

(N.B. This piece, originally written for some lectures in 1976, and expanded in 1991 is in a very rough and preliminary form. The quotations have not been checked and the arguments are provisional. This is a very rough set of preliminary thoughts.)

Karl Marx and the Origins of Capitalism.

Marx's concept of the individual.

The importance of establishing the exact nature of the 'natural' or ideal-type individual was evident to Marx: "the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. The first fact to be established, therefore, is the physical condition of these individuals..."(Writings, p.69). Despite the diametrically opposed view taken by Dumont (see second half of 'From Mandeville to Marx'), it would appear that Marx did not base his position on the idea of original individualism. His basic premise is that human individuals are not, in their essence or 'natural' (i.e. pre-capitalist) state self-contained and isolated 'individuals', set loose like billiard balls. This is the state we see them in when we encounter them in capitalist society, he argues, but an analysis of history shows that they were originally (and should be, hence the tension) **social** beings: "the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in any particular individual. The real nature of man is the totality of social relations". (Writings, p.83) As McLelland (Marx, 36) notes, he speaks of the original human being as "total" or "all-sided".

Marx returns again and again to the theme that individuals are not separate and autonomous, and hence that a society is not merely a collection of separate individuals (or separate families, as in the famous metaphor of the sack of potatoes). "Society is not merely an aggregate of individuals; it is the sum of the relations in which these individuals stand to one another" (Writings, 110), or again "It is above all necessary to avoid postulating 'society' once more as an abstraction confronting the individual. The individual is a social being." (Writings, p.91).

What then did Marx really mean by a 'social being'? He appears to mean two things. Firstly, the ideal type human being before capitalism, what we may term 'natural man', is more than his mere physical body; he is one with his physical environment. There is no real discontinuity between each natural man and the world around him. Each natural man is inexplicably bound up with the physical world: "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is, therefore, the production of material life itself" (Writings, 75). Individuals are not naked beings; they **are** what they produce and what they do; their labour, inventiveness etc. are all part of them. "As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, with what they produce and how they produce it..." (Writings, p.69)

One of the most obvious instances of this is the tie with the earth, or the natural man's laboratory' as Marx calls it: "the earth is the great laboratory, the arsenal which provides both the means and the

materials of labour, and also the location, the basis of the community." (Pre-Capitalist, 69) Man is tied to it as a child still attached by an umbilical cord to its mother, another of Marx's similes. Natural man thus partakes of the natural world, is, in Wordsworth's sense, "one" with rocks and trees and winds.

The other major meaning of "social being" is that natural man is partly composed of all his or her social relationships; he is not a self-contained individual but a point or node in a network of social relations which spread out from himself. He would have agreed with Donne; "no man is an island", all are parts of a continent. For example, he contrasts men and animals and reduces the difference to the fact that "the animal has not 'relations' with anything, has no relations at all. For the animal, its relation to others does not exist as a relation" (since it is not conscious of it). (Writings, p.86). Or again, he praised Feuerbach as follows: "the great achievement of Feuerbach is...to have founded genuine materialism and positive science by making the social relationship of man to man the basic principle of his theory" (Writings, p.85). Natural man, Marx believed, was blended in with other men; individual identities were only a recent phenomenon, a product of a particular (bourgeois-capitalist) mode of production: "Man only becomes an individual by means of the historical process. He appears originally as a generic being, a tribal being, a herd animal." (Pre-Capitalist, - see pp.36, 96).

In the earlier modes of production (or socio-economic formations) the individual is therefore still one with his physical environment and with his fellow men: "among hunting peoples, or in the agriculture of Indian communities...there is common ownership of the means of production...the individual has not yet severed the navel-string which attached him to the tribe or community" (Writings, 130) The essence of man is "the sum of productive forces, capital, and social forms of intercourse" (Writings, 71). The separation off of this natural relationship is the result of the historical process; the complete stripping away of all ties, either to the natural world or to other human beings is the final achievement of the capitalist form of production. The way in which labour is regarded in modern economic systems, Marx argued, "presupposes the separation of labour from its original intertwinement with its objective conditions" (Grundrisse, p.515), such conditions being the land, sea etc. In modern bourgeois society the individual does not retain the part of himself which his labour creates, the use value; he only produces so that he may exchange, "the individual has an existence only as a producer of exchange value, hence...the whole negation of his 'natural' existence is already implied..." (Grundrisse, 248). He is not conceived of as **merely** an individual worker, an exchanger of his labour, a view of him which Marx rejects as merely an impoverished vision created by the capitalist ideology. (Writings, pp.176,9).

The reasons for the rise of the 'naked individual' are complex, and a few thoughts are contained in another section (q.v. Marx on the Germanic mode of production.)

Marx on the original, primitive, communal mode of production.

Marx defines property as "a relation of the working (producing) subject...to the conditions of his production (e.g. animals, land and so on). Thus, for instance, in bourgeois society the worker exists purely subjectively, without object, and hence is 'propertyless'. (Pre-Capitalist, 95,96).

He believed that the absence of private ownership was the original state, out of which all later systems grew. This was to be found behind all later forms. "A ridiculous prejudice has recently obtained currency that common property in its primitive form is specifically a Slavonic, or even exclusively Russian form. It is the primitive form that we can show to have existed among Romans, Teutons and Celts, and even to this day we find numerous examples, ruins though they be, in India..." (Writings, p.124).

We may wonder exactly what he means by 'common property' here. There are various descriptions. For example, describing the Scottish clans, he wrote in 1853 that "To the clan, to the family, belonged the district where it had established itself, exactly as, in Russia, the land occupied by a community of peasants belongs, to the individual peasants, but to the community. Thus the district was the common property of the family. There could be no more question, under this system, of private property, in the modern sense of the word, than there could be of comparing the social existence of the members of the clan to that of individuals living in the midst of modern society." (Writings, p.131) Here Marx seems to be very similar to saying what anthropologists later described as corporate descent groups which, as a corporation, owned the resources, with individuals having rights in it through family membership, but the land etc. being inalienable.

Marx is not so naive as to believe that everyone shares everything, but he does argue that no individual can stake a unique and permanent claim to a particular resource, buy and sell it, pass it on to private heirs and so on. This is what he means by "common ownership of the means of production" (Writings, 130). This original system is one which may occur, he argues, in Hunter-Gatherer, pastoral, and agricultural societies. He sometimes terms it the 'tribal' system. Thus he writes that "The first form of property is tribal property. It corresponds to an undeveloped stage of production in which a people lives by hunting and fishing, by cattle breeding, or, at the highest stage, by agriculture. In the latter case, a large area of uncultivated land is presupposed. The division of labour is, at this stage, still very elementary, and is no more than an extension of the natural division of labour occurring within the family..." (Writings, 126; same as Pre-Capitalist, 122-3). Resources and kinship ties, in other words, are blended together in this system, hence the term 'tribal'. There is no separation whatsoever of the economic from the social.

Marx does not seem to go much further into this communal form in the simplest form, merely referring occasionally to land being 'held in common' with pastoral peoples, for example "the communal property of the Slavs" (Grundrisse, 107). There is very little else in this earliest form.

Marx on the Oriental, Asian and Asiatic systems.

This form of property shares the characteristic of having no 'private property' and hence no 'contradictions' or class conflicts built into the system. "Private property, as the antithesis to social, collective, property, exists only where the means of labour and external conditions of labour belong to private individuals." (Writings, 148) and this is not the case in either tribal or Asian systems. Thus Hobsbawm speaks of "direct communal property, as in the oriental...system" (Pre-Capitalist, 37).

It appears that Marx makes no clear distinction here between the Asian system, based on self-contained communities, and the 'Ancient' systems of Greece and early Rome, based on cities. He equates them in their over-all absence of private property, for example, as follows. "The second form (of property, AM) is the communal and State property of antiquity, which results especially from the union of several tribes into a city, either by agreement or by conquest, and which is still accompanied by slavery. Alongside communal property, personal and later also real, private property is already beginning to develop, but as an abnormal form subordinate to communal property. It is only as a community that the citizens hold power over their labouring slaves, and on this account alone, therefore, they are bound to the form of communal property". (Writings, 126-7).

In the tribal system an individual has access to rights in the corporate property of the king group through descent; in the Asian system, by virtue of being a member of a community; in the Ancient system, by being a member of a State, in other words a citizen. Thus in all cases the kinship group or community or State 'owns' the property, while the individual has temporary and particular rights in it. This "Second form (of property) has, like the first, given rise to substantial variations, local, historical etc....The community is here also the first precondition.." (Pre-Capitalist, 71). Marx recognizes, however, that although the property may be ultimately communal, individuals may assert individual possessive rights. "To be a member of the community remains the precondition for the appropriation of land, but in his capacity as member of the community the individual is a private proprietor. His relation to his private property is both a relation to the land and to his existence as a member of the community...we have here the precondition for property in land...i.e. for the relation of the working subject to the natural conditions of his labour as belonging to him. But this 'belonging' is mediated through his existence as a member of the state, through the existence of the state - hence through a precondition which is regarded as divine etc..." (Pre-Capitalist,73) Even if there is private property in practice, in theory property is still communal.

Marx on the meaning of 'community' in the primitive mode.

The principle of recruitment into this first and most real 'community' is kinship. "The first prerequisite of this earliest form of landed property appears as a human community, such as emerges from spontaneous evolution: the family, the family expanded into a tribe, or the tribe created by the inter-marriage of families or combination of tribes...The spontaneously evolved tribal community, or, if you will, the herd - the common ties of blood, language, custom, etc...Only in so far as the individual is a member - in the literal and figurative sense - of such a community, does he regard himself as an owner or possessor." (Pre-Capitalist, pp.68-69).

We see that the bonds of such a community include language, custom, blood (kinship), but the essence is probably even deeper - communal ownership. Each individual in such a situation derives his being from the community, "the others re his co-owners, who are so many incarnations of the common property". (Pre-Capitalist, 67). In Marx's view, individual and community are totally

blended, hence the references to the herd etc. The identity of interests is not enough to make a real community (Writings, 196); it is in the nature of the relation between an individual and his environment, i.e. in the nature of property relations that the reality of community lies. In this form, as in the next stage, there is 'real community'(Pre-Capitalist, 97), as opposed to the artificial communities of the third and fourth stages (i.e. feudal and post feudal). We may remember that in this original, tribal, situation, "the land occupied by a community of peasants belongs, not to the individual peasants, but to the community. Thus the district was the common property of the family." (Writings, 131). Thus 'community' is synonymous with ownership in common, based on kinship ties. The bounds of the community are the bounds of kin ties, language and ritual (customs) add extra bonds.

Marx on the 'community' in the Asian and Ancient modes.

Here too, in Marx's view, there is true 'community', the major difference being, however, that there are also numerous separate 'communities' (e.g. Indian villages), which are bound together into one larger whole or 'community'. The major difference between Asian and Ancient is that the former is based on rural villages, the latter on city states. Marx devotes most attention to the Asiatic mode (India), so we may look in a little more detail at that.

There is one central passage which provides a central key to understanding Marx's image of the Indian village community and is hence worth quoting at length. The passage occurs in *Capital*, volume one.

"Those small and extreme ancient Indian communities, some of which have continued down to this day, are based on common ownership of the land, on the association of agriculture and handicrafts, and on an unalterable division of labour, which serves, whenever a new community is started, as a plan and scheme ready cut and dried. Occupying areas of from a hundred up to several thousand acres, each forms a self-sufficient productive entity. The greater part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself, and does not take the form of commodities (i.e. for exchange, AM)..The constitution of these communities varies in different parts of India. In those of the simplest form, the land is tilled in common, and the produce divided among the members. At the sometime, spinning and weaving are carried on in each family as subsidiary industries...If the population increases, a new community is founded, on the pattern of the old one, on unoccupied land...The simplicity of the organization for production in these self-sufficing communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form, and if destroyed by chance, spring up again on the same spot and with the same name - this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the **unchangeableness** of Asiatic **societies**..." (Writings, 123)

A good deal of value has been left out here in the omitted passages, but the essential characteristics of a system in which resources are communally available and owned, and where there is little production for exchange, are well revealed. People are still tied in through the natural environment, the land. There is a "combination of manufacture and agriculture within the small community which thus becomes entirely self-sustaining and contains within itself all conditions of production and surplus

production." (Pre-Capitalist, 70). It can be seen that such communities share many characteristics with the 'tribal' situation.

Yet there is a major difference, in that there is a growing distance between individual and 'community'. "The community is here also the first precondition, but unlike our first case, it is not here the substance of which the individuals are mere accidents or of which they form mere spontaneously natural parts". (Pre-Capitalist, 71). Though Marx may be talking more of 'Ancient' than 'Asian' systems in this comment, there are signs of a change. But whatever the differences, Tribal, Asian and Ancient are all alike in that ownership is, in the last resort, communal. There can thus be no classes, no inherent 'contradictions' in the system. Thus, for Marx, classlessness, community, and communalism of property all have overlapping meaning. This becomes particularly evident when we turn to the next major form, the Germanic or feudal system, which represents the crucial break away from true community.

Marx on the absence of community in the capitalist mode

If there are no real 'communities' in the feudal and Germanic stage, it is not surprising that Marx should find none at all in capitalist society. He notes the absence of community in both the countryside and towns. Even small-holding peasants form no community. "The small-holding peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another... In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class." (Writings, p.196).

Each peasant family is a separate 'potato' in the sack; there is no higher entity, as there was in the Asian 'communities' to subsume them. Basically, therefore, the social structure of western Europe and India is fundamentally different; only out of one could capitalism emerge. Furthermore, there is even less chance of there being a 'community' in the urban setting. "Being independent of each other, the labourers are isolated persons, who enter into relations with the capitalist, but not with one another." (Writings, 120). Each person is separate and distinct.

In conclusion, therefore, Marx would argue that some form of real communities do exist in tribal societies, in the traditional agrarian civilizations of India (and China?), but that feudal, and pre-feudal Germanic societies (including Japan?) and capitalist ones do not have real communities.

Marx on the necessity of the 'Germanic' or 'feudal' mode.

Marx believed that individualism was absent in the Primitive, Asian and Ancient modes of production. The Germanic form, upon which feudalism and later capitalism was based, had a much more highly developed form of individualism than did the others: he contrasts the Germanic with the other modes thus: "...among the Germans... The property of the individual does not appear mediated through the community, but the existence of the community and of communal property as mediated

through - i.e. as a mutual relation of - the independent subjects. At bottom every individual household contains an entire economy..." (Pre-Capitalist, p.79). In other words, the basic unit of society is no longer the community or the city, but the individual household. It is becoming smaller and smaller. And instead of the earlier forms where "the community is...the substance of which the individuals are mere accidents..." (Pre-Capitalist, 71), and where, as in the Asian form, the fundamental principle is that "the individual does not become independent of the community" (Pre-Capitalist, 83), the emphasis has been shifted. Now "the community exists only in the mutual relations of the individual landowners as such" ((Pre-Capitalist, 80).

Having moved to the levels of households, the movement from this mode of production to capitalism was merely one more stage, occurring basically in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, when growing propertylessness, so that the workers no longer enjoyed the fruits of their labour, but could only exchange a part of themselves, their labour, for wages, reduced the civilization to one of individuals. It is the growth of exchanges, of production for exchange rather than for immediate use or consumption, which has mainly contributed to the distancing of the individual. In exchange, 'Each serves the other in order to serve himself; each makes use of the other, reciprocally, as his means.' (Grundrisse, 243). People enter into abrupt, immediately ended, dead, apparently balanced and single stranded exchanges. This modern world consists of numerous propertyless individuals involved in endless exchanges, of their labour for something else. In such exchanges, "Both sides confront each other as persons. Formally (i.e. on the surface, A.M.), their relation has the equality and freedom of exchange as such...the free worker..sells the particular expenditure of force to a particular capitalist, whom he confronts as an independent individual." (Grundrisse, 464). This is the world of Adam Smith. "According to Adam Smith, society is a commercial enterprise. Every one of its members is a salesman." (ibid).

Marx's depiction of 'Germanic', feudal or 'estate' mode.

This is his third mode of production (after primitive and ancient), and with it we get the emergence of 'pure' private property, the medieval system, heavily influenced by the Germanic social customs which swept Europe after the fall of Rome. Marx's description of this mode of production, the necessary gateway to capitalism, is worth quoting at some length.

"The third form of ownership is feudal or estate-property...feudal property developed under the influence of the Germanic military constitution. Like tribal and communal ownership, it is based again on a community; but the directly producing class standing over against it is not, as in the case of the ancient community, the slaves, but the enserfed small peasantry...the hierarchical system of land ownership, and the armed bodies of retainers associated with it, gave the nobility power over the serfs...This feudal organization of land-ownership had its counterpart in the towns in the shape of corporate property, the feudal organization of trades. Here property consisted chiefly in the labour of each individual person..Thus the chief form of property during the feudal epoch consisted on the one hand of landed property with surf-labour chained to it, and on the other of individual labour with small capital commanding the labour of journeymen..."(Pre-Capitalist, pp.125-6).

Thus, individuals owned estates on which others worked; probably the major differences between this situation and later fully developed capitalism were as follows. Firstly, it was based on the countryside and land, rather than towns and manufactures, secondly, that production was consequently still mainly for consumption (use) rather than for exchange. Furthermore, even the serfs sometimes grew some of their own food and were not necessarily a totally propertyless class.

Yet the central point, is that the vital bridge from communal property to private property has been passed. Marx recognises this, in the same way that Maine recognized that the crucial shift from Status to Contract, occurred with feudalism. The means of production, particularly land, were already in private hands. "Already in feudal landownership the ownership of the earth appears as an alien power ruling over men. The serf is the product of the land." (Writings, 133). Yet the transition is not complete. The land is still something more than a commodity, it trails a few traces of its earlier condition, it is a source of prestige, military strength etc. for those who own it. It is not yet regarded neutrally as something out of which the maximum amount should be squeezed. It is only after the "transformation of land into a commodity" (Writings, 132), or perhaps we should say into only a commodity, which occurred during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries that modern capitalism emerged.

It seems clear that the social and economic structure of the Germanic peoples which directly shaped feudalism (or, as Hobsbawm argues, 'was' the social formation of feudalism), permitted the rise of modern capitalism. It is indeed a crucial factor - the 'crucible' to use Maine's metaphor, which caused the temperatures to rise high enough to launch certain parts of the world on a totally new enterprise.

The final triumph of capitalism built on this foundation, and merely changed the means of appropriation. As Hobsbawm summarizes it, "The fourth stage is that in which the proletariat arises; that is to say in which exploitation is no longer conducted in the crude form of the appropriation of men - as slaves or serfs - but in the appropriation of 'labour'" (Pre-Capitalist, 37). This is put by Marx as follows. "For Capital the worker does not constitute a condition of production, but only labour. If this can be performed by machinery, or even by water or air, so much the better. And what capital appropriates is not the labourer but his labour - and not directly, but by means of exchange" (Pre-Capitalist, 99). The modern totally propertyless, but 'free', individual has emerged. There are complex private rights in property - land, machinery, labour and so on, which may be transferred to others.

Marx on the nature of the Germanic and feudal system.

There are several critical passages in which Marx expounds his view of the Germanic system. In his descriptions of the Ancient and Asiatic modes (e.g. Writings, 123), the community is more than the sum of the parts. It exists outside and beyond them: "the whole does not consist of its separate parts. It is a form of independent organism". (Pre-Capitalist, 78). This is something very akin to what Dumont means by holism. On the other hand, the Germanic system, out of which developed

feudalism and capitalism, is basically individualistic, that is to say, the whole is merely a sum of the parts.

This individualistic nature of Germanic or feudal society is described by Marx as follows:

"Among the Germans, where single heads of families settle in the forests, separated by long distances, even on an external view the community exists merely by virtue of every act of union of its members, although their unit existing in itself is embodied in descent, language, common past and history etc. The community appears as an association, not as a union, as an agreement, whose independent subjects are the landowners, and not as a unit...If the community is to enter upon real existence, the free landowners must hold an assembly..."(Pre-Cap., 78). It is worth noting here the echoes of themes which were taken up by Tonnies; this is *Gesellschaft*, not *Gemeinschaft* (Association not Community), It also reminds one of Maine; this is 'an agreement', ie. a contract, rather than a status relationship. We are across the great bridge into 'modern' society.

The basic change has been to the concepts of property. Marx recognizes that private property has emerged, individual rights directly in land and other resources, which are not mediated through some larger unity. He writes that public land "appears as a mere supplement to individual property among the Germans, and figures as property only in so far as it is defended against hostile tribes as the common property of one tribe. The property of the individual does not appear mediate through the community, but the existence of the community and of communal property as mediated through - i.e. as a mutual relation of - the independent subjects."

He then contrasts this situation with that in other, different, modest of production. "At bottom every individual household contains an entire economy...In classical antiquity the city with its attached territory formed the economic whole, in the Germanic world, the individual home...there is no concentration of multiplicity of proprietors, but the family as an independent unit. In the Asiatic form (are at least predominantly so) there is no property, but only individual possession; the community is properly speaking the real proprietor..." (Pre- Cap, 79). In the Germanic system "The community exists only in the mutual relation of the individual landowners as such...The Community is neither the substance, of which the individual appears merely as the accident, or is it the general, which exists and has being in men's minds, and in the reality of the city and its urban requirements, distinct from the separate economic being of its members." (Pre-Capitalist, 80). Thus the community is nothing more than the sum of its parts.

Marx admits that there may be some elements in common in this situation - as there would be in a nation state today. "It is rather on the one hand, the common element in language, blood, etc. which the premise of the individual proprietor; but on the other hand it has real being only in its actual assembly for communal purposes". (Pre-Capitalist, 80). Thus community for Marx means more than identity of interests, more than common descent (blood), common language, common race, common customs etc. It means communal ownership and the presence of something over and above the individual elements. Hence, in his argument, while there may have been a true 'Germanic community'

somewhere between the first and fifth century, by the time the Germanic tribes conquered Italy, Gaul, Spain etc. it no longer functioned. (Pre-Capitalist, 144). There have thus been no real 'communities' or 'Community' in Tonnies sense, for at least fifteen hundred years. This was true in the countryside and also in the towns. In the case of artisans, for example, "the community on which this form of property is based already appears as something produced, secondary, something which has come into being, a community produced by the labourer himself." (Pre-Capitalist, 100). These are that paradoxical institution, the 'artificial community', the constructed or willed community, which is a key to the peculiarity of both the West and Japan.

Thus Marx saw that the social structures of 'Asian' or 'Ancient' societies were 'holistic' and *Gemeinschaft*, while from the very start Germanic/feudal society was individualistic and *Gesellschaft*. The decisive difference is thus not caused by the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but the transition from whatever it was that preceded to feudalism to feudalism. This is where the paths diverged, though it was not necessary that they should remain totally separate - in the West, for instance, a number of 'feudal' societies went back to almost join the 'Asiatic' pattern under the Ancien Regime. What is important to remember is that Marx, unlike most of his followers, did not see feudalism and capitalism as antithetical; capitalism was a social formation which built on, refined, exaggerated, evolved out of, but by means cast off feudalism. This makes sense in the English and Japanese cases, the most 'feudal' of societies in some ways, yet also very capitalistic - and until the nineteenth century in both cases blending the two in a curious way that should warn us that they are not antithetical in nature, but complementary.