

Marx and Communal Society

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“Ultimately communism is the *only thing* that is important about [Karl] Marx’s thought,” Hungarian British political theorist R. N. Berki observed in 1983.¹ Although this was an exaggeration, it is undeniable that Marx’s broad conception of communal society/communism formed the basis of his entire critique of class society and his vision of a viable future for humanity. Yet, there have been few attempts to engage systematically with the development of this aspect of Marx’s thought as it emerged over the course of his life, due to the complexity of his approach to the question of communal production in history and the philosophical, anthropological, and political-economic challenges that this presented, extending to our own day. Still, Marx’s approach to communal society is of genuine significance not only in understanding his thought as a whole, but also in helping guide humanity past the iron cage of capitalist society. In addition to presenting a philosophical anthropology of communism, he delved into the history and ethnology of actual communal social formations. This led to concrete investigations into communal production and exchange. All of this played into his conception of the communism of the future as a society of associated producers.²

In our time, communal production and exchange, and elements of a communal state, have been developed, with varying degrees of success, in a number of socialist societies following revolutions, notably in the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Venezuela, and elsewhere around the world. Marx’s understanding of the history, philosophy, anthropology, and political economy of communal/collective society is thus an important source of insight and vision, not only with respect to the past, but also the present and future.

The Social Ontology of Communal Production

Marx was a product from his earliest age of the radical Enlightenment, influenced in this respect by both his father, Heinrich Marx, and his mentor and future father-in-law, Ludwig von Westphalen. To this was added his deep encounter with German idealist philosophy, as exemplified by the work of G. W. F. Hegel. Marx was an accomplished scholar of Greek

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antiquity, engaging in intense studies of both Aristotle, whom he viewed as the greatest of the Greek philosophers, and Epicurus, the leading materialist thinker of the Hellenistic world. He completed his doctoral thesis on Epicurus's philosophy of nature in 1841, emerging as a materialist soon engaged with the idea of communism.³

Marx read Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *What Is Property?* as early as 1842. However, along with other radical thinkers in Germany in the 1840s, he first took up discussions of the contemporary communistic movements emerging in France as a result of the spread of these ideas to Germany in the Prussian official Lorenz von Stein's *The Socialism and Communism in Present-Day France* (1842) and Moses Hess's *Socialism and Communism* (1843), which took the form of a critical commentary on von Stein. Hess was the cofounder in January 1842 of the liberal newspaper *Rheinische Zeitung*, which Marx became editor-in-chief of in October 1842. One of Marx's first tasks as editor was to reply to accusations that the *Rheinische Zeitung* was a communist paper due to the publication of two articles on housing and communist forms of governance, and a piece on followers of Charles Fourier – all written by Hess. Marx's reply on behalf of the *Rheinische Zeitung* was very circumspect, neither supporting nor opposing communism, while making it clear that “the *Rheinische Zeitung*...does not admit that communist ideas in their present form possess even *theoretical reality*, and therefore can still less desire their *practical realisation*.” Marx mentions Fourier here for the first time, along with Victor Prosper Considérant and Proudhon, also referring to the *idea* of communism in Plato's *Republic*.⁴

For most thinkers at the time, the question of communism was one simply of opposition to private property and was treated purely philosophically, largely from an idealist standpoint. Hess saw society as having originated in a social compact between individuals – as distinct from both the Epicurean notion of the establishment of an original social contract between kinship groupings, which was defeated and then resurrected in more limited, class-mediated forms, following social revolt and the death of kings; and Aristotle's sense of humanity as a political/social animal.⁵ The individualistic view of property of early French and German socialism reflected the influence of Proudhon, who, following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, failed to distinguish between private property and property in general, seeing property simply as “theft.”⁶ Proudhon thus failed to comprehend the notion of property as having its active principle in *appropriation from nature*. His analysis implicitly denied the universality of property in human society, and, more specifically, the existence of common property, as depicted in Hegel and Marx. Still, for Hegel, property, even if arising universally in appropriation from nature, existed as

an *abstract right* only as private property. Abstract right thus led to the dissolution of common property.⁷

In contrast to these dominant bourgeois views, which penetrated into socialist thought, Marx's own perspective was both historical and materialist. Humans were from the start social animals. Production, based on the appropriation from nature for human purposes, was originally communal – and held in common. The complete dominance of private property as alienated appropriation/production only came into being under capitalism, preceded by “thousands of centuries” of human history.⁸ Marx drew from the outset on his extensive knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and history and on traces of early Germanic history as revealed by Caesar in *The Gallic Wars* and by Tacitus in his *Germania*, which Marx translated in 1837.⁹ Throughout his life, Marx continued to explore whatever historical and anthropological evidence became available with respect to communal production, exchange, and property, while also considering the inner logic of communal production via philosophical and economic conceptions. As a student of classical antiquity, he would most likely have been aware of ancient accounts of the household communities in India with common tillage of the soil, recorded by Alexander the Great's admiral Nearchus and related by Strabo.¹⁰

Remnants of the old Germanic Mark system of common tenure and collective production on the land survived into Marx's lifetime in the region around Trier, where he grew up. His father, a lawyer, had discussed the ramifications of these collective property rights with him in his youth.¹¹ Signs of *customary right* carrying over from the *commons* of feudal times, were evident throughout early nineteenth-century Germany. In the same month in which he addressed the question of communism in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx wrote his first political-economy article on “Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood,” in which he strongly defended the customary rights of the Rhenish peasant that had persisted into the modern era related to the removal of dead wood (together with dead leaves and berries) from the forests, an act that was then criminalized. In this context, he explored how such customary rights were being systematically expropriated by landowners in league with the state. “We are only surprised,” he declared, “that the forest owner is not allowed to heat his stove with the wood thieves.”¹²

Marx's critique of private property in the 1840s and '50s depended on an ontological conception of human beings that emphasized social and communal relations arising out of the appropriation of nature. Most of the concrete knowledge of the history of antiquity in Europe prior to the mid-nineteenth century was dependent on ancient Greek and Roman sources. As

Eric Hobsbawm wrote in the introduction to Marx's *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (part of the latter's *Grundrisse*, written in 1857–1858), "Neither a classical [European] education nor the material then available made a serious knowledge of Egypt and the ancient Middle East possible."¹³ This was true also of India, Ceylon, and Java to varying degrees, though there Marx was able to rely on the questionable accounts of British and Dutch colonial administrators. The brief treatment of communal property relations under the Incas in Peru included in William Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847) was to occupy an important place in Marx's analysis in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. From the fifteenth up through the middle of the sixteenth century, the predominant tribe of the Inca social formation in present-day Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia was "subdivided into 100 clan communes (*ayllu*), which gradually developed into village communes."¹⁴

Prior to the "revolution in ethnological time" giving rise to modern anthropological studies, beginning in 1859, the historical and anthropological knowledge of communal production in early kinship and tributary-based societies available to Marx was limited.¹⁵ Marx's historical and anthropological knowledge of communal production in his early years was thus heavily weighted toward ancient Greek and Roman class society, where earlier communal forms of production had left their mark. Nevertheless, he relied on his deep ontological understanding of labor and production in society, allowing him to develop a penetrating analysis that, at least in its broad outlines, remains relevant today.

Underlying Marx's entire analysis was his materialist ontology of human labor and production first introduced in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 and that became the basis of his materialist conception of history as presented in 1845–1846 in the *German Ideology*, written with Frederick Engels. In Marx's social ontology, labor and production was a social process in which individuals took part as social beings. Human history could be perceived in changing "modes of appropriation."¹⁶ All human culture was rooted in the reality of human labor and the appropriation of nature, and therefore in the formation of property relations within communities, which were originally kinship communities. The first form of property depicted in *The German Ideology* was tribal property, associated with hunting and gathering and the earliest forms of agriculture. These were characterized by "the original unity between a particular form of community (clan) and the corresponding property in nature." Here the division of labor remained undeveloped. Society was patriarchal, while the first forms of the division of labor were associated with the development of the "slavery latent in the family." In this initial description of tribal society in Marx, there is not yet any direct mention of communal production or property.¹⁷

It is worth noting that there is no reference in *The German Ideology* to “primitive [original] communism,” a term that neither Marx nor Engels ever used except in reference to the “Asiatic communal system,” the Slavic form of land tenure, and, somewhat more tenuously, the precursors of the German Mark, and did not apply to hunting and gathering societies. The latter, though communal in their arrangements, were not viewed as modes of production in the full sense, but as clan-kinship societies. Use of the term “primitive communism” to describe hunting and gathering societies specifically was a later importation within the Second and Third Internationals.¹⁸

The second historical form of property in *The German Ideology* is “the ancient communal and state property,” arising “from the union of several tribes into a city by agreement or by conquest, and which is still accompanied by slavery.”¹⁹ Private “property in land” in antiquity, as Marx later explained in his *Ethnological Notebooks*, arose “partly from the *disentanglement of the individual rights of the kindred or tribesmen from the collective rights of the Family or Tribe*...partly from the *growth and transmutation of the Sovereignty of the Tribal Chief*.” Private property in land thus was initially mediated by the communal land ownership (*ager publicus*), and yet gradually served to introduce class relations that weakened the collective order.²⁰

The notion of the “ancient commune and state” governing social relations in antiquity was associated with the *polis* as a communally governed society arising out of earlier tribal relations. As Patricia Springborg wrote in “Marx, Democracy, and the Ancient Polis,” the polis was “an urban commune in which private property existed alongside communal property.” The Greek polis, in Marx’s conception, Springborg explained, held “in suspension tribal and communal forms while inaugurating the state as a phenomenon.”²¹ The economy and conversely the state, as Hegel and Marx, and, later, Karl Polanyi, argued, were not yet disembedded from the polis. Hence, the alienation of the state from civil society in the modern sense did not yet exist, allowing for the persistence of communal forms, together with class divisions.²²

For Marx, slavery, though in many ways constituting the material foundation of the Greek polis of the golden age, was subordinate to the communal order governing property relations, arising out of previous kinship relations. The growth of mobile property and money, particularly coinage, commencing in Lydia in the seventh century BCE, had the effect of intensifying class distinctions. This development was crucial in accounting for the origins and expansion of ancient chattel slavery, while also contributing to the eventual dissolution of the ancient communal order of Greece and Rome.²³

Indeed, although heavily emphasizing the role of slavery in antiquity, Marx never characterized ancient society as an actual “slave mode of

production,” as was later to become common in Marxist theory. Thus, in Perry Anderson’s *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, we are told that the “decisive innovation” of the ancient Greco-Roman world was the “massive scale of chattel slavery” or the “slave mode of production.”²⁴ In contrast, Marx saw slave production in antiquity as a secondary attribute of the communal and state form, associated with the growth of money and trade. At its core, the polis was rooted, from primordial times, in tribal or kinship relations, as in the Greek *phratry*, out of which its class divisions between the aristocracy and the *demos* (in the case of Athens) were to emerge with the growth of private property. Slavery was viewed by Marx as something of an add-on. Still, this did not keep him from noting in the *Grundrisse*, with the golden ages of Pericles’s Athens and Augustus’s Rome clearly in mind, that economically “direct forced labour is the foundation of the ancient world; the community rests on this as its foundation.”²⁵

The persistent critiques of unlimited acquisition of wealth that played such a prominent role in Greek philosophy from Aristotle to Epicurus were characterized by Marx (and by classical scholars up our day) as resulting from changes in the society that could be traced primarily to the first signs of a money economy, mainly in the interstices and in trading nations, opening the way to the systematic pursuit of wealth for its own sake, and destabilizing prior social relations.²⁶ As Marx wrote: “All previous forms of society – or, what is the same, of the forces of social production – foundered on the development of wealth. Those thinkers of antiquity who were possessed of consciousness therefore directly denounced wealth as the dissolution of the community.”²⁷

The Political Economy of Communal Society

“All treatises on political economy,” Marx and Engels wrote, “take *private property* for granted.”²⁸ In opposition to this and in line with Hegel, Marx insisted that “all production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society. In this sense it is a tautology to say that property (appropriation) is a precondition of production,” while to claim that production is identical with private property is to deny the greater part of human history. Communal production and property constituted the “natural economy” of society, which had prevailed at a low level of the development of the productive forces. Private property emerged with class society and the division of labor, only becoming the dominant property form under capitalist relations of production.²⁹

“Property,” Marx wrote in the *Grundrisse*, “originally means – in its Asiatic, Slavonic, ancient classical, Germanic form – the relation of the working

(producing or self-reproducing) subject to the conditions of his production or reproduction as his own." Here he meant by the "Asiatic" form primarily the village communities in India and Java; by the "Slavonic" form, the Russian *mir*, or peasant commune, which still persisted in the nineteenth century; by the "ancient classical" form, the communal relations still evident in the Greek polis; and by the Germanic form, the old Mark tradition, in which the commune was reflected in German tribes "*coming-together*" periodically on a collective basis, while not "*being-together*."³⁰ Marx also referred to communal property as evidenced in the Celts. Tacitus wrote in his *Germania* with respect to the Germanic tribes: "Lands proportioned to their own number are appropriated in turn for tillage by the whole body of tillers. They then divide them among themselves according to rank; the division is made easy by the wide tracts of cultivable ground available. The ploughlands are changed yearly, and still there is enough to spare."³¹ It was recognized that in many communal societies, "the individual has no property as distinct from the commune, but rather is merely its possessor," under principles of communal usufruct. A part of the surplus labor invariably goes to the "higher community" for its reproduction.³² In such situations, "membership in the commune remains the presupposition for the appropriation of land and soil, but, as a member of the commune, the individual is a private proprietor" of a "particular plot."³³

In both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Marx laid great stress on Peruvian communal relations under the Incas. Based on Prescott's work, Marx noted that in Inca society an individual "had no power to alienate or add to his possessions" with respect to the land, which was communally held and redistributed each year. In *Capital*, he referred to Peru under the Incas as having a "natural economy" or non-commodity economy, and to the "artificially developed communism of the Peruvians." What fascinated Marx with respect to Peru was that it was a "society in which the highest forms of economy, e.g. cooperation, a developed division of labor, etc." were "found even though there [was] no kind of money" and a "community of labour." In some other social formations, such as the Slavic communities, Marx emphasized that while monetary exchange occurred in external relations it was not "at the centre of communal society as the original constituent element." Even in the Roman Empire at its highest development, the "money system" only dominated in the army.³⁴

Marx considered the "Asian communal system" represented by still-existing village communities to be one of the main exemplars of the "original unity" between workers and the natural conditions of production. He insisted that "a whole collection of diverse patterns (though sometimes only remnants survive) [of 'primitive communal property'] remained in existence

in India, where “communal labour” could be seen in “its spontaneously evolved form.” Indeed, “a careful study of Asiatic, particularly Indian, forms of communal property ownership would indicate that the disintegration of different forms of primitive communal ownership gives rise to diverse forms of property. For instance, prototypes of Roman and German private property can be traced back to certain forms of Indian communal property.” The Asiatic form of property in village communities represented a form (theoretically) anterior to the ancient Greek and Roman mode.³⁵ In Marx’s analysis of precapitalist economic formations, Hobsbawm noted, “the oriental [Asiatic] (and Slavonic) forms are historically closest to man’s origins, since they conserve the functioning primitive (village) community in the midst of the more elaborate social superstructure, and have an insufficiently developed class system.”³⁶

It is often said that Marx and Engels laid strong emphasis on the idea of an “Asiatic mode” of production, which is usually described, relying more on Karl Wittfogel than on Marx, as a society in which the need for large irrigation projects, and thus vast collective labor, led to the growth of a centralized, despotic state, or a hypertrophy of the state. There is little basis for this in Marx, however. Although Marx employed the notion of an Asiatic mode in the preface to his 1859 *Contribution to Political Economy*, he almost never used the term and eventually dropped it altogether. Moreover, while Marx referred on occasion to a despotic state managing large irrigation projects, his analysis was generally directed at the village communities themselves, which he saw as self-sustaining collectives exhibiting communal ownership, production, and exchange both in agriculture and small manufacture (artisanal production).³⁷ These Indian village communities, which he explicitly identified with “primitive communism,” exhibited a tenacity of existence that pointed to an antiquity even greater than the “ancient commune and state” of Greece and Rome. Moreover, unlike ancient Greece and Rome, slavery did not lie at the economic foundation of Asiatic society.³⁸ Although such societies often took a despotic tributary form, this did not negate for Marx the communal nature of property/production in the village communities themselves. Nevertheless, despotism from above, together with colonization, often led to their stagnation in terms of mere simple reproduction.³⁹

The *economic* nature of communal production and exchange, Marx indicated in the *Grundrisse*, lay in its attention to collective human needs, and the development of the social individual. “The communal character of production would make the product into a communal, general product, from the outset” not mediated by commodity exchange. “The exchange which originally takes place in production...would not be an exchange

of exchange values but of activities” and use values. Such communal production/exchange would be “determined by communal needs and communal purposes [and] would from the outset include the participation of the individual in the communal world of products.” By its very nature, communal production is not determined *post festum* by the market, allowing capital to mediate all production relations, but rather *ex ante* on communal principles through which the social character of production is presupposed from the beginning.⁴⁰ In this sense, production on the basis of communal property, in a modern context, he argued, would have to be carried out “in accordance with a definite social plan,” one that “maintains the correct proportion between the different functions of labour and the various needs of the associations” of workers.⁴¹

In capitalist society, according to Marx, “Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at most, time’s carcase. Quality no longer matters. Quantity alone determines everything.”⁴² In contrast, where communal production is concerned, labor time as pure quantity is crucial but does not have the final say:

The determination of time remains, of course, essential. The less time the society requires to produce wheat, cattle, etc., the more time it wins for other production, material or mental. Just as in the case of an individual, the multiplicity of its development, its enjoyment and its activity depends on economization of time. Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself. Society likewise has to distribute its time in a purposeful way, in order to achieve a production adequate to its overall needs.... Thus, economy of time, along with the planned distribution of labour time among the various branches of production, remains the first economic law on the basis of communal production. It becomes law, there, to an even higher degree. However, this is essentially different from a measurement of exchange values (labour or products) by labour time. The labour of individuals in the *same branch* of work, and the various kinds of work, are different from one another not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.⁴³

It is true, Marx wrote to Engels in 1868, that “no form of society can prevent the labour time at the disposal of society from regulating production in ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. But so long as this regulation is a not effected through the direct and conscious control of society over its labour time – which is only possible under common ownership – but through the movement of commodity prices,” the result is the anarchy of capitalist class society and the failure to meet the “hierarchy of...needs.” Under the generalized commodity economy of capitalism, the most pressing human and social needs – including the free development of the individual – rather than constituting the chief aims of production, become barriers to accumulation.⁴⁴

The emergent productive power of labor as *cooperation* through which workers become members of a “working organism” existed prior to capitalism. As Marx wrote in *Capital*, “simple co-operation,” which achieved “gigantic structures,” was evident in the colossal works of “the ancient Asiatics, Egyptians, Etruscans,” and, as he had noted elsewhere, in those of the Incas of Peru. Early civilizations in Asia “found themselves in possession of a surplus which they could apply to works of magnificence or utility and in the construction of these their command over the hands and arms of almost the entire non-agricultural population has produced stupendous monuments which still indicate their power.”⁴⁵ Such diverse non-commodity societies were able to extract surplus as tribute from a largely agricultural population. This conformed to the model of natural economies, or what is now broadly called the tribute-paying or tributary mode of production, which encompassed numerous precapitalist civilizations from antiquity to feudalism, most of which retained communal or collectivist relations at the base of society.⁴⁶ As Samir Amin remarked, “the tribute-paying mode,” emerged out of earlier “communal modes of production.” It “adds to a still existing village community a social and political apparatus for the exploitation of this community through the exaction of tribute.” Though it varied substantially in different times and places, it constituted “the most widespread form of precapitalist societies.”⁴⁷

From Medieval Commons/Communes to the Paris Commune of 1871

Up to early modern times, peasant villages in Europe relied on customary rights in relation to the land, often accompanied by petty commodity production. Hence, the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, as in England beginning in the fifteenth century, depended on the dissolution of the customary rights and enclosure of the commons, thereby generating a modern proletariat – a process that took centuries. The commons or communal property, even occurring within feudalism and other forms of tributary production, was associated with collective rights of appropriation while geared to use values and noncommodity forms of exchange. Whereas private property in a generalized commodity economy is alienable, communal property in the land is not, and is rooted in the customary rights of a particular community or locality. As historian Peter Linebaugh notes, “common rights are embedded in a particular ecology with its local husbandry.”⁴⁸ In medieval society, peasant communities had customary rights to the appropriation of the land/nature that placed limits on the corresponding rights of the feudal lords to the land.

The medieval commons of England are often thought of as simply having been based on the commons proper (woodlands, marshes, and uncultivated meadows used for grazing and for natural materials and resources), but the commons in this narrow sense could not be separated from the common fields themselves, directly surrounding the towns and villages, which were normally kept in tillage through collective ploughing, with the strips of land distributed in such a way as to ensure the equality of villagers in the access to the most fertile land.⁴⁹ Marx wrote extensively in *Capital* and elsewhere on the enclosure of the commons as crucial to the development of capitalism, and the brutal means used in their forcible expropriation, commenting on “the stoical peace of mind with which the political economist regards the most shameless violation of the ‘sacred rights of property’ and the grossest acts of violence against persons, as soon as they are necessary in order to lay the foundations of the capitalist mode of production.”⁵⁰

The notion of communal society has always been connected to the question of the political command structure of society as well as property/production, raising the issue of communal governance. In the late medieval era, particularly in northern Italy and Flanders, there emerged urban communes or self-governing towns based on binding oaths between equal (usually wealthy) citizens in defiance of feudal notions of rank and vassalage. The medieval urban communes were built around guilds and so took the form of guild-based merchant oligarchies, forming the birthplace of the bourgeoisie. The feudal era also generated utopian conceptions of urban communes, arising from a nascent bourgeoisie.⁵¹ The government of the city of Paris following the storming of the Bastille in 1789 was known as the Paris Commune. It was from this earlier Paris Commune, emerging from a bourgeois revolution, that the revolutionary workers’ Paris Commune of 1871 was to take its name.⁵² A far cry from the earlier medieval communes, and even from the Commune of Paris of 1789, the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871, emerging during the Franco-Prussian War, represented, according to Marx, not the construction of a new state power but a negation of state power, and thus of the alienated dual relation of state and civil society. It constituted a genuine nineteenth-century revolutionary working-class urban communal order, which was to end after seventy-two days in a massacre of the communards by the French state.

For Marx, the Paris Commune pointed to a new communal political command structure that, in breaking with the capitalist state as a power above society nonetheless carried out functions analogous to it, still affected by the bourgeois order from which it had emerged. Universal male suffrage was introduced. Elected officials were to be paid at rates comparable to the general workers’ wage, with the instant recall of those elected if they did

not follow the mandates of their constituents. The Commune abolished the death penalty, child labor, and conscription while eliminating debts. The workers were organized into cooperative societies to run the factories, with plans to organize the cooperatives into one big union. A women's union was created, as well as a system of universal secular education.⁵³ As Marx wrote in *The Civil War in France* (1871):

The Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labor. – But this is Communism, “impossible” Communism!... [Indeed,] if co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the Capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control and putting an end to constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of Capitalist production – what else... would it be but Communism, “possible” Communism?... This was the first revolution in which the working class was acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative.... The great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence. Its special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people.... Another measure of this [working] class [formation] was the surrender, to associations of workmen, under reserve of compensation, of all closed workshops and factories, no matter whether the respective capitalists had absconded, or preferred to strike work.⁵⁴

For Marx, the Paris Commune, with all of its weaknesses, had proven that in a working-class republic, a state power above civil society was no longer necessary along with the abolition of bourgeois civil society itself. The Paris Commune was an urban commune that prefigured a working-class republic as a whole based on collective production under a common plan and democratic social governance, thereby constituting an initial phase in the transition to a fuller communist society. “The Communal Constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon and clogging the free movement of society.”⁵⁵

This overall view of the shaping of communal society, sharpened by the experience of the Paris Commune, was reflected in Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, written in 1875. For Marx, the 1871 Paris Commune had represented the form at last discovered of “the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat,” destined, he believed, to overthrow the class dictatorship of capital, constituting a new, more democratic order in the transition to socialism/communism. In fully developed communism, as envisioned by Marx and Engels, there would be no Leviathan of state power standing above society. The state would gradually “wither away” as the

political command structure was transferred to the population at large, replaced by what Engels called simply *community/commune*.⁵⁶ Nor would there be civil society in the bourgeois sense. The economy would be run on a common plan in which decisions would be made principally *ex ante* by the associated producers, not *post festum* by the market. Creative labor, would be “the prime necessity of life” such that “the free development of each” would become the basis of “the free development of all.” The overall structure of the economy would be that of a “co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production” and governed by the principle *from each according to one’s ability, to each according to one’s need*. “Within the co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products... since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labour no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of the total labour.” In such a society, “communal satisfaction of needs, such as schools, health services, etc.” would be vastly increased in proportion, as would the realm of cultural development generally. The “sources of life,” that is, the land/nature, would be made into common property for the benefit of all.⁵⁷

In delimiting the overall character of production, Marx wrote in *Capital*: “Freedom, in this sphere [determined by natural necessity], can only consist in this, that socialised man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way...accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy,” in the process of promoting sustainable human development.⁵⁸ The alienated social metabolism between humanity and nature would be transcended. As Marx had indicated early on in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, “communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature.”⁵⁹

The Revolution in Ethnological Time

The year 1859 saw the publication of both Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, which provided a strong theory of natural evolution for the first time, and a closely related “revolution in ethnological time,” resulting from the discovery of prehistorical human remains in Brixham Cave in Southwestern England. The Brixham Cave discovery expanded the length of time in which human beings were recognized to have lived on Earth by thousands of centuries. Human remains, sometimes accompanied by primitive instruments, had been found prior to this, including the first Neanderthal remains in the Neanderthal Valley in Germany in 1856. Although less spectacular than the Neanderthal discovery, the Brixham Cave remains left no doubt about “the great antiquity of mankind.”⁶⁰

The result was a great rush to explore the evolutionary and anthropological origins of human beings, the nature of early societies, and the origins of the family, the state, and private property, in such works as Thomas Huxley's *Evidences as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863); Charles Lyell's *Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man* (1863); John Lubbock's *Pre-historic Times* (1864); Henry Sumner Maine's *Village-Communities in the East and West* (1871); Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877); and John Budd Phear's *The Aryan Village in India and Ceylon* (1880). In Germany, Georg Ludwig von Maurer continued the research that he had commenced in 1854 with his great work on the German Mark, *Introduction to the History of the Mark, Village, and Town Constitutions and Public Power*.

In 1880–1882, Marx composed a series of excerpts from the works of Morgan, Phear, Maine, and Lubbock, known as his *Ethnological Notebooks*. He had taken extensive notes a year earlier from the ethnological studies of the young Russian sociologist Maxim Kovalevsky, whose book manuscript, *Communal Landownership: The Causes, Course and Consequences of Its Dissolution*, dealt with communal relations in India, Algeria, and Latin America.⁶¹ In 1880–1881, he took down passages from William B. Money's *Java; or How to Manage a Colony* (1861).

The source of Marx's interest in ethnological studies at the end of his life was best indicated by his response to Maurer's work on the German Mark, in which Maurer had conclusively demonstrated that the Mark had a stronger communal basis than was previously thought. Writing to Engels in 1868, Marx indicated that these ethnological investigations of Maurer and others revealed, unknowingly on their part, that it was crucial "to look beyond the Middle Ages into the primitive age of every nation, and that [this] corresponds to the socialist trend." Nevertheless, Maurer and other similar ethnological investigators, such as the philologist and cultural historian Jakob Grimm, Marx remarked, showed no real comprehension of this tendency: "They are then surprised to find what is newest in what is oldest." The surviving communal forms, remnants from more egalitarian communities of the past, pointed in a dialectical way to the future developed communist society.⁶²

Given his previous close studies of communal property and communal governance in societies, Marx was able to incorporate these new discoveries in all their richness without fundamentally altering his basic approach, developed over his life. In his *Ethnological Notebooks*, the focus is often on communal relations. Twenty-seven passages from Morgan's *Ancient Society* addressing communal property, housing, and land tenure are highlighted by Marx with parallel lines drawn next to them in the margins or with brief comments.⁶³ Still, much more emphasis than in Marx's earli-

er work was placed here on kinship-based and gender relations, as they shaped these communities. He was particularly impressed by Morgan's studies of the Haudenosaunee, called the Iroquois Confederacy by the French and the League of the Five Nations by the English, representing an earlier clan-based (gens-based) society. "All members of the Iroquois gens," Marx wrote, drawing on Morgan, were "*personally free, bound to defend each other's freedom.*"⁶⁴ The Haudenosaunee built large longhouses that included multiple families. The longhouses were described by Morgan in his *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines* (1881), as "large enough to accommodate, five, ten, and twenty families, and each household practiced communism in living."⁶⁵ In Morgan's words, as excerpted and emphasized by Marx: "It (a higher plan of society) will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes [traditional communal society]."⁶⁶

Marx's understanding of property as arising originally from appropriation of nature removed the myth of peoples without property used to justify the expropriation of the land by European colonists. In his interpolated extracts from Kovalevsky's *Communal Landownership* with respect to Algeria, Marx (via Kovalevsky) observed that "centuries of Arabic, Turkish, finally French rule, except in the most recent period...were unable to break up the *consanguineal* [kinship-based] *organization*, and the principles of *indivisibility* and *inalienability* of landownership."⁶⁷ Yet, only a revolt could secure lasting communal land tenure. Following two months spent in Algiers in 1882 for his health, Marx was to declare that the Algerians "will go to rack and ruin WITHOUT A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT."⁶⁸ Likewise, he was to take special note via his excerpts from Kovalevsky of the British "robbery of the *communal and private property* of the peasants" in India.⁶⁹

Due to ill health, Marx was unable in these last years prior to his death in 1883 to develop a treatise, as he had clearly intended, based on his *Ethnological Notebooks*. However, Engels sought to carry Marx's ethnological discoveries via Morgan, Maurer, and others forward in his *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), written in the year after Marx's death, as well as in *The Mark* (1882), which Marx read and commented on prior to publication. Engels's analysis was deeply rooted in the examination of kinship and gender relations, particularly the gens (clan) as it manifested itself in different cultures. Everywhere – in the Iroquois in North America, in the Incas in Peru, in the village communities in India and Java, in the Russian *obshchina*, in Celtic clans in Europe, in Greek antiquity, and in the German Mark – there were indications, he argued, of large household communities, common living, common land tenure, common tillage, and cooperative labor, varying over time and location. Aspects of these archaic

communal relations were evident in the ancient Greek *phratry* and the Roman *gens*.⁷⁰ “The patriarchal household community,” he declared,

was widespread, if not universal, as the intermediate stage between the mother-right communistic family and the modern isolated family.... The questions whether their economic unit was the *gens* or the household community or an intermediate communistic kinship group, or whether all three of these groups existed depending on land conditions will remain subject of controversy for a long time yet. But Kovalevsky maintains that the conditions described by Tacitus presuppose not the Mark or village community, but the household community; only this latter developed, much later into the village community, owing to the growth of population.⁷¹

In Engels’s conception, in the earliest, most traditional, hunter and gatherer tribal societies, where an economic surplus did not yet exist, the social order was centered more on the *reproduction* of kinship relations and of the population than on *production* in the economic sense.⁷²

The contemporary issue of the Russian commune, which played an important part in Marx and Engels’s thought, first arose in 1847–1852. It was at that time that the Prussian Baron von Haxthausen-Abbenburg (a German aristocrat and official and supporter of serfdom) wrote a study of Russian agrarian relations with the support of the tsar, in which he uncovered the widespread existence of the Russian *mir* (*obshchina*). This discovery was to play a big role in the development of Russian populism. At first, Marx saw nothing particularly distinctive in the Russian *mir*, viewing it as simply a manifestation of a decaying archaic communal order. However, upon receiving a copy of *The Situation of the Working Class in Russia* by the young Russian scholar V. V. Bervi (Flerovskii) in 1869, Marx devoted himself with the utmost urgency to learning to read Russian, which he achieved in less than a year. This led him to the intensive study of Russian populism, which ended up changing his views about the contemporary significance of the *mir*.⁷³

Marx’s developed view of the Russian commune was manifested in the 1881 drafts of his letter to Vera Zasulich, and in the 1882 preface (written together with Engels) to the second Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. In his draft letters to Zasulich, Marx argued that the Russian *mir* was the most developed form of communal agriculture, traces of which had been found “everywhere” in Europe, and in parts of Asia. Earlier forms, such as the German tribes at the time of Caesar, were kinship-based and characterized by communal living and collective cultivation. In contrast, the later agrarian commune of the German Mark, as described by Tacitus more than a century later, combined village communal ownership, including the periodic redistribution of the land, with individual homes and cultivation. The agrarian commune displayed a “dualism” in forms of proper-

ty that was both a source of greater vitality and also a sign of impending dissolution and the gradual emergence of private property, in which the remaining communal property would become merely an appendage.⁷⁴

All of the surviving forms in the lineage of communal agriculture, to be found in Russia and in Asia in the nineteenth century (in the former, free from the distorting force of external colonization), exhibited the same fundamental characteristics and *dualism* of the agrarian commune. Wherever agrarian communism had survived, it was due to its existence as a “*localised microcosm*” that was subjected to “a more or less centralized despotism above the commune.” All of this raised the question as to whether the Russian commune or mir could be the basis for the development of a new communist society. Marx’s tentative answer was that given: (1) the non-kinship basis of the Russian commune; (2) its “contemporaneity,” which meant that it was able to incorporate some of the “positive achievements of the capitalist system without having to pass under its harsh tribute”; and (3) its survival on a *national* basis, it could conceivably be the nucleus of a newly developed communal society, rooted in cooperative labor. The crisis of contemporary capitalist society could itself promote “the return of modern societies to a higher form of an ‘archaic’ type of collective ownership of production.” But for this to happen, a revolution would be necessary drawing on contemporary socialist movements.⁷⁵

Marx and Engels concluded their preface to the second Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto* with the words: “If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia’s peasant communal land-ownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development.”⁷⁶

Communal Society as Past and Future

Marx indicated several times over the course of his life that the survival of remnants of communal landownership in the region surrounding Trier, where he grew up, had left a deep impression on him. He had discussed these archaic property relations in his youth with his father, a lawyer. His translation of Tacitus’s *Germania*, completed while Marx was still in his teens, no doubt reinforced these views. His early studies of the Greek polis and philosophy via Aristotle and Epicurus (both of whom addressed the nature of community); his engagement as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* with the question of the peasantry’s loss of customary rights to the forest; and his adoption of Hegel’s notion of appropriation/property as the basis of society all fed into this perspective. Property, for Marx, writing in 1842, arose from “the elemental power of nature” and human labor. This was visible in the Germany of his day in

the customary/communal right to gather wood from the forest, in line with all forms of appropriation basic to human existence.⁷⁷

Marx's approach to the question of communism from the beginning was materialist and historical, emphasizing the *social origins of human beings*, as opposed to the individualist, idealist, Romantic, and utopian views common among French socialists and German Young Hegelians. From his earliest writings, he stressed the natural, communal basis of human appropriation from nature and the social development of property relations as a product of human labor evident throughout human history, contrasting this to the alienated relations of capitalist private property. This involved a deeply anthropological view and a labor theory of culture.⁷⁸ The resulting social ontology underpinned his entire critique of political economy. The notion that the past offered clues to the human future, and the possibility of transcending the present through the creation of a higher communal society, governed Marx's thought almost from the beginning.

Due to the underlying importance of communal society in Marx's thought, he drew on all the historical and anthropological information available in his time to explore the various forms of communal property and communal governance, including both agrarian communes and urban communal structures. He dug deeply into Greek and Roman history, reports of colonial administrators, and early ethnological works. This research was carried forward by other classical Marxists, particularly Rosa Luxemburg.⁷⁹ Ultimately, Marx was convinced that the past mediated between the present and the future. The natural, spontaneously communal basis of humanity would be resurrected in a higher form of society, not just in Europe, but worldwide via revolution. "No misinterpretation of Marx," Hobsbawm wrote, "is more grotesque than the one which suggests that he expected a revolution exclusively from the advanced industrial countries of the West."⁸⁰

In our time, the revolutions in China, with its early, vibrant People's Communes and its current system of collective land tenure in communities, and in Venezuela, with its diverse communes and its struggle to create a "communal state," demonstrate that the human future, if there is to be one at all, requires the creation of a communal society, a society of, by, and for the associated producers.⁸¹

Notes

1. R. N. Berki, *Insight and Vision: The Problem of Communism in Marx's Thought* (London: J. M. Dent, 1983), 1.
2. Paresh Chattopadhyay, *Marx's Associated Mode of Production* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

3. On Marx and Epicurus, see John Bellamy Foster, *Breaking the Bonds of Fate: Epicurus and Marx* (forthcoming, Monthly Review Press).

4. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International

Publishers, 1975), vol. 1, 215-23; Moses Hess, *The Holy History of Mankind and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 47-56.

5. Moses Hess, "Speech on Communism, Elberfeld, 15 February 1845," Marxists Internet Archive, marxists.org; Lucretius 5.1136; Aristotle, *Politics* I.1253a; Patricia Springborg, "Marx, Democracy and the Ancient Polis," *Critical Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1984): 52. In referring to man as a "political animal," Aristotle meant a member of a polis, that is, society, particularly a town.
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The "Discourses" and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 165; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13–16, 70.
7. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 41–42. On property as appropriation in classical political economy (as in John Locke), see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 194–262; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 297–301.
8. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 647.
9. Marx, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 17.
10. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 168.
11. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 189; Karl Marx, "Marx-Zasulich Correspondence: Letters and Drafts," in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 118; Kevin B. Anderson, *The Late Marx's Revolutionary Roads* (London: Verso, 2025), 70. On the German Mark, see Frederick Engels, "The Mark," in Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 77–93.
12. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 254; Daniel Bensaid, *The Dispossessed: Karl Marx's Debates on Wood Theft and the Rights of the Poor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). On such customary rights in the English context in the eighteenth century, see E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: The New Press, 1993).
13. Eric Hobsbawm, Introduction to Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 21.
14. Editors' note, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35, 773. Marx was to rely in *Capital* on such works as George Campbell, *Modern India: A Sketch of the System of Civil Government* (London: John Murray, 1852) and T. Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java* (London: John Murray, 1817).
15. Thomas R. Trautmann, *Lewis Henry Morgan and the Invention of Kinship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 3.
16. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 29, 461.
17. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), 495; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 32–33. The question of "mother right" or of traditional matrilineal society was only introduced later by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, based primarily on Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* and Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*.
18. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), part 3, 422–23; Frederick Engels, "Supplement to Volume Three of *Capital*," in Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 1038; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, 103. Engels expanded the concept of "primitive communism" to the precursors of the Germanic Mark association, as well as to the village communities in India and the Russian commune or *mir* (*obshchina*) in his day. The inclusion of precursors of the German Mark in this context was probably what accounted for his own very provisional substitution of the term "primitive communism" (in his appendix to *Capital* and a couple of letters) for the Asiatic mode as characterizing the base mode of production in such societies. Engels refrained altogether from alluding to earlier hunting and gathering societies, as "primitive communism," seeing these societies as determined largely by kinship relations rather than economics. Nevertheless, neither Marx nor Engels had any doubt about the communal-clan character of these earlier societies, which was reinforced in the 1870s and '80s by their anthropological writings: Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* and Engels's *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. See Stephen P. Dunn, "The Position of the Primitive-Communal Social Order in the Soviet-Marxist Theory of History," in *Toward a Marxist Anthropology*, ed. Stanley Diamond (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 175, 181; Moses Finley, "Ancient Society," in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 20.
19. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 33.
20. Karl Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, ed. Lawrence Krader (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1974), 292; Marx, *Grundrisse*, 474–75, 477, 483.
21. Springborg, "Marx, Democracy and the Ancient Polis," 52–53.
22. Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1974), 90; Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 183; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 970; Karl Polanyi, *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 82–83.
23. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 103, 491, 495–96; Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 213; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 332; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 970; Springborg, "Marx, Democracy and the Ancient Polis," 59; Finley, "Ancient Society," 20. As Samir Amin notes, slavery "is practically nowhere found to be the origin of class differentiation." Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 20. Coinage appeared in China about the same time as in Lydia (or earlier). See "Chinese Coinage," American Numismatic Association, n.d., money.org
24. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 245; Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left Books, 1974), 18, 35. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix's great work, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1981) can be seen as aligned with Anderson in this respect. In contrast, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Peasant-Citizen and Slave* (London: Verso, 1989), 42–80. Wood argued that, aside from domestic service and work in silver mines, two areas where slave labor predominated, the remaining enslaved people in ancient Athens were "scattered through the division of labour," including areas such as agriculture and the "lower civil service," as in the "Scythian archers who represented the nearest thing to an Athenian police force." Wood, *Peasant-Citizen and Slave*, 79.
25. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 245, 491, 495–96; Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 213; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 332; Springborg, "Marx, Democracy and the Ancient Polis," 59; Finley, "Ancient Society," 20. On the tribal formation in Attica, see George Thomson, *The Prehistoric Aegean: Studies in Ancient*

Greek Society (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), 104-9.

26. This has now been established in great detail in contemporary classical scholarship. See Richard Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-20, 125-36, 147-72.
27. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 540.
28. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 31-32.
29. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 87-88, 488-89.
30. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 483, 495. In relation to Java, Marx was influenced by Thomas Stamford Raffles's 1817 *History of Java*. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 417, 916; Raffles, *History of Java*.
31. Tacitus, *Germania*, 26; translation as found in Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. H. Mattingly and S. A. Handford (London: Penguin, 1970), 122-23.
32. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 473-75.
33. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 473-75; Springborg, "Marx, Democracy, and the Ancient Polis," 56.
34. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 102-3, 473, 490; Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 1978), 196, 226; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 1017; William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico/History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.; originally published separately in 1843/1847), 756-57.
35. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 3, 422-23; Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 21, 33; Marx, *Grundrisse*, 490-95.
36. Hobsbawm, Introduction to Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 37-38.
37. Marx's concept of the "Asiatic mode of production," a term which he almost never used directly (though he made frequent reference to Asiatic village communities), had the virtue of going against any unilinear theory of development, raising the issue of alternative paths. He saw it as standing for the oldest form of communal property, which, like the related Slavic form, was remarkable for its tenacity. He was eventually to conclude that the Russian commune (as well as perhaps some Asiatic village communities) could conceivably be the basis of revolutionary developments when integrated with modern communist thought, possibly skirting the capitalist path. See Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, part 3, 422-23; Lawrence Krader, *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Sources, Development and Critique in the Writings of Karl Marx* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum and Co., 1975), 5-7, 183; John Bellamy Foster and Hannah Holleman, "Weber and the Environment," *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 6 (2012): 1640-41; Bryan S. Turner, "Asiatic Society," in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 32-36; Karl Wittfogel, "Geopolitics, Geographical Materialism and Marxism," *Antipode* 17, no. 1 (1985): 21-71.
38. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 470-73; Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 3, 422; Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 69-70, 88; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 149-50.
39. It is a mistake to argue, as Kevin Anderson does, that Marx was mainly interested in "communal social formations" as a whole, and that "communal property" was "too superficial a category for his investigations." Rather, Marx always based his analysis in this sphere on communal property, often found in forms that were in contradiction to the larger tributary formation. Nor is it meaningful to claim that many traditional societies "lack much in the way of property," since property itself for Marx (and Hegel) is merely derivative of forms of appropriation that lie at the basis of human material existence in all of its forms. Hence, no society can be devoid of property. Anderson, *The Late Marx's Revolutionary Roads*, 8-19.
40. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 171-72.
41. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 171-72.
42. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 127; István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 765.
43. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 172-73; Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 749. The notion of "time's carcass" here has to do with Epicurus's conception of time as the accident of accidents, "death the immortal," erasing all qualitative features. Marx, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 63-65; Marx, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 166.
44. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 515; Karl Marx, *Texts on Method*, ed. Terrell Carver (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 195.
45. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 451-53.
46. On the concept of "natural economy" in Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, see Scott Cook, *Understanding Commodity Economies* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 114, 130-31, 151; Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1951), 368-85.
47. Amin, *Unequal Development*, 13-20.
48. Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 44-45.
49. Jan de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 43; Christopher Dyer, "The Economy and Society," in *Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England*, ed. Nigel Saul (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143-46; Thomas Edward Scrutton, *Commons and Common Fields* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887), 1; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, "Marx and the Commons," *Social Research* 88, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 1-5.
50. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 889. See Ian Angus, *The War Against the Commons: Dispossession and Resistance in the Making of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2023).
51. See Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, *Communes and Conflict: Urban Rebellion in Late Medieval Flanders*, eds. Andrew Murray and Joannes van den Maagdenberg (Boston: Brill, 2023), 229-49.
52. Mitchell Abidor, "The Paris Commune: Myth Made Material," *Tocqueville21*, May 11, 2021, tocqueville21.com.
53. Mathijs van de Sande and Gaard Kets, "From the Commune to Communalism," Resilience, March 22, 2021, resilience.org.
54. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, ed. Hal Draper (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 76-81.
55. Marx and Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, 75; Frederick Engels in Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), 31.
56. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 247-48, 267-68; V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 16-27. On the whole question of the "withering away of the state," see Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 460-95.
57. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 5-10, 31; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Man-*

- ifesto* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), 41.
58. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 959.
59. Marx, *Early Writings*, 348.
60. Trautmann, *Lewis Henry Morgan and the Invention of Kinship*, 3; Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock (New York: Meridian Books, 1963); Preface to John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 212–13.
61. Karl Marx, "Excerpts from M. M. Kovalevsky," in Krader, *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, 346–414.
62. Karl Marx to Frederick Engels, March 25, 1868, in Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, 188–89.
63. Lawrence Krader, Introduction to Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 28.
64. Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 150.
65. Lewis Henry Morgan, *Houses and House Lives of the American Aborigines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 6.
66. Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 81, 139; Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 562.
67. Marx, "Excerpts from M. M. Kovalevsky," 400.
68. Karl Marx to Laura Lafargue, April 13, 1882, *Collected Works*, vol. 46, 242; Peter Hudis, "Marx Among the Muslims," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 15, no. 4 (2004): 67.
69. Marx, "Excerpts from M. M. Kovalevsky," 387. See John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, "Marx and the Indigenous," *Monthly Review* 71, no. 9 (February 2020): 9–12.
70. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 167–68, 190–203; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 482; Frederick Engels, "The Mark," in Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 77–93. Engels's "The Mark" is often referred to as first having appeared as an appendix to the 1892 edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, but it was initially published in the first German edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* in 1882. Engels sent it to Marx prior to publication requesting suggested changes. Although Marx had earlier taken notes on the Teutonic Mark in his *Ethnological Notebooks* based on Maurer's discussion, it was Engels's "The Mark" and Marx's comments in this respect in his draft letters to Vera Zasulich that represented their most developed view, an area in which they were in close accord. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, 334.
71. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 241–42. Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* is often dismissed for its supposed rigid notion of "primitive communism." Thus, anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything* use this as an excuse for dismissing Engels's analysis, despite the fact that Engels himself never used the term "primitive communism" in his book, which was imported into historical materialism in this context by Second and Third International Marxism. Nor did Engels ever apply the term "primitive communism" to hunting and gathering societies, which he saw through a much more complex kinship lens, though recognizing "communal" elements. The main outlines of Engels's argument, focusing on kinship, community, and egalitarianism in traditional societies, conforms to what anthropology in general has long since discovered in this respect. Having foisted the notion of some kind of absolute, pure, and holistic "primitive communism" on Engels, Graeber and Wengrow proceed to declare that property relationships were more "ambiguous" than Engels thought. They emphasize the gendered division of labor, as if this invalidates Engels's argument, ignoring his own analysis there. Nevertheless, the existence of communal property and relatively egalitarian arrangements in hunting and gathering societies and in many later societies is not to be denied. Hence, Graeber and Wengrow themselves point to a "baseline communism" supposedly in opposition to Engels's dogmatic (though in fact nonexistent) use of "primitive communism" to describe hunting and gathering societies. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 47. For a more detailed discussion of Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, emphasizing kinship-family-gender aspects of his argument, see John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 287–96. On the egalitarian character of traditional kinship societies and their collective/communal aspects, see Morton Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay on Political Anthropology* (New York: Random House, 1967); Richard B. Lee, "Reflections on Primitive Communism," in *Hunters and Gatherers*, eds. Tim Ingold, David Riches, and James Woodburn (New York: Berg, 1988), 252–68.
72. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 131–32; Dunn, "The Position of Primitive-Communal Order in the Soviet-Marxist Theory of History," 180–81.
73. Haruki Wada, "Marx and Revolutionary Russia," in Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, 43–45.
74. Marx, "Marx-Zasulich Correspondence," 103, 107–9, 118–20.
75. Marx, "Marx-Zasulich Correspondence," 110–13, 120–21.
76. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*" (1882), in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Shanin, 139.
77. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 234.
78. Charles Woolfson, *The Labour Theory of Culture: A Re-Examination of Engels's Theory of Human Origins* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 452–64.
79. Rosa Luxemburg, *Complete Works*, vol. 1, ed. Peter Hudis (London: Verso, 2014), 146–234.
80. Hobsbawm, Introduction to Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 49.
81. On China, see William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008) and Lu Xinyu, "'Chinese-Style Modernization': Revolution and the Worker-Peasant Alliance," *Monthly Review* 76, no. 9 (February 2025): 22–41. On Venezuela, see John Bellamy Foster, "Chávez and the Communal State," *Monthly Review* 66, no. 11 (April 2015): 1–17; and Chris Gilbert, *Commune or Nothing!: Venezuela's Communal Movement and Its Socialist Project* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2023).