Rethinking Marxism

Marxism, Tribal Society, and the Dual Nature of Archaeology

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This paper considers current archaeological approaches to theorizing "tribal" society, and the contributions that stand to be made by Marxist class analysis. Empirical study of pre-Columbian societies in the American Southwest and Midwest grounds the argument. Implications for development of an explanatory and emancipatory archaeology are discussed.

Key Words: Class, Communal Formation, Typology, Emancipation

Over the past twenty years the interrogation of Marxist theory by archaeologists interested in the social dynamics of so-called small-scale, tribal, intermediate, or middle-range societies has been intense. Concepts such as mode of production, social reproduction, and contradiction have been brought into everyday discourse. Other concepts like power and ideology have been developed in new ways. Some of these concepts have filtered into the mainstream as processual archaeologists considered the relational and symbolic dimensions of human life featured by various post-processual (social and cognitive) archaeologies (see McGuire, O'Donovan, and Wurst 2005; Chapman 2003).

In recent years the mainstreaming of Marxist concepts, especially notions of power and ideology, has accelerated. Marx's dictum that "men make history but not exactly as they choose" has been appropriated by agency theorists as a way of distinguishing their approach from that of methodological individualism (Patterson 1990). A conceptual focus on labor has been embraced by such self-proclaimed "eclectic processualists" as Arnold (2000), who finds utility in the Marxist concept but—in keeping with the selectivity explored by McGuire, O'Donovan, and Wurst (2005)—prefers to wed it to, in her view, the "more scientific" framework of processual and evolutionary archaeology. Such eclecticism would be at home among the growing number of archaeologies that Hegmon (2003) describes as "processual-plus." Trigger (2003) generally approves of such cherry-picking, suggesting that it promises "more comprehensive and useful hybrid formulations" for understanding the past. Whether the hybrids will deliver on this promise remains to be seen. Minimally, as argued below, they risk compromising other goals of archaeological inquiry.

In this paper I consider some current archaeological approaches to theorizing "tribal" society that draw upon, or at least overlap with, the concerns of Marxist

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anthropology. I use these approaches as a foil to show that the Marxist tradition still has much to offer theories of tribal materiality and complexity. These contributions are both *explanatory* (they help understand what happened in the past) and *emancipatory* (they foster critical self-consciousness about the present). They respect the "dual nature" of archaeological inquiry defined by Wilk (1985, 308), who characterizes archaeology as a rigorous pursuit of objective facts as well as a reflexive and sometimes hidden dialogue on contemporary politics. They also further the aims of a critical archaeology as developed by Leone, Potter, and Shackel (1987) and reviewed in this issue by McGuire, O'Donovan, and Wurst (2005).

Current Archaeological Approaches to Theorizing Tribes

Perhaps the most interesting current formulations of tribal social dynamics owing a debt to Marx are the *dual processual* theory developed by Blanton, Feinman, and colleagues working in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest (Blanton et al. 1996; Feinman, Lightfoot, and Upham 2000), and the *historical processual* theory developed by Pauketat, Emerson, and others working in the American midcontinent (Pauketat 2001). Both approaches are sensitive to the difference that history, and historically contingent events, make in human affairs. Power is also central to both approaches, but is addressed in different ways. Dual processualists focus on the building of power through what are termed *corporate* and *network* strategies of accumulation—through the mobilization of local labor and the development of long-distance exchange, respectively. Historical processualists focus on the interplay of ideology and cosmology with power, especially how power is sustained through the construction of particular individual and collective subjectivities. Among the concerns of historical processualists is the difference between "communitas" (or what I'll call "organic community," a kind of community that transcends kinship and political hierarchy) and "political community" (one in which central elite interests coopt organic community tradition in self-serving and hegemonic ways).

Theorizing this continuum of variation raises the issue of change between corporate and network strategies, and between organic and political community. Dual processualists suggest that change can be understood by invoking a "structural antagonism"—a contradiction—between network and corporate strategies. The contradiction stems from these strategies having different logics and competing conditions of existence. Network strategies support individual monopolies of power and are socially exclusive. They are associated with long-distance exchange in exotic "prestige goods," elite aggrandizement, and princely burials (Feinman 2000). Corporate strategies support power sharing across groups and are socially inclusive. They are associated with communal ritual, large cooperative public works, and weak economic differentiation (Feinman 2000). But dual processualists have not yet explained why, in particular instances, we see change from one strategy to another. Instead, they have focused more on how network and corporate strategies characterized different political economies at different points in time (e.g., Feinman, Lightfoot, and Upham 2000, on proto-Puebloan and Puebloan cultures of

the northern American Southwest; and Trubitt 2000 on early and later "Mississippian" mound-building cultures in the American midcontinent). The same can be said about the historical processualists: they haven't been clear about the motivation for midcontinental Mississippian social change, who was involved, or how the transformation of organic into political community was accomplished (DeBoer and Kehoe 1999, 264; cf. Fotiadis 1998, 394–5).

I think that we can fruitfully explore such issues by making some rather different assumptions about the complexities and materialities of human social life. These assumptions can be distilled from Marx's work, and they revolve around his concept of *class*. The conceptual status of class has been much debated within recent critical archaeology (Leone, Potter, and Shackel 1987; cf. Wilkie and Bartoy 2000). As understood here, class analysis focuses on the economic process of producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor in society (Resnick and Wolff 1986). It theorizes individuals in terms of their positions within such processes as well as within a variety of nonclass political, economic, and cultural processes. On this definition, *all* societies are class societies in the specific sense that that they all require the social production and appropriation of surplus labor. Class is an inherent part of the group life of human beings. Societies vary with respect to the precise combination of forms by which surplus labor is appropriated within them; that is, they vary in the precise specificity of their class relations. Appropriation can range from collective to exploitative, and social differences between people can be theorized for societies all along the range.

In the "middle-range," tribal societies of interest here, class relations are based *primarily but not necessarily exclusively* on the collective appropriation of surplus. In such societies, network and corporate strategies depend upon each other. Production of local corporate surpluses is crucial to supporting network functionaries interested in accessing new, external sources of surplus that have political and/or ritual import. By the same token, access to and distribution of "foreign capital" in either exotic craft goods or ideas can be crucial to maintaining the levels of local corporate production necessary for the social reproduction of individuals and groups.

This class-theoretical formulation breaks with the mainstream in three other ways. First, it understands the currency of tribal sociopolitical life—prestige goods—as "communal social entitlements" required for local debt transactions and life transition events, not simply as elite instruments of surplus accumulation and power building. The latter idea was the linchpin of much structural Marxist theorizing within archaeology in the 1970s and 1980s, and was straightforwardly appropriated by processualists. Second, class analysis understands tribal elites (e.g., political functionaries, exchange brokers, ritual specialists, craft specialists, etc.) to be "subsumed classes" who operate on behalf of the collective to guarantee access to basic life-sustaining resources and foreign goods, but who also have room to initiate structural change given fortuitous change in social, environmental, and historical circumstances. Moreover, it understands that these elites, even when arranged in formal hierarchies, can reproduce rather than threaten communal relations of production (cf. Pauketat 2003). Third, this Marxist theory understands agency as

collective agency—class agency—rather than as the individual agency that anchors most social theory in archaeology.

As noted, class analysis does not take structural contradiction between corporate and network strategies for granted. It is just as comfortable with their structural *complementarity*, albeit one that stands to put the squeeze on individuals who participate in both sets of relationships. It also refuses to conflate, as historical processualists tend to do, domination with exploitation (e.g., Emerson 1997, 186–7). Domination is about the power held by some over others; exploitation is about a social class *division* between those who produce and those who appropriate surplus labor. With this distinction, I think that we can produce more nuanced models of the relationship between individuals, and between power and class, in human life.

I have sketched what this approach comes to in my studies of social change in ancient North America at the great pre-Columbian centers of Cahokia (Saitta 1994) and Chaco Canyon (Saitta 1997; see also Saitta 2001). Both these centers emerge around A.D. 900, peak around A.D. 1100, and undergo dramatic change after A.D. 1150 (Lekson and Peregrine 2004). I understand both places to have been centers of complex communal social formations that, for different reasons, experienced impulses toward more exploitative, tributary class relations in the late 1000s and early 1100s. These impulses in turn produced class and nonclass struggles over communalism's conditions of existence that, eventually, resulted in reconfigured forms of communal life in both areas after A.D.1150.

My account of social change at the Mississippian mound center of Cahokia (east of Saint Louis, Missouri) explores how the changing availability and/or distribution of social valuables entering the region by A.D. 1050 complicated the lives of subsumed, "networked" exchange agents (and perhaps other functionaries) who drew support from communal producers in return for accessing and distributing social entitlements.[1] To compensate for this loss of support, these networked agents sought to create (perhaps in concert with other agents, like specialist producers of prestige goods and other socially necessary objects) exploitative tributary class relations via the manipulation of corporate politics, ideology, and material environments. These strategies were met by producer resistance (as evidenced by efforts to conceal household surpluses toward the end of "classic" Cahokia) and eventually failure, as evidenced by the outflowing of people from the Cahokia area to rural hinterlands after A.D. 1150 and other signs of politically inspired turmoil (Pauketat 1998, 71–2). Increased local village autonomy and greater emphasis on communal activities subsequently come to characterize post-Cahokian social formations in the region.

1. The temporal relationships at issue here are still fuzzy, given uncertainty about the exact temporal phase affiliations of many Cahokian exotics (Pauketat 1992; Trubitt 2000). It is also possible that exotic valuables were never a large part of Cahokian prestige and meaning systems. There is evidence that social and ritual power may have turned less on the control and manipulation of exotica than on local resources (Emerson and Hughes 2000). It appears, however, that the flow of even widely available local resources (such as mineral pigments like hematite and galena) was carefully regulated (Emerson and Pauketat 2002).

This scenario appreciates the distinctiveness of corporate and network strategies, but instead of privileging one over the other it brings them together in a way that produces—against a backdrop of changing historical circumstances wrought by contingent events, including changes in the supply areas for prestige goods—a distinctive set of struggles and trajectory of change. It is also compatible with historical processualist accounts of Cahokian development that emphasize the rapid sacralization of centralized elite power around A.D. 1050 via the appropriation of an organic community ethos or "doxa" (Pauketat and Emerson 1998). But it is more explicit about *whose* interests are problematized by *what* external changes, and also about the sociopolitical response—in this case, efforts (ultimately unsuccessful) to build a new, class-divided social order.

The account of change at Chaco Canyon—home to a set of large Ancestral Pueblo communities in the high mesalands of northwestern New Mexico—sees causation a little differently, although the outcome was similar to that posited for Cahokia. Here, environmental deterioration in the late eleventh century complicated the lives of subsumed ritual specialists and, perhaps, their political patrons, all of whom drew support in return for ensuring the wider collective's good standing with the supernatural. These agents and their allies likewise sought to build more exploitative tributary relations, perhaps by also appropriating notions of organic community or, in this case, what some have called the Chacoan "Big Idea" (Stein and Lekson 1992).[2] But here, as at Cahokia, the attempt to create tributary class divisions didn't stick. The number of small village sites within the canyon that served as home to primary producers decreases in the early 1100s (suggesting outward migration from the canyon), and material landscapes also simplify. Van Dyke's (2004, 426) recent analysis of Chacoan archaeology, especially in outlying areas, hints at a broadly similar scenario of change activated by popular dissatisfaction with corporate ritual leadership.

Dual processualists have recently engaged Chaco, but only to characterize it as a corporate polity (e.g., Peregrine 2001). Wills (1999) also makes the case for Chaco corporateness, while at the same time strongly criticizing class-struggle models. Wills suggests that conflict between ritual specialists was dampened by Southwestern environmental marginality (see also Neitzel and Anderson 1999). And, echoing the historical processualists, he suggests it was also dampened by Puebloan traditions of organic community. But Wills cannot completely rule out such conflict, either. Perhaps more important, he misses the *historicity* of the class-analytical account. This stipulates that anyone—including religious elites—is capable of acting "out of character" under unusual circumstances, and that *any* elite worth the name wouldn't worry about environmental limitations on surplus production if their social survival was at stake.[3] This class dynamic of change also appears to be excluded by

2. The Chacoan Big Idea refers to a pan-Puebloan cosmography of universal order—materialized in a canon of shared architectural design concepts, symmetries, and oppositions—that regulates sacred and secular activities.
3. This is why I am not totally convinced by Greg Johnson's (1989) widely cited and celebrated claim that the ancient American Southwest could only support "sequential hierarchies": structures of consensual decision-making marked by temporary, situational leadership rather than the more permanent leadership structures that the term hierarchy usually connotes.

other models casting Chaco as a "rituality" (Yoffee, Fish, and Milner 1999) or, more recently, as a "Location of High Devotional Expression" (Renfrew 2001). I am not sure that Chaco theorized as either corporate polity or faith-based initiative does full justice to what we see there. As Mills (2002) notes, our best chance for understanding Chaco lies with models that decouple or disaggregate the variables or features (e.g., scale, centralization, hierarchy) that we conventionally take as indicating social "complexity." Marxist class analysis disaggregates such variables better—or at least more ruthlessly—than most.

A Marxist class analysis of tribal society as communal formation thus points the way to more detailed and conceivably richer accounts of causality and change. It tries to address, in Roseberry's (1997) words, "those specific structured constella-tions of power [and, I would add, *class*] that confront working people in particular times and places." Critics within the archaeological mainstream as well as on the Left have missed this point because of their preoccupations with the traditional meaning of terms like commune and class. Mainstream critics see class analysis as "utopian," a misguided attempt to "empower the masses" of prehistory (Emerson 1997, 187; see also Feinman 2000, 46). Some Marxist critics, in a different spin, see class analysis as an unwarranted projection of capitalist categories onto societies better seen as capitalism's radical other (Trigger 1993). Both camps miss the reconceptualizations that allow for hierarchy—and even forms of institutionalized inequality—to serve communalism, for the coexistence of communal and non-communal (exploitative) relations of surplus flow, and for a variety of conflicts and struggles over surplus appropriation and its conditions of existence, while *simultaneously* respecting the tenacity of collective appropriation and consensus decision-making.[4] Class analysis explores how various agents can move into and out of corporate and network processes using one strategy to facilitate or counter development of the other, tweaking ideologies and wider cosmologies in ways that justify new arrangements. The kinds of strategies that will be adopted will depend upon specific local relations of labor flow, the subsumed class structure of a polity, the opportunities available for accessing outside sources of surplus, and other historical circumstances. Such a theoretical framework, with its set of unique and even counterintuitive features, seems required if we are to explain the real-world empirical puzzles and ambiguities that continue to bedevil archaeological interpretation in North America and elsewhere.

4. The ability to sustain consensus decision-making in large populations depends on the way in which social collectives increase Johnson's (1989) "basal group size"—that is, the maximum size at which consensus decision-making can be maintained by a social entity. As Speth (2000) notes, there are many unanswered questions about how this happens and with what effects. Johnson suggests that there is a demographic threshold at which sequential hierarchies give way to nonconsensual, "simultaneous" hierarchies marked by permanent, institutionalized leadership. But this threshold *could* be quite variable across time and space, depending on circumstances. Even if it isn't, simultaneous hierarchies are not inconsistent with communal appropriations of surplus and, in fact, could provide them with an important political condition of existence, again depending on circumstances.

Explanation and the Political Dialogue Between Past and Present

There is another reason for pressing a class analysis of communal formations in this context that goes beyond improving our explanations of causality and change. This reason goes to Wilk's "informal and sometimes hidden" dialogue between archaeology and society (1985, 308). There have always been those in archaeology—both within and without the mainstream—who have accepted this dialogue (see also Yoffee and Sheratt 1993). I take this acceptance to mean that good theories should illuminate the past in ways that are logically consistent and empirically verifiable, but also engage the present in ways that can produce critical reflection and, where needed, social action (i.e., the "praxis" of McGuire, O'Donovan, and Wurst in this issue). This latter, emancipatory concern has never been prominent in the discipline (for other discussions of emancipation see Paynter 2005; also Leone and Preucel 1992, 121, on emancipation as "greater participation in democratic society"). Today it is at risk of disappearing altogether as Marxist concepts are appropriated and tamed by those lobbying for "more scientific" or "more comprehensive" hybrid approaches for understanding the past. I do not believe that we can afford for this to happen given the number of public constituencies that are interested in and affected by archaeology, and given the discipline's tenuous status as an enterprise warranting the public's financial and moral support.

Within the literature on "middle-range" or tribal societies there are just a few theorists who currently evaluate ideas in terms of their potential for doing political work, or for generating what the philosophical pragmatist would call "usable truths" (Rorty 2000). Brumfiel (1995), for one, has suggested that concepts of *heterarchy* have such potential. Heterarchy is defined by Crumley (1995, 3) as the relation of societal elements to one another when they possess the potential for being ranked or unranked in a number of different ways. Heterarchy stipulates that forms of order exist that are not exclusively hierarchical and that the interactive elements of society—everything from cities to individuals—need not be permanently ranked to one another. Relationships depend upon context and scale. This formulation thus recognizes fluidity rather than fixity as a latent potential of all social formations. Accordingly, Brumfiel argues that students of heterarchy "may be in an excellent position to give advice to social activists who seek to institute a more egalitarian society in our own complex contemporary world" (1995, 130).

But I fail to see how we can achieve the sort of politically charged, comparative understandings of past and present with concepts of "heterarchical," "middle range," "corporate-network," "small-scale" (Potter 2000), "transegalitarian" (Clark and Blake 1994), "intermediate" (Mills 2002), "intermediate hierarchical" (Arnold 2000), or indeed any other concept of society that rests on a foundational belief in continuous variation. These concepts do not assign a distinctive ontological status to the subject societies of interest. They neither highlight specific causal powers that can focus comparative work nor, arguably, do they explain to our varied constituencies (native peoples, "working classes," the general public) exactly *how* the present is different from the past. I suggest that we need something stronger, with a sharper critical edge, for capturing and comparing organizational differences

across time and space and for fostering the kinds of critical self-consciousness about contemporary lived experience that can impel broader interest, engagement, and change.[5]

I think this is where good, old-fashioned, typological thinking can help. Types are widely disparaged these days because they allegedly suppress organizational variation (see contributors to Neitzel 1999 and Schiffer 2000; also Emerson 1997, Peregrine 2001, and many others). As noted, continua that crosscut the range of social complexity—like corporate and network strategizing, or organic and political community—are deemed better for understanding such complexity and/or for addressing the "classificatory ambiguity" (Neitzel and Anderson 1999) that results when theoretical preconceptions are met by puzzling empirical realities. But as several recent commentators have noted, typologizing doesn't preclude the study of process, nor does it imply that any given type must follow only one historical trajectory (Zeitlin 1996). Process cannot be conflated with outcomes, and thus social types can still be useful constructs for meeting the comparative and explanatory goals of archaeological inquiry (see also Spencer 1997; Stein 1998). Types are also uniquely well disposed for clarifying exactly *how* the present is different from past, in ways that can further archaeology's emancipatory project (for another perspective on the use of types in archaeology, and a milder critique of concepts that employ the language of "intermediacy," see Thomas 2000).

Marxist concepts and categories still strike me as especially useful in this latter regard. Marx's typology of primitive communal, feudal, Germanic, ancient, and capitalist social formations—which Eric Wolf (1982) brilliantly condensed and translated as a taxonomy of kin-ordered, tributary, and capitalist modes of production—sends an important message about the specific kinds of social processes that are of analytical interest, and captures important differences in the ways that human groups produce and distribute social surplus across space and time. Antonio Gilman, for one, has tried to redeem the concept of Germanic formation for use in interpreting European prehistory (Gilman 1995). Working from ideas developed by Amariglio (1984), Resnick and Wolff (1988), Cullenberg (1992), and Ruccio (1992), I have tried to show how Marx's notion of "primitive communism" can accommodate great organizational variety and complexity and thus be of some utility in explaining North American social change. I believe that if we more carefully consider the nuances of Marx's work on complexity, materiality, and the *variability* of human social arrangements, we may find his framework to possess superior explanatory *and* emancipatory value. And I believe that we can tap this value without lapsing into the relativism or nihilism that senior "Enlightenment Marxists" saw as the bogeyman of Marxist archaeology—especially as practiced by junior scholars—in the mid- to late 1980s (Gilman 1989; Trigger 1993).

5. Our recent work on the historical archaeology of coal-mining communities in southern Colorado brings this need for broad, intercommunity intelligibility around a shared set of concepts into especially high relief (Ludlow Collective 2001). It is a need to which prehistorians should also attend, regardless of whether they actually engage through their work the descendants of past communities (Wilkie and Bartoy 2000), an actual "descendant community" (Duke, McGuire, and Saitta 2001), or the public generally.

Conclusion

Existing archaeological approaches to the political economy of tribal society have drawn on the Marxist tradition to good effect. But I think we can do better explanatory and emancipatory work if we reconsider other concepts in the Marxian storehouse. Redeeming the nonessentialist, and quintessentially dialectical concept of class is perhaps the most important move we can make (Resnick and Wolff 1986; see also Knapp 1996,143; Durrenberger 2001). Thomas (2000) has recently worried about the "blunting" of theoretical edges in archaeology as cognitive and phenomenological approaches challenge those concerned with power. I think that even the archaeologies of power are dulled without a parallel concern for class. A longstanding tendency within Marxist archaeology to insist on a distinction between "class" and "nonclass" societies (Spriggs 1984) further hamstrings the effort. Class is a powerful concept, a vitally important tool for imagining (for particular times and places) what individual and collective human agency might look like, and for determining what is most important (in the context of a particular program for change) for individuals and collectives to struggle over. At the very least class analysis can enhance our search for, in Thomas's words, a "more colorful and peopled past" (2000, 155). But critical and radical archaeologies also need to decide which is more beneficial to Marxism's contemporary political project: a definition of class that, though useful in preserving the "otherness" of the past, is conceivably helpless in the face of new structural complexities, or a definition that starts with these complexities in an effort to better explore the past's relevance for contemporary struggles.

Similarly, it is important to evaluate the merits and limitations of other theoretical constructs—especially the various types and antitypes doing battle today—not only in terms of how they help us explain the past, but also in terms of their ability to produce critical reflection about the nature of lived experience across time and space, including the hegemonies of life and thought that govern *us*. Critical comparison of the organizing relationships of past and present is the first step toward imagining and creating "other ways of doing" in the world. The Marxist discourse about complexity and materiality continues to go much farther than the alternatives in dealing both with what the past was like, and with how we might live in the present.

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