

# Marx, Engels, Luxemburg and the return to primitive communism

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In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels claims that “the overthrow of mother-right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex”. He goes on to argue that this counter-revolution led to the decline of primitive communism and the rise of class society. He also predicts that humanity will one day return to communistic relations. He then ends the book with a quote from the pioneering anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan, which states that this future society “will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes.”

Contemporary Marxists sometimes use these arguments to show that sexism and class divisions are not inherent to human nature. But it is rare for them to defend Engels’ anthropology and rarer still for them to argue that Engels’ ideas can help us understand the nature of any future revolution.

Yet, although Engels made many errors, anthropological and genetic studies of African hunter-gatherers do now show that early human society may have been both matrilocal and matrilineal. Hunter-gatherer societies are far from perfect but studies also show that hunter-gatherer women have more power than women in agricultural societies and that hunter-gatherer childcare is more collective. Furthermore, unlike other tribal societies, nomadic hunter-gatherers maintain strong egalitarian and communistic principles as regards material wealth.<sup>1</sup> These principles of equality and sharing would have been particularly easy to maintain in prehistoric times when hunters had access to abundant food supplies in the form of mammoths and other mega-fauna.<sup>2</sup> So, perhaps, we should look again at the early Marxists and their hopes of a return to primitive communism, at a higher technological level.

Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family* at Marx’s ‘bequest’ and he derived many of its ideas from Marx’s intensive research into anthropology. In his later years, Marx seems to have prioritised this research, rather than finishing further volumes of *Capital*. Unfortunately, he then died before he could connect up this anthropological work with his analysis of capitalism. However, an unsent letter to the Russian revolutionary, Vera Zasulich, gives us some idea of what he was thinking.

In that letter, Marx writes that “the vitality of primitive communities was incomparably greater than that of ... modern capitalist societies.” He goes on to argue that “the

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<sup>1</sup> L.Sims, ‘Primitive Communism, Barbarism and the Origins of Class Society’; C.Knight, ‘Engels was Right: Early Human Kinship was Matrilineal’; S.Hrdy, *Mothers and Others*; C.Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*; R.B.Lee, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Hunters and Gatherers*, esp. J.Gowdy p391-7. (Available at libcom.org.)

<sup>2</sup> These mega-fauna eventually died out and the subsequent scarcity and insecurity seems to have encouraged people to look to leaders to adjudicate between conflicting interests. At first these leaders probably advocated egalitarianism but then the temptation to attain individual security and wealth became too great. This decline of egalitarianism seems to be reflected in ancient Greek culture in Aesop’s fable of ‘The Wolf and the Ass’. In that story, the leader of the wolves announces “laws to the effect that whatever was caught by hunting would be shared communally.” However the ass then declares: “What about your catch of yesterday which you have concealed in your lair? Bring it out and share it with the community.” Aesop then ends the fable with the sentence: “The wolf, disconcerted, abolished his laws.” Aesop, *Complete Fables* p170.

best proof that the development of the Russian ‘rural commune’ is in keeping with the historical trend of our age is the fatal crisis which capitalist production has undergone in the European and American countries where it has reached its highest peak, a crisis that will end in its destruction, in the return of modern society to a higher form of the most archaic type — collective production and appropriation.” Well aware of how radical this argument was, Marx reassures any readers that “we must not let ourselves to be alarmed at the word ‘archaic’.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the first Marxist theorists, August Bebel, was certainly not ‘alarmed’ by ideas of returning to the ‘archaic’. In his classic text, *Woman under Socialism*, Bebel even quotes the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist, Johann Bachofen, who argued that “the end-point of political development resembles the beginning of human existence. The original equality returns again at last. The materialistic, maternal existence opens and closes the cycle of human history.” Bebel also writes that “the line of human development returns at the end of its journey to social structures similar to those of primal society, only at a much higher level of culture... The whole development forms a spiral heading upwards, whose end point is exactly above the start.”<sup>4</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg was also not ‘alarmed’ by such ideas. In her last book, *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie*, she argues that “primitive communism, with its corresponding democracy and social equality [was] ... the cradle of social development.” She goes on to claim that “the whole of modern civilisation, with its private property, its class domination, its male domination, its compulsory state and compulsory marriage [are] merely a brief passing phase, which, because they first formed from the dissolution of primitive communist society, in future will become higher social forms.... The noble tradition of the ancient past, thus holds out a hand to the revolutionary aspirations of the future, the circle of knowledge closes harmoniously, and the present world of class domination and exploitation ... becomes merely a minuscule transient stage in the great cultural advance of humanity.”

## The Origins of Coinage

These quotes by the early Marxists raise the question of how contemporary Marxists can connect up this return to primitive communism with Marx’s analysis of capitalism in his master-work, *Capital*.

The most obvious connection between primitive communism and *Capital* is that the word ‘capital’ derives from the Indo-European word ‘caput’, which probably refers to ‘head’ of cattle. In ancient Greece, wealthier men would donate cattle to the temple for sacrifice. The priests would then give worshippers a share of the cooked meat as a symbol of their integration into society. Ancient Greece was, of course, no longer

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<sup>3</sup> J.D.White, *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism* p275-84; MECW Vol.24.

<sup>4</sup> P.Davies, *Myth, Matriarchy and Modernity* p67.

a primitive communist society. But these rituals seem to have derived from hunter-gatherer traditions in which the meat of hunted animals is carefully shared between every member of the tribe.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike egalitarian hunter-gatherers, the Greek priests gave higher class men considerably more of these shares. Then, later, the priests seem to have distributed pieces of metal, in the form of coins, rather than pieces of meat. In fact the coin, the drachma, derives its name from the Greek for a ‘handful’ of spits — where ‘spits’ refers to the skewers used to cook the ritual sacrifice.<sup>6</sup>

The uniform nature of the first coins may have been a response, like Athenian democracy, to people’s desire for equality at time of growing inequality. However, once coins were introduced, they spread to markets and trade, and eventually people started selling themselves for coins.

Is this, at least partially, the origins of wage labour — with all its insecurities and real, though limited, freedoms? If so, how does this understanding help us transcend the whole money system? How does this understanding help us go from a society held together by the fake equality of money and wage labour to one held together by the real equality of sharing and community? How does this understanding help us fulfil the hopes of the early Marxists by returning to the social relations of primitive communism, at a higher level?

There are no obvious answers to these questions. But, as Marx predicted — 130 years too soon — capitalism’s crisis does appear to be heading towards the disintegration of the money system (with Greece, uncannily, at the centre of this crisis). Even *The Financial Times* now admits that, for most people in the West, the bad times will not just last for a few years, but forever.<sup>7</sup>

Capitalism was surprisingly resilient in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because it was usually able to keep its promise of improving living standards. However, once people realise that this promise is over — forever — it is only a matter of time before they will start looking for alternatives to the whole money system.

As the system stumbles from crisis to crisis, it will take a while for people to realise that they will need to transcend it completely. After all, we have been selling ourselves for coins for several thousand years. But we do need to remind ourselves that we spent much longer than this — tens of thousands of years — sharing everything as communist hunter-gatherers, without coins, classes or states. We also lived for tens of thousands of years without patriarchy.

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<sup>5</sup> A.Semenova, ‘Would You Barter with God? Why Holy Debts and Not Profane Markets Created Money’, *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol.70 p378-92; P.Wiessner, *Food and the Status Quest* p171ff.

<sup>6</sup> The earliest Greek word for coinage, *nomisma* and the word for law, *nomos*, both derive from *nemein*, meaning ‘to distribute’. Moreover, the word ‘collateral’ seems to derive from the Greek for a ‘receiver of limbs’. These derivations presumably refer to the distribution of pieces of sacrificial animals. Semenova (ibid); R.Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind* p49-50, 79, 102ff.

<sup>7</sup> M.Wolf, ‘Is Unlimited Growth a Thing of the Past?’, *Financial Times*, 2/10/12.

# The Overthrow of Patriarchy

By achieving better employment opportunities, women have significantly weakened patriarchy. By sacrificing more of their time for coins, women have become fully integrated into Western capitalist society. But, despite this improvement, individualised childcare means that proletarian women's workload has only increased. On top of this, cuts in welfare and jobs have now brought a halt to any further improvement in women's lives. Consequently, it may only be a matter of time before women start looking to collective and revolutionary solutions to their problems.

If women do take a leading role in any future anti-capitalist revolution, they are unlikely to put up with the continuation of individualised childcare. If such a revolution does collectivise childcare — putting human care, not material production, at the centre of society — women would then have an unprecedented opportunity to reverse what Engels called, “the world-historic defeat of the female sex”. Humanity could then return to the better aspects of primitive communism, to, what Marx called, “a higher form of the most archaic type”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the era of classic Marxism, the theorist who went furthest in describing this future revolution was the Communist Party member and, at one time, highly-regarded colleague of both Freud and Jung, Otto Gross. Dr. Gross argued “that the entire structure of civilisation since the destruction of the primitive communistic mother-right order is false.” He called for “the dissolution of the father-right family by socialising the care of motherhood” and for a revolution for “Communist Mother-Right”. See ‘Otto Gross — The Anarchist Psychoanalyst’ and ‘**Is Revolution Back on the Agenda?**’ (at libcom.org).

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Marx, Engels and Luxemburg were all keen to return to the egalitarian relations of primitive communism, at a higher level. But how does the egalitarianism of early human societies connect up with Marxism's prime focus on the rise and decline of capitalism? As capitalism continues to disintegrate, this article looks at the egalitarian origins of money in ancient Greece for clues as to how we might transcend the whole money system.

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