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# MARX AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the continuing relevance of Marx's work in anthropological theory by examining three dimensions of his thought, concentrating on a central text in each: historical materialism (*The German Ideology*), the analysis of capitalism (Volume 1 of *Capital*), and political analysis (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*). Each of these dimensions is related to present-day discussions in anthropological and social history, but the emphasis remains on an interpretation of Marx's work.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Marx (1970a) claimed, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (p. 123). Today both ends of this thesis point to problems. Most marxist-inspired or -organized attempts to "change" the world have been discredited, and there are few activists who will now mount a political program in his name. Moreover, many scholars contend that a central reason for the failure of marxist-inspired attempts to change the world lies in marxist interpretations of it. That is, as an attempt to understand the making of the modern world, marxism was embedded within, and shared basic assumptions of, other modes of thought that interpreted the rise of capitalism. It was, in short, modernist, and it approached history and politics with a positivistic commitment to interpretive schemes that subsumed different societies and histories within a common overarching scheme—a grand or master narrative.

A central figure in this line of critique was Foucault (1980), who began with a rejection of what he called “global, *totalitarian theories*” (p. 80) (he mentioned specifically marxism and psychoanalysis) and counterposed what he called “local” and “subjugated” knowledges—knowledge of relations, struggles, and effects that are denied or suppressed by “totalitarian” theories. Such knowledge therefore undercuts or subverts the “tyranny of globalising discourses” (p. 83).

A consideration of the relevance of Marx’s thought for anthropology must begin with a recognition of the political failure of most marxist-inspired movements and the influential intellectual critique that seems to speak to it. A radical disjuncture must also be recognized between the interpretive schemes of those marxisms that came to power and those of Marx himself. The criticism of “globalizing” or “totalizing” theories can more easily be leveled at these marxisms than at Marx himself. This is not to deny that elements in Marx’s thought can be found to support the more closed, mechanical, and evolutionistic schemes that came to dominate marxist thought for much of this century. But Marx’s thought was not a closed system, and he did not see the historical and materialist framework or outlook he devised in the 1840s as a universal scheme (or “master narrative”) in terms of which a range of historical, political, and philosophical problems could be resolved. It contained inconsistencies and contradictions, and it was capable of development and modification through analysis and interpretation of particular events and processes. Indeed, Marx warned against the mechanical application of his ideas or the construction of grand historical schemes (e.g. Marx 1983, p. 136).

My aim in returning to some of Marx’s texts is not to claim that there is nothing to criticize. Rather, I engage some of Marx’s texts to suggest that he dealt creatively with a number of issues that remain active concerns in anthropological work, and that he proposed resolutions or modes of approach to some of those issues that continue to influence current thought. My strongest claim is that these ideas and modes of analysis deserve to be part of the discussion.

I develop this claim across three thematic areas, in each of which I concentrate on a central text: Marx’s materialism (in which I consider *The German Ideology*), the analysis of capitalism (Volume 1 of *Capital*), and the historical and political surveys (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*). Unlike other commentaries on anthropology and Marx, I do not concentrate on anthropologists’ subsequent appropriations of Marx or evaluate Marx’s assertions in light of more recent anthropological understandings (see Bloch 1985; Donham 1990; Kahn & Llobera 1981; Sayer 1987, 1991; Vincent 1985; Wessman 1981). In each thematic area I deal with issues that have received anthropological attention, but the emphasis remains on the texts themselves.

## HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

### *The Framework*

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels began not with nature or with material “conditions” but with a collectivity of humans acting in and on nature, reproducing and transforming both nature and material conditions through their actions (Marx & Engels 1970). The starting point of Marx’s materialism was the social, conceived as material. Individuals within the social collectivity were seen as acting upon nature and entering into definite relations with each other as they did so, in providing for themselves. The process of provisioning was not limited to the problem of basic subsistence but to the reproduction of a “whole mode of life” (Marx & Engels 1970), taking Marx and Engels back to the specific collectivity of individuals with which they began. Yet the process of provisioning, of interacting with nature and individuals through labor, was seen to transform both nature and the collectivity of individuals.

Marx had emphasized that labor was organized by and in a specific, “empirically perceptible” (Marx & Engels 1970, p. 47) social collectivity. Thus labor as human process, the nature upon which humans acted, and the social collectivity that organized labor were historically situated and differentiated. Marx and Engels related all intellectual and philosophical problems to a material/productive history, and they moved quickly from a statement of philosophical principles to a discussion that would otherwise seem to be a diversion—a preliminary account of the history of forms of ownership and property (pp. 43–46). One finds, first, an emphasis on materiality in the form of transforming, creative labor, in specific conditions; second, a statement of the historicity of both the conditions and the labor; and, third, a referencing of all philosophical problems to this material history. As Marx expressed it, “The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” (p. 122).

Thus a range of philosophical problems were given both practical and historical resolutions. There was little room in this framework for universal truths. The human essence Marx had earlier located—labor (see Marx 1964)—led in turn to an emphasis on historical difference, as particular modes of organizing and appropriating labor were seen as the *differentia specifica* of historical epochs. This philosophical stance required investigation of particular social collectivities and their modes of life, particular “ensembles of social relations,” or particular forms of property in history. This was what *The German Ideology* proceeded to do.

Marx and Engels made a number of moves that were to influence their later work, as well as subsequent marxisms. First, their treatment of labor had vari-

ous temporal dimensions. While one involved a long-term, epochal or evolutionary sweep across various forms of property broadly conceived, another involved a concentration on more specific forms and the processes of their reproduction or transformation (Marx & Engels 1970, pp. 62–63).

Second, as they considered long-term history, they emphasized two aspects that were to become central to most definitions of “modes of production”: the productive forces (or the material conditions and instruments upon which and with which labor acts and is organized) and the “forms of intercourse” (or the ensemble of social relations through which labor is mobilized and appropriated, understood elsewhere as “relations of production”; pp. 86–87).

Third, their placement of philosophical issues within material and historical forms and processes led them to a clearly stated determinism (pp. 46–47). A number of deterministic statements were made in *The German Ideology*, from the general claim that social being determines social consciousness to strong claims of the material determination of the form of the state, ideas, and beliefs. Some of these statements can be read in terms of the polemical context in which the text was written, and the intellectual and political excitement the authors must have felt as they criticized and rejected a range of philosophical texts, experimented with a new form of materialism that seemed to undercut prior conceptions of materialism and idealism, and considered a range of historical, political, and philosophical projects their approach both required and made possible. There are, nonetheless, a number of problematic dimensions that require comment.

### *Nature*

One of the strengths of the text is its historicization of “nature.” Marx and Engels criticized the separation of nature and history, “as though these were two separate ‘things’ and man did not always have before him an historical nature and a natural history” (pp. 62, 63). Nonetheless, “always” had a more limited meaning for them than it should have. Thus, by the end of the passage in which they made this claim they had begun to retreat, envisioning a natural time before or outside of history—“except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin” (p. 63). Their exception gives pause, because it includes within the nature that preceded human history a social world, made natural.

Earlier, the implications of this exception were made clear when they presented a thumbnail sketch of forms of property (pp. 43, 44). Here one finds two kinds of naturalization that subsequent generations of anthropologists have effectively undercut: a first of “the tribe” and a second of “the family.” In this

early text, Marx and Engels were not radically historical enough in their consideration of the family.

### *“Ideological Reflexes and Echoes”*

The basic framework itself can also be questioned. Consider the frequent references to “real premises” and “real individuals,” which can be “verified in a purely empirical way.” Or, in one of their most famous passages: “[W]e do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process” (p. 47).

Here three elements of a necessary unity (what men say or imagine, how they are narrated, and men in the flesh) were separated, and one of those elements (men in the flesh) was treated as before the others. The central contribution of Marx’s materialism was to stress that men as they imagine themselves and as narrated or imagined by others could not be separated from men in the flesh. The reverse point, however, can also be made against most materialisms: Men in the flesh cannot be separated from men as they imagine or are imagined. Sahlins (1976) criticized all philosophies that begin with practice for ignoring the mediation of a conceptual scheme. That is, all action occurs within, and is understandable in the context of, socially and culturally conditioned frames of reference. This does not necessarily mean, as Sahlins claimed, that a kind of priority needs to be reestablished, with “conceptual scheme” seen as superior to “action.” The danger of any simple materialism that would assert the alternate priority (men in the flesh) is that its inadequacy in the face of both action and meaningful frameworks will almost require the assertion of a reverse priority (what men say, imagine, conceive).

Similarly, the recent emphasis on the discursive constitution of the historical and social sciences has made students much more aware of how the objects of social scientific and historical inquiry are “constructed” through the process of investigation and, especially, the writing of texts. Here the emphasis shifts from what men say, imagine, and conceive to how they are narrated, imagined, and conceived by other “men,” and how these narrations are shaped and constrained by literary, interpretive, and investigative conventions. This emphasis on how narrative and investigative conventions “constitute” certain objects of inquiry offers a necessary correction to naive empiricism. Yet the danger here, too, is that a kind of priority might be given to the narrative conventions of the texts, and the “real individuals” or “men in the flesh” will disappear.

Together, the twin emphases on conceptual scheme and narrative conventions undercut any materialism that takes as its basic premises “real individu-

als” in “purely empirical” relationships making “real history.” “Real history” is made by men and women acting within and upon socially, politically, and culturally constituted relationships, institutions, and conventions, reproducing some and changing others. As they do so, they have certain understandings and images of who they are and what they are doing (Marx 1974b, p. 146). Similarly, “our” understanding of “their” history is constructed and conveyed in texts that emphasize certain “real individuals” and not others, or certain “purely empirical” relationships and actions and not others.

To the extent that the materialist method in *The German Ideology* calls up a naive realism or empiricism, it is untenable. Yet the text can also be read, more modestly, as claiming that imagination (conceptual scheme), narration (texts), and “real individuals” (or “men in the flesh”) constitute an indissoluble unity. In this sense, the text offers a fundamental criticism both of the young Hegelians of the 1840s and much of the cultural anthropology of the 1980s and 1990s.

To say that these dimensions constitute a unity is not to say that they are indistinguishable. The three points of the Marx and Engels quote indicate three aspects of “real history,” and the tension and relation among them needs to be maintained. Williams’s emphasis on mutual construction, or the way in which language, for example, is both constituting and constituted, is important here. We could then revisit Sahlins’s claim that all practice is mediated by conceptual scheme and argue that the conceptual scheme is itself shaped by action, by “real individuals” who live and act within an “ensemble of social relations.” Similarly, we could accept the new historicists’ emphasis on the narrative construction of history while insisting that there are definite limits to such construction and that those limits are created by “real individuals” and what they “say, imagine, conceive.”

### *History and Evolution*

There are two dimensions that are necessary for a claim of indissoluble unity: (a) a starting point in a social collectivity, made “material,” and the specific “conditions” in which they live (including the “nature” they confront, the tools and instruments they use to work on them, the ensemble of social relations, institutions and relations of power, and the images and conceptions actors have of nature, instruments, ensembles, and institutions); and (b) a temporal dimension that stresses both the constitution of subjects within this complex of “conditions” and the formation of those “conditions” by generations of subjects.

This temporal dimension was emphasized by Marx himself. Yet there is a tension in Marx’s work between two kinds of temporal dimension, both of which can be called “historical.” Williams has usefully distinguished between

“epochal” and “historical” analysis, the first characterizing long-term epochs in human history and the second examining particular societies at specific moments (Williams 1977, p. 121; cf White 1945). One could easily substitute the word “evolutionary” for “epochal” in that the temporal dimension involved is the *longue durée*, the succession of human epochs (such as feudalism or capitalism) in history and the analysis of their basic characteristics, structures, and dynamics. This evolutionary dimension is present in much of Marx’s work (Marx 1970b, Marx & Engels 1970), conceived as a succession of modes of production.

Yet Marx also attended to historical analysis in the more specific and particular sense suggested by Williams. The two kinds of analysis must be distinguished; each is appropriate for different kinds of problem. Yet they are also interconnected. On one hand, most historical changes and processes are not part of epochal transformations, although our understanding of historical processes is enhanced by placing them within an epochal time and space. On the other hand, epochal transformations also, and always, take place in historical times and places, and proper understanding of the development of capitalism (say) requires detailed knowledge of complex and changing social fields in Leicester, Nottingham, Manchester, or Leeds—and Charleston, the Gold Coast, and Bombay.

## THE ANALYSIS OF CAPITALISM

### *The Formal Analysis*

Marx’s method led him to concentrate on the organization, mobilization, and appropriation of labor. Class relations could be characterized according to an opposition between producers and nonproducers, and relations between them were based on the appropriation by nonproducers of a portion of the labor, or the surplus labor, of the producers. Different historical epochs and modes of production could be characterized according to different forms of appropriation and the property relations that made them possible (Marx 1967, pp. 791–92).

Given this general framework, Marx devoted most of his analysis to the inner workings of capitalism. In one sense, an epochal and definitional one, Marx’s analysis in *Capital* can be quickly summarized. Capitalism depends, first, on a situation in which working people have been stripped of ownership or control of means of production (and stripped from a community of producers as well) and must work for wages to survive. Second, capitalism involves the accumulation of means of production in the hands of a few, who employ

those means in production by hiring members of the propertyless mass. In short, capitalism depends on free wage labor.

In his analysis of capitalism, Marx critically engaged the literature of classical political economy, especially Smith, Ricardo, and Mill. Despite Smith's well-known emphasis on the "free hand" of competition, the classical economists were also concerned with the production and distribution of wealth among three classes (labor, capital, and landlords, which depended on three different sources of income: wages, profits, and rent). Where later economists began with exchange and circulation occurring in a world of asocial and classless individuals, the classical economists considered the production, distribution, and circulation of wealth in a differentiated social and political world.

Their theory of value was based on labor rather than the circulation of commodities among consumers. Although terminology differed among authors, the classical economists made a distinction between value and price, or between "natural" and "market" price. Value was seen as something that inhered in a commodity, around which market prices oscillate; value was determined in, and as a result of, production whereas price was determined in the market.

In this sense, Marx was a classical economist, working within while writing against the basic assumptions of the political economy of the day. This was most clear in the treatment of value and price, and the assumption that value was determined by the labor time that inhered in the commodity. While Marx shared the classical emphasis on production, however, he actually began *Capital* with commodities and the circulation of commodities (Marx 1977).

A commodity is defined by Marx as a product of human labor that can be alienated through a particular kind of exchange, in which one product of labor can be placed in quantitatively comparable relation to another product of labor. What makes commodities comparable in this sense is that both are products of human labor. While they are different as useful things, and may be valued differently by those individuals who use them, they have in common the fact that they are products of labor. To the extent that qualitatively different kinds of labor can be compared at all or made equivalent, in Marx's view (and that of classical political economy), they can be measured in terms of time—the average number of hours or days that go into making a particular commodity. Thus the value of a commodity is determined by the average "socially necessary" time that goes into its production.

A central task of the first section of *Capital* is to provide a formal analysis of the appropriation of labor under capitalism, using the assumptions of classical political economy. That is, if labor is the source of all value, and if commodities are purchased and sold at their values, how does profit emerge, and how is "surplus value" (appropriated by capital) created? Marx resolved this by introducing a distinction between labor power and labor: In the wage rela-

tion, capital purchased not labor but the worker's capacity to work, for a limited period. Capital then had use of that capacity, as actual labor, during which labor generated enough value to reproduce the cost of labor power plus additional ("surplus") value, which could be appropriated by the purchaser of the commodity labor power (that is, by capital). At a formal level, and within the assumptions of classical political economy, the production and appropriation of surplus value through the wage relation was "a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injustice towards the seller" (p. 301).

### *Questions Suggested by the Formal Analysis*

Marx's framework suggests certain questions, only some of which were addressed by Marx himself. First, as he recognized, "exchange" value was not the only kind that one could discern in a product of human labor. There was also a subjective component in that products must be considered useful by the person purchasing or exchanging for them; they must satisfy a felt need. All commodities were therefore seen to have two kinds of value: use value (that is, they satisfy felt needs on the part of purchasers) and exchange value (that is, they are comparable in exchange as products of average quantities of human labor). Marx stressed that both aspects were necessary for a product of labor to be a commodity. On the one hand, not all kinds of useful products are commodities in that they never become alienable exchange values. They are produced for the use of those who have made them, or they change hands through mechanisms other than market exchange (gifts, tribute, etc). On the other hand, a product of human labor placed on the market must be considered useful by someone, or it fails as a commodity. Thus, for a product to have an exchange value, it must first be felt to be useful.

This apparently simple distinction raises a number of interesting dimensions for analysis, most of which Marx ignored. One is evolutionary, questioning the relationship between use values and exchange values (or use values and commodities) at various stages in human history before the dominance of capitalism (seen as a particular kind of commodity economy in which commodity exchanges have come to dominate all social relations). A related historical question concerns the relationship between capitalist and noncapitalist spheres in a world economy, and the flow of particular products between these spheres (use values in one sphere, commodities in the other), or the introduction of commodified relations and valuations in formerly noncommodified relations and valuations. Still another concerns the construction of felt needs, or the manipulation of "usefulness."

Each of these questions has received important attention (e.g. Collins 1990, Ohmann 1996, Palerm 1980, Taussig 1980, Trouillot 1988, Wolf 1982), and

they remain central issues for most anthropological extensions of Marx's ideas toward an analysis of culture and power in capitalist as well as noncapitalist settings. That Marx chose to ignore these questions has nonetheless been the starting point for two contrasting, facile commentaries—one, written by critics of marxism suggesting that the fact that Marx neglected these questions invalidates marxism as a whole, and the other, written by the watchdogs of orthodoxy, contending that because Marx did not address these questions they lay outside the domain of marxian inquiry altogether.

Another question concerns the reduction of qualitatively distinct kinds of human labor to the common denominator of measurable time, which requires a number of historical processes with cultural effects. A central transformation is in the understanding of time itself; a second is in the reduction of qualitatively different thought and work processes to a number of relatively simple and common operations that can be performed across various branches of human activity [what a later literature has called “deskilling” (Braverman 1975)]; another concerns the loss of control over the work process, and the means of production, by people performing the basic work of production. For most of human history, working people did not live and work under such circumstances. The development of capitalism involves, in part, a transformation of work and the conditions of work that includes these three dimensions, all of which are necessary for the imposition of a new kind of work discipline and control. The imposition of discipline, in turn, is necessary for the rational calculation and comparison of different labors in terms of a common, “socially necessary” standard.

Marx recognized this, though he had little to say about time, and he stressed the historical uniqueness of capitalism and of the concepts useful for the analysis of capitalism. Following this line of reasoning, the labor theory of value could only be relevant under capitalism, in a situation in which qualitatively different kinds of labor have been reduced, socially and economically, to a common standard (Marx 1977, pp. 152, 168).

### *Historical Analysis*

On the basis of the formal analysis of the wage relation, Marx pursued a range of economic implications. But formal analysis also made possible and required historical and political commentaries and investigations. That is, having pursued the theory of value in a fictitious world of commodity producers and merchants in which all transactions are fairly conducted among equals, Marx arrived at a social world divided between two classes, in which a uniquely positioned commodity was offered for sale on the market. On the one hand, remaining within the confines of value theory and a fictitious world of equality

and equity, he said the fact that one of those classes appropriates the value produced by the other class was “by no means an injustice.” Yet several hundred pages later, he returned to a more evaluative mode and condemned an economic system that makes, “an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth” (Marx 1977, p. 799). The movement from the one view to the other can only be understood by recognizing that Marx placed the historical and political development of capitalist social relations at the center of his analysis, not as a mere appendage to a more rigorous and logically satisfying formal analysis.

The first move toward history came when Marx postulated a new kind of commodity, labor power. As Marx noted, however, this commodity does not exist in nature; it is produced, under specific conditions. For labor power to exist as a commodity, it must be “free” to be sold, in two senses. First, the person who possesses the capacity to work (the laborer) must be free to sell it on a limited, contractual basis to the possessor of capital. That means he or she must not be encumbered by ties of bondage or slavery that restrict his or her independent action on the market. Second, he or she must have been “freed” from ownership or control of means of production, and from participation in a community of producers, and must therefore sell his or her capacity to work to survive.

Marx insisted that most working people in human history have not been “free” in this dual sense and have therefore not been in a position to sell their capacity to work, a necessary condition for capitalist social relations. In *Capital* and elsewhere, he pursued two kinds of retrospective analysis to stress the uniqueness of capitalism and the commodity form of labor power. One, which we might call epochal, looked to prior modes of organizing and mobilizing labor. At various points in *Capital*, he briefly pointed to earlier forms (pp. 169–75; see also Marx 1973, 1989). Second, in an analysis we can call historical, Marx examined the proletarianization of peasants in England through the enclosure movements (Marx 1977, part 8). Here, his aim was to show that force was required, and we are far removed from the formal analysis with which *Capital* began.

Another occasion for historical and political analysis was provided by the relationship between capital and labor (as classes, rather than as political economic categories) over the level of surplus value. Marx first presented surplus value as a category, and as an unproblematic sum appropriated by capital. He soon emphasized that it points to a relationship marked by negotiation and struggle. Marx made a distinction between absolute and relative surplus value, suggesting that there are two ways in which capital can increase the amount of surplus value it captures in the production process. The first, assuming a constant level of productivity and rate of surplus value, increases the amount of

surplus value by lengthening the working day, or the period of time living labor can be used when the commodity—labor power—has been purchased. Assuming here that the value of labor power is recovered in the same amount of time, increasing the amount of work increases the quantity of surplus value. This method appropriates and increases absolute surplus value. Relative surplus value, alternatively, increases the rate of surplus value appropriation, lowering the portion of the working day required to recover the value invested in labor power. This can be done by increasing productivity, or by cheapening the value of labor power itself.

All these issues push Marx toward history. In his consideration of absolute surplus value, he examined the history of English legislation and agitation over the length of the working day. In his discussion of relative surplus value, he moved toward a history of English industrialization and an examination of work and health conditions in English mills, especially with the employment of women and children. In this, he focused primarily on increasing productivity and (with one important exception) did not pay much attention to mechanisms by means of which the value of labor power itself could be decreased.

This remains a rich area for analysis, however. Marx had stressed that the value of labor power did not represent a bare subsistence minimum but a level that was historically and culturally determined. The level of subsistence, then, is subject to a different kind of historical process and political struggle than that associated with the expropriation of peasants from the land. Changing working-class diets could cheapen the value of labor power (Thompson 1966, pp. 319–49; Mintz 1985).

### *Population Dynamics*

Finally, Marx linked demographic structure and dynamics to the historical and cultural determination of the value of labor power. He claimed that population growth was not subject to natural or universal laws but that each mode of production produced its own laws of population (Marx 1977, p. 784). This in itself is not surprising from an author who explicitly rejected any sort of abstract, universal “laws” or dynamics. The historically specific “laws” he pointed to here do not develop mechanically but through the action of human agents. That is, he indicated certain characteristic relationships under capitalism and explored the ways in which people might act within these relationships.

With regard to population dynamics under capitalism, Marx stressed that capitalist production occurs within social spaces that include what we might call structural centers and peripheries: active mills and mines that regularly employ workers but do not regularly employ the same numbers of workers. In economic cycles of boom and bust, they sometimes employ relatively more,

sometimes employ relatively fewer. The working population is divided into segments composed of those who are routinely employed across economic cycles, those who are routinely not employed across economic cycles, and those who are sometimes employed, sometimes underemployed, and sometimes unemployed. The second and third groups compose what Marx called a “disposable industrial reserve army” (p. 784), which he divided into various segments. The first he called the “floating” reserve army, composed of proletarianized workers who are alternately employed and unemployed. Their labor power is a commodity, but they have difficulty selling it on a routine basis. The second is the “latent,” composed of people who are not employed but also not unemployed. That is, they may be independent producers (e.g. in agriculture) who have not been proletarianized (or whose labor power is not a commodity) who may become proletarianized and employed as part of the general expansion of capitalist production. The third, the “stagnant,” is composed of people who have been proletarianized but who find employment with difficulty, workers who have been passed over (“have become redundant,” p. 796) by the social and technological development of capitalism. The dynamic relation between the employed and unemployed across economic cycles serves as a check on the activities of laborers and can decrease the value of labor power.

This model remains a suggestive source for historical and anthropological analysis. When one considers the kinds of ethnic, racial, and gendered markers through which such human segments are created in any social setting, for example, we see that Marx’s model went well beyond a simple two-class model. Students fascinated by the recent emergence of flexible labor schemes and who think that this marks a “postmodern” world that is also “postcapitalist” would do well to read this brief section of *Capital* (pp. 781–802). Indeed, Harvey’s (1989, pp. 150–55) analysis of sectorial distinctions among the workforce under flexible accumulation is explicitly indebted to Marx’s treatment. Scholars on both sides of a growing employment crisis in the academy (those with jobs and those without, those with tenure and those without) might find insight here as well (Roseberry 1996).

### *Critical Reflections*

Reading *Capital* critically, one notices, first, the narrowing of his approach to labor. While the early Marx saw labor as human essence and criticized an economic process that channeled workers into specialized, repetitive tasks, thus only partially developing a fuller human capacity, *Capital* concentrates on labor primarily in its relationship to capital. Marx was also exclusively concerned with “productive” labor, in the language and assumption of classical political economy, leaving aside other kinds of labor that fell “outside the do-

main of political economy” (Collins 1990, Marx 1964, Sayer 1991, Young et al 1981).

There is, further, the question of what kind of sociological work the analysis in *Capital* can, and cannot, be made to do. Marx claimed that the manner in which surplus labor is pumped out of direct producers “reveals the innermost secret” of the social structure (Marx 1967, p. 791). While this “secret” provided the basis of a powerful analysis of fundamental relationships and processes under capitalism, the “secret” of a social structure cannot stand in for an adequate description of it. For this we need much more specification and detail.

We might therefore return to *Capital* and ask what has been left out. All that was specified was a relationship between capital and labor power. At a structural level alone, much more specification is necessary. Beginning with the “nonproducer,” or capital, end of the bipolar model, we find a mechanism for the production of surplus value, and an indication of its conversion into “capital.” But surplus value is sectorially subdivided into, say, industrial, merchant, financial, and landed capitals, which figure both in the distribution and production of value. At the least, these are tied to different social and spatial configurations, material interests and projects, and so on. Similar differences concern small and large capitals, or regional and sectorial hierarchies. At the “direct producer,” or labor, end, we need a more expansive conception of labor, one not wedded to the classical economists’ distinction between productive and unproductive labor. We should consider as well a variety of differences among workers—skilled and unskilled, employed and unemployed, male and female, adult and child, old and young. Marx provided a basis for such analysis in his model of the relative surplus population under capitalist accumulation. But the divisions among floating, latent, and stagnant sections of the “reserve army of labor” need to be fit within regional, spatial and social hierarchies. We need also to see how ethnic, racial, or gendered labels are assigned—socially and politically—to these sections. In short, a thick sociology and history can, and must, be built up on the “innermost secret” of the relationship between capital and labor.

## THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL SURVEYS

### *The Texts*

A number of essays develop Marx’s methodological framework for more straightforward historical analysis. In these surveys, Marx did not attempt to force recalcitrant events and movements into a preconceived and formulaic model or grand narrative. He applied a materialist conception to these events

and movements, posing questions about class formation, structure, and interests, the position of various groups in relation to each other structurally, spatially, and historically, and the structure and role of states. He also attended to less predictable issues such as individual careers and strategies, parliamentary debates and party platforms, and the texts of constitutions.

The surveys include *Class Struggles in France* (1974a), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1974b), *The Civil War in France* (1934), and a number of brief pieces written about the peasant commune in Russia and its fate in the aftermath of an agrarian reform (Shanin 1983). Some preliminary observations concerning the surveys are necessary. First, they cover the entire period of Marx's writing career. The first two were written during and immediately after the mid-century European revolutions, the last two during the last 12 years of his life. *The Civil War* was a response to the Paris commune of 1871, and the discussions of Russian peasantries, written shortly before his death, were a response to inquiries from and a debate among Russian activists about the revolutionary potential of the *mir*, or peasant commune. The middle decades of his writing life were dominated by the work on *Capital*, but even here he attended to specific historical and political issues in England, Germany, France, India, and the United States.

Second, the surveys directly responded to the imperative of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach in that they were commentaries on and attempts to shape the direction of movements to "change [the world]." They, more than the general methodological essays or even *Capital*, constitute the most important texts in which to evaluate the philosopher who hoped both to understand and change the world he encountered.

Here a remarkable aspect of these surveys is how little they respond to or reflect a "grand narrative." This is most clearly seen in his discussion of Russian peasantries. Marx was asked his view on a debate among Russian activists about the specific history of Russia in relation to the more general history of world capitalism. Reflecting the evolutionist spirit of the time, one group (hoping to monopolize the claim to "marxism") contended that Russia would have to recapitulate the history of western European capitalism, that the Russian peasantry would have to suffer a process of "primitive accumulation," and that Russia would have to enter a long "stage" of capitalism before entering a socialist future. Their opponents saw in the commune a possible cell form for a future socialist society. They hoped Russia could avoid capitalism altogether and that the commune would serve as the social bridge that would make this possible.

Marx's attempts to respond gave little comfort to either group. With regard to the first, he rejected any evolutionist understanding of world history or capitalist development, calling such schemes "supra-historical" attempts to find a

universal master-key (Marx 1983, Shanin 1983). The populists' position, however, was both evolutionist (the question had to do with skipping stages, not rejecting stage schemes altogether) and romantic, in that their vision of the commune removed it from its specific history and structural relations to landlords, merchants, and the Russian state. Marx turned his attention to these questions, producing a more detailed and realistic account of late-nineteenth-century Russian peasants.

### *The Eighteenth Brumaire*

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, instead of the two great classes Marx and Engels had postulated in theory (capital and labor), there are a number of historically and politically specific class fractions. There is also an analysis of a particular spatial and political constellation of classes and class fractions, within Paris and between Paris and the rest of the country. Moreover, we find a detailed narrative analysis of a specific political process—the 1848 Revolution and subsequent processes of reaction, state formation, and petty and personal intrigue. I consider three dimensions of this survey: his approach to the French state, his understanding of the peasantry, and his use of class analysis.

Marx's analysis of the French state was complex. It included an attempt to understand politics in terms of the actions, interests, and strategies of classes, and he claimed that one can discern certain kinds of material interest behind more flowery claims of principle and program. But he also saw important gaps between interest and program. One gap occurred in the separation of the bourgeoisie (or particular fractions thereof) and its parliamentary representatives, who, in addition to representing broader class interests, pursued their own careers and strategies. The postulation of a "republican faction of the bourgeoisie" (1974b, p. 157), then, provided an analytic bridge for the representation of certain class interests in parliamentary debates and processes, but it also introduced the possibility of tensions and contradictions between factions, in which general class interests would be badly represented or sacrificed.

He also explored the structural relationship between state and society in France, arguing for what later generations would call the "relative autonomy" of the state (p. 238). Surveying the structure of the French state from the Old Regime through the Revolution of 1789 to the Revolution of 1848, Marx saw continuity. Despite major economic and social upheavals, state institutions remained intact and became more ramified and developed over time. Thus the state became a growing power in and over society. It was not simply an inert set of institutions to be captured by a particular class so that the state might serve that class's interests. Instead, the state, and the people who staffed it across revolutionary upheavals, might have their own interests not reducible to those of any particular class. The French state, then, was "a frightful parasitic

body, which surrounds the body of French society like a caul and stops up all its pores." In it, "[e]very *common* interest was immediately detached from society, opposed to it as a higher, *general* interest, torn away from the self-activity of the individual members of society and made a subject for governmental activity, whether it was a bridge, a schoolhouse, the communal property of a village community, or the railways, the national wealth and the national university of France" (pp. 237–38).

Marx, however, also observed that the French state "does not hover in mid-air" (p. 238). By 1852 it was grounded in, and enjoyed the support of, the peasantry. We here encounter some of Marx's most often quoted and least understood claims. The French peasantry, in his view, constituted an "immense mass" of similarly structured but socially isolated households; they could only be considered as a group "by the simple addition of isomorphous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes." Moreover, in analyzing them politically, he considered two questions: whether they shared common material interests, and whether their common interests promoted the formation of a political organization or shared "feeling of community" (p. 239). Finding common interest but no possibility of community, he concluded that the peasants were "incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name," and: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (p. 239). Their representative in 1852 was Bonaparte himself, a strong executive power before whom "all classes fall on their knees, equally mute and equally impotent, before the rifle butt" (p. 236).

To these claims, two kinds of question might be posed. One deals with them as historical analysis: Is this an adequate account and interpretation of the positions and roles of French peasants in the Revolution of 1848 and its aftermath? A second treats them as epochal analysis: Is this Marx's view of the positions and roles of peasants in revolutionary movements in general? Unfortunately, generations of marxists subjected the passage (along with his analysis of the state) to a systematic, epochal misreading. In this misreading, Marx was examining not the French state or the French peasantry, but "the" state and "the" peasantry in general.

Yet in Marx's discussion, the references were specific and historical. Marx moved from his general observation regarding the French peasants as a sack of potatoes to a discussion of concrete issues: the creation of small proprietorship as a result of the Revolution of 1789, and then the experience of "two generations" of peasants in the face of exactions placed on their parcels—mortgages imposed by urban merchants and creditors, and taxes imposed by the state. The "immense mass" of households, as "isomorphous magnitudes," was a relatively recent political product, which had as one consequence the creation of a class (in one sense) of producers with none of the mediating institutions, either

of community or of aristocracy, that had characterized the Old Regime (p. 243).

### *Critical Reflections*

This, in turn, raises a final question concerning *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, one that points toward a critical assessment. Throughout the text, Marx pursued a class analysis that took him in at least two different directions. First, he interpreted political positions and programs in terms of material interests. In discussing the division between the Orleanist and Bourbon royal houses, he linked the two factions to two different forms of property—capital and landed property. He contended further that the passions these groups brought to politics—their “old memories, personal enmities, fears and hopes, prejudices and illusions, sympathies and antipathies, convictions, articles of faith and principles” (p. 173)—were only their imagined starting points of activity. One could find the “real” starting points in “the division between their interests” (p. 174).

This claim needs to be placed next to Marx’s discussion of the French peasantry as a class, in which he posed two questions—one concerning the peasantry’s positions and material interests in relation to other classes, the other concerning the peasantry’s (lack of a) feeling of community. In his earlier discussion of class and politics, he did not ask the second question and concentrated on the first. Yet it is interesting that in both cases he referred to certain “feelings”—“modes of thought and views of life” in one case, and feelings “of community” in the other. He recognized that these were separate from, and in many ways counter to, the class interests and identifications he posited. But in one case he dismissed them as “illusions” or imagined starting points of activity; in the other he saw the “feeling of community” as necessary for the very definition of a class.

Marx was outlining the basis for two distinct forms of class analysis, then, one that would separate “real,” material interests from imagined (implicitly false) ones, and the other that might take the cultural construction of community as a central problem for class analysis. Yet the second remained little more than a suggestion, picked up by a later marxist tradition (Thompson 1966, 1978). The first undergirded most of Marx’s analysis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and had a dominant influence on the later development of marxisms. Despite the move from a two-class model toward one that saw several class fractions in a particular social and political space, the definition of class was tied to material interest, and the “tradition and upbringing” of individuals and groups were relegated to the secondary realm of illusion.

This ignored the materiality of “tradition and upbringing,” and even of “memories, personal enmities, fears and hopes, prejudices and illusions,”

along lines suggested above (pp. 7–10). Here three dimensions require emphasis. The first concerns the social formations and communities through which individuals and collectivities identify themselves as subjects (e.g. as “proletarians,” “cobblers,” “tailors”; or as “Parisians” or “the people”; as “peasants” or “Burgundians”; and so on). It is interesting to note, for example, that French working people had only begun to see and organize themselves as a working class with the Revolution of 1848. Earlier, they had grouped themselves by particular and separate trades (Sewell 1983). Second, just as these modes of association and identity are material, they are also formed in fields of power, including state power. Third, the formation of individuals, as subjects, in relation to particular communities, modes of identity, and material interest will often involve multiple sites and modes of distinction (Althusser 1971, Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

## CONCLUSION

Among the many marxisms that have laid claim to Marx’s work, two grand traditions can be delineated: one that makes Marx’s framework a science of society and history, positing an evolutionary teleology; and another that uses a historical materialist framework to grasp both the “innermost secret” of social structures in terms of the appropriation of labor and the specific structured constellations of power that confront working people in particular times and places (Roseberry 1993, p. 341; Thompson 1978, pp. 188–90). The first can be unproblematically subsumed within a wider range of evolutionary philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second remains a valuable and creative tradition despite the political defeat of the first tradition. Indeed, that political defeat might be considered a condition of possibility for the further development of the second.

Stripped of evolutionist “grand narratives,” Marx’s work stands in critical relation to much that is now dominant in social theory. It is, first, materialist, in its broad assumption that social being determines social consciousness and its more specific assertion that the forms and relations through which humans produce their livelihoods constitute fundamental, and determining, relations in society. It is, second, realist, in its confidence that these forms and relations have a material existence and can be described and understood in thought and text. It is, third, structural, in that it envisions these forms and relations as consolidated over time in classes, powers, and institutions. Fourth, among the most important structures Marx analyzed are those of class. Fifth, he saw these institutions exercising a determining influence over human action. This does not mean that Marx ignored the transforming capacities of human action: aside from the opening passage of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* or the eleventh thesis on

Feuerbach, a confidence in such transforming capacities infused his work. He nonetheless saw the real, material structures he had delineated as exerting a shaping power over, and setting limits upon, human action.

Marx's understanding of power is worth some concluding comment. While I have contended that recent readers have been wrong to place Foucault, say, and Marx on different sides of a philosophical divide because of the former's search for local knowledges and the latter's faith in grand narratives, their understandings of power were starkly different. Foucault was therefore correct to identify Marx as one of the influential thinkers who thought of power as concentrated in particular structural or institutional locations or centers. Marx would almost certainly have rejected Foucault's emphasis on a more diffuse and "capillary" understanding of power; he might even have suggested that Foucault's was the more "global, totalitarian theor[y]" (Foucault 1980, p. 80). Yet I wish to conclude not by pointing out obvious differences and then taking sides but by indicating ways in which these different positions can speak to, and "supplement" (Dirks et al 1994), gaps or weaknesses in other positions.

Of critical importance in Foucault's work was his concentration on the formation of certain kinds of subjects within and by regimes and rituals of rule (Althusser 1971; Corrigan & Sayer 1985; Foucault 1982, 1991; Laclau & Mouffe 1985). This is missing in most of Marx's discussions of class, as we have seen, leading him to ignore both the materiality and power dimensions in other modes of association and community. Here Foucault's more complex model of power, permeating a range of institutions and relationships, with multiple sites and modalities, is important.

Yet it is here that Marx remains insightful and important. Clearly one does not want to resort to a simple power grid, akin to a corporate or military hierarchy. But by placing power in specific locations, he also understood that it is limited and subject to change, even as his political surveys emphasized the overwhelming resistance of, say, the state to change despite other kinds of social transformation and revolution (see Corrigan & Sayer 1985). It is in this sense, above all, that Marx's thought resisted becoming a "totalizing" or "totalitarian" theory, and it is here that his own writings nurtured a critical tradition that undercut official marxisms.

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