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Excerpt

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PART I

The domestic community

The agricultural domestic community, through its organised capacity for production and reproduction, represents an integrated form of social organisation which has existed since the neolithic period, and upon which still depends an important part of the reproduction of the labour-power necessary to the development of capitalism. This social formation has been the object of some attention by students concerned with economic history and the theory of pre-capitalist societies. Marx and Engels both tried to define its characteristics. In the *Formen*¹ Marx's ideas on this still appear to be influenced by bourgeois ideology. He viewed the community as being constituted 'spontaneously', the family, or tribal community, as being 'natural', and kinship as being 'consanguineous'. By formulating it this way, he by-passed the historical and material conditions which contributed to the development of this particular form of social organisation, and therefore tended to regard the family as an extra-social given.

However, in other texts and in the work of Engels, there are elements of a more relevant approach. This could be summarised as follows: the domestic community is composed of individuals who (a) practice self-sustaining agriculture, (b) produce and consume together, on common land, access to which is subordinated to membership of the community, and (c) are linked together by unequal ties of personal dependence. Within this community only use-value emerges.²

Marx and Engels attached considerable importance to common ownership of the land, which they contrasted to the private ownership of the means of production characteristic of capitalism. Elsewhere (1972a) I have criticised this retrospective approach to history which, although it undoubtedly demonstrates the radical evolution of social structures, does not provide concepts which can be applied to all societies.

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It is interesting to note that few of the features in this description relate to the level of productive forces. They refer rather to norms (the division of labour, common ownership of land) or to traits which are not specifically defined (like self-sustenance and use-value) which, at this level of the productive forces, are implied by the process of agricultural production. Also, the idea that such communities are self-sufficient is only true as far as production is concerned, for their reproduction depends on their being one of a group of similar communities.

However, in *Capital* (Vol. III, p. 831) Marx does recognise that the problem of reproduction of communal society is 'its ultimate purpose': this refers not only to physical reproduction of individuals but to the social reproduction at large.

Thus, in contrast to some of his other propositions by which he seems to consider the community as 'natural' and 'spontaneous', Marx emphasises here, as does Engels in *The Origin of the Family*, the position occupied by the relations of production in the constitution of the domestic group.

German and British sociologists of the second half of the nineteenth century did not, however, choose to define the domestic community in this way, but rather made a distinction between trading and non-trading societies. Rodbertus (1865) took up the idea of the self-sustaining community again, using the term 'oikos' to designate an autonomous productive unit, whose main feature was, in his view, that it did not trade. This he related to a specific form of economic organisation within which the categories of political economy did not operate: there was no selling or buying, and no transfer of 'national dividend' or property. Production, consumption, investment, etc. were all undertaken without resorting to trade. Although he recognised their inadequacy, Rodbertus started from the categories of liberal economics (production, distribution and consumption), and thus remained imprisoned within a negative view of the domestic community in that he could describe it only in terms of what it was not.

This approach, thinking of economic phenomena *a contrario*, and using the notions of classical economics negatively, not only deprives the latter of their eventual operative capacity – in so far as they have one – but confines itself to the limited statement that pre-capitalist societies are different from capitalist societies only in being their opposites. It provides neither elements for a positive clarification of the relations of production, nor the means to distinguish qualitatively between different social systems.

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For the nineteenth-century German and British schools of sociology, the distinction between use-value and exchange-value was perceived in terms of its juridical implications. H. Maine (1861) distinguished between societies in which social relations were established on the basis of status and those in which contract or bilateral agreement prevailed. Morgan (1877) made a similar distinction between the 'societas' in which personal relationships were dominant, and the 'civitas' based on territorial possession and property – a distinction to which Marx and Engels returned in their exploration of primitive society (Kradner, 1972). Tönnies (1887) used the term *Gemeinschaft* to describe those societies in which relations of kinship and neighbourhood were predominant and *Gesellschaft* for those societies in which individuals, through exchange, confront one another as strangers. These distinctions, taken up by Max Weber, contain certain positive analytical elements. The drawback is that they are only juridical, or argue that the juridical distinction is determinant. In fact, they do not express social change, only the norms which societies adopt to perpetuate themselves.

For Polanyi (1957/1968) and his school the rise of exchanges was the major distinction – 'the great transformation' which separates the antique from the market economies. Two forms of circulation dominate in the former, both inseparable from the status of the parties concerned: reciprocity between peers and redistribution between the central authority and its subjects. In the market economy, in contrast, commodities are exchanged for each other. Despite the relevance of these distinctions, which point at a qualitative difference between the market economy and those that preceded it, they are still descriptive and structural and do not touch upon the phenomena of production, although it is from production, however, that relations which operate at the level of circulation develop.

What Polanyi did show was that in ancient societies the economy was subordinate to a unified political endeavour and not to the varied individual decisions of entrepreneurs. He found that in a status-based society the movement of goods was subordinate to hierarchical structures and their renewal; these were the channels through which goods had to flow if circulation was to reinforce rather than to disrupt established social relations. Consequently, the economy seemed to him to be embedded in the social fabric and did not, as it seems in a market economy, to occupy its own exclusive place, constrained by its own laws. In fact, the economy

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is integrated into capitalist society just as it is in other societies. Polanyi here is confusing economics as a discipline, the product of an intellectual division of labour, with its object. Marx showed that what appeared to the liberal economists to be purely economic and material, for example commodities or capital, was, in fact, the crystallisation of social relations, in particular those which dominate the wage earning process.

Through reading ancient philosophers, Polanyi and his collaborators clarified a few mysterious aspects of the ways in which these ancient societies functioned. But the focus of their research moved to trading societies, to slavery, and to the manorial economy. So that, as a whole, Polanyi treated more of the antique economy in general than, as I intend to do here, the domestic economy on its own.

More recently, Marshall Sahlins (1972) attempted to define what he called the domestic mode of production by emphasising the characteristics of production rather than those of exchange. For Sahlins, the main features of the domestic mode of production are the following: the sexual division of labour, based on the minimum family: a man and a woman; a man-tool relationship deriving from the individual manipulation of tools; production geared to satisfy basic needs, from which it follows that, according to Chayanov's law³ (1925), productive capacity is limited; rights over things exercised through rights over people; an 'introverted' circulation of domestic products and thus the predominance of use value.

Still, this domestic economy in this form would be as unreliable as it is apparently functional. The irregularity of production, the effects of Chayanov's law (which states among other things, as does Sahlins, that the productivity of labour varies in inverse proportion to the number of active labourers in the peasant family), the underproduction and underpopulation which is inherent in this mode of production, the ecology, are all factors which require reciprocity between communities, at the same time as they explain the simultaneously anarchic and independent nature of this society.

Following Marx, Sahlins specifies the *individual* nature of the means of production in the domestic economy and recognises a more subtle form of appropriation through the creation of personal ties. He raises the problem of a double level of the social structure, the community and the association of communities, a contradictory organisation which according to the author could be

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explained by this specific mode of production. On the other hand, as opposed to Marx and Engels, but like almost all other contemporary writers, Sahlins' weakness remains that he nowhere specifies the historical period to which this 'mode of production' applies. Although several of the characteristics he proposes are related to the productive forces, he never specifies what level of knowledge has been acquired, what techniques of producing energy, or what mode of exploitation of the land exists.

The characteristics that he delineates apply just as well to hunter-gatherers and to fishermen, to pastoralists or to agriculturalists. The title of his book leaves one to conclude that all these activities are part of the same 'stone age'⁴ economy, although his argument on the 'domestic economy' seems – without its being very clear – to be uniquely concerned with agricultural communities. I have been similarly unclear myself in the past (1960) and these criticisms could be levelled equally well at me. They derive from the fact that up to now we have not known how to distinguish the characteristics of the level of the productive forces from traits that derive from them. Therefore, despite an attempt at rigour, Sahlins' approach remains to a great extent empiricist. The model of exchange and the generalisation of the idea of reciprocity that he puts forward in the same book demonstrate all the drawbacks of his analysis. His model in fact incorporates data from *all kinds of societies* without taking account of their historical specificity which his analytical method is unable even to distinguish. But generalisations dealing with highly diverse societies can only be applied after each of the systems considered has been analysed and identified. They can only incorporate *elements explaining historical change* and not scattered traits belonging to different periods.

From the outset, then, our job is to discover which of those societies known to us belong to similar economic systems, and in what way they can finally be reduced to distinct modes of production, the 'models' of which will serve to guide and demarcate our progress.

1. *Locating the domestic community*

Initially I had meant to limit my research to ‘the domestic mode of production’ which I will later define in terms of the historical level of the productive forces to which it corresponds (Part 1, Ch. 2, § 1). As a first approximation the domestic mode of production overlaps with the ‘segmentary’ agricultural societies, composed of productive social units which are generally named lineages, although more appropriately identified with households. In a previous work (1967), I tried to show how these societies are based on a mode of exploitation of the land which, because of its social, political and ideological implications, sharply distinguishes them from those societies which practise extraction/production activities (in particular hunting and gathering). However, I realised during the course of this work that to achieve an appropriate definition of the domestic community I would have to pursue my analysis further if I wanted to get really close to the subject of my research. To clarify some of the distinctions I wished to make between the domestic economy and other forms of social organisation of production and/or reproduction, I was led to reject certain erroneous notions about the latter and to undertake, in order to justify the specificity of the subject of my research, at least a trial analysis of forms of social organisation which are *not* domestic but usually assimilated with it.

The object of this first chapter is to establish how at least three types of society have positive characteristics distinguishing them from the domestic community. This is demonstrated through implicit comparisons with the domestic economy which is not defined until later in the book: reference to Chapter 2 will allow the reader – I hope – to follow the argument which underlies the present chapter.

It is evident that in order to situate the domestic community properly among all social and economic systems, a definition of each of them should also be given. My aim is less ambitious. It is

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simply to show, taking cases with which I am most familiar, that the notion of primitive or traditional economies is unduly applied to distinctive forms of social organisations each with their own laws. It is also to show that it is possible to discover relevant and scientific criteria for the characterisation of social systems, to which specific concepts apply. Assimilating these systems to modes of production is a question of judgement which one may make about each case, judgements which may eventually allow us perhaps to refine the notion and give it operative value.

All writers in this field, particularly Marx and Engels, attempted to establish how the 'primitive community' differs from capitalism and, in a less convincing way, from slavery and feudalism – that is, in every case, from the forms of organisation which came of it. Few have been concerned to distinguish it from other forms of social organisation that are presumed to be anterior or inferior to it. As we have seen, the 'primitive economy' remains a relatively vague category within which only some dominant *activities* appear distinctive. We therefore talk of hunting, fishing and pastoral societies, etc. This initial approximation should not be rejected altogether. It shows that for researchers production plays a determinant role. However, the logical relationship between these different activities (which are not necessarily exclusive) and the types of social organisation, has not been established. Can we properly accept that this distinction is an *a priori* one through which 'modes of production' can be defined? Marx teaches us that what men produce matters less than the way in which they produce it.

In fact Engels himself was mistaken, as is shown in a famous letter (Engels to Marx, London, 8 December 1882 in Marx and Engels, 1846–95): 'The similarity [between the Germans of Tacitus and the Red Indians – C.M.] is indeed all the more surprising because the method of production is so fundamentally different – here hunters and fishers without cattle-raising or agriculture, there nomadic cattle-raising passing into agriculture. It just proves how at this stage the type of production is less decisive than the degree in which the old blood bonds and the old mutual community of the sexes within the tribe have been dissolved.'

We know that it was on the basis of this statement of Engels that Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968, 336ff.) could claim to be Marxist. If in fact one affects to understand by what Engels wrote that historical materialism does not apply to primitive societies, the true Marxist is he who excludes Marxism from the field of anthropology and substitutes for it a 'method' more appropriate to the study of these 'old ties of consanguinity'. The betrayers of Marxism are those who stubbornly try to apply Marxist analysis to subjects outside its

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scope. But what Engels really means is that the relations of production are not 'decisive'. He implies, without here being explicit, that beyond the relations of production 'consanguinity' covers the relations that bind people together for reproduction of life. In saying this he does not deny historical materialism as a means of analysing primitive societies as his work on the *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* proves decisively. Lévi-Strauss' pirouette does not destroy the fact that these societies are obliged to produce – under conditions determined by the level of the productive forces – in order to exist and perpetuate themselves. Even though they do not all fall within the same scientific categories, they all are encompassed by historical materialism.

In addition to Lévi-Strauss' deliberate confusion here, there are other confusions which are more important. Engels' letter betrays the weakness of the concept of 'mode of production', even for those who coined the notion, for it is here reduced to a simple productive activity. Moreover, the theoretical analyses concerning anthropology were still too crude to enable a distinction to be made between all the kinds of relations subsumed under what was called 'consanguinity'. This distinction in fact still has to be made in relation to 'kinship', and in the following pages I will try to show how the confusion persists relative to the nature of social relations which are conflated in this category.

Fishing, hunting and agriculture are each multiform activities to which no simple determinism can be applied. Each of these activities involved numerous labour processes (Terray, 1969),¹ some collective, others individual, requiring more or less investment of labour. The relations which unite producers depend on the means they employ, the labour processes and the nature of the product and its use. Analysis should start from the relations that develop between the producers and their means of production (particularly the land) and the social relations which are necessary for setting these means of production to work.

Why incest?

In classical anthropology, the whole problem of reproduction is superseded by kinship theory. It is explicitly assumed, both by functionalists and structuralists, that the universal prohibition of incest is the primary cause of exogamy² and the exchange of women,³ therefore accepted as the basis of kinship theory. Before we embark on any discussion we must remove the assumption that there is an ideological *primum mobile* behind the socialisation of marriage relations as observed in agricultural societies.

Lévi-Strauss (1969, 29) assumes that the incest prohibition, 'which has its roots in nature' – how otherwise could its supposed universality be explained? – can nevertheless have a sociological

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explanation in the need to exchange women. This is stated in such a way that it is not clear whether he believes this prohibition relates to law and morality (which derive from the general conditions of society) – in which case I would agree with him – or whether it is a natural given, over which men have no control.⁴ Though he persistently claims to be Marxist, Godelier (1973b), faithful to his structuralist options, accepts this latter premise, seemingly without reservations, as an ideological postulate. Robin Fox (1967, 31) makes it one of the four basic axioms upon which, according to him, kinship is based: ‘primary kin do not mate with each other’. Members of a ‘kinship’ group, being unable because of this prohibition to have sexual relations with each other, should look, in order to mate, for a partner outside their group. In this way the ‘exchange of women’ which takes place even when kinship groups are large enough to allow members to mate with each other, is explained. The universality of the incest prohibition is, however, far from being proved and remains too doubtful to serve as the basis for the whole of kinship theory.⁵ Furthermore it is unnecessary to explain matrimonial mobility.

If incest is taken to mean copulation between offspring of the same genitors, or between genitors and their offspring (without extending this idea even to classificatory kin), we know that such relations are practised and sometimes institutionalised in a certain number of societies. Incest has been legitimately practised among brothers and sisters in Hawaii, within the Pharaonic dynasties, between Azande fathers and daughters, Mbuti mothers and sons, and even among commoners in Roman Egypt, etc. (Middleton, 1962). Other cases could probably be found, but presumably, as with other practices which Christianity considered ‘shameful’, they were quickly suppressed. All anthropological fieldworkers know how it becomes difficult wherever missionaries and colonial administrators have penetrated, to get information about practices which offended the latter’s morals (human sacrifice, the killing of the old, certain sexual practices, cannibalism and even slavery) (Meillassoux ed., 1975). It is also well known that when anthropologists and travellers discover these facts, they tend to censor their own information for fear of vilifying peoples who have won their sympathy. Because of the extreme repulsion which surrounds incest in our Christian societies, it is probable that information on this subject is even less available than on others.

In societies with relatively unelaborated matrimonial controls