

## Two Questions to Marxist Anthropology

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**Abstract:** “Marxist anthropology” is typically understood as a phase within the history of Euro-American anthropology, which is said to have fizzled out in the 1980s. Since some spectres are difficult to chase, however, Marx’s critique of capitalism continues to haunt the discipline’s output, which is not necessarily couched in Marxist language nor inserted in an explicitly Marxist framework. This essay will not diagnose the reasons behind the waning of “Marxist anthropology” according to the discipline’s professional narrative, but it will eschew such boundaries to concentrate on more urgent issues in criticising contemporary capitalism. Two questions are addressed: 1) How can micro- and macro-social scales in social scientific analysis be integrated? and 2) How can we distinguish between conventional ideas and ideologies through which humans guide their lives under capitalism? Anthropology, I argue, can contribute to a strong critique of contemporary capitalism by attending to these questions, which have been integral in Marxist analysis within and beyond the discipline.

**Keywords:** Marxist anthropology, scaling, ideology, capitalism, exploitation, modes of production, social science

### 1. Introduction

“Marxist anthropology” is often characterised as a phase in the history of anthropological theory. According to Sherry Ortner’s (1984) widely cited essay on “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties”, Marxism emerged as a disruptive theoretical force in a discipline dominated by functionalist and structural-functionalist approaches in the 1960s. Under the impulse of two main strands, one emerging in France and Britain (e.g. Terray 1972; Bloch 2004/1975; Godelier 1977) and another in the United States (e.g. O’Laughlin 1975; Diamond 1979; Wolf 1982), Marxism has been instrumental in getting anthropologists to reconsider the colonial power relations inherent in their discipline, to apply the methods of historical materialism to their traditional field sites, and to insert their enclosed analyses into a wider political economy of capitalism. Beyond this disciplinary wake-up call, as goes the narrative, Marxism had limited explanatory value. As Alan Barnard (2000, 81) notes in his standard *History and Theory in Anthropology*, “over the last decade or more Marxism has declined as a predominant paradigm in anthropology”.

The rise and fall of Marxism is an entrenched narrative within the history of anthropological theory, yet it reveals a certain narrowness of scope. First, it ignores continuities between the anthropological scholarship explicitly labelled as “Marxist” in the 1970s and later scholarship which, without being overtly Marxist, shares an interest in a critical reading of Marx. Direct and indirect engagements with Marx’s work in journals such as *Economy and Society* or *Critique of Anthropology*, themselves growing out of the ferment of 1970s Marxist anthropology, is a testimony to this continued relevance within the discipline. Second, the rise-and-fall narrative ignores the trajectories of Marxism in non-Western anthropological traditions. By focusing on Marxist anthropology in France, Britain, and the United States, this narrative casts aside productive anthropological engagements with Marx, say, in Mexico (Bartra 1974; Palerm 1980; Adame

2011). Moreover, it marginalises continued and explicit engagements with Marxist theory within the dominant centres of anthropological theory (e.g. Littlefield and Gates 1991; Donham 1999; Marcus and Menzies 2005). Lastly and perhaps most importantly, this narrative restricts Marxist anthropology to the confines of the discipline, which not only evicts its wide-ranging political ambitions, but also unevenly fits it to the shape of professional concerns.

This narrow scope, in short, does little justice to the worldwide impact of Marxism within anthropology, while being incommensurate with the ambitions of Marxist anthropologists themselves. As Joel Kahn and Josep Llobera (1981, x) noted: “It is the nature of any approach which takes its inspiration from Marx to break disciplinary boundaries and aim at a unified human and social science in history”. This is easier said than done. As Wessman (1979, 464) lucidly states: “[Marx’s] synthesis has been difficult to emulate, partly because of the times and partly because our intellectual tradition manifests the alienating and individualizing tendencies Marx warned about”. This essay is not intended as an expansion on the usual narrative about “Marxist anthropology”, which would require a serious intellectual history of the continuous and global impact of Marx and his disciples, whether within or beyond anthropology. Nor is it a revisionist account of 1970s Marxist anthropology as the “correct” path from which all further research has erroneously deviated. Rather, this essay is a call to ground anthropological practice within a critical tradition of engagement with Marx’s work which includes – without being limited to – the works of 1970s Marxist anthropologists. The intellectual project is therefore not an empty diagnosis of theoretical fads and their fluctuations within the discipline, but a critical reckoning with and an opening to the possible contributions of Marxist traditions to a historicist, materialist, systematic analysis.

This essay will concentrate on two questions in this vein: 1) How can micro- and macro-social scales in social scientific analysis be integrated? and 2) How can we distinguish between conventional ideas and ideologies through which humans guide their lives under capitalism? These questions do not directly arise from Marxist theory, but in reaction to the intellectual climate in which I am immersed as a professional anthropologist working in the United Kingdom. This position makes me liable to similar pitfalls to the ones in which earlier British and French Marxist anthropologists were ensnared, when their project to expand the study of the world’s societies through Marx’s historical materialism was funnelled into a dated intervention with little consequences beyond the echo chamber of professional anthropology. To avoid this possibility, I hope to show how these theoretical arguments can bear on a contemporary political understanding of capitalist exploitation.

## 2. Scales

How can micro- and macro-social analyses be integrated? This question is formulated according to the concerns of a rather technicist social science, which betrays certain assumptions about the radical difference between micro- and macro-studies, and the uncertain mechanisms whereby they are articulated. Can fine-grained ethnographies on specific groups or localities aggregate into a wider understanding of entire societies or global processes? Can theoretical models of these societies and processes be disaggregated into “micro-foundations”, as sociologists would call them? The micro/macro binary is in many ways unhelpful, because it erects boundaries between methods designed for small vs. large populations – say, participant observation and interviews vs. surveys and censuses – without being attentive to the way in which any study, whether small- or large-scale, makes implicit theoretical assumptions about how they can be aggregated or disaggregated into various units. As Maurice Bloch (2004/1975, xiii)

states in his introduction to *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*: “There are theoretical postulates present in the work of all social anthropologists and [...] these have political significance”.

In this sense, surveys and censuses are not just carried out on a “macro” level: they are based on a theoretical model of a more-or-less rational, more-or-less norm-governed actor who can be representatively captured by statistical methods and expected to repeat his behaviour in predictable patterns. Likewise, the classical 1950s ethnographic study centring on one village or ethnic group is not just conducted on a “micro” level, but with the assumption that an aggregation of similar studies in all villages and all ethnic groups would yield a picture of societies as organs in perfect functional articulation within a worldwide body. This view has been extensively criticised by social anthropologists of all stripes, and 1970s Marxist anthropologists have not failed to point out their narrow positivism (Godelier 1977), ahistoricism (Friedman 2004/1975), and inattention to the violent disruptions imposed by imperial capitalism on supposedly harmonious and unchanging non-Western societies (Gough 1968; Asad 1973). The empiricist fiction that such “micro” studies can aggregate into a healthy “macro” social body denies the very historical forces making this possibility unthinkable.

The canonical ethnographic study from the 1950s bears little resemblance to present-day work in Anglo-American anthropology, which has become more attentive to the historical and political economic dimensions highlighted by Marxist anthropologists in the 1970s. In David Graeber’s words, “Marxism in many ways became the inspiration for a whole series of new approaches [...] that beginning in the 1960s transformed most anthropologists’ ideas about what their discipline was ultimately about [...] All were part of a broad left turn in academic life that probably peaked in the late ‘70s [...], but that permanently altered the basic terms of intellectual debate, ensuring that most academics now think of themselves as political radicals” (Graeber 2001, 25). Graeber criticises those academics who produce “what seem like ever more fervent position papers for a broader political movement that does not, in fact, exist” (Ibid.), an epistemological trap in which several Marxist anthropologists seem to have fallen in the 1970s. This trap, incidentally, is most visible in the contradiction between the scope of their intellectual project and their actual knowledge-making practices.

Marxist anthropologists from the 1970s, who did not otherwise constitute a coherent theoretical school (Terry 2007, 2), at least agreed on the apparent contradiction between the intellectual project of Marxism and the (structural-functionalist) anthropological project. Bridget O’Laughlin summarizes this attitude as follows:

I have argued that from a Marxist perspective there can be no autonomous discipline of anthropology. We cannot construct an anthropological mirror in which to find the reflection of the basic universal Man, for all individuals are determined by particular historical social relations. Nor can we find theoretical unity by limiting ourselves to the study of precapitalist or primitive societies, for their similarity lies in what they are not rather than in what they are. (O’Laughlin 1975, 368)

This challenge to the autonomy of anthropology has two sides: one cannot study “universal Man” outside the historical circumstances that produce Him, and one cannot rely on the spurious distinction between “primitive” and “civilized” societies to delimit the scope of anthropology, as though the categories used to study the former had to emerge from a specific discipline with nothing to say about the latter.

In consequence, Marxist anthropologists re-scoped the ambitions of anthropological studies in two ways. Anthropologists like Claude Meillasoux (1964) or those in Joel Kahn and Josep Llobera's (1981) and Alice Littlefield and Hill Gates' (1991) edited volumes sought to apply the conceptual tools of historical materialism to study the colonised societies on which they would otherwise be working. Their ambition was a grounded one in this sense: to insert societies which had hitherto been excluded from consideration by the methods of historical materialism – especially in its Althusserian guise – into a historical and materialist analysis, with attention to the application of concepts such as “mode of production”, “forces of production”, or “relations of production”. In France, this trend was most visible among Africanists, who had extensive debates about whether there was one single “African mode of production” (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1978), or multiple modes corresponding to different labour processes like the “hunting” or “lineage” modes of production (Willame 1971), or different yet articulated modes of production (Rey 1982). While the label “primitive” was criticised by these anthropologists as being unscientific, they remained committed to analysing a type of society (some still called it “pre-capitalist”) which paradoxically was inseparable from the spread of imperial capitalism across the globe.

In a way, this project was fraught from the start. While it produced interesting empirical engagements between Marxist theory and anthropological material, it accepted the professional distinction between small-scale anthropology and large-scale capitalism, while assuming that the methods of historical materialism were perfectly adequate to the study of so-called “advanced” capitalism. The other direction taken by Marxist anthropologists like Maurice Godelier (1977) and Eric Wolf (1982) has been more in the spirit of Marx's analyses. These anthropologists did not begin with a distinction between the small- and the large-scale to observe their mutual correspondence, but with a conceptual understanding of exploitation that can describe *both* small- *and* large-scale populations. In O'Laughlin's words, “Radical anthropology should not consist of showing how the ‘exogenous’ structures of the wider capitalist system impinge on isolated traditional communities or marginal groups, but rather of locating these groups and communities within that structure itself” (1975, 366). The issue of scaling is no longer one of “integrating” small and large scales in this sense, but one of recognising the effects of capitalist exploitation on both scales.

Recent anthropological work on analytical scales would seem to corroborate this insight, since it argues that the act of scaling is a perspectival exercise through which both analyst and subject of study can gauge the size of the worlds in which they live and act (see Carr and Lempert 2016). While such an understanding opens the notion of scaling beyond the spurious micro/macro distinction, it is made relative to an agent's perspective and ability to scale – whether an individual, say, or a corporation. Under this relational definition, no act of scaling has precedence over another except in the loose sense that “power relations” condition some acts as being more “powerful” than the others. A Marxist scaling, however, would not give equal weight to all acts of scaling, because under capitalist relations of production, they always begin within a world where petty and monopolistic capitalists reap the surplus-value generated by their workers' labour. This exploitation, again whether it happens in one shop, in a multinational company, or in a country, is the historical condition under which any Marxist analysis should begin to cut across all scales.

This theoretical stance has an important political consequence: the struggle against capitalist exploitation can begin at any scale or “level” because we are not, in fact, living in a social building where one must take the elevator to move between the micro and the macro floor. There is no elevator, because no mechanical contraption can

“integrate” so-called levels of analysis when the historical constitution of these very levels is both uncertain and relative to various agents’ perspectives. Yet extraction of surplus-value goes on, and no matter how many are affected and where, there remains a critical possibility to organize and fight against this exploitation. This analysis is by no means exhaustive enough to ground activist strategy, but it is necessary to break away from the impression that analysis should somehow be commensurate to scale, when scale is indeed a product of analysis.

### 3. Ideology

What is the difference between conventional ideas and ideologies? This question would have seemed irrelevant to many 1970s Marxist anthropologists. In a context where the Althusserian creed about the base’s determination of the superstructure “in the last instance” was widely repeated in French and British Marxist anthropology, the main intellectual effort was invested in analysing forces and relations of production. The superstructure became an afterthought in this context, a “structural level” where any political, religious, legal, aesthetic beliefs and institutions that could not be neatly assigned to “the base” were bundled together. There seems to have been little consistency in the way in which the category of the “ideological” was deployed as a consequence, sometimes meaning just illusory beliefs, other times incorporating both beliefs and institutions, sometimes meaning just about any idea at all. Some theorists of the time were dissatisfied with this muddled territory, witness the following reflection by Godelier:

Does this mean that all mental reality is ideological? Are there criteria for distinguishing between those ideas that are ideological and those that are not? Certainly not if we confine ourselves to dubbing as ‘ideological’ any representation of the world that is in the least organized. Ought we then to conform to another more current usage and to term ‘ideological’ those illusory representations which men elaborate concerning themselves and the world, and which serve to legitimise an existing social order, and hence the forms of domination and exploitation of human beings by human beings that may be contained in this existing order? This restrictive definition has the appearance of being Marxist. But is it really, and how does it tie in with the idea we have just put forward, namely, that any social relation necessarily contains an element of thought which is not necessarily either illusory or legitimizing, and which forms part of this relation from the moment of its formation? (Godelier 1986, 129)

This passage captures the main tensions in the concept of ideology. The term itself has had a slippery genealogy (see Kolakowski 1978, 153-154), and it is even more slippery in everyday usage. One consistent usage in corporate news sources and in a contemporary university setting has been to equate ideology with political affiliation (e.g. liberal, conservative, libertarian, “green”, socialist), as if each were available for purchase in an open market of ideas. Under this definition, an ideology is a set of ideas to which citizen-consumers choose to adhere no matter the link between such ideas and their historical context of emergence.

This conception of ideology is seen as being somewhat self-evident, but it is this very self-evidence that is “ideological” in Godelier’s Marxist definition: “illusory representations [guaranteeing] the domination and exploitation of human beings by human beings”. This notion is “more restricted” because it does not include all possible ideas within a society into its fold, as some crude analyses imply. One of the legacies that

Marxist anthropologists in the 1970s have had difficulty shaking off, like many anthropologists in their own time, is the presumption that local knowledge is always somehow misapprehended, and it is the anthropologist's task to "correct" it in some sense. The eclectic application of the term "ideology" or "ideological" to a number of these ideas – local systems of political rule, religious belief, legal reasoning – has had the effect of de-legitimizing local knowledge by supposing the ethnographer's knowledge somehow deeper and less mystified, although the opposite was often the case. There is value in a restricted notion of "ideology" as the mystifying representations of the ruling class or group in this sense, because it avoids the presumption that all ideas within the anthropologist's society of study are illusions except when the ethnographer can demystify them.

Such a definition has been integral in the lineage of Marxist thought since *The German Ideology*, and the difference in each iteration has hinged on what exactly is deemed "illusory" and to whom. It has been clear since *The German Ideology* that it is not a cognitive misapprehension of reality, a hallucination, but a biased representation, a way of apprehending the world which obscures its basic material operations. While arguments on what constitutes the material basis of society in different parts of the world have mobilised the attention of Marxist theorists and anthropologists without end, few have elaborated on how exactly this material basis is obscured. The assumption is that the dominated do not understand the basis of their domination because a certain ideology prevails, and this ideology prevails because, in the words of Marx and Engels, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Marx and Engels 1845/46, 59).

There have been more fine-grained takes on the issue, including by Louis Althusser (1971) and Slavoj Žižek (1989), who have argued that the material basis of society is obscured not in knowledge – in people's comprehension of the world – but in practice – in the everyday activity reproducing the world in a way which sustains the ideology without requiring sincere belief in it. Such an account is implicitly reproduced in much contemporary political anthropology, where the practice of political agents is considered the site where they reproduce their group ideology as opposed to their (often empty) talk. While it is a generative account to understand *how* the base is obscured in everyday life, this line of reasoning again muddles the ground between ideology and conventional ideas, insofar as both are located at the level of everyday activity with indistinction.

What is needed to establish the distinction once again is a return to Marx and Engels' simple notion that ideology is, after all, the "ideas of the ruling class". This return is not meant to endorse the assumption that the "ideas of the ruling class" necessarily become "the ruling ideas", nor that in some sense these ideas "fool" the dominated into adhering to dominant ideologies according to a crude interpretation of "false consciousness". Rather, it is a call to distinguish analytically between the ideas of the rulers and the ideas of the ruled, which are both differently shaped by capitalist exploitation. Anglo-American anthropologists would not find it difficult to recognise that there is a difference between the worldviews of a worker, a manager and a shareholder, but it takes another step to argue that the one's worldview is not ideological while the other one's is. Yet it is a necessary step to avoid flattening all ideas into the same "market", because ideas – like people and things – are cleaved according to the class divides inherent to capitalist extraction of surplus-value. The question, therefore, is not how an idea is reproduced in everyday activity, but how "ideas of the ruling class" or ideologies

in the strong sense are reproduced by different classes, and what kinds of hybrid consciousness do they create in each case.

The Marxist anthropologist Donald Donham adds an insight to this analysis. Arguing in a similar manner that ideologies are “systems of belief that uphold sectional interests while appearing to express general ones”, he goes on to suggest that this is important “to avoid any simple distinction between ideas that reveal the world and those that hide the world” (Donham 1999, 50). Following E. P. Thompson instead, he argues that “most ideologies contain partial truths, and their ‘falseness’ is due not to blanket error but to unwarranted generalization across contexts. [...] What makes ideologies ideologies is precisely a lack of recognition of the context that renders their claims persuasive” (Ibid., 68-69). The language of “truth” and “falsity” used by Donham is perhaps not the clearest, but the sentiment he expresses is exactly what Kolakowski has described as “the difference between false and liberated consciousness” according to Marx:

“[This difference] is not that between error and truth but is a functional difference related to the purpose served by thought in the collective life of mankind. ‘Wrong’ thinking is that which confirms the state of human servitude and is unaware of its own proper function; emancipated thought is the affirmation of humanity, enabling man to develop his native abilities” (Kolakowski 1978, 175)

The impetus to analyse ideology in these terms, as a set of ideas promoted and maintained by the ruling classes, has an important political purpose which cannot be reduced to the now professionalised understanding of “critical theory”. The goal is not to reproduce the critical theories taught as an inviolable canon in some academic settings, but to scratch through the veneer of apparent “truth” or “common sense” in ideologies of capital, growth, profit, job creation, and the list goes on. Scratching will not remove the veneer to reveal a hidden reality, because ideological analysis should not be about a dramatic unmasking as it is often rhetorically made to be, but it should articulate the connections between capitalist exploitation and the apparently anodyne ideas reproduced by the ruling classes. And while this articulation starts to happen in writing, it cannot be effective unless a systematic mobilisation occurs to change the conditions under which these ideas are reproduced, say, within the current corporate media environment. Otherwise we would risk becoming Marx and Engels’ Young Hegelians, who waged tremendous battles “in the realm of pure thought” (1845/46, 27).

#### 4. Reading the Classics

I wish to conclude with an opening thought on the nature of a reflection on Marx as a classic author. A recent debate has emerged in professional anthropology concerning the “classics” in the field and the importance of revisiting them (see the special issue in *HAU* by Da Col and Sopranzetti 2017). The debate was initially triggered online by the eminent anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, who has written a Facebook plea for all anthropologists to safeguard the large reserve of anthropological knowledge produced since the 19th century, much of which had been created under colonial rule and is no longer integral in undergraduate syllabi or in research conversations. Online criticisms fused, accusing Sahlins of wanting to perpetuate a white colonial project, which elicited impassionate criticisms against and defences of the “anthropological canon”. This debate raises two core questions in fact: 1) What should or should not be part of the canon of writings in the discipline? and 2) Under what historical conditions does devel-

oping a canon become an important knowledge-making practice? These two questions, it seems to me, are also important to bear in mind in a special issue celebrating the legacy of Karl Marx.

The first question in effect leads to the creation of professional boundaries around a given discipline, whether it is anthropology or a certain theoretical Marxology which gets developed within a highly personalised, usually male intellectual lineage (Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin, Althusser). These boundaries lead to such intellectual specialisation that the wider thrust of Marxist analysis – the analysis of capitalist exploitation – becomes dissected among what Henri Lefebvre (2016) has called “patchy sciences” (*sciences parcellaires*). This patchiness explains, in part, what ideological role professional intellectuals play within their institutions, even though they might think of themselves as “radicals”.

What is most significant about the so-called decline in Marxist anthropology is perhaps not, in Barnard’s (2000, 81) words, that “former Marxist scholars [moved] away from explicitly Marxist endeavours”, but that this move is the logical consequence of their professional knowledge-making practice, which was ultimately restricted to a disciplinary project. This is not to exempt myself or certain theorists from this ideological effect, but a call to actively work against epistemological “patchiness” in the spirit of Marx’s wide-ranging analyses. These analyses are not just a matter of perspective, as though one could trade viewpoints in a theory market, but they start with the recognition that these perspectives emerge in a context of massive social inequality and exploitation, and any theory designed to hide this fact is “ideological” in this sense.

Thus, the creation of a canon maintains spurious and hierarchical distinctions within and among intellectual disciplines, which is far from the way in which we should interpret Marx and his successors. “Following Marx today as a classic implies, just as different authors recognize it, becoming conscious of the fact that his work is a work-in-progress containing ambiguities and lacunae; it presupposes accepting that Marxisms are only understandable in the plural, because unanimity and uniformity are the negation of its most profound core” (Etulain and Gonzalez 2013, 74).

In other words, Marx’s work cannot be understood as an unquestionable original bound to be repeated by his loyal successors, but it should be understood as a historical experience fostering an ongoing tradition of critique. What makes Marx a classic is the generative potential of his critical work in a world still dominated by capitalist exploitation.

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