

## SOCIALISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Chris gray

"I read in my school books, I thought they were rule-books,  
Of how life was ordered and history planned.  
They scarcely made mention or drew my attention  
To people who lived in a far distant land."

Rod Shearman, "Australia's Own"

"Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."

Karl Marx, Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach.

Anthropology is the study of what it means to be human.

You might think that the study of peoples that we regard as primitive has absolutely nothing to contribute to the solution of the horrendous social problems that we currently face, but, in my view, you would be wrong to make that assumption. Recent anthropological studies have shown that the experiences of such peoples are highly relevant. Here I want to try to show that the best practice of those early societies was marked by three features that we desperately require, that is, egalitarianism, reciprocity and a balanced relationship between humans and nature.

### The Human Revolution

I use the term "human revolution" here with the proviso that much of what it covers applies not just to members of the species *homo sapiens sapiens* but also to our cousins of *homo sapiens neanderthalensis*. (See the article by Joao Zilhao cited in the Reading). Readers will have noted that the designation "homo sapiens" applies to both groups.

The principal equality which this revolution established was between the male and female sexes, and it revolved around the distribution of food. The comparison here is with chimpanzees, where the males hunt and then proceed to eat their prey as soon as they have caught it; the females do not get a look in. Their best tactic is to offer sex at the kill site, which sometimes allows them to grab a bite in passing. Female chimps also advertize their being on heat via "oestrous swellings which appear around the vagina; these attract the males." (Chris Knight, "Blood Relations", p. 201 and pp. 159-62). For the human species walking on two legs a different biological signal replaces this --menstruation. As Chris Knight points out, in this area the human pattern is the direct opposite of the basic primate condition:

"Whereas the basic primate pattern is to deliver a periodic 'yes' signal against a background of continuous sexual 'no', humans emit a periodic 'no' signal against a background of continuous 'yes.' This reversal indicates something of the nature and scale of the sexual revolution central to the process of becoming human." ("Blood Relations", p. 210, emphasis in the original).

What exactly happened, then, in the "dark backward and abysm of time" to warrant the use of the term "revolution"? In respect of the period beginning around 100,000 years BP (Before the Present) two features stand out: one, a spectacular increase in brain size and, two, widespread use of ochre among hunter-gatherers. The latter is still found in hunter-gatherer societies, e.g. in Australia ("Blood Relations", pp. 441-48)). Chris Knight in "Blood Relations" locates the increased brain size in the African Rift Valley (pp. 242-44). The article by Ian Watts in the Reading treats extensively of the use of red ochre: writing of Europe, he states that

"Widespread and regular use of red ochre is restricted to incoming *Homo sapiens* and those last Neanderthals who were the authors of the Chatelperronian

industry, living in the shadow of the newcomers. Indeed, habitual use of red ochre seems to be a hallmark of the spread of modern humans across the world." (op. cit.)

Perhaps it is necessary to make two additional points: one, Zilhao places the Chatelperronian Neanderthals prior to the incomers and emphasizes their independent possession of symbolic culture, and, two, yellow and black ochres are also found.

Why the emphasis on ochre, however? Increased brain size and lengthening of childhood created serious problems for human females, who needed to ensure themselves a reliable supply of food --procured by the males predominantly. As with chimps, sex was the only playable card, but women hit on a very effective way of playing it. (See "The Science of Solidarity", pp. 11-12). They had to act as a disciplined body, since the males would be likely to home in on any isolated menstruating female. To counter this it was necessary to send out a collective "no" signal with the argument "wrong sex, wrong species, wrong time". Among the Hadza of Tanzania this message is conveyed in the so-called Eland Bull Dance, in which all the women participate, their bodies daubed with ochre. But the "no" is in fact conditional: the real message is "Bring us all some meat and then we will all become available --and a good time will be had by all."

As Liz Dalton puts it

"The model explains at a single stroke menstrual and incest taboos and the origins of human kinship systems. Culture --collectively agreed rules and rituals governing society, something unknown in the animal world, and a unique breakthrough in evolution-- was born." ("The Science of Solidarity", p. 12) (For more detail see "Blood Relations" and Camilla Power's short summary in the pamphlet entitled "The Human Revolution").

So this early form of human organization was based directly on equality between the sexes --something that disappeared as class societies later emerged. Similarly reciprocity is present in the exchange of meat for sex and vice versa. A balanced relationship with nature was clearly more problematic given the vast quantities of mega fauna to hand, but the temporary absence of food supply difficulties helped to maintain the social arrangements intact. Finally we may note that in both production phases we find workers' control: the men control the hunt and the women control the cooking. But production takes place in the final analysis for the benefit of the consumer, not the producer, just as in modern societies. (In the transition to socialism the situation is more complex because of the necessity to socialize investment: hence the Hungarian workers' councils in 1956 resolved that, while the factories should belong to the workers, the latter should pay to the workers' state a levy calculated on the basis of output and profits --see "1956: The Hungarian Revolution", Anarchist Federation in Manchester, 2009, p. 15).

We cannot go into the reasons for the breakdown of original communism here --see Chris Knight's discussion in "Blood Relations", pp. 449-52. Suffice it to say that these times have left behind a cultural legacy that is still very much with us.

## Reciprocity

A principal legacy of original communism is the notion of reciprocity. Here I must take issue with David Graeber, who writes that

"as currently used 'reciprocity' can mean almost anything. It is very close to meaningless." ("Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value", p. 217).

But the idea is not totally devoid of meaning, imprecise though it may be. The basic notion is "If I do you a favour, I expect you to return it, and vice versa". In other words, one good turn deserves another. This attitude is very deep-seated, but also very positive: Marshall Sahlins comments appositely that it

"sustains the community or community effort, in a material sense" ("Stone Age Economics" p. 190).

The persistence of such an attitude can be exemplified by a piece of modern-day political argumentation. Here is Ashley Mote complaining about the ostensible appropriation of Britain's oil reserves by the EU:

"North Sea oil sells at a premium, it has a low sulphur content, doesn't require expensive desalination, and could be sold anywhere. So why do we export so much to Europe? Is there a treaty obligation --have the Continentals got their sticky fingers on this asset without the rest of us knowing it? ...

The UK's oil reserves are estimated [c2001] to be worth over \$400 billion, and that's before any future discoveries. Yet the Maastricht Treaty, Preamble 8, Title 2, describes our oil as a 'shared resource'.

This is the law of contract gone mad. Contracts are normally agreements to exchange assets or benefits. Usually, money from one party is exchanged for goods from the other. But on this occasion, just signing a piece of paper magically converted a national asset of the UK [Scotland] into someone else's property, without any counter-balancing transfer of benefits to us. We did not sell this asset --we simply gave it away. Just as our fish were given away by the Heath government in 1972.

But there is more, and it gets worse. In October 1997 Jacques Delors claimed that the EU would share all the assets of member states --and all the liabilities! So, take our fish, our gold and our oil ... and then saddle the UK with part of the EU pension debt of over £1,200 billion (yes, billion!). But we will deal with that later." (Ashley Mote, "Vigilance: A Defence of British Liberty", Tanner Publishing 2001, pp. 89-90).

My purpose in quoting this is not to enter into the rights and wrongs of the topic in question --despite the glosses!-- but to emphasize the notion of reciprocity on which Ashley Mote bases his argument, i.e. the idea of a contract as an exchange of mutual benefits. One good turn deserves another.

Understandably there are plenty of examples of exchange in the anthropological literature which illustrate this idea of reciprocity and inclusion of partners. A prominent example is the Kula Ring among the Trobriand islanders as described by Bronislaw Malinowski in "Argonauts of the Western Pacific". The ring is a dual circulation of two types of special artefacts --armshells (mwali) and necklaces (soulava). The armshells circulate anti-clockwise and the necklaces circulate clockwise. The goods are purely decorative, and no person gets to own them permanently: nonetheless they are highly prized, and circulation of them is continuous --the rule is, for an object, "once in the Kula, always in the Kula" ("Argonauts of the Western Pacific", p. 83).

What I want to stress here is the exact balance in the circulation process of the two goods --a marked contrast to circulation of money and commodities under capitalism, where, as we know from Keynes, money can be withdrawn from circulation and hoarded, resulting in a pile of unsold commodities. Furthermore, as we know from Marx, there is a tendency for wealth to accumulate at one pole, with a corresponding growth of misery at the opposite pole. The challenge of our time is to construct the equivalent of a Kula ring featuring everyday commodities on an international scale such that no one is left out of the loop.

## Sustainability

An awareness of greater respect for the natural environment among indigenous peoples in comparison with ourselves does seem to have entered everyday consciousness to some extent. Rod Shearman's song, whose opening I quoted at the beginning of this piece, contains the lines

"People of the Sky Heroes --how long you've lived who knows?  
At one with the land and wise to its ways".

Actually the achievements of aboriginal Australians in this area are easily romanticizable but need to be objectively evaluated. Their negative contribution was the extermination of vast numbers of big game animals. Positively they made

such progress as to be on the verge of developing agriculture:

"Aboriginal Australians who never reached the stage of farming yams and seed plants nonetheless anticipated several elements of farming. They managed the landscape by burning it, to encourage the growth of edible seed plants that sprouted after fires. In gathering wild yams, they cut off most of the edible tuber but replaced the stems and tops of the tubers in the ground so that the tubers would regrow. Their digging to extract the tuber loosened and aerated the soil and fostered regrowth. All that they would have had to do to meet the definition of farmers was to carry the stems and remaining attached tubers home and simply replace them in soil at their camp." (Jared Diamond, "Guns, Germs and Steel", Vintage Books 2005, p. 107)

They also developed elaborate methods of trapping fish:

"where water levels in marshes fluctuate with seasonal rains, Native Australians constructed elaborate systems of canals up to a mile and a half long, in order to enable eels to extend their range from one marsh to another. Eels were caught by equally elaborate weirs, traps set in dead-end side canals, and stone walls across canals with a net placed in the opening of the wall. Traps at different levels in the marsh came into operation as the water level rose and fell. While the initial construction of these 'fish farms' must have involved a lot of work they then fed many people. Nineteenth-century European observers found villages of a dozen Aboriginal houses at the eel farms, and there are archaeological remains of villages of up to 146 stone houses, implying at least seasonally resident populations of hundreds of people." (p. 210)

When it comes to sustainable production and population control, however, perhaps the prime example is Tikopia in the Solomon Islands, as described by the New Zealand ethnographer and anthropologist Raymond Firth in a series of works such as "We, the Tikopia". Here limited territory posed a food supply problem in conditions of population growth. Various methods were used to reduce the level of population, such as celibacy, contraception (coitus interruptus), abortion, infanticide, sending young men on sea voyages --sometimes they didn't come back-- and, as a last resort, warfare. On the supply side the chiefs could impose restrictions on the consumption of certain foods:

"Exercise of authority by the chief in order to guide the utilization of economic resources by his people is seen particularly in the imposition of a tapu. Each of the four chiefs has under control one of the major foodstuffs, the sanction for this lying in the religious sphere. This allows him from time to time to institute a 'close season' for the product in question, and the restriction is obeyed not only by his clansmen but by all people who have an interest in the lands where the tapu operates. About a year before I arrived in Tikopia the Ariki [chief] Tafua judged that the supply of coconuts was getting scarce, so put up a mark of tapu in Rofaea. This was removed shortly after I came, and the occasion was celebrated by a feast. The sons of the Ariki collected food from his orchards, Pa Saukirima and Pa Fenutapu brought contributions from Namo, Pa Tekaumata his son-in-law and Pa Motuanji his sister's son also assisted, and other people of his clan and his district. Before the food was prepared, the chief said to the assembled company, 'the tapu is lifted', which gave freedom to all to utilize the coconuts from that area once again. A period of several years usually elapses before any such large-scale Ariki Fanjarere controls the breadfruit in the same way, the Ariki Kafka the yam, and the Ariki Taumako the taro, though since the latter two crops are planted seasonally there is little point in attempting to conserve them by restriction, and these chiefs are concerned with the harvest ritual instead.

A conservation tapu is not inviolable. If a man's orchards happen to be concentrated in a single area affected by the restriction, then he may take his coconuts, prepare a portion of food for the chief and go to him. When the chief has finished eating, the man says 'I have taken coconuts from ... for food.' The chief usually then replies, 'It is good.' The act of notification does away with any offence." (pp. 376-77).

My submission, then, is that the original communists and their early successors have a lot to teach us --provided we do not view them uncritically.

The chief defect of these early societies, which also remains as a legacy in the present age, was that the area of social reference as far as they were concerned was limited to the kin --anyone else was outside the pale. This attitude can be seen in some early European tribal names --for example, among the Gauls, the Bituriges (literally, "the Kings of the World") or, among the Germans, the Allemanni ("Alle Manner" , "all People", there's nobody else). We are faced with the need to transcend such limits: as some German socialists wrote to Fenner Brockway on the eve of the Second World War, "Comrades, you like your country and we like our country, but our common fatherland is humanity." (quoted in "Inside the Left", Spokesman 2010 , p. 348)

## Reading

Chris Knight "Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture" (Yale University Press 1991)

Friedrich Engels "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" in Marx and Engels, Selected Works, Volume II, Foreign Languages Press, Moscow 1958)

Chris Knight "The Science of Solidarity" (Radical Anthropology Group 2006)

Camilla Power "The Human Revolution" (Radical Anthropology Group, no date)

Ian Watts "Was There a Human Revolution?" in "Radical Anthropology" no. 4, November 2010, pp. 16-21

Marshall Sahlins "Stone Age Economics" (Routledge 2004)

David Graeber "Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value" (Palgrave 2002)

Bronislaw Malinowski "Argonauts of the Western Pacific" (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1978)

Raymond Firth "We, the Tikopia" (2nd edition, Allen & Unwin 1957)

Joao Zilhao "Neanderthals are us: genes and culture" in "Radical Anthropology" no. 4, November 2010, pp. 5-15