and it may include involution, a movement towards increasing intricacies in production, in social forms (e.g., kinship), and/or ideological content.

The initial causes of social change are likewise numerous: population growth is among the most important; environmental variation, drift, and isolation play roles as well. Such broad forces, however, tell us little about what kind of change will occur. The response to population growth might include outcomes as varied as increased warfare, infanticide, emigration, or expansion of production. About all one can say at this point is that such broad forces do act as a motor for some sort of change. About the only outcome that is precluded is the maintenance of social reproduction without any directional shift (i.e., the maintenance of the status quo).

The problem addressed in this volume makes us particularly interested in the development of structural dynamics, internally generated motors of change such as intergroup conflict, social inequality and stratification, and sexual antagonism. The dialectical method allows us

to search for and discover the locus of contradiction in a given social formation; it allows us to predict the structural evolution of a social formation by a specification of the structure of contradictions.

At infrequent intervals in human history the combination of internal and external forces becomes too intense to be contained within a given mode of production. There follows, in Marx's view, a period of fairly rapid social change in which the whole structure of society is overturned. This third form of change is *social evolution*, the transformation from one mode of production to another. The transition from feudalism to capitalism is certainly the most intensively studied example of social evolution. But a smaller coterie of anthropologists and archaeologists have made the earlier but no less important transformations, the neolithic revolution and the origin of the state, their particular province of research.⁶

In one important respect, contemporary theories of social evolution in precapitalist societies are curiously deficient: in specifying the dialectic of change between old and new. The emergence of a new mode of production is not simply a question of new technical achievements or even of radically new forms of organization, though both are involved. *It also involves the systematic dismantling and destruction piece by piece of the old societal forms.* This does not happen overnight, and for periods of time old and new modes of production coexist in an uneasy stalemate. At times, older social forms may persist for centuries alongside and encapsulated by newly dominant ones.

Although the new relations of production achieve dominance, they do not succeed in completely eliminating the old from the social formation. This intertwining of old and new is particularly apparent when we turn to the communal mode of production, the oldest and least understood of the five modes of production (Communal, Asiatic, Ancient, Feudal, Capitalist, as defined by Marx). *In fact, it could be argued that the contradiction between communal forms and emerging hierarchy has provided much of the energy for the social dynamic during long periods of human history (since 10,000 B.C.) prior to the development of classes.*

It is the phenomenon of persistence of communalism, and the long struggle between it and hierarchical modes in prehistoric (and historic) sedentary societies, that provides the rationale for the present chapter and offers a perspective that is often absent from the growing literature in

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social evolution which arises from ecological, demographic, or social-organizational starting-points.

PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM CONSIDERED

Primitive communism: This refers to the collective right to basic resources, the absence of hereditary status or authoritarian rule, and the egalitarian relationships that preceded exploitation and economic stratification in human history. Eleanor Leacock (1983:394).

Despite the emotional loading of the term, there is no great mystery about the phenomenon of primitive communism and the communal mode it describes. Before the rise of the state and the entrenchment of social inequality, people lived for millennia in small-scale, kin-based social groups, in which the core institutions of economic life included collective or common ownership of land and resources, generalized reciprocity in the distribution of food, and relatively egalitarian political relations. This basic pattern, with variations, has been observed in literally hundreds of nonstate societies, as described, for example, in Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967). These societies, including bands, tribes, and some chiefdoms, have been known by a variety of names: savagery, nonstate, prestate, nonliterate, kin-based, primitive, in fact anything but communist. But the basic underlying principles of these social formations are the same. Something is there that demands explanation.

Prestate societies had no overriding political authority. Political power of any kind was weak. Decisions were made in a diffuse way, usually democratically, by consensus, by elders, by family groups, and by a variety of other means. There was no private property in land; land was held in common, or collectively (e.g., by all or by kin groups); rarely was it held by individuals. Production was for use rather than for exchange. There were no markets, no currency. Where exchange existed, it was based on sharing and reciprocity. The law of hospitality was strong; more than that, it was inviolable. There were strong sanctions against wealth accumulation. Leaders existed, but where they existed they were redistributors, not accumulators. The main bases for the status distinctions which did exist included age, gender, and locality. The whole population retained access to the means of produc-

tion and reproduction. As Marx put it, "it was a community of owners who also worked." There was no division into economic classes.

Lest I portray too rosy a picture, I hasten to add that some prestate societies did have the germs of inequality and did have chiefs, ranked lineages, wealth differences, and slavery. The Northwest Coast Indians are an example, and many societies in North America, Africa, and Polynesia followed this pattern. There are hundreds of other societies, however, including the bulk of the foraging societies, where these institutions were absent or only present to a small degree. And even these chiefly and ranked societies had by no means abandoned all the institutions of communalism. Many continued to hold land in common and to practice reciprocal economic relations. Therefore, I will designate such societies semicomunal.

Another misconception about primitive communism is that preclass societies were peaceful. As the Iroquois, Tiv, Nuer, and other societies demonstrate, communal organization is by no means incompatible with warfare. Yet even the "fierce" Yanomamo held land and resources in common.

Rather than accept the proposition that this remarkable clustering of traits is coincidental, historical materialism argues that there exists a core of culture in primitive society that is intimately linked to mode of production. It is much longer lived, has a much deeper time-depth, than our own Western capitalist culture. Historical materialism further argues that this culture core is communal: the collective right to basic resources and the egalitarian political culture. By any dictionary definition of communism, our ancestors were communist.

MORGAN AND THE EVIDENCE

It was neither Marx nor Engels, nor Fourier nor Saint-Simon, who can be regarded as the principal architect of primitive communism. That honor belongs to a Rochester ethnologist and staunch member of the bourgeoisie, Lewis Henry Morgan. In *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines*, Morgan devoted over a hundred pages to the conceptualization and documentation of primitive communism, calling it "communism in living" (1965 [1881]).

Morgan introduced the concept almost diffidently, as an extension of the law of hospitality. Noting the universal presence in aboriginal

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America of the obligatory custom of offering hospitality to visitors, Morgan sought to elucidate its central core.

The law of hospitality as administered by the American aborigines tended to the final equalization of subsistence. Hunger and destitution could not exist at one end of an Indian village or in one section of an encampment while plenty prevailed elsewhere in the same village or encampment (*ibid.*, p. 61).

How did the system of communism in living arise? In a strikingly modern form of argument, Morgan derived the institution from the ecological and social constraints of the mode of life of savagery and barbarism, from what Marxists would call the low level of development of the productive forces.

Communism in living had its origin in the necessities of the family, which, prior to the Later Period of barbarism, was too weak in organization to face alone the struggle of life Wherever the gentile organization prevailed, several families, related by kin, united as a rule in a common household and made a common stock of the provisions acquired by fishing and hunting, and by the cultivation of maize and plants. To a very great extent communism in living was a necessary result of the condition of the Indian tribes. It entered into their plan of life and determined the character of their houses. In effect it was a union of effort to procure subsistence, which was the vital and commanding concern of life. The desire for individual accumulation had not been aroused in their minds to any sensible extent (*ibid.*, p. 63).

The notions of the law of hospitality and of communism in living were backed up by an overwhelming array of ethnohistoric data. Morgan went as far back as the fifteenth-century journals of Columbus's voyages to document his thesis for the earliest periods of European contact. Among his other sources were the journals of De Soto, Sir Walter Raleigh, Cortez, Pizzaro, Capt. John Smith, Marquette and Joliet, Lewis and Clark, and many others.

Most anthropologists in the early part of this century, while not necessarily accepting his use of the terms, did accept Morgan's thesis of communism in living, adding the proviso that while land and its resources were communally owned, movables (tools, weapons, cooking utensils, procured food, occasionally trees, etc.) could be owned individually. A few more or less random examples from the bookshelf of classic ethnographies will suffice.⁷

if a cabin of hungry [Iroquois] meets another whose provisions are not entirely exhausted, the latter share with the newcomers the little which remains to them

without waiting to be asked, although they expose themselves thereby to the same danger of perishing as those whom they help at their own expense so humanely and with such greatness of soul (Lafitau 1974 [1724]:61).

The economic life of the local [Andaman Islander] group, though in effect it approaches to a sort of communism, is yet based on the notion of private property. Land is the only thing that is owned in common [! R.B.L.] A man of one of the local groups of the coast may notice in the jungle a tree suitable for a canoe. He will tell the others that he has noticed such a tree, describing it and its whereabouts. Thenceforward, that tree is regarded as his property, and even if some years should elapse, and he has made no use of it, yet another man would not cut it down without first asking the owner to give him the tree (Radcliffe-Brown 1922:41).

In the abstract, there are desirable practices in the [North American] Indian way of life. He was not really a communist, but he was liberal with food. So long as he had food, he was expected to share it. That he did not always do it, we learn from legends, but since in these tales the one who concealed food always came to grief, there can be no doubt that to share it was the thing to do (Wissler 1966 [1940]:281).

A most important difference between the Plains Indians and the Tahitians concerns material property. Whereas in Tahiti a monarch could appropriate the possessions of a lesser man, on the Plains any comparable act was unthinkable. On the contrary, a great man could maintain his standards best by lavish generosity to the poor. Such liberality, next to a fine war record, was the basis for high standing. The Oglala had a society of chiefs enjoying superior prestige, but when a novice was admitted, he was urged to look after the poor, especially the widows and orphans (Lowie 1963 [1954]:124).

Among the Navajos certain things are "communal property," in which no individual or family has vested or exclusive rights. Water resources, timber areas, and patches of salt bush (which serve livestock in lieu of mineral salt) belong to all The People, and certain conventions are observed in regard to this type of property. It is not good form to cut wood within a mile or so of someone else's dwelling. One uses no other than his accustomed water hole except when that source fails or he goes on a journey. Attempts of some Navajos to emulate white practices with respect to wood and water rights are among the most bitterly resisted of all innovations (Kluckhohn and Leighton 1962:105-106).

In general it may be said that no one in a Nuer village starves unless all are starving (Evans-Pritchard 1951:132).

A number of contemporary authors make wide use of the concept of primitive communism, while showing a certain reluctance to use the term. Sahlins, in his "Sociology of Primitive Exchange" (1972 [1965]:185-275), attempted to bring together the evidence for what I have called primitive communism under the rubric of "generalized

reciprocity." The latter concept, the giving of something without the immediate expectation of return, expresses an aspect of primitive communism in "social science-ese" and therefore in a way less threatening to hegemonic ideology. The basic import of both terms is, I believe, the same. Other contemporary restatements of Morgan's position can be found in the writings of Diamond (1974), Fried (1967), Leacock (1981), and Woodburn (1981). (Leacock and Diamond, in particular, have explored in their own work much of the ideological ground examined here, while Woodburn has given detailed attention to the substantive data. See also Testart [1985].)

ON THE ORIGINS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Proceeding from the assumption of a primitive communal baseline in human history, I now attempt to "reproblematize" the central issue: the development of a political system in prehistoric societies of the middle range (i.e., beyond bands and before states).

Fundamental to the historical evolution of these societies is an increase in the scale of social systems. This increase raises two questions: (a) why does increase in scale lead to increase in the complexity of social orders, and (b), why does increase in complexity lead first to the straining, then the breaching, and eventually the destruction of reciprocal norms upon which primitive communism is founded? It is important to reformulate these questions so that the development of social inequalities is not reduced to a "natural" outgrowth, a realization of human possibilities.

At a point in the history of some primitive communal societies the fabric of social reproduction becomes threatened by growing contradictions. The breakdown of social reproduction is then accompanied by directional change toward a new mode of production. Social and sexual inequality have their beginnings as untoward consequences of changes in societal scale and in the levels and forms of production. Gradually in the course of social evolution, social inequality and its concomitant, economic exploitation, shift to central stage and become the core institution and one of the driving forces of historical change in class-based societies.

In attempting to account for this phenomenon, we must first recognize and deal with yet another major misconception about the nature of

equality. Scholars who want to demonstrate the universality of social inequality use the following device. They take an impossibly high, abstract definition of equality and then sit back and show that "true" social equality is nowhere to be found.⁸ But the fact is that perfect equality doesn't exist anywhere. It is a fact of life that human beings differ in their abilities: some are bright, some are stupid; some are strong, some are weak; some are charismatic and some are drones. What is significant is that some societies take these differences and minimize them, to the point of making them disappear, while other societies take the same basic material and magnify it. Still other societies (and this includes the great majority of class societies) describe differences between people as being enormous, even though they have no reference to actual differences on the ground. Thus, the upper classes of Britain were described as tall, handsome, intelligent, powerful, witty; the lower classes were described as brutish, stupid, and coarse. No attempt is made to align these judgments with the actual abilities of the people concerned. In other words, in dealing with the question of equality, we are dealing with an enormous cultural/ideological overlay. Some scholars have argued that even the !Kung San are not egalitarian, because even if they lack chiefs, they do have leaders. My response to such an assertion is that if one takes a definition of *perfect equality* as a standard, it will never be found. Some !Kung men *are* better hunters than others, for example, but the question is, do they parlay that into wealth, wives, or power? As I have shown in a variety of different contexts, they don't.

In the broadest terms, population growth has to be regarded as a starting-point in the analysis of directional social change.⁹ Human numbers tend to grow, however slowly, and the growth of humankind has been a constant push over the millennia. Such growth has had the effect of upsetting equilibria between people and resources. Population pressure was generally not a problem for hunting and gathering humans; low fertility, infanticide, and outmigration prevented numbers from reaching critical levels in a given area (Cohen 1977; Spooner 1972).

During the late Paleolithic and Mesolithic this situation changed: Sedentary villages founded on a subsistence base of marine resources appear in the Old World and the New between 15,000 and 10,000 years ago. Here we see for the first time the appearance of the destabilizing conditions that have become almost pan-human by the present century (Cohen 1977; Binford 1968; Smith 1976).

However, between population growth and the growth of social

inequality, there are a number of intervening steps. Four general factors are crucial mediating variables: (a) an increase in population density, which leads to (b) a relative decrease in per capita resource availability, and therefore a decreased ease of subsistence, which leads to (c) an increase in societal scale and levels of production to meet increased demands, which in turn leads to (d) an increase in internal/external social tensions.¹⁰ These directional changes tend to operate on fairly long time scales, at a pace that is imperceptible to an observer within a lifetime. As a result, it may be difficult to document this kind of change with ethnographic case material. And in this century these kinds of slow internal evolutionary changes have been almost everywhere preempted and obscured by the massive forces of Western imperialism.¹¹ Therefore, the model presented here delineates hypothetical trajectories for large-scale changes that we know occurred.

Let us begin by visualizing a population of 500 foragers or simple farmers organized communally, and divided into ten villages of 50 people. If populations increase and the area occupied remains the same, then more people will have to make do on less land per capita. This process implies two outcomes: (a) more "strangers" will be in intimate contact, and (b) people will have to intensify production (i.e., increase labor to make ends meet). Societal scale increases when more people live under the same cultural/linguistic jurisdiction. And if these changes are taking place on a regional basis, then the expanding peripheries of villages are eventually going to impinge on one another.

Foraging societies organized in bands can function very well in groups of 25–50 with economically active members working two to four hours a day. Simple farmers can be seen to operate along similar lines. Doubling the population to 100 begins to introduce logistical problems. Who is going to hunt and gather where? Where are the new fields to be located, and who will clear them? And even if these questions can be sorted out, the nature of the productive process requires that the economically active adults will have to work harder to maintain their dietary standard, either by travelling farther afield, in the case of hunters, or by the added work of clearing new fields, for the farmers. If the population doubles again, to 200 people, the group may rapidly be approaching the limits of their resources under a given technology. Added to this are the problems faced by foragers or farmers from one area expanding their range fourfold and coming into contact with similarly expanding neighbors.

Such processes put definite (though by no means impossible) demands upon the institutions of communal society. The injunctions on the sharing of food and the sharing of work to produce the food would carry the group for a time. Sharing levels out disparities in food supply. Interlocking kindreds allow for the equitable distribution of work and land. The germs of inequality arise, not from a breakdown of the sharing ethic, *but from an effort to make it work under altered circumstances.*

When the scale of society reaches a certain point, egalitarian decision-making can no longer cope. Too many people with too many conflicting interests overtax the capacity of face-to-face political processes. Here we see a crisis in social reproduction. At this point the crisis is resolved by the emergence of a new figure in human history, a *manager*, whose task it is to preserve the equitable distribution of food, work, and land. Fried, following Polanyi, has called these figures "egalitarian redistributors," people (usually men) who act as adjudicators, spokespersons, and repositories for the purpose of food redistribution. Harris notes that the way to identify who is the egalitarian redistributor in a given village is to seek out the *poorest hut*. The leader leads by example, and in primitive communal society virtue lies in generosity (Fried 1967:118; Polanyi 1944; Harris 1985:235-39).

The redistributor has very limited powers to keep people in line. He influences by persuasion and consensus. He may or may not pass on his "office" to his children. Part of his influence may derive from leadership in war, raiding, or intergroup conflict, or it may derive from his skills as a negotiator and a diplomat. Skills as a shaman, healer, or diviner may also play a role. Such leaders are found throughout the band and tribal world in North and South America, the Kalahari, Australia, and Southeast and Northeast Asia.

The next step is one about which we know very little. Yet the importance of this step cannot be doubted. At some point in the development of these redistributive societies there was an ideological shift of great magnitude, a changeover in the demeanor of leaders from modesty to self-aggrandizement, and from self-denial to self-praise. This shift removed a constraint on the behavior of leaders, lifting a ban that opened the way for the accumulation of power, prestige, and wealth for the first time.

Thus, we see in American Northwest Coast society chiefs living under the same roofs as commoners, but occupying a special place at feasts, wearing special regalia, and boasting of their prowess in war, of

their wealth, and of their ancestry. In Polynesia the deference toward chiefs was carried even further. The chiefs were almost godlike, with ritual constraints on their diet, toilet, and contact with commoners.

Not all advanced redistributive societies glorify their chiefs. In the big-man societies of New Guinea, the big-man is a "mover and shaker" with a larger house and more wives than the norm, but he has no "royal" prerogatives and no coercive powers. Among the Iroquois, the chiefs or *sachems* had to maintain a modest, temperate behavior in council and were subject to recall by the woman of their clan (see Trigger, this volume).

Social inequality thus seems to have its origins in the increasing scale of society, and in the development of productive forces. But there is not a perfect correlation between these variables and the degree of inequality. In some societies (e.g., West Africa), fairly large villages (100–2,000), will exist with modest social differentiation (e.g., Ibo), while in others (e.g., Northwest Coast, Tutchone), marked inequalities appear in relatively modest villages of 100–200 people. There is also considerable variation in the objective degree of inequality compared to its subjective perception. In some societies, the language and idioms of kinship and reciprocity may conceal large differences in wealth, while in others a discourse of masters and slaves, superiors and subordinates may be found in situations where rich and poor are not that far apart.

COURSES TOWARD INEQUALITY

Although examples of hierarchically organized foragers do exist (the Northwest Coast), the development of inequality is first and foremost a consequence of food production. Foragers directly appropriate from nature; farmers and herders by contrast depend far more on *improvements* upon nature and the *husbandry* of resources. Agricultural fields must be cleared, fenced, and weeded. Herds and flocks must be tended, watered, and protected from predators. The investment of labor in fields and herds adds value to the resource and sets it apart from the common store. In a word, farmers and herders depend for their livelihood on *property*, and new social groupings crystallize around the management of these properties. Let me cite three examples.

Lineage systems, found in West Africa and other parts of the world, tend to concentrate power in the hands of older men (elders) and disenfranchise the younger men (cadets) and women. As lineages grow

in size they tend to subdivide into senior and junior branches, and the oldest male of the most senior branch becomes the lineage head, a position which may become hereditary. Senior lineage segment heads get their pick of arable lands, and through their leverage within the lineage can concentrate wealth in land or cattle. In Polynesia social inequality is expressed through the ranked lineage or *ramage*. Senior members of senior segments of a *ramage* are chiefs who hold enormous power over the labor and lives of the junior members of the same social grouping.¹² The Lineage Mode of Production and the Polynesian *ramage* illustrate the point that the kin-ordered societies are capable of accommodating a considerable degree of inequality.

New Guinea big-men provide another example of the genesis of inequality.¹³ In the great periodic ceremonials that brought together hundreds of people, big-men supervised lavish distributions of food and wealth in pigs, yams, and sweet potatoes. In hosting these feasts the big-man had to mobilize the resources of his clansmen and women. All the big-man's persuasive powers of oratory were necessary to get the people to part with their goods. The reward was the fame and renown that the big-man and his clan received for their largesse, though in precolonial times mobilizing neighboring groups as allies in war was a major function of these feasts.

Severe limitations acted as a brake on the self-aggrandizing big-man. He had no coercive powers, and if the demands placed upon his followers were too great, his supporters would melt away and attach themselves to the rising star of another big-man. The big-man thus might end his life in obscurity, just another member of the "rank and file." The dilemma of the big-man was the subject of a famous essay by Marshall Sahlins in which he contrasted the transitory fame of the Melanesian big-man with the inherited majesty and power of the Polynesian chief (1964).

Big-men systems exhibit the logic of communal society pushed to the breaking-point. Chiefdoms usher in for the first time the fundamental breach with the norms of communal society. The chief can command the obedience of his followers. His word is law. He can requisition goods and services in peace and war, and, perhaps most importantly, he can pass all this, the office and the wealth, on to one or more of his children.

Carneiro (1981), one of the most knowledgeable students of the chiefdom, has argued that the significance of the chiefdom lies in the fact that it is the first social form in history to transcend village

autonomy. In order to qualify as a chiefdom, the domain has to include two or more villages under a single rule. How do chiefdoms arise? Sahlins, following Polanyi, sees redistribution as the key to the chiefdom. The chief acts as a central force in concentrating, through labor and tribute, the economic wealth of society. The greater the level of production, the bigger the chiefdom. But where does the surplus come from? It is not natural; it has to be coerced. The chief and his retinue, through political means, coerce the subjects to produce more. Therefore, Carneiro concludes that political power leads to surplus production, and not the other way around.¹⁴ The ultimate source of political power, argues Carneiro, is force. Therefore, the ultimate cause of the rise of chiefdoms is war.

Archaeological evidence of regional cultural florescences document the presence of warfare in sequences where the appearance of chiefdoms can be identified. Such sequences also exhibit evidence for population growth and environmental circumscription. However, not all cases of high warfare lead to chiefdoms. Tropical forest South America and highland New Guinea both exhibit high levels of warfare, but they have not produced chiefdoms. And not all chiefdoms are environmentally circumscribed. Some may be socially circumscribed (i.e., chiefdoms occurred on the islands of the Caribbean, but also on the adjacent mainland of South America and southeastern North America).

I doubt whether warfare alone will stand up as the principal "cause" of the chiefdom. It is difficult to disentangle warfare from the bundle of other forces in the economic and ideological spheres. Carneiro's argument *does* have the virtue of directing our attention to the political sphere, since the chiefdom, and for that matter the state, are primarily political institutions, and war, to paraphrase Clausewitz, is a form of politics.

Chiefs for the first time in history wear the mantle of legitimacy. They rule by right, a right society confers; there is the mystique of royal blood. There is an aura about the chief. We speak of chiefly bearing, or regal manner; this mystique is reinforced by speech forms, elaborate terms of respect, and by regalia, symbols of office. A second element of chiefdoms that is new is the retinue, the building up of a body of retainers, personal servants, bards, cooks, and bodyguards who owe loyalty to the chief and are not bound by family ties. These retainers may be relatives of the chief, but more often they are commoners recruited from the ranks, or outsiders specifically recruited to serve the ruler. Combining

the symbols of legitimacy with the body of retainers, we see the emergence of a court and court life.¹⁵ The court revolves around the person of the chief and the running of the affairs of the chiefdom. Here we see the dawn of bureaucracy and the dawn of civil society.

How is the retinue to be provisioned? How is the chief's need for resources to be satisfied? Here we come to another watershed in the evolution of social complexity: the transformation of redistribution into taxation. The first headmen were economic managers who helped communal society function on a larger and larger scale by acting as a focal point for food distribution and deployment of labor. Even with the changeover from the modesty of the egalitarian redistributor to the self-aggrandizement of the chief, the redistribution of goods at feasts and in times of hardship mainly benefited the people at large. With the rise of the chief's retinue, however, a larger and larger proportion of the tribute remained and was consumed at the center. Many anthropologists have suggested that the term redistribution needs refinement. What percentage of goods is redistributed, and to what percentage of the population? If the figures are high and a large proportion reap the benefits, it can be called redistribution, but if the figures are low, then that is properly called taxation.

Here in a nutshell is the key to the rise of the chiefdom and the key to "government": to build up and reproduce the center through greater exaction from the populace, while still retaining the loyalty (or at least acquiescence) of the same populace. It is at this point that the stage is set for the evolution of the state.¹⁶

WHAT IS THE CORE OF THE COMMUNAL MODE?

In the foregoing I have argued that a long sequence and a multiplicity of pathways link the communal mode with systems of inequality. And for an extended period, elements of communalism coexist with elements of hierarchy. Yet even in these transitional forms, the contours of the communal mode are visible to those who have eyes to see it. Because of this coexistence of communal and hierarchical forms, and because the dominant ideology in the capitalist West seeks to minimize or obscure the presence of communalism, the concept of primitive communism has received "bad press." Even among those who are sympathetic to Marxism, there is much resistance to the notion of a communal mode.

It is therefore appropriate that I conclude this inquiry with a hard look at what the communal mode is and is not.

First, the communal mode is *not* a system of perfect equality. Identity of subjects is not present; everybody is not the same. In communal societies wealth and status differences do occur, although to a limited degree. Second, primitive communism is not communism as currently constituted in the socialist world. The current socialist regimes are *state societies*, centrally administered and heavily bureaucratized. Whatever role the concept of primitive communism may play in their official ideologies, the “common” ownership of the means of production in these societies is of a fundamentally different character from that in the small-scale, communally organized *traditional societies* of interest here.

Third, the communal mode is neither utopian nor “pretty.” *The members of these societies are real people with all the human frailties of people everywhere.* As I pointed out in *The !Kung San* (1979:458–61), communalism and sharing are achieved by the !Kung at considerable cost. A very rough form of joking and gossip is used to keep people in line. “Please” and “thank you” are not found in their vocabulary. And the impulse not to share (to hoard) is always present just beneath the surface. As Trigger points out (this volume), the capacity for altruism and selfishness are both present in the human make-up. Those who live by the communal mode are no more “noble” than the rest of us.

Fourth, and related, is the point that life in the communal mode is not peaceful. Violence, raiding, even warfare (but not conquest) can be observed among communal societies. Whether the levels of violence observed are higher, lower, or the same as those in state societies is a matter for discussion (cf. Lee 1979:396–400). But fierce or not, all communal societies (including the Yanomamo, to take one of the most dramatic examples) practiced the collective ownership of hunting lands and the law of hospitality.

Finally, the communal mode of production as observed in world ethnography is equivocal on gender relations. I agree with Leacock that band and tribal societies *overall* show less gender hierarchy and more equality between the sexes than do other levels of society (Leacock 1982). It is clear that the principles of communal organization do tend to protect women’s status in crucial ways against the full weight of patriarchy (Lee and Daly 1987). However, there are many anomalies, cases where a degree of oppression of women coexists with a communal

or semi-communal mode (epitomized by the Yanomamo, for example, and a number of highland New Guinea societies). This oppression is an important problem in need of further study.

Now that we have seen what the communal mode is not, we must ask what remains? What is the irreducible core of the communal mode of production? The key to this question lies in the remarkable institution of the leveling device. The rough form of joking that keeps people in line is part of a larger complex of behaviors and values that is as central to the reproduction of communal society as is the principle of private property and the right to profit in capitalist society. This can be characterized as a fierce adherence to egalitarianism, an abhorrence of the acceptance of status distinctions among them. This abhorrence persists even in some semicommunal societies with headmen and chiefs, where the leaders do hold office but only by virtue of continuing generosity to their "subjects."

But leveling devices are not simply aspects of value orientation. They also operate on the material plane to prevent both accumulation and destitution. The underlying principles can be modeled as follows: visualize two horizontal parallel lines. The upper line is a ceiling of accumulation of goods above which an individual cannot rise, and the lower line is a floor of destitution below which one cannot sink. In the communal mode the ceiling and the floor are closely connected; one cannot exist without the other. No one can have too much, and if there is any food in the camp, everybody in the camp is going to get some of it. The obligation to share food and the taboo against hoarding are no less strong and no less ubiquitous in the primitive world than the far more famous taboo against incest. But unlike the incest taboo, which persists to the present, the hoarding taboo became a casualty of social evolution. One of the key developments of social evolution is the lifting of the ceiling of accumulation. Animal domestication represents such a shift. Instead of shooting the animal and eating the meat, one brings the beast into the settlement and it sits there as property. Once the ceiling is raised, the possibility of wealth differences emerges. Someone could have no goats while another person had one; and if no goats and one goat is possible, then so is one goat and ten goats, or one goat and a hundred.

So far we have spoken of raising the ceiling, but at a crucial point in the evolution of societies we observe the lowering of the floor. I don't know exactly how that happens. In the communal mode if someone gets a little uppity, (s)he is leveled out. By the same token, those falling

through the cracks are supported by the group. But when the floor is lowered, poverty for some becomes possible. The community safety net for some disappears. One of the elements of social evolution that is of great interest is how the cracks get wider. Do people fall through those cracks by neglect, or are they preyed upon? Does society devour itself by the rich preying upon the poor? (In ancient Greece, as some people got wealthier, they first took the land of their neighbors, then they enslaved them.) The ceiling and the floor are dialectically connected.

In the modern world, both floor and ceiling have disappeared. There are billionaires in one area and mass poverty and starvation in others. It is on the political agenda of both socialists and liberal capitalists to restore the floors and at least a semblance of the ceilings; both would stabilize at a much higher level of accumulation than that found in primitive communal formations. Primitive communism has existed within a narrow range at the bottom of a scale; future society would operate in a broader range at the top. But whatever the future may hold, it is the long experience of egalitarian sharing that has molded our past. Despite our seeming adaptation to life in hierarchical societies, there are signs that humankind retains a deep-rooted egalitarianism, a deep-rooted commitment to the norm of reciprocity, a deep-rooted desire for what Victor Turner has called *communitas*, the sense of community. All theories of justice revolve around these principles, and our sense of outrage at the violation of these norms indicates the depth of its gut-level appeal. That, in my view, is the core of primitive communism and the communal mode.

NOTES

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1. D. Legros has proposed an example of the latter, the Tutchone of the Southern Yukon. See Legros (1985).

2. Many "environmentalists" in archaeology are not unsympathetic to Marxist perspectives, while the bulk of Marxist scholarship in economics and

political science remains remarkably indifferent to the dynamics of precapitalist societies.

3. By adding the word "written" before "history" in the 1886 edition of the Manifesto.

4. My thinking on social reproduction has been influenced by Edholm, Harris, and Young (1977); and Luxton (1980).

5. The work of Carol Kramer comes to mind here (1982).

6. For a discussion of foraging as a mode of production see Lee (1981).

7. For full quotes, see my paper "Reflections on Primitive Communism" (in press).

8. Martin Whyte (1978) is one author who comes to mind.

9. It is worth noting here that Marx, in the "Formen" section of the *Grundrisse*, invokes population growth as a cause of social development. Where he parted company with Malthus was on the view of population growth as the main cause of human misery.

10. A more detailed sketch of this argument is presented in chapter 12 of *The !Kung San* (Lee 1979:320ff), where intensification of social life is examined in terms of concentration/dispersion settlement patterns, and of the increased labor demands of aggregated settlements.

11. But not entirely obscured; *pace* Wolf (1982a and 1982b).

12. For the lineage societies see Rey and Dupre (1973); and Meillassoux (1972). For Polynesia see Goldman (1970) and Sahlins (1958).

13. On the big-men see Meggitt (1974); Strathern (1971); Loman-Vayda (1976).

14. Sahlins (1958); Polanyi (1944); Carneiro (1981).

15. Court life as an evolutionary form is a theme developed by Norbert Elias (1982).

16. For a discussion of early Marxist theories of state formation see Lee (1985).