Anthropology and the ‘crisis of Marxism’

The theory and politics of ‘primitive society’ in postwar France

by

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'… the true enemy of the savage is Marxism.'

Jean-Luc Amselle, *Le Sauvage à la mode* (1979)

Abstract

Anthropology, a discipline historically devoted to what Marc Augé called 'the elsewhere and the anterior' of capitalist modernity, bears an uneasy relationship with Marxist thought. By bringing to bear modes of life foreign to traditional Marxist categories, anthropology has long thrown into doubt the universality of classical Marxist schemas, such as the relationship between base and superstructure and the centrality of the labour-capital contradiction. Yet anthropology's critique of Marxism cannot be understood outside of the political history of the discipline itself and the shifting commitments of its thinkers within their specific conjuncture.

This thesis examines this relationship between Marxism and anthropology as it plays out in the writings of four intellectuals in postwar France, who represent a series of positions on the left: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Claude Meillassoux, Pierre Clastres and Jean Baudrillard. While these authors all claimed to be concerned with 'primitive societies', I show that they were in fact animated by concerns much closer to home, not least the politics of Marxism and the French Communist Party. By taking primitive society as a cipher for non-alienated sociality in general – whether this appeared as a sociality founded on exchange (as for Lévi-Strauss) or reproduction (as for Meillassoux), on the refusal of authority (as for Clastres) or productivism (as for Baudrillard) – each thinker sought to reconfigure the coordinates of radical political thought and to demonstrate how Marxism itself participated in the alienating logics of contemporary capitalism. In doing so, I suggest, radical anthropology during these decades played an important and often unrecognised role in the 'crisis of Marxism' that arose against the backdrop of the long decline of the workers' movement. By reading politics into anthropology, this thesis also offers a contribution to discussions in contemporary critical theory, some strands of which repeat problematic theoretical gestures of postwar anthropological thought.

Table of Contents

Introduction…………………………………………………………………………….. 8
1. Societies of nature: Marx and Engels on the primitive community……………………… 28
2. Societies of exchange: Claude Lévi-Strauss's early ethical socialism ………………….. 55
3. Societies of reproduction: Claude Meillassoux's economic anthropology ……………… 90
4. Societies against the state: Pierre Clastres's anti-totalitarian primitivism …………..….. 135
5. Societies against production: Jean Baudrillard's anthropological turn after '68 ………. 165
Conclusion ………………………………………………………………………… 197

Acronyms

CAGI – Centre d’action des gauches indépendantes

CGT – Confédération générale du travail

CRS – Compagnies républicaines de sécurité

FLN – Front libération nationale

FNES – Fédération nationale des étudiants socialistes

GES – Groupe d’étudiants socialistes

PCF – Parti communiste français

PCI – Parti communiste italien

POB – Parti ouvrier belge

PS – Parti socialiste

SFIO – Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière

SouB – Socialisme ou Barbarie

UGS – Union de la gauche socialiste

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Introduction

'If we really read and listen to Marx,' Louis Althusser wrote in 1966 in a text titled 'On Lévi-Strauss', we would be forced to admit that 'there are no "primitive societies"'.[1] He explained:

> The *fundamental* source of ethnological prejudices, and thus of ethnological ideology, consists, *basically*, in the belief that 'primitive' societies are of a very special sort that sets them apart from others and prevents us from applying to them the categories, particularly the Marxist categories, in which we can think the others. ... Not only are primitive societies primitive, they are also originary: they contain the truth in empirical, perceptible form, a truth that is masked and alienated today, in our non-primitive, complex, civilized, etc., societies. This is Rousseau's old myth, resuscitated by the bad conscience of the ethnologists, those sons of the colonial conquest who, to assuage their bad consciences, discover that the primitives are 'human beings' at the dawn of human civilization, and then cultivate their friendship…[2]

Althusser's comments speak to the central problem of this thesis: how are we to understand the relationship – possible, actual, and historical – between Marxism and anthropology? This is firstly a question of the logical compatibility or incompatibility of these two intellectual traditions: are the epistemological premises on which they are based reconcilable or not? For Althusser, they are not: while Marxism could not admit the ideological object of 'primitive society' into its system, anthropology could not give up primitive society and retain its disciplinary identity. For if there were no primitive societies, there could also be '*no such thing as anthropology*'.[3] But the question of the relationship between Marxism and anthropology is also a question of historical affinity and disaffinity: how have these two intellectual traditions evolved in relation to, *in* or *against*, one another? Althusser gestures towards this question in the second part of the passage quoted above. Anthropology, he suggests, is animated by the 'bad conscience' of colonialism. This bad conscience emerges in the course of a reversal: once

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[1] Louis Althusser, 'On Lévi-Strauss' (20 August 1966), in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. François Matheron and trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2003), p. 22.
[2] Ibid., pp. 21–22.
[3] Ibid., p. 24.

derogated, 'primitive societies' are now idealised and romanticised. For Althusser, anthropology and Marxism were opposed on both epistemological and political grounds.

Althusser's critique of Lévi-Strauss is a polemic, but it expresses a real tension between Marxism and anthropology, which runs through the history of these two intellectual traditions. The discipline of anthropology has indeed historically constructed its identity around the notion that its object of study, 'primitive societies', are phenomena of a distinct kind, quite unlike modern or even ancient societies, and thus in need of a series of methods, theories, and epistemological frameworks particular to them. Within such societies, anthropology has typically investigated social phenomena – kinship, reciprocity, prestige, magic, ritual, the sacred – that lie at the peripheries or on the outside of Marxist analysis, and which have often been viewed as 'survivals' from a prior era and, as such, lacking an active role in the dialectic of world history. At some moments in Marx and Engels's writings, primitive societies even appear to escape the determination by the economy; as many anthropologists have noted, primitive social forms confound the very idea of the economy and the very category of production. For many anthropologists, social life in primitive societies appears to unfold not from the manner in which subsistence is procured but from some other more mysterious quantity – the 'spirit of the gift', perhaps, as for Mauss; or the symbolic structures inherent in the human mind, as for Lévi-Strauss. In all these ways, primitive societies – and anthropology – pose a problem or limit for Marxist analysis. They also represent a pole of attraction for a series of anti-Marxist political currents: a way out of the deadlocks of economism and productivism; a model for radically democratic, egalitarian, and libertarian political organisation; and a means of accessing a utopian imagination that historical materialism seemed to have closed off.

This thesis investigates this tension between anthropology and Marxism as it played out in the transformation of political ideas on the French left in the postwar decades. It focuses on four intellectuals on the left and the radical left in France who were writing between the 1940s and the 1970s: Claude Levi-Strauss, Claude Meillassoux, Pierre Clastres and Jean Baudrillard. All of these figures identified themselves either with or against Marxism, and often this identification changed over time. I focus on writings or periods in these writers' careers that express these changes and conversions, and these identifications and de-identifications, particularly strongly, in order to examine the way in which anthropological

thought was bound up in the political transformations of the French left – and especially its role in what was announced as the 'crisis of Marxism' (in fact only one of many *crises* of Marxism) that arose in the late 1970s. How did anthropology contend with the key premises of historical materialism in the decades leading up to this 'crisis' in Marxist thought? Was there something about the intellectual engagement with 'primitive societies', and with the form taken by anthropology's critique of Eurocentrism, that encouraged a dissatisfaction with Marxist methods and categories? Or, put differently, was anthropology perhaps not only *caught up in* but *active*, in some way, in what Perry Anderson has described as the 'abrupt and widespread renunciation of Marxism … by thinkers of older and younger generations on the Left alike'?[4]

This introduction begins by providing a brief outline of the mid-1970s 'crisis of Marxism' that represents the endpoint of the historical period examined in this thesis, and in many ways a culimation of the theoretical and political tendencies it traces, before indicating some of the consequences of this moment for contemporary critical theory. It will then provide a brief overview of a set of intellectual histories of postwar France, representing the main body of literature that this thesis aims to contribute to, before outlining the methodology that guides its effort to read politics into anthropology, and defining some key terms (such as 'primitive society'). It concludes with a brief overview of each chapter.

1 The 'crisis of Marxism' and the return of the primitive

In a speech given at the Il Manifesto conference in Venice in 1977, Althusser announced in no uncertain terms that Marxism was 'once again in crisis, and that this crisis is an open one'.[5] For Althusser the essence of this crisis was captured in the remarks made by a delegation of FIAT Mirafiori workers at the same conference:

> They said: for many of us, something has 'snapped' in the history of the labour movement between its past and present, something which makes its future unsure. … For it is a fact that it is no longer possible today, as it was, to 'integrate' the past and present, to 'integrate' on the one hand October 1917, the enormous world role of the

[4] Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 28.
[5] Louis Althusser, 'The Crisis of Marxism', *Marxism Today*, July 1978, p. 215.

> Soviet Revolution, as well as Stalingrad, with on the other hand the horrors of the Stalin regime and the oppressive Brezhnev system. These same comrades said that if it is no longer possible, as it used to be, to hold the past and present together, it is because there no longer exists in the minds of the masses any 'achieved ideal', any really living reference for socialism.[6]

Something had snapped: the workers' movement of the present could no longer recognise itself in the workers' movements of the past, shadowed and overdetermined as these had become by the image of the Soviet state. Between communists of the present and communists of the past lay the blot of Stalinism, which had only swollen in the absence of any real explanation or interrogation, more than twenty years after Khrushchev's revelations in 1956, on the part of Communist Parties across Europe and the world. For Althusser the crisis of Marxism had 'been hatching for a very long time'; it had its origins in the 1930s, when Marxism had come under the historical control of Stalin. But it had lain dormant, a 'blocked' crisis, for forty years.[7] Its explosion might 'allow new life to be breathed into Marxism',[8] enabling it to perceive the gaps in its theoretical framework – including on the subjects of the state and the different conditions and forms of exploitation present in contemporary global capitalism.

According to Perry Anderson, the source of the crisis was not Stalinism – the facts of which had already been long established – but the much more immediate experience of the twin failures of Maoism and Eurocommunism in the late 1970s. 'What detonated [the crisis] was essentially a *double disappointment*: first in the Chinese and then in the West European alternatives to the central post-revolutionary experience of the twentieth century so far, that of the USSR itself.'[9] Mao's Cultural Revolution seemed, when it was launched, to represent 'a superior form of rupture with the institutional inheritance of Stalinist industrialization and bureaucratization', a hopeful experiment in popular administration and anti-imperialist solidarity.[10] Eurocommunism, which arose as Maoism unravelled, hoped that civil liberties and political plurality could be preserved by instead taking 'a peaceful, gradual, constitutional

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., p. 217.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 76.
[10] Ibid., p. 72.

road to socialism, antipodal to the model of the October Revolution and to the Bolshevik regime that emerged from it.'[11] Both projects ended up repeating the same problems they had sought to overcome: Maoism morphed into a personality cult and a centralised apparatus for the repression of dissent, while the Communist Parties of southern Europe that had adopted Eurocommunist positions found themselves 'enfeebled and subordinate' in relation to resurgent Socialist Parties.[12]

In the context of these political developments, a theoretical substitution was taking place. In the immediate postwar years, intellectual debate in France had been dominated by Marxist philosophy, presided over by Jean-Paul Sartre. The French Communist Party (PCF) was during this time a 'massive, adamantine presence',[13] bolstered by the leading role the Communists had played in the French Resistance.[14] Marxist philosophy was reinvigorated in the 1960s under the influence of Althusser and his students at the École normale supérieure.[15] But on the other side of 'the events' of May 1968, and with special vigour from 1974, preeminent Marxists in France shrunk from the intellectual and political tradition they had once represented. For some, such as Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, Pierre Clastres and Jean Baudrillard, this was a case of direct renunciation. Others, such as Althusser, experienced the crisis of Marxism as a more muted loss of faith, manifest as vigorous self-criticism. Altogether, what took place was a widespread 'massacre of ancestors' in a generation of intellectuals that had come of age under the dominance of Marxism in intellectual and political life.[16]

This crisis reached fever pitch with the 1974 French publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. The revelations of Stalinist horror it contained were not new, but the PCF's defensive condemnation of it as anti-Soviet propaganda allowed it to explode into the public imagination as evidence of the inherent totalitarian tendencies of communism.[17] The most prominent commentaries on these events were written by André

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[11] Ibid., p. 74.
[12] Ibid., p. 76.
[13] Ibid., p. 35.
[14] Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against The Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), p. 20.
[15] For a study of French Marxism as philosophy (or 'the end of philosophy') in relation to the postwar political conjuncture, see Roberto Mozzachiodi, *The End of Philosophy in Marx: Henri Lefebvre, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida*, doctoral thesis (2020).
[16] Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 30.
[17] Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against The Left*, p. 113.

Glucksmann, a '68 militant and former Maoist who became one of the notorious 'New Philosophers', and Claude Lefort, who had led (with Cornelius Castoriadis) the left-communist group Socialisme ou Barbarie (see Chapter 4).[18] Other remarkable turnarounds came from Kristeva and Sollers, who 'switched virtually overnight' from militant Maoism to 'revaluations of mysticism and exaltation of the social order in the United States.'[19] This 'veritable *débandade*' of French thinkers on the left led Anderson to describe Paris, in 1983, as 'the capital of European intellectual reaction'.[20] Anti-communism was in the air; the New Philosophers were on TV; the image of the gulag smothered political discussion. For Emmanuel Terray, all this had little to do with the actual character or quality of Marxist thought at the time. 'What appeared in 1975 was not a crisis of Marxism, but a crisis of Marxists,' he writes.[21] 'For varied reasons – among which the considerations of theoretical or scientific character are only secondary – the majority of French intellectuals who then professed to Marxism renounced their first convictions and assembled themselves around on or other of the doctrines offered at that time on the market of ideas.'[22]

One of these doctrines was structuralism. Structuralism survived May '68 in a way that Marxism did not: while Marxism found itself increasingly out of favour after 'the events', Anderson writes that structuralism 'passed through the ordeal of May and re-emerged phoenix-like on the other side' in the form, not distinguishable in any obvious way, of post-structuralism.[23] Anderson's early judgement has been proved correct: since the mid-1970s, post-structuralism – in which we can include the diverse theoretical projects of Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard, among many others – has unequivocally succeeded Marxism in what has become known as 'French theory'. Writing in 1983, Anderson insisted that this was the result of external (political and historical) rather than internal causes: he considered that there was never a meaningful debate between Marxism and structuralism, and that (post-)structuralism triumphed largely by way of 'the extraordinary *lability* of the political

[18] Ibid., p. 90.
[19] Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 29.
[20] Ibid., p. 32.
[21] Emmanel Terray, 'Anthropologie et marxisme: années 1950-70', L'Afrique, miroir du contemporain, Journée d'études de l'Institut Interdisciplinaire d'Anthropologie du Contemporain, CNRS-EHESS (Paris), 2007, p. 10.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 40. For a critique of the distinction between structuralism and post-structuralism, see Étienne Balibar, 'Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?', *differences* 14 (1), 2003, especially p. 11.

connotations' it assumed.[24] 'At no point, from the early sixties to the early eighties, have [structuralism] or its sequels defended an independent social viewpoint of their own,' he wrote.[25]

The object of this thesis is not structuralism, but a set of anthropological theories that developed at its peripheries and mostly under its theoretical shadow.[26] This project is premised on the conviction that these theories were in fact deeply political, and not simply 'labile', as Anderson puts it, or capable of being filled with whatever political content the fashions of the time offered up. Claude Meillassoux, Pierre Clastres and Jean Baudrillard owed their intellectual formation to structuralism, but they do not describe themselves as structuralists and all of them criticise structuralism – for different reasons, as we shall see. And while Lévi-Strauss is the undisputed 'father' of French structuralism, and has been subject to much criticism for his detachment from politics, my examination of his work in this thesis is restricted to a selection of his early writings in which the intense political engagements of his youth remained evident and in which his structuralism was not yet formulated. In choosing these authors and these texts, I have opted not to try to add to an important but already well-established set of theoretical discussions regarding the intersections between (post-)structuralism and Marxism,[27] and to focus instead on a less well-known political discussion of anthropology and Marxism.[28] That is, my aim is to draw out the way in which the political

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[24] Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 56.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Here I refer, as I do throughout the thesis, not to anthropology in the broader sense of an inquiry into the nature of the human being as such – a sense more closely aligned with the tradition of *philosophical* anthropology – and rather to anthropology as the discipline of that name, originally called *ethnologie* in France and known today as social or cultural anthropology in Britain and America. The question of the legitimacy or value of this disciplinary identity – and its relationship to philosophical anthropology, on the one hand, and physical anthropology, on the other – is nevertheless one that recurs at several points in the following chapters.
[27] For direct critiques of structuralism and poststructuralism from a Marxist perspective, see, for example, Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*; Althusser, 'On Lévi-Strauss'; and Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996). For Marxist appropriations, revisions, and reconsiderations of French structuralism and post-structuralism, see Jacques Bidet, *Foucault with Marx*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Zed Books, 2016); Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Jason Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Guillame Sibertin-Blanc, *State and Politics: Deleuze and Guattari on Marx* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); Samo Tomsic, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2015).
[28] A number of theoretical discussions on the relationship between anthropology and Marxism appeared at the height of the Marxist anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s, discussed in Chapter 3. Among these include, in France, Lucien Sebag, *Marxisme et structuralisme* (Paris: Payot, 1964), Emmanuel Terray, *Le Marxisme devant les sociétés "primitives"* (Paris: Maspero, 1969); Marc Abélès, *Anthropologie et marxisme* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1976); in Britain, Maurice Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Barry

transformations of the French left between the 1940s and the 1970s helped to structure the debates between anthropology and Marxism – and the way anthropology, in turn, influenced the forms of political radicalism that emerged in this period.

My motivation for this project is not only to add to the historical record, but also to contribute – if only indirectly – to discussions in contemporary critical theory, certain strands of which appear to me to repeat problematic theoretical gestures of the postwar period. For many French theorists of the postwar and especially the post-'68 generation, as socialist projects failed and environmental crisis reared its head, it appeared necessary to ground political thought outside of the modern and/or Western imagination. One had to move beyond the ineffectual (because forever recuperable) critique of capitalism and get 'to the root' of the problem, which meant to fashion a critique of *civilization* instead. The sources of this critique were not in a dialectical or immanent critique of civilization, as for the Frankfurt School, but in civilization's outside: in the 'elsewhere and anterior' of far-flung territories and in the 'radical alterity' of primitive life and savage thought. Today, in the midst of climate catastrophe, it is not surprising to witness a return to the primitive/civilized dyad in the field of critical theory and philosophy. Such discussions are most evident in the interdisciplinary nexus between anthropology, philosophy, and the history of science, and often arise where the question of 'ontology' is concerned, for their aim is to dismantle or problematise divisions between humans and non-humans, and between the realm of nature and that of culture.[29] They do so frequently by endowing non-living objects with agency or elaborating the symbiotic relations between humans and non-humans, as in the various strands of 'new materialism',[30] or by contesting the premises of universalism through various 'radicalizations' of relativism, as in 'comparative metaphysics' and 'ontological anthropology'.[31]

Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-capitalist modes of production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Joel S. Kahn and Josep R. Llobera (eds), *The Anthropology of Pre-Capitalist Societies* (London: Macmillan, 1981); and in America, Stanley Diamond (ed.), *Toward a Marxist Anthropology* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979).

[29] See, for example, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2013).

[30] See, for example, Karen M. Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[31] See, for example, Pierre Chabonnier, Gildas Salmon and Peter Skafish (eds), *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology After Anthropology* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

Such work is often – although certainly not always – structured by a political orientation similar to that which emerged in the 1970s: an orientation 'beyond left and right', a repudiation of historical materialism as necessarily anthropocentric or Eurocentric, and a desire to extend the moral community to the realm of non-human nature.[32] For example, while Eduardo Viveiros de Castro sees the 'attentive listening to extramodern voices' as essential for overcoming the political deficit of the left,[33] for Bruno Latour the only hope for dealing with the catastrophes unleashed by ecological crisis hinges on the formation of a new 'terrestrial' subject that transcends the human-nonhuman divide and finds new possibilities for reconciliation with nature.[34] This thesis does not directly interrogate these theoretical movements, which have been criticised for some time.[35] Instead, it excavates some of the political foundations on which they have been built, thus bringing to light some of the political currents which course through them. Indeed, the greatest claim of ontological primitivism today is its theoretical novelty. By examining the political history of anthropology, this thesis questions this claim – or at least provides some preliminary materials for separating what *is* novel in such work from what is simply repetition.

2 Intellectual histories of postwar France

The case for taking up a study of the relation between politics and anthropology in France has been made recently by Jacob Collins in his *The Anthropological Turn: French Political Thought After 1968* (2020).[36] For Collins, French political thought has always had an anthropological cast, setting it apart from the traditions of political theory in Britain and America. 'At a basic level,' he writes, 'modern French thinkers have understood political

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[32] A very clear expression of these three tendencies can be seen in Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018). There are exceptions to this political orientation, which take up the challenges posed by theory of 'the Anthropocene' without viewing these as incompatible with Marxist thought; see, for example, Jason Read, 'Anthropocene and Anthropogenesis: Philosophical Anthropology and the Ends of Man', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116 (2), 2017, pp. 257–273.
[33] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'Metaphysics as Mythophysics: Or, Why I Have Always Been an Anthropologist', in Charbonnier, Salmon and Skafish (eds), *Comparative Metaphysics*, p. 257.
[34] Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), Chapter 9.
[35] See, for example, Benjamin Noys, 'Matter Against Materialism: Bruno Latour and the Turn to Objects', in *Theory Matters: The Place of Theory in Literary and Cultural Studies Today*, ed. Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 81–93.
[36] Jacob Collins, *The Anthropological Turn: French Political Thought After 1968* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

theory to be a cultural-anthropological project involving not only the formulation of policies but deeper propositions about the nature of the sociopolitical world.'[37] Political thought in France is less concerned with the question of 'how to rule' than with that of 'how to institute symbolic forms' that might bind society together.[38] For Collins, the anthropological thread running through French political thought was already evident in the '(imaginary) encounters with the non-European' that populated the speculations of Michel de Montaigne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot, but it was also bolstered by a perceived need to understand the bases of social solidarity in the wake of the French Revolution – a project pursued through the development of the modern social sciences.[39] It was also connected to the distinctively French tradition of popular anthropology, which sprung up in the late nineteenth century with the opening of the world's first anthropological museum, the Ethnographic Museum of the Trocadero.[40] It was out of this imbrication of anthropology within general French culture that the early-twentieth-century literary and aesthetic preoccupation with the primitive emerged,[41] and later the hugely influential anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, whose attempt to discover a subterranean set of laws of the social remains an obligatory reference point for French social thinkers and holds a stable place in the *lycée* curriculum.[42]

Collins approaches this distinctively French fusion of anthropological and political traditions by focusing on a series of understudied thinkers, from across the political spectrum, that were prominent in France in the 1970s: Alain de Benoist, Marcel Gauchet, Emmanuel Todd, and Régis Debray. What united them across their diverse positions, Collins argues, was their common effort to develop 'an elaborate political-anthropological system' that could provide a new, firmer foundation for French society at a moment of deep uncertainty.[43] Like Collins, I take the 1970s, and the questions generated by the political crises that emerged at that time as my point of departure. Unlike him, my project approaches this question in reverse, as a *genealogy* rather than exactly a *study* of this moment of impasse and failure for the left. To this end, I begin my survey of French anthropological thought in the interwar and wartime

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[37] Ibid., p. 16.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 25.
[41] Ibid., p. 26.
[42] See Camille Robcis, 'Lévi-Strauss's Structuralist Social Contract', *Yale French Studies* 123 (2013), pp. 145–165.
[43] Collins, *The Anthropological Turn*, p. 5.

years, in an effort to bring into view some of the social, political, ideological, and intellectual conditions for this later 1970s conjuncture. Also unlike Collins, I am interested primarily in discussions internal to the left, and especially where they interact with the ideas of Marxism, rather than attempting any kind of survey of the political spectrum.

The Anthropological Turn is a welcome addition to a recent series of important books – mainly from authors based, like Collins, in the United States – seeking to make sense of the intellectual and ideological transformations of postwar France in the context of the political movements and social transformations of this period. Kristin Ross's *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (1994) inaugurates a current of politicised intellectual history that refuses to 'keep separate' the stories of French modernisation and decolonisation.[44] This approach, which has helped to correct the amnesia fostered by the French state regarding its colonial and racial history, has been continued by Gary Wilder in his two books *The French Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (2005) and *Freedom Time: Négritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (2015) as well as by Todd Shepard in his *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (2006).[45] This thesis takes inspiration from these approaches, which insist on the inseparability of the movement of French ideas from the shifting imaginary of France's colonial and racial 'others' and from the territories, cultures and people implicated in this othering. The distinctively French cross-pollination between anthropology and philosophy evident throughout this thesis can be read as a reflection of this contorted fascination France has had with its colonies and ex-colonies in the twentieth century – even if this fascination sometimes reads negatively, as a symptomatic absence or pathological silence.[46]

Other important books in the current of political intellectual history described above have focused, like Collins, on the transformations undergone by political ideas in France after

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[44] Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

[45] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[46] On the effects of the Algerian War on French philosophy, see Alberto Toscano, 'The Name of Algeria: French Philosophy and the Subject of Decolonization', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 1 February 2018. On the pathologies of silence and denial after the Algerian War, see Adam Shatz, 'Dynamo Current, Feet, Fists, Salt', *London Review of Books* 43 (4), 18 February 2021.

1968. Kristin Ross's *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (2002), a product of the author's immersion in archives of print and TV culture of the era, initiated a revision of what she calls the 'active forgetting' of the political content of May '68.[47] Other important studies of the intellectual transformations of this period and its aftermath include Richard Wolin's *The Wind From the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (2018),[48] Warren Breckman's *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (2015),[49] Julian Bourg's *Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (2007),[50] Michael Scott Christofferson's *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (2004),[51] and Benjamin Noys's *The Persistence of the Negative* (2009), even if the latter's focus is on an 'affirmationist' current of theory which peaks somewhat later, but which is nevertheless connected to the '"original" trauma' of the 1970s intellectual counter-revolution.[52] Camille Robcis's *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (2013) and Stefanos Geroulanos's *Transparency in Postwar France: A Critical History of the Present* (2017) offer critical perspectives on some of the same authors I discuss here, especially Lévi-Strauss, and again situate their readings in the fabric of French social history rather than on the plane of ideas alone. Unlike these latter works (and some of those mentioned above), the focus of this thesis is not on popular culture or public discourse, nor primarily on the details of French history. Its approach is, however, influenced by the way in which many of these studies combine critical commentary and historical reconstruction, and the close attention they pay to the imbrication of French theory in both political movements and in the workings of the French state.

3 Methodology

This thesis seeks to read politics into anthropology. It does so in two ways: firstly, by attending to the ways in which these anthropological texts intervened in relation to the immediate and

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[47] Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 3.
[48] Richard Wolin, *The Wind From the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
[49] Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
[50] Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).
[51] Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against The Left.*
[52] Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative*, p. 2.

concrete political questions of their time, often doing so most effectively when they appeared not to. At first sight, many of the texts I examine in this thesis are ethnographic accounts concerned with societies far from metropolitan France. As such, they seem to have little bearing on domestic political questions. But by reading them alongside political writings by their authors from the same period (such as writings in student newspapers, small reviews and periodicals associated with political groups), and in relation to the political activities their authors were engaged in at the time (such as membership in political parties and 'groupuscules', participation in political movements and demonstrations, and the founding and editing of radical periodicals and reviews), it becomes possible to understand these anthropological writings as political documents. In reading them in this way, I draw on Quentin Skinner's approach to intellectual history. For Skinner, texts should be read as speech-acts; he writes: 'The question that interests me most is: what are texts *doing*? What are they rejecting or affirming, criticizing or ignoring, satirising or ridiculing? Speech, I am saying, is action, and to understand speech requires that we find means to understand what actions are being performed by the language we use.'[53] Like Skinner, I try to discover what these anthropological texts were *doing* in relation to the immediate political questions faced by the left in the particular conjuncture(s) in which they were written. This involves close attention to the political biographies of each author. I also try to excavate the implicit political theories and underlying presuppositions that animate these anthropological texts (whether the authors are conscious of this or not): most of these texts, whether openly or not, contain theories about the state of nature, the social contract, the political community in its modes of interaction with other political communities, the origins of the state, and the nature of political power and political representation. The more concrete and immediate political interventions described above are in constant interplay – and at times in contradiction – with these abstract and more fundamental political theories and ideas.

Reading politics into anthropology brings to light the way in which anthropological concepts are inevitably what Nietzsche called 'frozen conflicts'.[54] Anthropological concepts – such as exchange, reciprocity, reproduction, subsistence, and kinship, in addition to the concept

[53] Quentin Skinner in Jacques Lévy and Emmanuelle Tricoire, 'Quentin Skinner: "Concepts only have histories"', *EspacesTemps*, 2007, p. 4.
[54] Ibid., p. 1.

of primitive society itself – carry beneath their relatively stable appearance a whole weight of ideological debate, which only occasionally comes to the surface. I have tried to focus on texts which bring such disputes and tensions into view, rather than to attempt any kind of exhaustive account of the oeuvre of any of the authors studied here. I have chosen texts often because they represent a point of *transition* in the author's political thought: they may express the justifications taken up in support of that political transformation or bring out most clearly a contradiction relevant to this thesis as a whole. For this reason, I have focused more on the earlier works than the mature works of most of these authors (with the exception of Marx), because the earlier writings tend to express a more open set of political positions, before the authors had etched out their names and reputations, and before they had come to represent and perform a certain singular position or 'ism' (for example, I look at Lévi-Strauss's writings before he became associated with 'structuralism', and Baudrillard's before he became associated with 'postmodernism'). If intellectual history inherits concepts which are 'the outcomes of battles', Skinner writes, then '[w]e need as historians to go back to the point before these battles were fought. There we find very different configurations of thought, and we may even find valuable traditions of thinking that have subsequently been lost.'[55] In this spirit, this thesis investigates a series of ideological battles that have taken place at the frontier between anthropology and Marxism.

Skinner's method is based on a strong critique of 'Marxist' approaches to intellectual history, which he considers to proceed according to the view that 'all ideologies are simply ex post facto rationalisations'[56] of class interests or according to an underlying positivism of 'true' against 'false' consciousness.[57] Although such criticisms are no doubt valid in certain circumstances, it does not seem to me that Marx held them himself in any uncomplicated way, nor that many of those producing contemporary intellectual histories guided and influenced by the Marxist tradition (such as many of the studies cited above) do either. This thesis is more interested in these contemporary efforts to reclaim the term and idea of 'Marxism' from its economistic or deterministic variants, or from notions of ideology as merely reflecting more 'real' social relations – which for Skinner, unfortunately, characterise 'Marxism' as such. The

[55] Ibid., p. 7.
[56] Ibid., find p.
[57] Ibid., p. 14.

ideas examined in this thesis are of course not *unrelated* to class relations and economic transformations, but these relations are far from direct or totalising; the ideas themselves are sites of struggle and contradiction. In short, it seems possible to me to both retain many of Skinner's insights and to remain true to the spirit of a renewed Marxism.

4 'Primitive society'

In this thesis, 'primitive society' emerges as the pivotal category at the nexus between anthropology and leftist thought. It is nevertheless a fragile category, threatening to collapse at any moment and to be replaced by a variety of others. In Marx and Engels (Chapter 1), a number of German terms are used to designate primitive societies, including the adjectives *naturwüchsig* (naturally grown) and *urpsrünglichkeit* (original), and the noun *Stammwesen* (tribal beings). In Lévi-Strauss (Chapter 2), 'primitive society' (*société primitive*) is the most common term, but the savage (*sauvage*) is a close rival. Meillassoux (Chapter 3) is most reluctant to uphold the category of 'primitive societies'; he trials a number of alternatives, from the rather ungainly 'self-sufficient agricultural community' to the nebulous 'domestic mode of production' – while debates about how to divide up and specify the various 'precapitalist modes of production' rage in the background. Clastres (Chapter 4) and Baudrillard (Chapter 5) are less hesitant to use the term 'primitive society', since the specificity of the 'primitive' world is at the heart of their speculative critiques of capitalism and state-socialism; they retain the term self-consciously and in knowledge of the critiques it has begun to attract by the time they were writing.

In the following chapters, I have tried to follow the term used by the author in question, while retaining a commitment to investigating the category of the primitive *as primitive* – that is, as a malleable yet incredibly persistent figure with a principal function, much like the figure of the savage, of presenting a 'living negation or inverted image of civilised Western humanity',[58] and of marking an anthropological difference important to the organisation of racial capitalism.[59] Used to refer simultaneously to peoples on the peripheries of commodity economy and to a prehistory from which all of humanity is seen to derive, the figure of the

[58] Alberto Toscano, '"By contraries execute all things": Figures of the savage in European philosophy', *Radical Philosophy* 2.04, Spring 2019, p. 9.
[59] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1983).

primitive has underpinned evolutionist world-historical paradigms that arrange different social and cultural groups as stages along a linear developmental trajectory. It goes without saying, then, that primitive society does not correspond to any real group of people, in the present or in history, but to an idea or representation of *a certain kind of society*, filled with whatever content its author chooses.

The term 'society' is used in a similar way. While Marxist critics have argued that society is an ideological category, mistaking a surface appearance for a functional or otherwise analytically useful totality,[60] society is also an anthropological concept *par excellence*. This is especially the case in French anthropology, which was until the 1950s understood as a sub-category of sociology and whose founding figures, Durkheim and Mauss, were sociologists. The term society was therefore preserved within French anthropology, while British and American anthropology was reconceived as the study of 'cultures'. This persistence of the term 'societies' in French thought also seems to me to reflect a particularly French proclivity for schematic comparison between what are read as formally different social, cultural, or epistemological universes, and for efforts to make a general claim about the essence, organising logic, or dominant feature of the foregoing – Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) institutes this as a kind of trope, to be followed by Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society* (1970), Deleuze's 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' (1990), and Foucault's 'disciplinary societies' in his *Discipline and Punish* (1975). I have reproduced this convention in my chapter titles to reflect the way each chapter is organised around a central claim made about the nature, or essence, of primitive society.

5 Chapter outline

Chapter 1, 'Societies of nature', explores Marx and Engels's changing conceptions of the primitive, primitivity and primitive societies in a series of writings that spans the length of their careers, including *The German Ideology* (1846), the section of the *Grundrisse* entitled *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (1857–8), Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* (1880–1882), his late drafts and letter to Vera Zasulich (1881), and Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). It focuses in particular on the relationship between Marx and

[60] Jason Read, 'Mode of Production', in Jeff Diamanti, Andrew Pendakis and Imre Szeman (eds), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 349.

Engels's ideas of primitive societies and the concept of the *naturwüchsig* (the naturally or spontaneously developed). In doing so, it delineates a set of oppositions that recur in left imaginaries of primitive society, including those concerning (1) the communal vs. individual origins of man; (2) spontaneous vs. historical development; (3) immediacy vs. mediation in the figure of the primitive; and (4) unilinear vs. multilinear (or non-synchronous) conceptions of history. Delineating these themes provides a theoretical and methodological foundation for the subsequent chapters, and identifies the contradictions and tensions inherent to the imaginary of primitive communism that is implicit in Chapters 2–5. This first chapter should not be read in any straightforward sense their chronological precursor, however, since several of the texts it focuses on were not in circulation, translated from the German, or even published at all in France in the postwar period.[61] In this way, Chapter 1 stands separately from the historical arguments formed in these latter chapters, but provides an essential basis for evaluating their representations of Marx, Engels and Marxism.

Chapter 2, 'Societies of exchange', examines some of the early writings of Lévi-Strauss, bringing these into dialogue with the political interests of his youth. Reconstructing his intense engagement during his teens and twenties with the 'ethical socialism' of Henri De Man and the Belgian Socialist Party (POB), initially, and later the right wing of the French Socialist Party (SFIO) and Marcel Mauss, it argues that these political activities had an important influence on his developing anthropological ideas. Specifically, the chapter suggests that it was in part through Lévi-Strauss's early socialism – and the conceptions of moral economy, reciprocity and redistribution cultivated therein – that he came to place the idea of symbolic exchange, which for him was closely related to the social contract, at the heart of his anthropological thought. It also suggests that an early 'anti-materialist' thread, emerging from

[61] My reading of Marx and Engels is also not in a simple sense a chronological precursor of the latter chapters, since it draws on a current of Marxist thought – which seeks to revise representations of Marxism as an evolutionary, teleological, or colonial tradition – that emerges only from the 1980s. See Teodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983), Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2015 [1982]), Peter Hudis, 'The Third World Road to Socialism: New Perspectives on Marx's Writings from His Last Decade', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 3 (1), 1983, pp. 38–52. These multilinear or 'deprovincialising' readings of Marx have been taken up again more recently by Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); and Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

interwar socialist critics of Marxism such as De Man, helped to foster Lévi-Strauss's interest in anthropology – and led him to approach anthropology as a science of symbolic, rather than material, structures.

Chapter 3, 'Societies of reproduction',[62] investigates a current of 1960–70s French Marxist anthropology known as *anthropologie économique*, focusing on the thought of Meillassoux. Unlike in some of the other chapters, the politics of by this current of anthropology are explicit: it is conceived as a means of understanding (and furthering) the revolutionary potential of the Third World peasantry, especially in Africa, and of challenging liberal versions of economic anthropology, which impose capitalist economic categories onto primitive societies. But for Meillassoux, too, primitive societies presented a problem for Marxian materialism, obliging a reconfiguration of its central categories. In primitive societies in which subsistence agriculture was dominant, relations of production were determining only alongside and in (often secondary) relation to what he called *relations of reproduction.* My reading of Meillassoux interrogates this concept of reproduction, disambiguating some of the meanings contained within it, which I call reproduction-as-domination, reproduction-as-repetition, and reproduction-as-life. I suggest that in conflating these different meanings, Meillassoux's concept of reproduction does not succeed in breaking from the functionalist framework that it inherits from pre-Marxist economic anthropology. Yet his efforts provide an example – and a contrast to the arguments of Chapters 2, 4 and 5 – of how anthropology can indeed force Marxism to rethink its foundational premises in relation to non-capitalist modes of life.

Chapter 4, 'Societies against the state', turns to one of the most enthusiastic opponents of Marxist anthropology, Pierre Clastres. Clastres's 'political anthropology' makes a deliberate effort to shift the focus in radical anthropology from the question of the economic to the question of the political. Centred around the idea that primitive societies are in their essence resistant and opposed to the essence of the state, Clastres's writings put forward a number of propositions about the radically singular nature of power in primitive societies. This chapter reads Clastres's political anthropology as emerging out of his deepening criticism of the

[62] My title for this chapter (perhaps for all of the chapters) was prompted, I realise (as so often) in hindsight, by Simon Barber's use of the phrase. See Simon Barber, 'Māori Mārx: Some Provisional Materials', *Counterfutures* 8, pp. 43–71.

Communist left. Having left the PCF in 1956 and turned to anthropology that same year, Clastres would become close to members of the group Socialisme ou Barbarie (above all Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort), which had been an early left critic of Soviet bureaucracy. By the 1970s, this left-libertarian tendency emerged, with its vehement caricatures of Marxism, as an important participant in what has been called the 'antitotalitarian moment' in France.[63] I argue that Clastres's anthropological writings convert the concrete problems of Soviet bureaucracy, the state, and political representation into ontological questions about the nature of power as such, through the figure of primitive society. The paradoxes that result reveal much about the impasses of political thought in this conjuncture.

Chapter 5, 'Societies against production', focuses on Baudrillard's *The Mirror of Production* (1974),[64] which it reads alongside a number of his writings on French politics published in the journal *Utopie* between 1968 and 1978.[65] Reading these two strands of writing together, I draw out a conception of *sauvage* politics present in Baudrillard's thought during this period. While this is the only chapter that does not focus on an anthropologist, Baudrillard's writings from this period are demonstrably influenced by the discussions in anthropology considered in the chapters above. Moreover, the clear alignment between Baudrillard's turn from Marxism and his interest in the figure of the primitive seems to me to encapsulate the central problem of this thesis: the way in which anthropology was mobilised to accelerate Marxism's theoretical crisis. *Mirror* claimed that Eurocentrism was inscribed into the very grammar of Marxism; to stretch Marxist categories to encompass 'primitive societies' or 'precapitalist modes of production' was, then, not sufficient. The Marxist system in its entirety had to be overcome. Chapter 5 tries to draw out the relations between Baudrillard's theoretical arguments about primitive societies and his concurrent analysis of the decline of the Left in France in the decade following 1968, and the short-lived hope he finds in what I call the 'politics of the *sauvage*'.

The conclusion is an attempt to map out some of the overall theoretical consequences of the preceding chapters. It returns, firstly, to the opposition between anthropology and Marxism, which I hypothesised above as both a *logical* opposition and a *historical* opposition.

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[63] Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left.*
[64] Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).
[65] Jean Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred: Writings for* Utopie *(1967–1978)* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006).

I consider how the ‘crisis of Marxism’ in the 1970s exposes the contradictions between these two intellectual traditions with particular clarity – even if such contradictions have been in place ever since Marx and Engels began to consider the problem of ‘primitive’ societies. The second part of the conclusion identifies three principles which I suggest run through the left imaginary of ‘primitive societies’ identified in this thesis: (1) exchange, (2) reproduction, and (3) *autogestion.* These principles draw together the most important themes and problems of the preceding chapters, and form the basis for a future assessment of the relationship between Marxism and anthropological theory in the present.

Chapter 1

Societies of nature: Marx and Engels on the primitive community

The role played by the figure of the primitive in the postwar transformations of intellectual debate on the French left is difficult to adequately grasp without examining the concepts of the primitive, primitivity and primitive societies developed in Marx and Engels's own writings. Marx and Engels's primitive is not a stable object: in their early work, influenced by the young Marx's immersion philosophical anthropology, the primitive is an abstraction, undetermined in time and space and used mainly to throw into relief the historical mediations of capitalist modernity;[1] later the term 'primitive' is assigned to currently existing peoples according to the 'level' of material production attributed to them by the emerging field of empirical anthropology. Both of these iterations of the primitive, abstract and concrete, helped Marx – and Engels, especially after Marx's death – to develop the argument that the origins of human society were communal rather than individual, against liberal theorists of the social contract and later political economists. Marx suggested increasingly towards the end of his life that these communal origins were marked not by brutality and privation but rather by egalitarian and even democratic relations, the absence of private property and the primacy of use value, which bore out in greater levels of material and social flourishing than those seen in modern industrial societies. As he wrote in one of the drafts of his reply to Vera Zasulich in 1882, 'primitive communities had *incomparably greater vitality* than the Semitic, Greek, Roman and *a fortiori* the modern capitalist societies.'[2] At this late point in his life, Marx suggested that the Russian peasant commune, which shared many of the features of so-called primitive communal societies around the world, might constitute 'the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia'.[3] Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which was based heavily on Marx's notes on Lewis Henry Morgan in his *Ethnological Notebooks*, further solidified the idea of the vitality of the primitive community.[4]

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[1] For an elaboration of this point, see Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology*, pp. 10–20.
[2] Karl Marx, 'Drafts of a reply' (February/March 1881), in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, p. 107.
[3] Karl Marx, 'The reply to Zasulich (March 1881)', in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, p. 124.
[4] Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1972).

Thus challenging Hobbesian depictions of primitive privation, Marx and Engels's later writings have played an important role in the development of a 'left' version of the primitive, according to which the primitive embodied characteristics essential to the leftist imagination, including non-alienation, egalitarianism, communalism, democracy, self-determination and ecological responsibility. This 'left primitive' precedes Marx and Engels in the utopian socialism of Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon. It also develops in parallel to Marx and Engels, in Peter Kropotkin's anarchism, Marcel Mauss's socialism, and even in the accounts of Louise Michel from the time she spent interned in New Caledonia.[5] So why begin with Marx, whose writings on primitive societies have been little known until recently, in a study of the postwar French left? Firstly, because their ideas provide the most important single point of reference for the authors examined in the following four chapters, each of which expresses a different kind of effort to depart from what they term 'Marxism' (or, in the case of Meillassoux, Marxist orthodoxy), and in doing so to revitalise political thought and anthropology on the left. It is necessary to examine Marx and Engels's own writings, and especially the differences between them, to be able to evaluate the different versions of Marxism presented in the following chapters – many of which were marked by the Stalinism of the PCF, as well as by the fact that many of Marx's work on anthropology (including the *Grundrisse*, the *Ethnological Notebooks* and the letters to Zasulich) was not published or translated at this time, and that Engels's *Origin* therefore remained 'the Marxist bible on primitive societies' and was taken to be synonymous with his thought.[6] The reading of these twentieth-century turns from (or reconstructions of) Marxism can in this way proceed with a fuller view of the sedimented layers of intellectual history in which they unfolded, allowing a more precise excavation of their meanings, motivations, and consequences.

The second reason for focusing on Marx and Engels in this chapter is because woven through their changing accounts of the primitive is one of the most persistent and problematic legacies of this figure: its association with nature. This association appears mostly in Marx and Engels's writings in the adjective *naturwüchsig*, meaning literally 'natural growth' or 'spontaneous development' but also translated as 'primordial', 'native' and, at times,

[5] Carolyn J. Eichner, 'Civilization vs. Solidarity: Louise Michel and the Kanaks', *Salvage*, 22 May 2017.
[6] Philippe Descola, 'Review: Towards a Marxist Anthropology: Problems and Perspectives, ed. Stanley Diamond', *American Ethnologist* 8 (2), 1981, pp. 394–395.

‘primitive’. The term *naturwüchsig* captures some of the ambiguities inherent to the idea of the primitive in Marx and Engels’s work, for it is not clear what it might mean to develop spontaneously when the object of development is human society, nor which societies and social forms are *naturwüchsig* and which are instead the result of conscious, deliberate or more properly ‘historical’ development. In other words, the question of whether primitive societies belong to *natural history* or *human history* does not generate a straightforward answer in Marx and Engels’s writings.

Taking the term *naturwüchsig* as its point of departure, while also examining other conceptions of nature alongside it, this chapter reconstructs Marx and Engels’s concepts of the primitive, primitivity and primitive society as they appear across the course of their writing lives. This reconstruction serves as a foundation for the discussions of the French authors considered in Chapters 2–5, by identifying some of the key oppositions at the nexus of Marxism and anthropology which recur in various forms throughout this thesis. In brief, these oppositions are (in an order which follows the structure of this chapter) as follows: (1) the state of nature as a state of individualism versus one of communality; (2) spontaneous versus historical development, (3) immediacy versus mediation, and (4) unilinearity versus multilinearity in world history. Each of these oppositions expresses a different angle through which Marx and Engels wrestled with the association of primitive societies with nature.

I begin by briefly summarising the nineteenth-century debate regarding the individual and communal origins of man, outlining Marx’s criticism of social contract theorists and liberal political economists in his Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857/8).[7] I then move to a more chronologically-ordered discussion, beginning with the concept of the *naturwüchsig* or ‘naturally grown’ in *The German Ideology* (written in 1846),[8] and continuing onto the problem of immediacy in relation to nature and the primitive community in Marx’s *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations* (written 1857–8).[9] From here I jump to Marx’s final years to discuss his *Ethnological Notebooks* (written 1880–1882), as presented by Lawrence Krader,[10] and corroborated by Marx’s letters to Vera Zasulich of the

[7] Karl Marx, *Preface and Introduction to* A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976).
[8] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998).
[9] Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, trans. Jack Cohen (New York: International Publishers, 1965).
[10] Krader, ‘Introduction’.

same period (1881).[11] Finally, I draw out some of the differences between Marx and Engels on the idea of primitive societies by revisiting Engels's *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

1 Marx on the communal origins of man

Marx held, from his earliest writings up until his death, that human life was originally communal, and that the primordial unit of mankind was not the individual but the community. This was not a given, especially prior to the development of empirical anthropology (in which can be included ethnology, prehistory, and human biology) in the second half of the nineteenth century.[12] Social contract theory – underlying the political thought of Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Hume and Rousseau – conceived society as secondary to the individual, the result of individuals' need for a basis for their security and welfare. In this tradition it is in fact the state, not society, that represents the primary collective entity: the state represents the end of prehistory and the beginning of history proper, indicating that humanity has successfully exited the state of nature.[13]

Marx's criticisms of the 'Robinsonades' – the 'isolated hunter or fisherman with whom Smith and Ricardo begin'[14] – in the first volume of *Capital* and the 'Introduction' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* attacked these premises. As Marx argued, the eighteenth-century political economists had rendered a particularly eighteenth-century individual the timeless figure of the human as such: 'Not as a historical result, but as history's point of departure. Not as arising historically but as posited by nature, because this individual was in conformity with nature, in keeping with their idea of human nature.'[15] But, as Marx argued, this supposedly primordial individual dated back no further than the emergence of capitalism in Europe, paradoxically a time in which man was *more* socialised and interdependent than ever before. The modern individual was an effect, not a precondition, of this socialisation, as per his well-known adage that 'man can be individuated only within

[11] Marx, 'Drafts of a reply'; Marx, 'The reply to Zasulich'.
[12] This definition of 'empirical anthropology' is taken from Krader. Lawrence Krader, 'The Works of Marx and Engels in Ethnology Compared', *International Review of Social History* 18 (2), 1973, p. 241.
[13] Krader, 'Introduction', p. 69.
[14] Marx, *Preface and Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 10.
[15] Ibid.

society'.[16] According to Marx, the foundational premises of political economy, not least the timeless and natural vision of private property, rested on this individualist anthropology. In this way, Smith and Ricardo 'smuggle[d] in *bourgeois* relations surreptitiously as irrevocable natural laws of society *in abstract*'.[17]

For Marx, the relation of dependence between the individual and society was in fact the inverse of that posited by the political economists. The individual began dependent on the community, becoming independent only in the course of history: 'The further back we trace the course of history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent and belonging to a larger whole'.[18] In criticising the individualism of the social contract theorists and the political economists, Marx joined a heterogeneous set of eighteenth and nineteenth-century thinkers of a 'communalist' tradition ranging from the anarchist and utopian socialist traditions to the nationalist elements of German Romanticism. This communalist thread is not easily situated on the twentieth-century political compass, since it traversed the distinction between left and right. Distinctions can be drawn to some degree through the prism of the nation: while communalisms of the right tended (then as now) to attach themselves to the figure of the nation, left communalist traditions largely (but not wholly) preferred to conceptualise communalism in terms of other social entities such as the guild, the commune, or humanity as such. As Lawrence Krader writes, 'the Hegelian right brought out the collectivity as the womb of the nation, the Hegelian left brought out the collectivity as the womb of all mankind.'[19] Yet the ideological opposition to individualism was not always divisible along these lines. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, ethnologists including Georg L. Maurer, E. B. Tylor, Morgan, and Maksim Kovalevsky all affirmed the communal origins of man, yet their political reasons for doing so were very different.[20]

This heterogeneous communalist tradition remains an important reminder that the figure of the primitive community is by no means solely a figure of the left. As we will see especially in the writings of Meillassoux (Chapter 3), the primitive community can be cast as

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[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., p. 13.
[18] Ibid., p. 10.
[19] Krader, 'Introduction', p. 71.
[20] For example, while Maurer was a conservative patriot and nationalist, Kovalevsky was a liberal who had helped to establish the Russian Progressists. See Krader, 'Introduction', p. 71. On Morgan's politics, see below.

an internally oppressive social unit as much as a liberating and life-giving one. And as we will see especially in the writings of Lévi-Strauss (Chapter 2) and Clastres (Chapter 4), the figure of the primitive community often has the tendency to close in on itself, and to appear as exclusionary or conservative rather than inclusive or emancipatory. The following sections outline some of the ways in which these ambiguities play out in Marx and Engels's writings.

2 The concept of *naturwüchsig* in The German Ideology (1846)

Marx wrote in 1842 that 'just as each century has its own nature, so it produces its own primitives.'[21] He recognised that any conception of the state of nature, and hence any vision of natural man, reflected back the set of social relations dominant at the moment of its production. Yet Marx himself did not easily give up the association of primitivity and nature, which appears regularly in the notion of natural growth expressed in the adjective *naturwüchsig* in his discussion, with Engels, of primitive societies in *The German Ideology*. In this text, Marx and Engels attempted their first periodisation of world history, outlining a series of epochs of mankind that begin with 'tribal' communitarian societies and progress according to material developments in land use and property relations. If this was, as Maurice Bloch argues, 'a first foray into anthropology' as a means of developing the premises of historical materialism, it remained very much within the frame of philosophical rather than empirical anthropology.[22] 'For the tribal stage, in particular,' writes Bloch, the authors 'base themselves only on the vaguest generalization as gathered probably from philosophical treatises.'[23]

The meaning of *naturwüchsig* is relatively stable throughout *The German Ideology*: it refers above all to spontaneous development, as opposed to conscious or voluntary development. These two forms of development do not, however, align clearly with particular historical epochs: the point at which natural or spontaneous development ends and at which historical or human development begins shifts according to the subject of the discussion. On the whole, though, the term *naturwüchsig* is most commonly associated with premodern as

[21] Karl Marx, 'The Philosophical Manifesto of the Historical School of Law', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works Volume 1: Marx 1835–1843* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), pp. 203–210. Originally published in the *Rheiniche Zeitung*, 9 August 1842. This is Lawrence Krader's translation; see Krader, 'Introduction', in Karl Marx, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, ed. and trans. Lawrence Krader (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), which replaces 'primitives' with 'natural men'.
[22] Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology*, p. 31.
[23] Ibid.

opposed to modern institutions. Early in the 'Feuerbach' chapter, *naturwüchsig* is used with reference to the division of labour dominant in 'tribal' societies, presented here as the first evolutionary stage in human history. Here the first, 'natural', division of labour is that which emerges in the family; it is followed by 'that division of labour which develops spontaneously or "naturally" [*naturwüchsig*] by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g. physical strength), needs, accidents, etc.'[24] Marx and Engels continue: 'Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears.'[25]

The natural division of labour, which has developed spontaneously (*naturwüchsig*), is hence opposed to the 'true' division of labour, which develops in a qualitatively different way – in a way that is planned or consciously premeditated. This is consistent with the remarks Marx and Engels make in the same section about the development of consciousness. '"Pure" consciousness', which is defined as consciousness able to reflect on thought itself, also only emerges with the division between mental and material labour.[26] Prior to this, society is still in the stage of 'mere herd-consciousness' – a 'sheep-like or tribal consciousness' which is a development of animal instinct.[27] Marx and Engels describe herd-consciousness as a base recognition of 'the immediate sensuous environment' and of 'the limited connection with other persons and things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious.'[28] It develops gradually 'through increased productivity, the increase of needs, and, what is fundamental to both of these, the increase of population.'[29] At face value, the concept of herd consciousness seems to place the 'tribal' stage of humanity within the realm of natural history, leaving history proper to begin only with civilisation.

Things are not so simple, however, for these passages on the development of consciousness are not in fact clearly aligned with the precapitalist epochs (tribal, ancient and feudal) outlined elsewhere in *The German Ideology*. It is not clear that 'herd consciousness' and 'pure consciousness' are intended as historical concepts, since the register is speculative and at some points distinctly ironic:

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[24] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 50.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 49.
[27] Ibid., p. 50.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

> Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. (The first form of ideologists, priests, is concurrent.) From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.[30]

The depiction of pure consciousness in this passage as hubristic and rather deluded – imagining it can 'emancipate itself from the world' – suggests that it is not as pure as it seems; far from a universal achievement of world spirit, it reveals itself to be, on the contrary, a highly particular expression of a class position. Marx and Engels continue: 'it is quite immaterial what consciousness starts to do on its own: out of all such muck we get only the one inference that these three moments, the forces of production, the state of society, and consciousness, can and must come into contradiction with one another'.[31] In this passage as well as the one cited above, Marx and Engels draw attention to the fact that the development of consciousness is *not a universal development*, and that in fact it is divided along class lines, and along the lines of a division between mental and material labour. As these differing developmental trajectories come into contradiction with one another, pure consciousness emerges as simply one moment in the set of historical contradictions: it is 'the idealistic, spiritual expression, the conception apparently of the isolated individual, the image of very empirical fetters and limitations, within which the mode of production of life and the form of intercourse coupled with it move.'[32] Pure consciousness presumes itself to be the highest form of consciousness, while it is really no more than the 'muck' of capitalist philosophy. In this respect, it is evident that the passage from the 'natural' to the 'true' division of labour, and from herd-consciousness to pure consciousness, is not a simple moral or universal progression. The notion of a transition from the spontaneously or naturally developed (the *naturwüchsig*) to the consciously developed is already more complicated than it first appears.

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., p. 51.
[32] Ibid.

Other uses of the term *naturwüchsig* in *The German Ideology* suggest the difficulty involved in associating it unproblematically – or exclusively – with the primitive community or 'tribal' stage. It is not the case that the emergence of the 'true' division of labour marks the point at which spontaneous or natural development ends and conscious or historical development begins. In fact, Marx and Engels imply in some passages that the existence of *any* division of labour is evidence that humanity has not left the stage of 'natural society', defined in a way that seems to include capitalism within it:

> The division of labour offers us the first example of how, as long as man remains in naturally evolved society [*naturwüchsigen Gesellschaft*], that is, as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntarily, but naturally [*naturwüchsig*], divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him.[33]

According to this passage, *any* society in which the particular and the common interest are divided is a kind of 'natural society'. Capitalism, which has not resolved but rather intensified these divisions, would also then be in the realm of the 'natural', too: not only is it defined by a cleavage between the particular and the common interest, but the separation of the economic realm from the rest of social life under capitalism means that the economy functions as a natural law, outside of the remit of the collective will and needs of society. *Naturwüchsig* or natural development on the one side; communist development on the other. This perspective is also evident in Marx's famous statement in the 1857 *Preface* that 'The prehistory of human society … closes with [the bourgeois] social formation', again indicating that history proper only begins with communism.[34] In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels write, in a similar spirit, that '[The evolution of history so far] takes place naturally [*naturwüchsigen*], i.e. is not subordinated to a general plan of freely combined individuals'.[35] Instead, 'it proceeds from various localities, tribes, nations, branches of labour, etc., each of which to start with develops independently of the others and only gradually enters into relation with the others.'[36]

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[33] Ibid., p. 53.
[34] Marx, *Preface and Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* p. 5.
[35] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 91.
[36] Ibid.

Here *naturwüchsigen* gains an additional meaning, where it refers to the aggregated results of individual actions, and is hence a concept capable of encompassing both biological evolution (although this is not yet, in 1846, formalised by Darwin) and the doctrine of the invisible hand. This is a point corroborated by Krader: 'The use of *Natur*, *naturwüchsig*, *Naturwüchsigkeit* by Marx in various places in *The German Ideology* reflects the distinction made by Hegel between whole man and the divided man … and the distinction between alienated *versus* true man, or alienated *versus* true labor'.[37] That is, *Natur* and its derivatives refer to man in his divided and alienated, not *yet* whole and disalienated, form. According to this conception, humans are not whole in their natural state, and only become whole in the process of transcending it. This vision of 'natural' man contrasts as much with Rousseau's state of nature as with the notion of primitive communism. Social life that is *naturwüchsig* remains divided, alienated, and one-sided; only what can transcend *Naturwüchsigkeit* can bring about true, non-alienated, whole man. The distinction between primitive and modern man is not absolute, then, as Krader also insists, but relative:[38] 'primitives' might live communally, but just like modern capitalist societies, they remain alienated from an overall, conscious plan determining the organisation of social life. At the time of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had not yet put forward the idea of primitive communism; but in deriding bourgeois claims to world-historical superiority, they have begun to erode the moral foundations of the primitive–civilised opposition.

3 Immediacy and community in Marx's *Formen*

By the time Marx wrote the *Grundrisse* in 1857–8, his orientation had shifted from philosophy to political economy, and he had begun to work out his theory of historical evolution in more detail. This theory would be laid out most clearly in the 1857/8 Preface, written shortly after the *Grundrisse*, where he states that 'new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the womb of the old society.'[39] The famous organic analogy – the new society gestating in the shell of the old before finally bursting through – indicates that Marx was indeed convinced at this point by a

[37] Krader, 'The Works of Marx and Engels in Ethnology Compared', p. 237.
[38] Ibid., p. 75.
[39] Marx, *Preface and Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* p. 4.

stadial conception of historical development. In this conception, the passage from one stage or epoch to the next was not smooth, it was antagonistic and ruptural. However, such ruptures were not completely fortuitous; they had a material basis. In the background of the spurts and leaps, the general direction of development – from simple to complex and 'inferior' to 'superior' – was clear. Thus Eric Hobsbawm, in his introduction to the English translation of *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations* (known as the *Formen*) published in 1964, writes: 'The Formen seek to formulate the *content* of history in its most general form. This content is *progress*. … For Marx progress is something objectively definable, and at the same time pointing to what is desirable.'[40] According to Hobsbawm, Marx's belief in progress rested not on a utopian wish or teleology, but on the evidence provided by world history. Primary within such evidence, Hobsbawm argues, is 'the growing emancipation of man from nature and his growing control over nature', which Hobsbawm considered to be self-evident.[41] Hobsbawm's reading of Marx's theory of progress thus casts primitivity as a state of submission to an overpowering and hostile nature. There is little scope here for the utopian primitive, whose relationship to nature is characterised by harmony and equilibrium rather than domination or subjugation. However, a close examination of the *Formen* shows the matter to be more complicated than Hobsbawm suggests.

In the *Formen*, Marx conceptualises primitive man's relation to nature through the concept of property. From one perspective, this involves a certain naturalisation of property as universal and pre-existing its legal form; from another perspective, Marx is seeking to undermine concepts of natural property by playing on the word. Marx writes: 'originally *property* means no more than man's attitude to his natural conditions of production as belonging to him, as the *prerequisites of his own existence*'.[42] These natural conditions of production – the whole ecosystem in relation to which man derives his subsistence – 'constitute, as it were, a prolongation of his body'.[43] The term property [*Eigentum*] relates here, as in English, to the sense of being 'proper to'. Marx clearly differentiates it from private property, which he insists is only one specific form of property arising in the transition to

[40] Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction', in Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and trans. Jack Cohen (New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 12.
[41] Ibid., p. 13.
[42] Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 89.
[43] Ibid.

capitalism. In this sense, Marx takes property (in its 'original' form) not to signify something separate from the subject, but rather to signify an *objective part* of the subject. 'Originally', he writes, man 'stands in no relation to his conditions of production, but has a double existence, subjectively as himself and objectively in these natural inorganic conditions of his being.'[44]

We can note the way in which this sentence elaborates on Marx's claim in the 1844 *Manuscripts* that nature is 'man's inorganic body'.[45] Several commentators have observed the challenge Marx poses, in this phrase, to the ontological boundary between nature and the human.[46] Judith Butler's analysis adds an important determination here.[47] That nature is man's inorganic body does not mean that nature and humanity are simply collapsed into one another, she argues, but rather that man has 'one body that appears under two distinct but related perspectives', which Marx differentiates by way of the terms *Leib* and *Körper*.[48] While *Leib* signifies 'the lived body' of the individual, *Körper* 'can mean a simple discrete density, alive or dead.'[49] Hence, for Butler, the term 'inorganic body [*Körper*]' references an 'inanimate or de-animated' body of matter, which Butler argues is nature's form of appearance when it is transformed, by man, into the means of his subsistence. As Butler sees it, Marx is not suggesting that nature is inorganic in itself, but rather that it is inorganic from the *perspective* of the labouring subject, when it labours on it. '[T]here is a perpetual oscillation of perspectives (organic/inorganic) that depends on whether nature is approached theoretically or practically,' she writes.[50] Nature in itself (theoretically) is organic; nature in interchange with man (practically) is inorganic. Nature becomes, in the 'constant interchange' that is labour, the inanimate matter from which man is animated.

Butler's interpretation of Marx's claim in the 1844 *Manuscripts* finds support in the sentence from the *Formen* quoted above. Let us take a look at it again: 'Originally, Marx writes, man 'stands in no relation to his conditions of production'[51] – that is, rather than

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[44] Ibid., p. 89–90.
[45] Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), pp. 279–400.
[46] John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, 'Marx and the Dialectic of Organic/Inorganic Relations', *Organisation & Environment* 14 (4), 2001, pp. 451–462; Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).
[47] Judith Butler, 'The inorganic body in the early Marx: a limit-concept of anthropocentrism', *Radical Philosophy* 2.06, 2019.
[48] Ibid., p. 13.
[49] Ibid., p. 5.
[50] Ibid., p. 14.
[51] Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, pp. 89–90.

standing in any kind of 'relation' to nature, which would presuppose a separation, 'originally' man *is* nature. In being so, however, Marx writes, man 'has a double existence, subjectively as himself and objectively in these natural inorganic conditions of his being.'[52] It is double firstly in the sense that there is a discontinuity between the life of the individual and the part of nature that must be killed to give him life, but there is also a continuity, since the latter is the precondition of the former. Man's existence is also double simply in the sense that any form of consciousness has a double foundation in the play of the subjective and the objective. When Marx claims that man 'stands in no relation' to his natural conditions of production, he is underlining that man is not yet separated from these conditions; he considers them an extension of his own body. At the same time, he is not suggesting that primitive man is *merely a body*, or is himself part of the realm of matter dictated by the laws of nature. The reference to primitive man's 'double existence' excludes this possibility, for presumably what makes man's subjective side subjective is the fact that it escapes or exceeds its objective (its natural, inorganic) conditions.

The unmediated mediation of primitive man is complicated further by the fact that the natural prerequisites or 'inorganic conditions' of man, understood as an extension of his body, turn out also to include the community [*Gemeinwesen*]. In fact, the community is primary among the natural conditions of production and of labour: 'the tribal community, the natural common body, appears not as the consequence, but as the precondition of the joint (temporary) appropriation of the use of the soil.'[53] Again Marx is insisting on the social rather than individual origins of man: 'An isolated individual could no more possess property in land than he could speak'.[54] Land is the property of – it is proper to – the community, not individual man. '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.'[55] The other members of his community are his 'co-owners', but they are also *themselves* 'so many incarnations of the common property.'[56] The primitive, then, relates to others in his community as themselves property, in the sense of being proper to and in a 'natural unity' with him, but also as co-

[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., p. 68.
[54] Ibid., p. 81.
[55] Ibid., p. 69.
[56] Ibid., p. 67.

proprietors.[57] As Marx is well aware, however, the community is not an ahistorical entity: there are only historically particular communities, and these particularities determine the relation (or non-relation) one has with nature. Marx writes: 'What immediately mediates [man's attitude to the land] is the more or less naturally evolved, more or less historically evolved and modified existence of the individual as *a member of a community*'.[58] The reverse is also the case: 'the real existence of the community is determined by the specific form of its ownership of the objective conditions of labour.'[59] Marx discusses a series of different types of communal property that characterise precapitalist social formations, marked by an increasing dissolution of the community as private property begins to emerge. It is through this separation, which is 'only fully completed in the relationship between wage-labour and capital',[60] that the members of the community become individuals. Once more, 'man is only individualised through the process of history. He originally appears as a *generic being*, *a tribal being*, *a herd animal*'.[61]

The question has shifted from the relation (or lack thereof) between man and nature to the relation (or lack thereof) between the individual and the community. In doing so, it has become a political question: can the not-yet-individualised primitive be said to be free? In *Capital*, Volume One, Marx writes that under the common ownership of the conditions of production 'the individual has as little torn himself free from the umbilical cord of his tribe or community as a bee has from his hive.'[62] The individual is tied to the primitive community as a matter of survival; if they leave it, they will die. The community is thus in a sense imposed – or, rather, it is not chosen: the primitive community is a necessary source of sustenance under the conditions of primitive production, and not a unity formed by the conscious action of its participants. Krader again offers a useful interpretation here, claiming that Marx's remarks suggest a negative account of primitive freedom: the primitive is unfree because he *has not yet become* free, which is not the same as being dominated or oppressed. Krader returns to Marx's image of the blissful and unknowing confinement of the womb: 'Rousseau's notion of the chains of civilization as opposed to the primitive state of freedom was reconceived by Marx as

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[57] Ibid., p. 67.
[58] Ibid., p. 81.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., p. 87.
[61] Ibid., p. 96.
[62] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume One, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 452.

the chains of primitive bondage which were, rather, satisfying and comforting. Despotic, dissatisfying, discomforting are the bonds of civilization.'[63] In other words, for Krader, Marx's primitive institutions 'are not liberating: they are rather not enchaining.'[64] This vision of communitarian unfreedom in a primitive society not yet divided by class or caste will emerge as essential to the political anthropology of Pierre Clastres (Chapter 4), in which the apparently 'undivided' character of primitive societies precludes relations of domination and servitude at the same time as it assures a quasi-totalitarian control over those subject to its egalitarian strictures. The vision of a primitive community as defined by dependency, as a necessary result of constrained conditions of subsistence, will also be central to Claude Meillassoux's conception of the 'domestic community' (Chapter 3). Indeed, the tensions of community and dependency, of non-division and unfreedom, are present to some degree in all of the conceptualisations of the political in primitive societies encountered in this thesis.

Despite such notions of primitive unfreedom in *Capital* and the *Formen*, Marx is already, at this point in his career, impressed by certain aspects of primitive life. In the primitive community, use value dominates. The purpose of labour is 'not the *creation of value*', he writes, but 'the maintenance of the owner and his family as well as of the communal body as a whole.'[65] The notion of primitive societies as oriented toward reproduction rather than production, and hence as forming an economic system quite incommensurate with that of capitalist societies, is taken up in detail by Meillassoux in his theory of the domestic community (Chapter 3). An economy oriented to use value is at the heart of Marx's comparison in the *Formen* of modern and 'ancient' modes of production:

> The ancient conception, in which man always appears … as the aim of production, seems very much more exalted than the modern world, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim of production. … Hence in one way the childlike world of the ancients appears to be superior; and this is so, in so far as we seek for closed shape, form and established limitation. The ancients provide a narrow satisfaction, whereas the modern

[63] Krader, 'Introduction', p. 60.
[64] Ibid., p. 64.
[65] Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 68.

world leaves us unsatisfied, or, where it appears to be satisfied with itself, is *vulgar* and *mean*.[66]

The precapitalist world lacks the perversions of exchange value: the life that capital strips from living human beings and invests instead in dead matter, the complete elaboration of human powers revealing itself only in their complete alienation. Precapitalist societies are non-alienated societies, but they are also 'closed' societies. Oriented to reproduction, 'fixed into tradition',[67] the relation between individual and community is assumed as given and predetermined. The idea of primitive societies as closed systems is at the core of Levi-Strauss's distinction between the primitive and the modern: primitive societies, he argues, are delicately balanced 'clock societies' in contrast to the steam-engine societies of capitalism (see Conclusion).[68] These ideas have echoes in Marx, for whom the development of the primitive community is 'from the outset *limited*, but once the limits are transcended, decay and disintegration ensue.'[69] The primitive community is a fragile entity, its unity guaranteed only by stasis. But Marx is attentive to the painfulness of its dissolution. Like the severing of an umbilical cord, the separation of the community from the land and the individual from the community appears to him, at this stage in his thought, as both necessary and violent. Trajectories differentiated by class and property relations emerge from this point onward: the umbilical cord is re-routed from the producing subjects to the owning subjects, as the life of the latter is increasingly predicated on the labour of the former. For Marx, this differential development is not progress or emancipation, as Hobsbawm describes it, in a simple sense. The destructiveness of original separation, a dark kernel lodged in Marx's conception of progress, will unfurl itself in his mind in the coming decades as he begins to question the idea of history as a linear moral movement.

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[66] Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 85.
[67] Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 83.
[68] Claude Lévi-Strauss and Georges Charbonnier, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 39.
[69] Ibid.

4 Non-contemporaneity and diffusion in Marx's letters to Zasulich

If in the *Formen* primitivity constitutes the point of departure for mankind's evolutionary trajectory, this trajectory appears in reverse in Marx's late writings. In his *Ethnological Notebooks* as well as various letters written in the years before his death, primitivity appears not as an immature condition to be (painfully) overcome, but as a kernel of non-alienated social being to be defended and revitalised. Marx's change of heart appears to take place in the context of debates on Russian revolutionary strategy, which then pivoted on the question of the Russian peasant commune (*obshchina*). While in 1868 Marx had celebrated the decline of the *obshchina* – he wrote gladly of 'all that trash coming now to its end' – by 1881 he appeared to have radically changed his views.[70] In a letter replying to the Menshevik revolutionary Vera Zasulich, who had asked for his views on the *obschcina*, Marx was unambiguous: 'The commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia', he wrote – provided the various forces besieging it were checked.[71] This position obliged Marx to clarify for Zasulich the account of primitive accumulation he had provided in the first volume of *Capital*. There, he had described the expropriation of the peasants from their land in terms of an 'historical inevitability'. Here, he emphasised that this inevitability was 'expressly restricted to *the countries of Western Europe*'.[72] This appeared to be a radical break with his earlier stageism and, above all, with the conviction that each country was to pass through the capitalist mode of production as a condition for socialist development.

Marx's several drafts of the letter to Zasulich testify to his struggle over what place to give precapitalist social forms, especially those underpinned by communal property, in relation to socialist strategy.[73] They reveal a close assessment of the specific situation in which the contemporary *obshchina* found itself, including both the attacks on it from within Russia and the broader dynamics of world capitalism in which it was caught. The drafts display especially Marx's view of the interdependence of the capitalist world system and the differential developmental trajectories this interdependence made possible. 'Precisely because it is contemporaneous with capitalist production,' he wrote, 'the rural commune may appropriate

[70] Marx quoted in Teodor Shanin, 'Late Marx: gods and craftsmen', in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, p. 15.
[71] Marx, 'The reply to Zasulich', p. 124.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Marx, 'Drafts of a reply'.

all its positive achievements without undergoing its frightful vicissitudes'.[74] The relative backwardness of the *obshchina* could work to its advantage: nothing prevented it from adopting capitalist technological and scientific achievements and, the same time, retaining its communal character. This conception of the possible mixture of non-contemporaneous forms – an untimely borrowing, repurposing and adaptation – is more resonant with the twentieth-century diffusionism of Frantz Boas than the evolutionism which dominated late nineteenth-century anthropology. Yet it was possible for Marx to retain the two at once, provided the theory of necessary stages only applied at the level of *world history as a whole*. Each country or region need not proceed separately through the same sequence, and certainly not at the same pace. Anticipating derision from the 'Russian admirers of capitalism' who doubted the possibility of such a developmental leap, Marx posed the rejoinder:

> Did Russia have to undergo a long Western-style incubation of mechanical industry before it could make use of machinery, steamships, railways, etc.? Let them also explain how they managed to introduce, in the twinkling of an eye, that whole machinery of exchange (banks, credit companies, etc.) which was the work of centuries in the West.[75]

In the course of Russia's contorted development, stages had long been skipped. From the vantage-point of the amalgam of capitalist and non-capitalist forms that comprised contemporary Russia, the peasant commune appeared less as a survival from a vanished past than a living foundation onto which modern techniques and technologies could be grafted. Marx's evolutionism would then resemble less an immanent organic unfolding than a haphazard and untimely *bricolage*, torn by opposing interests. As a number of commentators have noted, these letters throw into doubt the notion that Marx viewed history as universal in the sense of a *unilinear* procession, on the part of each country or region, through a series of necessary stages.[76] More likely, the universality of history refers for Marx to the condition of

[74] Ibid., p. 106.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*; Shanin, 'Late Marx'; Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan, 'Late Marx: continuity, contradiction and learning', in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, pp. 77–94; Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*.

the already-interdependent world system: capitalism, through its universalising powers, had drawn the trajectories of societies across the world into a single, combined process.

Marx found in Darwin's evolutionism a useful set of principles for theorising human history, but it is not clear that he took from him a teleological vision of historical progress. As Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan remind us in their reconsideration of Marx's evolutionism, Darwin's theory of evolution was in fact *opposed* to teleological sequences.[77] For Darwin, they write, 'mutations are fortuitous, not pre-ordained; there is no *necessity* involved'.[78] While the young Marx wrote in a very abstract and schematic way of stages of world history, toward the end of his life it is clear Marx did not see it fit to impose such schemas on concrete political events, and indeed to perceive the way in which stageist arguments were often mobilised for ideological ends. In his drafts to Zasulich, Marx revealed his scorn of narratives propounding the inevitable decline of the *obshchina*:

> While the commune is being bled and tortured, its lands sterilised and impoverished, the literary flunkeys of the 'new pillars of society' ironically refer to the evils heaped on the commune as if they were symptoms of spontaneous, indisputable decay, arguing that it is dying a natural death and that it would be an act of kindness to shorten its agony.[79]

Marx has come to see that to place the *obshchina* within a trajectory of natural history has become an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie, who wish to see its decline. The difference from his writings in *The German Ideology, Capital* and the *Formen* – which described the primitive community as 'immature' and 'naïve', a situation of precarious unfreedom – is clear. The *obshchina* was certainly not an undivided community, gestating in the womb of world history and not yet fully conscious of itself. It was riven by an 'innate dualism', Marx wrote, since it incorporated elements of both private and communal property.[80] While this dual character gave it strength, allowing it to adapt to capitalist conditions, it could also constitute the seeds of its disintegration. 'Either its property element will gain the upper hand over its

[77] Sayer and Corrigan, 'Late Marx'.
[78] Ibid., p. 76.
[79] Marx, 'Drafts of a reply', p. 116.
[80] Ibid., p. 120.

collective element; or else the reverse will take place', he wrote. 'Everything depends on the historical context in which it is located.'[81] The register in which Marx speaks of history has shifted, decisively, from that of an abstract and metaphorical unfolding to that of a concrete and specific balance of forces. Contradiction still guides history, but such contradiction is no longer understood in terms of a process of gestation and necessary rupture. Rather, it signifies a contingent project of strategy, borrowing, refunctioning and struggle.

5 Dialectics of evolutionism: Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* (1880–82) and Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884)

In the last decade of his life, Marx was not only preoccupied with the Russian commune but with forms of communal property and social organisation across the world, as evident in his lengthy notes on primitive social structures and institutions contained in the *Ethnological Notebooks*. The *Notebooks* contain Marx's citations from and notes on and John Budd Phear's *The Aryan Village*, Henry Sumner Maine's *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions*, John Lubbock's *The Origin of Civilisation*; the bulk of them, however, are lengthy copied passages from Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*. Morgan's 1877 volume propounded his three-stage theory, running from savagery to barbarism to civilisation, each stage determined by the dominant mode of subsistence. Morgan made a strong impression on Marx; he makes his way into the Zasulich drafts, where Marx writes of him:

> In the words of an American writer who, supported in his work by the Washington government, is not at all to be suspected of revolutionary tendencies, … 'the new system' to which modern society is tending 'will be a revival, in a superior form, of an archaic social type.'[82] We should not, then, be too frightened by the word 'archaic'.[83]

The archaic social type in question was what Morgan had called the *gens*, a Roman term for the kinship organisation sometimes known as the clan, but which Morgan claimed to have found in its original form among the Indians of North America.[84] The *gens* was the basis for

[81] Ibid., pp. 120–121.
[82] Ibid., p. 107.
[83] Ibid., p. 107.
[84] Engels, *Origin of the Family*, p. 71.

the social order of all peoples in the barbarian stage, which encompassed Native Americans as well as Greeks and Romans. Engels's *Origin* is, for the most part, an exposition of its nature.[85] The original *gens* was matrilineal – members had a common ancestral mother, and had to seek marital partners outside their own *gens* – but, more importantly for Engels, it was *matriarchal*. Women held supremacy in matters in and outside of the household; the power of the democratically-elected male chiefs was not coercive. Disputes were resolved collectively, land was held in common, and wealth did not accumulate. 'All are equal and free – the women included', Engels wrote.[86]

On the basis of this utopian vision of the *gens*, Morgan drew from his ethnological studies an implicit critique of the degrading effects of civilisation on humanity.[87] While Marx took inspiration from this where it was warranted, he had no illusions about Morgan's political allegiances. Krader argues that Morgan inherited an egalitarian tradition of thought sustained by the American and French revolutions.[88] He was by no means a socialist: unsympathetic to contemporary struggles of the working class, 'he was idealistic and utopian, anti-aristocratic and communitarian in his abstract opposition to property.'[89] Marx's interest in Morgan can be explained more by the rigour with which the latter conducted his ethnological work and developed his theory of historical evolution than by his politics.[90] Morgan's evolutionism was also a kind of materialist account, in the sense that the major stages of human development outlined by Morgan were related to the 'successive enlargement' of sources of subsistence.[91] For Morgan, a series of objective factors defined the progression of human groups through developmental stages, including the accumulation of property, territorial settlement, and

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[85] Krader on Engels's process of writing *Origin*: 'He found a copy of Morgan in late March 1884, and, armed with Morgan's book, Marx's notes, his own synopsis, plus a background of wide erudition, he completed his small book in the following two months.' Krader, 'The Works of Marx and Engels in Ethnology Compared', p. 241.
[86] Ibid., p. 159.
[87] Krader writes: 'With the exception of Morgan … none of the evolutionary school of that period wrote with any relevancy to the theme of the deformation of man's character by civilization, a theme later taken up by Sigmund Freud.' Krader, 'Introduction', p. 4.
[88] Ibid., p. 49.
[89] Ibid., p. 49.
[90] The Morgan sections in the Notebooks are almost entirely excerpts copied out from Morgan's *Ancient Society*, with very occasional comments and asides; the ethnographic details were, here, of value to Marx. The section on Maine, by contrast, comprises a lengthy critique of the sort that Marx often undertook in order to clarify his own position.
[91] Krader, 'Introduction', p. 8. On the earlier (eighteenth-century) development of the theory of socio-economic development on the basis of modes of subsistence, see Ronald Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

corresponding changes to the family or kinship group, which provided the basis for the mode of life of any given people.

It is for this reason that Engels, in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, praised Morgan for having 'discovered afresh in America the materialistic conception of history discovered by Marx forty years ago'.[92] Yet Morgan's materialism differed from Marx's, for Morgan's was a mechanical rather than a dialectical materialism. In his thought, the transition from one epoch to the next was generally marked by the invention of subsistence technologies: the use of fish and fire characterised the transition from lower to middle savagery, the bow and arrow marking the epoch of upper savagery, while the domestication of plants and animals marked the stage of barbarism. As Krader argues, for Morgan such inventions were not the work of inventing subjects, but the result of an objective movement independent of individual activity.[93] Each technological invention was for Morgan 'a matter of the ripeness of the particular ethnical period to bear that particular fruit or not'.[94] As such, Krader writes, Morgan's 'categories of change take up only the passive, external, objective, undirected tendencies in evolution. They do not take into account the directive, active, conscious acts of man in social change on the political side, the factors of social and national revolutions'.[95] Thus, Krader notes that even though Morgan's account contains an implicit critique of civilisation, '[he] did not propose any means to overcome the limitations or distortions of the social institution of property; instead he proposed an act of faith in progress and optimism in man's capacity for development beyond his present limitation.'[96] Morgan's evolutionism thus placed human society 'within the natural continuum', viewing it as 'an organism subject to the laws of nature.'[97] In contrast to this, Marx's theory of historical change – as we saw in the letters to Zasulich, and as is evident in all of his political writings – had at its heart the interplay of subjective and objective factors in history.

While Engels described his *Origin* as a 'bequest' to Marx and an attempt to 'provide a meagre substitute for what my departed friend no longer had the time to do',[98] Engels's

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[92] Engels, *Origin of the Family*, p. 71.
[93] Krader, 'Introduction', pp. 53–4.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., p. 54.
[96] Ibid., p. 3.
[97] Ibid., p. 2. On the unilinear and mechanical materialism of *Origin* see also Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology*, pp. 95–99.
[98] Engels, *Origin of the Family*, p. 71.

rendering is in some ways much more *Morgan* than *Marx*, since it puts forward a largely mechanical conception of the transition from one stage to another. Rana Dunayevskaya, one of the first to grasp the significance of Marx's later writings on ethnography, argues that Engels's evolutionary (and at times biologistic) account in *Origin* misinterprets Marx's reading of Morgan and overlooks his dialectical thinking about the question of transition more generally.[99] For Marx, she argues, 'materialistically a stage of production wasn't just a stage of production – be it the Western or the Asiatic mode of production – but a question of revolutionary relations.'[100] Hence, Marx saw antagonism as present within the primitive community and intensifying through the period of transition, 'whereas Engels always seems to have antagonisms only at the end, as if class society came in very nearly full blown *after* the communal form was destroyed and private property was established'.[101]

In *Origin*, Engels's *gens* does indeed seem to exist in a prehistoric time, purified of the contradictions associated with history's commencement. His descriptions of it follow the formula of negative determination that, as Toscano has observed, has structured depictions of the primitive since the early modern era.[102] Engels writes: 'a wonderful constitution it is, this gentile constitution, in all its childlike simplicity! No soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, or lawsuits – and everything takes its orderly course'.[103] Dunayevskaya argues that Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, alongside his other later writings, are evidence that he viewed primitive communal forms as always already *historical* forms, and hence contained within themselves the seeds of social differentiation: 'Marx demonstrated that, long before the dissolution of the primitive commune, there emerged the question of ranks within the egalitarian commune'.[104] Indeed, one of Marx's key comments in his Morgan notes concerned the conditions under which the *gens* could 'petrify into its opposite, caste'.[105] For Dunayevskaya, discounting these emergent inequalities left Engels

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[99] Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*.
[100] Ibid., p. 180.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Toscano, '"By contraries execute all things"'.
[103] Engels, *Origin*, p. 159.
[104] Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, p. 181.
[105] Marx quoted in Krader, 'Introduction', p. 15.

without an explanation for the commune's eventual dissolution – leaving his account of 'the world-historical defeat of the female sex' both grandiose and empty.[106]

6 Conclusion: Dialectics of the primitive

It is clear, having traced his ideas of the primitive across his career, that Marx was no primitivist in the simple sense of the term – even at the very end of his life. 'Of course, primitive collective production stemmed from the weakness of the isolated individual,' he wrote in one of his drafts to Zasulich, 'not from socialisation of the means of production'.[107] To see a role for primitive communal forms in socialist strategy did not mean envisioning any kind of return to a prehistoric past, nor any simple reunification of humanity and nature. It is important not to overlook his emphatic qualification: communism was to found 'a *higher form* of the archaic type of property'.[108] Yet Marx's writings on the commune and on ethnology should equally make us doubt that any unproblematic vision of progress underlies his philosophy of history. Indeed, there is much to suggest that his investigations into Iroquois federations, the radical democracy of Indigenous Australians, and the revolutionary potential of the Russian peasantry testify to his deepening disaffection with civilisation. They certainly testify to his tactical attention to the fruits non-contemporaneity might yield in the revolutionary struggles of the present.

The material covered in this chapter builds a picture of Marx and Engels's efforts to balance a broadly developmental theory of world history – which became increasingly multilinear and dialectical, especially for Marx in his later years – with a conviction that primitive communities already contained many of the principles necessary for communist societies of the future. In this balancing act, Marx and Engels wrestled throughout with the concept of *Naturwüchsigkeit*, or natural development. While the term *naturwüchsig* was frequently applied to primitive societies, especially in their earlier writings, we have seen that it was not by any means neatly associated with a division between prehistory and history proper. What was *naturwüchsig* had emerged prior to or outside of human control, and hence in a way that did not correspond to the universal interest; according to this definition, capitalist

[106] Engels quoted in Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, p. 184.
[107] Marx, 'Drafts of a reply', p. 108.
[108] Ibid., p. 102.

society was *naturwüchsig* as much as the primitive community. In the *Formen,* Marx is clearer that the primitive community is a historical entity in its own right: he describes the precapitalist 'forms' at issue as 'more or less naturally grown [*naturwüchsig*], but all at the same time also results of historical processes'.[109] We saw in the *Formen* that primitivity did signify a state prior to the separation from nature, but that this relation to nature was perhaps not best captured in the notion of unqualified 'immediacy', especially since it was always determined by the particular form of the community. Thus, far, then, we can see that the primitive and primitivity were associated in Marx and Engels's writings with two interrelated concepts of nature: nature as *spontaneous development* that takes place outside of human control, on the one hand, and nature as non-separation from – as in a *metabolic relation with* – the pregiven conditions of production (i.e. the land). We will see in the following chapters, especially in the writings of Clastres (Chapter 4) and Baudrillard (Chapter 5), how the association of the primitive with similar but distinct understandings of non-separation, immediacy and spontaneity is used to quite different effects in the context of 1970s France.

In the French context, we will see that the primitive is associated with the concept of nature above all in the notion, which sticks to anthropological thought with incredible persistence, that primitive society functions like an organism with the goal of perpetuating or reproducing itself. We saw this to some degree in Marx's depiction in the *Formen* of the primitive community as oriented to stasis and self-perpetuation, and which would not well survive changes to its structure; however, in Marx's later writings the primitive community emerged as an entity capable of adaptation and transformation, and of combining older communal forms with contemporary technological advancements. It appears that the late Marx did not perceive the primitive community as an 'undivided society' (see Chapter 4) or as exempt from the contradictions driving world history as a whole. Unfortunately, this vision did not make it into Engels's *Origin*. Engels's portrayal of primitive societies as classless and internally non-contradictory obliged him to explain the transition from the egalitarian primitive community through biological evolutionism or mechanical ideas of technological advancement, in a way that was more true to Morgan's mechanical materialism than to Marx's more dialectical theory of history. Little space was left in Engels's account for the subjective side of history: the whole sphere of political action, of the desires and decisions of individuals

[109] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974), p. 385.

and collectives acting politically, the strategies and fortuitous breaks that are only appreciable in relation to human practice. Instead, by viewing the transition from primitivity to civilisation as a wholly objective process, Engels's *Origin* had placed primitive societies within the sphere of natural history, while human history was reserved for societies which had seen the emergence of class.

This difference between Marx and Engels in relation to primitive societies is important in understanding the different versions of 'Marxism' presented in the chapters that follow. In his discussion of the role of anthropology in the interpretations and presentations of Marxism by the Marx and Engels's immediate successors, Maurice Bloch observes that 'What … seems to occur in differing degrees during the period immediately following Marx's death is that the theory which had been developed for primitive societies only [by which he means Engels's theory in his *Origin*] begins to gain ground on all fronts.'[110] That is – as Bloch argues – in the writings of Paul Lafargue, Karl Kautsky, and Georgi Plekhanov, the mechanistic approach of Engels's *Origin* became the dominant paradigm for explaining history as such.[111] Lafargue's *La Propriété, Origines et Évolution* (1895) reproduced, in simplified forms and at times with entirely fallacious biologistic additions, many of the more tenuous claims in Engels's *Origin*,[112] while his *Le Déterminisme Économique* (1909) was a clear example of the extension of a natural history framework to human history.[113] Kautsky's neo-Darwinian account of the genocide of indigenous peoples in North America in an article entitled 'The Indian Question', for its part, presented a unilinear and fatalistic theory of world history.[114] But, above all, it was Kautsky and Plekhanov's determination to counter reformist positions such as those of Eduard Bernstein that drove them to put forward a form of materialism which drew in a large part on Engels's *Origin*.[115] In this way, in the decades following Marx's death, the primitive became less a problem for Marxism than a vehicle through which a mechanical and evolutionary materialism could be cemented as the essence of the Marxist account. These positions would form the basis for Stalinist stage-theory, and in France – largely via the PCF – would come to stand in for Marxian materialism as such.

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[110] Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology*, pp. 98–99.
[111] Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology*, p. 99. See Plekhanov,
[112] Ibid., p. 100.
[113] Ibid., p. 99.
[114] Ibid., p. 101
[115] Ibid., pp. 102–105.

Indeed, as Tony Judt writes, ‘From the Liberation until 1981, the PCF exercised a serpentine fascination over the radical intelligentsia of France.’[116] It is important to grasp the role played by the PCF not, however, in order to simply demarcate a ‘Marxism’ (in scare quotes) from a truer Marxism represented, perhaps, by the elderly ‘Marx himself’. As Judt argues, it was not a simple matter for French Marxist intellectuals to separate themselves off from the PCF’s version of Marxism – and even the Hegelian Marxism that began to emerge via Alexandre Kojève, Henri Lefebvre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty from the 1930s struggled in this respect. It made little sense to adhere to Marxism in theory while repudiating it in practice, and in relation to the most powerful worker’s movement of the time: there was ‘a preference, openly acknowledged, for according some credibility to the form marxism had actually taken in French political life (the PCF) while retaining the self-respect to admit that if *this* was marxism, then no one could embrace it as a system of thought.’[117] For Judt, this was ‘a confusion which went to the heart of the intellectual self-doubt of this generation.’[118] In the following chapter, we encounter an early expression of this struggle over the meaning of Marxism in the anti-materialist ‘ethical socialism’ of the young Claude Lévi-Strauss.

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[116] Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies on Labour and Politics in France, 1830–1981* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 183.
[117] Ibid., p. 185.
[118] Ibid.

Chapter 2

Societies of exchange: Claude Lévi-Strauss's early ethical socialism

The previous chapter examined some of the ways in which Marx and Engels's vision of primitive communism, which began as a philosophical notion and became progressively more grounded in ethnological research, was used to challenge social contract theories. Such theories, which depicted the primitive as a 'Robinsonade' scattered across the primordial forest, rendered natural the bourgeois figure of the self-sufficient individual and the legal form of the contract. Social contract theories persisted in twentieth-century anthropology, adjusted to their social and political context. This chapter shifts focus to the 1930s and 1940s in France, and to the political and intellectual context in which the anthropological thought of Lévi-Strauss was being formed, in order to examine one such theory. It argues that Lévi-Strauss's anthropological project, far from being evacuated of politics as many critics have argued, bears the imprint of the author's early engagement with French and Belgian ethical socialism. It forms this argument by way of an examination of Lévi-Strauss's early political activities and a close reading of his early writings – prior to *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949)[1] – through the prism of these political engagements. A picture emerges of the influence of the SFIO (The French Section of the Workers' International, precursor to the French Socialist Party), especially its interwar revisionist wing, on an anthropological project that many claimed had turned its back on politics in general, and on socialism in particular. Lévi-Strauss's socialism finds its roots less in Marx, however, than in Jean Jaurès, Marcel Mauss, and Henri de Man; its key concerns are not production, class struggle and private property, but mutualism, cooperativism and redistribution. This chapter argues that it is necessary to grasp this current of ethical socialism – which envisions moral economies, more equitable distributions of wealth and a stronger social contract as remedies for social ills – in order to understand the political substructure of Lévi-Strauss's paradigm of exchange.

For Lévi-Strauss, primitive society is constituted by, and for, exchange. Primitive life only enters the realm of culture and leaves the realm of nature when the prohibition on incest arises and families begin to 'exchange' women in marriage, thus connecting them in

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[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

longstanding networks of alliance with other families. But the exchange of women is only one element of the vast latticework of exchange relations – involving the giving and receiving of objects, words, prestige, power, enmity, alliance, and trust – which represent both the substance and form of the primitive social contract. Exchange is for Lévi-Strauss an emphatically non-materialist principle, at times used interchangeably with the French term *communiquer*, meaning not only 'to communicate' but also 'to give' or 'to pass on' (see also the Latin *communicare*: 'to be in relation with'). In French it is not only meanings and diseases that can be communicated, as in English, but objects, moods and passions, too. For Lévi-Strauss, this equally material and symbolic exchange – also captured in Mauss's idea of *generalised reciprocity* – represents the founding principle of society, defining the transition from nature to culture. It is most visible in primitive societies because, lacking the distortions and encrustations of civilisation, they display human sociality at its simplest.[2] The framework of exchange remains widespread in anthropology today.[3] Yet the paradigm of exchange has an origin, and a political origin: it became dominant in a particular historical moment marked by a postwar social-democratic consensus in Western Europe and the United States, and it became dominant only at the expense of other theoretical paradigms. Not least among these is the paradigm of production, which, as the previous chapter discussed, was key to nineteenth-century ethnology as well as to the ethnological thought of Marx and Engels.

This chapter argues that Lévi-Strauss's exchange paradigm was influenced by two distinct but related strands of ethical socialism. The first was that of Henri de Man, leader of the Belgian Worker's Party (POB) and one of the most prominent and controversial anti-Marxist revisionist socialists of the interwar years. De Man's critique of Marxism drew on social psychology to argue that the working classes were not driven by economic interests, but by complicated emotional and psychological needs. For De Man, Marxism was cold, stolid and blinded by the rigidities of materialism; his ethical socialism sought to build on older

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[2] This point is made most clearly in Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Reciprocity and Hierarchy', *American Anthropologist* 46 (2), 1944, pp. 266–268.

[3] See Chapter 4, which traces the ways in which Clastres builds on (and ultimately departs from) Lévi-Strauss's exchange paradigm, and Chapter 5, which examines Baudrillard's concept of 'symbolic exchange'. Recent anthropological theory remains similarly preoccupied with the idea of exchange, especially gift exchange, which is often used in contrast to the paradigm of production: see, for example, Philippe Descola, 'Beyond Nature and Culture: Forms of Attachment', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (1), 2012, pp. 447–471; Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); or Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990).

socialist traditions that held a place for the emotional and spiritual dimensions of life. I argue here that De Man's anti-materialist outlook laid the foundations for Lévi-Strauss's turn to anthropology, and led Lévi-Strauss to approach anthropology in a particular way: as a space for studying cultural and psychological structures as autonomous from economic relations. I also suggest that De Man's collaborationism may have been a factor in Lévi-Strauss's turn from politics, and the fatalistic view of world history that he adopted after the end of the Second World War. The second strand of ethical socialism that influenced Lévi-Strauss came via Marcel Mauss, with whom Lévi-Strauss became close within the right wing of the SFIO. Mauss, especially his *Essay on the Gift*, laid the foundations for Lévi-Strauss's focus on symbolic exchange, which was conceived by both thinkers as a kind of social contract – analogous, in some ways, with modern ideas of redistribution and social security. Both De Man and Mauss were critical of Marxist socialism and Bolshevism. Both proposed not the overhaul of capitalism but its reconfiguration around moral principles, not least the principle of redistribution. Both were also deeply affected by the experience of the Second World War: De Man by his own collaboration with the Nazis on their invasion of Belgium, and Mauss by his experience of being forced out of Paris and abandoned by associates during the Nazi occupation.[4]

In reading aspects of Lévi-Strauss's early ethical socialism into his theory of exchange, this chapter builds on – but also departs from – some recent efforts to challenge the anthropologist's apolitical image, especially among French scholars. Sartre famously alluded to Lévi-Strauss as an 'aesthete' who, evacuating politics and subjectivity from his investigation into the patterns of social life, studied people as though they were ants.[5] This was only compounded, over the course of Lévi-Strauss's career, by his fatalistic accounts of world history, which he considered to be an entropic process over which human subjects had little control,[6] his obsession with formal structures that he considered to inhere in the human brain,

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[4] Keith Hart, 'Marcel Mauss: In Pursuit of the Whole', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49 (2), 2007, p. 479.

[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Volume One, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004), p. 101.

[6] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952) and his 'Race and Culture', *International Social Science Journal* 23, 1971, pp. 608–625.

and his emphatic disinterest in political questions of his time. As Fraçoise Heritier recounted, 'He made it a point of honour to never sign a single petition'.[7]

Alexandre Pajon, Victor Stoczkowski, and Emmanneulle Loyer have all done important historical and archival work in reconstructing Lévi-Strauss's early political activities and bringing into view the utopian aspirations of his youth.[8] All also try to draw a line of continuity between these early commitments – which Lévi-Strauss himself disavows after the war – and the anthropological project for which he is most well-known. For example, Stoczkowski argues that Lévi-Strauss's break from the socialism of his youth concealed 'a more fundamental continuity, in which the soteriological, redemptive infrastructure of the Lévi-Straussian worldview remained intact.'[9] For Pajon, Lévi-Strauss's early socialism was the first stage of a lifelong ethico-political project which cohered around a concern for cultural diversity and ecology. And according to Loyer, Lévi-Strauss's early socialism represented one side an 'unstable binary' which ultimately made him, despite his withdrawal from politics *per se*, the purveyor of 'a truly reconciled humanism, commensurate with our Anthropocene.'[10]

I want to suggest that these readings – which are largely rehabilitative, rather than critical – fail to interrogate the relationship between Lévi-Strauss's anthropology and the political and historical forces that were at work in its development, not least those underlying the emergent fascism of the interwar years. Indeed, by reducing his early politics to a set of largely unchanging moral principles which turn out to be perfectly adequate to the present (or indeed the future), I suggest that they repeat the depoliticising gesture at the core of his legacy. To appreciate the politics of French anthropology, it is necessary to examine in much closer detail the *content* of Lévi-Strauss's early politics rather than simply their moral or ethical *form*: to see the historical and theoretical paths these politics excluded, and to bring out some of the contradictions internal to them. To trace the continuities between his early socialism and his later structuralism, one does not have to reduce the former to a *mere morality* that 'exceeded

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[7] Fraçoise Heritier quoted in Alexandre Pajon, 'L'influence politique de Claude Lévi-Strauss: essai de généalogie', *Esprit* 377 (8/9), pp. 87–98. On the image of Lévi-Strauss as apolitical see also Robcis, 'Lévi-Strauss's Structuralist Social Contract', p. 145.
[8] Pajon, 'L'influence politique de Claude Lévi-Strauss'; Wiktor Stoczkowski, 'Un étrange socialisme de Claude Lévi-Strauss', *Europe* 91 (1005–1006), 2013; Emmaneulle Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss: A Biography*, trans. Ninon Vinsonneau and Jonathan Magidoff (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018).
[9] Stoczkowski, 'Un étrange socialisme', p. 14.
[10] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 11. The reconstruction of Lévi-Strauss as a thinker of the posthuman is now ubiquitous in anthropological and philosophical appraisals of his thought. See Chabonnier, Salmon and Skafish (eds), *Comparative Metaphysics*; Viveiros De Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

partisan frameworks', as Pajon puts it,[11] or, as for Stoczkowski, that amounts to 'the search for an ethical foundation that would allow all classes and all beings to live together harmoniously.'[12] Ethical socialism was a lot more complex – and a lot more contradictory – than that.

1 The ethical socialist: 1924–1935

Lévi-Strauss's socialist years were not marked by a specific interest in anthropology, but the revisionist character of his socialist education set the conditions for his anthropology to come. Lévi-Strauss was most inspired and formed politically by a current of interwar socialism led by De Man which, along with his French counterparts in the right wing of the SFIO, saw in Marxism the same spiritual degradation that motivated their critique of modern civilisation. For the milieu of young socialist intellectuals of which Lévi-Strauss was a part, who already felt the effects of the interwar slump on their career prospects, Marxism was afflicted by the economistic sclerosis of the older generation. It lacked a spiritual core. 'We must break definitively with the sickly veneration and conservative respect that surround this doctrine,' Lévi-Strauss wrote in 1930 in the Belgian student paper *L'Étudiant socialiste*. 'Young people must free themselves from the grip of Marxism.'[13] A series of substitutions resulted: the key historical actor was no longer the proletariat but rather a broad anti-capitalist front (sometimes termed a *faisceau*[14]) that included the middle classes; analysis based on class interests was replaced by analysis based on psychological instincts; and the political struggle for socialism was reconceived as a spiritual revolution internal to socialist organisations and militants themselves.

Lévi-Strauss's induction into French socialism took place only a few years after the predominant socialist movement, represented by the SFIO, had split in 1920 into its socialist and communist wings. These opposing tendencies had been present since the formation of the SFIO in 1905, when Jean Jaurès had represented the social-democratic tendency and Jules

[11] Pajon, 'L'influence politique de Claude Lévi-Strauss', p. 98.
[12] Stoczkowski, 'Un étrange socialisme', p. 16.
[13] Ibid., p. 6
[14] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Marcel Déat: Perspectives Socialistes', *L'Etudiant Socialiste* 6, 1931, p. 15.

Guesde and Paul Lafargue the 'Marxist' tendency.[15] It was the question of the newly-established Bolshevik government in Russia which precipitated the 1920 split of the SFIO. On the one side emerged the French Section of the Communist International (SFIC), which supported the Bolsheviks and would become the PCF, encompassing the majority of the former movement; on the other was the minority, which retained the name SFIO and refused to align itself to Moscow. The most influential figure in the latter 'socialist' camp was Léon Blum, a disciple of Jean Jaurès.

It was in the midst of this newly-independent socialist movement, at pains to defend itself against the communist opposition, that Lévi-Strauss received his political education. He was 'converted' to the socialist cause at around sixteen, in 1924, after meeting Arthur Wauters, a militant in the Belgian Workers' Party (POB), on a family vacation.[16] Wauters had Lévi-Strauss read Marx and Jaurès, and invited him to Belgium as a guest of the POB to tour worker cooperatives and meet Party militants.[17] 'For a time he made me into a kind of ward of the Belgian worker's party,' Lévi-Strauss recounts.[18] Lévi-Strauss's first publication appeared in the POB organ *L'Églantine*, which was edited by Wauters. In Paris, Lévi-Strauss joined the Groupe des étudiants socialistes (GES) set up by Marcel Déat, Georges Lefranc and Jean Le Bail, and helped to found the Fédération nationale des étudiants socialistes (FNES) in 1927, of which he was appointed secretary in 1928. He also joined the SFIO in 1927.[19] A significant part of his student militancy involved writing for *L'Étudiant socialiste*, a POB-aligned student journal based in Belgium.[20]

1.1 Henri De Man's *The Psychology of Socialism*

Lévi-Strauss has often cited the name of Marx when reflecting on his intellectual inspiration during his youth.[21] But those who introduced him to Marx also turned him away from Marxism.

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[15] Marx had distanced himself from this tendency, writing famously that if Guesde and Lafargue's positions represented Marxism, then 'what is certain is that I myself am not a Marxist'. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke,* Vol. 35 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1973), p. 388.
[16] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 52.
[17] Ibid., p. 53.
[18] Claude Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 8.
[19] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, pp. 60–61.
[20] Ibid., p. 60.
[21] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 153–155; Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, *Conversations*, p. 15; 108; 168.

As Loyer notes, Wauters's critical review of Marxism, *L'Évolution du marxisme depuis la mort de Marx*, had been published the same year that he met Lévi-Strauss. 'One is left to wonder', Loyer writes, 'whether, rather than to Marx himself, the young acolyte was not initiated into critical versions and theoretical revisions of Marx, which played a more important role in Belgian socialism than in its rather less doctrinally driven French counterpart.'[22] Stoczkowski reinforces this claim: in the writings of the young Lévi-Strauss, 'his references to Marx were surprisingly rare, in obvious contradiction with his declarations from 1955 onwards [that Marx was one of his primary influences]. Instead, another name arose frequently under the pen of the young Lévi-Strauss: that of Henri De Man. And this name, curiously, would never again be mentioned by Lévi-Strauss after the war.'[23] Through the influence of Wauters, Lévi-Strauss was indeed introduced to a socialism with a strongly *demanienne* flavour. Both *L'Églantine* and *L'Étudiant socialiste* were vital in disseminating the ideas of De Man, and Lévi-Strauss himself wrote articles on De Man and on Déat.[24] Lévi-Strauss also went to some lengths to arrange for De Man to speak in Paris in 1928. This attracted the consternation of the SFIO's central committee, which remained broadly committed to Marxism and rejected De Man's revisionism. In response to this experience, Lévi-Strauss wrote to De Man: 'We have learned that Marxism is a sacrosanct doctrine in our Party, and that to study theories which stray from it one must shut oneself away tightly, so that nobody outside knows of it.'[25] For Lévi-Strauss, De Man's revisionism was a revelation: 'Thanks to you,' he wrote to his mentor, 'socialist doctrines are finally awakening from their long slumber.'[26]

For Lévi-Strauss, the path opened by De Man led toward a renewed socialism, alive to aesthetics as much as to the insights of the new social sciences, and which took as its object not only capitalism but the spiritual degradation of Western civilisation. Lévi-Strauss described De Man's book, *Au-déla du marxisme* (1926), in a letter to its author, as 'a true revelation', enabling him to 'get out of a deadlock from which I had thought there was no escape.'[27] Why did the proletariat of the industrialised countries not revolt? Why had internationalism failed in the face of imperialist war? Why, as De Man put it, just when capitalism's contradictions

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[22] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 54.
[23] Stoczkowski, 'Un étrange socialisme', p. 4.
[24] Ibid., p. 5.
[25] Ibid., p. 7.
[26] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 62.
[27] Ibid.

were intensifying, did 'the goal of a classless society seem further away that ever'?[28] For De Man, the answers lay not in the economic determinism which he saw as the 'basis of Marxist socialism',[29] but in the insights of social psychology. 'What leads the worker to raise the banner of the class war,' he wrote, 'is not that his acquisitive instinct has become a conscious one. The motives are far more complicated and far more deeply rooted in the affective life.'[30] For De Man, these motives sprung instead from what he called a 'social inferiority complex'.[31] Workers sought dignity, not possessions; they resented the bourgeoisie less for its wealth than for its power to determine the organisation of society and the course of their lives.[32] Bourgeois socialism was different in character from the socialism of the working classes, but no less grounded in emotion. 'Socialist conviction is, first and foremost, a complex, and emotional state, no less in the isolated thinker who launches ideas, than in the masses who accept them as symbols of their own volitions.'[33] For De Man, the origins of socialism were primarily psychological, and only secondarily economic or material. *Au-déla du marxisme* was, accordingly, published in English under the title *The Psychology of Socialism.*

De Man's discussions of the proletariat can also be seen to be prompted by an anthropological impulse: a desire to understand the proletariat in its earthly existence, in its psychological impulses and its spiritual desires, and to examine the real sources of its cultural life, which, for De Man, were ignored by Marxism. 'For the Marxist,' he wrote, 'the proletariat is not a reality but a concept.'[34] Marxian materialism had, in this exaltation of the proletariat, turned curiously into an *idealism*. It had recast the proletariat as an abstract and messianic force – 'the Savior, the Power, the Will' – destined to act out the terms of their historical drama. After a 'mental rebirth' experienced fighting alongside the working class in the First World War,[35] De Man would not make the same mistake:

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[28] Henri De Man, *The Psychology of Socialism*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: Allen and Unwin, 1928), p. 25.
[29] Ibid., p. 13.
[30] Ibid., p. 45.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., p. 41.
[33] Ibid., p. 36.
[34] Ibid., p. 32.
[35] Ibid., p. 44.

> I no longer look upon the proletariat simply as a mass which exists for the sole purpose of fulfilling its historic mission to set mankind free. The workers seem to me all the more lovable, all the more in need of help, because they have ceased to be the heroes of historical drama, and have put on flesh and blood, with its biological and social heritage of virtues and vices, longings and imperfections. ... They are creatures driven onward by instinct, and their ideas are but tools for the satisfaction of the bodily and spiritual needs that arise in social life.[36]

The bodily and spiritual needs of these 'lovable' workers, their flesh and blood as much as their waxing and waning political enthusiasms, were also imbued with the qualities and ethics of a life not yet subsumed by capitalism. Marxism had been inattentive to this fact. 'The socialist labour movement is not a product of capitalism,' De Man wrote, but 'the product of a reaction which occurs when capitalism (a new social state) comes into contact with a human disposition which may be termed precapitalist.'[37] Entwined within the anthropological impulse of De Man's project is also, then, a desire to seek out and reconstruct a precapitalist socialism, which draws its vitality not from a merely negative opposition to capitalism but from the remnants of a past alive in the capitalist present. This utopian thread is reminiscent in some ways of Ernst Bloch's 'nonsynchronism',[38] yet the signifiers attached to De Man's ethical precapitalism turn out to be closer to those privileged by Georges Sorel and guild socialism:

> This [precapitalist] disposition is characterised by a certain fixation of the sense of moral values, a fixation which can only be understood with reference to the social experiences of the days of feudalism and the craft guilds, to Christian ethics, and to the ethical principles of democracy.[39]

If the impulse of De Man's writing can be called anthropological, then this would correlate to a spiritual-philosophical anthropology bearing a closer resemblance to nineteenth-century

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[36] Ibid., p. 36.
[37] Ibid., p. 39.
[38] Ernst Bloch, 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics', trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique* 11 (1977), pp. 22–38.
[39] De Man, *The Psychology of Socialism*, p. 39.

German anthropology – with its emphasis on the organic precapitalist community and its critique of bourgeois culture – than its positivist French counterparts. In this way, De Man's writing aligns itself with a long-standing critique of modernity that seeks out the moral core of a non-alienated past and counterposes this to the cold rationalism of bourgeois society, which De Man claimed to find 'irrespirable'.[40] For De Man, 'socialism is a *passion*, not a *cognition*',[41] and the roots of this passion lie 'in an almost infinite multiplicity of affects, derived from cultural, ethical, and aesthetic sources' which could not be captured by the blunt tools of Marxist analysis.[42]

References to De Man are indeed absent from Lévi-Strauss's reflections on his youth. This symptomatic absence in his autobiographical narrative would seem to be explained by the fact that De Man, along with others attracted to his brand of revisionist socialism, was to become a collaborator in the Second World War. Although De Man did not explicitly identify himself with Nazism, when the Germans invaded Belgium in 1940 he welcomed them, dissolving the POB and declaring that 'far from being a catastrophe, this collapse of a decayed world represents liberation for the working classes and for socialism'.[43] Marcel Déat, on the other hand, with whom Lévi-Strauss had worked closely in the SFIO student networks, became an explicitly pro-Nazi critic of the Vichy regime and founded the Rassemblement Nationale Populaire (RNP), one of the key collaborationist parties in France between 1941 and 1944.[44] Although Lévi-Strauss had left the SFIO and long given up his socialist activities by the time the war began, it is not difficult to hypothesise a process of repression and symptomatic absence – 'I have a ravaging, self-destructive memory', he insisted much later – at work in the erasure of these figures from his past.[45]

Repression functions to bury contradictions, not to resolve them. Loyer, Stoczkowski and Pajon tend to evade the question of how the revisionist socialism that so influenced Lévi-Strauss in his youth was able to evolve, in the political thought of its founders, into a position supportive of (or in the case of Déat, indistinguishable from) fascism. Loyer, bristling at

[40] Ibid., p. 500.
[41] Ibid., p. 497.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Brecht de Smet, '"Socialism From Above" and the Capitulation to Fascism', *Jacobin*, 24 August 2019.
[44] Matthieu Hikaru Desan and Johan Heilbrom, 'Young Durkheimians and the temptation of fascism: The case of Marcel Deat', *History of the Human Sciences* 28 (3), 2015, pp. 22-50.
[45] Claude Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *De près et de loin* (Paris: Olide Jacob, 1988), p. 5.

‘teleological’ approaches to intellectual history, is at pains to reject the suggestion that De Man harboured any proto-fascist tendencies. She takes issue especially with Zeev Sternhell’s reading of De Man, which has done much to tarnish the image of the Belgian socialist by identifying continuities between his earlier ethical socialism and his later collaborationism, as well as with the fascism of those with whom his ideas were closely aligned, such as Déat.[46] For Loyer, Sternhell’s analysis is governed by ‘a framework that examines ideologies and movements from what they became and then traces them backward in time, as though all 1930s heterodox socialists were bound to become 1940s collaborationists.’[47] The fact remains, however, that De Man and Déat *did* become collaborationists. One does not need to assert this as an inevitable trajectory to hold it necessary to interrogate the trajectory itself, as well as the theoretical currents that underpinned it. In this respect, De Man’s psychologism, his invocation of precapitalist European ‘ethical’ traditions, his arguments for class collaboration and for a return to national values all need to be grasped in their resonance with certain ideas of the far-right. Let us look further at the way these tendencies played out in Lévi-Strauss’s thought.

1.2 Lévi-Strauss’s anti-materialism and the ‘Constructive Revolution’

The anthropological impulse that De Man seeks to awaken in socialism also appears in Lévi-Strauss’s writings through this period. On the one hand, Lévi-Strauss and his peers writing in *L’Étudiant Socialiste* also took up a commitment to spiritual renewal, with Christian inflections. Born to an Alsacian Jewish bourgeois family, Lévi-Strauss was an atheist, like his parents, throughout his life. Yet Christian socialism offered a fresh, non-traditional perspective that appealed to many young intellectuals at the time. Lévi-Strauss wrote regular reviews of the Christian socialist paper, *L’Espoir du monde*, while his vocabulary during these years often takes a religious tone; in a review of a pamphlet by Jean Guéhenno in 1931, he writes: ‘Our task today is that of the prophet and martyr: to achieve within ourselves – and not just in our thoughts, but in our lives – a new order.’[48] The theme of spiritual self-renewal, conceived as a necessary accompaniment to social renewal, also emerged in Révolution Constructive, a ‘tendency’ within the SFIO formed by Lefranc, Lévi-Strauss and a number of other young

[46] Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
[47] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 63.
[48] Ibid., p. 67.

socialists to the right of the Party.[49] The group planned to write a book, which Lévi-Strauss foresaw as 'a sketch of a metaphysics at the service of revolution'.[50] Asked later, he professed to remember little about the group aside from the fact that, as evidenced by the name, it was oriented toward building a new society within the shell of the old: 'We thought it was possible to construct the socialist society inside of the capitalist world, to make it grow, push through, and we declared that when it was big enough capitalism would collapse all by itself'.[51] This metaphor of the chrysalis, signifying the constructive rather than the destructive side of revolutionary transformation, was also linked for Lévi-Strauss to the localist, cooperative model of Belgian socialism, with its focus on building socialist organisations in the interstices of capitalist society:

> I have already mentioned the formative role that the Belgian Workers' Party had played for me and its ambition, through its unions, its people's houses, its cooperatives, to create an embryo of socialist society within the capitalist world. … If, day after day, we applied ourselves to building institutions of a socialist spirit, they would gradually grow, by virtue of their superiority, like the chrysalis in the capitalist cocoon, and [the latter] would fall like a dead and parched envelope.[52]

For Lévi-Strauss, the 'constructive revolution' was also an aesthetic revolution. He wrote in *L'Étudiant Socialiste* in 1928: 'Socialism, to be complete, must insert itself in the mind as much as in the realm of political economy. A rich and novel aesthetic model is as full of revolutionary content as any union demand.'[53] The novelty of this aesthetic model was derived from its position of exteriority in relation to capitalism and the West. It emerged to a large degree out of Lévi-Strauss's immersion in the Parisian avant-garde and his reading of literary travel writing, often with a primitivist flavour: among the books he reviewed for *L'Étudiant Socialiste* are Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*, Paul Nizan's *Aden Arabie*, Céline's *Voyage*

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[49] Note Henri De Man himself would soon publish *Le Socialisme constructif* (Paris: Librarie Félix Alcan, 1933).
[50] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 68.
[51] Lévi-Strauss quoted in Vincent Chambarlhac, 'Lévi-Strauss en socialisme', *Cahiers d'histoire: Revue d'histoire critique* 101, 2007, p. 3.
[52] Ibid., p. 7.
[53] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 70.

au bout de la nuit, as well as works by D. H. Lawrence.[54] Vincent Chambarlhac brings out the relationship between these writings and Lévi-Strauss's later anthropology, arguing that the value Lévi-Strauss ascribed to these literary experiments 'unfolds on two axes, intrinsically linked: one designates the observation of a crisis in bourgeois civilization, the other geographic and – or – social alterity.'[55] The two axes relate to one another: 'the elsewhere and the faraway are linked to a capitalist present that must be fought, to a world within which socialism must develop.'[56] Lévi-Strauss concludes in his review of *Aden Arabie*: 'I see it [the journey] less as the discovery of the similar than the discovery of the entirely other, less an encounter with other men than an encounter with the world. The value of Paul Nizan's experience is not that he returned from Aden, but that he went there.'[57] The desire for the other – or more precisely for a certain kind of exotic, non-Western, non-alienated other – already appears to have taken root in Lévi-Strauss, in a way that is internal to his vision of the 'constructive revolution'.

This constructive revolution was, however, above all a revolution against materialism. It was in a very clear sense 'a way out' from the deadlock represented, for Lévi-Strauss, by both left and right political visions at the time. From his perspective, the same elements of Western culture that had led to its spiritual degradation – rationalism, economism, productivism – were suffused through Marxism. Little of historical materialism seemed to be untainted by these ills. In emphasising the continuity between the aesthetic and cultural aspects of Lévi-Strauss's socialism and his turn to ethnography, Loyer, Pajon and Stoczkowski tend to overlook the basic elements of the political programme that this anti-materialist current represented. In the writings of De Man and Déat, we can witness a progressive dismantling of the concept of class struggle and the necessity for the transformation of capitalist production, in favour of various forms of economic reformism bolstered by a strong, and ultimately authoritarian, state.[58] Where De Man was concerned, the key problem driving the analysis in *Au-déla du marxisme* was the *embourgoisement* of the proletariat: this 'entry of the working class into the ambit of bourgeois culture' had affected the trade union movement and the cooperative movement alike with the psychology of reformism.[59] For De Man, this reformist

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[54] Ibid., p. 69.
[55] Chambarlhac, 'Lévi-Strauss en socialisme', p. 9.
[56] Ibid., p. 10.
[57] Lévi-Strauss quoted in Chambarlhac, 'Lévi-Strauss en socialisme', p. 10.
[58] See Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left*, p. 124.
[59] De Man, *The Psychology of Socialism*, p. 270.

impulse reflected the world-historical reconciliation of capitalism and socialism, a 'parallelism which is directing both capitalist production and the labour movement towards a worldwide unity'.[60] To make this claim, De Man separates capitalism into two aspects: there is the capitalism which maintains and organises the productive forces, on the one hand, and the capitalism which sets in place the social domination of the capitalist class over the proletariat, on the other. 'Socialism still contributes, and must contribute, towards the realisation of some of the aims of *capitalism as a method of production*,' he writes, 'while continuing to fight *capitalism as a form of social domination.*'[61] On the one hand was capitalism as an economic system, which might be reconciled with socialism; on the other was capitalism as a political system, which had to be overcome. There was no essential or necessary relation between the two.

We can be sure that the collapse of De Man and Déat's collaborationism played some role in Lévi-Strauss's sudden fatalism and his turn away from politics: where only a few years earlier he had announced his ambition to sketch 'a method that will allow us to develop the content of future civilizations', by the 1950s he had lapsed into a deeply melancholic attitude towards world history which finds its most significant expressions in *Race and History* and *Tristes Tropiques*. He recounted later that by the end of the war, 'each political position seemed contradictory to me.'[62] Both left and right had failed to in their efforts to envision radical transformation, but, unlike in his youth, he could no longer see the solution. 'Humans are mistaken at every turn – history proves it. People say, "It's either this or that," and it's always something else.'[63] Yet the revisionist socialism of De Man and Déat already contained its own thread of fatalism, too. De Man's collaborationism can be read as having emerged out of a 'realist' approach to politics. In 1926 he wrote, in reference to the First World War and rising nationalism: 'We shall be more likely to avoid the danger of a renewal of the tragedy if we are careful not to thrust our heads ostrichlike into the sand.'[64] One had to meet the 'mass' where it was, he insisted, and the De Man Plan, an initiative seeking to unite the working classes with many sections of the middle class against the financial elites, was envisaged as a necessary

[60] Ibid., p. 301.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, *De près et de loin*, p. 54.
[63] Ibid., p. 125.
[64] De Man, *The Psychology of Socialism*, p. 322.

means of beating a resurgent fascism on its own terrain. In the end, De Man, alongside Déat, came to view the only possible course forward as an authoritarian state which could 'inflect' capitalism in the right direction. Having lost the conviction that class struggle could be a driving factor in positive historical transformation, and having abandoned the goal that such transformation should touch the fundaments of capitalist production, the revisionist socialists fell back onto psychology, which had its own fatalistic tendency. As Sternhell writes:

> There is no determinism that would automatically make a fascist out of an 'anti-materialist'. However, it is undeniable that this desire to 'pass beyond Marxism by substituting a method of psychological analysis for historical materialism, or, in other words, by seeking behind economic facts the psychic realities they express', is one of the main routes for going from left to right and from the extreme left to the extreme right.[65]

By 1933, Lévi-Strauss had begun to move away from Révolution Constructive, and he had not chosen to join Déat's neosocialist Parti socialiste de France, also established that year.[66] He had also gained significant experience working as a parliamentary aide to Georges Monnet (between 1928 and 1930), and had attempted his own foray into local politics while teaching at a provincial *lycée* in Mont-de-Marsan (in 1932–3). In 1934, he would receive the famous call from Celestin Bouglé inviting him to take up a position at the University of São Paulo – the beginning of his anthropological career. When the Popular Front was elected to government in 1935, he still hoped to receive a call from Monnet, but was disappointed. 'It was obvious that in their victory my former comrades had forgotten me,' he said later. 'Events, the new course my life was taking, did the rest'.[67] Lévi-Strauss revoked him membership of the SFIO in 1935.[68]

Caught in the fracture of political tendencies within the SFIO, the young Lévi-Strauss ultimately sought a source of intellectual stimulation from outside of the political field altogether. Anthropology filled this need. Like De Man's ethical socialism, anthropology

[65] Zeev Sternhell, 'The "Anti-Materialist" Revision of Marxism as an Aspect of the Rise of Fascist Ideology', *Journal of Contemporary History* 22 (3), 1987, p. 382.
[66] Chambarlhac, 'Lévi-Strauss en socialisme', p. 6.
[67] Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, *De près et de loin*, p. 54.
[68] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 306.

represented a 'way out of the deadlock' of Europe's ideological battles. But in turning to primitive societies, Lévi-Strauss brought his anti-materialist orientation with him – his desire to escape the economism and rationalism of Western modernity. In this way, his early ethical socialism represented one of the preconditions for his development of an anti-materialist paradigm in anthropology, and the conviction that society was founded on symbolic exchange rather than material production. Let us now examine the way he developed these ideas in his early anthropological writings.

2 Two theories of primitive redistribution: 1937–1947

Lévi-Strauss lived in Brazil from 1935 to 1939, teaching sociology at the University of São Paulo and doing fieldwork with indigenous communities in Matto Grosso. This was followed by a period of exile in New York from 1941 to 1947. During most of his time away from France, but especially during the earlier period, Lévi-Strauss wrote regularly to one comrade (also Jewish) from the SFIO: Marcel Mauss. In Lévi-Strauss's relationship with Mauss we can discern another path from socialism to anthropology, overlapping in some ways with the ethical socialism of De Man but holding a more direct influence on Lévi-Strauss's developing anthropological thought. If De Man oriented a very young Lévi-Strauss toward an anti-materialist socialism with anthropological inflections, then Mauss guided a slightly less young Lévi-Strauss toward an anti-materialist anthropology with socialist inflections, with the support of his theory of primitive exchange outlined in *The Gift* (published in 1925). In this section, I firstly try to uncover some of the political motivations underlying Mauss's theory, and secondly examine the way in which these endured in Lévi-Strauss's own anthropological writings from this period. I focus in particular on the concept of redistribution – related closely to the concepts of reciprocity and exchange – which traverses Mauss's political and anthropological thought, and comes to hold an important place in Lévi-Strauss's. Focusing on the concept of redistribution helps to elucidate the way in which Lévi-Strauss's anthropological writings of this time were also *political* writings, concerned with an international order which had shown itself to be in need of radically new foundations.

2.1 *The Gift* as a theory of redistribution

Mauss's political and theoretical orientation can be seen to emerge from two key influences: the sociology of Émile Dukheim, his uncle, and the socialism of Jean Jaurès, with whom Mauss became a close friend while he was a student.[69] These influences set Mauss as a distance, from the beginning, from Marxism. Durkheim's sociological project – to locate the source of social solidarity in modern societies – was set at cross purposes to a socialism of class contradictions, preferring to find in syndicalism a source of stability for the Third Republic.[70] Mauss was less opposed to class-based socialism, yet for him too there could be no question of the abolition of the division of labour, which Durkheim had placed at the heart of his thought on progress in modern societies.[71] From Jaurès, Mauss inherited a form of French socialism oriented less toward the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism than toward its transformation from within, through 'an economic movement from below' combining syndicalism, cooperativism and mutual insurance[72] – a programme that resonated with Lévi-Strauss's Révolution Constructive project. An active member of the cooperative movement, Mauss admired much in English socialism, including the Rochdale Pioneers and the Fabians, especially Sydney and Beatrice Webb.[73] In the SFIO Mauss was toward the right of the party – he was in the fifth section, which also included Déat and Lefranc, and wrote regularly for *La Vie socialiste*, the SFIO's right-wing paper.[74] Like Déat, Mauss was favourable to parliamentary participation. He did not, however, join Déat on his 'neosocialist' split from the SFIO in 1933.[75]

Mauss's *The Gift* (1925) has become a canonical text of anthropological theory, but it is not generally read as a political statement. For this reason, its 'Conclusions', which apply the ethnographic accounts from the rest of the essay to contemporary Western societies, can strike the reader as extraneous to the book's purpose. Yet these final pages are vital for understanding the political motivations underpinning Mauss's efforts to rethink primitive forms of exchange. Against the background of Lenin's New Economic Policy (which Mauss had written about in his *Sociological Assessment of Bolshevism*, also published in 1925), he

[69] Frank Adloff, *Gifts of Cooperation, Mauss and Pragmatism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).
[70] Hart, 'Marcel Mauss', p. 475.
[71] Ibid., p. 477.
[72] Ibid., p. 478.
[73] Ibid., p. 477.
[74] Chambarlhac, 'Lévi-Strauss en socialisme', p. 5.
[75] Ibid.

was eager to probe the question of the market, and above all that of the morality of various kinds of market economies.[76] Mauss was opposed to the early Soviet efforts to abolish the market, and insisted that it was necessary to instead reimagine the market as a source of solidarity rather than atomisation. This involved a thoroughgoing critique of the legal systems that underlay contemporary capitalism. 'The whole field of industrial and commercial law is in conflict with morality,' he writes in his Conclusions.[77] The exploitative relations of industrial capitalism had inculcated an economistic rationality into workers and bosses alike, which had subsequently become inscribed into law. Contemporary societies could only move forward by 'putting back the clock' to rediscover the non-materialistic principles that had animated societies in the past:[78]

> Hence we should return to the old and elemental. Once again we shall discover those motives of action still remembered by many societies and classes: the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure, the pleasure of hospitality in the public or private feast.[79]

The examination of forms of primitive exchange in *The Gift* – in particular the system of 'total prestation' expressed in the potlach, which represented 'the oldest economic system we know'[80] – had revealed a kind of economy quite incommensurate with 'so-called natural economy' or utilitarianism.[81] 'It is something other than utility which makes goods circulate in these multifarious and fairly enlightened societies,' Mauss wrote. 'Clans, age groups and sexes, in view of the many relationships ensuing from contacts between them, are in a state of perpetual economic effervescence which has little about it that is materialistic.'[82] What Mauss called 'total *prestation*' captured the true, social nature of exchange, not as a calculated transfer of property but as a relationship between individuals or groups that exceeded or undid

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[76] David Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 157.
[77] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 64.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., p. 67.
[80] Ibid., p. 68.
[81] Ibid., p. 69.
[82] Ibid., p. 70.

possessive interest. In a text contributed to the *Manuel d'Ethnologie*, Mauss describes total prestation in the following way:

> For two clans, total *prestation* is manifest by the fact that to be in a condition of perpetual contract, everyone owes everything to all the others of his clan and to all those of the opposed clan. The permanent and collective character of such a contract makes it a veritable *traité*, with the necessary display of wealth *vis-à-vis* the other party. The *prestation* is extended to everything, to everyone, at all times …[83]

The term *prestation* does not have an equivalent in English, with its combined meanings of a service, performance, benefit or entitlement; what differentiates a *prestation* from a gift is that a *prestation* ensues from, or takes place upon the basis of, a contract. As a form of legislated giving or rendering, its use is often connected to the state: *prestation de services* can be translated as 'service provision', while a *prestation sociale* is a social security benefit. Mauss's choice of the term thus establishes a parallel, running through *The Gift*, between the state and the gift, both of which represent a form of social contract. As Marshall Sahlins writes, 'The *Essai sur le don* is a kind of social contract for the primitives.'[84] The total *prestation* Mauss sees in primitive societies is the expression of a fuller, more authentic social contract than that represented by the modern state. For Sahlins, Mauss's social contract theory is in fact closer to that of Hobbes than Rousseau, since Mauss ultimately views the state of nature as a state of war, to be overcome with the aid of reason: 'The gift is the primitive way of achieving the peace that in civil society is secured by the State.'[85] In primitive societies the gift binds together political communities, converting their enmity into trade; the obligation to give and receive is 'a veritable *traité*' – a treaty, the legal bond that holds society together.[86] By entering into such contracts, Mauss writes in *The Gift*,

> peoples succeed in substituting alliance, gift and commerce for war, isolation and stagnation. … Societies have progressed in the measure in which they, their sub-groups

[83] Mauss quoted in Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Tavistock, 1974), p. 169.
[84] Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, p. 169.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Mauss quoted in Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, p. 169.

> and their members, have been able to stabilize their contracts and to give, receive and repay. In order to trade, man must first lay down his spear.[87]

What attracts Mauss to systems of 'total prestation' is not so much the excessive nature of acts such as potlach, but rather the total responsibility for the other community – whatever its needs – that this excess represents. For this reason, David Graeber wrote that 'the elementary form of social contract is, for Mauss, precisely, communism: that is, an open-ended agreement in which each party commits itself to maintaining the life of the other.'[88] In this reading, total prestation is a system in which exchange value is extinguished, so that reciprocity corresponds directly to collective need. But it is not clear, as Graeber seems to suggest at times, that Mauss's political ideal is an anti-utilitarian, decentralised, anti-state communism. It is more plausible that for Mauss, total prestation represents an analogy in relation to modern democratic states, rather than a model. That is, between the total reciprocity of primitive societies and the forms of redistribution and social security Mauss sees as appropriate to modern societies, there are parallels and lessons to be learned, but not direct continuities. In fact, it seems more likely that Mauss draws from primitive societies not a theory of anarcho-communism, but a theory of social-democratic redistribution. In his 'Conclusions', Mauss does not advocate for any dismantling of capitalist social relations or capitalist processes of production.[89] Indeed, he insists that 'the legal principles of the market, of buying and selling, which are the indispensable conditions for the formation of capital, can and must exist beside other new and old principles.'[90] His focus is on the *redistribution* of the wealth thus produced:

> Peoples, classes, families and individuals may become rich, but they will not achieve happiness until they can sit down like the knights around their common riches. There is no need to seek far for goodness and happiness. It is to be found in the imposed peace, in the rhythm of communal and private labour, in wealth amassed and redistributed …[91]

[87] Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 80.
[88] Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value*, p. 162.
[89] Mauss is explicit on this. After outlining a series of examples of social security, he writes: 'We believe that such ideas and legislation correspond not to an unpheaval, but a return to law'. *The Gift*, pp. 65–66.
[90] Ibid., p. 128.
[91] Ibid., p. 81.

The knights in question are those of King Arthur's Round Table, a story Mauss retells at the very end of *The Gift*. In his narration, the Round Table becomes a kind of social contract, an object whose architectural properties render it capable of converting hostility into peace: as the 'marvel of the court', the Table allows sixteen hundred knights to sit around it with none being at the head and 'the highly [being] placed at the same level as the lowly'.[92] Seeking to draw parallels between 'primitive' forms of exchange and those of the European precapitalist past, Mauss's rather curious choice of aristocratic exemplars ultimately evokes not egalitarianism but forms of patronage or ritualised charity:

> We are returning, as indeed we must do, to the old theme of 'noble expenditure'. It is essential that, as in Anglo-Saxon countries and so many contemporary societies, savage and civilized, the rich should come once more, freely or by obligation, to consider themselves as the treasurers, as it were, of their fellow-citizens. Of the ancient civilizations from which ours has arisen some had the jubilee, others the liturgy, the choragus, the trierarchy, the syssita or the obligatory expenses of the aedile or consular official. We should return to customs of this sort.[93]

Mauss's affirmation of these feudal and ancient practices of patronage runs in parallel, in some ways, to his affirmation of the principle of social security in the modern state. A fair wage, he suggests, is not a sufficient means of fulfilling the social contract represented by the state. The worker is owed the means of reproducing their life during the periods in which they cannot undertake waged labour: 'The State, representing the community, owes him and his management and fellow-workers a certain security in his life against unemployment, sickness, old age and death.'[94] Here is the programme for the postwar welfare state – although Mauss suggests that these kinds of contracts might emerge not only from the state but from below, whether in 'social insurance, solicitude in mutuality or cooperation, in the professional group and all those moral persons called Friendly Societies'.[95] In return, the individual must dedicate

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[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., p. 66.
[94] Ibid., p. 65.
[95] Ibid., p. 67.

himself to work and to a basic level of self-reliance. The Soviet understanding of communism runs contrary to these aims: 'Communism and too much generosity is as harmful to [the individual] and society as the selfishness of our contemporaries or the individualism of our laws.'[96]

Mauss's attraction to systems of total prestation in primitive societies pivots on the social contracts established as a result of such practices, which form the basis for the equitable redistribution of wealth in such societies. Mauss is clear in his Conclusions that he does not envisage the transformation of the system of production as a necessary precondition for 'goodness and happiness'. There is no need to look so far as that. Rather, the market might be imbued with a spirit of generosity, limits might be placed on greed, and mechanisms for social insurance might be created. 'We need more good faith, sympathy and generosity in the contracts of hire and service, rents and sale of the necessities of life', he insists, as well as 'the means of limiting the fruits of speculation and usury.'[97] The vision is similar in certain ways to that of Lévi-Strauss's Révolution Constructive: both envisaged not the destruction of capitalism but the construction, within it, of a deeply-rooted morality that might graft itself onto it, softening its utilitarian brutalities. Mauss's vision is also similar in the way that it seeks to restore a spiritual wholeness to the narrow and truncated nature of capitalist social relations. The 'total' nature of the gift is key here. If primitive exchange is at the origin of sociality, representing the transition from the state of nature to that of the social, then it is only so as a simultaneously moral, spiritual and material phenomenon. By uncovering these foundations, Mauss suggests that the source of solidarity that held archaic societies together may be restored. In primitive societies, this solidarity appears as the principle of reciprocity; in modern societies it appears as the principle of redistribution. 'A wise precept has run right through human evolution, and we would be as well to adopt it as a principle of action', Mauss writes. 'A fine Maori proverb runs … "Give as much as you receive and all is for the best."'[98] Let us now turn to the way in which the ethical and anti-materialist socialism of Mauss influenced the young Lévi-Strauss, by looking at his earliest anthropological writings on Nambikwara societies.

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., pp. 66–67.
[98] Ibid., p. 69.

2.2 Primitive redistribution I: Nambikwara domestic affairs

At several points in his career, Lévi-Strauss would describe structuralism as a mode of analysis that excludes political and historical questions by necessity. Just as the internal workings of an organism only become visible in its cross-section, he insisted, the symbolic systems that are the object of structural analysis must be isolated from their diachronic transformations in order for their internal workings to be grasped. It is unexpected, then, to discover that the building blocks of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism were informed by questions of a profoundly political nature. If Lévi-Strauss was disillusioned by European politics from around 1935 onwards, he was still a deeply political thinker at least up until the end of the war. During his period in the Americas, he sought to unearth in the indigenous societies he encountered in Brazil, as well as in the ethnographic record, lessons for the political crises afflicting the West up to and during the Second World War. It is only recently that his writings of the New York years (1941–1947) have been collected, republished and commented upon by Debeane in his *Anthropologie Structurale Zéro*. This section owes much to Debaene's commentary on these texts, which does a remarkable job of situating them in their political conjuncture and sketching a picture of a no-longer-socialist, but nevertheless strongly politically orientated, Lévi-Strauss.[99] Here I follow a distinction Debaene draws between two theoretical stands to Lévi-Strauss's political thought as it developed in these articles: (1) the theme of intra-group solidarity, which I conceptualise here as a theory of leadership as the *redistribution of power*; and (2) the theme of inter-group solidarity, which I conceptualise in terms of a theory of foreign affairs as the *redistribution of alliance and enmity*.

The theme of intra-group solidarity – or what we could view in political science as a theory of 'domestic affairs' – emerges most strongly in Lévi-Strauss's article 'The Social and Psychological Aspect of Chieftainship in an American Tribe: the Nambikuara of Northwestern Matto Grosso'.[100] The article, first published in October 1944 in English, was originally presented at the New York-based École libre des hautes études, at an interdisciplinary

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[99] Vincent Debaene, 'Préface', in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale zéro*, ed. Vincent Debaene (Paris: Seuil, 2019), pp. 7–51.

[100] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Social and Psychological Aspects of Chieftainship in an American Tribe: the Nambikuara of Northwestern Matto Grosso', *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 7 (1) (II), 1944, pp. 16–32.

conference exploring a series of 'lessons' on 'modern political doctrines' in response to the end of the Third Republic.[101] The lesson Lévi-Strauss draws from his account of Nambikwara chieftainship concerns political leadership. He argues that the way political leadership operated in Nambikwara societies shed light on the fundamental principles of political leadership in general. 'Precisely on account of its extreme impoverishment,' Lévi-Strauss argues, 'Nambikuara political structure lays bare some basic functions which may remain hidden in more complex and elaborate systems of government.'[102] The extreme 'simplicity' of Nambikwara society – their lack of material culture, of social stratification, of accumulation of all kinds – held the keys to human sociality in general.

Nambikwara political structure was founded on a strange phenomenon: the 'powerless chief', or the chief who possessed no coercive power over the member of the tribe, and whose role was merely to reflect the general will back upon itself. With this institution, Nambikwara society revealed itself to be a 'primitive democracy',[103] in which relations between the leader and the people were differentiated, but not hierarchical, and, above all, a society founded upon *consent rather than coercion*. Because of this, the Nambikwara account helped 'to destroy the belief originated by early anthropologists, and temporarily revived by psychoanalysis, that the primitive chief could find his prototype in a symbolical father, and that the simpler forms of the State could progressively have grown out of the family.'[104] The Nambikwara chief did not reflect patriarchal qualities such as strength, dominance, age or inherited property. Rather, the chief was quite literally 'the one who unites' – *uilikande* – meaning that he 'appears as the cause of the group's willingness to aggregate rather than as the result of the need for a central authority felt by a group already constituted.'[105] In this way, the emergence of primitive leadership is key to the emergence of the group itself; there is no externality to leadership, and the leader does not stand above or outside of the group but at its heart. It follows that there is no coercion involved in the Nambikwara chieftainship. The chief's role is to 'inspire confidence' in the band, so that it can cohere as a unit; he must be a good orator and musician; he must also navigate the band's movements during the nomadic season, coordinate their

[101] Debaene, 'Préface', p. 28.
[102] Lévi-Strauss, 'The Social and Psychological Aspects of Chieftainship', p. 20.
[103] Ibid., p. 24.
[104] Ibid., p. 28.
[105] Ibid., p. 22.

means of food production, and determine their conduct in relation to neighbouring bands. In many respects, and on many occasions, the chief must submit himself to harder or more challenging work than the rest of the band. Above all, the chief must be generous. 'Generosity is the string constantly struck which makes the general consent to one's leadership sound clear or out of tune.'[106] If the chief is not generous enough, the band simply fragments: individuals or families withdraw their consent to be governed and leave the group to join another band whose leader inspires more trust.[107]

What does the chief receive in return for his generosity? A privilege unavailable to any other members of the band: he can take multiple wives. This means withdrawing a number of women from 'circulation', with serious effects on a social structure which relies on the conjugal division of labour. Lévi-Strauss conceives the privilege of polygamy not as a simple expression of the power accrued in the chief, however, but as an expression of the system of constant circulation and reciprocity, giving and receiving, that is the bedrock of primitive society. Here the influence of Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* is striking. Lévi-Strauss writes:

> Consent is the psychological basis of leadership, but in daily life it expresses itself in, and is measured by, a game of give-and-take played by the chief and his followers, and which brings forth, as a basic attribute of leadership, the notion of reciprocity. The chief has power, but he must be generous. He has duties, but he is entitled to several wives. Between him and the group, there is a perpetual balance of prestations, privileges, services and obligations.[108]

For Lévi-Strauss, Nambikwara society reveals the relationship between consent, contract and exchange that lies at the foundation of the political community as such. As in Mauss's account, for Lévi-Strauss the primitive social contract is founded on exchange – whether of symbolic, material or human goods – not only among members of the group but between the group and its leader as well. Because it is founded on exchange, this social contract cannot be 'signed' once and for all. It is constantly in need of ratification. The chief's constant redistribution of

[106] Ibid., p. 24.
[107] Ibid., p. 23.
[108] Ibid., p. 29.

material goods, guaranteed by the imperative to be generous, prevents any accumulation of wealth or other means of coercion that might enable this leadership to crystallise into a form of sovereign power. Moreover, because it is so completely tied to fragile and always ephemeral consent, Nambikwara social structure is forever fragmenting, decomposing and recomposing: 'The bands take shape, then disorganize, they increase and they vanish. Within a few months, sometimes, their composition, number and distribution cannot be recognized.'[109] 'Nambikwara social structure', like the Nambikwara themselves, 'appears continuously on the move.'[110]

The theme of exchange permeates Lévi-Strauss's account of Nambikwara chieftainship. The egalitarian social structure is based on the constant circulation of goods. The consent to be governed is heavily reliant on this circulation of goods, and the consent to govern is as reliant on the circulation of women in the chief's favour. But above all, this social structure reflects an exchange of *security*: some men, Lévi-Strauss writes, have to suffer the insecurity of being bachelors in exchange for the security of the collective: 'the granting of polygamous privilege to the chief means that the group has exchanged *individual elements of security* resulting from the monogamous rule for *collective security* provided by leadership.'[111] In this way, the Nambikwara band stands, curiously, as a little model of the social-democratic welfare state. Lévi-Strauss writes:

> The preceding considerations remind us … that the interpretation of the State, conceived as a security system, recently revived by discussions about a national insurance policy (such as the Beveridge plan and others), is not a modern development. It is a return to the basic nature of social and political organization.[112]

The Durkheimian resonance is clear: the 'basic nature' of the social is solidarity, and the redistributive state is a true expression of this solidarity. We are here, in a number of respects, closer to the tradition of social liberalism than socialism: for Lévi-Strauss the state is not an instrument of the ruling class, nor a Leviathan whose absolute power is granted by the majority against the wishes of the minority. The state is rather, in its essence, a political community

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[109] Ibid., p. 23.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid., p. 30.
[112] Ibid.

founded on consent and solidarity, and the postwar welfare state represents a 'return' to these foundations. Anxious to distance himself from the conservative implications of the Durkheimian tradition, however, Lévi-Strauss instead conceptualises the Nambikwara 'lesson' as a return to Rousseau, whom he views as representative of the original, critical spirit of French sociology:[113]

> Rousseau and his contemporaries displayed a keen sociological feeling when they understood that cultural attitudes and elements such as 'contract' and 'consent' are not the result of secondary processes, as claimed by their opponents; they are culture's raw materials, and it is impossible to conceive a political or social organization in which they would not already be present.[114]

Contract and consent are not an ideological gloss concealing a violent social order; they are not even genuine bonds that emerge, after time, out of the necessary acceptance (or 'secondary processes') of a social order; rather, they are at the origin of sociality as such. The logic underlying the social security state represents a 'return' to this origin. The Nambikwara chief 'must continuously display a skill belonging more to the politician trying to keep hold of his fluctuating majority than to an over-powering ruler', Lévi-Strauss writes.[115] This juxtaposition of the primitive chief and the beleaguered MP is assuredly ironic: the comparison is intended, at least in part, to invoke the pathos of a form of leadership that turns out to be quite unlike received images of a chiefly nobility. But the irony serves ultimately to invoke the modernity of this 'primitive democracy',[116] and the primitivity of the modern parliamentary system. The latter comes to appear, accordingly, as both a natural and an essentially *consensual* system – if one that is exhausted, dog-eared, rather pitiful in its current form.

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[113] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'French Sociology', in *Twentieth Century Sociology*, ed. Georges Gurvitch and Wilbert E. Moore (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 505.
[114] Lévi-Strauss, 'The Social and Psychological Aspects of Chieftainship', p. 28.
[115] Ibid., p. 23.
[116] Ibid., p. 24.

2.3 Primitive redistribution II: Nambikwara foreign affairs

In the above account of Nambikwara 'domestic affairs', the band or tribe is held together by the constant exchange of material, symbolic and human goods between the group and its leader. In Lévi-Strauss's account of Nambikwara 'foreign affairs', this basic premise remains the same. Exchange is the principle underlying the whole fragile network of debts, gifts, obligations, and responsibilities that enables the ever-decomposing and recomposing Nambikwara bands – as well as the other indigenous bands occupying the same vast area – to cohabit a territory that lacks the territorial and legal boundaries of the nation-state. And, unlike the binary logic that divides citizens from foreigners in the nation-state imaginary, the logic of Nambikwara foreign affairs is a logic of constant equivocation between friend and enemy, neighbour and stranger, and inside and outside. This theory of Nambikwara foreign affairs appears in its fullest form in Lévi-Strauss's article 'The foreign politics of a primitive society' ('La politique étrangère d'une société primitive').[117] Published in 1949 in the journal *Politique étrangère* in an issue dedicated to 'the problem of refugees' and 'the US, USSR and Chinese problem',[118] the article has escaped significant commentary and has not been translated into English. However, it remains one of the most illuminating windows into the way Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was built on and inspired by not only linguistics and cybernetics, but theories of international relations as well.

'The foreign politics of a primitive society' begins with a series of reflections on the concept of the foreigner (*étranger*) among the Nambikwara. For the Namikwara, the foreigner is not a coherent or stable concept, because it does not follow the binary logic of the Westphalian imagination. 'For these natives,' Lévi-Strauss argues, 'one does not find the distinction, so entrenched in our psyche, between fellow citizen (*concitoyen*) and foreigner (*étranger*): from the foreigner to the fellow citizen, we pass through a whole series of intermediaries.'[119] The foreigner 'in the strictest sense of the term', with whom the Nambikwara have very rare contact or no contact at all, is 'defined in a purely negative manner'; this *absolute foreigner* is avoided at all costs; it is 'a ghostly foreigner, a foreigner

[117] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'La politique étrangère d'une société primitive', *Politique étrangère* 14 (2), 1949, pp. 139–152.
[118] Debaene, 'Préface', p. 29.
[119] Lévi-Strauss, 'La politique étrangère', p. 206.

who does not exist'.[120] But there is also what we could call the *relative foreigner*, who might occupy any position on a whole 'scale, or continuous series of nuances' between amity and enmity.[121] Relations with these relative foreigners are marked by a fundamentally 'equivocal attitude', for it is difficult to predict whether encounters will be aggressive or friendly. Indeed, they can swing from one to the other in the course of a meeting. Lévi-Strauss describes one such encounter, in which 'all of a sudden, we passed from what was almost a conflict to commercial exchange' – in a manner totally unexpected to the anthropologist, the band 'accomplishe[d] the passage from hostility to collaboration, from fear to friendship, from possible war to the virtual market.'[122] Nambikwara fear these foreign bands as much as they need them to ensure the 'economic equilibrium' that sustains life in this world of scarcity, and war gives way to trade at any given moment.[123]

Primitive foreign relations are founded on debt. One band always comes up short in a transaction, but this paradoxically keeps the bonds between the exchanging bands alive. Falling short in an exchange 'accumulates a new bitterness which will become more and more aggressive and prepare a new conflict. And this may unleash a war, or give way to a new exchange.'[124] Exchange produces war sometimes, just as war produces exchange, so that there is 'a continuity between the notion of war and the notion of commerce, between the notion of antagonism and that of cooperation' – just as there is a continuity, rather than a strict division, between fellow citizen and foreigner.[125] But although this may suggest that such societies are doomed to endless and pervasive war, Lévi-Strauss insists that the reverse is the case. For it is the constant equivocation between war and commerce that in fact keeps aggression from erupting into the *total* violence, and immense destruction, that afflicts the modern state system. Among the Nambikwara, one witnesses 'organised and stylised relations of antagonism' reminiscent of a well-developed art of diplomacy: these are 'highly complex mechanisms which permit the settling of antagonisms and oppositions, but only after having given them the

[120] Ibid., p. 206.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., p. 209.
[123] Ibid., p. 207.
[124] Ibid., p. 210.
[125] Ibid.

occasion to be exerted, to manifest themselves, while at the same time assuring that, whatever the case, order would be able to be re-established.'[126]

The Nambikwara conception of territory is, much like their conception of the foreigner, 'subject to extreme fluctuations.'[127] Lévi-Strauss writes:

> Their earth is not our earth. For us, Nambikwara territory is a certain surface area, it's a space delimited by borders. For them, it's a reality as different as the image of a body seen by X-ray from the image of the same body in the light of day. The territory is nothing in itself; it is reduced to an ensemble of modalities, to a system of situations and values which are meaningless [*insignifiant*] to the foreigner and which can even pass unnoticed. These are the thickets where, some years, wild seeds grow in abundance; a route usually followed for a hunt; a group of fruit trees.[128]

'Native cartography' is thus incommensurable with 'civilised cartography', with the latter's crude, visible borders and static conceptions of ownership. The Nambikwara approach to territory is also built on reciprocity: in the case of exceptional harvests, for example, bands may invite others into lands that otherwise remain remote to them. 'There is therefore not one notion of earth, nor one notion of territory as such, but a very fluid and very variable notion of "earth values" [*valeurs du sol*] which, year after year, season after season, imply constant readaptations.'[129] Here the elements of an incipient structuralism – a shift from terms to relations between terms, from substances to positions in a system – begin to reveal themselves. But unlike in Lévi-Strauss's later work, this relational approach is here still couched in political, rather than ontological, terms. The lesson of the Nambikwara is, for Lévi-Strauss, above all in the way they disrupt conceptions of openness and closure in relation to political communities. The fluctuation of the division between inside and outside among the Nambikwara does not mean that these are societies in which boundaries or borders are absent. Forms and mechanisms of closure are just as important as openness, in the constant oscillation of positions that defines Nambikwara foreign relations. To be able to exist in relations of

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[126] Ibid., p. 217.
[127] Ibid., p. 213.
[128] Ibid., p. 213–214.
[129] Ibid., p. 214.

opposition and equilibrium with other groups, it is essential that groups maintain an identity, a coherence and a structure, and that humanity is considered not as a homogeneous mass but as 'an ensemble of concrete groups' linked by a complex network of relations.[130] Along these lines, Lévi-Strauss wonders in the concluding lines of the article if

> our current preoccupation in thinking of human problems in terms of open or always increasingly open societies does not allow a certain aspect of reality to escape, which is no less essential – and if the aptitude of each group to think itself as a group, in relation and opposition to other groups, does not constitute a factor of equilibrium between the ideal of a total peace that is the subject of utopia and that of equally total war, which results from the unilateral system to which our civilisation is blindly committed.[131]

For Lévi-Strauss, the ideal of total openness, of the 'constant enlargement of the limits of the human group,'[132] forgets the value of the limit, with its capacities for folding oppositions onto themselves, allowing them to proliferate in successively less destructive forms. Thus, against total war or total peace, total closure or total openness, Lévi-Strauss poses the permanent equivocation and redistribution of aggression and commerce displayed among the Nambikwara bands. Against a homogenising civilisation that can only subsume difference under a higher unity, he poses a politics of autonomy – whereby the political community, founded on consent, fragments in a fractal manner, recomposes, and decomposes again, according to the will of the group. Debaene perceives a federalist imaginary to underlie these positions, which is evident in Lévi-Strauss's other political writings from the period; as he wrote to interlocutors at the US State department in Feb 1943: 'The disintegration of national sovereignty has to begin from the interior by a process of federalism on the one side, and by the creation of economic bodies on the other, which destroy the differences between national groups.'[133] But federalism is, for Lévi-Strauss, only one expression of a deeper set of convictions formed in part by his earlier experiences in socialist politics and the betrayals that

[130] Ibid., p. 218.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Lévi-Strauss quoted in Debaene, 'Préface', p. 41.

accompanied them. These convictions are grounded in an opposition between the abstraction of utopian ideas, shown to be violent at their core, and the concrete practice of local politics. They are also grounded in an opposition between universalism, which can only be imagined as the pulverisation of difference, and cultural diversity. What is lost in Lévi-Strauss's oppositions, for all their apparent foundation in radically alterior forms of primitive social life, is the idea that radical social transformation might, in fact, be possible. Reflecting on the legacy of the French Revolution in an interview in 1988, Lévi-Strauss wondered

> if the catastrophes that have struck the West may also find their origin there. … Because [the Revolution] has given people the idea that society is to be ruled by abstract thought, when instead it is formed of habits and customs; by crushing these in the mortar of reason, one pulverizes ways of life founded on a long tradition, reducing individuals to the state of interchangeable and anonymous atoms. True freedom can be based only on a concrete foundation and is made up of a balance among small adherences, little solidarities. Pitted against these are theoretical ideas proclaimed as rational. When they have achieved their goals, there is nothing left for them but to destroy each other.[134]

As we have seen, Lévi-Strauss's aversion to rationalism and abstraction in politics took root early on, in the anti-materialist socialism of De Man. It was a response not only to the French tradition of republican political thought, but to the dogmatic variants of Marxism that circulated in the early decades of the twentieth century in France (see p. 53). But it became related increasingly, after Lévi-Strauss's experience in local politics during the 1930s, during his time in Brazil later that decade, and during his years spent as cultural attaché in New York during the 1940s, to a political vision based around the preservation of cultural identity. This would find its most egregious form in his 'Race and Culture' (1971), and prove useful to the far-right thinker Alain de Benoist.[135]

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[134] Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, *Conversations*, p. 81.
[135] See Collins, *The Anthropological Turn*, pp. 70–71.

4 Conclusion: Ethical socialism and the exchange paradigm

As we saw in the previous chapter, for Marx and Engels 'natural man' designated a humanity that had not yet begun to produce, in an intentional and collective way, the conditions of its own life. For Lévi-Strauss, natural man designates a humanity which has not yet begun to exchange. By tracing some of the political influences on and ideas of the young Lévi-Strauss, this chapter has sought to excavate the political substructure of his paradigm of exchange. Materialism was repulsive to the young, socialist Lévi-Strauss, as it was to many of his peers; it reeked of the economism of the older generation, and it fed off the same utilitarian logic that gave European modernity its cold, spiritless aura. This anti-materialist orientation helped to foster Lévi-Strauss's interest in anthropology, and it also led him to approach anthropology in a particular way.

In the footsteps of Mauss and Boas rather than Morgan and Marx, Lévi-Strauss carried some of the key presuppositions of ethical socialism with him as he began to formulate a new vision for anthropology in France. This vision was articulated most dazzlingly in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), which outlined his exchange theory in response to the question of the origins of the incest prohibition. Camille Robcis has argued that this work can be read as a social contract theory, 'describing the transition from a state of nature of discrete individuals to a structured social order' and offering 'a theory of the social bond, of social integration, an account of what gives society its foundation, its unity, and its basic coherence.'[136] For Robcis, the principle of this coherence was sexual difference, since for Lévi-Strauss heterosexual marriage marked the transition from nature to culture. Thus, Lévi-Strauss produced an implicit picture of an atomised state of nature in which humans were dominated by physical needs, in which language was absent, and in which behaviour was spontaneous and instinctual rather than organised and normative. The incest prohibition marked the departure from this atomised state, setting in motion the exchange of women that was at the foundation of culture. 'Within this framework,' Robcis writes, 'incest is not so much morally or biologically objectionable as it is fundamentally anti-social and selfish: "incest, in the broadest sense of the word, consists in obtaining by oneself, and for oneself, instead of by another, and for another." … Incest means the refusal to participate in the social contract.'[137]

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[136] Robcis, 'Lévi-Strauss's Structuralist Social Contract', p. 149.
[137] Ibid., p. 159.

By reconstructing Lévi-Strauss's early political thought and activities, this chapter has offered some material from which to build on Robcis's persuasive political reading of Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures*. I have argued that it was not only social contract theory, but also some of the key premises of the ethical socialism of Henri De Man and Marcel Mauss that underpinned Lévi-Strauss's orientation to exchange, reciprocity and redistribution in primitive societies. This paradigm of exchange was based, firstly, on a rejection of 'Marxist' materialism, and above all the idea that a mode of production (or subsistence) was determining of cultural and superstructural forms. For the young Lévi-Strauss, it was both more enlightening and more radical to study cultural, aesthetic, and psychological structures, which were relatively autonomous of economic structures; primitive societies such as the Nambikwara provided the means to do so. Secondly, Lévi-Strauss's paradigm of exchange drew significantly from Mauss's notion of total *prestation*, which already connected primitive exchange to modern forms of redistribution such as that of the social security state. The idea of moral economy was expanded, by Lévi-Strauss, to encompass all kinds of exchange in primitive societies – the exchange of prestige, trust, and security, as well as that of goods, women, and words – as part of a general moral economy of consent. It was on the basis of this consent that the primitive community was built: consent and contract were 'the raw materials' of primitive society.[138] In arguing this, Lévi-Strauss envisioned Nambikwara societies as 'primitive democracies' that functioned on the basis of an ephemeral and fragile consent in political leadership, which was itself secured by the reciprocal redistribution of goods, words, and labour from the leader to his people. In Lévi-Strauss's reading of Nambikwara 'foreign relations', the principle of exchange appears as the foundation of the constant equivocation between friend and enemy, neighbour and foreigner, and inside and outside, which maintains the subtle diplomatic equilibrium of the indigenous worlds they inhabit.

Equilibrium comes to constitute the horizon of Lévi-Strauss's politics by the end of the war. The revolutionary aspirations of his socialist youth – his efforts to elaborate a revolutionary metaphysics and a vision of spiritual, aesthetic, and political transformation – have given way to a much more tempered politics of cultural relativism, and the negotiation of differences so that social division might remain relative and never absolute. The aspirations for political and radical transformation are downscaled; all one can hope for is a 'balance

[138] Lévi-Strauss, 'The Social and Psychological Aspects of Chieftainship', p. 28.

among small adherences, little solidarities'.[139] In this way, the ethical socialism of Lévi-Strauss's youth becomes transformed into a political orientation well suited to the postwar liberal consensus. His appointments, from 1947 onwards, as cultural attaché to the French embassy in New York and as UNESCO rapporteur, and his increasing integration into Gaullist circles in New York and Paris, demonstrate his personal amenability to this new order. By the late 1950s he withdraws almost entirely from politics, most famously refusing to sign the 'Manifesto of the 121' that denounced the use of torture by the French army in the Algerian War.[140] Refusing to align himself with any political project on the left or the right, rejecting the apparently homogenising tendencies of the totally 'open society' as much as those of the closed totalitarian society, Lévi-Strauss settles, his ardent youth and its betrayals long passed, into a comfortable melancholia of the status quo.

[139] Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, *Conversations*, p. 81.
[140] Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 1577.

Chapter 3

Societies of reproduction: Claude Meillassoux's economic anthropology

> The ancient conception, in which man always appears … as the aim of production, seems very much more exalted than the modern world, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim of production.[1]

> Their end is reproduction of life as a precondition to production. Their primary concern is to 'grow and multiply' in the biblical sense.[2]

The previous chapter traced the origins of what I have called the 'exchange paradigm' in anthropology, while trying to excavate some of its underlying political claims. For Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, the ethnographic record had yielded a truth about humanity as such: in all of the societies studied by anthropologists, the rhythms and structures of social life were dominated by the constant and finely-balanced circulation of food, tools, livestock, women, words, alliances, and expressions of consent. These systems of circulation appeared for Mauss and Lévi-Strauss as a great latticework of contracts, requiring perpetual renewal to guarantee the equilibrium of primitive social life. Mauss called this phenomenon 'generalised reciprocity', while Lévi-Strauss referred to it in terms of 'exchange'. For Lévi-Strauss, human sociality was founded on exchange; exchange was the true form taken by the social contract. This view found its sources in an anti-materialist current of French socialism, which sought to understand and nurture non-economistic human relations, and to imbue the economy with the moral and spiritual dimensions it was seen to have lost. Redistribution, equilibrium and consent were the principles at the heart of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss's political vision, and their anthropological writings discerned these same principles at the foundation of primitive societies.

The exchange paradigm of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss was formed in part as a reaction against Marxist materialism. But it had its own counter-reaction in the Marxist anthropology that emerged from the 1960s in the work of Maurice Godelier, Emmanuel Terray, Pierre-Philippe Rey, and Claude Meillassoux, who is generally recognised as 'the founder of French

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[1] Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 85.
[2] Claude Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production: A Marxist approach to economic anthropology', *Economy and Society* 1 (1), 1972, pp. 101–2.

economic anthropology'[3] and who provides the main focus for this chapter. For these anthropologists, the decolonisation struggles unfolding across the Third World had made it imperative to find a place for 'primitive societies' in the Marxist schema: one had to know if, and how, such societies were incorporated into capitalist processes of accumulation and if, and how, they could become revolutionary. In their shared (if divided) project, the focus on moral economy which had preoccupied economic anthropologists up until then was supplanted by the effort to construct a 'general theory of economic systems'.[4] In parallel, the exchange paradigm which had dominated non-Marxist economic anthropology became challenged by a paradigm based on production. Did historical materialism apply to primitive societies? Was the history of *primitive* societies also a history of class struggle? To answer such questions, it was necessary to examine their social organisation of production, or the ways in which they acquired and distributed their subsistence.

On the basis of his ethnographic studies of agricultural communities in West Africa, Meillassoux sought to demonstrate that historical materialism was indeed applicable to those societies swept together in the category of 'primitive', but only on condition of a reciprocal action: the study of these primitive societies obliged an internal reconfiguration of the classical Marxist schema. This involved a centring of those phenomena deemed to be peripheral to the classical schema – kinship, gender, or domestic labour – and, in turn, a decentring of wage labour. For Meillassoux, the secrets of primitive social forms were not contained in those of advanced capitalism, an evolutionary epistemology Marx had appeared to propound in his statement that 'human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape'.[5] Quite the reverse: studying peasant communities in West Africa had revealed to Meillassoux the centrality of that most basic institution, the family, in the reproduction of capitalism: studying kinship systems in subsistence communities had revealed 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."'[6] In making this argument, Meillassoux draws an

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[3] Jean Copans, 'Claude Meillassoux (1925–2005)', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 177, 2005, pp. 1–8.
[4] Maurice Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, trans. Brian Pearce (London: Verso, 2012), p. 318.
[5] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 105.
[6] Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. xiii.

analogy between the family under capitalism and the subsistence agricultural community, both which, he suggests, are expressions of a 'domestic community' that has persisted through human history.

This chapter argues that through this concept of the 'domestic community' Meillassoux recast the primitive community, which had so captured the imaginations of Marx and Engels, as a *society of reproduction*. But the two epigraphs to this chapter, in their contrast, provide an indication of the tensions inherent to this notion of reproduction. A society of reproduction designates, on the one hand, as in the quote from Marx, an economy based on use value, in which subsistence is the aim of production and human flourishing the aim of subsistence. I refer to this as *reproduction-as-life*.[7] On the other hand – and here Meillassoux exploits the multiple meanings of the word reproduction, as can be read in the second epigraph – a society of reproduction can be conceived as one organised around the control and oppression of those born with procreative capacities and gendered accordingly. In Meillassoux's account, a society of reproduction is not only a society of use value but a society of dependence, in which individuals are bound together by the deferred and cyclical nature of agricultural production, and in which women are locked into procreation. In this second sense, reproduction appears as a somewhat different concept: *reproduction-as-domination.* Finally, the tension between these two senses of reproduction is exacerbated by a further meaning, in this case Marx's own, where social reproduction designates simply the perpetuation of the mode of production as a whole, including its dominant social relations, which is a necessary aspect of any process of continuous production.[8] We could call this final concept *reproduction-as-repetition*.[9]

This chapter aims to bring into view the political and intellectual conditions of this indeterminate concept of reproduction as it is developed in Meillassoux's work, set in the context of the broader problematics of the subfield of economic anthropology. It does so by

[7] In doing so, I draw especially on Marina Vishmidt and Zoe Sutherland's critical writings on social reproduction. See Marina Vishmidt, 'The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s', *Third Text* 31 (1), 2017, pp. 49–66; Marina Vishmidt and Zoe Sutherland, 'The Soft Disappointment of Prefiguration', Centre for Social and Political Thought , University of Sussex, June 2015; Marina Vishmidt, 'On Reproduction in an Extra-Systemic Sense', Marxist Literary Group Summer Institute on Culture and Society, 2014.
[8] This meaning is derived from the well-known passage in *Capital*, Volume 1: 'When viewed … as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction.' Marx, *Capital*, Volume One, p. 711.
[9] None of these three senses of reproduction corresponds exactly with the most commonly used meaning of 'social reproduction' in recent Marxist feminism, where it refers to all of the activities involved in the reproduction of labour power. All, however, overlap with it to some degree, as becomes evident below.

first examining the twentieth-century development of economic anthropology, bringing into view its relationship with two themes at the centre of Chapter 2: (1) the anti-materialist foundations of anthropology, which here relate closely to the development of substantivism and moral economy; and (2) the emphasis on exchange rather than production. Secondly, it examines a number of Meillassoux's early anthropological writings, tracing his development of the concept of reproduction through debates about the relations between kinship and production, debates about hunter-gatherer and agricultural modes of production, and debates about domestic labour in relation to capitalist accumulation. Finally, it examines the political consequences of the idea of 'societies of reproduction' by bringing it into dialogue with critiques, especially those of Marina Vishmidt and Bridget O'Laughlin, of the concept of reproduction.

Part 1

Enigmas of the primitive economy: A brief history of economic anthropology

1.1 Substantivism and moral economy: Malinowski, Polanyi, Thompson

Economic anthropology is today an established subfield of anthropology, defined by Chris Hann in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2018) as 'cross-cultural philosophizing about human livelihoods in the broadest sense', with roots running as far back as Aristotle.[10] But the notion that this kind of comparison could be possible, and even the idea that the societies studied by anthropologists *had* economies, is a relatively recent development in the history of anthropology. In an article entitled 'The Primitive Economics of the Trobriand Islanders' (1921), Bronislaw Malinowski complained that, apart from certain exercises in 'speculation' on the origins of property and stages of economic development, very little empirical or theoretical work had been done on 'the problems of economics among primitive races'.[11] A somewhat recent attempt, made by the German economist Carl Bücher in his book *Industrial Evolution* (1901), had concluded with the sentiment that 'the savages … have no

[10] Chris Hann, 'Economic Anthropology', *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), p. 1.

[11] Bronislaw Malinowski, 'The Primitive Economics of the Trobriand Islanders', *The Economic Journal* 31 (121), 1921, p. 1.

economic organisation, and that they are in a pre-economic stage'.[12] That is, for Bücher, primitive peoples lacked any systematic mechanisms governing the organisation of production, exchange and consumption across society as a whole; at the most, the economic life of these peoples included the sexual division of labour within the household 'and an occasional spasmodic bit of barter'.[13] Malinowski was not convinced. Primitive economies looked little like capitalist economies, perhaps, but they constituted complex systems in their own right, 'socially organised and regulated by custom, and where a special system of traditional economic values governs their activities and spurs them on to their efforts.'[14] Malinowski called this 'new conception' of the economic, which he had observed during his long period of fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, 'Tribal Economy'.[15] It presented a new terrain of research for economists and anthropologists alike:

> The analysis of the natives' own economic conceptions of value, ownership, equivalence, commercial honour and morals opens a new vista of economic research, indispensable for any deeper understanding of a native community. Economic elements enter into tribal life in all its aspects – social, customary, legal and magico-religious – and are in turn controlled by these.[16]

For Malinowski, in the 'Tribal Economy' the economic dimension was embedded in all aspects of primitive life, forming a functional whole in which spirituality was not distinct from subsistence: in Trobriand society, 'the authority of the chief, the belief in magic, and the prestige of the magician are the social and psychological forces which regulate and organise production'.[17] In this way, Malinowski's vision for economic anthropology was closely related to his functionalist mode of analysis, which explained the existence of customs on the basis of the role they played in maintaining social equilibrium.[18] His monograph on the system of Kula

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[12] Ibid., p. 2.
[13] Ibid., p. 15.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., p. 6.
[18] Functionalism turns out to have been difficult to eradicate from economic anthropology, as we will see later in this chapter in the discussion on Meillassoux. It has been attached, however, to very different political projects. Malinowksi's functionalism has become notorious for its role in justifying the British colonial policy of indirect rule, which Malinowski supported. See Freddy Foks, 'Bronislaw Malinowski, "Indirect Rule," and the Colonial

exchange among the Trobriand Islanders, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), was hailed as a landmark text in social anthropology, putting on the map not only economic anthropology but also the methods of participant observation and extended fieldwork and orientation toward what is known in anthropology as 'emic' analysis – 'the final goal', he wrote, 'is to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world'.[19] This orientation would be important for Mauss's analyses of reciprocity among Māori societies (such as in *The Gift*), which he considered ultimately to be determined by the Māori principle of the *hau*, as well as for the theoretical direction of economic anthropology in general.

In insisting that what characterised 'Tribal Economy' was the embeddedness of the economy into non-economic institutions, Malinowski laid the foundations for what came to be known as *substantivism* in economic anthropology. The term 'substantivism' originated from Karl Polanyi, whose studies of economic history, including *The Great Transformation* (1944) and the edited collection *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (1957), laid some of the key theoretical foundations for economic anthropology, even if they originated from outside of the field *per se*. Taking a broad view of the history of economic thought, Polanyi argued that two distinct meanings were combined in the contemporary conception of the economic. In its older 'substantive' meaning, the economic had referred to 'the interchange [of man] with his natural and social environment, in so far as this results in supplying him with the means of material want satisfaction.'[20] Economics here referred to the multiple concrete ways in which different social groups obtained their livelihoods; it was an empirically-oriented field of study encompassing societies throughout history. The 'formal' meaning of the economic, on the other hand, was evident in words such as 'economical' or 'economizing': it referred to a much more restricted situation of choice, 'namely, that between the different uses of means induced by an insufficiency of those means.'[21] The formal meaning presupposed scarcity in all economic affairs – which Polanyi disputed – and viewed economic behaviour in terms of a logic of rational action. The formal and substantive meanings 'could not be further apart',

Politics of Functionalist Anthropology, ca. 1925–1940', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60 (1), 2018, pp. 35–57. As we will see, the functionalism that troubles Meillassoux's account of the 'domestic community' had quite different aims.

[19] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 19.

[20] Karl Polanyi, 'The Economy as Instituted Process', in Karl Polanyi (ed.), *Trade and Market in Early Empires: Economies in History and Theory* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), p. 243.

[21] Ibid., p. 243.

Polanyi argued. The formal had to do with logic, the substantive with fact; 'the laws of the one are those of the mind; the laws of the other are those of nature'.[22] It was only a particular historical circumstance that had allowed them to coincide: the emergence of a system of 'price-making markets' in Western Europe over the previous two centuries, in which the economy really did appear to have become untethered from the rest of social life, and in which the aggregation of individual choices played out as a system of measurable laws – a rationality of its own.[23]

'The relation between formal economics and the human economy is, in effect, contingent,' Polanyi wrote.[24] Formalism held little relevance for the economic analysis of non-market societies, in which 'the human economy' was 'embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and noneconomic' alike.[25] All economies, Polanyi insisted, had an institutional basis. Even the market system only *appeared* to have grown organically out of the free behaviour of individuals; in reality, it relied upon on 'an institutional setup which is nowhere created by mere random acts of exchange'.[26] Polanyi identified three major 'patterns' according to which economies were instituted: reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange.[27] Reciprocity, which Polanyi had drawn in part from Malinowski's studies of Trobriand kinship and the Kula trade, referred to systems arranged around symmetrical social groupings; redistribution referred to 'appropriational movements towards a center and out of it again'; exchange referred to 'vice-versa movements taking place as between "hands" under a market system'.[28] Polanyi argued that these patterns of exchange were much more appropriate than the Marxist stagist models, which he considered to be based unduly on the forms of labour presumed to be paradigmatic of a given stage – such as slavery, serfdom, and wage labour – and which presumed an evolutionary trajectory that Polanyi rejected.[29] Different forms of labour as well as the different 'patterns' of institution of the economy – reciprocity,

[22] Ibid., p. 244.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., p. 247.
[25] Ibid., p. 250.
[26] Ibid., p. 251.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., p. 250.
[29] Ibid., p. 256.

redistribution and exchange – could coexist in all societies, from ‘tribal societies’ to the Soviet Union, although in any given society one configuration tended to be dominant.[30]

‘Man's economy, as a rule,’ wrote Polanyi, ‘is submerged in his social relationships.’[31] Economies were not dead things, distinct from hearts and minds. If acts of barter were to take place in an economy of reciprocity or redistribution, Polanyi wrote, it was possible that ‘a violent emotional reaction would set in, as against acts of indecency or acts of treason, since trading behaviour is never emotionally indifferent behaviour and is not, therefore, tolerated by opinion outside of the approved channels.’[32] Ideas of right and wrong, of the sacred and the profane, were not separable from ideas about proper methods of production and legitimate practices of buying and selling. This was consistent with Polanyi’s own politics, which favoured socialist humanism – inspired by British socialism, which he encountered during exile in England from 1933 – and a planned economy in which production was organised around social need.[33]

In this respect, substantivism lent itself to the theme of moral economy, a term popularised by E. P. Thompson in his article ‘Moral Economy and the English Crowd’ (1971), an account of counter-market logics of the English poor during the eighteenth-century food riots. Thompson’s point of departure was the gulf between economic anthropology and the ‘crass economic reductionism’ that pervaded historical analysis of popular revolt in Western Europe:

> We know all about the delicate tissue of social norms and reciprocities which regulates the life of Trobriand islanders, and the psychic energies involved in the cargo cults of Melanesia; but at some point this infinitely-complex social creature, Melanesian man, becomes (in our histories) the eighteenth-century English collier who claps his hand spasmodically upon his stomach, and responds to elementary economic stimuli.[34]

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 48.
[32] Polanyi, ‘The Economy as Instituted Process’, p. 252.
[33] See Maurice Godelier, *The Mental and the Material*, trans. Martin Thom (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 180–181.
[34] E. P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past & Present* 50, 1971, p. 78.

It was an elaborate 'moral economy of the poor', not the crude reaction to hunger, that sustained the food riots and gave them political content. Rises in the cost of grain were seen as moral outrages, and the rioters saw themselves as defending traditional rights and customs.[35] In other words, these were rebellions *for* a fair economy, not rebellions *against* destitution. The same kind of emic orientation as the one made famous by Malinowski informed Thompson's history from below – and if the term 'moral economy' is originally Thompson's, the *concept* of moral economy is a constant in the history of economic anthropology. As William James Booth put it, 'The theoretical center of the moral economic approach is the defining dichotomy of the embedded economy and the disembedded, or autonomous, market.'[36] This dichotomy appears at times as a periodisation, as we have seen in Polanyi, identifying a fundamental break between capitalist ('disembedded') and precapitalist ('embedded') economies. At other times, the concept of the embedded economy appears as a general interpretive framework, applicable to all societies and enabling more precise and contextually-driven examinations of their economic relations.

But moral economy has always been, in addition, a normative framework and a political disposition founded on the rejection of utilitarian or economistic approaches in theory and practice. Disembedded economies are not only not *universal*, they are also not *desirable.* Moral economy is itself a moral framework – and as such it is not simply an orientation to 'other' economies, but to the anthropologist's own. For this reason, it encounters a break in the characteristically anti-moralist framework of Marxism and, in particular, the Marxist economic anthropology that emerges in France from the 1960s, which finds the appeal to inhabit the 'native's point of view' less promising than the unveiling of its fetishistic character, and which is less interested in the utopian aspiration of moral economy than in the negation of capitalist relations.

1.2 Two schools of Marxist economic anthropology: Godelier and Meillassoux

From one angle, Marx's critique of commodity fetishism draws out the way in which capitalist economies are no more 'disembedded' than the primitive economies in which fetishism is

[35] Ibid.
[36] William James Booth, 'On the Idea of the Moral Economy', *The American Political Science Review* 88 (3), p. 653.

originally observed. Capitalism, too, is driven by a kind of black magic: the 'phantom-like objectivity' of dead objects that take on lives of their own and come to dominate the worlds of the living.[37] From another angle, however, the conditions of possibility of Marxism, as a critical theory of capitalism and a political tradition based on class struggle, can be seen to lie squarely in the 'autonomous' character of the capitalist economy. For this reason, the idea of moral economy does not fit easily within a Marxist framework. Marx's critique of fetishism seeks to expose the dissimulation of the workings of capital in bourgeois ideology; beneath the imaginary social relations between objects lie real, material relations between labouring human beings – relations of production. The study of these relations of production is identified as the primary task of historical materialism. Drawing away the veil of capitalist ideology, dissolving the fictions of liberal political economy in order to grasp their 'real basis'; Marxism appears in this light to be premised on the theoretical *separation* of the moral and the material, if only so that the contradictions inherent to the material might be pushed, in the realm of practice, to moral ends.

But when Marxism is viewed not simply as a critical theory of capitalism but as a science of history in general, which is one of the key premises of Althusser's *Reading Capital* (1965) and of the Marxist anthropology that emerged from the same structuralist milieu,[38] the waters of 'production' become muddied. How is it possible to apply a Marxist framework to societies in which relations of production appear much less important than relations of kinship, the will of a despotic leader, or the prescriptions of religious law? What if very similar relations of production – a sexual division of labour in subsistence agriculture, for example – give rise to an incredible diversity of social and political arrangements? Are relations of production then no longer the 'determining' relations – and what, then, is the 'real foundation' of society? These were some of the principal questions to preoccupy the first major post-Soviet school of Marxist anthropology, which emerged in France from the early 1960s. Both of its two most important figures, Maurice Godelier and Claude Meillassoux, came to anthropology from economics, and both were influenced by substantivism in this trajectory. Their orientations were, however, quite different – to the degree that Pierre-Philippe Rey has referred to French

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[37] Marx, *Capital*, Volume One, p. 128. See also J. Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
[38] Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey and Jaques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015).

Marxist anthropology not as a single tendency but 'as a convergence between two different schools'.[39]

The Godelier current: A system of systems

On the one hand was the 'technical' school associated with PCF circles, whose leading figure was Godelier.[40] Trained in philosophy at the École normale supérieure, Godelier had also studied economics under Charles Bettelheim and Edmond Malinvaud, and worked briefly with Braudel. Having joined the PCF in 1952 (he would leave it in 1968, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia), he published a series of articles on the notion of 'structure' in Marx's *Capital* in the PCF review *Économie et politique*.[41] Lévi-Strauss took interest, perceiving in the articles a similar theme to his own *agrégation* dissertation, and suggested that Godelier join his Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale at the Collége de France. 'He jokingly suggested that I work "on infrastructure"', Godelier recounts[42] – a gap, by Lévi-Strauss's own admission, in his oeuvre, which he had described in terms of a 'theory of superstructures'.[43] In this way, from 1963 Godelier embarked on a renovation of economic anthropology, with the aim of synthesising the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and the political economy of Marx.

In one of his first articles on the subject, Godelier defined economic anthropology as 'the comparative theoretical analysis of different economic systems, actual and possible', in the interests of 'constructing a general theory of the various social forms of man's economic activity.'[44] Polanyi's project was an important influence, although Godelier was critical of him from the beginning.[45] The substantive definition of economics failed for Godelier because according to it, he thought, 'economics absorbs and explains the whole of social life, religion, kinship, politics, science', to the degree that 'everything becomes economic in principle while nothing remains economic in fact'.[46] The formal definition of economics was no better, however: formalism 'does not grasp the economic as such, but dissolves it in a formal theory

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[39] Pierre-Philippe Rey, 'L'anthropologue et le paysan: entretien avec Pierre-Philippe Rey' (Video), *Période*, 17 March 2016.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Maurice Godelier, 'Aux sources de l'anthropologie économique', *Socio-anthropologie* 7, 2000, pp. 1–10.
[42] Ibid., p. 2.
[43] Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 130.
[44] Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, p. 49.
[45] See Godelier, *The Mental and the Material*, p. 207.
[46] Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, p. 255.

of purposive action'.[47] For Godelier, the task of economic anthropology was to grasp economics as a *system* – 'a group of structures interlinked by certain rules (laws)'[48] – regulating production, distribution and consumption. The task of the economic anthropologist was to construct a formal model capable of explaining any given economic system – his own version of Lévi-Strauss's 'totemic operator'.[49]

From this foundation, Godelier embarked on an intense programme of model-building. But synthesising Marx and Lévi-Strauss proved no easy task. To do so meant wrestling with a perennial problem of Marxist anthropology: What was determining in primitive societies: production or kinship? Godelier tried to solve the dilemma by arguing that in certain societies 'kinship functions as a relation of production'[50] – as infrastructure and superstructure at the same time. In Aboriginal Australian societies, he wrote, kinship relations 'are what, in our own western culture, one would call the society's economic structure and what Marxists would term social relations of production.'[51] This was the same problem as the one encountered by Meillassoux, but Godelier approached it in a manner that was indeed, as Rey put it, 'technical': with a view to reconciling problems that are primarily theoretical and only secondarily political, and on the basis of a formal apparatus that seemed capable, much like Lévi-Strauss's, of almost infinite permutation and complexification. Much like the mature structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, Godelier's economic anthropology appears as an effort to construct a 'system of systems' capable of solving universal anthropological problems. It remains, for this reason, remote from the immediate problems of the field.

The Meillassoux current: A turn to the field

The Godelier current of Marxist economic anthropology diverged from an alternate current founded around the figure of Claude Meillassoux. Rey describes the origins of this current as fundamentally political, rather than academic: 'We followed a conception of anthropology which privileged the *terrain*. In other words, we began by being politically engaged', in particular, 'on the side of the Algerian people during the Algerian War.'[52] Nearly all of the key

[47] Ibid., p. 253.
[48] Ibid., p. 258.
[49] Ibid., p. 262.
[50] Godelier, *The Mental and the Material*, p. 29.
[51] Ibid., p. 93.
[52] Rey, 'L'anthropologue et le paysan'.

figures who worked in this current, Rey remarks, 'to various degrees according to their age, and by different paths, had first been marked by the struggle against the war in Algeria and the support for the national liberation struggle of the Algerian people.'[53] While Terray does not recognise this current as unified enough to constitute a 'school', he corroborates Rey's account of its political origins. The question of decolonisation was 'the major, if not the exclusive, concern' for all who received their political formation in the mid to late 1950s or early 1960s, he recounts.[54] The massacre of Algerian demonstrators in 1961, an event at which Terray was present, alongside the terrorist attacks by the OAS and reports of torture by the French military in Algeria, marked the minds of many young intellectuals with a repulsion toward the French state and French national culture in general. The allure of Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* still in the air and his structuralist programme reaching peak prestige, anthropology seemed a way out. 'My ethnological vocation was born of a mixture of three elements', Terray writes: 'affective disgust of France at the time, political interest in the Third World, and the incomparable intellectual influence exercised by the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss.'[55]

For Marxist intellectuals, the Third World had become the new locus of revolutionary politics. 'I held the vague conviction that a decisive part of world history would play out there,' Terray remembers, 'without doubt more than in our societies bogged down in their material and intellectual comfort: a new reason to leave.'[56] In the context of the social-democratic turn taken by postwar governments and the reformist turn taken by many working-class organisations, the sense of revolutionary urgency had lifted from the industrial metropoles. Decolonisation struggles transplanted it to the Third World. 'At that time,' Jean-Loup Amselle writes, 'the African continent, like all the countries of the south, represented the hope of freedom for the whole planet.'[57] For Marxists, in particular, it became essential to understand the role of the peasantry in struggles for independence from colonialism. In this respect, the influence of Fanon was essential. Fanon's writings, which also conveyed to French readers the political programme envisioned by the FLN leaders, made apparent 'an internal contradiction

[53] Pierre-Philipe Rey, 'De l'anthropologie économique à l'anthropologie dialectique: un débat actuel', *Tiers-Monde* 29 (114), 1988, p. 443.
[54] Terray, 'Anthropologie et marxisme: années 1950–70', p. 3.
[55] Ibid., p. 4.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Jean-Loup Amselle, 'The *Cahiers d'études africaines* over the Years', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 198-199-200 (2), 2010, p. 375.

of the Marxist schema', Rey recounts. This pivoted on the question: 'Why [did] the working class have to liberate the peasantry, rather than the peasantry liberating itself?'[58] For Fanon and for the leaders of the FLN, the Algerian revolution was above all 'the peasant revolution', and 'the peasant class was the revolutionary class.'[59]

It was at the beginning of the Algerian War, around 1953–54, that Meillassoux – who was then working for a marketing agency in Paris, having studied economics in the United States – joined the CAGI (Centre d'action des gauches indépendantes). This small militant group, which had the support of Jean-Paul Sartre, eschewed both official Communism and the reformism of the SFIO, particularly with regard to both parties' positions on Algeria. In the CAGI, Meillassoux came into contact with other heterodox anti-imperialist intellectuals such as Pierre Naville and Daniel Guérin. CAGI would become the Nouvelle Gauche, which would itself be transformed into the Union de la Gauche Socialiste (UGS), the latter partially constituted by defectors from the SFIO who had opposed Guy Mollet's soliciting of 'special powers' for the French military in Algeria. When the UGS took a parliamentary turn, Meillassoux and a number of other militants turned their energies to founding the review *Analyses et Documents*, which for fifteen years served as a source of analysis of current events from a non-dogmatic Marxist perspective, including documentation of the various forms of repression taking place in Algeria.[60] The review had what Francis Tour calls a 'triple demarcation': a critique of capitalism and of social-democratic reformism 'but also, and at that time it was quite remarkable, an intransigent critique of Stalinism.'[61] In the milieu that developed around *Analyses et Documents*, 'Marxism was important, but … the analysis of concrete reality was just as important'.[62] The idea was above all 'to criticize the capitalist economy, colonialism and imperialism in terms of their real functioning'.[63] This also involved understanding the 'internal logic' of African societies and the pre-existing forms of division and domination that were frequently mobilised by the colonial apparatus to its own ends.[64]

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[58] Rey, 'L'anthropologue et le paysan'.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] François Chesnais, Francis Tour, and Claude Meillassoux, 'Entretien avec Claude Meillassoux', *Carré rouge* 14, 2000, p. 59.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

Meillassoux's approach was also strongly marked by the influence of Georges Balandier, who had inaugurated an Africanist 'political anthropology' attentive to crisis, struggle and above all to what he called, in a paradigmatic article, 'The Colonial Situation' (1950).[65] Meillassoux writes that, along with Paul Mercier, Balandier 'renovated French anthropology and threw a new light on African societies by setting them back into their historic realm', putting an end to Lévi-Strauss's notion of 'cold societies'.[66] As Amselle recounts, Balandier 'spoke to our minds and above all to our hearts as Third World activists fighting for Algerian independence, then for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.'[67] From 1956, Meillassoux left his marketing career to study under Balandier, who was then giving a seminar on 'the sociology of Black Africa' at the École pratique des hautes études.[68] In 1958, Meillassoux left on his first fieldwork mission to Côte d'Ivoire, under the supervision of Balandier, where his research focused on the transition from subsistence farming to commodity production among the Guro, in what would form the basis for his first monograph, *Anthropologie economique des Gouro de Côte d'lvoire* (1964).

Meillassoux wrote this work while reading *Capital*. 'Not that it provided me with ready-made schemes', he reflected later; '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.'[69] Confronted with the scarcity of Marxist writings on non-capitalist societies (let alone of 'self-sustaining' and 'lineage-based' communities like those of the Guro), Meillassoux sought to extract a method from Marx's works on political economy which could be applied generally, much in the manner that Althusser would seek to do in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*.[70] Unlike Godelier, Meillassoux conceived Marxist anthropology not as a project of exegesis or theoretical synthesis, but as in terms of a *method* through which to approach problems of the field.[71]

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[65] Georges Balandier, 'La situation coloniale: approche théorique', *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 11, 1951, pp. 44–79.
[66] Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money*, p. viii.
[67] Jean-Loup Amselle, 'The Cahiers d'études africaines over the Years', p. 375.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money*, p. viii.
[70] Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*; Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005).
[71] Chesnais, Tour, and Meillassoux, 'Entretien avec Claude Meillassoux', p. 60.

An anthropology to end anthropology

Despite their differences, two key characteristics define Marxist anthropology for both Godelier and Meillassoux. Firstly, Marxist anthropology is consistently conceived as *an anthropology to end anthropology*. Perhaps the strongest expression of this point was made by Althusser in his 'On Lévi-Strauss', discussed briefly in the Introduction, in which he wrote '*There can be no such thing as* anthropology'.[72] 'It is a concept which simply sums up ethnological ideology … in the illusory belief that the object of ethnology is constituted by phenomena different from those studied by the science of history (of social formations, of whatever kind).'[73] This object 'was primitive society'. As we saw, for Althusser the very concept of anthropology, its internal coherence and *raison d'être*, were premised on the notion that primitive societies were epistemologically different from modern societies and demanded a special method and theory of their own. Primitive societies needed to be wrenched out of the frameworks of essence and origin in which anthropology had placed them and understood simply as social formations of diverse kinds which, 'like any other *social formation* … can be thought only with the help of the concept of *mode of production*'.[74] Once this happened, Althusser argued, anthropology would collapse as a discipline and the 'science of history' would be able to take its rightful place.[75]

This critique of disciplinary anthropology should be understood in the context of a broader, and much older, Marxist critique of the disciplines. Originating from Marx himself, this had perhaps its clearest expression in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukacs argued that specialisation within the social sciences was a function of capitalist abstraction: just as labour was wrenched from the bodies and minds of living individuals and made into an abstract quantity, so were social 'facts' torn from the ensemble of social relations and placed in the clinical and isolated spheres of the separate disciplines. 'Marxism does not acknowledge the existence of independent sciences of law, economics or history,' Lukács wrote. 'There is nothing but a single, unified – dialectical and historical – science of the evolution of society as a totality.'[76] This principle was reiterated by most of the leading figures of Marxist

[72] Althusser, 'On Lévi-Strauss', p. 24.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid, p. 22.
[75] Ibid, p. 24.
[76] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 28.

anthropology in France, who may well have been influenced directly by the French publication of *History and Class Consciousness* in 1960. Outlining his programme for economic anthropology, Godelier wrote: ‘it will no longer be possible to go on counterposing anthropology to history or to sociology as three fetishized separate domains, nor to present economic anthropology or economic history as mere specialized lines of research’.[77] For Terray, the death of anthropology coincided with the birth of a specific field of study devoted to non-capitalist modes of production: ‘the aim is to replace social anthropology by a particular section of historical materialism consecrated to socio-economic formations where the capitalist mode of production is absent’.[78] French Marxist anthropology was marked, at least initially, by enormous ambition: its participants felt themselves to be witnessing an epistemological break – a ‘theoretical revolution’, as Godelier put it[79] – in the human sciences.

From exchange to production

The second key characteristic of French Marxist anthropology, which cuts across the Godelier and Meillassoux currents, was expressed in a shift from the paradigm of exchange that had dominated anthropology prior to it, largely through the influence of Lévi-Strauss, to a *paradigm of production*. The turn to production was at the heart of the ‘theoretical revolution’ described above, for it was above all through the extension of the concept of ‘mode of production’ to *all* societies – even primitive societies – that, its proponents argued, the human sciences could gain a universal basis. The critique of the primacy of exchange in anthropology took a variety of forms. Its most obvious target was Lévi-Strauss. Godelier, Terray and Meillassoux – as well as Althusser, of course – had all been strongly influenced by Lévi-Strauss, but all also found his thought limited. As a ‘theory of superstructures’,[80] structuralism was impressive; even Althusser admitted that Lévi-Strauss’s studies of kinship structures would ‘endure as an important discovery.’[81] All the same, analysing superstructures alone left kinship relations ‘hanging in the air’ – without a material basis, there was no way to explain

[77] Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, p. xlii.
[78] Terray cited in Jean Copans and David Seddon, ‘Marxism and Anthropology: a preliminary survey’, *Relations of Production: Marxist Approaches to Economic Anthropology*, ed. David Seddon and trans. Helen Lackner (London: Frank Cass, 1978), p. 8.
[79] Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, pp. xii–xiii.
[80] Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 130.
[81] Althusser, ‘On Lévi-Strauss’, p. 31.

why kinship was organised as it was in a given society.[82] The different projects of Meillassoux, Godelier, and Terray were initiated on the basis of similar readings. 'Production on the one hand and power on the other, or if one prefers, politics: these were the two "blind spots" of structuralism', writes Terray.[83]

The second target, in the turn from exchange to production, was Polanyi. Exchange was also at the foundation of Polanyi's system: his three main macroeconomic 'patterns' – reciprocity, redistribution and exchange – were all patterns of the *circulation* of goods in different societies. By basing his comparative system on these categories, Polanyi had constructed a theory of modes of exchange rather than a theory of modes of production. Rey argued that this was a serious error.[84] Meillassoux agreed; while Polanyi had gone further than most in his studies of precapitalist economies, 'his analysis is again entirely restricted to the phenomenon of circulation, without ever entering the sphere of production.'[85] For Meillassoux, the focus on circulation was inherited from Mauss and Boas, who had found circulation to be the 'most aberrant' feature of the primitive economy in relation to the capitalist economy, and hence the most worthy of study.[86] But the problem of circulation had also dominated liberal economics, so viewing it as the foundational and determining category of political economy was not without an ideological basis.[87]

In Godelier's view, too, Polanyi's principal blindspot was related to his implicit acceptance of liberal economic theory as it applied to capitalist economies: 'His critique does not strike at the content of the liberal economists' theories, but only at their blindness and their employment of these theories outside their proper sphere'.[88] Polanyi satisfied himself with 'making as complete an inventory as possible' of forms of economy, embedded and disembedded, across the diversity of human societies.[89] But without understanding the sphere of production, he could not explain the real dynamics of these differently configured economies; he could not grasp their 'actual inner movement' nor the contradictions that might

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[82] Ibid., p. 25.
[83] Terray, 'Anthropologie et marxisme', p. 6.
[84] Rey, 'L'anthropologue et le paysan'.
[85] Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production', p. 96 .
[86] Claude Meillassoux, 'Essai d'interprétation du phénomène économique dans les sociétés traditionnelles d'autosubsistance', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 1 (4), 1960, p. 127.
[87] Ibid., p. 128.
[88] Godelier, *The Mental and the Material*, p. 189.
[89] Ibid.

bring about their transformation. 'He was a socialist, but his humanist socialism was above all a moral and philosophical attitude which he did not think could be based upon developments in the human sciences and history.'[90] While both Lévi-Strauss and Polanyi had established ambitious projects to unearth the structures hidden beneath the soil of society, neither of them had done more than trace patterns on the surface. Only production held to what was below.

Part 2
Meillassoux's theory of primitive social reproduction

Although Meillassoux's early writings reflect a turn from exchange to production in anthropology, their major intervention is in fact to bring about a second shift, with effects across both Marxism and anthropology, from production to *reproduction*. By centring reproduction in his analytical framework, Meillassoux sought to reconfigure a Marxist schema that did not apply well to non-capitalist societies. In societies in which private property did not exist, where land was abundant and the tools of production simple, it was not possible to own or even to easily control the means of production. Gaining access to the means of life was not contingent on selling one's labour power. Work, far from alienated, was saturated with social and spiritual purpose. Yet the collective still found itself submerged in unfreedom, and riven by relations of dominance and submission. For Meillassoux, to understand these power relations required reconceptualising relations of production as *relations of reproduction*. In making this argument, Meillassoux helped to clear the ground for the turn to social reproduction in Marxist thought, which brought feminised 'reproductive labour' out from the peripheries of political economy and into the centre. Examining Meillassoux's theory of social reproduction in what he calls the 'domestic community' involves asking after the relationship between anthropology and feminism and unravelling the parallels, real and imagined, between the subsistence economy and the domestic sphere. In doing so, it is necessary to disentangle the different meanings concentrated into the term 'reproduction' across Meillassoux's early works.

[90] Ibid., p. 186.

2.1 The society of fathers

Malinowski, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss had each, in different ways, described a 'beautiful' primitive reciprocity – an egalitarian system of circulation and redistribution, perfectly organised to ward off the kinds of oppressive relationships that might arise from the accumulation of power or goods. It is above all this image that Meillassoux sought to contest in his first ethnographic article, entitled 'Essai d'interprétation du phénomène économique dans les sociétés traditionnelles d'autosubsistance' (1960).[91] The article represented a 'paradigm break', Bernard Schlemmer writes, recounting the story of its discovery by two young (and today little-known) anthropologists:

> Roland Waast still remembers when, as a young student, sitting on the terrace of the Cafe La Sorbonne, the meeting spot of the Sociology students, he saw Raymond Jamous arrive, feverishly brandishing an issue of the *Cahiers* and shouting 'I have just discovered the article that will change the face of Anthropology!' It was suddenly clear that the indigenous societies studied by Anthropology – those that we could not identify other than by difference from or in opposition to our Western society – were like any human society, forced to produce economic goods and to become part of relations of production before they could function on any other level.[92]

That this could strike anthropologists in 1960 as a surprising fact is testament to the state of economic anthropology at the time Meillassoux wrote this first article. Judging by his account of the field, which prefaces the article, things seemed not to have moved far from Malinowski. Three approaches to primitive economies prevailed at the time: firstly, the approach – really more of a non-approach – based on the thesis of 'primitive mentality', which suggested that primitive peoples did not have economies at all and that their material life was dominated by the irrationality of purely self-referential customs.[93] The second approach was to try to force

[91] Meillassoux, 'Essai d'interprétation'. Translated into English as Claude Meillassoux, 'The "Economy" in Agricultural Self-Sustaining Societies: A Preliminary Analysis', in David Seddon (ed.), *Relations of Production* (London: Frank Cass, 1978), pp. 127–158.
[92] Bonnie Campbell and Bernard Schlemmer, 'A Tribute to Claude Meillassoux', *Review of African Political Economy* 32 (103), 2005, p. 197.
[93] Meillassoux, 'The "Economy" in Agricultural Self-Sustaining Societies', p. 129.

primitive economies into the categories of liberal economics. This had often absurd results: 'Objects … become "commodities", sometimes "capital" bearing real "interest"; transfers, gifts and prestations are seen as "exchanges" giving rise to "price" formation. Some liberal scholars ascribe the title of "entrepreneur" to the head of the family and bestow that of "employees" on those who work for him.'[94] The third approach accepted that primitive societies had economies *and* that these economies 'obey laws which are specific to themselves'.[95] This had been the approach taken by Marx and Engels, but it had remained undeveloped in their work. It was this approach that Meillassoux sought to take forward.

He aimed to do so by constructing the first 'general model for the explanation of economic phenomena in traditional self-sustaining societies'.[96] It was the 'community', however, of which these societies were composed, which constituted the starting point for the model. These communities were defined in rather general terms: they relied for subsistence on agriculture but might combine this with hunting, gathering, and herding; they could vary in size; they might be either sedentary or nomadic.[97] The defining feature of the community was its self-sufficiency – in other words, 'the group produces all the goods needed for its perpetuation and growth from the immediately available natural resources'.[98] But underlying these apparently harmonious cycles of production and consumption was a finely-tuned system of domination, relying on the division of the community into three major social categories. 'In a system of this type women work for their husbands who hand over their produce to the seniors; the latter redistribute it to the whole community either directly or through the married men.'[99] Mapping out the circulation of goods in this way revealed a two-fold 'dependence relationship' involving the subjugation of younger men ('juniors') by older men ('seniors'), and of women by men.[100]

The point of departure for Meillassoux's analysis regards the nature of this dependence relationship: how do the seniors maintain their authority over the juniors without controlling the means of production – these being widely accessible land and simple tools? Meillassoux

[94] Ibid., p. 130.
[95] Ibid., p. 131.
[96] Ibid., p. 133.
[97] Ibid., p. 134.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., p. 134–5.
[100] Ibid., p. 135.

suggests that the initial source of the seniors' authority lies in the complexity of production techniques: 'The acquisition of technical *skills* provides those who possess them with genuine authority over the layman since the continuation of the group depends on this knowledge'.[101] The acquisition of these skills is necessarily slow, coinciding up to a certain point with 'physiological ageing'.[102] But the natural authority of the seniors has limits – there is a point at which any individual's technical competence stops increasing and indeed begins to decline – so their authority must be prolonged artificially through the establishment of a complex and institutionalised system of knowledge in which production techniques are not separable from knowledge in the fields of genealogy, history, marriage regulations, religion, magic, and so on. The 'embeddedness' of the economy has, in this account, a clear political purpose: by submerging knowledge of production – which represents in itself, in such societies, a means of production – in other bodies of elite and closely guarded knowledge, the seniors can regulate its selective transmission *and* gain an aura of legitimacy in their role as distributors of subsistence goods.

The seniors' control over the community's foodstuffs is subsequently used to secure a second level of control, over marriages within the community. This operates through the institution of bridewealth. A portion of the goods handed over to the seniors is retained by them, as 'a levy on the group's production', for use as bridewealth.[103] All marriages must then pass through the seniors, since any groom's family must offer bridewealth in 'exchange' for his wife (or more accurately, Meillassoux insists, in exchange for her future progeny).[104] Since exogamy (marriage outside the community) is the rule, bridewealth also functions to secure alliances between communities. Hence, Meillassoux's model centres on the self-perpetuating interaction between two qualitatively different types of circulation: vertical (prestation of products of labour from juniors to seniors) and horizontal (deferred circulation of bridewealth between seniors in different communities).

The concept of exchange, Meillassoux argues, is not adequate for understanding either of these forms of circulation. When Mauss had theorised reciprocity in terms of a neutral and generalised system of exchange, 'failing to differentiate between the status of the protagonists

[101] Ibid., p. 137.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., p. 142.
[104] Ibid.

and to define the direction of the transfers', he had overlooked the way in which circulation was necessarily bound up in relationships of dependence and domination.[105] Only in the transfer of marriage goods is there something resembling 'reciprocity'; but even this, Meillassoux argues, 'is not strictly speaking an "exchange" but *two movements with different intentions* (first alliance, then preservation of social prestige).'[106] Moreover, these two movements are often separated by a delay of many years. And, finally, the goods that circulate do not confront one another directly, so they 'cannot be measured in terms of each other' – and hence 'no *exchange value* can emerge under these conditions.'[107] In these societies, which know only use value, labour also cannot be conceived in terms of remuneration. For example, Meillassoux writes,

> When a young man works for someone who is not a relative, there is in fact a transfer of the kinship relation … *Vis-à-vis* the person employing him, the worker will be in the position, for example, of a son in relation to his father. The employer will thus have the obligation of a father towards him; in particular he will provide him with food *during* the performance of the labour (and not *afterwards* as is typical of wage-labour). … The 'value' of the work performed will not be taken into consideration in determining the remuneration.[108]

This is a society of use value, but it is also a society of fathers. The impersonal domination of the wage-contract is replaced by the personal domination of the patriarch.[109] Patriarchy appears to structure and organise all aspects of the community, especially the lives of women. Indeed, constraints on the freedoms of marriageable women and their reproductive autonomy underpin the system of social control. Meillassoux writes:

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[105] Ibid., p. 132.
[106] Ibid., p. 143.
[107] Ibid., p. 145.
[108] Ibid., p. 146.
[109] In this respect, Meillassoux returns to a theme of nineteenth-century anthropologists of law, including Maine, who wrote of the transition from status to contract (and whom Marx read and commented on in his *Ethnological Notebooks*). See Krader, 'Introduction', pp. 1–90.

> Above all, it is logical in an economy in which the product of labour can only be controlled through the direct control over the producer, to control also – and maybe even more so – the *producer of the producer*, i.e. the procreative woman.
>
> This function of the 'producer of the producer' is reflected in the intermediate position of women in traditional societies where their status is not symmetrical to that of men and where they do not constitute a truly inferior social group. For it is not so much their function as worker which is considered but their procreative function.[110]

These early programmatic statements reveal a series of logical leaps already at work in Meillassoux's concept of reproduction. Why should it be 'logical' that controlling 'the producer of the producer' (women) ensures the control of 'the producer' (the adult male worker)? Would it not, in fact, be more logical the other way around? Meillassoux's answer would seem to be based on the thesis that *procreation underpins kinship relations*, and *kinship relations underpin relations of production*. That is, in Meillassoux's model, production is totally regulated, and permeated through and through, by kinship. The producing unit is the family, with its gendered division of labour, so marriage is the fundamental condition of production. But even this explanation would posit *marriage* rather than *procreation* as at the core of the system. Moreover, according to this explanation, the role of women as workers would in fact be inseparable from their role as procreators: women are, of course, not simply 'producers of producers' but producers themselves as well.

We might ask whether there is not an elision in Meillassoux's statements between his reading of the society's conception of itself (in which women are perhaps not *considered* as workers) and its real productive functioning (in which women *work*). This leads him to place gender relations curiously at a diagonal to the primary axis of senior-junior domination (and allows him to make such curious statements as the one that 'they do not constitute a truly inferior social group'). Yet everything else in his model would seem to indicate that women are indeed a truly inferior social group, if 'inferiority' is understood to refer to limits on the actual power and freedom of members of this social class to decide on the conditions of their lives. Does Meillassoux, despite himself, mistake a description of the 'native's point of view' for an analysis of material relations? In other words, *is the subsistence society really founded*

[110] Meillassoux, 'The "Economy" in Agricultural Self-Sustaining Societies', pp. 139–140.

on reproduction, or does it simply imagine itself to be? These problems become more complex as the concept of the 'producer of the producer' morphs in later articles into the even more indeterminate concept of 'reproduction'.

The term 'reproduction' is not used in this early article by Meillassoux. Yet the outlines are already present of his vision of a subsistence community as what I am calling here a society of reproduction. The 'agricultural self-sustaining society' is here dominated by the principle of reproduction in a number of respects: in the sense (1) that its primary mode of social control relies on the control of procreation; and (2) that it is geared to the maintenance of its social structures and resists any outside influence that might disrupt these. The society of reproduction already appears in this article as a society of dependence, however, and not a society of freedom. While the article follows the substantivist insight into the embedded nature of the economy, it undermines any romantic view of embeddedness: here production, circulation and consumption are perhaps as non-alienated as could be – work, sharing and expenditure are saturated with social and spiritual substance – but the collective is not, for all that, any closer to freedom.

2.2 The hunter and the sower

If Meillassoux's 1960 article provided a formal explanation of the internal functioning of social control in what he called the 'agricultural self-sustaining society', it did not speculate on how this social system came into being historically. This was the aim of two later articles, titled 'Recherche d'un niveau de détermination dans la société cynégétique' (1967),[111] and 'From reproduction to production' (1972).[112] Both articles elaborated a theoretical contrast between hunter-gatherer and agricultural modes of production, with a particular focus on the different temporalities emerging from the relationship with the land expressed in each mode. I want to suggest here that this contrast can be considered as a distinction between a *state of non-reproduction* (the hunting band) and a *state of reproduction* (the subsistence agricultural community). In drawing out this contrast, it is useful to take a short detour via Rousseau's account of independence and dependence in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. We

[111] Claude Meillassoux, 'Recherche d'un niveau de détermination dans la société cynégétique', *L'Homme et la Société* 6, 1967, pp. 95–106.
[112] Claude Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production'.

can consider, in this way, whether Meillassoux's theory of primitive social reproduction is not in fact based on a theory of a state of nature, and how this might undermine his historical materialist premises.

Rousseau on the origins of dependence

In Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1754) there is not one state of nature, but three. This point is made particularly forcefully by Althusser in his *Lessons on Rousseau*, in which he identifies these 'three discontinuous moments' of Rousseau's state of nature as (1) pure nature, (2) the state of peace and (3) the state of war.[113] The first state corresponds to the prelinguistic ancestors of humanity. The second state corresponds to existing peoples living in a state of savagery. The third state is a barbarian state not dissimilar to Hobbes's state of war, which draws to a close with the social contract, the formation of the state, and the establishment of civilisation. It is in the juxtaposition between the first and second states that Rousseau's account of the origins of dependency emerges.

The first state, the state of 'pure nature', is defined by animality and extreme individuality. The human began alone, Rousseau writes, 'scattered in the woods among the animals'.[114] Little invention or foresight was needed to satisfy his modest needs, for which nature offered itself in abundance. Having no reason to develop his sense of the future, man lived in an eternal present. 'His soul, agitated by nothing, is given over to the single feeling of his own present existence … his projects, as limited as his views, hardly extend to the end of the day.'[115] With no sense of duration, people were incapable of forming attachments with a particular territory or with one another. Promiscuity reigns; love and kinship are unknown; parents do not recognise their own children. Social progress cannot take place, for there is no such thing as society:

> … wandering in the forests, without industry, without speech, without dwelling, without war, without relationships, with no need for his fellow men, and correspondingly with no desire to do them harm, perhaps never even recognizing any of them individually, savage man, subject

[113] Louis Althusser, *Lessons on Rousseau*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2019), p. 78. This book reproduces Althusser's series of lectures on Rousseau delivered in 1972.
[114] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Origin of Inequality', in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 47.
[115] Ibid., p. 46.

> to few passions and self-sufficient, had only the sentiments and enlightenment appropriate to that state; he felt only his true needs, took notice of only what he believed he had an interest in seeing; and his intelligence made no more progress than his vanity. If by chance he made some discovery, he was all the less able to communicate it to others because he did not even know his own children. Art perished with its inventor. There was neither education nor progress; generations were multiplied to no purpose. Since each one always began from the same point, centuries went by with all the crudeness of the first ages; the species was already old, and man remained ever a child.[116]

This friendless, eternally repetitious existence drew to a close with the emergence of language, which enabled a whole range of intellectual advances, including the development of tools, more reliable modes of subsistence and the building of rudimentary shelters. As families began to live together, man experienced 'the first developments of the heart': conjugal and paternal love. At that point, 'each family became a little society'.[117] The gendered division of labour emerged, with women occupying a more sedentary role in the household, prompted by the needs of childcare, and men leaving to seek subsistence further afield. Yet labour was not yet onerous, for human needs were not yet enlarged by the desires of abstract thought or the torments of jealously and self-consciousness. Rousseau considered this leisurely society to be the happiest state humankind had known, and the state in which 'almost all' contemporary 'savages' were still, as he was writing, to be found.[118] Community without dependency – a 'middle position between the indolence of our primitive state and the petulant activity of our egocentrism'[119] – this describes, to use Althusser's term, 'the state of peace'.

For Rousseau, it is with the development of agriculture that human relations of dependency and subordination began to take root. As soon as labour came to require more than one pair of hands to undertake it, that is, as soon as cooperation emerged in the work of subsistence, the naïve equality of savage state began to collapse. 'Vast forests were transformed into smiling fields which had to be watered with men's sweat, and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops.'[120] The sowing of the land

[116] Ibid., p. 57.
[117] Ibid., p. 63.
[118] Ibid., p. 65.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

gave rise to a fixity of social relations, for members of the community were bound to the land and to each other by the cycles of the harvest. Agriculture gave rise to property, to the division of labour proper, and to unequal accumulation. It was from these developments that the *state of war* arose – and from it, ultimately, the domesticated and degraded state of civilisation, in which dependency reaches pathological limits.

Rousseau's account of the origins of humanity begins with the absolute atomism of the human individual, an atomism which is overcome in the course of the species' development. We begin with the independent individual and end with the enslaved collective. The 'happy' savage community, not yet tied to the temporality of the harvest and the dependency of field labour, finds itself in a 'middle position' between the two. In this trajectory, Rousseau has a linear conception of the relation between cooperation and dependency. As cooperation develops, so does dependency. The roots of dependency are sown with agriculture, which marks mankind's fall from innocence.[121] This can be contrasted with Marx's dialectical conception of cooperation, which was discussed briefly in Chapter 1. For Marx, cooperation in primitive labour was both a source of dependency and a source of freedom (considered as non-alienation); yet even the concepts of dependency and unfreedom made little sense for Marx in reference to the primitive community, in which, as he wrote, 'the individual has as little torn himself free from the umbilical cord of his tribe or community as a bee has from his hive.'[122] Under capitalism, cooperation in labour was also dialectically constituted: a condition of the development of capitalist forms of exploitation, but also the greatest source of potential for communism. As we will see, Meillassoux's conception of dependency turns out to be closer to Rousseau's linear conception than to Marx's dialectical conception.

Meillassoux on hunter-gatherer non-reproduction

In 'Recherche d'un niveau de détermination dans la société cynégétique' and 'From reproduction to production', Meilassoux outlines a juxtaposition of hunter-gatherer and subsistence agricultural modes of production which resonates markedly with Rousseau's

[121] In this respect, Rousseau affirms the long-running anthropological narrative of the development of agriculture (the so-called Neolithic Revolution) as the point from which humanity begins its long decline into inequality, power, oppression, and exploitation. See David Graeber and David Wengrow, 'How to change the course of human history', *Eurozine*, 2 March 2018.
[122] Marx, *Capital*, Volume One, p. 452.

account. Meillassoux's schema is premised on a distinction between two modes of 'exploitation of the land', according to which land represents either the *means of labour* or the *object of labour*, which he elaborates on the basis of a passage in Marx's *Capital*, Volume 1.[123] For the hunter-gatherer, land represents the *object of labour*. The hunter-gatherer's relationship to the land is one of simple extraction: land supplies the community with its needs ready-to-hand. The hunter-gatherer intervenes little in the land; he 'draws his reserves from nature without adjusting or restoring its resources'.[124] Once a community has exhausted the resources of a particular area, it moves on to another. Land regenerates itself without human aid. This form of exploitation of the land implies a nomadic existence; there is no 'locale' (*terroir*) and even the territory (*territoire*) within which the band moves is a relational and ever-shifting entity. Securing subsistence is a discontinuous event, repeated daily, with the product immediately shared and consumed. 'Since labour is not invested into the land, it has an *instantaneous* and non-deferred return.'[125] Since subsistence is not the result of long-term investment in the land, it is also 'maximally *aleatory*'.[126] The hunter-gatherer does not know what food they will eat the following day, or indeed if they will eat at all.[127]

The whole system of hunter-gatherer social relations unfolds from this relationship with the land. The needs of the collective hunt give rise to an 'ad hoc' and 'impromptu' form of cooperation between members of the band, which is in a constant process of composition and decomposition. 'The hunters, once they share the common product, are free from any further reciprocal obligations or allegiance. The process gives no ground for the emergence of a social hierarchy or of a centralised power, or even the extended family organisation.'[128] Kinship is not the determining social fact of the hunter-gatherer world: or, in other words, the relationship between the economic needs of the community and its social relations is relatively direct, unmediated by the system of social control encompassing marriage, procreation, and age hierarchies that is dominant in neighbouring non-nomadic societies. In the hunter-gatherer

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[123] Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production', p. 104. Meillassoux's terminology changes between these articles from 1967 and 1972. In 'From reproduction to production' (1972), in conformity with Marx's terminology in *Capital*, 'object of labour' becomes 'subject of labour' and 'means of labour' becomes 'instrument of labour'.
[124] Meillassoux, 'Recherche d'un niveau de détermination dans la société cynégétique', p. 99.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] This account of the aleatory nature of hunter-gatherer subsistence, premised on the idea of scarcity, was challenged as early as 1972. See Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, discussed further in Chapter 4.
[128] Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production', p. 99.

world, children are not indebted to their parents, and the elderly may even be abandoned in times of scarcity. Individual families are reduced to 'the conjugal nucleus', free of lineages and genealogical systems. 'The basic social unit is an equalitarian but unstable band with little concern for biological or social reproduction', Meillassoux writes.[129]

This lack of concern for biological or social reproduction is reflected in the peculiar temporality of the hunter-gatherer mode of production. Like Rousseau's prehistoric savages, Meillassoux's hunter-gatherers have little conception of the future. 'The brevity and repetition of intermittent activities foster a lifestyle linked to the *present*, without duration or continuity. The way of life is "instant."'[130] The presentism of the hunter-gatherer reflects, and is reflected in, the maximally independent nature of social relationships, and the relative freedom of individuals – even women. Again, Meillassoux's words echo Rousseau's depiction of the prehistoric savage:

> The preoccupations of hunter-gatherers are turned towards present production, much more than towards reproduction. In the band, there is no lasting bond between the young and their elders, no material dependence forcing them to stay near them. The child is not assured as the future provider of the unproductive old man, nor as a channel towards the cult of the ancestor. Social control over procreative women is therefore weak if not zero, and the woman enjoys a freedom which seems limited only by her physiology.[131]

The hunter-gatherer band appears, in Meillassoux's account, as a negative image of the agricultural community: as a society of radical non-reproduction, suspended in a memoryless present. In this respect the two societies are not simply different, but truly in *opposition*. This stems from the mode of exploitation of the land. In the subsistence agricultural mode of production, Meillassoux argues, the land is a means (or 'instrument') of labour in the sense that it serves as part of what Marx described as the 'complex of things which the labourer interposes between himself and the subject of his labour'.[132] Land is worked *with*, and not

[129] Ibid.
[130] Meillassoux, 'Recherche d'un niveau de détermination dans la société cynégétique', p. 101.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Marx cited in Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production', p. 104.

simply *on*: it is the milieu in which, or the apparatus through which, seeds are made to grow. The land (*terre*, also 'earth' or 'soil') thus serves, in Marx's words, 'as the conductor of [the labourer's] activity.'[133] It must be altered in order to generate the product, which cannot simply be extracted in ready-made form. In this way, this mode of production is distinguished, as Meillassoux puts it, by 'the incorporation into the land of labor power whose product is deferred.'[134] This gives rise to social relations based on a long-term attachment to the land – and in turn to a society of dependency. The attachment of the peasant to the land, as though it were an extension of his own body, is also an attachment to the community and its internal hierarchies, from which he cannot wrench himself free.

In the agricultural community, cooperation is 'prolonged and continuous': members are bound together until the time of the harvest in order that each may benefit from their collective labour. But they are also bound together between harvests, because to survive through the non-productive period means living on the accumulated product of previous harvests. 'At all times the workers of one cycle are indebted for seeds and food to the workers of the previous one, and this cyclical renewal of the relations of production theoretically never ends.'[135] For this reason, agriculture produces an orientation toward reproduction rather than simply present production:

> In this society, in which duration, waiting and cyclical repetition, in other words, time, enter in, the future becomes a concern and with it the problem of reproduction. Reproduction of the production unit's workforce in number and quality in order to ensure the continuous supply of its members; reproduction of the group's structures in order to preserve the hierarchy that guarantees its functioning. Filiation, which ensures the renewal of the relations of production and the workforce, and marriage, which reshapes the group in its hierarchical structures, become dominant concerns. The relations of production take on the appearance of kinship. The child appears there as the natural dependent of man, procreation as the most direct means of building up dependency, and the family as the cell desired by fate.[136]

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[133] Ibid.
[134] Meillassoux, 'Recherche d'un niveau de détermination dans la société cynégétique', p. 103.
[135] Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production', p. 99.
[136] Meillassoux, 'Recherche d'un niveau de détermination dans la société cynégétique', p. 103.

While the term ‘reproduction’ does not appear in Meillassoux’s earlier articles and only arises briefly in his 1964 monograph, the passages quoted above indicate that by 1967 it has begun to assume a central place in his analysis.[137] The concept of reproduction has become a matrix through which all of the central features of the agricultural community can be unified, giving this type of society a distinct identity, even a *telos*, as what I have called a *society of reproduction*. Yet, as in Meillassoux’s 1960 article, it is clear that a number of different meanings are combined in this concept of reproduction. Even simply in the passage above, reproduction refers to: (1) ‘the reproduction of the workforce in number and quality’, in other words, (1a) the production of new generations of workers through procreation, childrearing and socialisation on the one hand, and on the other (1b) the maintenance of the health of the current working population. But reproduction also refers to (2) the ‘reproduction of the group's structures in order to preserve the hierarchy that guarantees its functioning’, in other words, to all of the mechanisms through which the system of social control secures its permanence, with regulations concerning marriage and filiation primary among them. This dual concept of reproduction emerges, as we have seen, by way of an opposition to the state of *non-reproduction*. This opposition can be summarised in the following schema, which recalls Rousseau’s term for term:

Hunter-gatherer band	**Agricultural village**
Production	Reproduction
Presentism	Futurity
Independence	Dependence
Egalitarianism	Hierarchy

Revisiting Rousseau’s account of the first and second stages of the state of nature thus brings into view certain philosophical baggage attached to Meillassoux’s concept of reproduction. In depicting the subsistence agricultural community as determined by cyclical agricultural rhythms which lock individuals into dependent relations with their community, Meillassoux invokes a familiar narrative of a fall from innocence, marked by the emergence of agriculture,

[137] We can note the probable influence of Althusser and Balibar’s texts in *Reading Capital*, which foregrounded the problem of reproduction.

into a long history of dependency and patriarchy. This concept of reproduction – with its fusion of futurity and dependence, of the assurance of subsistence and the necessity of social constraint – is not a utopian concept. The reproduction of the means of life is here necessarily also the reproduction of domination, and not the reproduction of the conditions for freedom. In Meillassoux's later works, however, the meaning of reproduction changes again. Here, we encounter a more utopian sense of reproduction, which becomes decoupled from the association with the repetition of the social conditions of domination and designates more simply an economy, or sphere of the economy, whose *telos* is the continuation of life.

2.3 The domestic community and its parasite

In his most well-known work, *Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux* (1975),[138] Meillassoux weaves together the insights from his earlier ethnographic writings into a single theoretical intervention into contemporary debates in anthropology, development studies and – although somewhat more obliquely – Marxist feminism.[139] He does so by constructing a new theoretical object, the 'domestic community', which cuts a diagonal through capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production in representing a social sphere both *alien* and *necessary* to the reproduction of capitalism.[140] The remit of the 'domestic community' expands through the course of the book. For the most part, it simply replaces (with more detail and certain adjustments) the 'agricultural self-sustaining community' of Meillassoux's earlier articles. That is, the domestic community represents for most of the book a formal model of a subsistence agricultural economy in which patriarchal kinship relations are dominant. In this regard, the domestic community appears as a society dominated by what I have called *reproduction-as-domination.* However, the central proposition of *Femmes, Greniers et Capitax* – and its key departure from Meillassoux's monograph – is its framing of the domestic community in contrast to, and especially in

[138] My citations refer to the English translation (its unfortunate title notwithstanding). See Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money*.
[139] Meillassoux does not reference any feminist analyses of capitalism in the book, although it seems implausible that its conceptual framework was not influenced at least to some degree by the concurrent debates in materialist feminism concerning social reproduction and domestic labour. See, for example, Margaret Benston, 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation', *Monthly Review* 21 (4), 1969, pp. 13–27; Christine Delphy, 'The Main Enemy', *Feminist Issues* 1, 1980, pp. 23–40 (originally published as Christine Dupont, 'L'ennemi principal', *Partisans* 54-55, 1970); Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975), originally published in 1972.
[140] Sahlins had already begun to speak of the 'domestic mode of production' in 1972. See Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*.

articulation with, capitalist production. From this perspective, the domestic community comes to represent something much wider than the subsistence agricultural economy: the sphere of social reproduction as such, persisting through historically and spatially differentiated modes of production, and the space of the regeneration of living labour for the sake of life itself.

In his discussion of the domestic community in its more restricted meaning as the subsistence agricultural community, Meillassoux emphasises, even more than in his earlier articles, its domination by the principle of reproduction. 'Reproduction is the dominant preoccupation of these societies', he writes. 'All their institutions are organised to this purpose.'[141] The surplus generated by production was sufficient to this aim but not more; these were subsistence economies in the true sense. As such, 'within this community only use value emerges', while land was held in common, its access regulated by the community.[142] But if these characteristics made the domestic community a model of equilibrium and seemingly a world unto itself, its functioning foreign to the capitalist system, this did not prevent its capture by the latter. Capital exploited the domestic community not through the enclosure of common land and the compulsion of its inhabitants into the 'double freedom' of wage labour but, paradoxically, through the preservation of its traditional mode of subsistence and social relations. This was Meillassoux's solution to the puzzle of 'underdevelopment': if the accumulation of capital relied on its destruction of what Luxemburg had called 'natural economies', what explained the persistence of traditional subsistence communities, apparently untouched by capitalism, across the former colonies? For Meillassoux, the persistence of the domestic community was a result of 'an improved form of primitive accumulation' operating through what he called over-exploitation (*surexpoitation*).[143] Periodic migration cycles, a colonial strategy that became widespread in African colonies after the Second World War, allowed the domestic community to be preserved as a means of reproducing the lives of workers, both individually and generationally, in between periods of labour for capitalist firms. Since migration would take place during the dead season, Meillassoux reasoned, the 'capitalist sector' only needed to cover the reproduction of labour-power during the period of direct employment.[144] The worker's long-term reproduction – the reproduction of their life through

[141] Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money*, p. 38.
[142] Ibid., p. 3.
[143] Ibid., p. 110.
[144] Ibid., p. 95.

childhood, sickness and old age – was secured by the domestic community. In colonies and former colonies, then, the 'capitalist sector' could rely on a steady stream of labourers without having to squander its profits on a social security apparatus like those that existed within advanced capitalist countries. In this way, capital's indirect appropriation of the labour of the domestic community provides the overriding explanation for underdevelopment across the globe:

> It is by establishing organic relations between capitalist and domestic economies that imperialism set up the mechanism of reproducing cheap labour-power to its profit – a reproductive process which, at present, is the fundamental cause of underdevelopment at one end and of the wealth of the capitalist sector at the other.[145]

Meillassoux's argument regarding over-exploitation through periodic migration can be set in the context of dependency and world systems theories emerging in the same era: like Andre Gunder Frank[146] and Samir Amin,[147] Meillassoux sought to challenge the notion of a dual economy, 'according to which two unconnected sectors, one industrial and the other "traditional", exist side by side in underdeveloped countries', choosing instead to theorise the ways in which their articulation worked to the benefit of capitalism.[148] But Meillassoux departed from Frank and Amin in theorising what he saw as the distinctively *parasitic* relationship between the capitalist and domestic 'modes of production', 'one of which preserves the other to pump its substance and, in so doing, destroys it.'[149] Although it preserved the structures of the domestic community in the short term, over-exploitation led, in the long term, to its deterioration. The result was not necessarily full proletarianisation. More likely, the gradual decline of the reproductive capacities of the domestic community would drive many of its members to the urban centres, where this new would-be proletariat would find itself deprived of the means of social reproduction, which is to say the means of life, altogether.

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[145] Ibid.
[146] Andre Gunder Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).
[147] Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).
[148] Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money*, p. 98.
[149] Ibid.

In certain parts of *Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux*, however, the domestic community comes to represent a much broader sphere or set of relations which 'support' production, both capitalist and non-capitalist, while themselves remaining outside of it. Here, the domestic community refers not necessarily to the subsistence agricultural community but to the sphere of *domestic labour*, which can be understood to include all those forms of unwaged or informal labour that serve to reproduce the labour power (or 'energy') of workers:

> All other economies have been built upon the domestic community – from the aristocratic economy to capitalism, and including even slavery which, despite being its negation, could not exist without it. But crushed, oppressed, divided, counted, taxed, recruited, the *domestic community* totters but still resists, for *domestic relations of production* have not disappeared completely. They still support millions of productive units integrated to a greater or lesser degree in the capitalist economy, disgorging goods and energy under the crushing weight of imperialism. In the most advanced societies, domestic relations still structure the family, that narrow but vital foundation for the production of life and labour-power.[150]

In this passage, the domestic community appears as a transhistorical living *foundation* of production, which is nevertheless perpetually drained and polluted by the parasitic forces that attach themselves to it. The capitalist economy, like other major economic systems through history, is thus seen to be built on the basis of the (unwaged, informal and usually gendered) labour that takes place within the domestic community. This much-expanded conception of the domestic community gives an alternate valence to the concept of reproduction. Here, reproduction has come to stand for a sphere of the economy oriented to use value, in which the *telos* of production is the perpetuation of the lives of its members rather than the production of a surplus, and in which labour is inseparable and in some cases indistinguishable from love and care. This concept of reproduction appears here, by way of its contrast with capitalism, in a vitalist guise – this is not reproduction-as-domination but *reproduction-as-life*:

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[150] Ibid., p. 87.

Domestic 'sector'	**Capitalist 'sector'**
Reproduction	Production
Perpetuation of life	Accumulation of capital
Use value	Exchange value
Non-alienation	Alienation

Reproduction-as-life

This conception of reproduction-as-life is familiar to recent Marxist feminisms which argue for the valorisation of reproductive labour as a non-commodified and non-alienated 'commons'.[151] The writings of Silvia Federici are exemplary in this regard. For Federici reproductive labour is, as for Meillassoux, the 'foundation'[152] or the 'rock'[153] upon which all societies are built. It is foundational firstly in the very general sense that so-called reproductive activities are necessary to ensure the life of the population (although we might ask why these tasks should indeed be more foundational than so-called productive activities); as Federici writes, 'the immense amount of paid and unpaid domestic work done by women in the home is what keeps the world moving.'[154] Under capitalism, however, reproductive labour is also foundational in the specific sense that it boosts capital's rate of exploitation by providing the means of regenerating labour power for free (or for cheap). Subsistence farming and domestic labour are analogous, according to Federici's analysis, in both representing activities that take place outside of the market but which are nevertheless essential for capitalism to reproduce itself. With this analogy established, Federici conceptualises the anti-capitalist task in terms of the defence of these spaces of reproduction, the resistance to their continued enclosure and the invention of new forms of their collectivisation. Such forms of prefiguration and defence, she argues, may bring about the progressive disentangling of the spaces and activities of reproduction from capitalist value relations, so that they might instead become the foundations of a *non*-capitalist future. Federici writes, 'by pooling our resources and re-appropriating the wealth that we have produced, we can begin to de-link our reproduction from the commodity

[151] Vishmidt and Sutherland, 'The Soft Disappointment of Prefiguration'.
[152] Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), p. 2.
[153] Silvia Federici, 'Feminism and the Politics of the Commons', *The Commoner*, 24 January 2011.
[154] Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, p. 2.

flows that, through the world market, are responsible for the dispossession of millions across the world.'[155] In this way, the sphere of reproductive labour becomes the '*ground zero* for revolutionary practice' – a practice which involves above all the *defence and affirmation* of the life-giving activities that take place within this sphere.[156]

This detour into Federici's politics of social reproduction enables us to see what is at stake in the conception of reproduction as a sphere of life-giving activities separate from the life-draining activities of a parasitic capitalism. In her critical readings of theories social reproduction, Vishmidt argues that the tendency among such theories to simply affirm reproduction risks eclipsing the potential oppression inherent in the 'direct, interpersonal' relations of reproduction.[157] In other words, an over-emphasis on the concept of what I have called reproduction-as-life may threaten to eclipse the aspect of domination inherent in domestic relations as they currently exist. This is compounded by the fact that affirming reproduction often amounts simply to affirming the necessary activities of survival and maintenance of a given community, its internal relations and gendered determination intact. Reproduction-as-repetition creeps back in. The problem of gender, Vishmidt argues, is for this reason 'not conceivable in terms of a politics of reproduction per se, because such a politics suppresses the need for change … and privileges the need for maintenance, for continuity and survival – the very elements of life which capital is constantly attacking and thus must evidently be preserved – notice preserved, not transformed or perhaps even abolished.'[158] That is, the affirmation of reproduction can often unfold into an affirmation of gender as the principle that serves to differentiate this sphere from production: 'reproduction as a gendered realm of tasks and relations assumes its own independent dignity regardless of its role in sustaining the capital relation.'[159] The domestic or reproductive sphere is not necessarily governed by a life-giving *telos*, as both Federici and Meillassoux often suggest it is, and even if it were this would by no means automatically place it on the side of emancipation.

These problems are all underpinned by the construction of a theoretical separation between reproduction and production, which is at the core of Meillassoux's intervention. This

[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Vishmidt, 'On Reproduction in an Extra-Systemic Sense'.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid.

separation emerges, as we have seen, out of the effort to develop a materialism appropriate to primitive societies, which appear to be 'dominated' (if not 'determined') not by relations of production but by relations of reproduction.[160] This separation *within* the domestic community is generalised to become a separation *between* the domestic community and its capitalist exterior, enabling the latter to be conceived as having a parasitic relationship to the former. The dualism of this image endows the domestic community with a *telos* of its own, an 'independent dignity', as Vishmidt puts it,[161] and a certain purity; it is then possible to speak of capitalism as merely a 'sector' or to conceptualise the coexistence of two 'modes of production' articulated to one another. To consider how subsistence economies and the sphere of reproduction in general may be more deeply embedded in a global capitalist system, it would be necessary to move beyond the image of the parasite which might be removed or 'de-linked' (in Federici's terminology), leaving the host's body intact. In order to do so, it is necessary first to unravel the functionalist tendencies inherent in this image.

2.4 Reproduction and the functionalist imaginary

In Althusser's opinion, Lévi-Strauss's thought was marred not only by its neglect of production, but by a functionalist logic that was typical of anthropology. 'If certain rules governing marriage, and so forth, exist in primitive societies, it is *so that* these societies can live, survive, and so on' – such was the logic of 'ethnological ideology'.[162] In spite of his efforts to overcome the problems of classical anthropology, Meillassoux, through his fuzzy concept of reproduction, takes this epistemological error and turns it into a social principle. Let us recall the quote that forms the epigraph to this chapter, in which he writes of the domestic community: 'Their end is reproduction of life as a precondition to production. Their primary concern is to "grow and multiply" in the biblical sense.'[163] All of the social relations of such societies are interpreted in light of this *telos* of reproduction. As we have seen, this is effected through the ambiguities inherent in the word reproduction, so that procreation, the reproduction of labour power, and the reproduction of the social totality are combined into the single aim governing these subject-societies. If gendered oppression is prevalent in such societies, it is *so*

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[160] Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal, and Money*, p. 37.
[161] Vishmidt, 'On Reproduction in an Extra-Systemic Sense'.
[162] Althusser 'On Levi-Strauss', p. 25.
[163] Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production', p. 101–2.

that they can perpetuate their numbers and their social relations. The circular logic does little to explain why gender relations are organised as they are in such societies, instead taking them as given. As Maureen Mackintosh put it in her searing critique of *Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux*, 'for [Meillassoux], female subordination is a *fact*, not a *problem*, it is something which exists, not something which the dominant groups have to struggle to maintain.'[164]

It is not only Meillassoux's theory of the domestic community that is functionalist, but his theory of capitalism as well. This argument is made comprehensively by Bridget O'Laughlin in her critique of *Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux*.[165] Her criticisms focus above all on Meillassoux's argument that capitalist accumulation relies on its appropriation of the surplus produced from non-capitalist ('reproductive') spheres. 'Meillassoux assumes that all that exists within a world capitalist system – backward subsistence sectors, government nurseries, social security programmes – exists because it fulfils some function for capital as a class.'[166] Yet, she argues, this totalising perspective makes capitalism out to be more powerful and totalising than it is: it excludes the fact that capital must always *struggle* to extract surplus labour from labour-power, a struggle which becomes more difficult when the working class organises itself against capital. Meillassoux's occlusion of this constant struggle becomes particularly evident when he discusses what he calls (with evident scepticism) 'the "liberation" of the female labour force' in advanced capitalist countries:

> Objectively, therefore, the struggle of young people and women to free themselves (however progressive it may be when it is subordinated to, and reinforces class struggle) falls into line with the social development of capital. It recruits (and produces) 'free labourers' by depriving the domestic community – now the elder, now the father (and now, today, the mother) – by emancipating dependents earlier and earlier so as to deliver them the more quickly to employers.[167]

[164] Maureen Mackintosh, 'Reproduction and Patriarchy: A Critique of Claude Meillassoux, "Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux"', *Capital & Class* 1 (2), 1977, p. 122.
[165] Bridget O'Laughlin, 'Production and Reproduction: Meillassoux's Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux', *Critique of Anthropology* 2 (3), 1977, pp. 3–32.
[166] Ibid., p. 27.
[167] Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal, and Money*, p. 143.

The dissolution of the patriarchal family in advanced capitalist countries appears, for Meillassoux, as a simple result of the interests of capital, in the same way that the maintenance of these relations is in the interest of capital in the underdeveloped countries. The result is his disappointing reduction of the multifarious aims and achievements of feminist struggle into those elements that 'fall into line with capital', on the one hand, and those which are 'subordinated to' class struggle, on the other.

But the arrangement of the social world is not simply a reflection of the functional needs to capital. As O'Laughlin argues, capitalism does not necessarily *need* the 'backward subsistence sector' to persist in order to reproduce the lives of individual workers. Capital may, in fact, as Meillassoux himself observes, be capable under certain conditions of covering some of the costs of social reproduction (as it does in advanced capitalist countries via social security). Conversely, it may not need to reproduce the lives of these individual workers at all – they may be able to take ill or die, and be replaced by others, without disrupting capital's accumulation. In misunderstanding the politics and contingencies inherent in the determination of wages, O'Laughlin argues, Meillassoux forgets the insight at the core of Marx's critique of Malthus: that 'the biological reproduction of people is a contingent outcome of the ways in which the production and reproduction of the means of subsistence are socially organized.'[168] The social organisation of production determines biological reproduction, not the reverse. This is as true of the domestic community as it is of capitalism, and hence the articulation between the two cannot be based on any necessity to reproduce the labour power, or lives, of individual workers. O'Laughlin writes:

> certain modes of production – take capitalism to name one – are organized in such a way as not to assure the biological reproduction of a given supply of workers. The quantity, quality, and value of the labour-power employed in capitalist production are constantly altering with the evolution of the technical conditions of production and the state of the class struggle.[169]

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[168] O'Laughlin, 'Production and Reproduction', p. 6.
[169] O'Laughlin, 'Production and Reproduction', pp. 6–7.

Drawing on O'Laughlin's critique, we can suggest that Meillassoux's theory of underdevelopment is based on the generalisation of what is in fact only a contingent form of capitalist exploitation – the persistence of traditional subsistence economies as a means of reproducing cheap labour-power – by rendering it a necessary feature of *all* capitalist exploitation throughout history. The existence of subsistence economies may be useful for capitalism in certain cases, but a glance at the heterogeneous means by which colonisation and uneven development have proceeded indicates that this is hardly a necessary or universal relationship. In other cases, full proletarianisation may be more useful to capital, and, subject to the political forces in place, the destruction of the subsistence economy may proceed – as indeed it has at innumerable points throughout history. If one departs from a historical rather than a functionalist analysis, and relinquishes the pressure to explain processes of capitalist accumulation in terms of an elegant and universalisable model, it becomes evident that the reproductive sphere cannot be viewed as an unyielding core of the capitalist system or an ever-renewing fount from which living labour is produced – if indeed it is usefully viewed as an independent 'sphere' at all.

Conclusion: The 'wild fruit' of women

Through his theory of the domestic community, Meillassoux sought to account for two of the most acute contradictions pressing on Marxist thought and practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the problem of underdevelopment and the problem of women's oppression. Both problems could be defined by the persistence of apparently residual, precapitalist forms – the 'backward' subsistence economy in the Third World, and gendered oppression in the First World – which were supposed to have been quickly evaporated by the forward march of a race-blind and gender-blind capitalism. Yet in his attempt to contain these different contradictions by way of a universal revision, explaining the persistence of these analogous but otherwise distinct non-capitalist phenomena in terms of a functional need of capital to outsource the costs of the reproduction of labour power, Meillassoux's theory reproduces some of the same problems he sought originally to overcome. I have tried to show the way in which his conceptual separation of reproduction from production gives rise in his writings, as it does in certain strands of Marxist feminism, to the image of capitalism as a parasite feeding off an organic host. This dualism replaces a conception of capitalism as a whole complex of social,

political and ideological relations that traverse capitalist and apparently non-capitalist social forms – in other words, as a *mode of production* in the expansive sense, the overcoming of which would necessitate total transformation rather than simply the removal of the parasitic body.

Presented as a sphere of vitality against an undead and life-draining capital, Meillassoux's domestic community appears, in many respects and despite his best intentions, as a *natural* entity. It delineates a productive – as in life-giving – section of the world devoted to reproduction, separated from the unproductive – and in life-draining – sector of capitalist production by the hard border of commodity exchange. This image is present in the closing lines of *Maidens, Meal and Money*, in which Meillassoux presents the spectre of a totalitarian capitalism set finally to dissolve (if more slowly than anticipated) the affective bonds of the family, renting out its members' inner lives, and hawking the 'wild fruit' of feminised labour:

> Thus threatened, the family is coming to be regarded, by reason of the few affectionate relationships it preserves, as one of the last bastions of individual liberty. It is, however, a very fragile bastion, for nothing any longer predestines it to withstand the corrosive influence of money-relations; and in this we have the measure of the totalitarian menace with which capitalism is heavy. Totalitarianism, which the bourgeoisie holds up as a scarecrow before the masses, invoking the example of the bureaucratic forms of socialism, is flourishing (and in a still more inhumane fashion) in the foreseeable changes in capitalism, in the necessary destruction of all ties of affection. All it can put in the place of these ties is the barbarism of absolute 'profitability' [*rentabilité*] – the last stage of the metamorphosis of human beings into capital, their strength and intelligence into commodities, and the 'wild fruit [*fruit sauvage*] of women' into investments.[170]

The living matter from which the domestic community is composed is governed by the same *telos* commonly attributed to the organism as such: a *telos* of self-perpetuation (life) and perpetuation of the species (procreation), the difference and contradictions between which Meillassoux glosses over. Since these societies of reproduction appear to be oriented in one

[170] Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal, and Money*, p. 144.

single direction, their societal eye set on this single prize of staying alive and enlarging their numbers, they often appear in his writings to be hierarchically structured yet not internally contradictory, functionally oppressive but not struggling to maintain – or to throw off – such oppression.[171]

This objectivist tendency was already present in the conception of reproduction that I have called reproduction-as-domination. In constructing this concept, Meillassoux's intention was to wrench primitive societies *out* of the realm of nature and bring to light their historical character, and the contradictions that traversed them. In this respect, he set out to challenge the idea of the internal unity, self-identity or homogeneity of the primitive community that we encountered in Chapter 1 in Marx and Engels's writings, especially their early writings, which Marx especially seemed to depart from in his *Ethnological Notebooks*; and which we will unravel it in greater detail in Chapter 4 when considering the political anthropology of Pierre Clastres. Seeking to overturn these images of the primitive community as a homogeneous and egalitarian organic whole, Meillassoux's conception of reproduction-as-domination stands as a useful attempt to sketch a systematic analysis of domination via patriarchal kinship structures, to bring to light some of the ways in which systems of kinship, production and circulation are imbricated in one another in a way that transcends any simple base-superstructure determination. Yet, as was seen above, the idea of reproduction-as-domination reproduced the linear relationship between cooperation and dependency put forward by Rousseau in his account of humanity's descent from nomadic freedom into the bonds of civilisation, with sedentary agriculture the crucial turning point in between. Such a line of thought, which does not see in cooperation any dialectical possibilities for *resistance* to domination, as Marx did, evidenced early on the objectivist tendency that troubles Meillassoux's explanations – just as it troubled Engels's (Chapter 1).

Reproduction-as-domination and reproduction-as-life come into contradiction in Meillassoux's efforts to theorise social reproduction. Reproduction-as-life emerges as a concept by way of a contrast between capitalism and the subsistence community: it designates the predominance of use value, common access to the means of production, and subsistence as

[171] Meillassoux does make a series of attempts, across different articles, to identify the mechanisms for transformation out of subsistence economies. But in the end, the stimulants for these contradictions always appear to come from outside of the society.

the aim of production. Reproduction-as-domination, on the other hand, emerges by its contrast with the hunter-gatherer mode of production, designating the predominance of dependency, social control over women, hierarchy and procreation. And, to return to this chapter's contrasting epigraphs, while reproduction-as-life posits *life* as the *telos* of the community, reproduction-as-domination posits *procreation* as this same *telos*. Even while they contradict one another, both concepts of reproduction instantiate the functionalist perspective that runs through the history of economic anthropology, beginning with Malinowski and enduring in Polanyi, which considers economic arrangements to exist simply by virtue of their necessity to a social whole presumed coherent and unitary, and endowed with a single aim. In this respect, the 'epistemological break' and 'theoretical revolution' proclaimed by the founders of Marxist anthropology does not turn out, in the thought of Meillassoux, to have been an altogether clean break.

Chapter 4

Societies against the state: Pierre Clastres's anti-totalitarian primitivism

Nineteen fifty-six is the very condition of the choice of ethnology.[1]

In 1956 – the year of Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, the Soviet suppression of the Polish workers' revolts and the Hungarian Revolution, and the PCF's vote in favour of granting the government 'special powers' in Algeria – four young philosophers revoked their membership of the PCF and, that same year, decided to become anthropologists.[2] Their names were Alfred Adler, Michel Carty, Lucien Sebag and Pierre Clastres, and they had met while studying in Paris, where they had also participated in the demonstrations opposing the Algerian War.[3] In 1956 the group attended Lévi-Strauss's seminar at the École pratique des hautes études, having discovered *Tristes Tropiques*, published the preceding year.[4] Lévi-Strauss polarised their milieu, Adler recounts, but he also gave them 'the desire to leave, to see, to think elsewhere and about other things'.[5] This situation, in which the allure of anthropology coincided with a disenchantment in the French left, echoes that of the young Lévi-Strauss in the 1920s. In both cases, anthropology presented itself as the source of a new radicalism, in politics and in thought. And in both cases, this radicalism led toward a rejection of Marxism *tout court*, which appeared to these students as the discourse of an old and tired Europe.

Of this 'club of four' philosophers-turned-anthropologists,[6] it is in the writings of Clastres that the conjunction of anti-Marxism and anthropology is most acute. Against the economic anthropology of Meillassoux and Godelier, during the 1960s and the early 1970s Clastres outlined a vision for a 'political anthropology' that would investigate the nature and operation of power in primitive societies. Clastres's project was rooted in the 'Americanist'

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[1] Alfred Adler quoted in François Dosse, *History of Structuralism, Volume 1: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 162.
[2] Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, p. 161.
[3] Alfred Adler, 'Michel Izard, L'État en Afrique noire et Hegel' in Olivier Herrenschmidt, Alfred Adler, Charles-Henry Pradelles de Latour, Gérard Lenclud, Emmanuel Terray, Dominique Casajus and Fabio Viti, 'Hommage: Michel Izard', *Journal des Africanistes* 84 (2), 2014, pp. 221–265.
[4] Patrick Wilken, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 227.
[5] Ibid., p. 232.
[6] Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, p. 161.

branch of French anthropology, in contrast to the 'Africanist' branch developed by Balandier and Meillassoux. In this respect and in others, Clastres followed closely in the footsteps of Lévi-Strauss. After working as an assistant to Lévi-Strauss in his Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale, Clastres did his fieldwork among the Guayaki (today known as the Aché), the Chulupi (now Nivaklé), and the Guarani in Paraguay, and later also visited the Yanomami in Venezuela. But even before he travelled to South America, Clastres had already formed the outlines of a theory of power in primitive societies that was deeply marked by Lévi-Strauss's early writings on politics and 'foreign relations' among indigenous peoples of the Amazon and especially Lévi-Strauss's arguments about the 'powerless chief'.[7] By the mid-1970s, Clastres had developed these ideas into his famous thesis that primitive societies were 'societies against the State'.[8] That is, primitive societies were defined, for Clastres, by their rejection of political division – the division between 'those who command and those who obey' – which he considered to represent the germ of the state form.[9] For Clastres, this embryonic separation preceded and underpinned all forms of economic division. This political anthropology was thus based on a reversal of the idea, popularised by Engels in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, of the anteriority of the division of labour in relation to the emergence of political power. For Clastres, the primacy of the political was a fact of both modern and primitive society. The refusal of Marxism to recognise this fact accounted, at least in part, for the left's sequence of failures over the course of the twentieth century.

While Clastres's theses on power in primitive societies appear, on the surface, far removed from the problems of 1960s and 1970s France, they bear the shadow of the critiques of Stalinism, Soviet bureaucracy, the state, and political representation that were prominent on the left during the post-'56 period, and especially in the political milieu of which Clastres was a part. This milieu was marked by the influence of the group Socialisme ou Barbarie and the left-libertarian animus of its founders, Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, with whom Clastres was a close associate. These figures and their ideas also became increasingly caught up in what Christofferson has called 'the antitotalitarian moment' which, reaching its height around 1975, would be an important component of the undoing of French Marxism.[10] In this

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[7] Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1987), pp. 27–47.
[8] Ibid., pp. 189–218.
[9] Pierre Clastres, *Entretien avec l'anti-mythes* (Paris: Sens&Tonka, 2012), p. 16.
[10] Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left*.

chapter I argue that by way of his political anthropology, Clastres transforms the critique of left bureaucracy into an ontological problem of mediation and immediacy in relation to the political community as such. In doing so, he renders primitive society as a metaphysically ‘undivided’ whole that wards off, or refuses, any separation of power from the ‘body’ of society. In this primitive universe, nothing can stand in for anything else: society acts as a whole, immediately, in its homogenous and self-identical being. Clastres’s primitive utopia thus has a tendency to metamorphose, in the blink of an eye, into the image of a totalitarian dystopia, in which any desire for separation from the presumed functional unity of society it repressed at its source. It is never entirely clear how Clastres interprets, or whether he intends, these contradictions. His primitive world is in no clear sense a model or exemplar – it offers no obvious moral lessons or transferrable political practices. Rather, I argue that it might best be read as a speculative expression of a blocked desire for non-alienation, at a moment in which every avenue for putting such desires and imaginaries into practice seemed to be closing.

This is quite a different reading to those offered by the ‘anarchist anthropologists’ that have sought to revive Clastres’s legacy in recent years. While not uncritical of Clastres, they tend pass quickly over the contradictions in his accounts of power in primitive societies and instead to draw positive lessons from his thought, to support anti-state political practices or philosophical imaginaries. For David Graeber, Clastres provided the raw materials for ‘a theory of imaginary counterpower’ around which a society of mutual aid and direct democracy might be built,[11] while James Scott finds in Clastres an anti-state imaginary that is a stimulus for his ethnographic works attesting to practices of ‘everyday resistance’ against the state in peasant communities in southeast Asia.[12] Viveiros de Castro, whose anarchism take a more ‘ontological’ than political form,[13] presents Clastres’s ideas as closely related to those of Deleuze and Guattari, seeing him as a thinker of multiplicity, deterritorialisation and radical alterity – and arguing that it is for this reason that he has been cast out of ‘the polite society of

[11] David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), p. 24.
[12] See James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
[13] Viveiros de Castro has been described as ‘as much an anarchist activist as an anthropologist’; see Charbonnier, Salmon and Skafish (eds), *Comparative Metaphysics*, p. 8. His writing itself, however, is presented as an attempt to radicalise political anarchy to ‘ontological anarchy’; see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Who is afraid of the ontological wolf? Some comments on an ongoing anthropological debate’, CUSAS Annual Marilyn Strathern Lecture, Rio de Janeiro, 2014.

contemporary Academe'.[14] For Viveiros de Castro, Clastres remained one of the last true thinkers of difference: impervious to the critiques of primitivism and exoticism, he was committed to intensifying, rather than diminishing, what was radically other about the indigenous societies he studied. As such, he was one of the few anthropologists willing to 'take seriously' the worlds and 'philosophical choices' of indigenous peoples. For Viveiros de Castro, he thus instantiates the role anthropology can play in affirming the 'ontological self-determination' of its subjects.[15] Graeber, Scott, and Viveiros de Castro all seek to (re)claim Clastres, if in different ways, as an anarchist ancestor – a thinker of radical self-determination and multiplicity.

This chapter suggests that the lineage of anarchism – while not unrelated to some of Clastres's ideas and political leanings – does not entirely accurately describe the anti-Communist, left-libertarian milieu of which he was a part. In doing so, it draws instead on Samuel Moyn's intellectual history of Clastres as a key figure in the 1970s critique of totalitarianism, and as a representative of the turn away from Marxism and especially Hegelian dialectics in French political philosophy in this period.[16] For Moyn, Clastres's analysis is guided by his teleological conception of the state in relation to world history: 'Having, in a sense, found the end of history in the Stalinist dictatorship, Clastres and his fellow ex-communists transmuted their earlier idealism by seeking an alternative to Stalinism before universal history's beginning.'[17] This alternative was the prehistoric present of primitive societies, which Moyn argues represented for these thinkers 'a point of view external to the dialectic.'[18] With these arguments, Moyn's analysis provides the point of departure for this chapter's investigation into the post-1956 conjuncture and its relationship to Clastres's anthropology. In what follows, I take a closer look at the ideas of Socialisme ou Barbarie and at the role played by the Algerian War in this group and wider milieu, as a foundation for my analysis of Clastres's conception of the state, his disputes with Marxist anthropology, and

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[14] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'The Untimely, Again', in Pierre Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, trans. Jeanine Herman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), p. 18.

[15] Ibid., p. 21.

[16] Samuel Moyn, 'Of Savagery and Civil Society: Pierre Clastres and the Transformation of French Political Thought', *Modern Intellectual History*, 1 (1), 2004, pp. 55–80. See also his 'Claude Lefort, Political Anthropology, and Symbolic Division', in *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*, ed. Marin Plot (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 51–70 and 'Savage and Modern Liberty: Marcel Gauchet and the Origins of New French Thought', *European Journal of Political Theory* 4 (2), 2005, pp. 164–187.

[17] Moyn, 'Of Savagery and Civil Society', p. 57.

[18] Ibid.

finally his notion of primitive societies as 'undivided' societies. Unlike Moyn, however, I do not conclude that Clastres's writings act as a simple precursor to neoliberal political thought. Clastres's primitive societies, suspended between total freedom and total unfreedom, seem to me rather to be symptoms of a sense of political closure resulting from the failure of successive projects for transformation in both Europe and the Third World. From Clastres's perspective, the politics of state societies – in the West, in the East, and in the Third World – had exhausted themselves, showing themselves to be incapable of bringing about any type of genuine emancipation. One had to move to the source of the problem, which lay somewhere in the metaphysics of civilisation itself.

1 1956: Anthropology and the anti-Stalinist left

If 1956 was a turning point in the history of the left globally, it was decisively so for France. The PCF was at the time one of the most powerful political forces in the country, with 25 percent of the vote and four hundred thousand members.[19] Yet it was also resistant to the de-Stalinisation beginning to take place within other Communist Parties, including that of the Soviet Union itself. After refusing to acknowledge the existence of Khrushchev's report, the PCF supported the invasion of Hungary, arguing that it was necessary to quell Hungarian fascism.[20] Many intellectuals resigned from the party in response to these events. Jean-Paul Sartre condemned the invasion of Hungary and broke his ties with the PCF, writing of Party officials: 'Each sentence they utter, each action they take is the culmination of thirty years of lies and sclerosis.'[21] Khrushchev's revelations were not new to most PCF members. But prior to 1956, leaving the party had been felt by many to represent not only a class betrayal but a betrayal of the hopes for the left that had briefly illuminated the postwar international order. The events of 1956, on the contrary, as Foucault reflected, 'led us to stop being forced to hope for anything.'[22] This experience of 1956 as a kind of melancholic liberation was common to many who left the PCF at the time. The sociologist René Lourau described 1956 as 'a kind of

[19] See, for example, Jane Jenson and George Ross, '1956: French Communists Turning a Corner', *French Politics and Society* 5 (1/2), 1987, pp. 30–36; David Drake, 'The "Anti-Existentialist Offensive": The French Communist Party against Sartre (1944–1948)', *Sartre Studies International* 16 (1), 2010, pp. 69–94.
[20] Christopherson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, p. 38.
[21] Nicholas Birns, *Theory after Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2010), p. 168.
[22] Foucault quoted in Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, p. 160.

ceremonious massacre' which nevertheless 'made possible a clean sweep, a big breath of fresh air, a hygienic act.'[23]

The loss of support for the PCF was not only a result of the events in Eastern Europe but also of the positions the Party had taken in response to the decolonisation movements that erupted during the 1950s, and above all the Algerian War. By 1956, the War had reached crisis point. In March, the PCF had voted to allow the French government 'special powers' to suspend civil liberties in Algeria and impose martial law on the country, while FLN supporters were expelled from the party.[24] Aimé Césaire left the PCF in October 1956, citing in his departing 'Letter to Maurice Thorez' (the General Secretary of the PCF) the 'French Stalinism' of the PCF and the vote for special powers in Algeria,[25] but also the PCF's more general paternalistic and stifling attitude toward anticolonial movements. He wrote: 'the colonial question … cannot be treated as a part of a more important whole, a part over which others can negotiate or come to whatever compromise seems appropriate in light of a general situation, of which they alone have the right to take stock.'[26] Following Stalin's lead, the PCF had failed to view Third World struggles on their own terms and outside of the geopolitical designs of Russia, nor to recognise the need for colonised peoples to determine their own struggles and alliances. The PCF, its officials governed by 'inveterate assimilationism', 'unconscious chauvinism' and a 'fairly simplistic faith, which they share with bourgeois Europeans, in the omnilateral superiority of the West',[27] maintained no more than an instrumental orientation toward struggles against racism and colonialism. 'What I want is that Marxism and communism be placed in the service of black peoples,' Césaire wrote, 'and not black peoples in the service of Marxism and communism.'[28] For Césaire as for many others, the PCF's response to the events of 1956 confirmed that French Communism in its obstinacy *lagged behind* the rest of the world, and especially the Third World:

> We expected from the French Communist Party an honest self-critique; a disassociation with crimes that would exonerate it; not a renunciation, but a new and solemn

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[23] Lourau quoted in Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, p. 160.
[24] Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, p. 40.
[25] Aimé Césaire, 'Letter to Maurice Thorez', *Social Text* 28 (2), 2010, pp. 144.
[26] Ibid., p. 147.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., p. 150.

> departure; something like the Communist Party founded a second time. . . . Instead, at Le Havre, we saw nothing but obstinacy in error; perseverance in lies; the absurd pretension of having never been wrong … Never before have I been so conscious of so great a historical lag afflicting a great people.[29]

Against the PCF's 'senile incapacity' and 'childish tricks',[30] which served only to divide and dampen anticolonial struggle, Césaire contrasts 'the great breath of unity passing over all the black countries', arguing that 'in this context, it is life itself that decides.'[31] These sentiments were not Césaire's alone. The events of 1956 had made it clear to many on the French left that it was the Third World, and no longer the Soviet Union, that represented the model and ally for revolutionary politics. As François Dosse puts it, this was a moment marked by 'a clear tendency to swap Moscow for Peking, Hanoi, and Havana.'[32]

This turn toward the Third World was also palpable in the academic and literary sphere. Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, published in 1955, had already received wide acclaim for its poetic portrayal of indigenous societies in South America and elsewhere, rousing an interest in anthropology on the part of a number of French intellectuals. Among these was Clastres. 'Clastres was crazy about *Tristes Tropiques*,' Adler recounts.[33] '[He] read it four or five times.' Dosse and Moyn both interpret this sudden interest in anthropology in terms of a rejection of Hegelian Marxism – or, rather, Marxism defined by a deterministic dialectic of history – considered by many in this generation to be associated with Stalinism (even if other forms of Hegelian Marxism, such as that of the Frankfurt School, had broken from Stalinism decades earlier). As Moyn puts it: 'Structuralist anthropology discovered "cold" societies before the existence of the hot and historical ones that had given rise to communist horror; in a certain sense, then, it provided a point of view external to the dialectic.'[34] Lévi-Strauss's project also represented a way out of what seemed to some to be an epistemological dead-end. From the perspective of structuralism, political questions were a transitory gloss on much deeper structures of cognition and systems of meaning, and the glacial shifts of human civilisation as

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[29] Ibid., p. 146.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., p. 148.
[32] Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, p. 164.
[33] Adler quoted in Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, p. 161.
[34] Moyn, 'Of Savagery and Civil Society', p. 57.

a whole, that constituted the real mysteries of humanity. In this way, anthropology represented a site of thought above and beyond the exhausted options of the European left: radical without being partisan, and providing a space for utopian imaginaries and theoretical novelty.

In the 1950s, Clastres was also strongly influenced by the group Socialisme ou Barbarie (SouB). Led by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, known together as the Chalieu-Montal tendency,[35] SouB began as a small group within the Fourth International but broke from Trotskyism in 1948 in response to the latter's insufficient criticism of Soviet bureaucracy and what the group considered to be its out-of-date Bolshevism.[36] The group published the first issue of its eponymous journal a year later. Its central text, also entitled 'Socialisme ou Barbarie', presented a comprehensive analysis of the world situation, which it argued was governed by the tendency towards an increasing concentration of capital around the two 'super-states' of the US and the USSR.[37] In the absence of a successful proletarian revolution, SouB speculated, this situation would likely end in a Third World War, to be 'the most catastrophic and terrible ever seen'.[38]

The new proletarian revolution would have to avoid the pitfalls of the Russian experience. To this end, Soviet bureaucracy had to be understood for what it was: not 'a temporary excrescence grafted onto the worker's movement', but itself a new modality of capitalist exploitation.[39] While the Soviet system retained some appearance of having implemented the goals of the workers' movement – it had abolished private property, nationalised industry, and implemented economic planning – behind this appearance was, in fact, 'a more intense, better coordinated, and, in a word, *rationalised* form of exploitation.'[40] The new system was based on the replacement of the traditional bourgeoisie with a strata of bureaucrats, to whom the system's profits flowed. The bureaucratic strata came 'oozing out of every pore' of the traditional unions and parties, which, claiming to represent the proletariat, had abandoned their revolutionary aims.[41] Essential to the appearance of this anti-worker

[35] Marcel Van der Linden, 'Socialisme ou Barbarie: A French Revolutionary Group (1949–65)', *Left History* 5 (1), 1997, p. 8.
[36] Socialisme ou Barbarie, 'Socialisme ou Barbarie', *Socialisme ou Barbarie: Organe de Critique et d'Orientation Révolutionnaire* 1, 1949, pp. 1–46.
[37] Ibid., p. 17.
[38] Ibid., p. 7.
[39] Ibid., p. 2.
[40] Ibid., p. 11.
[41] Ibid.

bureaucracy was the re-stratification of the production process through the emergence of managerial, technical and 'specialist' roles separate from those of the mass of labourers. In this way, SouB argued that the conflict between the propertied and the dispossessed on which classical capitalism was based had been replaced, in the Soviet system, by the conflict between 'directors [*dirigeants*] and executors [*executants*] in the production process.'[42]

For SouB, the Soviet situation prompted a fundamental shift in Marxist analysis. The axis of domination had been transferred, in the Soviet case, from property to power, and from the economic to the political. Political economy, however 'critical', could no longer capture these dynamics: what was needed was a new type of political *philosophy*. Questions involving structures of power, management, and politics could be overlooked only at the risk of replacing bourgeois masters with bureaucratic ones. A successful future proletarian revolution had to commit itself to the immediate abolition of the state, whether capitalist or bureaucratic – 'i.e. the State as organized coercion' – as well as the abolition of the distinction between managers and executors 'in relation to both production and social life in general'.[43] Specifically, the management of production was to be organised on a collective basis and placed, in a *genuine* way, in the hands of workers. More generally, the proletariat would need to eschew representation as a political modality.[44] 'If it is not the proletariat itself, as a totality, that takes up the initiative and direction of social activities at every moment – both during and, especially, after the revolution – it will only have succeeded in changing masters,' the group wrote.[45]

Socialisme ou Barbarie's 1949 statement anticipates the way in which radical thought after 1956, especially from the non-communist left, would seek to supplement Marxism with a political philosophy capable of rethinking questions of power, division, and domination as distinct and, to some degree at least, autonomous from economic questions. It is perhaps not surprising, considering the conjuncture outlined above, that this new political philosophy found some of its sources in anthropology and was based, in part, on a critique of Marxism as an *ethnocentrism*. By the early 1960s, Socialisme ou Barbarie was publishing a long serial text by Castoriadis (under the pseudonym of Paul Cardan) which repudiated Marxism on the basis of

[42] Ibid., p. 10. *Executant* is often translated as subordinate or underling, but this loses the reference to a division between mental and manual labour, which is important in SouB's analysis.
[43] Ibid., p. 42.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

its 'socio-centrism' and looked to primitive societies for a demonstration of the inadequacy of categories such as that of the economy.[46] And in a 1962 text circulated within SouB entitled 'For a New Orientation', Castoriadis proposed the group conduct ethnographic studies of proletarian life, and study ethnographies of primitive societies – such as that of Margaret Mead – to bring into relief the symbolic organisation of social life under capitalism.[47] Exploring the anthropological interests of Castoriadis and Lefort, Jacob Collins writes: 'Castoriadis believed, as he wrote elsewhere, that capitalist societies were undergoing "a profound crisis, anthropological in character," with "the crumbling of frameworks and values," it would be necessary to produce texts underscoring "the revolutionary signification of ethnology."'[48] Lefort, too, had been strongly influenced by his readings of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, and anthropology certainly had something to do with his departure from Marxism; he reflected that around this time he 'acquired the conviction that the phenomena of so-called primitive societies called into question the principles of the philosophy of History – those of Hegel and Marx.'[49]

It is important to emphasise the role of the Algerian War – and especially its ending and aftermath – in SouB's criticisms of bureaucracy and the state. The group had supported Algerian independence while also being critical of the FLN, positions which were articulated largely through Jean-François Lyotard in his role as SouB's correspondent on Algerian affairs.[50] Lyotard was deeply critical of the PCF's reluctance to support the FLN struggle and of its 'systematic sabotage' of the working-class opposition to the war in France[51] – and himself was involved in the solidarity network of *porteurs de valises* for the FLN.[52] But his articles for SouB on the Algerian situation involved a sustained analysis of the social composition of the FLN,[53] the nature of its 'bourgeois leadership' and the class antagonisms this concealed,[54] and the way the FLN was 'already [in 1957] preparing itself for the role of the administrative

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[46] Paul Cardan, 'History and revolution: A revolutionary critique of historical materialism', *Solidarity* 38, London, 1971. This was originally published also under the name Paul Cardan in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* as a long serial text between 1961 and 1965 entitled 'Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire'.
[47] See Collins, *The Anthropological Turn*, pp. 84–5.
[48] Ibid., p. 85.
[49] Lefort quoted in Collins, *The Anthropological Turn*, p. 85.
[50] Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (London: UCL Press, 2003); I am grateful to Alberto Toscano for pointing this out to me. See also Toscano, 'The Name of Algeria'.
[51] Lyotard, *Political Writings*, p. 188.
[52] Ibid., p. 168.
[53] Ibid., pp. 187–196.
[54] Ibid., p. 198.

stratum of Algerian society' and 'objectively working to bring about a confusion between the present organization and the future state.'[55] This did not mean, however, that militants should withdraw their support for the FLN. On the contrary, the fact had to be recognised that their struggle for national independence was *different* from the class struggles of Europe. 'We have to get rid of a certain kind of patronizing Marxism: an ideology has no less *reality* (even and above all if it is *false*) than the objective relations to which this Marxism wants to reduce it,' Lyotard wrote.[56] The first step in the analysis of the Algerian struggle had to be 'to accord Algerian nationalist ideology the full weight of reality.'[57]

Lyotard also writes that the end of the Algerian War and its aftermath prompted a rethinking of SouB's purpose and reason for existence. In particular, he suggests that the end of the Algerian War was central to SouB's thesis of 'depoliticization' – the notion that the 'great figure of the alternative' – the hero or subject of history – had been 'erased'.[58] SouB disbanded in 1966, by which time most of their members had shed their earlier Marxism and turned increasingly to questions of political philosophy, religion and anthropology. It was around this time that Clastres – who had been taught by Lefort at the Sorbonne in the 1950s and known the group for many years[59] – began to think and collaborate with Castoriadis and Lefort, along with Marcel Gauchet, who had been a student of Clastres,[60] on the journals *Textures* and *Libre*. These two small Parisian reviews provide a reflection of the antitotalitarian afterlife of SouB's leading figures: Marcel Gauchet and Claude Lefort joined the editorial team of *Textures* from 1971, introducing a return to political philosophy infused with anti-Stalinist themes.[61] Clastres published an article on Anatoly Marchenko in *Textures* in 1975.[62] *Libre*, the subtitle of which was 'Politics – Anthropology – Philosophy', which was edited by Miguel Abensour, Cornelius Castoriadis, Pierre Clastres, Marcel Gauchet, Claude Lefort, and Maurice Luciani, came to exemplify the conjunction of political anthropology with a distinct left-

[55] Ibid., p. 195.
[56] Ibid., p. 199.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., p. 169.
[59] Collins, *The Anthropological Turn*, p. 92.
[60] Moyn, 'Savage and Modern Liberty', p. 167.
[61] Franck Berthot, '*Textures* et *Libre* (1971–1980): Une tentative de renouvellement de la philosophie politique en France', in François Hourmant and Jean Baudouin (eds), *Les Revues et la dynamique des ruptures* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007), pp. 105–129.
[62] Pierre Clastres, 'Martchenko,' *Textures* 10–11, 1975, pp. 45–46.

libertarian, anti-totalitarian, and anti-Marxist orientation.[63] *Libre* announced itself as a space for thought beyond 'a bourgeois ideology that has run out of steam and a Marxism that has become a dead language of the powers-that-be', which sought 'to return to the free thought that is born from the interrogation of *things themselves*. Hitherto unseen figures of the social, unknowns of history, the overturned face of man, all remain to be thought in our era.'[64] This gesture of reversal – the turning-over of the face of humanity to reveal its non-alienated or authentic underside – is, as we have begun to see in this thesis, a quintessential primitivist gesture. In *Libre* and among ex-communists and former-Marxists in the 1970s, especially those who had once invested significant hope in Algeria and the Third World in general as the new space for revolutionary struggle, it took on a particular meaning. The 'hitherto unseen figures of the social' and the 'unknowns of history' appeared, in this milieu and at this time, outside of the temporality of decolonisation. It was the *primitive*, no longer the all-too-historical *colonised*, that now represented the source of radical possibility.

2 Machines against the State: the powerless chief

For Clastres, primitive societies were first and foremost 'societies against the State'. This designation, which was also the title of his first collection of essays, was a play on the convention of classifying primitive societies as societies *without* States. But to define a society by what it lacked, Clastres argued, was to perpetuate the evolutionism that twentieth-century anthropology ought to have been rid of. Whether the missing object was a writing system, a Neolithic revolution, surplus production or political power, the evolutionary postulate interpreted the absence as a deficiency or failure, rendering primitive societies incomplete – 'embryonic, nascent, poorly developed'.[65] Such infantilisation had, of course, long helped to justify ideologies of liberal imperialism or 'development', whereby primitive societies were depicted as 'sociological axolotls, incapable of reaching the normal adult state without external aid.'[66] The evolutionary schema forced the heterogeneity of world history into single line of development with Western Europe as its culmination, rendering primitive societies as 'the

[63] See Miguel Abensour, Cornelius Castoriadis, Pierre Clastres, Marcel Gauchet, Claude Lefort, and Maurice Luciani (eds), *Libre* 1 (Paris: Payot, 1977).
[64] See Abensour et al. (eds), *Libre* 1 (Paris: Payot, 1977), back cover.
[65] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, p. 18.
[66] Ibid.

image of what we have ceased to be', while 'for them our culture is the image of what they have to become.'[67] Clastres sought to contest the negative determination of the stateless society by arguing that primitive societies were constituted not by a passive lack but by an active *refusal* – they were stateless not by accident, but by design.

The mechanism for this refusal was contained in the example of the 'powerless chief', described in Clastres's early essay, 'Exchange and Power: Philosophy of the Indian Chieftainship'.[68] First published in 1962, prior to his first fieldwork expedition a year later, the essay outlined a theory of power in primitive societies that lent heavily on Lévi-Strauss's exchange paradigm, and was in many ways an elaboration of Lévi-Strauss's 1944 article 'The Social and Psychological Aspects of Chieftainship in an American Tribe'. Clastres's starting point was that the nature of power in indigenous Amazonian societies was quite different to that of power in modern European societies. In 'primitive society', the chief had no coercive authority over the tribe. He did not own or control the means of production, nor have access to any means of violence over the tribespeople. If he decided to take the tribe to war against its will, it would simply abandon him; if he accumulated resources beyond his own modest needs, they might do the same. In the end, the chief could only reflect the will of the tribe back at itself. How were we to make sense of this form of power – 'a "power" that is practically powerless, of a chieftainship without authority'?[69]

In examining the way it operated, Clastres stumbled across an elegant idea. The three major functions of the chief (generosity, oratory, and polygamy) corresponded exactly to the three kinds of 'signs' (goods, words, and women) which Lévi-Strauss had argued were the basis for society in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. But, Clastres argued, this was a negative correspondence, since the chief was *exempt* from the rules of exchange that governed the rest of society: while the chief was obliged to speak and to give, he was rarely listened to or given anything in return. And, inversely, while polygamy was prohibited for the rest of the tribe, it was permitted for the chief. In this way – and in a quintessentially structuralist analysis – Clastres suggested that the chief's powerlessness was directly related to this inverted position in relation to the group. In the same way that Lévi-Strauss had argued that all structure cohered

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, pp. 27–48.
[69] Ibid., p. 29.

around an absent centre, Clastres argued that primitive society was organised around the *absence* of the chief's authority. Lévi-Strauss's theory was thus turned against itself: primitive society did not cohere around exchange, but around *non-exchange*. Primitive societies 'chose to let themselves be founders of authority, but in such a manner as to let power appear only as a negativity that is immediately subdued.'[70] The powerless chief was the absent centre of their political life, his empty authority a warning as to the dangers of centre itself, were it to be occupied. This was what Clastres called the 'political philosophy' of primitive societies:

> … it is as though these societies formed their political sphere in terms of an intuition which for them would take the place of a rule: namely, that power is essentially coercion; that the unifying activity of the political function would be performed not on the basis of the structure of society, and in conformity with it, but on the basis of an uncontrollable and antagonistic beyond; that in essence power is no more than the furtive manifestation of nature in *its* power.[71]

In primitive society, coercive authority was viewed as the manifestation of an asocial *nature*, which needed to be suppressed. As the realisation and unfolding of this coercive authority, the state represented not the crowning achievement of culture, as in social contract theories, but rather culture's *failure* to suppress or transcend nature. Unlike state societies, primitive societies had *decided* to reject coercive power; they had had 'a very early premonition that power's transcendence conceals a mortal risk for the group, that the principle of an authority which is external and the creator of its own legality is a challenge to culture itself.'[72] Such societies did not need to have experienced the state in order to know where coercive power might lead. In a later article drawing on the work of Étienne La Boétie on the problem of voluntary servitude, Clastres would outline the way the 'freedom' of primitive societies was enforced by a law that prevented any one part of society from seizing power and also prevented any part from developing the desire for submission.[73] 'To its children, the tribe proclaims: you

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[70] Ibid., p. 45.
[71] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, p. 44.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, pp. 171–188.

are all equal, no one among you is worth more than another, no one worth less than another'.[74] This law, which was not quite the same as egalitarianism, was inscribed into the bodies of its members through initiation rituals such as scarification, and the punishment of those who broke it was severe: 'when a chief wants to act the chief, he is excluded from society, abandoned. If he insists, the others may kill him: total exclusion, radical conjuration.'[75]

Again – primitive societies did not fail to develop a state; they refused to, and this refusal was at the core of their social organisation. They were endowed with a 'veritable defense mechanism' by which they rejected any manifestation of political power, which they understood to be a germ of their ultimate destruction.[76] Here Clastres should not be interpreted as 'granting agency' to peoples represented throughout the history of anthropology as passive or 'without history', however. The refusal that Clastres theorises is a structural refusal, to be sought in 'the field of unconscious activity by means of which the group fashions its models'.[77] The intentionality he describes is similarly a 'sociological intentionality' – it is the will of society as such, which may or may not coincide with the will of the individuals within it.[78] Hence, he writes, 'the refusal of power relations, the refusal to obey, is not in any way, as the missionaries and travellers thought, a character trait of the Savages, but the effect of the functioning of social machines on an individual level, the result of collective action and decision.'[79] Primitive societies were machines against the state, social apparatuses that functioned to prevent the monopoly on coercion from arising, by crushing the earliest signs of its appearance.

Clastres's arguments about non-state societies in South America tended toward speculative and philosophical conclusions: they bracketed sustained historical, geographical or political-economic analysis.[80] Philippe Descola, who had also done his fieldwork on indigenous groups in the Americas, suggested that Clastres's conclusions about non-state societies in the Americas could only result from a wilful blindness to the effects of colonisation

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[74] Ibid., p. 181.
[75] Ibid., p. 182.
[76] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, p. 46.
[77] Ibid., p. 42.
[78] Ibid., p. 44.
[79] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 179.
[80] Clastres's *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, which discusses in detail the encroachment of Paraguayan settlers on the territories of the Aché, is an exception here. See Pierre Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, trans. Paul Auster (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

on the continent. In fact, Desola argued, the lack of hierarchy in some indigenous societies was more likely the result of a *regression* brought about by centuries of colonial violence: 'Their current egalitarianism is not the fruit of a collective and obstinate will to oppose the emergence of coercive power, but rather the effect of a profound decomposition of the social tissue, eaten away at by demographic dismemberment, dispossession of land, military violence and the expulsion into inhospitable isolates.'[81] Descola argues this on the basis of pre-conquest archaeological studies which attested 'to the existence of complex and stratified societies' in a process of constant transformation: 'from the North of Columbia to the South of Bolivia, hundreds of local chieftainships and small theocratic kingdoms succeeded one another in the course of centuries.'[82] Moreover, Descola argued, it was unclear why these societies marked by the 'powerless chief' should be conceived as chieftainships at all. To include Jivaro or Yanomami 'bigmen', Yagua and Makuna 'house masters', and Suya 'conductors' in the same category of 'chief' seemed more likely to serve the interests of philosophical speculation than to reflect the specific conditions of these societies, Descola argued.[83]

If we follow Descola's arguments, colonialism would represent the condition or even the origin of the 'political philosophy' of the South American societies that are Clastres's subject. They would then once more be defined by a force or process external to them, and stripped of their autonomy and intentionality. This is why it is necessary for his account to bracket this colonial history. Clastres's discussion of the powerless chief is then not so much an ethnographic discussion as a kind of political theory parable. The speculative rejection of power that it contains is connected to a similarly speculative notion of the 'State' – the state form or the state's 'universal essence' (which Clastres admits 'is not realized in a uniform manner in all state formations', but which nevertheless exists *as a form*).[84] This state form serves above all as an ethical principle, opposed in a fundamental sense to the freedom which Clastres understands radical thought (especially Marxism) to have lost sight of. As he warns: 'the totalitarian State in its various contemporary configurations is there to remind us that however profound the loss of freedom, it is never lost enough, we never stop losing it.'[85]

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[81] Philippe Descola, 'La chefferie amérindienne dans l'anthropologie politique', *Revue française de science politique* 38 (5), 1988, p. 819.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., p. 822.
[84] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 177.
[85] Ibid., pp. 176–7.

3 Machines against production: original affluence

If primitive society was for Clastres an 'anti-State machine', it was equally an 'anti-production machine'.[86] That is, it had developed mechanisms to prevent not only the emergence of power relations but the production of any kind of surplus. It was due to this lack of surplus production that primitive economies, especially those that consisted of hunting and gathering as opposed to gardening or domestication, were categorised as 'subsistence economies' in much of the anthropological literature. For Clastres, subsistence designated bare survival – *mere* subsistence – a constant struggle against nature and the constant fear that its contingencies might lead to famine and death, reproducing 'the time-tested and ever serviceable image of the destitution of the Savages.'[87] To live in a subsistence economy was not conceivable as a choice; it could be explained only by technological (and ultimately, cultural) deficiency. Extending his ethnological 'Copernican turn' to the domain of the economy,[88] Clastres sought to reverse the perspective of this analysis by reading the lack of surplus as a refusal of overproduction. Primitive economies functioned precisely to satisfy their needs and to prevent unnecessary labour: 'production is restricted to replenishing the stock of energy expended'.[89] Primitive economies were characterised not by deficiency but instead by 'the refusal of a useless *excess*, the determination to make productive activity agree with the satisfaction of needs'.[90]

In making this argument, Clastres is heavily indebted to the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins and particularly his essay 'The Original Affluent Society', which was first published in French in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1968, and later as the leading text of his influential *Stone Age Economics* (1972).[91] Examining a number of ethnographic studies on indigenous Australian groups and !Kung Bushmen, Sahlins's central argument was that in fact a remarkably low proportion of time – two to three hours a day – was devoted to labour in hunter-gatherer societies relative to modern industrial and feudal societies. Hunter-gatherers rarely encountered periods of famine, especially in the absence of colonial dispossession or forced migration, nor were their relations with the natural world characterised by struggle,

[86] Ibid., p. 230.
[87] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 191
[88] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, pp. 7–26.
[89] Clastres, Archaeology of Violence, p. 197.
[90] Ibid., p. 195.
[91] Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*.

precarity or fear, as had been often presumed. Rather than unending labour for meagre returns, the hunter-gatherer economy was premised on vast amounts of free time and general economic confidence. 'Free from market obsessions of scarcity,' Sahlins concluded, 'hunters' economic propensities may be more consistently predicated on abundance than our own.'[92] Hunter-gatherer societies proved that scarcity was an invention of modern capitalism, which had created needs superfluous to survival and, in doing so, driven the increase of labour time. For Sahlins, the hunter-gatherer economy brought into relief the central tendencies of the capitalist economy – infinite production, not the satisfaction of human needs – and the dazzling abstractions on which it was built: 'it was not until culture neared the height of its material achievements that it erected a shrine to the Unattainable: *Infinite Needs*.'[93]

Clastres wrote the introduction to Sahlins's *Stone Age Economics* when it was translated into French in 1976.[94] He praised what he considered to be the profound paradigm shift prompted by Sahlins's work, throwing into question the network of concepts at the heart of Western political economy: production, scarcity, work, needs, and even the concept of the economy itself. As Clastres put it, Sahlins had revealed that in primitive societies the economy – 'as a sector unfolding in an autonomous manner in the social arena'[95] – did not exist, in a way that closely reflected the substantivist insights of Polanyi discussed in the previous chapter. This resistance to economic abstraction was again portrayed by Clastres as intentional on the part of primitive societies: these were 'societies that refuse economy'.[96] This refusal of economy was closely related to their refusal of power, since the absence of a surplus was also a means of keeping at bay inequality derived from any concentration of resources. Along with the universal refusal to work beyond what was necessary, primitive societies had developed a variety of mechanisms to prevent the unequal distribution of goods, including food. Guayaki hunters, for example, were prohibited from eating their own catch, thus decoupling hunting proficiency from reward; in many other societies, generalised reciprocity made it impossible to refuse another's request for a deferred exchange of goods; and one of the key requirements of the 'powerless chief' was a generosity that could at times drive him into poverty. But

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[92] Ibid., p. 2.
[93] Ibid., p. 39.
[94] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, pp. 189–208.
[95] Ibid., p. 198.
[96] Ibid.

primitive societies' refusal of economy was also a refusal of the *category* of the economy, defined in terms of the separation of the economic from the political – lest 'the economic escape the social and turn against society by opening a gap between the rich and the poor, alienating some.'[97]

As 'machines against production', the very logic of primitive societies was antithetical to that of Marxism, with its focus on production as a lens through which to view world history and at times as a moral value in its own right. Clastres's most virulent criticisms on the subject of the economy were directed against Marxist anthropology. In his polemical text 'Marxists and their anthropology' (published in *Libre*), Clastres wrote: 'What is the Marxist measure of social facts? It is the *economy*. Marxism is an economism, it reduces the social body to economic infrastructure, the social is the economical.'[98] Portraying Godelier and Meillasoux as followers of Stalinist orthodoxy – 'the Lysenkos of the human sciences'[99] – Clastres argued that Marxist anthropology has 'a discourse prepared in advance on primitive society'.[100] Using concepts generated from the analysis of capitalist society (relations of production, productive forces), it bulldozed ethnographic specificity, crushing its unique social configurations to fit the laws of capitalist motion and the dogma of 'Holy Production'.[101] For Clastres, 'Marxists', and *especially* Marxist anthropology, 'have nothing to do with Marx,' whose analysis of nineteenth-century capitalism was never intended as a general science of history.[102] Marxist anthropology, unlike Marxism, was little more than the unthinking outgrowth or calcification of a single, flawed principle: the priority of the economic over the political. Another reversal was in order.

4 The anteriority of the political

Reducing Marxism to an axiomatics of economy, Clastres constructs an axiomatics of the political in response. Its key principle is the logical and historical priority of the political in relation to the economic. This principle is presented in opposition to Marxist understandings of the state as an epiphenomenon or outgrowth of more fundamental class relations. From the

[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., p. 234.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid., p. 225
[101] Ibid., p. 230.
[102] Ibid., p. 233.

Marxist perspective, Clastres wrote, 'in both the logical and chronological sense, the state comes after society is divided into classes, into the rich and the poor, those who exploit and those who are exploited. The state is the instrument of the rich in order to better exploit and mystify the poor and exploited.'[103] But if one took primitive societies as one's point of departure, Clastres argued, the opposite conclusion would be reached. It would become clear that the state was the very division that had enabled class to arise in the first place, rather than merely an instrument developed by the ruling class to consolidate its power. 'The first division is not the division into opposed social groups, into the rich and the poor, exploiters and exploited,' Clastres wrote. 'The first division, and that which ultimately founds all the others, is the division between those who command and those who obey. Which is to say, the State, since this is fundamentally what the State it: the division of society into those who have power and those who are subject to power.'[104] We will return to this definition of the state below.

For Clastres, the political is prior to the economic in 'the logical sense' because it is the essential *analytical* category from which others are derived; relations of domination are more fundamental than relations of exploitation, and power is a more fundamental category than class. But the political is also *historically* prior to the economic, in the sense that the 'first motor of social change' is not social differentiation, instituted by the gendered division of labour and developing gradually into a system of private property, as Engels had theorised in his *Origin*.[105] Rather, history was driven by the seizure of political power: a seizure of the means of *coercion* preceded a seizure of the means of *production*. Clastres's arguments here resonate with Marx's own discussions of primitive accumulation as the violent preconditions for the extension of capitalist social relations across the world. These are not mentioned by Clastres – but again, it is not Marx Clastres is opposing but 'Marxism', understood as economism, which would reduce the political – and violence – to a purely secondary position in history. (As he writes elsewhere: 'Marx, it seems to me, does not have a lot to do with this [economistic] cuisine. As for him, he saw a little further than Engels's nose; he saw them coming, the Marxists in reinforced concrete, ahead of time.')[106] Clastres is opposing above all

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[103] Clastres, *Entretien avec l'anti-mythes*, p. 16.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, p. 25.
[106] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 219.

a form of Marxism that would claim certain types of state do not in themselves breed new forms of class:

> What is the USSR? It is a class society – I don't see why we should hesitate to use this vocabulary – it is a class society, and a society of classes, which is constituted purely on the basis of [*à partir de*] the State machine. … The Soviet State, centred on the Communist Party, has engendered a class society, a new Russian bourgeoisie which is certainly no less ferocious than the most ferocious of European bourgeoisies of the nineteenth century. … It seems certain to me … that it is the State which engenders classes, and one can illustrate this with examples from completely different worlds … from the Incas to the USSR.[107]

The Soviet Union shadows Clastres's account of the origins of the state and the anteriority of the political in relation to the economic. Yet his argument is based on the conceptualisation of the state as an ontological principle of political division, rather than any kind of actually or historically existing entity. The state is, for Clastres, 'the radical fissure at the root of the social, the initial break on which all movement and all history depend, the primal splitting at the core of all differences'.[108] This primal splitting divides 'those who command' from 'those who obey', or as SouB put it, the *dirigeants* from the *executants*. For Clastres, this was a *civilisational* division. Primitive societies had refused it; all other societies were organised around it. It is on the basis of this ontologisation of the State – as a principle of division, rather than a concrete social formation – that Clastres is able to posit the axiom of the anteriority of the political in relation to the economic, in such a way that excludes the possibility of any mutual determination between these two spheres or levels of social life, nor any middle passage between 'State' and 'non-State' societies. These axiomatics led Emmanuel Terray to label Clastres's thought 'a veritable sociological Platonism', based on a string of 'abstractions, simplifications and wild assimilations which ineluctably imply a whole theory of essences'.[109] We have begun to see the way in which this theory of essences finds its historical conditions

[107] Clastres, *Entretien avec l'anti-mythes*, p. 17.
[108] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, p. 25
[109] Ibid.

in the lingering legacy of Stalinism in France and in a corresponding perception of Marxism as an economism, which crystallise in the 1970s as the frustration with the PCF reaches its highest pitch.[110] Let us follow Clastres a little further in his thinking on power in primitive societies, to pursue this symptomatic reading.

5 Undivided societies: Power and delegation in primitive society

We saw above that in his early essay, 'Exchange and Power' (1962), Clastres argued that primitive societies were defined by the negation or suppression of power, which was understood as coercive authority. For primitive societies, the appearance of power represented a resurgence of nature; its suppression was the achievement of culture. That was, in any case, how Clastres made sense of the paradox of the powerless chief: the chieftainship was instituted so that the power it represented could be constantly negated, as the absent centre around which the sociality of the tribe cohered. By the time of writing 'Copernicus and the Savages' (1969), Clastres's position had changed somewhat. He had broken with Lévi-Strauss in 1965, turning his back on structural anthropology due to its failure to attend to social and political questions. The nascent political anthropology in France – of which Clastres takes Jean William Lapierre's *Le fondement du pouvoir politique* (1968) as the chief representative – was making some effort to fill the gap.[111] Yet such work fell into the trap of viewing primitive societies as societies *without* power, and hence as lacking institutions that could be considered properly political. For Clastres, this apparent lack of power was in fact a lack of conceptual imagination on the part of the anthropologists. 'All societies,' he argued, 'whether archaic or not, are political, even if the political is expressed in many voices, even if their meaning is not immediately decipherable, and even if one has to solve the riddle of a "powerless" power.'[112] While primitive societies did not know coercive power, they did know *non-coercive* power.[113] Non-

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[110] A turn to ontology and formalisation in political thought emerges in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Paris as a more general tendency, in a way that is related also to a revival of rationalism in French philosophy, combined in some cases with Maoism. See, for example, Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Seuil, 1982); Alain Badiou, *L'être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988); Tom Eyers, *Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology, and Marxism in Post-War France* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
[111] Clastres does not mention Balandier, who published his own *Anthropologie politique* in 1967 but who, as an Africanist, was likely dealing with questions of state societies (in Clastres's terminology) and hence outside of the purview of Clastres. See Georges Balandier, *Anthropologie Politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967).
[112] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, p. 22.
[113] Ibid., p. 22.

coercive power did not bear an essential relation with violence, hierarchy, or subordination; but it also could not be reduced to 'immediate social control' or the 'personal influence' of strong individuals – which is to say, to *non-political* factors.[114] Non-coercive power was political, but in a way that forced existing ideas of the political to be overturned.

In 'Power in Primitive Societies' (1976), Clastres elaborates on the difference between coercive and non-coercive power.[115] Coercive power, he argues, emerges with the State. It is understood in terms of a primary division between those who command and those who obey. Throughout Western political philosophy, the very concept of society had relied on this division: 'The social is the political, the political is the exercise of power … by one or several over the rest of society.'[116] Clastres argues that it matters little whether this exercise of power is legitimate or beneficial for those subject to it. What is essential is that the 'organ of power' is separated from society as such.[117] This organ, external to the social body, speaks for it and acts on behalf of it; it 'knows and says what is in everyone's best interests and puts itself in charge of imposing it.'[118] But here we can observe a second dimension of coercive power, which is defined not only by verticality, hierarchy and authority, but by its substitutive nature: it is invested in certain individuals or sections of society on behalf of, and in order to represent, others. In other words, power in state societies is *delegated* power.

In these arguments, Clastres echoes Marx in his 'Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State'.[119] In this early text, Marx had defined the modern state in terms of the separation, or 'abstraction', of the political sphere from the body of society. Separation was essential to the modern state and would not be overcome, as Hegel had thought, through the full unfolding of its Idea in the course of world history, but only through the dissolution of the state form as such. For Marx, both bureaucracy and representative democracy were based on this separation. In his arguments about democracy, Marx's words come close to those of Clastres: 'The separation of the political state from civil society takes the form of a separation of the deputies from their electors. Society simply deputes elements of itself to become its political

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[114] Ibid., p. 23.
[115] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, pp. 163–170.
[116] Ibid., p. 164.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid., p. 168.
[119] Marx, *Early Writings*, pp. 57–198.

existence'.[120] We have seen the way in which this argument was developed by SouB in their argument that representative political structures had led to the hollowing out of the political organisations that had led the Soviet transition to socialism. 'For the first time in history,' SouB argued in 1949, 'the class taking power cannot exert its power through "delegation," it cannot entrust its power for any lengthy and enduring period of time to its representatives, to its "State," or to its "Party"'.[121] The proletariat was to act as itself, without mediation – the 'consciousness' guiding its action 'can only be that of the class as a whole'.[122] SouB concluded the line of argument (with perhaps some irony intended) with a quote from Lenin: "Only the masses," said Lenin, "can really plan, for they alone are everywhere at once."'[123]

The 'political philosophy' of Clastres's primitives also sought to diffuse power 'everywhere at once' – its virtue was in its capacity to preserve primitive societies as undivided totalities possessed of a single will, eschewing representation, mediation, and delegation: in primitive societies, power was not separated from society because it was in the hands of no one in particular. The chief, as we saw, did not possess power – not even the power of being society's delegate. He was unable to make decisions on society's behalf, to arbitrate conflicts, or to act as an executor of the law. He was at the most a 'spokesperson', but his speech had to 'respond exactly to the desire or to the explicit will of the tribe.'[124] His speeches merely offered society a mirror, affirming it in its undivided being: 'From the chief's mouth spring … the discourse of society itself about itself.'[125] As we have seen, if the chief tried to exceed this role, he would be subject to the only kind of power that exists in primitive society: power against power itself, society's defense against separation, exercised 'over anything capable of alienating society'.[126] In primitive societies, then, the relation between policing and authority is the reverse of what it is within state societies: rather than society being under surveillance by its leaders, 'the chief is under surveillance' by society.[127] 'Society watches to make sure the taste for prestige does not become the desire for power.'[128]

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[120] Ibid., pp. 193–4.
[121] Socialisme ou Barbarie, 'Socialisme ou Barbarie', p. 26.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence,* p. 166.
[125] Ibid., p. 167.
[126] Ibid., p. 169.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

If the essence of coercive power is its *externality* in relation to the social body – its figure being the Father or the Law that restricts society's functioning from the outside – then the essence of non-coercive power is its diffusion *inside* the social body. What does this immanent power look like? How does it function, and what is its purpose or *telos*? If we can call it power at all, it is a power that exists in order to disperse power, to de-coagulate it and prevent it from concentrating in any particular place. It has a strongly *decentralising* character. But the chief's discourse is not the expression of a process of consensus, dissensus, deliberation, democracy, or conflict. It is not the result of *any* deliberative process, in fact; as Clastres writes in a later article, it 'has nothing to do with human decision'.[129] In the end, the chief's discourse resembles quite simply the expression of *tradition*: 'The substance of [the chief's] discourse always refers to the ancestral Law that no one can transgress, for it is the very being of society: to violate the Law would be to alter the social body, to introduce into it the innovation and change that it absolutely rejects.'[130] If the most fundamental desire of society is self-preservation, then it would seem that the primary function of power in primitive societies is to ensure the *self-identity of the tribe*.

'By a sort of curse,' Terray writes, 'whenever Clastres tries to define primitive liberty – that of society as of individuals – the formulations he employs evoke the worst kinds of servitude.'[131] Terray quotes Clastres's statements that primitive society experiences 'an absolute and total power over all that composes it', and that its foundations are 'beyond human decision'.[132] We might just as well add others; for example, Clastres's description of primitive politics in terms of a 'sovereign will to let nothing slip outside its being that might alter, corrupt, and destroy it',[133] or his depiction of primitive society as an absolutely closed system, 'a society from which nothing escapes, which lets nothing get outside itself, for all the exits are blocked.'[134] Because its political philosophy is beyond decision and beyond conscious process, the mechanism for closing off these 'exits' is located ultimately in the individual and collective unconscious – at the level of desire: 'As social machines inhabited by the will to persevere in their non-divided being, primitive societies institute themselves as *places where*

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[129] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 261.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Emmanuel Terray, 'Une Nouvelle anthropologie politique?', *L'Homme* 29 (110), 1989, p. 14.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Clastres, *Society Against the State*, p. 198.
[134] Ibid., p. 212.

evil desire is repressed.'[135] Clastres's political philosophy thus reveals itself to be based on a binary opposition between two types of power, defining two types of society: one type governed by the irrevocable emergence of the state form, and the other that wards this form off through social closure, hypostasis, and repression. Referring to the latter, Terray writes, 'one must resist the temptation to see, in such formulations, an exact picture of totalitarian society.'[136]

With self-identity as its *telos*, Clastres's primitive can be read as an anti-dialectical figure in a number of respects.[137] Primitive society is self-identical firstly in the sense that it is a closed (bounded and autonomous) system: it is 'at once a totality and a unity. A totality in that it is a complete, autonomous, whole ensemble, ceaselessly attentive to preserving its autonomy: a society in the full sense of the word. A unity in that its homogeneous being continues to refuse social division, to exclude inequality, to forbid alienation.'[138] Defined thus, primitive societies resemble organisms, and power within them approximates the organic processes through which bodies self-regulate: expelling toxins, regulating blockages and enabling flows, defending against external dangers. 'Primitive society is a whole multiplicity in circulating flux,' Clastres says, 'or rather, a machine with its organs. Primitive society codes – that is to say controls, holds tightly – all the flux, all the organs … it doesn't let [power] escape.'[139] Clastres's primitive societies, apparently devoid of partitions, are nevertheless bodies *with* organs, tightly organised within the social body, prohibited from straying from their proper place.[140] As such, these are unmediated, or *im*mediate, societies. They are, again in the words of Terray, societies that 'coincide with themselves in an indissoluble unity'.[141]

Primitive society is depicted as spatially self-identical – untroubled by internal conflict or contradiction, 'homogeneous' – but also as temporally self-identical. That is, it does not have the means of transforming itself in time or of entering history, because it is only capable of thinking in the homogeneous terms of 'tradition'. For Terray, this is the fundamental

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[135] Ibid., p. 182.
[136] Terray, 'Une Nouvelle anthropologie politique?', p. 13.
[137] See Moyn's 'Of Savagery and Civil Society' for an exploration of the influence of Nietzche on Clastres.
[138] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 260.
[139] Clastres, *Entretien avec l'anti-mythes*, p. 35.
[140] The most prevalent principle ordering these places is gender: without perhaps his intending it, the gender division of labour emerges in Clastres's writings as an order from which it is exceedingly difficult to stray. See, for example, *Society Against the State*, pp. 101–128.
[141] Terray, 'Une Nouvelle anthropologie politique?', p. 12.

contradiction of Clastres's project: 'On the one hand, he seeks to describe primitive society as a free society; on the other, he claims to set it in an eternal present, to preserve it forever from the ravages of time.'[142] In this respect, Clastres's description of primitive societies as 'homogeneous' bears a circularity: non-coercive power exists in primitive societies *because* they are homogeneous, but such power also exists in order to *preserve* society as a homogeneous totality. A society that cannot see itself as potentially other than what it is cannot develop into anything else. 'Refraining from putting itself at a distance from itself, it cannot therefore take itself as an object and act on itself in order to transform itself,' Terray argues. The refusal of what Clastres calls division is, in the end, 'a refusal of change and history.'[143] Clastres's definition of primitive societies, and by association his political anthropology, assigns to the 'true' primitive only a politics of the conservation and conservatism.

Clastres's writings are based on a choice between *division* and *self-identity*. Yet we have also begun to observe a third, underground choice in play. In Clastres's writings division is not only associated with inequality, sovereignty, coercion and violence, but also with a range of concepts that might more accurately be characterised as forms of *mediation*, such as relations of representation and delegation. When Clastres places the refusal of division at the heart of his vision of primitive societies, he also implicitly refuses an understanding of primitive social life as mediated. In this way, Clastres's 'Copernican turn', in its efforts to grant agency to 'primitive' peoples, leaves them stranded in unmediated subjecthood and thus consigned to the same type of static existence as the 'peoples without history' that recur in ever-new guises as the subjects of anthropological discourse. In refusing to ground his political thought in a necessary relationship between the subjective and the objective, Clastres, despite being a key figure of left-libertarianism in French thought, finds himself in the unexpectedly conservative position of depicting primitive societies as undifferentiated wholes, not as permanently fractured and infinitely contradictory because constituted, from the very beginning, through processes of mediation with an Other. The relationship between anti-dialectical thought and the trope of primitive society will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, with reference to Baudrillard. Here it is enough to note the way in which, for Clastres, it is not possible to decouple dialectics from division. Non-alienation – such as

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[142] Ibid., p. 15.
[143] Ibid., p. 12.

that which Clastres projects onto primitive societies – cannot thus be read other than in terms of a self-identical, and in many ways deeply unfree, immediacy.

6 Conclusion

Clastres's premature death in 1977 left it up to his readers to speculate as to the ultimate meaning and political consequences of his thought. It also left French anthropology to struggle over his legacy, a struggle which was perhaps all the more fierce due to the fact that his project was cut off at the height of its anti-Marxist fervour. His vehement demolition of Meillassoux and Godelier in 'Marxists and their Anthropology' was written a few days before his death,[144] at a moment in which French anthropology was deeply divided between its Marxist (and generally Africanist) and anti-Marxist (usually Americanist) wings. Those representing the Marxist wing cohered around what was known as 'the Meillassoux seminar' at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris, which ran from 1969 for around a decade.[145] From 1974–1975, the seminar was devoted to the critique of its anti-Marxist opponents. The talks from this year were published in 1979 in a volume entitled *Le sauvage à la mode* (*The Fashionable Savage*), which, as its title suggests, took aim at the primitivist revival represented by Clastres, Robert Jaulin, Jacques Lizot, and Sahlins, and playing out as a lineage running from Rousseau to Lévi-Strauss.[146] Jean-Loup Amselle's introduction to the volume provides a lively assessment of the conjuncture in which this primitivist turn took place. Ecology here goes hand in hand with anticommunism, localism with postmodern philosophy:

> … now we come to it, what's happening in the West? Crisis, 'crisis of civilization', first of all. May 1968 sees the collapse of the productivist myth, of economic growth without end. Ecology is in vogue, soft technologies, those which do not murder nature, are making their appearance in the autarchic 'communities of the South'. One eats organic, one wishes equally for a more convivial society where social relations would be transparent, proportionate to man. *Small is beautiful*. Desire makes its appearance

[144] See Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 326.
[145] Mahir Şaul, 'Claude Meillassoux (1925–2005)', *American Anthropologist* 107 (4), 2005, pp. 753–757.
[146] Jean-Loup Amselle (ed.), *Le Sauvage à la mode* (Paris: Éditions le Sycomore, 1979).

> in the intellectual field and class struggle itself becomes an affair of the libido. The Club of Rome discusses zero growth while the global economic crisis looms on the horizon. This phenomenon is further augmented by the rising price of petrol which prompts the interrogation on the possibilities of maintaining a consumer society. The time of the end of the world begins… In the East nothing new, nothing exultant in any case, the Gulag – meaning the absolute evil – makes us appreciate the relative wellbeing that we all enjoy here. But then what remains of the 'lost generation', that of May 1968, which has seen everything, understood everything and come back from it: the savage of course![147]

As Amselle sees it, the savage, hunter-gatherer or primitive presents a fitting object of ideological consumption for a post-1968 generation that has turned its back on Marxism and become 'so fond of nomadism and desire'.[148] As a mascot for the anti-productivist current of contemporary theory (as much as for the concurrent *décroissance* movement), the savage represents a form of humanity not predicated on infinite growth and not subject to the alienation from labour, time, and community seen to be unique to the metropolis – in this way, Amselle suggests, it finds another parallel in the neo-ruralist movements appearing in France at the time: 'The agricultural mode of life is today becoming as much an economic model as a moral model. Economical with his energy and his gestures, the farmer symbolises a balanced existence, unfolding according to the rhythm of the work and the day.'[149] The French farmer, the Occitaine, or the Bretagne, in their non-alienated authenticity, now emerges as the sister of the Amazonian savage.

For Amselle, this savage 'envisages a public and he proposes a politics'.[150] This is, first and foremost, a politics against Marxism. We have seen the way in which Clastres constructed an opposition to Marxism by reading it as an economism, and relating it to a desire for the state exemplified in the Soviet Union under Stalin and, at home, in the PCF. We also saw that in his effort to reverse this 'Marxism', Clastres postulated the axiom of the anteriority of the political in relation to the economic. In this narrative, the first act of history and the principal organising

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[147] Jean-Loup Amselle, 'Présentation: Les métamorphoses du sauvage', in *Le Sauvage à la mode*, pp. 12–13.
[148] Ibid., p. 17.
[149] Ibid., p. 13.
[150] Ibid., p. 17.

principle of present sociality was an elemental separation of society. On the one hand this was separation as simple coercive *domination*, into relations of command and obedience. On the other, it was separation as *delegation*, granting one part of society the role of deciding and the other part the role of observing the decision. These two forms of separation were fatally linked: the latter could not but lead to the former.

We can trace this anti-representational line of thought back to SouB's criticisms of Soviet bureaucracy, and their insistence that any successful revolution had to go deep into the texture of social relations to bring about 'the abolition of all fixed and stable distinctions between directors and *executants* in relation to both production and social life in general'.[151] We can see thus why Clastres has had such purchase for anthropological thinkers that identify with anarchism: his foregrounding of the corrupting influence of *all* forms of domination, his insistence on a power against power itself, which seeks to decoagulate and prevent power's accumulation, and his opposition to representational forms of organisation all speak closely to classical anarchist problematics. Yet we have also seen that his arguments emerged at a very specific time, in which the PCF was one of the most powerful political forces on the French left and, at the same time, an institution paralysed by dogma and reaction, with which the aftermath of Algerian independence combined to invoke a sense of political closure. Clastres's antidote – political anthropology – fell prey to some of the same reductions that were bred by this tenuous political moment.

[151] Socialisme ou Barbarie, 'Socialisme ou Barbarie', p. 24.

Chapter 5

Societies against production: Baudrillard's anthropological turn after '68

'Be careful not to see revolution in what is only a metamorphosis.'[1]

The last chapter argued that the historical and political conditions for Clastres's political anthropology were in the year 1956, which I took to represent the end of the Stalinist era. This chapter, which examines the role played by the figures of the primitive and the savage in Baudrillard's early writings, takes 1968 as its point of departure instead. As a participant in the student uprisings at Nanterre, the epicentre of 'the events', Baudrillard felt the ruptural force of May 1968 and immediately began to analyse how this moment broke with the anachronistic logics of the left, especially those of Marxism and Communism. But this break was never complete, he argued, and the student revolts themselves fell prey to the scripted performance or *mise en scène* to which he felt political contestation had been reduced. In May, transgression played itself out as a kind of 'social menstruation'[2] and repression itself, including the violence of the riot police, became 'the *number one object of consumption* for the rebellious imagination.'[3] Every subsequent effort to challenge the dominance of capital was recuperated ('recycled')[4] into a means of capital's reproduction – from demonstrations to mass strikes to the sequence of elections narrowly lost by the Left in the 1970s. Recording this sequence of failures, Baudrillard's writings between 1968 and 1978 tell a story of profound political disillusionment that runs parallel to, and perhaps precipitates, an increasingly abstruse and totalising theory. As Baudrillard himself put it: 'it was necessary to transform the political radicality that no longer had any stakes – for which we no longer felt had any stakes… – into a theoretical radicality.'[5]

Anthropology plays an important role in this evolution. Baudrillard is a reader of Mailnowski, Mauss, Bataille, Lévi-Strauss, Clastres, Jaulin, and Sahlins, and draws on their ideas in his writings throughout this decade. Anthropology constitutes the point of departure

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[1] Jean Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred: Writings for* Utopie *(1967–1978)* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006).
[2] Ibid., p. 50.
[3] Ibid., p. 36.
[4] Ibid., p. 19.
[5] Ibid., p. 30.

for his semiotic revision of Marxist political economy developed in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), in which his concept of symbolic exchange is advanced through a reading of the *kula* (the Trobriand Islanders' system of gift exchange described by Malinowski),[6] a consideration of Mauss's notion of *mana* in his *Essay on the Gift*, and an application of Saussure's structural linguistics.[7] But Baudrillard's most sustained discussion of anthropology and primitive societies takes place in *The Mirror of Production* (1972),[8] a text which also contains his fiercest polemics against Marxism and is often seen to mark his break with the tradition.[9] This chapter examines *Mirror* alongside a series of political writings Baudrillard published mostly in the journal *Utopie* between 1968 and 1978, to see how anthropology and the figures of the primitive and the sauvage were involved in this turn away from Marxism.

In these texts, primitive society initially represents an epistemological outside to the predominant categories of leftist and, especially, dialectical thought. In a gesture familiar from the above chapters, Baudrillard views primitive societies as a logical 'heresy' for Marxist thought, contravening such sacred categories as economy, scarcity, need, use, finality and production in a way that rebounds onto the analysis of contemporary capitalism. That is, primitive societies not only challenge the idea that Marxism is a *universal* theory applicable through human history and to different non-capitalist formations across the world; they also challenge Marxism *as an analysis of contemporary capitalism*. These positions find a political parallel in the widespread use of the term *sauvage* during 1968 to designate strikes, demonstrations, and all kinds of events and networks that were not institutionally approved or recognised (and hence 'wild'), which merges, in Baudrillard's writings, with the anthropological figure of the savage or primitive. The result of this merger is a conception of a *sauvage* politics: 'minoritarian', deviant, illegitimate, unclassed, unclassifiable and uncontrollable, the politics of the *sauvage* unmasks the predetermined ('domesticated') logics of the situation and the rules and performances that it institutes. The *sauvage* is here a counterpoint to Baudrillard's critique of the 'domesticated' left. As such, it expresses the

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[6] See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 3.
[7] Ibid., p. 33, 52–53
[8] Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St Louis: Telos Press, 1975).
[9] Mark Poster, 'Translator's Introduction', in Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 1–16; Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989).

widespread sense – which we also encountered in Chapter 3 – of the decline of the industrial proletariat as the subject of history and the labour relation as the motor of history. For Baudrillard, as for Meillassoux, the Labour-Capital dialectic is limited by its Eurocentrism. It is a dialectic of, and from, 'the white cities', and the political programmes based on it have long ceased to pose a threat to capital.[10] Only politics of the *sauvage* seem capable of doing that.

As the 1970s wear on, Baudrillard's references to this politics of the *sauvage* – the revolt of the marginal and truly radical elements of society, including women, immigrants, the racialised and the youth – diminish. What replaces them is a series of increasingly sardonic readings of 'the Left', especially the PCF and the Socialist Party (PS), and an increasingly pessimistic and totalising theory of simulation. This is what Baudrillard calls the 'third phase' of capitalism, which witnesses 'a structure of control and of power much more subtle and more totalitarian than that of exploitation.'[11] This is the reign of the 'sign form', a development or radicalisation of the reign of the commodity form. In this theory, however, references to the primitive in fact reemerge in a new form: contemporary capitalism turns out to be in some ways *analogous* to primitive societies, since both are structured by symbolic exchange, untethered from their material referents and above all from a production that would form their 'real' basis. Primitive societies perhaps no longer represent an exterior to capitalism, but they do represent an exterior to Marxist thought. As such, they provide us with the epistemological tools to bring thought up to the present – a present dominated by a capitalism-turned-semiotic.

Baudrillard's invocation of the primitive has drawn criticism largely on the basis of the appeal to radical alterity contained within it. In *The Neo-Primitivist Turn* (2001), Victor Li argues that while Baudrillard claims to challenge Eurocentric depictions of primitive societies – which he discerns above all in Marxist anthropology – 'on another level it is neoprimitivist in that it reinscribes an all-too-familiar binary model of a debased modern West and an idealized primitive Other.'[12] While Baudrillard depicts the primitive as irreducible, singular and ethnographically unknowable, he reduces it to the classical set of primitivist tropes, generalises it to conform to a single idealised model, and fixes it into knowledge by way of a

[10] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 248.
[11] Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production*, p. 121.
[12] Victor Li, *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 49.

speculative ethnology. The radical other turns out to be not so other at all, and its difference merely returns us to Baudrillard's own 'hell of the same'.[13] Meanwhile, in his *Libidinal Economy* (1947), Lyotard aims a more philosophical critique at Baudrillard for reproducing 'the phantasy of a non-alienated region' in his appeals to the primitive.[14] How is it, he asks, that Baudrillard fails to see that his concept of symbolic 'belongs in its entirety to Western racism and imperialism – that it is still ethnology's good savage, slightly libidinalized, which he inherits with the concept?'[15] There is no position of exteriority to capitalism, no 'whole body', no nature that has been forgotten or foreclosed by the present.

Benjamin Noys has countered such criticisms by casting Baudrillard in terms of a 'negative accelerationism', which does not aim for any 'a positive transcendence of capital.'[16] The romantic attitude that Lyotard accuses Baudrillard of is not justified, for Noys: 'Baudrillard does not simply step back to some pre-Marxist category, as his invocations of "primitive" symbolic exchange might suggest, but instead embeds himself within the "molecular" speeds of capitalism itself.'[17] Noys suggests that Baudrillard retains more of a fidelity to Marxism than is often understood; his thought does not surrender 'the Marxist analysis of the immense productive forces unleashed by capital', but intensifies it – if in an often 'hyperbolic and totalising' way.[18] I suggest here that these different readings by Lyoard and Noys may belong to different phases of Baudrilllard's thought, and that while he does see certain forms of non-alienation incarnated in the figure of the *sauvage* before around 1974–6, after this point he turns against anthropology – 'ethnology is dead, truly and irresistibly dead', he writes in 1976 – and increasingly adopts the position of total subsumption. Prior to this point, however, Baudrillard does not refer to the *sauvage* or the primitive to invoke a lost authenticity or to stimulate a moral critique of the present, as Lyotard claims. Rather, the savage plays a more negative role of bringing into relief the anachronism of a productivist left. Non-alienation, in Baudrillard's thought, is a negative rather than a positive ideal.

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[13] Ibid., p. 46.
[14] Lyotard, Jean-François, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 107.
[15] Ibid., p. 106.
[16] Benjamin Noys, 'Forget Neoliberalism? Baudrillard, Foucault, and the Fate of Political Critique', *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 9 (3), 2012.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

This chapter reads Baudrillard's texts on primitive societies and the *sauvage* as documents of a particular historical and political conjuncture. It tries to draw out the relations between Baudrillard's theoretical arguments about primitive societies and his concurrent analysis of the decline of the Left in France in the decade following 1968 – an analysis which traverses student revolts, wildcat strikes, the emergence of 'the immigrant' as a political subject, union betrayals, and the actions and attitudes of the PCF and the PCI (the Italian Communist Party) in relation to the 1974 presidential elections and the 1978 legislative elections. Baudrillard's acerbic and perceptive writings on these events reveal a profound effort to make sense, through them, of structural changes affecting the composition of class, the character of labour, and the relation between production and consumption.

This chapter has six parts. The first part reconstructs Baudrillard's reading of the French political conjuncture after May 1968 with particular attention to the figure of the *sauvage*. The second part shifts focus to *The Mirror of Production*, reconstructing Baudrillard's ethnographic arguments concerning primitive societies and the category of production. The third part examines in more detail Baudrillard's historical argument about the transformation of capitalist society. The fourth part evaluates Baudrillard's epistemological argument about the dialectical method and the Marxist conception of history, contrasting this with the account of the dialectic provided by Lukács, in doing so revealing certain misinterpretations underlying Baudrillard's argument and logical inconsistencies internal to it. The fifth section of this chapter returns to Baudrillard's political writings from the late 1970s and in particular to his critique of the PCF, from which he draws a profound sense of political closure. I suggest that it is perhaps precisely from this sense of closure – this claustrophobia of consumer capitalism and a left in (perhaps terminal) decline – that the desire for anthropology emerges.

1 Savage analysis: Baudrillard on the Left after 1968

Baudrillard trained as a Germanist at the Sorbonne, and wrote his MA thesis on Nietzsche and Luther.[19] He taught German in various lycées in Paris and provincial France between 1960 and 1966, and during this period translated a number of writings from German to French: in

[19] Mike Gane, 'Introduction', in *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, ed. Mike Gane (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

addition to Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology*, writings by Holderlin, Bertolt Brecht, Peter Weiss, and the anthropologist Wilhelm Mühlmann.[20] He read the Frankfurt School before they were translated,[21] and wrote a number for pieces for Sartre's journal *Les Temps Modernes* on German literature and poetry. Baudrillard took part in demonstrations against the Algerian War, which, he reflects, 'had a vital part to play [in his political formation], a kind of Marxist-type politicization'.[22] In 1962 he took part (alongside Félix Guattari) in setting up the Franco-Chinese Popular Association, which outlined its aims as 'defending the Chinese revolution' and 'telling the truth about China everywhere in France', and to create a space for discussion 'on the disagreements which have arisen within the world revolutionary movement.'[23] He was not a member of any political party; reflecting on this period he describes himself as 'much closer to anarchism and things like that';[24] it is clear, in any case, that he was immersed in the milieu of the Parisian anti-Stalinist left throughout the 1960s.

Baudrillard completed his doctorate, which would be published as *The System of Objects*, in 1966, under the supervision of Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu and Henri Lefebvre.[25] He was personally close to Lefebvre, participating in the formation of the journal *Utopie* at the latter's house in the Pyrénées in 1966. *Utopie* was, in his view, 'a minor radical review, of a situationist type'[26] born out of 'a symbiosis between a few architects and young intellectuals'.[27] The aim of the journal was 'to surpass architecture as such, just as urbanism as such had been surpassed and as the Situationists had liquidated the space of the university as such… Everyone was trying to liquidate his own discipline.'[28] While Lefebvre was a source of educational and institutional support for Baudrillard, he 'very quickly found certain of his positions a little naïve.'[29] Barthes was the real inspiration behind his early works, *The System of Objects* (1968/1996), *The Consumer Society* (1970/1998), and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972/1981), which sought to supplement historical materialism with a

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 28.
[22] Jean Baudrillard, 'I Don't Belong to the Club, to the Seraglio: Interview with Mike Gane and Monique Arnaud', in *Baudrillard Live*, p. 20.
[23] Le Monde, '"L'Humanité" attaque l'association populaire franco-chinoise', *Le Monde*, 8 February 1964.
[24] Baudrillard, 'I Don't Belong to the Club', p. 20.
[25] Simon Labrecque, 'Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007): au tour du complot de l'art', *Inter* 101, 2008, pp. 83–85.
[26] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Revenge of the Crystal: Interview with Guy Bellavance', in *Baudrillard Live*, p. 64.
[27] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 13.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., p. 29.

semiotic theory adequate to consumer society – taking 'literally', as Charles Levin argues, Lukács's claim that 'the problem of commodities … [is] the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects.'[30] The influence of Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, which had extended Marxist analysis to the domain of culture, urbanism, and the media is surely present in these works, alongside the structuralist approaches of Barthes, Foucault and Lévi-Strauss, which insisted on the systematicity of the semiotic domain and its autonomous operation in relation to the economy.

Baudrillard became Lefebvre's assistant in the Sociology Department at Nanterre, University of Paris, from 1966. When 1968 came along, he thus found himself 'at the center of the "events."'[31] The Nanterre Sociology Department, where the student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit was also based, was ground zero of the 'March 22 movement', an occupation of the University's administration building that led to the shutdown of the University on 2 May, triggering the eruption of protest in the centre of Paris.[32] Baudrillard recounts: 'We participated in AG, we went to the barricades… The "spirit of May" circulated for several years at Nanterre.'[33] This politicised climate can be read in a debate between members of the faculty at Nanterre – including Baudrillard, Bernard Conein, Laurent Cornaz, François Gantheret, René Lourau, Jean-François Lyotard, and Hélène Uhry – published in 1968 under the title 'Is transgression a mode of political action?'[34] While individual speakers are not identified in the transcript, many of the themes that would be central to Baudrillard's writings in the following years are present in this discussion. There is a consensus, in the group, that the movement earlier that year had not only broken with but changed unalterably the terms of political contestation. Or rather, the students had revealed changes that were already underway: they had 'shown up the fact that modern society is based not only on antagonistic class relations, but on new divides, on a system of cultural discrimination, on an interplay of value systems whereby the ruling classes blur the lines of the class struggle and sanction their own privileged

[30] Charles Levin, 'Translator's Introduction' in Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 5.
[31] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 16.
[32] Ibid., p. 305.
[33] Ibid., p. 16.
[34] Jean Baudrillard, 'Is transgression a mode of political action?', in *Jean Baudrillard: The Disappearance of Culture, Uncollected Interviews*, ed. Richard G. Smith and David B. Clarke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 13–35.

hold on power.'[35] The nature of class had changed – as one speaker put it, the traditional working class had become 'hung up on consumption' – so the idea of class struggle had to be reformulated.[36] That is to say, the principal categories of Marxist analysis, (economic) exploitation and (political) oppression, had to be analysed together with the category of alienation. 'If the productive forces are also cultural forces,' one speaker put it, 'then effectively the image of the class struggle changes'.[37]

This now-familiar shift to cultural questions is posed in this discussion as a radicalisation of, rather than a retreat from, materialist critique. But it also emerged as a way of theorising a very concrete problem: the preoccupation of the debate is above all the relationship, actual and possible, between the working class and the students. Were students simply part of the working class? Could they somehow see beyond it – in their 'privilege', could they transcend the desire to participate *in* consumption and form a critique *of* consumption instead?[38] Or did this privilege simply blind them to the struggles of workers, who resented them as a result? At one point in the May movement, one of the speakers claims, the students 'came to feel guilty. That form of guilt caused it to slide back to the formal imperatives of the working class and its political authorities and the movement stopped there.'[39] That is to say, the movement stopped in the trade unions. It is on this point that the speakers diverge. For some, the trade unions are repressive institutions in their own right. 'We criticised every institution except one: the organised, integrated oppositional action of trade unions and political parties.'[40] For others, the unions were necessarily ambiguous in their role as mediators between the ruling class and the workers, but they could not be aligned in any simple sense with repressive institutions such as the police, the state, and the university. Thus the critique of the institution-as-such does not go uncontested in this discussion, even if it forms the basis of Baudrillard's writings to come.

The work of mourning, 1969–1973

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[35] Ibid., p. 21.
[36] Ibid., p. 22.
[37] Ibid., p. 24.
[38] Ibid., p. 22.
[39] Ibid., p. 26.
[40] Ibid.

After the landslide victory for Charles de Gaulle at the national elections in June 1968, the tumult of May gave way to a rapid return to normality. 'The movement fell away at fantastic – really fantastic – speed. Within a week, there was no one there any more,' reflects one of the speakers at Nanterre.[41] Baudrillard is frank about the effect of this dissolution and recuperation on his political practice: 'During the work of mourning, for me, there was no longer any activity. I had passed to the side of theory. Leftism, or what it had become, closed militarism, was no longer an option.'[42] The sources of this retreat from politics are already evident in an article he published in *Utopie* in 1969, entitled 'Play and the Police'.[43] To see repression as incarnated in the riot police (the CRS) was to overlook its contemporary metamorphosis into forms capable of absorbing – and even *profiting* from – the revolts of May:

> It was one of the victories of the movement of May to have been able to ward of repression, to have brought it to light as the truth of the institution and of the social order, but it was its weakness to only have been able to ward this off under a spectacular form, in its murderous and archaic aspects, upon which of course a tactical solidarity is tied … but upon which too the movement exhausted itself in a spectacular guerilla conflict – ending in the fascination of the symbolic street fight, where incarnated repression became, accordingly in the iconography and the obsessional folklore inspired by the CRS, the *number one object of consumption* for the rebellious imagination.[44]

This was the 'trap, the game, the symbolic counter-dependence' in which the May movement was caught.[45] It had overlooked the fact that repression was no longer only incarnated in its paternal form – the CRS as authoritative father – but also in a maternal schema of absorption, participation, and gratification: through the complicity of the repressed in their own repression.[46] 'Repression in civilized countries is no longer a negation, an aggression, it is an

[41] Ibid., p. 18.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, pp. 36–50.
[44] Ibid, p. 36.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., p. 37.

ambiance'.[47] This 'generalized repression'[48] is inscribed less in the street fight against the police than 'in the arrangement of the street' itself,[49] in the urban order and its 'pacified everydayness, wherein the distinction between play and the police is effaced.'[50] While generalised repression erases distinctions between freedom and control, it also works through the separation of spheres of social life.[51] 'The principle of separation, which breaks the unity of desire and institutes human activity in multiple sectors … is the most effective principle of neutralization of energies.'[52] Public is separated from private, and work from leisure, while social life is ordered by the segregation of the urban space. The dissociation of social activities and social space prevents the system from suffering any kind of injury.

Rebellion, absorbed by the system, makes it stronger and more flexible, while struggles are incorporated into the same apparatus of the spectacle against which they are directed. 'Struggling on the barricades, the students exalted at the same time in their aural image on the radio.'[53] Subjects of this social order require authority to be able to fulfil their transgressive energies, so transgression and repression reproduce one another in a cyclical motion that changes nothing about the order as such. In this way, Baudrillard likens the transgression of May to primitive rituals which function as a means of social integration:

> Transgression is a cyclical space of social menstruation, like the order that it inverts periodically. In our rationalized society too transgression is largely integrated in rituals of rebellion (those of the 'critical' intelligentsia, see above) or of revolution (socialism de reigueur). But this society remains inferior to primitive societies in its real power of integration. It largely masters conscious oppositional processes, but not yet unconscious oppositional processes, and transgression flowers like a wild resurgence…[54]

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., p. 38.
[50] Ibid., p. 37.
[51] Ibid., p. 38.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., p. 45.
[54] Ibid., p. 50

In this text from 1969, primitive society represents a space of integration and order: it has mastered transgression and learned to incorporate it in the form of rituals. In contemporary Paris, however, transgression has erupted as a 'wild (*sauvage*) resurgence': not only does primitive 'peep through' the fabric of the contemporary, as Marx wrote,[55] it gushes forth uncontrollably. This notion of the *sauvage* occurs frequently in a series of articles published by Baudrillard between 1971 and 1974. It is in these texts that the theme of radical alterity emerges most clearly: the actions, perspectives, and subjects he describes as *sauvage* introduce a rupture into the closed space of recuperation, above all that effected by the left itself and its classical dialectical categories. We can look firstly to an article entitled 'Strike Story' from 1971, in which Baudrillard analyses a ten-day strike of metro conductors.[56] The strike, which sought to challenge the collapse of the category of the conductor (already a well-paid position) as a consequence of automation,[57] was condemned at the time as 'an "egoistic" struggle of a "privileged caste"' and a 'betrayal in regard to solidarity and transcendental proletarian internationalism'.[58] Baudrillard rejected such characterisations – 'Not at all!' – the strike of the metro conductors was in fact an (inarticulate) expression of the objective situation labour had found itself in.[59] That is to say, the strike was a reflection of the atomisation of labour, the hierarchies and segregation between categories of workers, the 'infinite fragmentation of statutes, interest, privileges'.[60] Capital no longer brought workers together, undermining itself by bringing about the generalisation of the proletarian class. It wrenched workers apart, setting them against one another. 'In this business of social dislocation,' Baudrillard wrote, 'one finds a capitalism still more savage than in the first phase of industrialization.'[61] From it emerged not the ideal dialectic of bourgeoisie and proletariat, but 'new contradictions and savages of the system'.[62] Despite being backed by the unions,[63] Baudrillard referred to it as a 'wild[cat]

[55] Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, p. 12.
[56] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 64.
[57] Jeannine Verdès-Leroux, 'Les conditions de transport: objet de mobilisation', *Sociologie du travail* 16 (3), 1974, pp. 225–246.
[58] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 64.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., pp. 64–5.
[62] Ibid., p. 65.
[63] Verdès-Leroux, 'Les conditions de transport'.

strike' (*grève sauvage*) on account of its 'minoritary'[64] and 'immoral'[65] nature, and its inability to express itself in the sanctioned languages of the left:

> One must accept this strike as wild [*sauvage*] analysis. Which is to say that none of the models of revolutionary analysis have a grip on it … the conductors themselves developed nothing theoretically from what was implicated in their strike. Irrecuperable for any orthodoxy, even Leftist, since it lacks the great Subject of History, the proletariat armed with a clear conscience of its actions. Too bad for dialectical prescience and its Office for the Study of History, if radical practice creates an event somewhere else.[66]

Two years later, Baudrillard published another 'Strike Story', this time about the strike of the OS *immigré*, or skilled immigrant workers, at the Renault factory in Billancourt in the spring of 1973.[67] Its subject is more broadly the wave of *grèves sauvage* by 'marginal' workers, including immigrants and young workers, that had taken place since 1968. A *grève sauvage* is a strike not sanctioned by a recognised union; for Baudrillard, such strikes represented not 'a test of strength between the organized (unionized) proletariat and the bosses, but of a *test of representation* for the union'.[68] Such a test caused great confusion among the workers – a type of confusion that resembled a dream, since it was now 'a question of confronting one's own repressive authority, of chasing the unionized, delegated, the responsible, the speakers *from one's head*.'[69] For Baudrillard, the politics of the *sauvage* resisted and rendered visible this crisis of representation faced by the unions.

In this text, the politics of the *sauvage* is incarnated in the real-life colonial Other who, compelled to seek work in the metropole, becomes known as 'the immigrant'.[70] According to Baudrillard, migrant labourers retained a position of critical exteriority in relation to the givens of the Western social order: 'As the immigrants were the ones most recently drawn from "wild"

[64] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 65.
[65] Ibid., p. 66.
[66] Ibid., p. 69.
[67] Laure Pitti, 'Les luttes centrales des O.S. immigrés', *Plein Droit* 4 (63), 2004, pp. 43–47.
[68] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 181.
[69] Ibid., p. 183
[70] Ibid., p. 184.

indifference to "rational" labor, they analyze Western society in its recent, fragile, superficial and arbitrary collectivization, forced by labor'.[71] He suggests that the wildcat strikes, with their non-instrumental logic ('overtly, collectively, spontaneously, the workers stopped working, like that, suddenly, one Monday, demanding nothing, negotiating for nothing'[72]), mirror the behaviours of supposedly undisciplined workforces in under-developed countries, incompletely educated in the ethics of production.[73] They grasp neither the intrinsic value of work, nor the salaried incentive, nor the rationalisation of time. If the wildcat strikes therefore see 'the Western laborers themselves "regress" more and more toward "under-developed" behaviors', this dissolution of industrial discipline is 'not the smallest revenge of colonialism'.[74]

In 'Marxism and the system of political economy' (1973), an article originally published in *Utopie* but which forms the final chapter of *The Mirror of Production*, it is not only the immigrant who claims the position of 'savage' exteriority, but all those excluded from wage labour: the populations, most often racialised and gendered, who occupy the peripheral zones of the segregated city, and whose 'total irresponsibility' grounds their capacity to contest the order of separation itself.[75] It is clear in this text that Baudrillard is working within a framework that associates marginality with radicalism: 'Subversion is born there, an *elsewhere*, whereas contradiction operates at the *interior* of the system.'[76] The *sauvage* is a figure of exteriority in relation to the dialectic of labour and capital; the *sauvage* opts instead for 'a refusal, pure and simple, of production as the general axiomatic of social relations.'[77] While speaking to struggles and the 'new social movements' often characterised in terms of an identity framework, for Baudrillard the *sauvage* is a figure *against* identity: it does not call for inclusion in the present system but seeks the destruction of this system:

> The emancipated or embourgeoisified Black remains a Black, just as the proletarianized immigrant remains first of all an immigrant, as the Jew remains a Jew. Again the code re-

[71] Ibid., pp. 185–6.
[72] Ibid., p. 185.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 133.
[76] Ibid., pp. 133–4.
[77] Ibid., p. 141.

> emerges with more violence in everything that would seem to suppress it. In Marxist terms, the superstructure is imposed with more force as the contradictions connected to the infrastructure are resolved, which is to say the least, paradoxical.[78]

Why do supposedly superstructural oppressions such as racism and sexism persist even as capital seems to advance? Why has capital's promise to 'dissolve all fixed, fast, and frozen relations', as Marx and Engels put it, turned out to be empty? Baudrillard's response is that capitalism itself has changed, entering 'a new phase' in which it no longer functions around the exploitation of a surplus but around the reproduction of a semiotic code. In this text, the concept of *domestication* comes to stand in for the new forms of alienation of consumer society. Domestication describes the transformation of desires, needs, and meanings instituted at the level of the sign.[79] I look at this argument in more detail in Section 3 below.

2 Baudrillard's ethnographic argument: Production and primitive societies

In *The Mirror of Production* (1973), Baudrillard pronounces the decline of Marxism by stating that its dialectic 'carries an incurable *ethnocentrism of the code*.'[80] In this book, written between 1972 and 1973 (some chapters of which are articles originally published in *Utopie*), dialectical thought emerges as the primary symptom of all that is 'domesticated' and neutralised by capitalism in its third phase. Baudrillard directs his critique, however, at several different strands of Marxist thought: alongside the words of Marx himself, he criticises the 'structural Marxism' of Althusser, the Marxist anthropology of Godelier, and the Hegelian Marxism of Lukács and Marcuse. Marxism is haunted, he argues, by 'the phantom of production'.[81] While it criticises the '*contents* of production' – its capitalist contents, that is – it 'leaves production as a *form* intact.'[82] That is, Marx's criticism of the fetish of exchange value leaves untouched the 'similar fiction' dwelling in the concepts of labour and use value, in an anthropology of the human as defined by their capacity to labour, with this labour being considered in utilitarian terms, as an intentional means to a designated end.[83] This anthropology

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[78] Ibid., p. 136.
[79] Ibid., p. 129.
[80] Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, p. 106.
[81] Ibid., p. 17.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., p. 19.

infects Marxist notions of emancipation, too, which seek the *liberation* of production from exchange value, enabling 'an authentic and radical productivity' to blossom under a disalienated labour that bears a transparent relationship with use value.[84] 'In this', Baudrillard argues, 'Marxism assists the cunning of capital. It convinces men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power, thus censoring the much more radical hypothesis that they might be alienated as labor power.'[85] Production is then the primary axiom of Marxist thought and political strategy: production as an analytical category unfolds itself, via an anthropology that views man as a being that produces, into *productivism* as the horizon of Marxist politics.

For Baudrillard, the productivist code is ethnocentric while claiming to be universal: not only does it impose itself across a heterogeneous *capitalist* society and the types of subjects formed within it, it also acts as a transcendental schema, remaking *all* past and future societies in its image. This includes the 'primitive societies' that exist on the peripheries of capitalism. For Baudrillard, the schema of production blinds Marxism to the different logics that form the basis of such societies. Its reasoning is

> like the man who, having lost his key in a dark alley, looks for it in a lighted area because, he says, that it is the only place where he could find it. Thus, historical materialism does not know how to grasp earlier societies in their symbolic articulation. It only finds in them what it could find under its own light, that is, its artificial mode of production.[86]

Marxist anthropology, especially that of Godelier, is, as for Clastres, a central culprit here. Against Godelier's efforts 'to preserve materialist orthodoxy against the heresy of primitive societies',[87] Baudrillard insists: 'there is *neither a mode of production nor production* in primitive societies.'[88] His justifications for this argument, which draw mostly on writings of Lévi-Strauss, Sahlins, Clastres, and Castoriadis, are familiar from Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Firstly, he criticises the use of the concept of the economic in relation to primitive societies, arguing

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[84] Ibid., p. 18.
[85] Ibid., p. 31.
[86] Ibid., p. 107.
[87] Ibid., p. 71.
[88] Ibid., p. 49.

that in primitive societies it is impossible to separate the economic realm from the totality of social (and natural) life. 'The specificity of the anthropological object is precisely the impossibility of defining the economic and the mode of production as a separated instance,' he argues, insisting that one can only begin to grasp the workings of such societies if one undertakes 'to reexamine the whole matter *starting from this non-separation*.'[89] The transhistorical imposition of Marxist categories such as mode of production 'can only make the specific reality of a given type of society burst into satellitized, disjointed categories'.[90] Baudrillard again turns to Godelier to illustrate this, arguing that in the latter's 'theoretical mania' for isolating the various functions of a society – economic, social, religious, kinship functions, and so on – he 'projects an imaginary anthropology of separated functions.'[91] This mania derives ultimately from Godelier's 'will to preserve the distinction between the infrastructure and the superstructure; without which historical materialism collapses. All the rest is [for Godelier] only reformist scrupulosity.'[92]

Primitive societies are heretical for Marxism in a second sense: they simply do not produce in the same way as capitalist societies. In fact, it is not clear they can be said to produce at all. Drawing on Sahlins's *Stone Age Economics*, Baudrillard points to the lack of 'surplus' production in primitive societies: For Marxists, he writes, '[t]here is ever-renewed amazement at the fact that primitives do not produce a surplus "whereas they could produce one"! It is impossible [for Marxists] to think this non-growth, this non-productive desire.'[93] But neither is the lack of surplus production a 'refusal', as Clastres had framed it, or a judicious weighing of labour against the society's needs. The threshold of need itself, Baudrillard argues, is arbitrary and derives largely from 'a moral conception of the superfluous and the artificial', which either views primitive societies in terms of a perfectly rational, self-regulating nature or a perfectly irrational, excessive religiosity.[94] The concept of scarcity is part of the same problem. When applied to primitive societies it bears very little meaning, as such societies are not organised around extractive relations with the natural world, but around 'symbolic

[89] Ibid., p. 74.
[90] Ibid., p. 87.
[91] Ibid., p. 73.
[92] Ibid., p. 71.
[93] Ibid., p. 75.
[94] Ibid.

exchange'.[95] According to the logic of symbolic exchange, 'it is not the socio-cultural realm that limits "potential" production; instead, exchange itself is based on non-production, eventual destruction, and a process of continuous *unlimited* reciprocity between *persons*, and inversely on a strict *limitation* of exchanged *goods*.'[96] Symbolic exchange is a fundamentally non-linear and non-ends-oriented process of exchange mediated by the gods: 'The final product is never aimed for. There is neither behaviour aiming to produce useful values for the group through technical means, nor behaviour aiming at the same end by magical means.'[97] Symbolic exchange thus plays a largely negative role in Baudrillard's discussion of productivism. Because they instantiate symbolic exchange, primitive societies are a 'heresy' in relation to the productivist schema, exposing the ethnocentrism of its matrix of concepts – use value, scarcity, subsistence, labour, and needs – rather than a positive vision of non-alienated sociality.

3 Baudrillard's historical argument: Capitalism's 'third phase'

Having demonstrated the failures of Marxist analyses of primitive societies, Baudrillard turns to a critique of Marxist analysis in general. 'Just as a people that oppresses another cannot be free, so a culture that is mistaken about another must also be mistaken about itself,' he writes.[98] There are two parts to this argument: a historical argument about the transformation of capitalist society into its 'third phase' and an epistemological argument about Marxist historicism and the dialectical method. While these arguments make fewer direct references to primitive societies, the notion of Marxism's ethnocentrism, understood as a mirror from which it is unable to extricate itself, remains the principle around which they revolve.

Baudrillard's historical argument constructs a new periodisation of the phases of political economy. The first phase corresponds to precapitalist (feudal or archaic) modes of production in which exchange is limited to the exchange of the surplus derived from material production, most of which is still undertaken for the objective of use value. In the second phase, designating the entry into the capitalist mode of production (which Baudrillard terms, following the classical category used by Luxemburg and Lenin, 'competitive capitalism'), commodity exchange becomes generalised, so that 'the entire volume of "industrial" material

[95] Ibid., p. 83.
[96] Ibid., p. 79.
[97] Ibid., p. 83.
[98] Ibid., p. 107.

production is alienated in the exchange'.[99] The core of Marx's project was to recognise the qualitative break between the first and second phases. But Marx failed to recognise the emergence of a *second* qualitative break, 'equal in importance to the industrial revolution',[100] inaugurating what Baudrillard calls the 'third phase' of political economy.[101] This phase is indeed 'monopolistic capitalism', as Luxemburg and Lenin had observed. However, they had only – or only been able to – theorise it as a quantitative extension of competitive capitalism, 'limiting the problem to its infrastructural and political givens'.[102] They had not been able to perceive the qualitative transformations involved in this phase, evident above all in the use of consumption as a means to control labour:

> In the planned cycle of consumer demand, the new strategic forces, the new structural elements – needs, knowledge, culture, information, sexuality – have all their explosive force defused. In opposition to the competitive system, the monopolistic system institutions *consumption* as control, as the planned socialization by the code (of which advertising, style, etc. are only glaring examples.) … [Consumption] signifies the passage, by its contradictions, to a mode of strategic control, of predictive anticipation, of the absorption of the dialectic, and of the general homeopathy of the system.[103]

This third phase is defined by the absorption of all that is apparently inalienable – 'virtue, love, knowledge, consciousness' – into the sphere of exchange value.[104] Monopolistic capitalism thus signifies a transformation of the social totality in such a way that the determination of social relations by the commodity form gives way to new form of determination by the '*sign form*'.[105] What has established itself, behind the backs of the most radical Marxist thinkers, is 'a structure of control and of power much more subtle and more totalitarian than that of

[99] Ibid., p. 119.
[100] Ibid., p. 122.
[101] Ibid. p. 120.
[102] Ibid., p. 124.
[103] Ibid., p. 126.
[104] Ibid., p. 119.
[105] Ibid., p. 121.

exploitation.'[106] This form of control 'plays on the faculty of producing meaning and difference'; as such, it is 'more radical than that which plays on labour power.'[107]

While certain Marxist thinkers perceived this transition, none understood its full implications. Baudrillard cites Lukács, who, with his concept of reification, came some way toward theorising it and in doing so 'constituted the only critical line of theoretical development between Marx and the Situationists'.[108] The Situationists went much further in grasping the radical nature of the transformation through their concept of the spectacle. Yet even they 'still refer to the "infrastructural" logic of the commodity', failing to see that the 'third phase' necessitated not simply the reconfiguration but the abolition of the categories of infrastructure and superstructure.[109] These categories were no more applicable to capitalism under its third phase, organised around the 'super-ideology of the sign',[110] than they were to primitive societies, organised by symbolic exchange. In the previous chapters, we have seen the base-superstructure schema dismantled in different ways and to different ends by Lévi-Strauss, Meillassoux, and Clastres. The singularity of Baudrillard's analysis is to dismantle it on the basis of a theory of monopolistic capitalism as a *semiotic system*. Baudrillard insists that his theory of domination by the 'sign form' is still a 'materialist' theory,[111] however, because it 'postulates a dialectical continuity between the political economy of the commodity and the political economy of the sign (hence of the critique of the one and of the other)'.[112] It, indeed, *more* properly materialist since it is based on a more adequate reflection of the changing nature of capitalism:

> The schema of value (exchange and use) and of general equivalence is no longer limited to the arena of "production": it has permeated the spheres of language, of sexuality, etc. The form has not changed (hence one can speak of a political economy of the sign, of a political economy of the body, *without metaphor*). But the center of gravity has been

[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid., p. 122.
[108] Ibid., p. 121.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., p. 122.
[111] Ibid., p. 123.
[112] Ibid., p. 123–124.

displaced; the epicentre of the contemporary system is no longer the process of material production.[113]

But is not one definition of a metaphor – or, more precisely, an analogy – the continuity of a form as displaced from one object onto another? Under the sign form, Baudrillard argues, 'the signifier and the referent are now abolished to the sole profit of the play of signifiers, of a generalized formalization in which the code no longer refers back to any subjective or objective "reality," but to its own logic.'[114] This untethering of the signifier from any real referent is indeed *analogous*, in Baudrillard's account, with the untethering of exchange value from use value described by Marx, taking on even more complex forms of real abstraction in finance capital, as Lenin had begun to theorise. It is less clear that, as Baudrillard claims, the sign form *replaces* the commodity form as the determining principle of contemporary capitalism. Moreover, the conditions Baudrillard describes as functions of this sign-domination are not in fact particularly new; Marx, writing in the nineteenth century, was well aware of the tendency for capital to fabricate demand, as much as he was of its production of artificial scarcity. Such phenomena were expressions of the perverse logic of the commodity form, rather than a new logic of the sign form.

Baudrillard claims that the domination by the sign form is 'everywhere sanctioned today by the new master disciplines of structural linguistics, semiology, information theory, and cybernetics'.[115] Baudrillard's description of the operation of the 'sign form' is indeed very close to Saussurean semiology, according to which all semiotic systems were defined by the arbitrary relation between the signifier and signified, which were never attached to any 'natural' value, since social life did not *have* any natural basis: it was symbolic through and through. For Saussure, however, non-substantial or purely differential relations were considered an eternal property of *la langue*, and certainly not a phenomenon specific to capitalism. While in many of the early sections of *Mirror* Baudrillard refuses the idea of any putatively concrete or authentic value – such as use value – his depiction of the detachment of signifier from any real 'referent' *as a recent historical phenomenon* amounts to an inference

[113] Ibid., p. 130.
[114] Ibid., p. 127.
[115] Ibid., p. 122.

that this very natural value may, prior to capitalism's 'third phase', indeed have existed. If today the sign form 'approaches its true structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs',[116] then it must have referred, before, to something other than signs. Despite his critiques of the false authenticity of use value, Baudrillard's theory of the 'third phase of capitalism' as involving a qualitative change underlined by the collapse of the signified presumes that there *may once have been* a referent or stable signified present beneath the signifier. In this respect, Lyotard's critique holds value.

4 Baudrillard's epistemological argument: Marxism and the dialectical method

Baudrillard's historical argument about the 'third phase' of capitalism plays a central role in his rejection of the Marxist dialectic. Firstly, it helps to justify his break with the dialectic as a historical schema: 'the very beautiful dialectic' of Labour and Capital, which presents the proletariat as the protagonist of a history that is ultimately moving in the direction of communism.[117] As we have seen, under capitalism's third phase history is recast in terms of an inexorable semiotic domestication in which even the momentary disruptions by *sauvage* elements tend to be recuperated by the totalising mechanics of the code. Secondly, Baudrillard's thesis of the 'third phase' supports his criticism of the dialectical *method*. We have already seen some of the ways in which Baudrillard makes this argument with relation to the concepts of production, labour, and need: the Marxist focus on production only targets the content (the specific logic of capital) but leaves the form (the more general logic of finality and the anthropology of man as a productive being) intact. Here is the eponymous mirror of production, capable only of reflecting the apparent problems and not of reaching their roots. The method proper to this mirror is the dialectic: unable to take a critical standpoint outside of the 'code', it perpetuates a 'vicious circularity'.[118] 'Between the theory and the object … there is, in effect, a dialectical relation, in the bad sense: they are locked into a speculative dead end.'[119]

In assessing Baudrillard's arguments regarding the fate of the Marxist dialectic, it is useful to contrast his interpretation with that of Lukács in his *History and Class*

[116] Ibid., p. 128.
[117] Ibid., p. 157f.
[118] Ibid., p. 116.
[119] Ibid., p. 29.

Consciousness.[120] First published in Germany in 1923, it was not until 1960 that the central essay of the book, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', was first published in French. From this point onward the concept of reification became well known in French Marxism. It is probable that Baudrillard, with his background as a Germanist and early reader of the Frankfurt School, and with his references to Lukács in *Mirror*, had read *History and Class Consciousness*. However, the dialectic that is the object of Baudrillard's critique bears little resemblance to that of Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*. Examining the differences brings into view some of the impasses of Baudrillard's theoretical critique, which rebound onto his view of the closure of politics after 1968.

Circularity

The first of the differences between Baudrillard and Lukács regards Baudrillard's clami that the dialectic is marked by an epistemological circularity.[121] For Baudrillard, this circularity is based on the identity posited by the dialectical method between thought and being. Ultimately, he argues, the dialectical method refers to nothing other than 'the self-verification of a model that is achieved through the adequacy of the rational (itself) and the real.'[122] Lukács's account, by contrast, stresses that while the dialectical method seeks to examine the relation between thought and existence, it does not posit the identity of the two – that is, unless the meaning of this 'identity' is rigorously specified. 'Thought and existence are not identical in the sense that they "correspond" to each other, or "reflect" each other, that they "run parallel" to each other or "coincide" with each other', he writes.[123] 'Their identity is that they are aspects of one and the same dialectical process.'[124] Expressions like 'correspondence', 'reflection', 'coincidence' all presuppose a duality between thought and existence, as separate substances that come into contact or 'interaction' with one another while each retaining their essential form. For Lukács the principle of the materialist dialectic involves, on the contrary, the transformation of subjective and objective forces of history *into* one another. The subjective class consciousness of the proletariat transforms itself into an objective historical force, as much as the resulting

[120] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*.
[121] Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 29.
[122] Ibid., p. 117.
[123] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 204.
[124] Ibid.

destruction of reified social relations transforms the objective nature of the social world. In this way, the only sense in which thought and being could be seen to have an 'identity' in Lukács's dialectical method is in the sense that both are oriented to totality. Totality for Lukács is considered not as a static fact but as the 'totality of a process';[125] it does not refer to the subsumption of a heterogeneous set of facts under an abstract schema: 'The category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity.'[126] To think in terms of totality is, on the contrary, to begin from the concrete specificity of such facts and to draw the processual relations between them, and hence to understand *all* empirical objects 'as the aspects of a total social situation caught up in the process of historical change.'[127]

Lukács's dialectical method would thus appear to be quite foreign to what Baudrillard's describes as the 'self-verification of the model'.[128] Indeed, Lukács suggests that it is a tendency of *idealism* to 'succumb to the delusion of confusing the intellectual reproduction of reality with the actual structure of reality itself'.[129] To confuse an unmediated reproduction of the appearance of the social world with the truth of that world would indeed be to perpetuate a vicious circularity – winding up with a dialectic that is indeed, in Baudrillard's words, 'everywhere a Moebius band'.[130] Yet for Lukács this kind of tautology is characteristic not of the Marxist dialectic but of a bourgeois historiography which takes society at its word, reproducing its unmediated appearance in intellectual form. The Marxist dialectic is, on the contrary, defined by a series of mediations between the subjective and the objective, the conception of historical totality, and of all social forms as part of an unceasing process determined by subjective intervention. It is this subjective side of history, as we have begun to see, that Baudrillard has lost sight of during the 1970s.

Separation

The second criticism Baudrillard directs at Marxist dialectical method is that it proceeds from same the logic of 'separation' on which political economy is built. The categories of historical materialism, he argues, 'function at the interior of our reality principle, which is the principle

[125] Ibid., p. 34.
[126] Ibid., p. 12.
[127] Ibid., p. 162.
[128] Ibid., p. 117.
[129] Ibid., p. 9.
[130] Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 28.

of separation … they blind us [to this] line of separation itself, [to] this fracture of the symbolic, [to] this place (or non-place: utopia) beneath (or beyond) the economy and the internal contradictions of the mode of production.'[131] In other words, the principle of separation underlies and organises both capitalist and Marxist perceptions of the social world – separation is 'the rupture which founds the system itself.'[132] As a Marxist principle, separation takes the form of the distinction between infrastructure and superstructure, which renders Marxism 'incapable of thinking the process of ideology, of culture, of language, of the symbolic in general.'[133] We are back to the problem of the category of the economy, and the artificial division of the totality of social life that this category brings about. For Baudrillard, the idea of the economy does not correspond to the *true* forms of separation that exist in contemporary society: 'It misses the point not only with regard to primitive societies' – presumably *un*separated (as for Clastres) – 'but it also fails to account for the radicality of separation in our societies, and therefore the radicality of subversion that grows there.'[134] For Baudrillard, capital *does* separate, but not in the way Marxism thinks. This is, moreover, what the '*non*-separation' inherent in primitive societies can help us to think.[135]

Lukács's theorisation of the Marxist dialectic again provides a counterpoint to this suggestion that dialectics is necessarily a method guided by separation. For Lukács, dialectics as a method is characterised precisely by its disavowal of the separation of the economy from other domains of social life, and from the economic determinism that is often the result: 'It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of the totality.'[136] For Lukács it is bourgeois thought, not Marxism, that fragments knowledge into specialised fields and disciplines, each of which functions as a closed system blind to its foundational premises. This is the reification of consciousness which Marxism seeks to overcome by *revealing* that the fragmentation of the objects of knowledge mirrors the fragmentation of the industrial worker, who is 'a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system' which

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[131] Ibid., p. 108 (translation modified).
[132] Ibid., p. 109.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid., p. 109.
[135] Ibid., p. 74.
[136] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 27.

‘functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not.’[137] The worker, and the thinker, both confront a wholly objective nature as something separate from themselves, and in which they are unable to intervene. This is, in certain respects, an image resonant of Baudrillard’s totalising vision of the third phase of monopolistic capitalism, in which subjective forces seem to dissolve in the face of the all-powerful dynamics of symbolic recuperation.

Immanence

But does the dialectical method not still succumb to a certain circularity, in the sense that its method is to work *through* pre-existing concepts – production, labour – rather than to begin on radically new conceptual grounds? It is true that dialectics does not comply to the demand for radical conceptual novelty, nor for immediate rupture with existing intellectual forms. As Lukács writes: ‘Proletarian thought does not require a *tabula rasa*, a new start to the task of comprehending reality and one without any preconceptions.’[138] Dialectics begins from a position of immanence, not exteriority: ‘it conceives of bourgeois society together with its intellectual and artistic productions as the *point of departure* for its own method.’[139] Beginning from the ‘one-sided, abstract and false’ concepts of bourgeois society is ‘inevitable’, however, since such categories cannot be overcome by the force of intellectual will alone. The transformation of concepts requires the transformation of the social world: ‘If concepts are only the intellectual forms of historical realities then these forms, one-sided, abstract and false as they are, belong to the true unity as genuine aspects of it.’[140] Any utopian project seeking to reinvent these intellectual forms in the absence of a practical movement to change their objective conditions is unlikely to be successful in doing so.

In light of the contrast with Lukács, Baudrillard’s depiction of the dialectic as a Möbius band or vicious circle seems to be based on the principle that theoretical radicalism must proceed from an absolute break with existing modes of conceptualisation. Failing to effect such a break would perpetuate this conceptualisation – for example, in its artificial separation of base and superstructure – in its entirety. It is less clear, in the case of Baudrillard, whether this

[137] Ibid., p. 88.
[138] Ibid., p. 163.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid., p. xlvii.

corresponds to the claim that thought *could* in fact begin from such a position of absolute exteriority to the existing social world – in other words, that a non-reified or not-yet-reified consciousness *could* be accessible in the here and now. We have seen, on the one hand, that a certain exteriority emerges in Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange that dominates primitive societies. But since the notion of symbolic exchange helps to shed light on, and shows continuities with, capitalism in its third phase, the primitive is only a figure of radical alterity in the sense that *capitalism itself is in a position of radical alterity* in relation to prevailing modes of thought, whether Marxist or not. For Baudrillard, the present thus has an anachronistic quality, witnessing the recurrence of primitive symbolic forms and, at times, *sauvage* energies. The primitive is not then a figure of radical alterity or a foregone past; it is a figure of the anachronistic present.

Ethnocentrism

The role of anthropology in Baudrillard's thinking is evident, finally, in the fact that he frames the dialectic as an *ethnocentrism*. Dialectical thought is ethnocentric, he argues, in viewing thought as corresponding to a linear universal history, which privileges contemporary capitalist society as the axiomatic point from which to illuminate the true forms of all other societies. All forms of Marxism, Baudrillard argues, are 'organised according to the idea that, with the mode of capitalist production, the universal process approaches its truth and its end.'[141] According to this conception, capitalism marks the first moment in world history in which people have become conscious of the way in which they reproduce both social relations and material wealth. It is thus 'the only mode of production whose critique becomes possible in its real terms'.[142] Althusser, for example, suggests in *Reading Capital* that capitalism constitutes a historical exception because it presents a situation in which, for the first time, '*scientific abstractions exist in the state of empirical realities*.'[143] The development of reason based on quantification and abstraction, the same forms of reasoning used by Marx to unveil the fetishes of political economy, are able to emerge only due to the extension of abstract labour and commodity production. It is for this reason, Althusser argues, that we can in fact accept, in this

[141] Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 111.
[142] Ibid., p. 112.
[143] Althusser quoted in Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 116.

instance at least, 'the *legitimate epistemological primacy of the present over the past*.'[144] Capitalism creates not only the conditions for exploitation and alienation, but for scientific understanding of the objective relations that underpin these phenomena, which have hitherto remained opaque. According to Althusser's argument, Baudrillard writes, class struggles in 'pre-capitalist' societies must remain 'blind and latent' since their part in the movement of history is not transparent to them.[145] Only capitalism makes possible the emergence of the proletariat, as the first class to be conscious of its own position in history. It is in this way that Marxism, in positing the coincidence between its own theory and objective reality, 'evokes the Hegelian trajectory in which the saga of Spirit is completely illuminated retrospectively, only to culminate in the discourse of Hegel himself.'[146] Marxism ultimately identifies itself – its own discourse – as the culmination of the historical process and as the vantage point from which to illuminate all other societies.

It is useful to turn here to an article written by Cornelius Castoriadis, under the pseudonym Paul Cardan, for *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (published serially between 1961 and 1965 and later in English as 'History and Revolution: A Revolutionary Critique of Historical Materialism', in 1971).[147] Among a number of other arguments that overlap with Baudrillard's regarding the ethnocentrism of Marxism, Castoriadis discusses the notion of universal history, presenting what is essentially the same argument for historical relativism as Baudrillard, in a passage which it is worth quoting at length:

> One never sees anything from all possible places at once. One always sees from a definite viewing point and one then always sees an "aspect". … Those who believe that a total history of humanity, almost free from socio-centrism, will be achieved under socialism are utterly wrong. This is equivalent to saying that socialist society will be capable of seeing *everything* … We always see from *somewhere*, from a certain perspective. This is *not* a 'defect' of our vision: it *is* seeing, it is vision. The rest is the perennial phantasm of theology and philosophy alike.[148]

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[144] Ibid.
[145] Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 113.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Cardan, *History and Revolution*.
[148] Ibid., p. 32.

The ocular figuration of knowledge, in both Cardan and Baudrillard, in reference to world history and ethnocentrism presents thought as a matter of receiving information that takes the form of an image imprinted on the retina. In consequence, the process of conceptualisation is made passive, and the object of knowledge static. What is lost here is a mode of thought that goes beyond, and requires more, than sight – such as the faculties of abstraction, enabling the departure from a static and two-dimensional plane and the understanding of history as process that is not simply objective (located in a legislated Nature external to the individual who 'sees' it) but as something that they themselves bring into being. As Lukács argues, 'relativism moves within an essentially static world.'[149] Baudrillard and Castoriadis criticise what they perceive to be the ethnocentrism of historical materialism by demanding one 'views' human history from the 'perspective' of primitive societies. Yet in doing so we might ask whether they do not reduce primitive societies *to* mere perspectives on the world rather than conceiving of them as subjects intervening *in* the world.

5 Conclusion: The death of the savage

By the time of the publication of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* in 1976, Baudrillard recounts, he had already 'passed to the side of theory'.[150] His turn from political practice was complete, as was his conviction that modern society had passed into the order of simulacra and the hyperreal, the themes for which he is largely known today. Yet his exposition in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* of the concept of symbolic exchange clarifies the relations between the figures of the savage and the primitive and the post-1968 political order that characterised his earlier writings. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* it is clear that symbolic exchange is opposed term for term to the order of production, finality, and the dialectic targeted in *Mirror*: 'The reversibility[151] of the gift in the counter-gift, the reversibility of exchange in sacrifice, the reversibility of time in the cycle, the reversibility of production in destruction, the reversibility of life in death, and the reversibility of every term and value of language in the anagram.'[152] Baudrillard confirms that the model of symbolic exchange 'harks back to primitive

[149] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 187.
[150] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 16.
[151] The French term is *réversibilité*, which could also be translated as 'inversion'.
[152] Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 8.

formations', established as the inversion of the rationalisation of the code and defined by the 'the extermination of value'.[153] This primitive order is, however, beginning to penetrate the underside of modern society: 'This radical utopia begins slowly to explode into all levels of our society, in the vertigo of a revolt which no longer has anything to do with revolution or with the law of history.'[154]

What concrete forms does this vertiginous revolt take? In his earlier writings for *Utopie* examined above, including 'Play and the Police' and 'Strike Story', we glimpsed it in emergent struggle tactics such as the riots of May 1968, the wildcat strikes of the early 1970s, and the new social movements – such as migrant, anti-racist and feminist struggles – which saw sites of struggle move outside of the workplace or so-called 'point of production'. For Baudrillard, these new forms of struggle target the code which differentiates the included from the excluded, and which establishes the regime of separation felt at all levels of social life. But they also incarnate a desire for pure refusal ('refusal of work, of organization, the drive to happiness'[155]) and a radical negativity whose 'goal is not a surpassing of contradictions, but an abolition of separations'.[156] All such forms of struggle operate, therefore, by way of an intrusion of the inversions of the primitive order into the social world. This is opposed, at every level in Baudrillard's analysis, to dialectical transformation and the tropes of 'the Left'.

Between 1974 and 1978, however, Baudrillard's references to the *sauvage* as a figure of radical rupture or subversive energy recede from his writings for *Utopie.* These texts express a sense of the closure of the political; they are preoccupied with visions of a left that has come to enjoy its own failure. For Baudrillard, the PCF exemplifies this tendency. In 'The Failure of Prophecy' (1974), he reflects on the electoral victory of the liberal-conservative Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (Giscard), who beat the Socialist François Mitterand, then backed by the PCF, by 1.6 percent.[157] This was the closest election in French history. As such, it provided an ideal outcome for the PCF, which Baudrillard argued did not in fact *want to win*, and indeed had become phobic of power. He argued that the PCF's continued existence was premised on a kind of 'disillusioned investment' that grew out of the 'failure of prophecies'.[158] The

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[153] Ibid., pp. 8–9.
[154] Ibid., p. 7.
[155] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 49.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Jean Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, pp. 229–240.
[158] Ibid., p. 229.

revolution had not come as planned; the coming of the revolution was to be invested in all the more. ‘Frustrated by a victory, by a second coming, we are going to invest a long term practice with a fierce resignation. As we know, if the Kingdom of Heaven was in this world, the church wouldn’t exist.’[159] It was only in the purified space of failure that the PCF could continue to exist:

> This ghetto wherein we enclose it, and from which it makes us feel pity for it, is the only artificial space wherein it can survive. There it can exert its vocation as a great power at rest, its frozen vocation as a manager sheltered from power, its vocation as an oppositional silent majority. Moscow and Peking deliberately chose Giscard – nothing says that the communist party did it in secret.[160]

The voters, for their part, acted out the script of democracy as though it were a primitive ritual based on clan allegiances. ‘Left and Right exchange their objectives and their politics’, Baudrillard wrote, while the vote was ‘recycled as a symbolic practice of kinship and a ritual of recognition.’[161] The end of history had arrived: all that appeared as politics revealed itself to be a simulation. ‘This is why, as Giscard d’Estaing said so well, “we live in a time without memory.”’[162]

Baudrillard continues this parody of the PCF in a series of three articles written for *Utopie* between 1977 and 1978. These texts trace the electoral strategies of the PCF and its ultimate withdrawal from the Union of the Left in 1978, which marked a pivotal moment in its decline in favour of the Socialist Party and leading to Mitterand’s victory in 1981. In ‘The Magic Struggle or the Final Flute’ (March 1977), Baudrillard wonders of the PCF, again, ‘Why do they desperately put on the brakes, cartoon-like, when they see the abyss of power?’[163] This ‘negative obsession with power’ is,[164] in this case, related to the legacy of Stalinism: the Communists are paralysed by their desire to prove they have exculpated themselves, that they have rid themselves of the desire for power that might associate them with Stalinism. They

[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid., p. 229–230.
[161] Ibid., p. 230.
[162] Ibid., p. 240.
[163] Ibid., p. 91.
[164] Ibid.

have to prove their morality, their goodness, the fact that their means align with their ends. 'Every aspect of excess, immorality, and the seduction and simulation that constitute politics escapes them. This is what makes them foolish, profoundly foolish, profoundly riveted to their bureaucratic mentality.'[165] In these texts, the PCF is cast as the embodiment of Nietzsche's slave morality, driven on by '*the triumphal position of ressentiment*' that results from its repeated failure.[166] In this way,

> They [the Communists] are everywhere and always victims, and they hold on to only this miserabilist myth of the masses dominated by an exploitative power. This is the only substance of all of their discourse; a lamentable and plaintive recrimination addressing itself to whose pity, to what instance of justice, to which god who will avenge them on capital?[167]

As this chapter has shown, Baudrillard finds himself attracted to anthropology and the figure of the savage in the same few years in which he becomes convinced of the foreclosure of the political. This is a moment marked by a feeling of claustrophobia of a capitalism that controls labour through consumption and the 'code'. In his book *Literary Primitivism*, Ben Etherington has argued that the primitivism of the interwar years emerged in response to a 'claustrophobia of immanence' prompted by the rapid advance of imperialism across the globe: 'A world that hitherto had been perceived as a patchwork of incommensurate social realities suddenly appeared as a single lit-up social space, and consciousness had to cope with this absolute immanence.'[168] The desire for the primitive was a response to this 'sudden and vertiginous realization' that capitalism was about to subsume all alternative modes of life, leaving no outside.[169] Etherington does not discuss the 1970s as a moment of similar claustrophobia, but his assessments ring true in relation to Baudrillard's writings. Baudrillard's resort to the figures of the primitive and the savage reflect perhaps not primarily, or not *simply*, disillusionment and despair, but above all the claustrophobia of a world that appeared to have assimilated all

[165] Ibid., p. 94–5.
[166] Ibid., p. 105.
[167] Ibid., p. 93.
[168] Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. xvii.
[169] Ibid., p. 11.

conditions of exteriority, and in which ‘capital has integrated the revolution as a variable.’[170] Absorbing its outside in this way, infected by the game of symbolic reversion, capitalism had succumbed to internal rot. As he wrote in a piece titled ‘Death to Savages’ (1976):

> Rot and decomposition are fundamental symbolic processes – along with catastrophe. They are ours today. The whole space of capital is surreptitiously dismantled, deconstructed, emptied of its rationality, its ends. The savage surgery has only just begun, but from this moment we are all entirely delivered to raw symbolic reversion, where there is no longer either a subject, an object, history, or capital.[171]

This ‘savage surgery’ is here an operation of capitalism itself, rather than the intervention of a non-alienated exterior. Capital’s subsumption of the entire world, through imperialism, has brought about a perverse self-cannibalism. In this world of recursion and reversion, ethnology no longer has any place, since it is no longer other to its object. ‘This ethnology is finished, and every return to it is a regression because this is a radically new situation: we are all Indians, all blacks, all savages.’[172] It is above all the postcolonial situation, and the migration of former colonial subjects to the European cities, that heralds the end of this radical alterity: ‘rather than holding the savage at a healthy ethnographic distance’, history has ‘brought the Savage to the center of the white cities.’[173] The internal rot of simulated capital proceeds through this folding-in of the exterior, cast as the revenge of colonialism: ‘white universality is devoured *in place* by the death that it sowed in the four corners of the globe.’[174]

Baudrillard’s *sauvage* expresses a desire to escape a left that keeps playing an old tape, closing its ears to the transformations taking place around it. The mantra of this left is the moralism of use value, labour, and production. But, Baudrillard insists, production is over. All is left is ‘the great recycling’.[175]

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[170] Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*, p. 178.
[171] Ibid., p. 250.
[172] Ibid., p. 249.
[173] Ibid., p. 248.
[174] Ibid., p. 250.
[175] Ibid., p. 19.

Conclusion

In a talk given at Meillassoux's '*seminaire sauvage*', which ran between 1974 and 1975 at the EHESS, Marc Augé wondered if the contemporary anthropologist had become the 'new informant for the new philosophers'.[1] A primitivist trend within anthropology, exemplified in the writings of 'the most disabused of the post-Marxists', such as Clastres and Jaulin,[2] appeared to Augé to be offering ethnographic fuel for the anti-communist mood of the time. The 'new anthropologists'[3] depicted primitive societies as free from all of the afflictions of modernity and the left alike: 'They lack all that represses us: they are without illusions, without power, without complexes and without commerce.'[4] The new anthropologists, in their desire to associate primitive societies with ideas of authenticity and radical alterity, substituted philosophical speculation for concrete analysis; losing their footing in the field and in the material world, they found themselves 'caught hanging feet up, like bats.'[5] Only a few years after the revolts of 1968, Augé's presentation spoke to the inversion of political horizons across the field of radical political thought, which drew its politics no longer from a critique of the capitalist present but from 'the mixed scents of the elsewhere and the anterior.'[6] This taste for the primitive world was for Augé a symptom of a future foreclosed, and a scepticism toward politics that was not, at that particular moment, unfounded. 'It nevertheless remains remarkable,' he wrote, 'at the hour when man arrives at the ends of the universe, that the basis of renewed philosophy would be an ethnology of dreams.'[7]

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At the beginning of this thesis, I outlined the hypothesis that anthropology may have played a role in what was known as the 'crisis of Marxism' that emerged at the end of the 1970s in France. We are now in a position to judge whether this was indeed the case, and to draw some

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[1] Marc Augé, 'Ces sauvages ne sont qu'une idée', in Amselle, *Le Sauvage á la mode*, p. 21.
[2] Ibid., p. 22.
[3] This phrase (*les nouveaux anthropologues*), which again associates these anthropologists with the *nouveaux philosophes*, comes from Amselle's introduction to the volume. Amselle, 'Présentation', p. 16.
[4] Augé, 'Ces sauvages ne sont qu'une idée', p. 24
[5] Ibid., p. 22.
[6] Ibid., p. 21.
[7] Ibid., p. 25.

conclusions about the nature of this role. We can begin by recognising that, historically, anthropology has not been incompatible with Marxist thought. Marx and Engels were deeply interested in the societies studied by anthropologists, which they saw as living exemplars of the communist capacities of human beings. The 1960s and 1970s also saw significant efforts by anthropologists in France to reconcile the categories and methods of Marxism with those of anthropology, and to reform and sharpen the analytical tools of Marxism so that they might be applied to societies not traversed by commodity relations. By the end of the 1970s, however, this project seemed to have lost its coherence and its drive. On the one hand, as Terray writes, 'Marxist reflection and debate withered away, if I dare say, for a lack of combatants, and Marxist anthropology suffered the full force of the consequences of this drying up.'[8] On the other hand, the themes and problems that had animated Marxist anthropology – especially debates on the role of the peasantry, 'articulation', transition, and underdevelopment – came to be taken up with more rigour in fields adjacent to anthropology, such as critical political economy and development studies.[9] To a large degree, anthropology reinforced its disciplinary identity by becoming once again a discipline devoted primarily to what Lévi-Strauss had called the 'theory of superstructures': the study of myth and religion, kinship and ritual, the psychic and cultural expressions of human life.[10]

These developments in postwar anthropology can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, we can read them as a reflection of *external* forces: specifically, as a response to the political transformations undergone by the French left in the postwar decades. From this angle, we might construct a story about Marxism and anthropology that runs parallel, if at a delay of a few years, to the fortunes of French academic Marxism more broadly (especially that of Althusser and his circle). According to this account, Marxist anthropology would fail because of something outside of it: the putative 'crisis of Marxism'. I discussed the character of this political crisis in the introduction to this thesis, drawing on the accounts of Perry Anderson and Althusser; Chapters 3–5 have shown in more detail the way it unfolded at particular moments in the postwar decades and in more specific tendencies and sections of the left, while

[8] Terray, 'Anthropologie et marxisme: années 1950-70', p. 11.
[9] See, for example, Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011); Harold Wolpe (ed.), *The Articulation of Modes of Production: Essays from* Economy and Society (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution*.
[10] Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 130.

Chapter 2 explored some of the ways in which this crisis, and its relationship to anthropology, were prefigured in the early ideas and political orientation of Lévi-Strauss. In each of these chapters, the authors in question wrestled with a series of disappointments on the part the PCF – which remained throughout the postwar period the largest and most powerful organisation of the French working class.[11] These disappointments included, but were not limited to, Khrushchev's revelations at the Twentieth Congress in 1956 and his invasion of Hungary later that year; the PCF's delayed support for Algerian independence; its capitulation in May 1968 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August that year; the PCF's role in the Solzhenitsyn affair of 1975; and, finally, its withdrawal from the Union of the Left in 1977.[12] In the course of these events, intellectuals on the left increasingly abandoned the PCF, either to join other political tendencies (some which, like Maoism, experienced their own crises) or to take leave of politics altogether. In parallel, Marxism became increasingly discredited as a body of thought capable of guiding emancipatory political practice: read through the lens of PCF dogma, it became seen as incapable of answering the social and political questions of the postwar world in any complex way, and unworthy of academic attention. In this version of events, the transformations undergone by French anthropology in the postwar decades would offer a reflection of an increasingly embattled left, struggling under the influence of the Soviet Union. The overtaking of Marxist anthropology by the post-Marxist (or 'neo-primitivist'[13]) tendencies of Clastres, Baudrillard, Castoriadis, Lyotard, Lefort, Gauchet and many others would then represent a sign or 'symptom' of this broader political crisis.[14] This 'extrinsic' perspective is the kind taken up by Perry Anderson in his *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*.[15]

I agree with this account but want to suggest that it offers only one side of the story. The materials examined in this thesis disclose a more complicated relationship between political events and theory, according to which the former does not simply influence the latter in a unidirectional way. In short, it does not seem to me that the historical forces leading to the decline of Marxism explain everything about the tension between anthropology and Marxism.

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[11] Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 75.
[12] Collins, *The Anthropological Turn*, p. 1.
[13] Li, *The Neo-Primitivist Turn*.
[14] Noys, *Persistence of the Negative*, p. 3.
[15] Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 56; Collins, *The Anthropological Turn*, p. 1.

There is much evidence to suggest that there is, in fact, an internal relationship between anthropology and Marxism as well, which is to say, a causality operating at the level of anthropology's constitution as a discipline and its resulting theoretical tendencies and logics. That is, we should not exclude the possibility of there existing a *logical* opposition between these two intellectual traditions. In the writings of all of the thinkers I have examined here, many of the key categories of historical materialism – exchange, production, class, labour, value, the economy – encountered a limit in anthropological analysis. This led some, such as Meillassoux and Godelier, to try to refashion these categories: to stretch Marxism to fit anthropology. However, as we have seen, many anthropologists and thinkers of primitive societies – Lévi-Strauss, Clastres and Baudrillard were by no means the only ones – did not think a Marxist anthropology possible. Some viewed Marxism as a useful critique of capitalism, but not as a theory that could be fruitfully applied to the study of primitive societies; as such, Marxism was a body of thought with sectoral rather than universal import. Others considered Marxism to be fatally infected by the logics it had sought to critique; as for Baudrillard, Marxism could not help but reproduce, in circular fashion, the problems inscribed into the frameworks of political economy, rationalism, and 'productivism'. In many such instances, primitive society was portrayed as the ultimate proof of Marxism's faults, and used as a wedge for separating a homogenised and disgraced 'Marxism' from other varieties of political radicalism.

While this situation was conditioned in a profound way by the political conjuncture, it was also related to the constitution of anthropology as a discipline in France. The recognition that primitive economies tend to be deeply imbricated in moral and spiritual life has, since Mauss, positioned anthropology as a space for culturalist readings of political economy, and for the rejection of simplistic materialist frameworks. Lévi-Strauss's reconstitution of anthropology from the late 1950s privileged 'culture' as the primary object of anthropological study, having transported this culturalist framework from American anthropology. But anthropology's focus on culture, on the uncovering of psychic and mental structures and processes and on discovering the particular character of '*la pensée sauvage*', was also generated from the kinds of methods that came to be most respected in anthropology. Since Malinowski, the emphasis on ethnography as sustained immersion in a particular community – 'participant observation' – set up twentieth-century anthropology as the study of the interior

of a cultural world (as Malinowski put it, 'the native's point of view, *his* vision of *his* world').[16] This orientation to the immanent interpretation of 'native' or 'primitive' meaning was systematised by Lévi-Strauss in his proposal that anthropology become a science of culture dedicated to uncovering psychic and mental structures and processes and discovering the particular character of '*la pensée sauvage*'. Altogether, it is possible to trace an anti-materialist thread running through twentieth-century anthropology in France, which made it an ideal 'outside' to Marxism and materialism. This anti-materialist perspective rejected the idea that the organisation of a given society is determined, or primarily conditioned, by its mode of production. Rather, it saw social and historical phenomena as first and foremost reflections of mental or cultural structures. Anti-materialist anthropology also rejected materialism from a moral perspective, pushing back against what it saw as a damaging orientation to the economic – a centring of work, production and economic calculation – and proposing an orientation to spiritual and aesthetic themes instead. In the foregoing chapters, these two dimensions of anti-materialism – its analytical and normative sides – have been seen to be consistently entwined.

To sum up these points: it is clear that French anthropology in the postwar decades was affected by the broader crisis of Marxism, which was first and foremost a political crisis. But anthropology was also well placed to intervene, in its own way, on the intellectual side of this crisis, and even to push it forward in certain respects. Here anthropology's interventions into Marxist and leftist thought were by no means unambiguously reactive or driven by an underlying conservatism – and their readings of Marxism as Eurocentric were not unfounded. The philosophical Marxism that emerged in the academy in France and elsewhere in Europe (which Anderson terms 'Western Marxism') was indeed, in the postwar decades, largely a Eurocentric theoretical tradition.[17] It remained marked by a conception of unilinear historical development and progressive modernisation that judged European societies to be the apex of such modernisation. Anthropology's challenge to this – beginning most famously with Lévi-Strauss's critique of Sartre's conception of history in *The Savage Mind* but appearing in some form in the work of all of the other authors examined here – was radical and necessary. Its critique of the logic of racial superiority embedded into modernisation narratives, and its dismantling of conceptions of work, production, and the economy which have often been

[16] Malinowski, *Argonauts*, p. 19.
[17] Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

fetishised on the left, should be considered a contribution to Marxist thought rather than simply a contribution to its 'crisis'. Indeed, the complicated intersection of anthropology and Marxism studied here prompts us to think outside of the notion of crisis, or at least outside of its purely negative valences, to see what was invented, transformed, opened, and reconfigured in the realm of Marxist and radical political thought during this period. The interventions made by anthropologists into Marxist thought were not uniformly progressive or reactive, and they did not follow a homogeneous political trajectory. We can nevertheless discern a set of principles that traverse them, which allow us some insight into the politics of radical anthropology in the present.

Principles of non-alienation

In his *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), David Graeber identified a theory of alienation as the pinnacle of anthropology's contribution to radical (in his case, anarchist) political thought: 'This is the ultimate prize: what, precisely, are the possible dimensions of non-alienated experience? How might its modalities be catalogued, or considered?'[18] All of the thinkers studied in this thesis have, in one way of another, viewed primitive society as a repository of social forms and phenomena that have not, or not yet, been subject to the alienations of modernity or civilisation. Alienation can be defined here in the loose sense of separation or estrangement: primitive societies are repeatedly conceptualised and represented as societies whose members are not separated from nature, from labour and its fruits, from one another, or from their species being. The character of this non-separation is, however, far from uniform. It may be conceived as naïve or conscious, pre-individual or transindividual, dialectical or non-dialectical. It may be figured as a permanent fusion or an ephemeral gathering, a tiny commune or a vast federation, a perspectival oscillation or a womb-like immanence. Traversing all of these different visions of non-alienation appears, however, to be a negative perspective: primitive societies are non-alienated societies because they are societies *without*, *against*, or *prior* to the logics of abstraction and separation that sever objects, people, and ideas from their imbrication and immersion in the social and natural world.

[18] Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, pp. 75–76.

In an article exploring the influence of the figure of the savage on modern political philosophy, Toscano draws our attention to this negative perspective: the savage appears repeatedly, he writes, across centuries of political thought, as 'the living negation or inverted image of civilised Western humanity'.[19] The savage is a particular kind of Other – 'in some sense the "perfect Other", the product of a matrix or accumulation of negations: he is *exactly what "we" are not*.'[20] As such, the savage threatens to emerge as a rather philosophically 'sterile' figure, an inversion empty of political content or speculative potential. Toscano writes:

> As Sergio Landucci observes, perhaps the savage is really the *caput mortuum* of Western political philosophy. This was the term – literally the 'dead head' – used by alchemists to describe the exhausted residue of their experiments. By analogy, the philosophical idea of the savage could be regarded as the sterile product of negating the distinctive and itemizable characteristics of Western political philosophy.[21]

We have encountered depictions of the primitive and primitive society as a 'living negation or inverted image of civilised Western humanity' repeatedly in the foregoing chapters.[22] Engels described the political organisation of the *gens* in precisely this way in his *Origin* ('No soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, or lawsuits'),[23] while the Marx of the *Formen* theorised the 'tribal community' from the perspective of modern private property, working backwards to argue that tribal property was *not* private, and indeed that it was *not* property as we know it. Clastres criticised the way in which primitive societies were defined by what they were seen to lack ('societies *without* states'), but he substituted for this another kind of negative determination ('societies *against* the state'). And in Baudrillard's writings, the primitive (and, by association, *sauvage* politics) represented all that was *not* recuperated by the logics of production, finality, and separation. Yet even where the figure of the primitive is determined by the formulae of negation, it has hardly turned out to be a theoretically sterile figure. On the contrary, it has represented a locus

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[19] Toscano, '"By contraries execute all things"', p. 9.
[20] Ibid., p. 10
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., p. 9.
[23] Engels, *Origin*, p. 159.

for the proliferation and self-multiplication of political ideas, a kind of philosophical petri-dish in which visions of the good society (or the bad society) might grow with abandon. This is because, on the one hand, and as Toscano also observes, there is always a '*hierarchy of negations*' in play,[24] and this hierarchy in itself gives the figure a certain positive political content: 'It matters to the historical mutation in the figure of the savage *which* negations take precedence.'[25] The emphasis each of the above authors gives to the social predicate or phenomenon to be negated – property, the state, production – tends to reveal a diagnosis of what they consider to be the most pressing political problems of their time. What the primitive did *not* instantiate was what mattered most. By reading these positions and commitments into anthropological texts, I have tried to show how the heterogeneous figures of the primitive examined in this project are endowed even in their negativity with the grain of immanent political problems and contestations, and mediated through their author's concrete political engagements. This is what I meant, in the introduction, by *reading politics into anthropology*.

However, these visions of primitive societies are hardly mere silhouettes of a world experienced by those who constructed them, but also, at least in some respect, depictions of actually-existing societies and communities – including but not limited here to Māori and Kwakiutl communities (for Mauss), Bororo and Nambikwara (for Lévi-Strauss), Bambuti, !Kung, and Guro (for Meillassoux), and Aché and Guarani (for Clastres) – which, in many cases, hosted these or other ethnographers for many months and may well have influenced their philosophical and political ideas. The primitive can only be a truly negative figure if it has *nothing* to do with the peoples it is affixed to. To suggest such an absence of influence, as some argue, is to do a grave disservice to the people studied by anthropologists, who are then cast as passive objects of an anthropological gaze, with no power to affect that gaze or to gaze back. This is a point made strongly by Viveiros de Castro in his *Cannibal Metaphysics*, in which he seeks to formulate 'a new concept of anthropology' based on what he calls the 'ontological self-determination' of the people studied by anthropologists.[26] For Viveiros de Castro, this form of anthropology is based on the axiom that 'every nontrivial anthropological theory is a *version* of an indigenous practice of knowledge, all such theories being situatable

[24] Ibid., p. 17.
[25] Ibid., p. 14.
[26] Viveiros De Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, p. 43.

in strict structural continuity with the intellectual pragmatics of the collectives that have historically occupied the position of object in the discipline's gaze.'[27] Or, in other words, 'the styles of thought proper to the collectives that we study are the motor force of anthropology.'[28] If the polemic force of these statements is welcome, granting epistemological 'agency' to indigenous people in relation to the anthropological accounts concerning them, my own account is too informed by Marxist theories of ideology to adopt it wholesale. The 'motor force' of the anthropological writings I have examined in this thesis seems, to me, to reside equally and in many cases more in the political ideas, aspirations, and desires of the writer – although these may of course be transformed by those with whom they live, organise, think and write, including the 'subjects' of their anthropological investigations. It is on this basis that this thesis has approached ethnographic texts as somewhat – although never entirely – fictive representations. In this, I have been influenced by Debaene's argument that French anthropology exemplifies a particular entanglement of the genres of science and literature.[29] I have tried to examine the primitive as a 'figure': a flexible character that nevertheless bears a degree of historical continuity and a certain persistence in the political imagination of the French left. While it is a figure *of* the left, it is not necessarily a figure which finds its *sources* only in the left. I have no doubt that indigenous philosophies and modes of life have themselves played an important part in its construction.

Primitive societies have emerged in this thesis, then, as much more than purely negative figures. Even when they are defined by reference to what they lack, they have been seen to constitute a repository of answers – sometimes concealed, sometimes overt – to the most immediate political questions of the time. In this way, the primitive has represented a lens through which to read the turbulent politics of the left during the postwar period. In each of the foregoing chapters, the vision of primitive society has also incarnated set of ideas of positions favoured by a given political movement, tendency, or organisation. While there are many differences between these visions, there are also certain principles that run through them, and which grant a certain unity to the role of the anthropological imagination in the postwar left. In what follows, I try to sketch out three such principles. Since each responds in a different

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[27] Ibid., p. 42.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Vincent Debaene, *Far Afield: French Anthropology Between Science and Literature*, trans. Justin Izzo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

way to a form of estrangement experienced in modern society, we might understand these as principles of non-alienation.

Principle I: Exchange

Primitive society, as we saw in Lévi-Strauss's writings (Chapter 2), was a society of and for exchange. Exchange was its *telos*, its texture, its origin, the foundation of its being. Lévi-Strauss understood 'exchange', in this context, in terms of reciprocity, circulation, redistribution, and communication: exchange was the mechanism by which primitive society achieved equilibrium. Primitive exchange was associated with equilibrium to the same degree that capitalist exchange was associated with imbalance, atrophy, and self-annihilation. Primitive exchange was a type of exchange that contravened the alienation of people from one another, from the products of their labour and from the natural world; commodity exchange was the root cause and logical core of the myriad forms of alienation experienced under capitalism. This idea of primitive exchange, which Lévi-Strauss placed at the centre of his anthropological project, was to reverberate through postwar French anthropology. All of the authors studied in the foregoing chapters (aside from Chapter 1) felt themselves compelled to respond to the problematic of exchange in some way. It is useful, then, to outline three forms taken by this problematic which have had particular relevance for political thought.

Firstly, the problematic of exchange appears in the form of the question of whether primitive societies are *societies of exchange*, founded on the constant circulation and redistribution of all kinds of material and social goods, or whether they are instead *societies against exchange*, defined by autarky, independence, and self-sufficiency.[30] These two perspectives are not necessarily opposed; in Chapter 2 we saw some of the ways in which they coexist in the early writings of Lévi-Strauss. Although Lévi-Strauss saw exchange as at the very origin of human sociality, for him exchange could imply closure as much as openness, enmity as much as alliance. Indeed, the exchange *of* openness and closure, enmity and alliance, was the heart of his theory of primitive 'foreign relations'.[31] This would lead him, later in life, to some questionable political conclusions, such as the ones espoused in 'Race and History'

[30] On this distinction see Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 269.

[31] This principle of oscillation between enmity and alliance is also taken up by Viveiros de Castro in his idea of 'perspectivism'; see *Cannibal Metaphysics*, pp. 49–63.

(1950) and later in 'Race and Culture' (1971), and modelled on principles from genetics, that there existed an 'optimal' level of cultural mixing which should not be breached, and which was later mobilised in the service of conservative and far-right political ideas, such as those of Alain de Benoist.[32] The theme of exchange, considered according to this axis of cultural openness or closure, thus offered a framework capable of oscillating between right and left political visions.

Secondly, the theme of exchange appears in the form of the question: *what constitutes an economy?* In the writings considered in this thesis, the primitive emerges as a character that seems to escape certain kinds of exchange, yet to subsist on others. Primitive societies are, often by their very definition, excluded from the sphere of commodity exchange (indeed, as we saw in the debates in Marxist anthropology in Chapter 3, the term 'primitive societies' was usually replaced by the term 'precapitalist societies'). Subsisting in a presumed precapitalist or non-capitalist realm, primitive societies are nevertheless caught up in all manner of other forms of exchange: gift exchange, marital exchange, deferred exchange, symbolic exchange, semiotic exchange… These non-material forms of exchange express different kinds of economic logics at work in worlds in which the economy is not separate from society, and in which notions of commensurability and fungibility simply do not exist. While such ideas were originally meant to describe non-capitalist social forms and practices, and to denaturalise ideas of a universal economic actor, they were in turn used by those such as Baudrillard to analyse phenomena of contemporary capitalism which seemed to have become untethered from their origins in material production and circulation (Chapter 5). The idea of primitive exchange thus helped to open the door to the ongoing investigation of the relations between immaterial and material determinants of the social in both capitalist and primitive societies. At the same time, the idea, present in Mauss and Malinowski, of a principle of reciprocity that traversed material and spiritual domains – and hence resulted in a certain flattening of these levels of determination – set the foundations for the anti-materialist and idealist tendencies of postwar anthropology. Primitive societies were a 'scandal' for any simple idea of base and superstructure, and French anthropology made this scandal a part of its disciplinary identity.

Thirdly, I have tried to argue that the exchange paradigm is related to a *political imaginary of redistribution* present in French anthropology since Mauss and Lévi-Strauss.

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[32] See Collins, *The Anthropological Turn*, pp. 70–71.

According to this imaginary of redistribution, primitive society provided a model *not* primarily because it exemplified a form of sociality in which private property did not exist, in which land and resources were communal, and in which the division of labour was simple and fairly equitable. Rather, its model was based on the way it instantiated mechanisms for the reciprocal and balanced circulation of goods already produced. Rather than advocating the abolition of private property or the ownership of and control over the means of production by increasingly fewer actors, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, via the SFIO, adopted a moral rejection of accumulation that had as its correlate a more well-balanced sharing out of goods across society. This was at times formulated according to the model of social security, and at other times according to a less state-centric and more federalist or decentralised framework.

The emphasis on exchange over production continues in those anthropologists most influenced by Lévi-Strauss. It becomes a polemical issue, at times, for it is precisely the centrality of production that the critics of Marxism – from Lévi-Strauss (Chapter 2) to Clastres (Chapter 4) and Baudrillard (Chapter 5) – take issue with. For them, the analytical primacy of production is fatally tied to the ideology of *productivism*, with its fetishism of work and its pursuit of industrial development at the expense of aesthetic and ecological concerns. The Marxist anthropologists, for their part (Chapter 3), argued that the emphasis on exchange or circulation was one of the main problems of non-Marxist anthropology which, whether associated with economic democracy (such as Polanyi), liberal political economy (such as Firth), or structuralism (Lévi-Strauss), was incapable of understanding the real dynamics of the social formations it tried to study. For Meillassoux, Godelier, Rey and others, the primacy of exchange had its own parallel ideology – an ideology of moral economy, economic democracy, and redistribution – which remained subservient to the overall structure of capitalist society. In this way, the paradigm of production and the paradigm of exchange have revealed themselves, throughout this thesis, to be what Skinner calls (after Nietszche) 'frozen conflicts', playing out political agendas behind the backs (or indeed, in clear sight) of the anthropologists and writers who used them. Understanding these embedded conflicts and agendas is essential for grasping their political valences in the present.

Principle II: Reproduction

In an interview with Georges Charbonnier in 1959, Lévi-Strauss suggested that the workings of primitive societies, from marriage relations to economic exchanges, could 'be compared to small-scale mechanisms, which operate with extreme regularity and complete certain cycles, the machine passing through a succession of states before returning to its starting point, and beginning its rotations all over again.'[33] Primitive society functioned like a clock, expending such little energy that it might tick on in the same regular way for centuries or even millennia. It is in this respect, Lévi-Strauss thought, that primitive societies could be understood as 'societies without history'. Or, rather, he says in the interview, 'primitive societies are surrounded by the substance of history and try to remain impervious to it', while 'modern societies interiorize history, as it were, and turn it into the motive power of their development.'[34] Primitive societies might exist within history, but their inner workings were opposed to history; they would try to shut it out, to stay the same, and to resist the external pressures to change or 'develop'. Lévi-Strauss's famous clock analogy expresses another principle which recurs throughout the depictions of primitive society encountered in this thesis: primitive societies are imagined as societies of, and for, reproduction.

Firstly, they are societies of reproduction in that they are defined by *repetition*. This is the meaning at work in the lines from Lévi-Strauss quoted above, but it emerges much earlier in the history of modern European philosophy in the trope of 'people without history'. This trope makes its best-known appearance in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*,[35] and remains an important reference point for Marx and Engels's early speculations on 'tribal consciousness' (Chapter 1). Its basic premise is the stability, to the modern observer at least, of primitive social forms, which appear not to change over very long periods of time. Across the chapters above, we have seen this stability judged both positively and negatively, and explained in a number of different ways: for Lévi-Strauss, the unchanging nature of primitive societies results from a balance of consensus and contract, and a balance of relations

[33] Claude Lévi-Strauss and Georges Charbonnier, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 39.
[34] Ibid.
[35] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

of alliance and enmity (Chapter 2); for Meillassoux, this stability or stasis is the necessary correlate of cycles of agricultural production and the kinship relations generated by these (Chapter 3); for Clastres, it is a more intentional outcome of 'defense mechanisms' that guard against any accumulation of political power (Chapter 4). The notion that primitive society is defined by reproduction as *reproduction of the same* – as repetition over time of the forms and structures of social life, whether these are viewed as models of radical democracy or patriarchal domination – is a notion that anthropology of the left has tried, but more often failed, to overcome.

Secondly, reproduction can take on a vitalist meaning, referring to the persistence or survival of the social organism or to the primacy of the life of the beings that compose it. Here, primitive societies are cast as societies for the reproduction of life, holding the health of individuals (and the production of future individuals) as their highest goal. This perspective appeared in Marx's statement in his drafts to Zasulich that 'primitive communities had *incomparably greater vitality* than the Semitic, Greek, Roman and *a fortiori* the modern capitalist societies' (Chapter 1).[36] It was also central to the writings of Meillassoux (Chapter 3), in which the 'domestic community' appeared as organised around reproduction (in all its meanings), as opposed to around production. The vitalist reading of primitive societies appears also in the discussions of the 'original affluence' of hunter-gatherer societies (Chapters 4 and 5), which, influenced by Sahlins, highlighted the waste, parasitism, overproduction and overwork that afflicted capitalist societies to the detriment of the life and health of their populations. This vitalist vision of primitive abundance was in many ways a distinctively left phenomenon; it sought to invert colonialist depictions of primitive societies as suffering a natural decline or 'extinction' due to scarcity, material stagnation, or Social-Darwinian evolution.[37] Colonial ideology had long depicted primitive societies as societies of deprivation, disease, and death; anthropology of the left sought to portray them instead as founts of vitality, strength, and vigour.

Some of the major political problems of left visions of the primitive find their sources in a tendency to conflate these two senses of reproduction: reproduction as *repetition* and

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[36] Marx, 'Drafts of a reply', p. 107.
[37] For an example from New Zealand of the latter perspective, see John Stenhouse, 'A Disappearing Race Before We Came Here': Doctor Alfred Kingcome Newman, The Dying Maori, and Victorian Scientific Racism', *New Zealand Journal of History* 30, 1996, pp. 124–140.

reproduction as *life*.[38] This conflation may mean that the primacy placed on life and flourishing in primitive societies (reproduction-as-life) is seen to be dependent on the stability of their social forms, on the value of 'tradition', and on their resistance to transformation (reproduction-as-repetition). As I argued with regard to Meillassoux (Chapter 3), there is a risk that this kind of celebration of the subsistence economy and of primitive societies as 'societies of reproduction' may develop into a conservative tendency by way of the concept of reproduction. I also criticised the way in which the concept of reproduction has a tendency to portray primitive societies as governed by a single *telos*. Even if such a *telos* is simply that of self-persistence or the survival of the society in question, to attribute this goal to 'primitive societies' as such, quite apart from the obvious problems with the category itself (see p. 22), reproduces their association with nature (examined in Chapter 1) by casting them as unitary organisms rather than contradictory and struggling, oppressive and divided entities. The stubborn endurance of this notion of primitive societies as having a single *telos* – and thus as being uniquely homogeneous or 'undivided' kinds of society – in even the most politically radical strands of anthropology has been one of the central insights of this thesis. On the one hand, it reveals the enduring legacy of Engels's depiction of primitive societies as classless, and as hence subject to a different kind of historical causation than non-primitive societies. On the other hand, it reveals the desire to keep the object of anthropology in the position of the singular, radical 'other' in relation to the anthropologist.

Principle III: Autogestion

A final principle that traverses the depictions of the primitive encountered in this thesis is that of self-government, self-determination, autonomy, or a broad anti-representational political framework captured in Clastres's claim that primitive societies are 'societies against the state' (Chapter 4). The different strands of this framework come together in the French term *autogestion*, which circulated in the French left in the 1950s and became especially prominent after May 1968. The accepted English translation of *autogestion* is 'self-management'. This is, in any case, how the term appears in the English translations of the writings of Socialisme ou Barbarie, the group which was one of the first to use the term in its critique of the differentiation

[38] See, again, Vishmidt, 'The Two Reproductions'; Vishmidt and Sutherland, 'The Soft Disappointment of Prefiguration'.

between *dirigeants* and *executants*, or managers and workers, which it considered to be at the root of the oppressive state bureaucracies of both the Soviet Union and postwar capitalism. An important text published by Castoriadis in 1956 in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, entitled 'Sur le contenu du socialisme' ('On the content of socialism'), outlined a set of arguments for 'a totally self-managed society', asking after its conditions and possibilities:

> How could institutions be made comprehensible? How could they be effectively controlled from below? How could relevant information be made available to all, so that meaningful decisions might be taken collectively? How could genuinely democratic planning function, in an advanced industrial society?[39]

Castoriadis looked to examples of worker self-management in twentieth-century Europe as expressions of the same desire for *autogestion*: 'The Russian Factory Committees of 1917, the German Workers' Councils of 1919, the Hungarian Councils of 1956 all sought to express (whatever their name) the same original, organic and characteristic working-class pattern of self-organization.'[40] Castoriadis's text was written just after, and in part as a response to, the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Workers' Councils in 1956. In this respect, it is emblematic of a division in the radical left – which becomes more permanent after the crises of 1956 – on the basis of different positions concerning the form and function of the state in the 'transition', imagined or actual, to socialism. In the 1960s and 1970s in France, the idea of *autogestion* would come to express an array of positions that rejected a strong and centralised party-state in favour of the decentralisation and dispersal of political power through the proliferation of forms of local self-government or worker management of factories and enterprises.

Autogestion would go on to become a catchword of May 1968, capturing the libertarian and anti-authoritarian spirit of the student revolts. In an effort to ally itself with these movements, the CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail), one of France's main trade union federations, announced its commitment to *autogestion* in a communiqué of

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[39] Cornelius Castoriadis, *Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society* (London: Solidarity, 1972).
[40] Ibid.

16 May: ‘For the industrial and administrative monarchy, we must replace democratic structures based on self-management.’[41] If the state and capital were the new ‘monarchy’, *autogestion* meant to cut off the head of the king. The CFDT’s vision for *socialisme autogestionnaire* was based on what it referred to as the ‘social (neither state nor private) ownership of the means of production’, ‘democratic planning’, and ‘self-management, of the firm as of society’.[42] In adopting these principles, the CFDT took inspiration from Yugoslav experiments in worker self-management as well as from experiments in self-governing farms and factories of the newly independent Algeria between 1962 and 1965. In doing so it, it differentiated itself from the CGT (Confédération générale du travail) – which maintained close links with the PCF, itself still close to the Soviet Union, and thus represented the state-socialist position – as well as from those sections of the left that had been reluctant to support the Algerians’ struggle for independence.

Outside of the CFDT, *autogestion* became a central claim of the main actors and thinkers of the ‘events of May’, used ‘to circumscribe their main demands and desires for a post-capitalist society.’[43] In this broader and more speculative usage, the English term ‘self-management’ does not do justice to the sense of *autogestion*, which might also be translated as self-creation, self-development, self-governance or self-determination.[44] In its reference to gestation, *autogestion* contains within it the notion of ‘creating the new society in the shell of the old’ and to the agenda of political prefiguration, which describes efforts to build and develop non-capitalist social institutions and practices in the here and now, and from the bottom up, as a precondition of and means for their generalisation across society. Such ideas, of course, precede the use of the term *autogestion*. In Chapter 2, we saw them at work in Lévi-Strauss’s early socialism, which was influenced by cooperativism and mutualism. The prefigurative impetus was evident in the idea, as Lévi-Strauss put it in reference to his Révolution Constructive project, that non-capitalist forms would ‘gradually grow, by virtue of their superiority, like the chrysalis in the capitalist cocoon, [which] would fall like a dead and

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[41] Théo Roumier, ‘Quand la CFDT voulait le socialisme et l’autogestion’, *Mediapart*, 25 March 2019.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Marcelo Vieta, ‘The stream of self-determination and autogestión: Prefiguring alternative economic realities’, *ephemera: theory and politics in organization* 14 (4), 2014, p. 792. In this respect, it prefigured the impulse of *autonomia* in Italy in the 1970s.
[44] Ibid.

parched envelope.'[45] In iterations such as Lévi-Strauss's, *autogestion* plays out as a call for the building of 'counter-power' rather than for the seizure of existing power, especially that concentrated in the state. The critique of authority, power and hierarchy contained in the notion of *autogestion* also in many cases replicates itself as a critique of the internal organisation of political groups. Anti-authoritarian ends must be pursued via anti-authoritarian means. This is evident in the mass defection witnessed during and after May 1968 from large, hierarchical political bodies such as unions, union federations or political parties in favour of horizontal, autonomous and leaderless networks, federations, local assemblies, and so on. In all of these ways, *autogestion* emerges, especially after 1968, as a political principle open to many interpretations, rather than simply a particular mode of organising labour and production. It is in this political form, as the broader notion of *self-determination*, that the principle of *autogestion* recurs in the depictions of primitive societies encountered through this thesis.

The primitive societies of leftist anthropology appear, almost throughout, as self-governing and self-determining communities. Their existence is an expression of political autonomy in its very essence: they reject the accumulation of wealth and the centralisation of power, and they resist any processes that might mean the community could end up subject to a power higher than itself, thus losing the ability to determine its own affairs. Lévi-Strauss's vision of primitive 'foreign relations' (Chapter 2), which sought to theorise the relations *between* primitive communities, was based on fluctuating and temporary networks of alliance and enmity, organised so as to exclude any overall political authority or any structure of third-party mediation or representation. Primitive society was for Lévi-Strauss fundamentally anti-corporatist – it sought to maintain its difference from other societies, and resisted subsumption into a larger whole. Segmented and fragmented, it was not, for this reason, unstable. Indeed, the ephemerality of primitive alliances and relations of enmity paradoxically guaranteed the long-term stability of these primitive worlds. Equilibrium, perhaps the pivotal idea in all of Lévi-Strauss's political thought, depended upon the autonomy of political communities. The subsumption of such communities into any higher unity – a process which, for Lévi-Strauss,

[45] Lévi-Strauss quoted in Chambarlhac, 'Lévi-Strauss en socialisme', p. 7.

was manifest in ideas of the 'open society' – could only lead, in the long run, to catastrophic violence and social collapse.[46]

These ideas regarding the self-governing nature of primitive societies were also taken up by Clastres (Chapter 4). He drew on them to develop a concept of power in primitive societies that was fundamentally *centrifugal*, in that it resisted centralisation and assumed instead 'a logic of crumbling, of dispersion, of schism.'[47] This logic was based, for Clastres, on the permeation of low-intensity violence between communities or tribes, which forced them to constantly fragment and recompose and ensured their dispersion across a vast territory. Like Lévi-Strauss, Clastres considered this constant warfare to be a paradoxical condition of the cultural stability of such societies, of their egalitarian nature, and ultimately of their resistance of the kinds of divisions that had, under modernity, developed into unbroachable gulfs, threatening the existence of humanity as such. Yet, as we saw, Clastres's notion of power in primitive societies came to undo the principle of *autogestion* that it also seemed to instantiate. Generalising from the example of the 'powerless chief', Clastres's vision of primitive power was premised on a disavowal of division and conflict within the tribe – the chief was only allowed to express the undivided and unmediated will of the tribe – gave rise to a conception of primitive societies as inherently conservative, repressing dissent before it had the chance to arise. As Jean-Louis Déotte put it, Clastres's vision of '*anarchie sauvage*' ended up excluding the possibility of *autogestion* that it had seemed to instantiate; the tribe ultimately answered to the religious law rather than to its own political will.[48]

This juxtaposition of primitive *autogestion* or autonomy against the separation at the heart of modern politics also found its way into Baudrillard's thought. He also saw in the primitive a logic of self-determination, which drew on his critiques of political representation. Both primitive society and what I have described as *sauvage* politics were based on a principle of immediacy, of the rejection of mediators or authorities who might claim to speak on behalf

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[46] In these claims by Lévi-Strauss, we can discern a relationship between what I am calling here *autogestion* and what decolonial theorists have called the 'pluriverse': both resist subsumption in political affairs, although in different ways. While pluriversality emphasises the coexistence of different ontological 'worlds', the emphasis of *autogestion* lacks this epistemological framework, instead emphasising political practices of self-determination and self-government. For a critical discussion of 'the pluriverse' in relation to decolonial theory and politics, see Kimberly Hutchings, 'Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse', *Ethics & International Affairs* 33 (2), 2019, pp. 115–125.
[47] Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, p. 264.
[48] Jean-Louis Déotte, 'Pierre Clastres: l'anarchie sauvage contre l'autogestion', *Lignes* 16 (1), 2005, pp. 73–84.

of political collectives, or make decisions affecting them. In my examination of Baudrillard's early political writings, I tried to draw out the way in which these ideas were related to this *soixante-huitard*'s disappointment in the representative organs of the French left and the recuperation of political radicalism, leaving *sauvage* politics as the radical outside and only possible route out of the symbolic domination of advanced capitalism. Baudrillard's metaphysical variant of *autogestion* – elaborated to reject the logics of production, work and even 'finality' – is different and even opposed to the earlier sense of *autogestion* as worker self-management. Yet both express a deeply held aversion to the state, and to the centralisation of power, authority, and representation.

In all of these ways, in the writings of Lévi-Strauss, Clastres and Baudrillard the figure of the primitive encapsulated a distinct left horizon based on the idea of the decentralisation of power. For this reason, these anthropological imaginaries were not aligned in any simple way with the decolonisation struggles, and above all the Algerian War, that provided their political backdrop in postwar France. This was perhaps both a cause and a consequence of the fact that the anthropologists (such as Lévi-Strauss and Clastres) who celebrated the most decentralised and *autogestionnaire* visions of primitive politics were ethnographers of indigenous peoples of the Amazon. When these thinkers envisioned 'primitive societies', they invariably had in mind highly isolated, nomadic hunter-gatherer societies such as the Aché (in Paraguay) and the Nambikwara (in Brazil). This was as close as one imagined it was possible to get to the true 'savage', with their lack of material possessions and their success, until the 1950s at least, in resisting contact with the 'whites' – whether 'Paraguayans', 'Brazilians' or Europeans – that encroached on their lands.

The current of anthropology which does not clearly fit into the *autogestion* narrative described above was, by contrast, composed of ethnographers of Africa (Chapter 3) – which is to say, of France's colonies, many of which were during the postwar years in the midst of violent struggles for national independence. Since Meillassoux, Rey, Terray, Dupré, Amselle and others owed their political formation to the Algerian Revolution, a struggle which was organised around the reclamation of a certain nationhood that had been denied and which needed to be dialectically reinvented,[49] the quasi-metaphysical aversion to political representation and statehood that characterised the political speculations of the 'Amazonists'

[49] See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001).

was not at work here. Yet a more pragmatic notion of *autogestion* was not absent from Marxist anthropology, which was clearly oriented toward projects for national independence and self-governance, and critical of state-socialism. Further research would be necessary to trace the contradictions and historical tensions inherent to this idea of *autogestion* in relation to decolonisation. For now, we can simply note that the 'Amazonist' and the 'Africanist' anthropologists of the left held quite different visions of the primitive. We might even speak of a carving up of the subjects of anthropology into, on the one hand, the stateless primitive of the Amazon (dispersed, deterritorialised, 'without history' or part of a concealed natural history) and, on the other hand, the nationalist primitive of Africa (unified, territorially bounded, incorporated into 'History' proper). The former is vulnerable to the point of extinction, while the latter is coded as a potential threat. The good savage; the bad native.

I have suggested in this conclusion that running through this primitivist imaginary are three principles through which non-alienation is conceptualised in the anthropology of the postwar French left: exchange, reproduction, and *autogestion*. Each invokes a certain vision of life outside of capitalist modernity, what Lyotard termed in his critique of Baudrillard 'the phantasy of a non-alienated region'.[50] The principle of exchange envisions this region as a space governed by relations of reciprocity, often conceived as contracts. In the imaginary of reproduction, the non-alienated realm is viewed as an economic sphere in which production is oriented to life, sustenance, and 'subsistence' rather than production. And for the *autogestionnaire* imaginary, non-alienation means freedom from being represented by or subsumed under a higher political entity: the freedom to govern oneself. While these principles sought to provide alternatives to the dominant imaginaries of the left, especially those of Marxism and the PCF, we have seen that they are themselves often turned out to be projections, unable to escape the struggles and alienations of their conjuncture.

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Faced with a sequence of failed left projects – from Soviet socialism to Maoism, and from the aftermath of Algerian independence to that of May 1968 in France – the anthropologists and theorists examined above felt it was necessary to inquire into the deeper roots of humanity's

[50] Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p. 107.

problems. The political phenomena of the twentieth century were perhaps only present-day manifestations of a deeper substratum of deformations, traumas, and rifts inscribed into civilisation. Each thinker conceived the problems of civilisation in a distinct way. For Lévi-Strauss, they were based on the failure to respect cultural diversity and a tendency to assimilate and subsume difference into a monolithic rationalism – that of the 'always-more-open society'. For Meillassoux, civilisation was marked by patriarchy and oppressive kinship relations, structured to grant near-absolute control to male elders, a situation which persisted in the distorted form of the bourgeois family. For Clastres, capitalism and state socialism were underpinned by the original 'separation' between the rulers and the ruled, out of which every other form of domination had grown. Baudrillard, in his writings of the early 1970s, claimed that capitalism and socialism alike rested on the epistemological framework of use value and production, which pervaded every sphere of social life and even poisoned the most oppositional forms of critique. In all of these ways, an anthropology which emerged out of the French left sought to find to root of the problem, and insisted that root was not simply capitalism, but civilisation. The root was so deep as to poison all that remained nourished by it; the only possible response was an escape, from the capitalist present, to a *sauvage* beyond.

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