

Primitives and Production: a response

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In response to Tech Examined a letter from Jeffrey Vega, FE #315, Winter 1984.

Jeffrey Vega would like to define primitive cultures “in the terms of class society” so he can assimilate them to the “historical materialist perspective.” In his mind this is a legitimate operation, since unlike “the self-definition of tribal society” (presumably to him a limited form of knowledge), a class analysis enables us to uncover “the dynamics which led to the development of class society.”

But Vega merely assumes what must be proved—namely that primitive societies contain “contradictions” that ultimately cause them to unravel, to devolve (or mature) into class societies. The term “primitive” may connote something beautiful to Vega, but he apparently sees a flaw in the diamond, in the form of social contradictions whose resolution must await the dialectical unfolding of human history.

In my opinion the “historical materialist perspective” is embraced at the cost of a radical miscomprehension of primitive society. Historical materialism transforms (in the minds of its adherents) cultures that are in fact fundamentally different from Western monoculture into latent or vestigial images of our society.

In his book *The Mirror of Production*, Jean Baudrillard exposes a fundamental lacuna in the Marxist analysis of primitive society:

“Does the capitalist economy retrospectively illuminate medieval, ancient, and primitive societies (as Marx maintains)? No: starting with the economic and production as the determinant instance, other types of production are illuminated only in terms of this model and not in their specificity or even, as we have seen in the case of primitive societies, in their irreducibility to production. The magical, the religious, and the symbolic are relegated to the margins of the economy. And even when the symbolic formations expressly aim, as in primitive exchange, to prevent the emergence with the rise of economic structures of a transcendent social power that would escape the group’s control, things are arranged nonetheless so as to see a determination by the economic in the last instance. Models never go beyond their shadows. Be it infinitely diversified and complicated, a model of political economy never permits us to go beyond political economy or to grasp what is on this side of it (or elsewhere).” (pp. 86–7).

Baudrillard argues that Marxism is trapped by its own analytical model into falsifying the reality of primitive society. He indicts Marxist economic anthropology for “seeking from beginning to end to preserve materialist orthodoxy against the heresy of primitive societies.” Maurice Godelier, a leading exponent of this approach, is singled out by Baudrillard for his efforts at twisting and bending Marxist categories to the breaking point in order to preserve “the distinction between the infrastructure and the superstructure, without which historical materialism collapses.”

Libertarian anthropologist Pierre Clastres is similarly critical of Godelier’s approach, which he believes exemplifies the inadequacies of Marxist ethnology. For example:

“For Godelier, everything is in keeping with his ideology. In Australia his discriminating mind noticed that “kinship relations are equally production relations, and constitute the economic structure.” ...Now, the above proposition has no content whatsoever, unless it means that the production relations in question are established with

relatives. Does Godelier want them to be established with enemies perhaps? Any budding ethnologist knows that all social relations, outside of war, are established with relatives; but Godelier the marxist has something more than this triviality to communicate. He would like to sledgehammer the marxist categories of production relations, productive forces, and development of productive forces into primitive society—where they are meaningless...More competent and attentive to facts than Godelier...specialists in primitive economy such as the American Marshall Sahlins or Jacques Lizot here in France, have established that primitive society functions precisely as a machine of anti-production.

“They have shown that the domestic mode of production always operates beneath its possibilities and that there are no production relations because there is no production, this latter being a source of little worry to primitive society...” (Pierre Clastres, *French Marxists and their Anthropology*, pp. 11–12.)

Baudrillard emphasizes the same point, stating that there is only exchange and reciprocity in primitive society, and that this symbolic exchange:

“excludes all production. The exchanged goods are apportioned and limited, often imported from far away according to strict rules. Why? Because, given over to individual or group production, they would risk being proliferated and thereby break the fragile mechanism of reciprocity...[Symbolic exchange] is based on non-production, and a process of continuous unlimited reciprocity between persons, and inversely on a strict limitation of exchanged goods. It is the exact opposite of our economy based on unlimited production of goods and on the discontinuous abstraction of contractual exchange. In primitive exchange, production appears nowhere as an end or a means: the meaning occurs elsewhere.” (Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, pp. 79–80.)

But why this blindness in Marxist ethnology? In the aforementioned article, Clastres offers the following answer:

“contemporary Marxism institutes itself as the scientific outlook on history and society, as an outlook setting forth laws of historical movement, laws for the transformation of societies—one society begetting another. Thus Marxism can have something to say about every type of society because it is acquainted with each one’s operating principles beforehand; furthermore, marxism must have something to say about every type of possible or real society, because the universality of the laws that marxism discovers will stand for no exceptions. Otherwise, the doctrine, in its entirety, crashes to the ground. Consequently, in order to maintain the coherence and the very existence of marxism, it is imperative for marxists to formulate the marxist conception of primitive society, to establish a marxist anthropology. Without this, the marxist theory of history would only be the analysis of a particular society (nineteenth-century capitalism), elaborated by someone named Marx.

“In this way marxists are caught in a trap set by their own marxism, and there is really no other way out—primitive social facts must be submitted to the same rules of operation and transformation as those that govern other social formations. Two systems of weights and measures are out of the question here. If there are laws of history, they must be as lawful at the beginning of history (primitive society) as during the rest of its course: one weight and measure alone. How do marxists measure social facts?—with economics. Marxism is an economic outlook, it pulls the social body down onto the economic infrastructure. Social is economic, so marxist anthropologists feel obliged to clamp...the categories that they think work elsewhere onto the primitive social body: production, production relations, development of the productive forces, exploitation, etc.” (*French Marxists*, 16–17.)

Thus Vega’s notion that a “division of labor between men and women” exists in primitive communities is wrong, not because men and women do not engage in different activities (which they do) but because their activities cannot be codified as forms of labor and production. Some primitive tribes did indeed keep slaves, as Vega also points out, but this fact cannot be understood in an economic sense, either. As Paul Radin observed: “while [slaves] lives were insecure because they had no status, they were never systematically forced to do menial work or regarded as an

inferior or degraded class in our sense of the term.” (quoted in Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, p. 85.) And as for Vega’s claim that primitive societies “exchanged women as an economic norm,” one must object that this is once again an intrusion of the economic into an area where it does not belong. As Bookchin argues, “women [in primitive society] are decidedly not ‘things’ that men can trade with each other to acquire allies. They are the origins of kinship and sociality—the arche of community and its immanent power of solidarity...” (*Ecology of Freedom*, p. 54.)

In fairness, it must be pointed out that Bookchin also affirms a dialectical, universalist model of the transition to class society. “The violation of organic society is latent within organic society itself,” he writes.

Still, he emphasizes in the very same passage that “Not until distinctly social interests emerge that clash directly with [the natural matrix of the early community] and turn the weaknesses, perhaps the growing tensions, of organic society into outright fractures, will the unity between human and human, and between humanity and nature, finally be broken.” And he further points out that the subjugation of women only emerges “when social life itself undergoes hierarchical differentiation and emerges as a separate terrain to be organized on its own terms...”

But this “hierarchical differentiation” and emergence of “separate social interests” cannot be explained as a gradual development that occurs “behind peoples’ backs” as the effect of an evolving system of production. As I have suggested, primitive societies are explicitly organized to prevent the emergence of production and, consequently, of a separate power over the community. Furthermore, as Clastres argues, this emergence of separate social interests is already the emergence of the state—that is, the exercise of power by some people over others. And this power must have involved a rupture with, a revolution against, the norms of primitive society.

This latter point is sharply revealed in Marshall Sahlins’ account of a successful rebellion of primitive people in Hawaii against their tribal chiefs, who had attempted to violate the inviolable norms of reciprocity. Numerous chiefs had tried to set up a system of compulsory labor, thus going beyond what was considered to be “their due” in the reciprocal order. But this imposition was firmly resisted, and many chiefs were put to death. “Thus,” remarks Sahlins, “did the system define and maintain a ceiling on the intensification of domestic production by political means and for public purposes.

“...If Hawaiian society discovered limits to its ability to augment production and polity, this threshold which it had reached but could not cross was the boundary of primitive society itself.” (*Stone Age Economics*, pp. 147–48).

Clastres ridicules the adherents of historical materialism for consigning “the social mode of organization that all humanity shared for thousands of years” to the conceptual dustbin by labeling primitive societies pre-capitalist. “For them, primitive society exists only insofar as it is grafted onto the form of society that made its first appearance at the end of the eighteenth century—capitalism. Before that, nothing counts, everything is pre-capitalist.” Clastres would turn this thought on its head, “compar[ing], on the other hand, Montaigne, La Boetie, or Rousseau, who all pose the question differently and try to judge what came after in terms of what came before. What about post-primitive societies? Why did inequality, separate power, and the State appear?” (*French Marxists*, pp. 18–19.)

According to Fredy Perlman in *Against His-story, Against Leviathan* (hardly a historical materialist account), the emergence of the state was a virtual accident, a circumstance originally confined to a small enclave in an otherwise primitive world. Even down to the 19th century many regions remained “unimproved” by civilization. And as Stanley Diamond emphasizes in his book *In Search of the Primitive*, no primitive people has ever voluntarily joined the civilized world: the primary mode of assimilation has been conquest—not the succumbing to internal contradictions or the embracing of civilized ways.

In fact, far from being a mere stage in humanity’s development, primitive society occupies an irreducible space as the antipode of the civilized world. Thus “all hitherto existing history is the history of class struggles” (Marx)—but only because state societies were able to suppress the primitive world and inaugurate the reign of the historical. Those who try to incorporate primitive people into the historical stream must not only ignore the active refusal of the primitives to allow History to burst into their midst, but must suppress the immanent critique of Western civilization that primitive society signifies.

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