

REVIEW ARTICLE

Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology

Edited by Maurice Bloch. London. Malaby Press. 1975. 240 pp. £6.75.

This volume makes no claim to an encounter between social anthropology and Marxism. On the other hand, both the title and the content give the impression that social anthropology in some way already includes Marxism, and it should be said at once that this impression is misleading, resting, as it does, on the fact that none of the contributions says anything terribly "Marxist". In short, it's all too well-behaved to be interesting or innovative. Referring to Firth's The Sceptical Anthropologist (reprinted here), Bloch assents that

"In a way Godelier and he (Firth) represent two sides of a debate which both are anxious to maintain." (p. XII).

Firth's position was, of course, that of the "reasonable" man and, in effect, conciliatory. "Marx's theories offer to social anthropology a set of hypotheses ..." which should be treated like any other hypotheses since they're of the same type. By way of contrast, we may note what Ardener (1971) had to say about Marxism, and psychoanalysis.

"These systems are like scythed chariots which slice away positivist reality around them."

The great weakness of Marxist Analyses is that the scythes have been discretely removed. In the present case the cutting edge should result from the fact that Marxism was, and in some quarters still is, a radical political movement. The A.S.A. decennial conference (from which this collection of papers comes) was not, I suppose, the place for baldly political interventions but one does wonder what became of Marx's XIth thesis on Feuerbach.

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it."

Apart from any further considerations, the lack of interest shown in "changing the world" means that Marxist Analyses consistently ignores the very real epistemological challenge which Marxism presents as a system.

Even under this handicap, Marxist Analyses displays a number of points of interest, some of which, at least, are of considerable importance for any debate "au dela de structuralisme". On the other hand, the present sluggishness of that debate may be due in part to that peculiar hold of Marxist rhetoric over middle-class intellectuals which is evident in a number of these papers. Surely stray allusions to Marx, grading into adherence to terminology long outgrown, are of little help either intellectually or politically. The "asiatic state", for example, should by now have had its day.

The first paper in Marxist Analyses, Godelier's Modes of Production, Kinship and Demographic Structures, is by far the

most wide-ranging of the contributions and it is difficult not to discuss the others in terms of it. It should be said, however, that many of the points Godelier makes are already published in Horizon, Trajets Marxistes en Anthropologie (Godelier 1973) and reappear here in a rather skeletal form.

"What is attempted is a contribution to the study of the problems of 'structural causality' of the economy: the effect of ... the mode of production on other levels of the social organisation".

(p. 3).

In the attempt, Godelier takes as his basic source Yengoyan's work on Australian Aboriginal demography. When one returns to Yengoyan's original papers (e.g. 1968 and 1970) one is left with the impression that his material has not so much been translated into a new analytic space as simply glossed with Marxist terminology. For instance, Godelier's discussion of "relations of order" (the objective properties of other levels which mediate determination by the material base) is unavoidably hollow since the only logically necessary constraints are those of Yengoyan's model and historical necessities are unestablished. What a society does with "... constraints internal to kinship..." is no more outside history than anything else but we are left with the assentation that the analysis

"... confirms Morgan's findings: relationships of consanguinity change less quickly than those of alliance and, since modifications in the system of alliance are immediately reflected in the family, new types of family appear at the same time as do new alliance rules."

(p. 6).

The system in question is classificatory and Yengoyan (1970) provides examples of its flexibility. Not only can we not glibly assume that a structure is invariant or a purely dependent variable but in this case the possibilities of confusion are all too obvious (vide Needham 1971).

Friedman's model of inter-systemic contradictions between sub-systems provides an expression of the necessarily mutual dependence of all the variables. Tribes, States and Transformations, a relatively lengthy exposition of his analysis of the Kachin of Upper Burma and their neighbours, actualises many of Godelier's earlier (1973) suggestions and in some respects moves beyond them. The self-containing quality of Friedman's model is admirable and the model generates the empirical discontinuity between gumsa and gumlas elegantly enough. More important, it effectively eludes the problem of "determination in the last instance by the economy"; a problem which persists in most of the other papers. (e.g. Godelier p. 13). Rather,

"We have tried to demonstrate how all these variations are parts of a single system of transformations in which particular variants are "determined in the last instance" by the transformation of the conditions of production which limit the possibilities of variation of the relations of production and of the entire social structure."

(p. 197)

In Friedman's model, where the conditions of production constrain the other sub-systems but are also themselves constrained by those sub-systems, not only does the last instance never arrive but it does not haunt and confuse the analysis. His paper demonstrates an appreciation of the fact that a social formation may be "expanded", for the purposes of analysis, in a number of different but equally valid ways. Before taking up this point we might note that, while Friedman's analysis deepens our understanding of Kachin "political systems" considerably, the outright disagreements with Leach (1954) are less frequent than one might expect. Most noticeably, "the state" looks surprisingly similar in the two accounts.

Marx and Engels wondered why the history of the East appeared as a history of religion. The contributions to Marxist Analyses can now confidently explain how history can appear as "kinship", but they seem unwilling as yet to dissolve "economy" with the same vigour. A clear differentiation between "economy" and "material production" is long overdue since the term "economy" lies in the midst of a cluster of related matters of perhaps more fundamental importance. One of the more pressing of these, touched upon but unresolved in Marxist Analyses, is that of the superstructure/infrastructure metaphor. In his contribution to this volume (Economic Scale and the Cycle of Petty Commodity Production), Kahn notes that

"Godelier particularly emphasises that kinship relations, for example, can actually become the social relations of production, and not merely a reflection at the level of ideology of the economic. Economic relations, then, are not relations between people and things, but relations between people with a material element or implication. These relations might, at the same time, be superstructural relations, thus making the layer-cake approach to social structures an untenable one." (p. 147).

If we demystify "the economic" and concentrate on what can be meant by "material", the problem is fundamental. As Feuchtwang notes in Investigating Religion (the third of the papers here),

"Marx's materialism precisely is not a fundamental categorical separation of thought from material human being." (p. 67).

Godelier's notion of "symbolic labour" (1973) and indeed Althusser's earlier usage of the concept of production (1970) already have currency. The realisation that the most tangible examples of "production" are governed by (intangible) "relations" leaves most of the contributors to Marxist Analyses in the position where everything is infrastructural. The resolution of the problem, when it comes, may look Nietzschean from one point of view, it may look Maoist from another, but it seems as though at present the necessary rethinking is hampered by adherence to the old terminology. Indeed, a lingering economism is visible in a number of places throughout the volume. A partial clarification of the problem is to be found in Friedman's exposition of "fetishization". (vide Friedman 1974). Certainly the solution does not lie with Feuchtwang's interpretation of Marx.

"Every human practice - all production - is social, intentional and significant" (p. 67).

Such a view has been castigated often enough (e.g. Banaji 1970) and it's disappointing to see it reappear at this stage.

As a whole, Marxist Analyses presents a slightly dated and inadequate appearance. Kahn's paper and Bloch's Property and the End of Affinity might still contribute to the unfortunate belief that marxist analyses are no more than something to do with "economic anthropology". Worse still, Bloch's use of "capital" (= earthworks), almost à la Salisbury, reveals a fetish in Madagascar only with the aid of a fetish here at home; the very one that Marx himself revealed some time ago. Ternay's Classes and Class Consciousness in the Abron Kingdom of Gyaman is subject to exactly the criticisms which Godelier directed at his previous thinking on modes of production and it represents but a small advance in our thinking about "class" since Marx's manuscript broke off at the vital point. Again, Fenchtwang's investigation of religion appears embarrassingly inadequate, pursuing as it does the idea of a simple parallelism between the "religious" and the "economic". He begins with Althusser's analysis of ideology and ends up with an account which loses the religious experience and requires, in effect, a conspiracy theory of society.

Despite these various shortcomings, Marxist Analyses will, no doubt, be widely read by students of anthropology. The fact that this is so, itself demonstrates a noteworthy state of affairs; Marxism has, in its present form, been thoroughly domesticated. The contributors to this volume seem well aware of the fact and are comfortable with it; there are no worries expressed, for example, about the possibility of "Bygones" (Gramscian 1971). So far as I know, only one of the contributors (Fenchtwang) has suffered any discomfiture on account of his "Marxist" affiliations, and the reasons why most of these authors call themselves "Marxist" are to be found, one suspects, in academic fashion rather than political commitment. This is no bad thing per se but we would do well to be aware that the exercise under review has little to do with political activism. What is important here is not the straightforward question of espousal of the cause of "their people" by individual anthropologists. The point at issue is that which I raised at the outset, and lies rather closer to home. Marxism is one of the two major "quasi-positivist" systems and its advantage over positivism lies in its "guess at the programme" to use Ardener's (1971) phrase. This "guess" is by no means uneducated and depends for its usefulness on its situation within a political practice. "Validation through praxis" is something more than a cry from the epistemologically lost: It's an admittedly unclear and poorly articulated perception of the need to include ourselves and to situate ourselves in the analysis. If we exclude this aspect of Marxism, as this volume does, we may be left with pieces of excellent anthropology (e.g. Friedman's paper) but, at the very least, anthropology throws away a chance to go beyond itself.

Paul Dresch.

References

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