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Marxism

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The work of Marx and Engels

Marxism stems from the work of Karl Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels. Marxism (sometimes called “political economy”) provides anthropology with fundamental theoretical concepts, especially with regard to deep human history and social change, conflict, social inequality, economics, and labor. Marxism is “a way to know the world, as a critique of the world, and as a means to change the world,” as Randall McGuire puts it (2006, 62, citing Patterson 2003). Marx and Engels were revolutionaries, whose theory and empirical work was developed in an explicitly activist context. They aimed to understand the world emerging in front of them, wage labor capitalism, but their work provided not just characterization but also critique. Their critique exposed systematically hidden dimensions and pointed out ways in which the social world could be arranged differently. While anthropology, as a scholarly enterprise, mainly uses Marxism as a way to know the world, engaged anthropology is inspired by its combination of knowing, critiquing, and changing, termed “praxis.”

Marxism begins with a materialist understanding of the world. Materialism prioritizes the history and arrangement of practical activities rather than the unfolding of abstract ideas. These practical activities are done by people in social relationships, rather than as self-contained individuals, utilizing the human capacity for reasoning, and they engage the natural world beyond humanity. A narrower interpretation of Marxist materialism is that it causally prioritizes the economy while a wider interpretation is that it encompasses a range of social practices conducted by thinking actors; Marx and Engels themselves wavered between the two. Marxism also recognizes relationships between apparent opposites; apparent contradictions are not necessarily errors but rather point to unfolding processes. It is a deep perspective in the sense that immediate empirical evidence, while important, is understood to be generated by unseen, more fundamental processes and the goal is to discern the workings of these deep processes. For that reason, Marxism has distinctive power to question and criticize taken-for-granted understandings.

Marx and Engels began with an analysis of wage labor capitalism, then in its early stages in Europe and North America. Wage labor capitalism is a relationship between unequal opposites, capitalists and workers; there are no capitalists without workers and vice versa. Through historical processes of dispossession, workers’ productive resources are no more than their own labor. To obtain goods needed for reproduction, daily renewal, and renewal across generations, abject workers must sell themselves, though

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they imagine themselves to be free. Workers, in reality full human beings, become nothing more than a commodity bought and sold on the market. This foundational moment of “commoditization” then extends across nature, consumption, culture, and so forth. Capitalists monopolize the productive resources but they require workers to turn those resources into products. This labor is compensated with wages but the final product is more valuable than the wages and other inputs (e.g., commodities stripped from nature). This added value is taken by capitalists as private profit but in fact it is the beneficial surplus produced by the entire collectivity of society and nature—creators, managers, laborers, solar energy, biophysical stocks and flows, and so forth. It is a social product and socialism involves various designs for sharing this collective benefit.

The privately captured surplus is invested in new productive resources, again owned privately, and reproducing the potential to employ labor. This cycle of building up capital, “capital accumulation,” is also a cycle of building up power since capital effectively exists only because it can command abject labor and defenseless nature. Capital accumulation can return to the same locations, production processes, and social groups but it also can undergo abrupt, creative, and destructive shifts as it pulls out of one role and into another. In one place, massive groups of workers are thrown into the streets and in others urgently recruited; youth, women, and men come and go from the labor market; migrants make desperate journeys in order to offer themselves for exploitation; new technologies are invented and others forgotten; famous cities, even countries, are abandoned while novel regions launch on chaotic booms; and biophysical resources are stripped before moving on to a new site, leaving a trail of degradation and disequilibrium. Hence the history of any one people or place forms part of a global network of relations and transformations, past and present.

Marxism is a deeply historical approach. Classes are not data classifications or separate sets of people but rather power relations combining apparently contrastive social groups. These relations are historically experienced by communities of people. People bring inherited frameworks of meaning and action into the disruptive and transformative maelstrom of capitalism, resisting change or inventing new responses. Marxism is, above all, a theory of continuous struggle. Conflict is fundamental and creative. Marx and Engels had, in most regards, a simple stage theory of history, with periods characterized by specific class relations and particular kinds of struggle, changing to new arrangements through revolutionary leaps. Finally, they thought, this sequence would culminate in the end of capitalism in favor of universal sharing of the collective social product. This single path is consistent with their preference for a centralized form of struggle. But, the basic perspective is capable of being modified to include more diverse paths, forms of struggle, and processes of transformation, without a simple endpoint. This diversification is a key way by which other theories of struggle (anarchism, feminism, and the like) usefully challenge and modify Marxism.

Since Marx and Engels started with European capitalism and worked backward in history and outward in geography, from an anthropological perspective their core work is limited and teleological. In late work, they explored nineteenth-century anthropological and historical sources concerning precapitalist relations of production and social formations, the relations of peasants with capitalists and landlords, diverse historical paths of change, and so forth. This work, while interesting, is less important than the

inspiration they gave later social scientists to explore a wide historical and cross-cultural range of modes of production and reproduction and processes of struggle and change. The words of Maurice Godelier (1977, 97) offer valuable guidance: the “living ideas” in Marxism should stimulate us, not the “dead sections” of the original texts.

Marxism in anthropology: The path to the Wolfian synthesis

Marxism’s conversation with anthropology went into abeyance during the Boasian and functionalist periods when relatively non-ethnocentric notions of distinctive cultures and social structures were established and grand historical sequences were critiqued. Even when it returned, during the Cold War its presence often was unspoken. One of the ways that Marxism returned to anthropology was the reconsideration of deep human history (misleadingly labeled cultural evolution), examining types and sequences of major sociocultural arrangements. An important figure in this was the archaeologist V. Gordon Childe. Leslie White wrote a grand history of human power based on updating the nineteenth-century synthesis of Lewis H. Morgan with Marx and Engels. White envisioned human culture, based on human symbolic capacity used to control energy, as following one single path of development. In parallel to White, but untouched by Marxist influence, Julian Steward developed a more complex approach involving parallel paths of development interwoven with local environmental adaptations. Karl Polanyi provided economic anthropology, a rival but also reinforcing set of ideas to Marxism. Marx and Engels emphasized the processes of production (and, by implication, reproduction of labor and capital) while Polanyi attended to the arrangement of circulation and distribution through horizontal reciprocity, vertical redistribution, and disembedded capitalist markets (see Wessman 1981).

Deep history remains central to anthropology and, as such, Marxism remains crucial. Hominization addresses the development of social relationality among humans, as well as symbolic and linguistic capacities, in a setting of material production and reproduction. The study of subsequent transformations—domestication and sedentization, accumulation and storage of surplus, the rise of structured inequalities, urbanization, state formation, hierarchical ideologies and their speakers, and so forth—is informed by Marxist as well as other theories. Capitalism as a transformation certainly demands insights from Marxist analysis. Marxism thus maintains a notable importance to archaeology and ethnohistory. Initial efforts simply to update Marx and Engels in stage theories have given way to recognition of more complex causation, more dynamic and fluid processes, a less rigid sequence of periods, attention to gender and embodiment, and greater roles for knowledge and meanings. Bruce Trigger (1998), in particular, brought Marxist insights to this discussion. The point is not to replicate mechanically Marx and Engels but to ask Marx-inspired questions, such as those concerning production, accumulation, deployment, and legitimation of surpluses throughout deep history.

Marxism also entered anthropology through ethnohistories and ethnographies situated in the capitalist world system. In southern Africa, Godfrey Wilson developed “a marriage of Marx and Malinowski,” as Richard Brown phrases it (1973, 195). With Monica Hunter Wilson, his wife, he situated culture change in the context of rural wage

labor migration to urban mining districts and in particular the devastating impacts of the gyrations of the world economy (the Great Depression) on the several locales of this regional labor system. While Marxist in regards to the economy, the Wilsons also recognized the southern African intersection of racism with capitalism. The intellectual tradition begun by the Wilsons, first centered in the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) and later transferred to the “Manchester School” (named after Manchester University in the United Kingdom), retained an important influence from Marxism in its focus on conflict, cleavage, and social change but gradually diluted its early radical analysis of race and class.

At Columbia University, at the very end of and immediate aftermath of the Boasian period, young scholars explored the historical impact of the expanding capitalist world system on Native Americans. Notable among them was Eleanor Leacock, who interpreted the culture of the Montagnais-Naskapi (Innu) historically, in the context of the fur trade and reinforced by Christian missionization. The fur trade shifted social relations from communal subsistence production and distribution within gender-egalitarian bands toward separated nuclear families that supported male fur trappers who were in turn bound by debt to international merchants. This work began Leacock’s career exploring Marxist feminism, especially revisiting Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, for which she wrote an introduction that is in many ways superior to the original book (Leacock 1972).

Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf, students of Julian Steward who researched the Caribbean and Mexico (and later the Mediterranean), and Ángel Palerm, a Catalan Spaniard exiled in Mexico, attended to peasants and plantation workers, who are crucial to understanding the connections of many world regions with the capitalist core. In this, they also were influenced by the revival of cultural evolutionism. While Marx was certainly aware of rural class relations, these populations appear marginal to his focal capitalist–urban proletarian relationship. Yet peasants and plantation workers constitute a vast and important part of the capitalist world; indeed, only recently have peasants declined below half the world population and many urban proletarians are better described as migrant peasant workers. Palerm and Wolf insisted in the Mexican case, and then Wolf in his general works on peasants, that landed estates (“haciendas”) and peasant communities need to be understood as combined regional wholes, and then those seemingly isolated and backward formations be understood as part of modernity, combined wholes with the capitalist core via commodity chains, credit–debt/rent flows, and migrant labor flows. The focus on rural class relations thus creatively challenges orthodox Marxism while at the same time the Marxist attention to power relations analysis challenges localist and culturalist anthropology.

Contemporary plantation workers are wage-paid proletarians, though sometimes subject to nonmarket coercion, but as tropical rural populations they stand apart from stereotypes of urban workers in the capitalist core, as Mintz pointed out. More conceptually, importantly, earlier periods of capitalist history saw slaves and indentured servants as plantation workforces, which were large and heavily capitalized units of production. This suggests, following Mintz, that capitalist production can directly utilize nonwage forms of labor and perhaps will continue to do so in some times and places. He

also placed cane sugar at the center of world capitalism, linking its plantation production with its consumption by newly proletarianized urban workers. Marxist approaches have generally treated consumption as a reflex of production while Mintz in *Sweetness and Power* (1985) synthesizes production and consumption in an entire historical totality.

These scholars (Leacock, Mintz, Palerm, Wolf, and other like them) anticipated and were important participants in the militant anthropological New Left of the 1960s, exemplified by works such as *Reinventing Anthropology* (Hymes 1972) and *De eso que llaman la antropología mexicana* (About That Which They Call Mexican Anthropology) (Warman et al. 1970). In this period, Marxism came out into the open. Marxist theories of class, of course, informed the New Left; however, that movement in anthropology appropriately broke with orthodox Marxist prioritization of class, bringing to the fore other relations of inequality and liberatory struggle, such as indigeneity, colonial subjection, race, gender, sexuality, and so forth. The connection of the New Left to Marxism was less through intellectual theory than through radical praxis, as the New Left saw knowledge as a critique of the world, and a means to change it, and not just an accumulation of academic capital.

The New Left was anticipated by a cluster of radical historian-activists, notably E. P. Thompson in the United Kingdom and Herbert Gutman in the United States, the latter communicating closely with Wolf and Mintz. This development, characterized by sensitive interpretation of cultural practices and meanings in histories of class struggle, converged with anthropologists discontented with standard approaches to culture and social structure. Their discontent centered on culture and social structure seen as static properties of relatively isolated units of people; the historical and anthropological New Left instead interpreted culture and social structure as processual moments in conflictive and unequal relations, in particular attending to domination and resistance. Wolf (1969), for example, sensitively analyzed peasant participation in revolutions across the course of the twentieth century in a book grounded in the protest movement against the Vietnam War. This was “gut” Marxism (Firth 1975), unabashedly political, attentive to human suffering, deeply immersed in field materials, and theoretically informed but uninterested in theoretical purism.

Alongside gut Marxism was the more theoretically precise structural Marxism and its close relatives (cerebral Marxism [Firth 1975]), especially influenced by the French theorist Louis Althusser. Anthropological structural Marxism took notice of the analytical similarities between British structural functionalism, French structuralism, and Marxist theory. The core notion was that surface cultural and social structures were results of underlying, fundamental arrangements of relations of production and reproduction seen in Marxist terms. The key concept was the mode of production, which Marx used sporadically as shorthand for the systems features of capitalism and major precapitalist economies. Impressive insights were gained into the systematic production and justification of equalities and inequalities lurking within complex ethnographic materials. Notable was the exploration of articulations (systematic connections) between modes of production, which helped analyze the production of commodities for global markets by tribal peoples and peasants, or seasonal labor migration from zones of domestic reproduction to direct capitalist production.

These situations remain pervasive and, furthermore, it can be argued that we all experience articulated modes of production in the sense that only some aspects of our lives are commoditized while others are not, yet are orchestrated within a capitalist whole.

Wolf, in *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), synthesized many of these elements and, in so doing, produced the essential reference for Marxism in anthropology. Though cultural history had long acknowledged diffusion, the basic thrust of anthropology had been to reveal inner essences of cultures and social structures viewed statically and in isolation. Wolf challenged this with an impressive survey of world history that showed that cultures (including many prominent anthropological examples) engage in continuous interactions and dynamic change throughout history, in particular the expansion of the world capitalist system outward from Europe. While the European side was dominant until very recently, Wolf's account is not Eurocentric and accords agency to all sides.

To help understand this material, Wolf delineated three modes of production characterized by ways that labor is mobilized to act on nature and other humans. In the kin-ordered mode of production, this activity is organized through symbolic constructs of persons and relations. In the tributary mode of production (which encompasses several previously separate concepts, such as feudalism and the so-called Asiatic mode), violence, literally and symbolically encoded, organizes labor and captures surplus. In the capitalist mode of production, apparently free choice leads people to enter into unequal relationships, following Marx's analysis detailed earlier. Wolf's modes are not meant as classifications of societies, or separate types, but as ideas that point to key relationships in the interplay of processual history.

Marxism in anthropology: Current developments

After its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, Marxism diffused as a pervasive but subtle component of anthropology, often in hybrids with other approaches. Much work in archaeology, linguistic anthropology, biocultural and sociocultural anthropology has recourse to ideas and attitudes originating in Marxism and the Marxist anthropological tradition. For example, neoliberalism, which involves subjecting more and more aspects of economy, society, and self to market calculation, is an important current concern for many anthropologists. A variety of theoretical traditions contribute to its study—for example, Karl Polanyi's critical history of the disembedding of the market or Michel Foucault's attention to power and subjectivity—but certainly Marxist theories are crucial to identifying the key aspects of this specific period as a kind of capitalism. Marxist anthropologists are notable as ethnographers and analysts of neoliberalism. It is hard to imagine any adequate account of recent history or the contemporary world without awareness of capitalism; and, in turn, hard to understand capitalism without insights from Marxism.

The New Left brought about a salutary broadening of Marxist anthropology and Marxism generally. Orthodox Marxism had distinctly narrowed its predelict subject of analysis to production, paid labor, and visible class, thereby embodying a masculine

starting point and treating women as a secondary if needy concern, and similarly sexual orientation. Likewise, the class-as-exclusive-concern frame obscured or rendered secondary the study of racial oppression, immigration status, colonialism, and so forth. Yet conscientious ethnographers attend to those forms of power and praxis requires engagement in those liberation struggles. We can understand production, labor, surplus, and reproduction as general principles and, in that way, class as inhering in diverse relationships. Race, for example, can be the central organizing principle in a specific historical labor situation. Contemporary race, after all, originated in the capitalist Atlantic economy as a labor regime. This is not to deny the importance of class as such. Rather, relations of unequal power and ideology such as gender, class, indigeneity, race, citizenship, and so forth intersect, contradict, and combine with each other in particular power settings. Intersectionality adds greater complexity and flexibility to Marxist anthropology, while Marxist attention to structural inequality provides a stronger, systematic version of intersectionality than individualistic versions do.

Marxist feminism has inspired many of these developments. Much attention has gone to women wage workers—domestic workers, caregivers, factory workers, “pink-collar” office workers, and the like. These ethnographies show that relations and ideologies affecting women outside the workplace interact with those inside, resulting in specific forms of exploitation and subjectivities in capitalist work. This point is salutary for the Marxist tradition in showing that the wage relation and the capitalist site of production is not separate and pure but rather is part of an intersecting web of power relations linking workplaces with other social settings. The Marxist tradition, despite occasional nods to women’s issues, has been persistently male-centered and unconcerned about social relations outside formal sites of capitalist production. This is not just a question for women; it also is the case that such relations and ideologies shape men’s work and it is a conceptual error to treat working men as if they embody the ideal-type, unmarked category “worker.” The point goes beyond gender; anthropological analyses of low-wage work show that it is partially produced by various nonmarket social relations, such as race, ethnicity, and citizenship. Anthropologists of work have demonstrated, in dialogue with Marxist economists, that divisions of labor (workplace tasks, conditions, authority, compensation, and consciousness, collectively termed labor market segmentation) emerge from complicated interactions of market and nonmarket relations.

Marxist feminism, however, posed a more fundamental conceptual challenge. Marxism, owing to its original critical insight into the wage relation within capitalism, had prioritized production. Marx had acknowledged that there was an entire totality of production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction but the overall thrust was toward male-associated production. Circulation or distribution characteristically concerned mainstream economics, so they also attracted research and analysis. But reproduction, the renewal and transformation of daily existence and broader social arrangements, was mostly taken for granted, unsurprisingly, because of its discursive association with women. This also has been the case with consumption, the labor process of provisioning and using of material goods in determinate social relations. (Most recent work on consumption has focused on identity meanings, which are important, but has neglected the reproduction of social systems.) The study of reproduction asks about the practices, social relations, and meanings of unpaid household production, as well as waged

production. The concept of reproduction is essential to Marxist concerns about the unfolding of social relations over time. Marxist feminism draws attention to how all the moments of social relations, production, circulation, and reproduction dynamically affect each other, a point that is particularly valuable to anthropologists, who deal with historically and culturally diverse social arrangements of these elements.

In addition to human and social reproduction, recent developments in environmental studies have challenged conventional Marxism. Although human action in nature is fundamental to materialism, and human–environment interactions are mentioned at scattered places by Marx and Engels, it has been undertheorized. Historically, anthropology emphasized how human cultures were functional adaptations to nature (as a given), with little regard for human power relations and disequilibria in human–environment interactions. Responding to this, the novel field of political ecology has combined Marxist (and, later, poststructuralist) theories of unequal and dynamic society with nonequilibrium approaches to human–environment interactions. Alf Hornborg, in *The Power of the Machine* (2001), raised political ecology to the level of fundamental contribution to anthropological theory, providing a more socially and biophysically robust interpretation of energetics than the pioneer Leslie White. In a heterodox Marxist approach, he starts with thermodynamics, specifically the unequal exchange and accumulation of centralized order at the cost of disorder imposed on weaker parties, human and biophysical. Thermodynamic power relations are culturally constructed but they masquerade as inevitable and natural, particularly through socially constructed technologies that enact unequal exchanges of order.

The means by which power is disguised and naturalized has long been a key concern of Marxism, unlike conventional anthropology, which often prioritized people's own subjective understandings or contingent arrangements, thereby avoiding critical, revelatory moves. Fetishism refers to the manner in which underlying relationships are encoded in surface forms in ways that disguise or incompletely express those relationships. Marx used fetishism to penetrate how commodities, material objects that are produced, exchanged, and consumed, appear to people as phenomenally "real" while social relations that produce such commodities remain unspoken. Commoditization, in turn, refers to all processes that turn human and natural phenomena into units or objects that can be bought and sold on markets. Commoditization, Marxists suggest, fundamentally shapes surface and deep levels in capitalist cultures. Mystification, in turn, is processes by which surface understandings are directed away from central nexuses of power. Mystifications are not just errors but systematic products of ideologies. Ideologies emerge through alignments of power and struggle in social processes of meaning creation and exchange. All social actors are caught in webs of ideology and critical penetration is a constant challenge. In penetrating ideologies, mystification, fetishism, and commoditization, Marxist anthropology breaks with the acceptance of surface subjectivities often encountered in ethnography-focused anthropology. It is not unique in this but certainly it is an important source of critical perspectives.

Anthropology in recent decades has received an important contribution from Marxist cultural studies, the point that culture is actively produced by discernible social–political groups and alignments rather than just existing as a given, unproduced quality of a particular people. This perspective is rooted in the work of the Italian

communist activist and theorist Antonio Gramsci. He sought to understand how everyday understandings of society emerge from, reproduce, and change fields of struggle in class society. In other words, he saw ideas as much the subject of struggle as workplaces. Gramsci's approach to the production of culture was explicitly a theory of, and for, revolutionary political change. Another influence on cultural and linguistic anthropology was the heterodox Marxist literary and linguistic theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. He saw language and meaning as always performed in complex, dialogical interactions. This implies that students of literature, language, and culture require analyses of unequal, dynamic social relationality. The Gramscian understanding of the contested production of culture and the Bakhtinian dialogic processes of culture have informed recent anthropology. In his later years, Wolf (1999) ventured a synthesis of the classic anthropological culture concept, the critical Marxist approach to ideology, and various strands of the production of culture.

It is essential to confront the authoritarian legacy of Marxism. It has been associated with murderous regimes, though the superficial appearance of Marxism was little more than crude justification in those cases. It is essential to reject all forms of intellectual and political centralism and orthodoxy in Marxism and retain the fundamental primacy of people over doctrine or systems. Similar criticisms need to be made of capitalist systems and doctrines. However, Marxism, stripped of authoritarianism, retains powerful insights for the contemporary world. Exploited workers have not disappeared, now being found in the millions in Mexico, China, and many other places. More and more people cling to precarious occupations. The world economy is wracked by destructive economic crises centered on the accumulation and dissipation of financial capital. Environmental disequilibria, such as global climate change, are linked to the accumulative nature of capitalism, to the point of fundamentally threatening social and cultural reproduction. Recent work in radical anthropology, which in some ways echoes the New Left, draws on a mixture of Polanyi and anarchism as well as Marxism, as illustrated by the work of David Graeber. He offers a useful observation (2004, 6) that Marxists excel in the social analysis of that which actually exists and the anarchists excel in analysis of what to do about it, and how; this offers a starting point for the profound tasks that face us now.

SEE ALSO: Alienation; Capitalism; Class; Class and Identity; Communism; Cultural Evolution; Desai, Akshay Ramanlal (1915–94); Dispossession; Division of Labor; Domestic Mode of Production; Economic Anthropology; Economy, Cultural Approaches to; Engels, Friedrich (1820–95); Exploitation; France, Anthropology in; Gellner, Ernest (1925–95); Gender and Kinship; Gender, Marxist Theories of; Gluckman, Max (1911–75); Godelier, Maurice (b. 1934); Gramsci, Antonio (1891–1937); Industrial Workers; Interethnic Friction; Interpretative Anthropology; Interviews with Eminent Anthropologists: An Online Resource; Leach, Edmund (1910–89); Mariátegui, José Carlos (1894–1930); Marx, Karl (1818–83); Materiality; Mode of Production; Montage; Morgan, Lewis Henry (1818–81); Palerm, Ángel (1917–80); Paternalism; Philosophical Anthropology; Poland, Anthropology in; Political Ecology; Political Economy; Postcoloniality;

Power, Anthropological Approaches to; Praxis; Religion, Marxism, and Ideology; Religion and Politics; Resistance; Russia, Anthropology in; Socialism, Marxist–Leninist–Maoist; States: Formation; Structural Functionalism; Surplus; Transnational and Multinational Corporations; Urbanism; Utopias and Dystopias, Anthropology and; Weber, Max (1864–1920); Wolf, Eric (1923–99); Work

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