

Comments and Arguments

Remaking Marxist Anthropology

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To begin to say what a Marxist anthropology might now become we need to start with a brief review of the relevant changes in our social world. The point will be to situate a partisan anthropology both within and against major current processes.

1. The former hegemonic powers have decisively lost their ability to win or even to suppress conflict. They retain an extraordinary and increasing power to butcher and destroy, but that is all. This inability to control the consequences of their violent assaults has revealed the chaos that power has always in its routine operations imposed upon the poor and the vulnerable. All that is happening now is that this ordinary chaos is being reimposed by the victims within the domains of its origins. If we look beyond the theatrics and the spectacles of car and roadside bombs, we can sense the uncertainty, the chaos, the appeal to and of "luck:" in sum the unpredictability that can be simultaneously humorous and deadly, that always permeates ordinary daily life of those who have long suffered the routine assaults of domination and exploitation. What this should reveal to us, above all, is the arrogance and worthlessness of our major concepts: culture, social organization, social structure, kinship systems, and so forth. The one utility of such concepts is the way they reveal the fantasies of order and regularity that the powerful have concerning the social worlds they oppress and exploit.

2. As capitalism depends upon its ability to manage, somewhat effectively, the chaos it creates, capitalism is now increasingly in serious trouble at the very least in the former hegemonic powers. The centre of its troubles is the increasingly severe limitations on the ability of the rate of profit to expand,

and as Rosa Luxemburg decisively showed this ability to expand is crucial to the continuity of capital. More precisely, she demonstrated that capital must continually expand over its hinterlands, marshaling the extraction of goods and labor from non-, or semi-, capitalist systems. These are the social formations that we have wrongly called pre-capitalist, a word that conceals the fact that they are continually created while being continually destroyed in the same place and at the same time.

In the context of intensifying limits the continuity of capital increasingly depends upon turning on its own: by increasing domestic (internal) inequality of income, of wealth or material goods, and especially of well-being, including healthcare, education, housing, and neighbourhood facilities. After a domestically brutal start in the early Industrial Revolution, capital always sought to export the bulk of the misery it created. It still does, but it no longer is as able or willing to use what it extracts to sweeten the existence of a significant portion of its domestic working-class. Simultaneously, capital must, or thinks it must, ignore its own long and medium term interests in pursuit of current profits. That is the dynamic underlying global warming.

This affects anthropology in several ways: most relevantly in the production and social reproduction of locality. Thus the terrain of most of our work is changing, and we need to change our frame of reference from working in a locality or in several localities, to examine more closely the production of locality itself. This should include the production of local cultures, both in the hinterlands and in the heartlands, for the production of local cultures is completely integral to the production of local inequalities.

The characteristic feature in the organization of local inequalities is that these inequalities are used to support both local and non-local elites, both local and non-local processes of appropriation, and this conjunction of local and non-local brings incompatible needs and interests into one inescapable embrace. This incompatibility is not at all because local forms of domination and exploitation are more humane, but because they serve very different needs. The characteristic feature of locally specific cultures, necessarily dealing with social relations formed in the context of local and non-local processes of domination and appropriation, is thus the unavoidable and unresolvable contradictions and tensions that local cultures incorporate at their core. All cultures are exclusionary—that is what “shared” actually means—but these exclusions, which ordinarily specify who may be treated abusively, who may be forced to bear the brunt of appropriation and domination, however brutal and intense, do not solve the inescapable internal contradictions of any local culture.

The increasingly intense appropriation from localities ordinarily intensifies differentiation both within and between localities. Globalization does not homogenize or erase difference; to the contrary it intensifies political and social inequalities, and what is loosely called cultural variation. And the intensifying appropriation also means that these increasingly differentiated localities ordinarily have increasing difficulty reproducing themselves. As we learn to look at localities in terms of what they were and what is impending we will come to understand how intensely they can be organized around their instabilities. Those instabilities are also our doorways.

In sum, a reinvigorated Marxist anthropology might well situate itself not in terms of finding un-

derlying patterns or structures or processes but in the increasing difficulty of social reproduction in localities, in regions, and in nations: the increasingly intense production of locality and the simultaneous failure of this productive process. This is not at all a call to place ourselves in the midst of an abstraction, not even the useful abstraction “social reproduction.” In the most concrete terms the situation before us can be characterized by the fact that people’s own social relations are inadequate to reproduce their own social relations with their own means. The ensuing dependency and vulnerability might well be taken to be the framework for a pervasive and widespread depoliticization. But the increasing inability of capital and the state to harness the dependency and the vulnerability their own actions produce toward any productive or useful end leaves open a terrain for organization among the discarded and the dispossessed, as we come to better understand the expansionary tendencies within the ways the dispossessed become useful to one another.

The political point here is different than usual, in two ways: we are focusing on peoples who are not “elevated” to the status of proletariat, as much as on the regular, but deteriorating, working class, and we are suggesting that the core of organizing turns on their relations to one-another, as a precondition for opposition to the forces that exploit and dominate them. Anthropology, which had something to say about what it thought were orderly and patterned social relations now needs to look more closely at the social relations that emerge with chaos, uncertainty, and under the unpredictabilities of domination and intense appropriation, and find in these relations, these needs, these hopes, these fears, these terrors, ways that dispossessed and becoming-dislocated people reach toward different tomorrows.