

THE SCIENCE OF ANTHROPOLOGY:  
AN ESSAY ON THE VERY OLD MARX

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Marx's lifelong associations with anthropology are numerous and mutually illuminating. Historically, according to the commonest view, the rise of anthropology occurred in the middle years of the nineteenth century—and so of Marx's own life. At the time of his birth (1818) this field was still part of general philosophy; by the time of his death (1883) it had declared its independence as a separate discipline. What is more, the development of Marx's thought followed a similar trajectory from a philosophically "idealist" to a positive and "scientific" approach to man, as most of his contemporaries regarded this transformation. As a teenage student at the University of Berlin, Marx took a course in "Anthropologie" with H. Steffans as part of his studies toward a law degree, and several of his early publications were directly or indirectly concerned with the sort of theoretical anthropology taught in conjunction with philosophy and jurisprudence.<sup>1</sup> His interests in the field continued in various ways throughout his life but emerged most prominently in his last years, when he began amassing notes on a quartet of modern anthropologists (Lewis Henry Morgan, Henry Sumner Maine, John Lubbock, and John Budd Phear), presumably in order to devote a more systematic work to anthropology in the context of his own social philosophy.<sup>2</sup> That work was never begun, though Engels continued some of these lines of investigation, and so the direction of Marx's thought is largely a matter of speculation. About the provenance and development of his anthropological thinking, however, we are much better informed; and it is to this question, the genesis of Marx's anthropological thought, that this paper is devoted.

I. *Marx and the Two Anthropological Traditions.*—Ideological controversies aside, the tendency which has done most to obstruct a historical understanding of Marx's thought has been to select an artificial or stereotyped perspective based on a superficial reconstruction of particular academic fields, especially philosophy, political thought, sociology, and economics.<sup>3</sup> The trouble is not that such views are incorrect but that

<sup>1</sup> *Index lectionum . . . in Universitate Friderica Guilelma* (Berlin, 1927), and see my earlier discussion, "The Metaphysics of Law: An Essay on the Very Young Marx," *American Historical Review*, 83 (1978), 350-67.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, ed. Lawrence Krader (Assen, 1972), hereafter referred to as "EN"; and see below note 36.

<sup>3</sup> There is to my knowledge no satisfactory study of Marx's thought based on a comprehensive investigation of his learning; in any case this is no place for Marxian bibliography except as it bears on specific points.

and the result was to shift attention not only from bourgeois property to the longer-termed problem of the family but also from class struggle to that ultimate dialectic of mating and the family—precisely the direction which the new anthropology was itself taking.<sup>35</sup>

This interpretation is by no means to suggest a reversion to the idealism of the "very young Marx," but it is to infer a transcendence of the relatively narrow and parochial materialism of the middle (the "classical" and most easily vulgarized) Marx. From the beginning he had followed a path which brought him, according to a modern philosophical anthropologist, into "the ranks of those who, with Herder, developed the line of study that is now called cultural and historical anthropology."<sup>36</sup> His revulsion from idealism and discovery of the analytical potential of political economy led him into a self-consciously "scientific" (as well as revolutionary) phase culminating in his systematic critique of western capitalism. Finally, Marx was attracted to the pioneering researches of the first generation of social and cultural anthropologists, especially those of Morgan, whose Indian field work seemed to Marx to give his writings better authority than the more bookish speculations of Maine, McLennan, Bachofen, and others; and so he returned to the initial field of his youthful studies, though now, to be sure, in a positive, scientific, and truly universal form. Anthropology, representing the last phase of Marx's personal dialectical evolution, took him beyond Marxism as understood by most of his followers; and in this perspective it is hardly going too far to suggest that Marx was himself the first "revisionist." In any case, his hope was clearly to rise above the parochialism of western, bourgeois history. It is a pity that neither critics nor admirers have seen the fulfillment of the vision of the very old Marx.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>The issues of original collectivism and matriarchy dominate the famous old collection edited by V. F. Calverton, *The Making of Man* (New York, 1931). Perhaps the most thoughtful discussion of more recent Marxist anthropology is the work of Maurice Godelier, especially *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, trans. R. Brain (Cambridge, Eng., 1977).

<sup>36</sup>Michael Landmann, *Philosophische Anthropologie* (1st ed. 1955; 4th. edition, Berlin, 1976). Translated as *Philosophical Anthropology*.

\*<sup>37</sup>Mme Raya Dunayevskaya has been working on Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* in connection with a proposed book on "Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution," a draft chapter of which appears in *News and Letters* (Jan.-Feb. 1979), 5-8, discussing also the discovery of the manuscript of the notebooks, reported in 1923, and the Russian translation published in 1941 (information which I owe to Ms. Suzanne Casey).