Introduction

> *What, after all, is one to make of savages? . . . For the anthropologist, whose profession it is to study other cultures, the puzzle is always with him. His personal relationship to his object of study is, perhaps more than for any other scientist, inevitably problematic. Know what he thinks a savage is and you have the key to his work. You know what he thinks he himself is and, knowing what he thinks he himself is you know in general what sort of thing he is going to say about whatever tribe he happens to be studying. All ethnography is part philosophy, and a good deal of the rest is confession.*
>
> *Clifford Geertz*

This book does not fit accepted categories of writing. For instance, what follows does not constitute ethnography – yet in the course of presenting my arguments, I return repeatedly to the details of social life in a remote area of southern Ethiopia called Maale. Similarly, this is not a work in abstract social theory – yet I attempt throughout to pose and to resolve conceptual issues of broad relevance. Neither simply ethnography nor social theory, the chapters that follow are both.

Trespassing the accepted boundary between fields involves some risk. Social theorists of the purist sort, those dedicated to what has been called the "detachable conclusion," may well grow impatient with my Maale detail. After all, why should anyone but an anthropologist be interested in an out-of-the-way people? At the same time, ethnographers, many of whom are distrustful of wider-scale discussions, may tire of my didactic return to "general" issues. In the end, doesn't abstract discussion distract from a proper appreciation of Maale society and culture?

The risks that these questions imply seem to me to be worth taking. A number of years ago, Robert K. Merton noted the persistent gap in academic sociology between grand theory and empirical analysis. A gap no less great nor any less debilitating exists in many Marxist discussions. More than sociology, Marxism has an inherent interest in closing this gap. Therefore, one goal of what follows is to trace out, as precisely as possible, the connections between abstract theory – in particular, Marxism – and embedded empirical analysis – in this case, of Maale political economy. Otherwise put, my problem is to translate megawords like

history, power, and ideology into micropractices like dabo, lali ekane, and wolla soofane.[1]

The choice of where to situate myself relative to established discourses has, however, been motivated by more than a preference for the middle range. Located between ethnography and social theory, this book seeks to combine anthropology and Marxism so that the critical edge of one can be used to sharpen issues in the other. My master questions are: Can the critical moment in anthropology be used to transform aspects of Marxism? Can the critical aspect of Marxism be used to recast anthropology?

That anthropology indeed has a critical moment has often been overlooked of late. More attention has been devoted to ways in which the discipline – in the context of colonialism and the world capitalist system – has distorted the depiction of its subjects, suppressed inconvenient realities, and contributed, if only unwittingly, to extant forms of domination.[2] All of these are aspects of the subject as it has been practiced.

But social and cultural anthropology has another side, one from which writers have used portraits of other cultures to reflect upon our own practices – to disrupt our common sense, to disorient our moral certainties, and, in general, to place in doubt much of what we have always assumed as simply given. Anthropologists attempting to accomplish these ends have had to construct other cultural worlds – that is, write ethnography – in enough density and detail to overcome the initial resistances set up by our own cultural conditioning.[3]

Thus one of my concerns below in interpreting Maale political economy: By attempting to make a radically different way of living "real," I hope to be able to place the analysis of my own, capitalist society in a different light.

[1] These Maale phrases refer respectively to a particular kind of communal work arrangement, marrying a woman, and working together. They form the main empirical themes of Chapters 1, 3, and 4. Because I want other cultural notions ultimately to be accepted on the same basis as our own, I have not italized foreign words.

[2] Dell Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Pantheon, 1969); Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973); Gérard Leclerc, *Anthropologie et colonialisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1972). See also Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

[3] A recent statement of this theme is George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). James Clifford's "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 117–51, is an excellent study of the critical spirit of French anthropology between the wars.

If the critical aspect of anthropology (like history or literature) works in a positive way by expanding one's sense of human possibilities, the critical moment within Marxism works negatively. It seeks most fundamentally to remove, to lift away, those forms of consciousness, those partially self-imposed ideologies, that limit and deform people's lives. Such ideologies, according to Marxism, arise and function at particular social sites: namely, in relationships based on systematic differences in materially grounded power.

These relations may be as different, in different societies, as those between Maale commoners and chiefs, South African black workers and international capitalists, or – at closer range – middle-class American housewives and their husbands. Whatever the case, the critical assumption of Marxism is that such relationships, and indeed all others in which one group has the power to suppress the interests of another, are inevitably problematic. Ideologies naturalize power differences; they do social work. But according to Marxism, ideologies can be only partially successful for the fundamental reason that people suffer under such conditions. Not only do people suffer, they see, or in principle can be brought to see, the causes of their suffering.[4]

It is just in this context that Marxism takes on its critical aspect: of promoting the process of bringing people to see, of removing the veil of ideology, and by so doing, opening up the range of human possibilities.

These two notions of critique – anthropological and Marxist – are quite different. Characteristically, they exhibit opposite strengths and weaknesses. At its best, anthropology has stressed an unceasing respect for cultural differences, has maintained a genuine attempt to see the world from other, often despised, points of view. But at its worst, the anthropological project has descended into a kind of wearied relativism, a distanced and aestheticized practice, with very little critical purchase.

Marxism at its best has placed problems of human oppression at the center of attention and has stubbornly deconstructed ideologies that have perpetuated social inequalities. But at its corresponding worst, the tradition begun by Marx has degenerated into an iconoclastic disregard for other ways of living, a contempt for people who do not see the point of "liberation," a contempt that has increased the fund of human suffering.[5]

[4] For a closely reasoned discussion of the peculiar complexities of critical theory, see Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.)

[5] Stephen Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) cites Rosa Luxemburg's paradigmatic critique of the Russian revolution. Lenin's elimination of democracy was, according to Luxemburg in 1918, "worse than the disease it is supposed to

Precisely because of these differences, something may be gained by attempting to hold anthropology and Marxism together – in tension. Such is the initial assumption, at any rate, of the chapters that follow.

Over the century since Marx's death, anthropology and Marxism – these two bodies of theory and knowledge with such different social contexts and political aims – have gotten along better than one might have expected. At least, committed Marxism has often appeared satisfied with bourgeois anthropology.[6] To overstate the case, it is almost as if two critical theories, brought together, cancelled each other out. The result has often been a strangely quiet theory of so-called precapitalist modes of production, irrelevant to the present except as a completed past. Marxism for capitalism. Anthropology for everything "before."[7]

This pattern of thought began with Marx himself. Toward the end of his life, Marx read extensively in anthropology, and he used anthropological materials, as Maurice Bloch has shown, in two ways. The first was to construct the broad outlines of history that led up to capitalism: ". . . to show how capitalism and its institutions have been produced by history and how it will therefore be destroyed by history."[8] Related

cure; for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come the correction for all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammeled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people" (p. 104).

[6] How academic anthropology received Marxism is another matter. So far, we have no historian's account of this question. See, however, James W. Wessman, *Anthropology and Marxism* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1981), and Maurice Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology: The History of a Relationship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). According to Sidney Mintz, "While [we] Americans reconstructed a seamless past and resolutely avoided the present in dealing with our internal natives, the British studied a bounded present, and resolutely avoided the past in dealing with their external natives. I believe that it is in the context of these orientations that the absence of almost any reference to the work of Marx and the Marxists in the anthropology of the first half of the twentieth century is to be explained. " See Mintz's "American Anthropology in the Marxist Tradition," in Sidney W. Mintz et al., *On Marxian Perspectives in Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Harry Hoijer, 1981* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1984), p. 16; Eric R. Wolf, "American Anthropologists and American Society," in Dell Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology;* Joan Vincent, "Anthropology and Marxism: Past and Present," *American Ethnologist* 12 (1985): 137–47; Hanna Lessinger and David Hakken, "Introduction," in David Hakken and Hanna Lessinger, eds., *Perspectives in U.S. Marxist Anthropology* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 1–23.

[7] Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) is an insightful study of a persistent tendency within anthropology to distance the presentation of other cultures by, in various ways, denying coevality. This tendency is evident in the Marxist terminology that opposes *pre*capitalist to capitalist societies. The simple negative term, *non*capitalist, is not much better, for it raises other problems: a supposedly homogeneous type of society set off against capitalism. Although not satisfied with these terms, I have been unable to avoid them entirely.

[8] Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology*, p. 27.

to this concern for the past was a second, more political, aim. Early anthropologists provided Marx with materials to undermine and to question the widespread assumption that capitalist norms offered the only possible way for human beings to live. If the Iroquois got along perfectly well without private property, the possibility of socialism seemed all the more real.

The combination of these uses of anthropology led finally to Marx's notion of primitive communism. In the 1870s, a number of early anthropological thinkers, from Lewis Henry Morgan to Henry S. Maine, were constructing a model of an original communal, egalitarian society, and by the 1880s, this notion proved too rhetorically convenient for Marx and Engels to resist. Whereas earlier in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had written of the "latent slavery" contained within the family in so-called primitive societies, by the time that Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884, the year after Marx's death, he claimed that the technologically simplest societies were classless and without contradictions. The result – the construction of a supposedly original communism to which humanity would eventually return on a new and higher level of technological development – was, according to Raphael Samuel, "the most striking example of Marxism's indebtedness to bourgeois historical [or anthropological] thought."[9]

Rather than reformulating and recasting the insights of anthropology, then, Marxism at first simply imported them for analyses of technologically simple societies. But this move had ironic consequences: "When Engels postulated a pre-class stage when there were no conflicting principles and everything was sweetness and light, he had no Marxist way by which to explain historical change."[10] Some twentieth-century Marxists such as Lukács went a step further and argued that Marxist theory applied, not to class societies in general, but principally to capitalism. In this view, so-called precapitalist societies were held up as reproachful models of everything that capitalism was not: social life without class, without alienation, and without reification.[11]

[9] Raphael Samuel, "British Marxist Historians, 1880–1980: Part I," *New Left Review* 120 (1980): 34.

[10] Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology*, p. 54.

[11] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingston (Cambridge: MIT Press, [1923] 1971). Lukács was influenced by what he himself later called the romantic anticapitalism of Max Weber and Georg Simmel. See Michael Löwy's "Naphta or Settembrini? Lukács and Romantic Anticapitalism," *New German Critique* 42 (1987): 17–31. For an anthropological defense of "romantic anticapitalism," see Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1974).

Such a portrayal fitted hand-in-glove with the largely functionalist and ahistorical theory being developed within academic anthropology from the 1920s to the 1950s. Anthropology was, apparently, Marxist avant la lettre. Even so hard-headed an observer as Perry Anderson, when he surveyed the terrain of British thought in the 1960s, found only social anthropology as an indigenous source for inspiration or encouragement.[12]

This division of labor between anthropology and Marxism was systematically called into question only during the 1960s. In Britain, Talal Asad and others began to investigate the effects of colonialism on the writings of British anthropologists working in Africa and to call for an analysis of the colonial order as a part of the description that anthropologists normally made of local social systems.[13] In a related development in the United States, the work of Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz emphasized that Latin American societies that had once been analyzed as noncapitalist had in fact been influenced long and intimately by what came to be known as the world capitalist system. Commodity flows, labor migration, and the exertion of imperial power have connected "us" with "them" far longer, according to Wolf and Mintz, than anthropology was previously wont to admit.[14]

While the empirical analysis of African and Latin American societies in the 1970s began to call into question the old boundary between anthropology and Marxism, theoretical discussion did the same. The most consequential conversation in this regard originated in France and centered on the seemingly arcane question of how to analyze kin-based societies from a Marxist perspective.

Maurice Godelier took what I shall call the traditional point of view. He maintained that in technologically simple societies kinship functions as relations of production and that consequently concepts like exploitation are inapplicable.[15] Godelier's move was an example of anthropolo-

[12] Perry Anderson, "Components of the National Culture," *New Left Review* 50 (1968): 46–50.

[13] Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*.

[14] The latest and most substantial statements of this strand of North American anthropology are Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), and Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985). Both Wolf and Mintz have been influenced, in some ways, by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974). Exactly how anthropologists are to capture both the openness of local history and its conditioning by larger-scale structures remains a difficult problem – one to which I will return in the Conclusion.

[15] See Ariane Deluz and Maurice Godelier's review of Claude Meillassoux's work, "A propos de deux textes d'anthropologie économique," *L'Homme* 7 (1967): 78–91. Just at the

gy's usual critical impulse – it sought to undermine naïve universalism by emphasizing social and cultural variety. Such an intervention was, no doubt, salutary in relation to the dogmatic version of Marxist theory that Godelier was addressing, but it had fateful unintended consequences for anthropology, for it effectively protected the orthodox notion of "kinship" from any Marxist reconceptualization. In the terms set forth by Godelier, the task to be undertaken was apparently one of translating anthropological knowledge, as it already existed, into Marxist language.

An alternative to Godelier's juxtaposition of anthropology and Marxism developed out of the tangled interchange among French anthropologists in the 1970s.[16] Below, I attempt to clarify and extend this different approach. At the outset, let me draw attention to what are perhaps my master assumptions. Contrary to traditional anthropological relativism and contrary to Marxist theorists like Engels, I believe (1) that all human societies to the present have been organized by systems of material domination and (2) that these systems everywhere have been, to varying degrees, socially problematic.[17] Relations of production, as Marx called them, are like sand in an oyster. They constitute inevitable points of irritation, however such irritation is dealt with – whether it is expressed, displaced, or finally transformed into something that looks quite different.

moment Godelier was asserting that kinship could function as relations of production, other anthropologists were beginning to question whether in fact "kinship" in the usual anthropological sense exists. See David M. Schneider, "What Is Kinship All About?" in Priscilla Reining, ed., *Kinship Studies in the Morgan Centennial Year* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Anthropological Society, 1972). The functionalist consequences of Godelier's early position become clear in his reanalysis of Mbuti materials in *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, trans. Robert Brain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1973] 1977), pp. 51–62. Over the years, however, Godelier's stance seems to have changed, at least as it is reflected in empirical analysis. His recent work focuses much more closely on social inequalities and on consent and resistance; see *The Making of Great Men: Male Domination and Power among the New Guinea Baruya*, trans. Rupert Swyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1982] 1986).

[16] Joel S. Kahn, "Marxist Anthropology and Segmentary Societies: A Review of the Literature," in Joel S. Kahn and Josep R. Llobera, eds., *The Anthropology of Pre-Capitalist Societies* (London: Macmillan, 1981), gives an admirably clear summary of the debate.

[17] I assume that domination, to be such, must be materially based – whether it is defined in sexual, ethnic, or class terms. If height, for example, were judged a mark of prestige but played no role in linking groups of persons with differential power over a society's total product, then one could not say that tall people dominate shorter ones.

It is not clear that assumption (1), by itself, uniquely characterizes historical materialism. According to many forms of functionalist theory, for example, all past and present societies have exhibited forms of materially-based power differentials. The addition of assumption (2) may be necessary, therefore, to differentiate Marxism. In this respect, the notion that forms of domination in some ways work against requirements of universal human nature (to be explained in Chapter 2) is crucial. For then the continuance of systems of inequality becomes inherently problematic; successful social reproduction becomes an unstable result, open to possible disruption.

If these assumptions – which privilege Marxism over traditional anthropology – can be shown to be realistic grounds for departure, a great deal follows. Anthropology's rhetoric of nostalgia becomes inappropriate as any guide or helpmeet for the future. And, as for the past, so-called primitive societies have to be analyzed differently as well. Kinship becomes not just a symbolic or social system that neutrally orders people's lives, but a central part of the power and culture of many noncapitalist forms of domination.[18]

Marxism, then, has some role to play in recasting anthropological knowledge. But the reverse relation must be examined as well, for historical materialism, at least as it has often been construed, will not escape unscathed by modern social anthropology. Here, the special value of anthropology is its attempt to provide an Archimedean point outside the confines of any one cultural system in order that variation may be observed without prejudice. Whether in fact such a point can finally be reached is debatable, but minimally, the exercise of analyzing another cultural system has the potential to free us from our own categories. We observe capitalism no longer from within but from without. From this standpoint, some of what we have always accepted as natural turns into something strange, and seeing something as strange is a prerequisite of any fuller knowledge.

The process of tacking Marxist analyses back and forth between radically different modes of production has only begun. In the absence of much attention to this problem, there have been persistent tendencies within historical materialism, beginning with the work of Marx himself, to mistake capitalist categories for universal analytical ones.

Let me take an example that will be elaborated on in later discussion. For some time, Marxists and others have held an image of capitalism as organized in a more naked, hard "economic" way than many noncapitalist societies, in which it is difficult to disentangle the economy from

[18]The reformation of kinship studies is already well under way. Feminism has been particularly important in this regard. See, for example, Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157–210; Jane F. Collier and Michelle Z. Rosaldo, "Politics and Gender in Simple Societies," in Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds., *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 275–329; Jane F. Collier and Sylvia J. Yanagisako, eds., *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Jane F. Collier, *Marriage and Inequality in Classless Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

the polity or from religion, in which, indeed, all of these sometimes appear to be dominated by "kinship."

This view has, at the same time, vexed Marxists, for if some noncapitalist societies are less "economic" – indeed dominated by something entirely "noneconomic," namely "kinship" – this fact appears to contradict one of the central tenets of historical materialism: that the economy or the base determines the superstructure. If the economy cannot be separated from kinship or religion, how can one say that the economy is determinant?

A number of responses have been given to this question. Some, like Marshall Sahlins, believe that there is no solution and that consequently Marxism cannot be applied to noncapitalist societies.[19] Others, like Emmanuel Terray (and before him, Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar), have gone to some scholastic length to insist that the concept of determination must be supplemented with another of "dominance."[20] According to this line of thought, in every society the economy is determinant in that it determines which level of society – economic, political, or religious – is dominant. In capitalism, the economy is both determinant and dominant, whereas in noncapitalist societies, it is typically determinant but not dominant. Finally, still other writers, like Perry Anderson, have maintained that in noncapitalist societies superstructures enter into their bases; only in capitalism have the two become entirely separate.[21]

It will be useful to follow Anderson's reasoning in some detail, for he presents more lucidly than most the set of ideas I want to examine:

> Capitalism is the first mode of production in history in which the means whereby the surplus is pumped out of the direct producer is "purely" economic in form – the wage contract: the equal exchange between free agents which reproduces, hourly and daily, inequality and oppression. All other previous modes of exploitation operate through *extra-economic* sanctions – kin, customary, religious, legal or political.[22]

[19] Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[20] Emmanuel Terray, *Marxism and "Primitive" Societies*, trans. Mary Klopper (New York: Monthly Review Press, [1969] 1972), and Étienne Balibar, "On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism," in Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Pantheon, [1968] 1970).

[21] Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1974). After G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) was published (see particularly pp. 247–8), Anderson abandoned this position in *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1980), pp. 72–3.

[22] Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 403.

Notice that Anderson's definition of what constitutes the economic is straightforwardly embedded in the particular capitalist category of wage labor. It is not very revealing, then, to be told that other modes of production rest upon extraeconomic sanctions. In so far as they do not rest upon wage labor, inequalities in other societies are of course not "economic," at least on this reading of the term.

Such an objection would constitute only a quibble were it not for the fact that Anderson's definition of the economic has further consequences. It does not, on the one hand, problematize capitalism. When we see the word "economic" we nod our heads and read on – we think we know what it means. And, on the other hand, it makes noncapitalist societies appear exceptional, almost too strange. From the passage quoted above, Anderson continues:

> The "superstructures" of kinship, religion, law or the state necessarily enter into the constitutive structure of the mode of production in noncapitalist social formations. They intervene *directly* in the "internal" nexus of surplus-extraction, where in capitalist social formations, the first in history to separate the economy as a formally self-contained order, they provide by contrast its "external" preconditions.[23]

But this argument is misleading. In what sense is law external to the relationship between workers and capitalists? In what sense is religion, at least insofar as it involves fundamental definitions of personhood – so-called free agents – external to surplus extraction in capitalism?

Anderson's characterization of capitalist versus noncapitalist modes of production effectively discourages the analysis of a complex of culturally specific ideas that are crucial in defining and maintaining capitalist inequalities. And, at the same time, it verges on making noncapitalist inequalities almost mystically different, as if persons in such societies stumbled about the world in an ideological haze. Anderson draws the following conclusion in the passage that I have been quoting above:

> In consequence, pre-capitalist modes of production cannot be defined *except* via their political, legal and ideological superstructures, since these are what determine the type of extra-economic coercion that specifies them.[24]

But exactly the same conclusion should be drawn for capitalism. It is the superstructure that provides the very terms in which the capitalist mode of production becomes a social reality. Marx's own analysis, in-

[23] Ibid., pp. 403–4. [24] Ibid., p. 404.