

**EMMANUEL TERRAY, *MARXISM AND "PRIMITIVE" SOCIETIES*,**

**Translated by Mary Klopfer (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 186 pages**

**Reviewed by Bridget O'Laughlin**

Marxist methodology demands that a distinction be maintained between the order of inquiry and the order of presentation or exposition. Though in a Marxist framework one always begins with an analysis of the forces and relations of production, the crucial features laid bare by the analysis may well be superstructural or may relate to other aspects of the base. So Marx's presentation of the capitalist mode of production begins with a discussion of money and commodities: the different forms which value takes under capitalism are clearly presented. Marx's emphasis here is not determined by any general theory of the primacy of commodity exchange, but rather by the central and mystifying importance of the circulation process in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production.

The aim of Louis Althusser *et al.* in *Reading Capital* was precisely to reconstruct the order of inquiry – the underlying theoretical and methodological framework (*problématique*) – from the order of presentation of Marx's later works. With the two long essays of *Marxism and "Primitive" Societies*, Emmanuel Terray extends Althusser's and Balibar's work to the reconstruction and elaboration of Marxist analyses of precapitalist formations.

Terray's first essay, "Morgan and Contemporary Anthropology," a close reading of *Ancient Society*, is an attempt to distinguish

those aspects of Morgan's thought (such as the correspondance between arts of subsistence and forms of social organization) which led Marx and Engels to find support from anthropology for their science of historical materialism. Underlying Marxist, structuralist, and evolutionist approaches are quite different notions of system (totality), function (structural causation), and transformation (supercession). Although his reading of Morgan is occasionally somewhat obscure, Terray quite successfully shows how elements of these different theoretical approaches are counterposed in *Ancient Society*, and in doing so he clarifies for us the differences between them. He concludes that when Morgan is able to overcome the "ideological opposition between the diachronic and the synchronic," he is thinking out the beginning concepts of a truly Marxist framework for the analysis of pre-capitalist formations.

The second essay, "Historical Materialism and Segmentary Lineage-Based Societies," develops the Marxist concepts of "mode of production" and "social formation" by applying them in a rigorous manner to pre-capitalist Guro society. Here Terray relies partially on his own research experience in the Ivory Coast but primarily on a re-analysis of Claude Meillassoux's Marxian study, *L'Anthropologie économique des Gouro de Côte d'Ivoire*. Abstracting from present entanglement with capitalist relations of production, Terray analyzes the Guro social formation as a complex articulation of two modes of production, each with its correspond-

---

Bridget O'Laughlin is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University, Stanford, California.

ing superstructures. The first of these, the village-tribal system, is characterized by complex forms of cooperation and egalitarian sharing of product. The second, and dominant, mode of production, the lineage system, is characterized by simple forms of cooperation and redistribution of product by male elders.

There are a number of difficulties in Terray's analysis of the Guro, three of which will be discussed in this review. The first is his method of defining a mode of production. For Marx a mode of production is an analytical concept describing the dialectical unity of forces and relations of production. To define a particular mode of production should therefore be to specify both the forces of production (in terms of relations between people and the instruments of their labor) and the relations of production (in terms of the mode of extraction of surplus labor in class societies).

In the Guro case, however, Terray defines the mode of production in terms of forms of labor cooperation, each form in turn corresponding to one of the two principle branches of Guro production. The village-tribal system is therefore associated with hunting, while the lineage system is associated with agriculture. Terray's procedure for identifying these modes of production seems to be based on two unwarranted assumptions: (1) that in systems of shifting cultivation with communal ownership of land one can suppress the question of relation to the means of production; (2) that exploitation cannot occur in societies in which kinship is the basis of recruitment to productive units (implying that social relations of production can then be analytically reduced to technical relations). Both of these assumptions have since been retracted by Terray himself, in response to the criticisms of P.-Ph. Rey. In my own efforts to apply the concept of mode of production to an acephalous African system, I found that Terray's formulation suppressed a number of important questions (such as the evolution of lineage systems) and posed a number of false problems (such as the associa-

tion of descent groups with complex forms of cooperation).

A second weakness in Terray's study is his method of defining a social formation. Conceptualizing the articulation and order of dominance of modes of production within a social formation is a thorny issue for contemporary Marxist thinkers; one cannot fault Terray for not producing a polished theory in 1969. One can, however, criticize his glossing over certain conceptual problems, for signaling problems in analysis and clarifying the terms of questions are essential contributions to the social production of knowledge. And so it is inadequate to substitute an "Althusser says" for an analytical discussion of what it means *theoretically* to say that any social formation must consist of more than a single mode of production. Similarly, problems in understanding how superstructures corresponding to different modes of production are integrated in particular social formations should not be swept under footnotes from Marx on the crossed dominance of ideology.

In his definition of the Guro social formation, Terray also has a tendency to replicate the empiricist definitions of society and culture to which traditional anthropology still clings. If one takes a population — an ethnic or linguistic group such as the Guro — as the unit of analysis, then it is almost impossible to avoid the old error of treating "tribal" systems as closed and historically stagnant. In the Guro case, it seems highly unlikely that one could understand the pre-capitalist situation without including in the analysis of the social formation links with the Sahelian states through the trans-Saharan trade.

Terray's decision to deal only with the pre-capitalist modes of production in his re-analysis of the Guro material is, perhaps, a further weakness of this study. The reasons for his decision are quite convincing: Meillassoux's work is both most innovative and most exhaustive in the sections on pre-capitalist dynamics; there has been a remarkable paucity

of Marxist analyses of the specific problems of pre-capitalist formations. Nevertheless, there is a risk (again one common to conventional anthropology): the confusion of the ethnographic present with the reconstruction of the past. If we try instead to explicitly relate the dynamics of capitalism to the ethnographic present, then it seems to me that in the Guro case, as in many other anthropological analyses of African societies, the enshrinement of descent rules and bridewealth exchange may turn out to be much more closely linked to the introduction of cash crops and to administrative units of taxation than we have previously supposed. (Meillassoux has a wonderful example of a young Guro man in the North explaining the meaning of the word for lineage to the elders so that they can tell him what the different lineages are.)

These criticisms of *Marxism and "Primitive" Societies* are not intended to detract from the importance of the book for all anthropologists and for anyone interested in colonialism, imperialism, and uneven development in Africa.

We now understand that there is not and cannot be a single process of capitalist development or "modernization"; instead, advanced capitalist penetration of pre-capitalist formations blocks the development of productive forces, sucks out surplus value, and conserves primitive modes of production in distorted and dependent forms. Moreover, the course that capitalist development will follow in a peripheral area is not simply dictated by the monolithic needs of international capital; we must consider the particular institutional history of the periphery and the state of the class struggle in the metropole as well.

If we are to have a theory of transition, if we are to understand how the process of uneven development actually occurs, we must be able to conceptualize the dynamics of pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production in comparable terms: i.e., we must have a common framework of analysis. Terray's study is a significant contribution to the elaboration of the science of historical materialism as applied to pre-capitalist formations.