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Claude Meillassoux

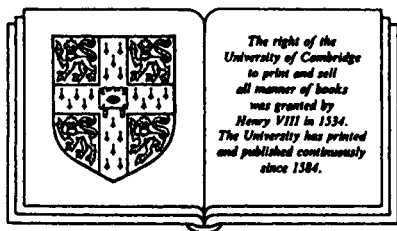
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Maidens, Meal and Money

Capitalism and the domestic community

by *Claude Meillassoux*



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Preface to the English translation

In 1964 I devised a long term project to identify and characterise the different modes of production which existed in pre-colonial West Africa and to analyse both their reaction to each other and to the colonial impact. It was then the era of independence. But the policy underlying development, as it went along with decolonisation, had quite a different outlook on the problem. Plans for cash-cropping and mining were conceived without regard for the existing social structures, which were considered as the remnants of a superseded archaic past. French anthropology could not have been of a great help anyway, since it had treated economics, in so far as it had been concerned with it at all, in a completely ethnocentric way. When 'primitive' people were not considered as living off myth and religion, they were sparsely granted some sort of backward 'primitive capitalism'. The only categories used for analysis were those of liberal economics. Furthermore, the effects of the imperialist economy – which, within this framework, should have been considered as relevant to these categories – were ignored or hidden. Anthropological tradition, too intent on discovering savages preserved from civilisation, was more prone to idealistic reconstruction of past paradises than to a materialist approach.

When in 1957 I embarked on my first field work under Georges Balandier, he was setting up, together with Paul Mercier and Gilles Sautter, one of the first French curriculum on Africa. At that time there was no training in anthropology available in Paris except a very short course at the Institut d'Ethnologie of the Musée de l'Homme. Through a research project on the impact of techniques on social organisation, Balandier introduced me to the best of current anthropology – that is to British anthropology – which provided me with some of the best research on this topic, particularly on the effect of massive migrations undergone by peoples from eastern and southern Africa (somewhat earlier than in the francophone countries). Anthropologists such as Isaac Schapera

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and Max Gluckman, Monica Hunter-Wilson and others in the 'forties had the courage to expose the appalling exploitation of the Africans in the racist states of southern Africa. Functionalism however, while very descriptive and stimulating, was based more on a sort of legalistic empiricism than on a thorough analysis of the content of economic and social relationships. The notion of kinship invaded all the field and glutted the analysis of family households, cloaking the concept of relations of production. It is on the basis of this material and analyses, anyway, that Balandier and Mercier renovated French anthropology and threw a new light on African societies by setting them back into their historic realm, and by pointing at the situation of 'crises' induced by the policy of 'development' to which they were exposed. In other words by exposing exploitation.

It was thanks to Balandier that I was able to orient my first field-work toward an examination of the problems related to the transformation of African peasants into commodity producers. Although Balandier was always reserved towards historical materialism he was most interested in my work on the Guro (1964) and was very instrumental in promoting it.

With regard to my theoretical and field orientation, I had worked until then in relative isolation. No one was then interested in France in economic anthropology, except Pierre Bessagnet (1966) with whom I had little contact. In the field of historical materialism the Communist Party was holding a monopoly by which nothing could be done except along the line of official orthodoxy. I wrote *Anthropologie économique des Guro de Côte d'Ivoire* while reading *Capital*, which I had discovered a few years before as a militant in a leftist group. Not that it provided me with ready-made schemes; but Marx's approach, his way of arguing and analysing, of uncovering hidden truth, his subtle dialectic gave me an unequalled intellectual stimulus. In my confinement, Marx became an interlocutor and a master. I thus learned to distinguish between, and at the same time to link together, empirical field-work and theoretical thinking. It is along this line that I produced my first two works: an analytical description of historical transformations that have taken place in a population of peasants converted into cash croppers and, in 1960, a theoretical essay on self-sustenance.

Balandier was not only a researcher and a teacher; he was also the promotor of African studies in France. Most French Africanists today owe their career to him, even those who now work

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in different schools of thought. He almost invariably recruited people of great talent so that from the 'sixties onward I was joined by a new generation of researchers whose theoretical, methodological and political concerns were close to mine. This coincided with the development in France of a research policy which opened up greater prospects for field investigation. After 1965, unfortunately, bureaucracy gained a growing control over the administration of French research and it has now reached the point where the original impetus is lost and the results of the last fifteen years are in jeopardy. In spite of the present obstacle, French anthropologists remain of considerable quality and they have started to produce high-grade original work. It is in these stimulating surroundings that I have had the chance to follow up my research.

Since 1963 my fieldwork has carried me among peoples of Mali and Senegal. The ancient tradition of their civilisations induced me to give a larger part to history as a means of gaining knowledge on present societies and to the analysis of present societies as a means of understanding the past. From my research among the Soninke, the Bamana, the Maninka, the Pular of Fuuta Tooro I have brought back a large amount of material that I am trying to treat theoretically and historically in order to build up a *theory of social practice* as it seems to fit best Marx's intent. Given the extension of French anthropological research in the 'seventies my data could now be brought together and tested against that of my colleagues working in the same socio-cultural area, namely West Africa. From village or ethnic monographs which have been predominant for the last 20 years, we were able to move towards research covering whole historic and geographical areas within which each people is organically related. It is in this context that research on trade, slavery or war was attempted.

It was also on the initiative of this group that French Africanists were led to take a stand on the great Sahelian famine of the 'seventies and to expose the political and economic background of this disaster which was too easily put down to climatic fatality. A large demonstration, an exhibit of documents, films, discussions, a book and a manifesto were produced on the problem. It had such an impact that it resulted in several of the signatories being subject to administrative sanctions and considerable professional difficulties.

Finally it was through our acquaintance with the world of the African migrant workers in France that the problem of their exploitation was posed in a critical way. Our research, which had

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begun in African villages, led us to the squalid and overcrowded dormitories of Paris suburbs where the very same men that we met in their places as proud peasants were converted into anonymous proletarians.

Should not such a situation lead the anthropologist to associate the analysis of the domestic economy where these people came from with that of the problem of labour in the capitalist economies, as I have tried to do in the present volume? Colonisation has brought capitalism and the domestic economies into direct contact; the in-between modes of exploitation and their related classes of masters and lords vanished amidst this encounter. The abrupt transition between the first part of the book, which deals with anthroponomic societies, and the second, which jumps to modern conditions of labour, was forced down upon me as it is forced down on African peasants by the callousness of the colonial relationship.

Indeed my first intention was to proceed in a more academic way and to deal successively with the modes of production in their presumed historical order. But it seemed to me important at this point of my research that I should use my results to support an argued exposition of the specific mode of exploitation that it revealed. This might be an unorthodox way to proceed, but it is one that may contribute further to free anthropology from an out-worldish attitude and demonstrate its relevance to current affairs. This discipline should cease to be a pretext for exotic fantasies and become an instrument of freedom.

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If the notion of kinship has pervaded the field of anthropology it is because it refers to a widespread institution – which regulates a function common to all societies, the reproduction of human beings, both as productive agents and as reproducers and (mostly in the domestic economy) social reproduction at large. Yet, through kinship, classical anthropology has only grasped the institutionalised expression of reproduction without investigating its basic function. Being unable to connect kinship to the other levels of social reality it has considered it as a sort of a postulate and dealt only with its normative and formal sides. ‘According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This, again, is of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, of articles of food and clothing, dwellings, and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.’ (Engels, [1884], pp. 1–2)

Was Engels wrong to put on the same level the reproduction of the means of existence and the reproduction of men? This is the contention of the Marxist editors of the French translation (Editions Sociales, 1954) according to whom it would be a mistake. But I believe these critics of Engels are, here, getting away with a production essential among others, namely the production of human energy, or, in the capitalist context, of labour-power. The reproduction of human beings is, in terms of economics, production of labour-power in all its forms. But in spite of this foreview of Engels, little attention was given by historical materialism to this problem. Instead of granting to the production of this essential good the importance which could be expected from a theory of labour, it gives only partial attention to it.

It is true that the historic and economic conditions under which

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capitalism arose did not point at the reproduction of labour-power as to an urgent matter. Through the process of primitive accumulation it was solved straight off and the peasants migrant from European hinterlands contributed to rid the theoreticians of this extra worry. Neither Marx nor the other economists were really concerned with it.

In spite or maybe because of Malthus, the study of human reproduction has nearly been, since then, the exclusive concern of demography, a statistical technique whose extrapolations are often viewed as the effects of a causal theory. If historical materialism rightly rejected demography as a determination, and the Malthusian notion of poverty as resulting from the proliferation of unchaste brutes, it rejected also but, wrongly, the problem of reproduction.

Marx was undoubtedly right to think that every mode of production has its own laws of population. This statement, which he never explicitly argued, implies above all that questions about population cannot be considered apart from the dominant relations of production. Strictly speaking there is no such thing as 'demographic causes'. The growth of population is governed by constraints other than the fertility of women. In all societies the biological capacity for procreation is far above the birth rate. Poverty, illness, starvation, rites, beliefs, or in our societies, 'well-being', have always set the rate of reproduction below that of fertility.

In the analysis of the nineteenth-century capitalism, the lack of a theory of the reproduction of labour-power did not undermine Marx's theory of labour in a critical way. In Marx's model, everything happens as if a non-specified part of the labour-power used by the capitalist sector is given as being produced and reproduced outside the capitalist sector (a historically and conjuncturally correct hypothesis for this period). To reintroduce the process of reproduction of labour-power into the model requires only a re-adjustment of the argument, not a reassessment. The reasoning applied to the equalisation of the rate of profit can be applied equally to the phenomenon. So doing, it gives to the theory of Marx a wider historical relevance and a larger scope by connecting it with the problem of the expansion of capitalism (as raised by Rosa Luxemburg).

If we are to understand how the domestic society operates, reproduction must be taken into central consideration. The domestic community is indeed the only economic and social

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system which manages the physical reproduction of human beings, the reproduction of the producers and social reproduction at large through a comprehensive set of institutions, by the ordered manipulation of the living means of reproduction, that is: women.

Neither feudalism, nor slavery, even less capitalism, know such regulating and correcting built-in mechanisms governing the process of reproduction. On the contrary, in the last analysis, we find that all modern modes of production, all classes of societies depend, for the supply of labour-power, on the domestic community. As for capitalism, it depends both on the domestic communities of the colonised countries and on its modern transformation, the family, which still maintains its reproductive functions although deprived of its productive ones. From this point of view, the domestic relations of production can be considered as the organic basis of feudalism, slavery as well as of capitalism or bureaucratic socialism. None of these forms of social organisation can be said to represent an integrated mode of production to the extent that they are not based on homogeneous relations of production and of reproduction. It is not therefore strictly accurate to look at the modes of production which developed on the domestic community, which dominated and exploited its productive and mostly its reproductive capacity, as being in every way superior to it. In terms of their productive potential they are superior, but not in terms of the reproduction of human beings. Marx's argument, which states that the key to inferior forms is found in more advanced ones, does not quite apply to the evolution of human societies and the naturalistic analogy with the anatomy of the man and of the ape is, like all analogies, faulty and insidious. Our knowledge of capitalism, when it remains linked to other relations of production vividly maintained as necessary elements of its development, is not enough to enlighten us on the mysteries of the domestic economy. But the recognition in this last mode of production of a problem of reproduction, leads to an understanding of this function in the capitalist system. If it is true, as Marx argued, that the hierarchy of institutions does not reflect their order of emergence, and that in this respect family has a subordinate position in the capitalist society, it remains that its function is crucial in that it is the family which produces, not only the physical worker, but also this social ingredient essential to the functioning of capitalism and which Marx has called 'the free labourer', freed from lasting servitude (as the slave, the serf, or the junior members of the lineage).

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The maintenance of functional domestic relations within the capitalist system raises the problem of the characterisation and classification of the social systems. We know that history cannot be perceived as a succession of modes of production totally exclusive from each other. But it is not only that each mode of production contains the germs of future relations of production or the relics of ancient ones, it is that, up until now and for an indefinite future, the domestic relations of production have been organically integrated into the development of each and all of the subsequent modes of production. Is it the evidence of the fact that we are still in the pre-historic phase of the development of humanity and that only communism, the real one, will be able to rid humanity of the archaism of kinship and re-invent at the same time affective relationships?