Young Engels and the Politics of the Encounter

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Camilla: Welcome, everybody, and thank you so much for coming along today.

It's a fantastic crowd, considering we're right at the end of term before Easter and thanks to everyone on Zoom as well and we've got a couple of young– well, Anne Monk, who's a medical student, and young anthropologist Jacob Seagrave with us and Chris, did you want to say something about how we came across?

Chris: Well, it was because Anne is an amazing poet. As a father. He is an unpublished poet and he is a total, utter, complete genius.

Who got in touch with us a little over a year ago, I suppose 18 months ago, perhaps.

Because all because he suddenly realized that he had been in UEL, University of East London.

where we were teaching in the anthropology department, all the time not knowing about who we were and then he retired from UEL and he suddenly discovered our extraordinary theory of how we became human and inspired by that, he began to write a poem and he's been writing this poem ever since and the poem was so utterly strange and magical and peculiar and wondrous that this person who has only first names, he doesn't have a second name, he's called Paul and he's also called Dave.

I just thought, wow, this poem is just beyond it.

It's completely magical.

So I decided that he ought to be not only published, but he ought to be the poet laureate.

So I decided to put on some green leaves on my head and conduct a ceremony with a kind of sword, a bit of wood actually, and make him kneel down and declare him to be said poet laureate and he's still writing this extraordinary poem.

It's going on and on and on and on.

I mean, it might, you might, it's sort of funny, but it's actually, I'm quite serious.

He is an amazing poet and we ought to get him down here to read out his poem.

Camilla: Well, we did, of course, nearly a year ago, have a wonderful session with him in the pub.

After Easter, Radic Anthropology went to the pub last year.

We haven't worked that out this year, but it was a lovely session down in pub near St.

James's.

Chris: I just wanted to just finish with a little bit.

His poem is about origins.

It tells origins and it's the origin of Paul, the origin of life on Earth, the origin of the future communist revolution.

It sort of mingles all these amazing origins, as well as being about the first people to step on the moon and lots of stuff about Marilyn Monroe and I don't know, somehow it puts the whole sort of 20th century together, but in the context of deep, deep, deep origins and your dad's.

Camilla: It's very magic, very magical.

But just to come back to this evening's session, well, I got very excited when Jacob and Anne were proposing this title, because of course, Engels has been fundamental to radical anthropology for a very long time and we're talking here about the extraordinary matriarchalist tradition that came through Lewis Henry Morgan, Louis Henry Morgan being the absolute state of the science of anthropology of the 19th century in kinship theory, taken up by Marx and his notebooks, but especially published by Engels in Origins of the Family, Private Poverty, and the State and this matriarchalist tradition, with Louis Henry Morgan's material on the Seneca Iquoire, Haudenosaunee, was was arguing that the very first forms of human family were fundamentally matrilineal, that societies were matrilineal, matriarchal, and that women's oppression was not something original to human society at all.

It was something subsequent in the development of patriarchy, the world's historic defeat of female sex, as Engels put it.

The twentieth century trashed Engels and Morgan's reputation, because, of course, it was far too associated with communists, with communism and so one of the great founders of social anthropology, Malinowski, did absolutely everything he could to suppress Engels or rubbish the reputation of Engels and assert, despite his own researchers with a fantastic matrilineal people, Trobriand Islanders, to assert that the original form of human family, unchanging, is a nuclear family.

Well, actually, no.

Morgan and Engels were kind of pioneers of an evolutionary ecology, both Darwinian, tracing the shifting forms of family, the change in kinship and marriage in relation to changing subsistence modes.

This was pioneer of evolutionary ecology and what's happened in this 21st century, late 20th to 21st century, is that the actual evolutionary ecology has put things to rights with Kristen Hawke's grandmother hypothesis, with Sarah Hurdy's cooperative childcare hypothesis, mothers and others, that actually Yeah, matrifocal, matrilocal, mums and daughters as the core of original human society, evolving human society, would have been, yeah, what made us human, what made us cognitively, emotionally, physically, heart, soul, bodies, minds, human.

So Engel's reputation of it's very much on the quiet but it has to a large extent been restored and the idea that a nuclear family is in any way traditional now it has more to do with the 1950s U.S.A.

model actually rather than earliest human society.

Chris is well known for his article Early human kinship is matrilineal and Chris has always been waging a war on that one and there is plenty of endorsement and even just recently endorsement by from the genome sequences of Neanderthals, that as modern humans came into Europe, they were actually likely to be naturally or matril, locally matrilineally organized.

We're getting some of the latest genome data for the first time about modern humans in Europe through through that material.

Okay, now I got so excited because, of course.

Anne and Jacob were not looking down that evolutionary route, but taking me back to an extraordinary communist ethnography that was absolutely life-changing when I read it.

I read Origins of the Family, but I also read Conditions of the Working Class in England and this is such a life-changing, experience of the social geography of Manchester, the social murder in Manchester, written data-driven observation, foot slogging work by Engels, producing this extraordinary polemic against the entire history of the Industrial Revolution of the biggest empire of the world at that time and so it was an extraordinary, powerful book and we're going to I'm going to hand over now after an upper antics to Anne and Jafa to tell us more.

Anne: Cool, thank you Camilla.

Hi everyone, so I'm Anne, this is Jacob.

So yeah, we want this talk to be about, it's going to be largely about angles, but we're going to kind of start by thinking about the politics of ethnography and we're going to kind of do that by actually looking at the Nor, which is one of the kind of most famous early anthropological ethnographic texts.

So let me move to this.

So in this talk, we would like to discuss the challenges and political potential of the method of ethnography as it's used by anthropologists.

But also, we argue, by communists, too, primarily in this talk, angles.

So we want to focus especially on the scene of encounter that comes with this method and the demands and questions that it throws up and we're kind of thinking about this in two kind of three conceptual frameworks.

So one being the politics of difference, two being the making of a revolutionary project, and the third being the production of knowledge in ethnographic work.

So whilst anthropology often claims ethnography for itself as its own disciplinary method, defined as a kind of immersive, long-term, holistic form of participant observation, more often than not in a culture and society of another, what we want to explore is perhaps the neglected tradition of its use and experimentation by communists as a specifically revolutionary method.

So as I said, we're going to kind of stage an encounter between anthropology and communism and We're going to do this by looking at what we see as two ethnographies that are worth kind of putting in conversation with one another.

So to summarise, this is kind of essentially looking at the political problems of ethnography, but also the political potential of ethnography.

So first we're going to have a look at Evans Pritchard.

Let me see.

So.

Some of you, I'm sure, will know a lot about Evans Pritchard, some of you might not if you've not studied anthropology.

But he was a student of Radcliffe and Manolowski, who were kind of two of the founding fathers of British anthropology.

He himself became one of the kind of dominating figures of anthropology in the mid 20th century, and he developed a very influential strain of anthropological theory called structural functionalism.

So, In the 1920s and the early 1930s, Evans-Pritchard was in southern Sudan studying the Azande, and he was studying particularly witchcraft.

So at this time in Sudan, the Anglo-Egyptian government were colonially ruling the area, and they approached Evans-Pritchard and asked him to do a study of the Nor.

who were a group of people across quite a wide geography, who the government have been basically in a prolonged bloody campaign against and it's quite a complex history in of itself.

But they wanted Evans Pritchard to go and study the nor and basically advise them on what the nature of the nor was and they were interested in kind of putting in their own colonial administrators into the area and they wanted to know more, basically.

So Reading a little bit around this, it turns out that Evans-Pitchard didn't really want to go and study the Noor.

He wasn't particularly interested in it.

He wanted to stick with the Izande, he'd learned the language and he wanted to stay there.

A high commissioner of the colonial government called Harold McMichael, who ended up also being the high commissioner of the British Mandate of Palestine later on, wrote to Evans-Pritchard and asked him personally, and Evans-Pritchard thought he should do the favour and go and study the Noor, which is what he did.

So when he went, he had a lot of trouble getting any access to the Noor.

They didn't want him there because they were highly suspicious, rightly so, of his presence.

So I'm going to read you a quote now from how he describes his troubles being there.

So he said, When I entered a cattle camp, it was not only as a stranger, but as an enemy and they seldom tried to conceal their disgust at my presence, refusing to answer my greetings and even turning away when I addressed them.

So when he was trying to deal with this, he wrote a letter to McMichael, the colonial administrator, and he said, From our point of view, the natives of this area are too unsettled and too resentful and frightened to make good performance, and the breakdown of their customs and traditions too sudden and severe to enable an anthropologist to obtain quick results.

So you can see what the problem was.

You know, it was a very, very tumultuous moment amongst them all, and they didn't want him there.

So he decided to leave and he went back, he went back to the Azande, he spent a few years kind of doing various things and then he came back to go and start with the Noor and he had better success.

So when he is writing in his introduction to this book about his kind of time with the Noor, he expresses a lot of frustration in the introduction because he basically says, you know, I wanted to have structured interviews I wanted them to sit down with me and ask my questions, but they didn't want to talk to me about their customs.

They wouldn't talk to me one-on-one.

They were just coming to my tent.

I had to do everything in public.

My privacy wasn't respected, things like that.

So I wasn't very pleased really.

What I want to do now is, well, read out, me and Jacob are going to read out an exchange that is at the beginning of the norm.

It's in the introduction and we think, we've come back to this exchange a lot of times because we think it's very interesting and it reveals a lot about what's at stake in the ethnographic encounter and it's interesting.

the way this exchange is just put at the beginning of the book and not much said about it and then we kind of move on to the anthropological theory.

So we're going to read it out and we're going to put it on the screen as well so you can see it for yourself.

So I'm Evans Pritchard, Jacob Isquel, one of the nor.

I: Who are you?

Cuol: A man.

I: What is your name?

Cuol: Do you want to know my *name?*

I: Yes.

Cuol: You want to know *my* name?

I: Yes, you have come to visit me in my tent and I would like to know who you are.

Cuol: All right. I am Cuol. What is your name?

I: My name is Pritchard.

Cuol: What is your father's name?

I: My father's name is also Pritchard.

Cuol: No, that cannot be true. You cannot have the same name as your father.

I: It is the name of my lineage. What is the name of your lineage?

Cuol: Do you want to know the name of my lineage?

I: Yes.

Cuol: What will you do with it if I tell you? Will you take it to your country?

I: I don't want to do anything with it. I just want to know it since I am living at your camp.

Cuol: Oh well, we are Lou.

I: I did not ask you the name of your tribe. I know that. I am asking you the name of your lineage.

Cuol: Why do you want to know the name of my lineage?

I: I don't want to know it.

Cuol: Then why do you ask me for it? Give me some tobacco.

Anne: Yeah, so it's funny, but it's also very, it's a very, very strange conversation and it's very strange.

that he places this at the start of the book, and then kind of moves on from it.

It just he he basically then turns to the reader, the kind of fellow anthropologist.

and he says, quote, I defy the most patient ethnologist to make headway against this kind of opposition.

One is just driven crazy by it.

So what what's happening here? Like, why? why does he put this exchange at the beginning of the book? And what does it tell us about the politics of ethnography and the politics of the encounter? So we have a few kind of interpretations and they're all kind of open to discussion and more mulling over.

But we would say that the first is kind of most primarily a political refusal.

So Quoll is saying, why are you here? Why do you want to know? And what are you going to do with the information? we think that that's quite obviously a very direct political challenge, because he's aware of the context of Evans Pritchard's study.

You know he's a colonial presence in the in the camp, and he wants to know why he should hand over this information and that's what it is.

Information.

So Quoll is demonstrating a suspicion.

But he's also curious, you know, he's he's engaging with Evans Pritchard and he's he's he's pushing as to what it is that Evans Pritchard really wants from him and importantly, it's reciprocal exchange that he's asking for.

He's asking to know why he wants to know, but also what his name is and he's trying to have a conversation on essentially all terms.

So.

Evan's Pitchard is just shutting down this dialogue, and it gets to the point where he actually just ends up saying, Right, well, I don't want to live in the first place, which is a very peculiar way to respond after you've been questioning someone.

So, and then the second thing we kind of ask about this conversation is, why did he choose to recount this particular conversation to the reader? What is it that he's trying to demonstrate? And I think we would say that it is an act of containment in the text.

It's trying to neutralize the problem of the presence of the anthropologist and the political encounter at the heart of ethnographic work by...

essentially turning it into a problem of the professional demands of anthropological work.

So suddenly you can just put these kind of exchanges at the start of your book and say to the other anthropologists, look, it's been quite difficult for me to get this information and he does say that at kind of multiple points.

So there's a kind of neutralisation going on and a kind of professionalisation of the problem almost.

But also there's a kind of comedy to the exchange, because it's very ironic that Evans Pritchard manages to pose it as if he's the one being affronted.

Why are you in my tent? And why are you asking? Why can I not ask who's in my tent? But obviously the irony of that is that actually it's Evans Pritchard that is in their camp uninvited.

So again, this kind of comes back to the political nature of the encounter and the colonial encounter and the kind of situation in which anthropologists were operating and how do they make sense of that in terms of the way they write their theory.

The final thing to say about this passage is that Evans-Pitchard, ironically, for an anthropologist, isn't interested in translating categories.

So he isn't able to explain why his naming convention is the way it is.

He wants Quoll's answer, but he won't he won't translate his kind of awkward English formulation of names.

So what we kind of want to draw out of this whole little side story about the Nor is there's a lot to think about in terms of the ethnographic, the politics of ethnography and what what is at stake in the encounter and what we want to what we want to suggest and try and tease out of these two ethnographies is that ultimately the kind of challenge at the heart of the ethnographic encounter should become a central part of the way you generate your theory and the more you try and sidestep that problem, the further you're going to get away from a political ethnographic project, or particularly a communist ethnographic project.

So I think I can pass over to you.

Jacob: So what we really want to focus on then is that question that call asks of Evans Pritchard, why do you want to know? So if this seminar would have it, the big question that anthropology asks is what makes us human, we'd like to think that the question that ethnography demands is why do you want to know? And it's this demand that recurs again and again in ethnographic encounters and it demands a kind of responsibility to respond to that question, which we feel Engels kind of prototypically gives us a way to respond to that.

So in November 1842, the 22-year-old Friedrich Engels arrived in England with the ostensible purpose of learning the family trade at the Ermine and Engels mill in Manchester.

He was fresh from his military training in Berlin, where he was exposed to the young Hegelians.

In the following 21 months, Engels took an ethnographic plunge into proletarian life, investigating the condition of a class whose state in 1842 was to be the future of the world.

German and bourgeois by birth, but communist by will, Engels encountered the working class as a foreigner with a difference.

one able to see the promise of emancipation within the processes of catastrophic exploitation and immiseration, building his investigation upon a foundation of political solidarity and fidelity to a newly opened up communist horizon.

Walking the slums and streets of industrialising Manchester, he was guided by the local Irish worker Mary Burns, who would be his lifelong partner until her death in 1863.

Walking these streets, talking to proletarians in their homes, on their streets and at the gates of the factories in which both they and their children often toiled, combining this experience with inspectors' reports, urban doctors and priests' testimonies, Engels was, we argue, engaged in a pioneering kind of ethnography.

So to look at this, in this talk, we'd like to kind of zoom out of the details of the main body of the text.

which are kind of fascinating in of themselves and deal in a kind of furious tone and often obsessive detail with both the immiseration, exploitation, destitution of the working class, but also their political potential, their historical mission, which we'll touch on later.

We want to zoom out of that and kind of look at the form of encounter and political definition of difference, Engels framed in his crucial dedication to the working classes of Britain, which he wrote when he returned to his family home in Barmen, Germany.

He had a bit of time on his hands, so he wrote his dedication.

As he wrote to Marx, though, in late 1844, a few months before he wrote it, or during the process of writing, he intended his 500 word dedication, and I quote, to be printed separately and sent to English party leaders, men of letters and members of Parliament.

to give those fellows something to remember him by.

So if I change that.

So he begins.

I wanted more than mere abstract knowledge of my subject.

I wanted to see you in your own homes, observe you in your everyday life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances, to witness your struggles against the social and political power of your oppressors.

I have done so.

I forsook the company and the dinner parties, the port, wine and champagne of the middle classes, and devoted my leisure hours almost exclusively to the intercourse with plain working men, and I am both glad and proud of having done so.

He then moves quickly to critique the ignorant English bourgeoisie who emphatically do not want to know.

In his words, they have left it, and I quote, to a foreigner to inform the civilized world of the degrading situation of the working class.

Have they even done as much as to compile from those rotting, sorry, have they ever paid any serious attention to your grievances? Have they done more than paying the expenses of a half a dozen commissioners of inquiry, whose voluminous reports are damned to everlasting slumber amongst heaps of waste paper on the shelves of the Home Office? Have they even done as much to compile from those rotting blue books a single readable book from which everybody might easily get some information on the condition of the great majority of free-born Britons? Not they indeed.

Those are things they do not like to speak of.

They have left it to a foreigner to inform the civilized world of the degrading situation you have to live in and then he shifts in the following paragraph, qualifying his relation of difference, which for us, we feel is quite crucial.

A foreigner to them, not to you, I hope.

Here then, a 24-year-old bourgeois German intellectual is defining the terms of his encounter with others through his communism.

Not as one characterized meaningfully by any inherited national, class, cultural, or linguistic difference, but by a chosen political difference.

A foreigner by both nationality and class to the English proletariat, Engels is redefining the terms of the encounter through his revolutionary solidarity.

recognizing that differences at once determined by class structure, yet equally transformable through a will that seeks to create a sameness based on a shared orientation towards a future of emancipation.

So Engels is trying to open up an encounter, a sustained encounter with the working class through, you know, a hopefulness and enthusiasm and an expression of political desire.

Here we find The political philosopher, Jodi Dean, her article, her really insightful essay on the figure of the comrade helps us think about this passage.

So, and I quote, For her, comrade names a relation characterized by sameness, equality, and solidarity.

For communists, this sameness, equality, and solidarity is utopian, cutting through the determinations of capitalist society.

For Dean, a comrade is distinct from being a friend, a kin, a neighbor, and even a militant and it's defined by its generic quality.

So anybody, but not everyone can be a comrade.

So anyone, but not everyone.

Being a comrade then designates a relationship, not an individual identity.

Thus, and I quote, To be a comrade is to share a sameness with another with respect to where you are going.

So we like to, You know, think about this sameness that Engels is trying to construct in relationship to a horizon and this is an imaginative act here.

But if the student Engels had already made-up his mind about the abstract idea of a horizon of emancipation, i.e.

communism, before he had arrived in Manchester, his experience there confirmed to him the centrality of practice in the generation of any revolutionary theory about the world.

As he put it in the preface, which he also wrote in 1845 when the book was published, A knowledge of proletarian conditions is necessary to provide solid ground for socialist theories and to put an end to all sentimental dreams and fancies, pro and con.

Again, the Feuerbachian dissolution of Hegelian speculation cannot provide a solid theoretical ground for communism, which must seek to know the real conditions of life of the proletariat.

So kind of biographically here, Engels was reaching the same conclusions as Marx of a revolutionary unity of interpretation and change, theory and practice, of the coincidence of changing circumstances and changing self, here rooted in the encounter, he was doing this simultaneously but separately from Marx and whereas the important thing is that, you know, if Marx was reaching his conclusions through his eight-year long process of going through the twisting and turns of Hegelian philosophy, then Engels here was doing it through ethnography through a very, very different kind of method and he was reaching the conclusion, which as Marx puts it in thesis eight, in the thesis that, All social life is essentially practical.

All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice and the most kind of profound revelation that Engels has in his experience It's crucially, and it's quite an important historical innovation he makes is that he reads the working class not simply as a suffering class, not simply as a kind of monolithic poor.

So in their lived experience, and actually through an attention to lived to their lived experience, he can read at once the political potential that they have through their kind of nascent organizing.

industrial militant organizing, and also through, and also their historical destiny.

So what role will they play in a much grander sense of of history as the grave diggers of of capitalism and I think what's crucial here is that this concept of the proletarian is important as a kind of negative definition.

So Engels isn't here claiming that the working class are a kind of fixed identity, that they are a kind of fixed object.

He's saying that proletarian is a negative definition.

It's to lack something, it's to have nothing but your labor to sell and I think that kind of innovation on what was a conservative concept of the poor is really important, not just for the history of Marxism, but kind of in general and for him, he was very proud

that he did that through a very fine, detailed interest in all the different gradations of working class experience.

So all the different types of occupations of work.

He actually did that through an attention of detail, not an avoidance of it and you know, in Capital 25 years later, Marx will write beamingly about how Engels's book is the only serious book on the experience of the working class, and there hasn't been a better book written by it and I don't think this was just a friend kind of, you know, selling his friend's work.

I think it's true that the level of detail, the kind of power of the text is there and it's crucial as well to put it in this context that it's not like there weren't other people doing observations on making social reportage or being journalists at the same time.

We have people like Henry Mayhew, who wrote the London Labour and the London Poor in 1852.

Likewise, the factory inspectors were making their reports for the government, even if Engels was sure that the English Borchazine never read them.

Engels was then self-consciously entering into a pre-existing genre, which was the so-called the most important question of the time, which was the condition of England question, pioneered by people like Thomas Carlyle.

which was essentially, you know, a a denunciation of the enormous wealth generated by early industrial capital and the enormous poverty at at the other end.

So overall, then, we we like to think, then, that even if Engels is quite ironic in a sense, because Angles Angles's image to us through through the history of Stalinism is of scientific socialism.

When actually he formed his Communism, he formed his views in dialogue with a whole range of other thinkers, social observers who were anything but Communist and I think as well, it's it's it's nice to see that as Camilla mentioned at the beginning that there are But his life in general is bookended by two types of anthropology, one being the historical towards the end of his life, and this being the kind of practical ethnographic at the beginning of his work.

So crucially, Engels's communist vision made all the difference to what he was doing.

Here then, political commitment is shown to be the precondition for real knowledge about the world.

Partly because it involves the imperative to act in the world, responding to the question, why do you want to know? Taking responsibility for it.

Engels wanted to know because he wanted to change the world and in his dedication, he is opening out an invitation to sustaining an encounter, which ultimately is the encounter of communism and I think it's crucial here that he isn't much like Evans-Pitchard, he isn't shutting the book on that experience.

He isn't, he's opening up an encounter.

And, you know, it's important to qualify some of this in terms of what the text looks like.

So, you know, we're not claiming that he literally forged a relationship with comradeship with the entirety of the English working class, even if he no doubt became comrades with many of the kind of chartists that he would have been meeting in Manchester and Engels doesn't give us the kind of interpersonal scene that Evans Pitchard does a century later.

He rarely uses the first person in the book, and there are actually only two direct quotations from interlocutors, so it doesn't look like a 20th century, 21st century ethnographic text in that sense.

But it was, for us, a really crucial act of imagination and revolutionary enthusiasm that wanted to construct an open-ended but Poliski-directed encounter, even if it might seem grandiose or naive.

We want to take it seriously.

We want to take this hope seriously, but also tentatively and kind of without guarantees and likewise, this isn't to say that political desire or hope is in itself sufficient grounds for knowledge or that it's entirely transparent and that it's always obvious to people why they want to know, that they know why they want to know.

But what we think is that it kind of begins at least a logic.

It begins the logic of the encounter.

encounter, which can be sustained afterwards and of course, this we see in Engels's biography.

Mary Burns was no doubt an absolutely indispensable guide for him, who clearly collaborated with him so much, and perhaps co-produced the text in that way, even though she, of course, goes without credit and they themselves would have a sustained encounter, not without its contradictions, but they would have a sustained encounter and partnership until her death, of course.

Do you want to?

Anne: I was just quick.

Jacob: Yeah.

Anne: This is just a quick, quick comparison now that Jane has kind of talked a little bit about Engels between something that I think is quite important to draw out about the kind of difference between Engels and Evans Pritchard.

So in that quote that I read out from Evans Pritchard where he is saying to the administrator that basically, you know, this is not a good condition for an anthropologist to work in because everything is quite unstable here and their kind of ability to do the culture that they normally do is being challenged by the fact that they're in a political conflict with the colonial state is essentially what he's saying and I think it's quite interesting to reflect on that because For Evans-Pritchard, that poses a problem for ethnographic practice and for the ability to do anthropology properly.

Whilst Engels, it's precisely because the working class in England are in flux, because they are being made and making themselves as a revolutionary class, that the inquiry is important, that the ethnographic work of being there and studying and be-

ing amongst them and alongside them and watching the making process, the making of a class.

That's the exact conditions that you want to operate in as a communist ethnographer, because the politics of the encounter is central to it.

So I just wanted to kind of draw that out because I think it's a it's a very important thing to think about and you know, what is the conditions, the historical or political conditions that an anthropologist or an ethnographer or a communist wants to be doing their study in and what implications does that have for what kind of work they're doing? Now Jacob's going to talk a little bit about some other ethnographic forms.

Jacob: Yeah, so what we'd like to do then is kind of not isolate this text.

For us, we feel that it's the beginning of a kind of tradition or a genealogy that is really, really significant to the development of communism as a movement, of Marxism as a theory.

So if Marxism or communism begins with ethnography, it was also developed through it, and it developed through that experimentation.

So in this talk we'd like to talk a little bit about how the ethnographic form alongside other slightly different forms of investigation, perhaps shorter term.

Were used by and experimented with by communist movements in the twentieth century.

Here we could only be kind of suggestive because of course it's a it's a lot it's a big history.

But we would we'd like to then limit our focus to kind of Chinese Maoism and its uptake in the French case because it is in Maoism that I think we find in the twentieth in the twentieth century especially.

A real grappling.

both practically and philosophically, with this question of ethnographic practice and investigation.

and it's kind of use is is quite dramatic, and I think has important lessons for us.

This is not to kind of put aside the forms of workers inquiries, for instance, that were used by people like the Italian autonomous or the American Johnson Forest Tendency.

That tradition definitely is still alive and kicking today and people like the Notes from Below Collective have done a lot of work on kind of resurrecting that particular tradition.

But I think to some extent it is distinct from a more ethnographic emphasis, a more kind of immersive emphasis, because these inquires were in a sense shorter term, they were centered around a production often of a piece of literature, often involving the workers speaking for themselves directly.

So it's kind of also about kind of agitating, organizing inside production.

So a very significant tradition, but in a sense doesn't quite ground itself on the problem of the encounter, which we think Maoism does particularly think about and of course this was, They were unified in their concern that the party, the Communist

Party, should have a dialogue with its masses, with its workers and that was the division that was often the motivation for developing a kind of ethnographic practice.

So this we think is clear in Mao's 1927 report on an investigation of the peasant movement in Hunan, which he wrote for the Chinese Communist Party in response to a breakout of spontaneous peasant rebellion.

which upended the orthodox Marxist position held by the party that it would in fact be the advanced workers who would lead any revolution in China.

Swept up by these events and open to being challenged by them, Mao expresses a movement within the communist encounter from preconceived ideas, ignorance and misrecognition to enthusiasm, surprise and novel theoretical horizons.

Chris: Can you explain the details of that picture?

Jacob: Yeah, sorry.

So this is Mao with his comrades in.

Sorry this is the young Mao in in the middle there, peering out of the out of the doorway and this is after the Long March.

So this is after they've been the kind of really difficult years of survival.

making lots of tactical retreats from the Kuomintang and ending up in And this is where they're kind of resting, recuperating.

This is also where Engels, not Engels, Mao begins to write his kind of central philosophy, as it were.

He's got some time on his hands.

He's resting from the guerrilla war and so he writes on contradiction and on practice here in this kind of mountain without.

So this is a little bit before then and this is a quote then.

So in the 32 days from January 4th to February 5th, I called together fact-finding conferences in villages and county towns, which were attended by experienced peasants and by MRI comrades working in the peasant movement and I listened tentatively to their reports and collected a great deal of material.

Many of the hows and whys of the peasant movement were the exact opposite of what the gentry in Hankow and Changsha are saying, I saw and heard of many strange things of which I had hitherto been unaware.

Of the following decades, through the dire years of survival in the guerrilla war, to the victory in revolution, and onwards to the disastrous Great Leap Forward, Maoism developed through centering the role of investigation.

So as Mao wrote in 1930, in Opposed Book Worship, The aim of social and economic investigation is to arrive at correct appraisal of class forces and then to formulate correct tactics for the struggle.

Mao's investigation then is more directly subordinated to the revolutionary, to the needs of a revolutionary struggle that's already ongoing in a way that Angus's could not have been.

So in this sense, the why do you want to know of Mao was an immediate question of war, of class war, of guerrilla war and he criticised other comrades, and I think perhaps one can criticise an anthologist for the same thing.

He's criticising other comrades while producing reports as trivial as a grocer's accounts, or that resemble the many strange tales a country bunkin hears when he comes to town.

So Mao came to propagandise the role of investigation along peasant populist lines.

No investigation, no right to speak when the lion to investigate a problem was to solve it.

He also philosophized it, though, declaring that all genuine knowledge originates in direct experience, quoting Lenin approvingly that the living soul of Marxism is the concrete analysis of concrete conditions.

There is a sense then that ignorance here is is is the beginning point.

There is an emphasis then that.

not knowing in that kind of almost classical philosophical sense is the beginning of all inquiry and there's a kind of a sort of emphasis on the modesty, for instance, of the communist intellectual and Mao would kind of take that forward.

So in 1957, Mao foreshadowed the sending down to the countryside movement that characterized the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, offering us here, though, in 1957 a nice typology, which was really significant for the French Maoists.

They took on this typology, even in terms of their language that they used.

So we encourage intellectuals to go among the masses, to go to factories and villages.

Some can go just to look around.

This may be called looking at the flowers on horseback.

and it's better than doing nothing at all.

Others can stay for a few months, conducting investigations and making friends.

This may be called dismounting to look at the flowers.

Still others can stay and live there for a considerable time, say two or three years or even longer.

This may be called settling down, and this would be used by the French Maris in the term etablismo, which was their idea of settling down, perhaps we might say, an ethnographic inquiry in terms of being slightly longer.

So going to the peasants.

being, in effect, almost paradoxically proletarianized by them, wants to become crucial in the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution.

But for us this is a kind of difficult moment, because this is a moment whereby investigation which had spurred this movement to the masses, trying to break down this distinction that was perceived between the Communist Party, communist intellectuals, and the masses, this is where it becomes essentializing and so you get a kind of sense in which the raw masses are presented as the kind of zero point of a pure revolutionary consciousness, and the urban workers, intellectuals, the party are the site of a kind of impure forced consciousness, a weakness and a kind of insufficiency and so we move

then from what we'd like to see is as seen as the encounter as sustained and mediated, a kind of mediation of difference to a kind of flattening out.

So it becomes about becoming the same and it kind of turns into something of a kind of psychodrama where the insufficiency of the ethnographer is the most important thing and so if we've traced here rather swiftly the development and degeneration of investigation within the history of Chinese Maoism, it is in order to look at these problems.

How the whiness of why do you want to know can become centred on changing the ethnographer rather than changing the world.

that this is a kind of self-help version of ethnography, a kind of narcissistic psychodrama, one way and two essentializing to generate a politically generative account or knowledge, or also crucially a collaboration and this was picked up, of course, this was kind of experienced traumatically as well in the French case.

So around just before, but also After May 1968, of course, the French mass in particular sort of launched campaigns of investigation and of land of so-called settling down and amidst all this, I think it's important to listen to the voice of Robert Linhar, who's kind of stands out, I think, as someone who survived this moment, but without disillusionment and he has a helpful I'll come back to that sheet.

So this is his critique, and then we'll move on to what he actually did.

So French Marriage Robert Linhardt expressed well when he wrote of his fellow of his fellow militants who undertook various forms of investigation.

He said in France I saw just before or after 1968 young intellectuals settled down among the workers and entered the factory with the religious fervor of men to whom the absolute truth was going finally to be revealed.

After a difficult experience or after failures, these same men abandoned this settling down by declaring that the workers had become irredeemably bourgeois, indeed were corrupt or fascist and it's important here that it's worth mentioning that Linhart published his own kind of ethnographic memoir of his time working in a Citroen factory on the outskirts of Paris in just after the tumultuous summer of May 1968, so for a whole year and I think it's worth turning to a scene in that that I think again will show this kind of scene of encounter that we'd like to focus on.

So seen from the outside, the business of getting into the establishment, so settling down into the movement, seems obvious.

You get taken on and you organise.

But here, this entry into the working class disintegrates into a vast number of small individuals, among which I can't find a solid footing.

These very words, the working class, don't have the same immediate meaning to me as they had in the past, not that I've come to doubt that they embrace a profound reality.

but the variety and mobility of this semi-skilled population into which I've been thrown have upset me, submerged me.

So there's echoes of Mao there, echoes, of course, of Engels and it's worth looking at this figure of Robert Linhart, because in a sense, through all of the kind of trauma and the kind of betrayals of the 1970s, French left scene, he kind of kept his fidelity to the role of, to the form of investigation and he carried on investigating.

So he published various small investigations throughout the 1970s in his work as a kind of academic and also as a kind of economist on kind of petrochemical complex down in Marseilles.

He also participated in the revolution in some of the land reforms in Portugal in '75, '76 and also crucially, he went to Brazil in '78, '79, and he looked at sugarcane workers and their experiences just after the amnesty that had been declared just after the end of the Brazilian dictatorship there and I think, and that book has actually just recently been published.

So yeah, this figure of Robert Linhart is a figure, I think, an important figure who carries on with the investigation, and that leads him onwards through the 1970s and also crucially going to Brazil.

The book has just recently been published and translated as The Sugar and the Hunger and it's a great kind of very vivid journalistic account.

So he was only there for two weeks and again demonstrates the kind of innovation of the form, not necessarily for a year or two years and he has this lovely phrase where he talks about the circuitous paths of inquiry and how we need to kind of follow these circuitous paths and I think his spirit of circuitous paths.

So following these kind of winding paths of inquiry whereby we don't go in for kind of an essentializing, idealizing, becoming same with the other, but actually a kind of mediation of difference and it's there that the kind of generative power we think of the encounter might be.

So just to finish then, all of this isn't to say that anthropologists themselves haven't thought about these problems and political demands that might come up in ethnographic encounters and I think what we'll leave you with is just another scene of encounter taken from this time an American anthropologist, Nancy Shepard Hughes, who in 1995 published an essay called The Primacy of the Ethical Propositions for a Militant Anthropology, where she was kind of critiquing her own previous claims to political neutrality and the assumption that this was indeed necessary for any production of academic truth.

So again, we're back in Brazil in some ways.

So we're in the Northeast in the historic sugarcane plantations.

So she worked there previously in the 1960s as a kind of development worker under the auspices of the of US aid, who at that time was running a development project to try and stave off agrarian communism that was developing in northeastern Brazil against the historical landowning class.

She then returned in the 1980s as an as an anthropologist this time.

and she's surprised, she was surprised, and she reflects on here that she was better received by the same community when she was a an aid worker.

with all the contradictions and problems that implies than as an anthropologist.

So she presents this scene, she reproduces it a little bit like, um, and the spiritual does.

So this is her interlocutor.

Shouldn't we organize a collective workforce? A Mutti Rao, as we did in the old days to get the building back in shape, I backed away saying, This work is cut out for you.

My work is different now.

I cannot be an anthropologist and a companiera at the same time.

I shared my reservations about the propriety of North Americans taking an interest, taking an active role in the life of a poor Brazilian community.

This was colonialist, I patiently explained, trying to summarize the arguments of Edward Said, Talal Assad, and the others that had gained such currency in anthropological circles.

But my argument fell on deaf ears.

Oh, Nancy, they protested, Dotto Claudio, the owner of the local sugar mill, is colonialist, not us and they gave me an ultimatum.

The next time I came back to the Alto do Cruzero, it would be on their terms, that is, as a companiera, accompanying them, as I had before in the struggle, and not just sitting idly by, taking field notes.

What is this anthropology to us, anyway?

Audience questions

Camilla: Fantastic. Thank you.

So many potential questions and comments.

Chris: Well, it was a lovely composition between the two of you. There's some historical stuff in a very original way. I suppose I just feel there wasn't much about Engels.

Jacob: Really? I thought there might be too much of it. Well, I think it's important to see Engels as the beginning of a particular kind of tradition.

We're trying to place Engels at the origin of something that actually is much wider and perhaps is a neglected aspect of the history of of of communism.

The investigation ethnography, if you will, was a consciously experimented with form that was for much of the 20th century considered an absolutely central part of the development of communist parties, communist movements, radical movements and projects.

Audiance member #1: How do you see this approach, this encounter approach or ethnography, how would it help us now with the kind of acute social, personal issues that we have, we say AI.

robot workers and billionaires.

Have we got time to do this kind of ethnography before they blow us all up even?

Camilla: Did Zoom hear that question about the problems that we're facing with the risks from AI and the billionaires? Did you hear that?

Anne: Yeah.

Yeah, I mean, I guess the question, do we have Do we have time for it? I mean, just to say as well, I think what me and Jacob are kind of trying to do via this talk is to try and ask that question of other people as well, kind of what-?

Audiance member #1: You want me to tell you?

Anne: I guess the question is really, what is the political value of doing these kind of involved, long-term, committed, encounters, you know, what comes out of the fact of being ostensibly on some level an outsider to something and coming in and engaging in what must be for it to be useful a kind of equal, reciprocal, critical dialogue about that political problem or that or that particular challenge that's going on.

So it's I don't think me and Jake have an answer to that question because I think it's a It's a question of practice.

But I think I think there's a necessity to it on some level, because I think that it's also very important for the development of solidarity across across kind of very differing political contexts where solidarity is very important for the sustaining of common political goals.

Jacob: Yeah, and just on the issue of AI, for instance, I think, you know, we have to ask ourselves, how much do we really know about the world or what's happening in the world? And where does this information come from? And how much do we ourselves take on the kind of hype that comes to us or the fetishism, the technological fetishism that comes to us through the media? You know, for instance, the idea of AI as an important factor, which it no doubt is.

and all this kind of general culture that we can't escape of doom and disaster, which also often fetishizes things.

It's a father that attributes a great agency to things that are seemingly non-human and I think that's what concrete, you know, concrete analysis of a concrete situation is helpful because it actually, in some ways, draws us back to the very fact that maybe we don't really have our own systems and procedures of generating knowledge like we used to.

Camilla: I've got Patrick at the back, and then Nick Patrick.

Audiance member #2: I really enjoyed the talk and what would you say was intentionality and you know, going to smell the flowers as like I I unintentionally, you know, I'll be like 18 months doing a delivery cycle, but it's set off like you know, as I've seen in my union work, anti-racist work, activism and all that.

What is that? What would you spread the intention? I listen to that.

I'm interested in kind of incidentally and I mean, it's been very helpful equally, but just did you think about that?

Camilla: Can we repeat that a little bit for Zoom? What? I'm just making it sure that the Zoom can hear.

Sorry.

Sorry.

Is there

Audiance member #2: Is there an emphasis on the intentionality of the ethnographic process versus sometimes just incidentally?

Camilla: Something incidentally happens as part of your work as a delivery organizer, right? Yes.

Okay, so I assume you heard that.

Audiance member #2: Wanna go?

Anne: Yeah, I think that's an interesting point.

I don't think...

Well, you've, I know I keep saying you are answering the question, but in some ways you have already answered that question because what you, I don't know the details of what you did, but you know, you found yourself in a situation where actually you were able to generate that kind of political questioning around it and do that process and I think this also relates to the question of kind of who owns ethnographic practice.

I'm not, I don't think that many anthropologists think that they own it as their own kind of privatized thing.

But I think in terms of thinking about the idea of communist ethnography, it's quite, I think it's quite fruitful to try and deprofessionalize it in some ways, not to make it less rigorous or under different standards, but actually that ethnography is something that we should see as a kind of democratic tool to answer certain political questions or to also just make use of our experiences and to be able to kind of generate that.

Nick: I thought it was really interesting you talk and it raised lots of questions in my own mind.

I like the way that you contrasted the traditional anthropologist, Pritchard, and really brought out strongly the colonialist context of the work that he did and the colonialist mentality that he brought to that and contrasted that strongly with the approach that Engels took.

I think that's a very interesting and important point to make.

I also it was interesting the way that with Maoism and Mao and the work he did and others.

I don't do you what work is who's doing that kind of activist communist ethnographic work now in terms of the same kind of thing that Engels did in terms of doing a proper investigation of the condition of the working class here in this country, all the working class anywhere around the world, because we tend in Marxist discourse, I think, and I'm guilty of this myself, I have to say, of talking in quite relatively abstract political economy terms.

But this is really about the impact all of this has on individuals and if we're going to transform the world, it's going to be because a working class is still in the working class is in the process of constantly being re made and for instance, the Conway back here was talking about his work as a delivery rider, and so on.

So that's because that that gig economy is immensely important.

Now, that's what lots of people are I say reduced to doing it's particularly **** work I think but where is the investigation into the actual reality of their work and the potential organizing and political activism and so on because I've I can't perhaps I'm wrong but I feel that's that's entirely miss missing and you can see the same there are centers of quite small manufacturing sector here I was reading is just 8% of LGEP, 80% is services.

China obviously is much larger.

Is there that kind of looking at the condition of the Chinese work work and so on? You may not know the answer, but these are just questions that occur to me as a result.

Jacob: Thanks.

Yeah, exactly.

I mean, for instance, you know, people around the Notes from Below collective, people like Jamie Woodcock, who did a kind of ethnography in a call center.

Again, I think, though, is the outcome of his PhD.

So on this point, I think, which we left untouched in the talk is it's hard to imagine now the form that this would take outside of the university and yet, clearly, the university can't suffice as as a kind of ground for this to be a properly kind of working class revolutionary project in a way.

So there is this whole problem, is that what we're, you know, how far did we get? We got to 1981, we got to 1995 with the anthropologist and so there is a question of what is the organisation that can hold this particular form? How does one pay for this in the first place? How do you sustain yourself through this? And that's why I think, you know, auto ethnography, as it were, or workers inquiries are are clearer.

They're the clearer kind of or what kind of straightforward method of doing this which isn't just kind of choose one or the other.

It's about kind of multiplying these forms in a way, and that general emphasis that what do we really know about the working class? What do we really what this this this term? And how can we build up our reports? How can people come to us? And I think the question has to be, what is the form of organization that can bring that, bring that together and act on it and that, I think, is tricky, because.

you know, I don't think the University is necessarily the way that it's going for that.

Camilla: I've got Alexandra online.

Can you?

Audiance member #3: Hello.

Can you hear me?

Camilla: Can we hear you? Oh, let's make it louder.

Audiance member #3: Yeah.

Can we? Can you hear me? Yep.

So so thank you for your presentation, although I have to admit to that I arrived a bit late, so I couldn't grasp all of that as it probably the recording.

I have.

So one is the question is a question that maybe has been addressed, but during the presentation, and I don't know, but it's something that has been in my mind.

The other one is a bit of a provocation on the very last conversation about who is studying the working class, because I don't come from anthropology.

I am a designer, but came to ethnography because of my my PhD.

So that has been a bit of a new world for me.

But ethnography is something that in design spaces is uses a lot because actually there is something that studied the working class or the labor or the middle class, which is generally called design anthropology, in which is in service in reality of the company.

So there is all a branch of design that is also composed by anthropology in the industry, the study, the user experience, the usability of all these kind of things that happens within the workspace in order to make the labor more efficient.

So I think that it's something that might be considered also in this in this conversation on how something that like an ethnography of the working class can have a double effect because depending on what you're studying, this is information that is actually valuable for companies to actually, you know, exploit even more the working classes and this is ethnography that is being done because the user research is a big chunk of the industry at the moment in design.

So that's, and that's my little provocation to you more than anything else.

Instead, in terms of...

ethnographic practice.

I was intrigued when I saw when I saw the this this talk being promoted about communist ethnography, because recently through my practice, I've been thinking a lot about the idea of commons within ethnography.

So and this idea of not just the politics in terms of our political role, I don't know, within the working class or within certain movements, if we're studying that, but also of politics and ethics.

to me the two things.

I come from probably more from an ethical standpoint, but also on the politics that are inherent to you entering the group and what kind of relationship you are establishing with them and who is really benefiting of ethnographic practice.

That to me is always more than anything the researcher of the ethnographic knowledge more than anything else.

So beyond the idea of solidarity and support, I think that there is also a question on how is ethnographic knowledge produced and who actually owns this knowledge and who is benefiting from it.

I don't know if you have thought about that.

Anne: I mean, yeah, absolutely.

I completely agree with you.

I think that these are like precisely the kind of questions we have to really centre when we talk about ethnography, because you're absolutely right.

You know, it is knowledge production and there is a value to it and I'm glad you gave the example of ethnography in your own work, because I've heard of similar things, you know, like companies employing ethnographers because they themselves recognise that if you actually do kind of like look into the details of a workplace and the kind of jobs people do and what they're actually doing in their jobs, you can make a lot of efficiencies through doing that and there's all kinds of professions that do that kind of work and that's something that should alert us in a way that so actually capitalists corporations and companies are doing this kind of work and they're doing it for a reason and actually the left should kind of take note of that and think about whether we might benefit from that kind of work as well.

Do you have something to add to?

Jacob: No, yeah, I mean, just almost on at the level that, for instance, you know, the historical figure of the ethnographer can be, has lots of doubles.

For instance, the spy is an ethnographer of a kind, or, you know, the colonial, the colonial spy in that sense.

So there is, there are these doubles, I think, to the figure of the ethnographer and this particular question of kind of research ethics or the politicization of research ethics, I think that's the question.

When does it stop? How do we radicalize the premises of research ethics into a kind of practice of of of solidarity, or kind of outside of of perhaps those those particular terms.

Audiance member #4: I really enjoyed the presentation last week, and I just want to share a bit about what I'm doing.

I identify right now from October as a physical scientist, right? I started off I'm only 25, little baby.

I started off my career in advertising.

I dropped out of university due to being a care leaver, a kinship care leaver, and the local authority not knowing how to do my case.

So I've become a lawyer, right? So very argumentative.

Because I dropped out of university and I didn't have any state numbers for my corporate parents, which helped my corporate parents.

I did a lot of alternative education, so a lot of short courses, a lot of digital online language courses, and that's when I got my first job.

as a account manager, I advertise for example.

So when you guys talk about market research, I'm I'm the people who are mining data.

I know you're doing online and what your shopping habits, your spending habits.

Right? So something that I've recognized from academic research is that there's a lot of groups that you have to jump through before any search is approved and then finding people really difficult and I feel like a lot of academic research methods are quite

outdated and you guys are just saying, how do we, I guess, make it more accessible for people and I feel like there are people who are doing alternative anthropology alternative ethnography, but I don't think, because of how many processes, you guys in universities have to jump through.

You're like missing out completely on the people who are doing community research, not actually doing the work that it takes to change and reform things.

So we've got and he does housing.

on Twitter, that's where he finds all his people.

He goes to these places, building mould, rat invested, things like that and like you said, ethnography is knowledge sharing, right? So there are people who are not even working class, they're middle class people, they weren't aware of the living conditions for people like that.

So he didn't have to jump through loops, didn't have to think, oh, okay, if I share this, oh, this person called Haybury, that could be a GDPR, right? But because We don't have to go to all these UCLs and everyone to sign it off and he's actually making a real change.

He was often the MVE, he's finding the people where they are online and I feel like you're asking the question, what are you actually looking? Because there are people who are doing it.

So how are you guys finding the people to work with and establish a working relationship? Like right now, I'm working with a company called the Belgrade and next year I'm going to apply to be a Churchill fellow, again, alternative educational alternative.

political science, like policy science, I don't need to have so many people survive, but the work I'm going to do is going to help other kinship young people to see the right benefits, to know what they're entitled to, to know the legislation, to look at the Act of 19, the shortest Act of 1989, right? And I feel like using my advertising knowledge, using my lived experience as a working class person in the system, and also being a young woman who knows where other people like me who need help and need to access the services are, are, you know, going for these like 10,000 pound grants, 15,000 pound, 5,000 pounds, but I'm actually making real change and I feel like that's what you guys should be doing because you guys have a lot more resources.

I'm a one man band.

I'm doing, I'm researching, editing, outreach, finding advantage, things like that.

Whereas the things that people are actually doing are helping and are changing policy, like policy.

So I feel like, yeah, there are ways just to actually like use anthropology that you're already doing, but those are those areas where they're doing the work.

Chris: Yeah, yeah.

Camilla: Can anybody, can you say something to Zoom, what you just heard there? I don't know.

It's a discussion of accessibility for people on the ground who are really involved in practical problems for everyday ordinary people in their real lives and how much is getting achieved and some of that through social media, some of that through various other techniques and it's a question of how much hoop jumping for academics to get through to apply for the grants that are creating their careers on the ladder, which is really kind of constraining for them and they're very out of date.

This person is saying very out of date academic processes.

Anne: Yeah.

That's really interesting.

I think, I mean, I agree with you and I think, obviously you're completely right in saying that all of this is already going on and I think in some ways it's also important to say that anthropology doesn't need to take over that work because what you're describing and the kind of ways in which people do what is kind of at least akin to ethnographic work it's right that they're doing it in those contexts and that's also about being embedded in the kind of political needs of whatever it is that you're looking at and I think that, because I'm not in academia either, I'm a medical student, so I don't, Jacob could maybe speak more about the kind of professionalising process of the way that ethics comes into it as well.

But I think that what is useful and interesting to think about, and we're definitely suggesting, is that there's an interesting conversation to be had about ethnography from that more professional canon and all of these ways in which it's been talked about and thought about in anthropology as a discipline I think is useful and a lot of that is actually I think about a dialogue like this dialogue about how the methods of ethnography and the questions of ethnography can be could be introduced to that work as well so I don't think it's I don't think that anthropology should or could take over that work.

I think that work is its own form of investigation, ethnography, and we should encourage and kind of enrich that conversation between academia and non-academia.

Yeah.

Camilla: Could I just follow up on that with asking the question, where does Paolo Ferreiri and Pedagogy of the Impressed and Action Research sort of modes of inquiry potentially come into that in a sort of dialogue with what we just heard about, you know, the actual practical interventions and ethnography and I'm thinking about the experience of a really brilliant student of mine, Anna Lopez, who doing real participant observation as a phone sex worker in a call centre, phone sex, doing shifts, working with action research with sex workers to work out, well, what are the problems, what are the things that need solving? And she was working towards and ending up with making a sex workers union branch with a GMB for particularly this part of the world, this area.

Now, though she did that as a PhD, and it was part of her research, and she was taking the action researchers, you've got to have this mode of discourse between somebody in an academic position, ethnographer, but actually doing work on the

ground with the other workers, and therefore creating that dialogue and that discourse that they were informing each other, but it was really worker-led to a large degree.

I don't know what are the thoughts on that area.

Jacob: Yeah, I mean, I think it's certainly, you know, this is a whole kind of field of activity and so, you know, it's not to say that it's not to colonize act lots of different forms of activism and organization and production of knowledge under the rubric of of kind of ethnography in that sense.

It's more just to build this particular kind of historical argument as a way to sort of give us a kind of vantage point to look at, perhaps these particular kind of activities, because almost anthropology has a vocabulary or has a form that it's been dedicated looking at, which it hasn't quite realized what it has on its hands, as it were and I think exactly, you know, as I see that there is so much work being done and there has been so much work done in the past, you know, 50 years on these kind of on these kind of themes of of activist anthropology, or I think.

But I think that ethnography gives a particular kind of language to kind of talk about this and sort of putting its place, giving it its proper place within the history of Communism itself.

is is is kind of significant, because that also gives us the whole vocabulary, which maybe we've kind of forgotten and I'm I'm not sure if activist anthropology, for instance, gives us a better vocabulary than actually we already have within the kind of tradition of Marxism.

Camilla: I'm right at the back.

Audiance member #5: Hey? Are you open up? in some ways.

British social anthropology and contrasted with an alternative.

We.

Camilla: Need you louder.

We've hardly they can hardly hear you.

Can we have you louder, Shivani? Yeah, possibly.

Yeah.

Audiance member #5: Commenting on how I appreciate the alternative genealogy in a way of English social and maybe that the project of your paper and comments with that.

I appreciate that and I also think of Engels of work living on beyond England and in American feminist anthropology.

The context that I think of as Marx has done his work, Eleanor Lico, Hubing, thinking about the social reproduction.

Is that something that can be compatible? Thinking about multiple genealogies that can also interweave with this one that you're kind of trying to draw nicely with Maoist or French or French international.

So that's kind of question one, what's the relation to the Marxist part, thinking about social reproduction in the family, and also about the ravage and the more broadly.

So not like a comrade.

Camilla: Over here was asking– Oh, quiet again.

Yeah, you've lost track.

You could come up and speak a little here.

Yeah, it's your punishment, you've got to come to the crime.

Audiance member #5: No, no.

I'll continue.

So question one, Marxist family's agenda, can it be compatible if we think about alliances, transnational alliance? Also thinking of, secondly, anti-imperialist social theory, thinking about the work of the Walton studies more broadly, thinking about not only proletariats, but critical peasant studies.

We have another peasant studies scholar in their room.

Could this be another alliance with their comradeship, even within the academy that is working within in revolutionary struggleism, but not always explicitly? And that's kind of a third question I had about, what about the problem and the need to step up also side questions? They're here.

Camilla: Three points here.

Third point to study up.

Audiance member #5: Studying up.

Feminist anthropologists that need not only to study, so to speak, down into areas of problem, of blowback, but those who are producing the problem.

Those are the 1%, those who are right now in almost a cabal-like setting, generating AI as a solution for all of them.

What about that need to study? Also the military.

Pushmere, heavily militarized place and I think it's just as important to be able to study those work in some ways in this room.

Camilla: That's a lot to think about.

Marxist feminism, subalterns and studying up.

Anne: I mean, I agree with you.

I think almost.

I don't have a lot to add because I think everything you're saying, I completely agree.

I think you're right in saying that all these are things that.

Should be included in these ideas and absolutely social reproduction and it's it's this is all kind of.

Things that necessarily need to be seen as part of that kind of common project of ethnographic investigation and it's not that and I think you're definitely right to kind of draw out that point that it's not just about, and this is sometimes what can be a bit dangerous about just talking about the working class, because obviously it's very easy to start to become very narrow about what that even means when really what we are talking about is social reproduction, reproduction of labour and the forces that shape that, which like you say, is studying up.

I completely agree with you.

Camilla: We've got Ian online.

Ian.

Audiance member #6: Yes, thank you for a wonderful, wonderful talk, both of you.

I found that really fascinating and this is not so much a question as just a sort of an anecdote that I don't know enough about, but I think is relevant, probably relevant.

About Mary Burns, the one time Engels got hopping mad with Marx was when Mary died, Engels was in grief and Marx was totally oblivious to it and this speaks to sort of two issues, really.

One was that Mary, in a sense, probably helped keep Engels grounded in his ethnographic experience, you know, for another 20 years and Marx applauded what the work that Engels produced, but barely acknowledged her and so this goes to the question of the interrelationship between the politics, politics being personal and what you've been talking about.

I think somehow, I haven't thought this through, but I was just wondering if you've got anything to say on that.

Jacob: Yeah, exactly.

So that is true that when Mary Burns dies and they have this falling out, perhaps one of their only kind of real serious falling outs.

Engels is deeply wounded by Marx's kind of understated response, as you say and you know, this this has been interpreted in different ways.

Some some some kind of interpreted that it's kind of it was Engels's fault because actually he didn't.

It was because he didn't share Mary Burns within a wider kind of life that he had, and that he actually kind of diminished her role in some ways, or didn't quite communicate that to Marx or didn't live a public life with with Mary Burns and we can.

It's hard to say, but I think that to some extent that's true.

But of course, that was also so much to do with the kind of convention at the time.

So if Engels is full of contradiction, you know, quite literally, in the sense that as we all know, he kept working for, we only have what Marx did because Engels kept working as a manager in the mill for 20 years, work which he didn't enjoy, but he kept doing to fund Marx.

That's one contradiction.

The other being that, of course, if he carried on leading a life of revolutionary, he also kept two residences, one of which he had his public bourgeois life and the other where he lived with with Mary Burns until she died in 1863, and then actually went on to live with Lizzie Burns, her younger sister and so, but of course, all of this is within, you know, see, this is the thing.

I mean, this is within a particular kind of context and Engels, just like Marx was, was a particular product of his time and of his class and of, and so do we judge Engels

for living a double life? you know, going to the mill, seeing May Burns, and then going to the Cheshire Hunt.

Was he studying up, you know, going to the Cheshire Hunt? He was, you know, the original Champagne socialist, as many people, he said.

When he retired, actually, he wrote very, there were great accounts that he stayed up until 5am in the morning drinking champagne and having oysters when he retired.

Chris: So Double Life wasn't anywhere near as bad as Marx's Double Life.

Jacob: Well, that's a yeah.

Well, that's an open to a different thing.

But yeah, I think the figure of Mary Burns, I mean, it's we don't even have a a a drawing or a photo of Mary Burns and I think definitely she was absolutely indispensable and pivotal, although this is this was shot through with with with contradictions, of course.

Camilla: Thanks.

That's a good question and Andrea?

Audiance member #7: Comrades, that was a brilliant.

Thank you very much.

I want to put a particularly urgent imperial submission to you and then he said, what is he done, particularly bearing in mind our sisterly comrades in Isfahan, which has been bombed by those 2,000 pound Yankee imperial bombs.

Because in fact, our Persian comrades have succeeded in deleting, let's say, 20 to 30% of world oil production.

Because their project is to destabilize the Yankee dollar.

and therefore can stabilize the American Fund, destroying their 39 trillion dollar policy scheme.

That's going to be huge economic catastrophes in.

Yeah.

So what should we do? How do we combine theory and actual street level practice to resist what the psychopathic intend to do this once they've shut down a lot of the economy? What shall we do? How are we going to socialize almost all of our lives to resist, not just fascist, but genocidal fascism in Gaza and in Tehran and Isfah.

Good question.

Camilla: All right.

You want to repeat the question for Zoom here? Did Zoom hear that question? What should we do?

Jacob: Well, that is the question, isn't it?

Camilla: I mean, genocidal fascists now, what should we do for that?

Jacob: But that is the question, isn't it? I mean that, you know, that's where we should begin, isn't it? And where we should begin to kind of construct our kind of politics in response to.

So I don't know.

No, but honestly, but to invoke, you know, Marx and the thesis on Fjordback, it begins in practice and in the comprehension of that practice.

So I agree though, entirely with the emphasis that, you know, we're kind of living in a death call, you know?

Audiance member #7: It's like it's not important and I don't think you're only thinking, Is it now that domestic electricity is going to be rational severely? Is it now that there's no food in the shops unless you have the right form of ID? And therefore, how would we return to our neighborhoods and collectivize all what the capitalists want to call our private, pretty gorgeous, QC domesticity? We need to socialize and radicalize all our modes of existence and more than exist is a lunatic genocide.

As Francesca Almesi says, we have moved from the economy of occupation by a page of perhaps forces to the economy, explicit genocide.

So these people aren't joking.

Trump, I mean, maybe he did, maybe not, but they're not, people are putting his why they're not joking.

They intend to get rid of a lot of us expeditiously in a way that won't trouble their conscience one little job.

As they've devastated in Gaza, they have no trouble killing most of the thousands of our economy.

Camilla: Thank you.

Yeah, they're expanding that to Lebanon, to Tehran, and it's gone to many parts of the world already.

uprisings in the Philippines, but people cannot afford any fuel or anything.

Not really fresh, Josh.

It's a collective political question, isn't it?

Anne: The only thing I will say is that your point about how we essentially sustain ourselves in this climate, I think it's a very important one and I think that And this is relating to your point about social reproduction as well.

I think we are in a time of, in some ways, kind of profound de-skilling and there's a lot of the kind of nature of contemporary society is that there is so much that, and this is also relates to AI, is like we're becoming, or we're supposed to becoming less and less able to actually sustain ourselves in a state of collapse and I think that political organisation and investigation and ethnographic methods or whatever it be has to focus on the question of sustaining ourselves autonomously and how we resist and struggle alongside being able to do that work.

So, but yeah, obviously I don't have any answers to that.

Audiance member #7: I mean, should we rely upon appealing to the better side of the metropolitan? We'll go and commandeer Victoria Park and start picking up the farm vegetables.

That's a very fun question.

Camilla: Absolutely.

Chris: So the things we used to be advocating in the in the late the last section was guerrilla gardening.

Guerrilla gardening.

if a whole bunch of people would start growing stuff in a park and those kind of off deliberately, you know, digging up the roast.

It might be one of the things we could do to sort of kind of break the law.

But, on the other hand, establish a higher law.

Camilla: When you have all the problems, allotment holders, how do you communalize and distribute produce in your neighborhood? Not just, you know, my little fence, my little patch.

I think.

Audiance member #4: Pick one thing can't do everything can't you can't you can't you can't stop them can't build the allotment and start bombing down the data centers you can't fix the water or any crisis in in place or the Philippines you pick one thing and you hope to God that someone else picks the next thing and then we build and one person builds you do the next thing you just have to have hope because I can't do anything there's so many things are happening I'm 100% all going to Congo, so go and track.

But you pick something and even if it's just recycling, you know, whatever, whatever you feel like I can actually make a difference.

I can mobilise the people around you.

Maybe I have a little 5000 pounds and I can buy an allotment and I can start a gardening club and then that's, that is happening one thing, but you're, you're doing something better than nothing.

1% better every day.

Audiance member #7: That's what they say about chess.

I think you feel as if you know your neighbor.

I mean, we live in a deliberately compartmentalized dramatically individualized.

You feel as if you know your neighbors.

Camilla: Okay, this is an important point.

No, that is an issue.

The atomization.

Audiance member #4: He's from Germany.

I met him one time and every time he comes to London.

This is my friend.

This is my friend.

If I don't have any money, I stay with him.

He pays for my food and when he comes to London and if I'm up, I've got a good paying job, I do the same, right? It doesn't have to be an agent.

It has to be people who are willing to travel and care and put that community work.

We are in an individualized society, but there are people that even means there are people who are more lonelier than ever, more people being mobilized for a cause.

We met in Thailand.

Well, I met in London.

I looked around one time.

I was very drunk.

We both say we can't remember what we do.

Absolutely.

Audiance member #7: This is a logical position to be drunk.

Audiance member #4: Yeah.

Well, we met again many years later in Thailand and we relied on the goodwill of random people, right? We got people to stay at their houses.

We met people from America.

We met, we were hanging out with native Thai people who were looking after us because a lot of the people in Thailand actually suddenly passed away from dangerous driving or moped.

So we, I don't know how to drive.

We're relying on the people around us, you know, one step, 1% better every day.

You have to trust the people around you.

We're women, we weren't, nothing bad happens to us, so many people looked after us.

So you still have to just try instead of just.

Yeah.

Camilla: Right.

I have to.

Ian, are you wanting to question again, Alexandra? Is it again?

Audiance member #3: Yeah, sorry to jump in.

I couldn't follow very well all the discussion that is happening now.

But I wanted to tie a moment, I found intriguing, because I work and my ethnography is with craftspeople.

So this idea of sustaining and sustainment, craftspeople, so sustainability.

Sustainability, yeah.

So this idea of How do we sustain ourselves? It comes a lot in my practice and partially, it's also how craftspeople see themselves as people that have skills to make things that, you know, they keep these skills alive, especially in the parts of heritage craft.

But I was wondering, because what I've learned a lot from them is that there is something like very imaginative in some of the spaces.

So they aren't necessarily challenging too much capitalism, because of course, everybody, I mean, we are all in the same, so this is so pervasive, so we are all inside this.

is the water in which we swim.

So either we stop being fish in the water, or I don't know how.

But I was wondering in this idea of how do we sustain ourselves to get back a bit on the practice on ethnography, because I was wondering in which way we can also make ethnography something more generative in itself, like instead of being just describing what we see or how something function.

Is there a way to make the practice also something creative and imaginative that is not just a response to the current moment, which of course we need, but also we need something else, an alternative to the current moment that exists independently.

There's not just a response to that, it's something that exists in itself.

So I don't have an answer, and I'm not expecting anybody here to give me an answer, but I wonder if you have thought about ethnography also as a creative practice that can actually build something new that exists onto itself instead, or can help and play a role in this building an alternative and thank you very, very much to everybody for this enormous discussion and I really enjoy it anyway.

Camilla: Thank you, Sandra.

Is that something to talk to or to try to end on? Did you have any more to say or?

Chris: One of the refreshing and kind of unusual things about the way both of you spoke.

when you mentioned communism, kind of identified with communism, and you mentioned communism as if in ways which remind me of the, you know, the 60s, 70s and 80s, when say I'm a communist, was a lot of people would do that and I would, oh, I still call myself a revolutionary communist.

But I mean, nearly all people who once called themselves communists have toned it all down.

Maybe they're socialists, maybe they're all alone.

I wondered if we could just say what it is about your experience, politically, makes you feel able to be so, I don't know, vibrant and current in describing yourselves.

I think you're describing yourself, not just the people you're talking about as, I mean, it's great.

What gives you that confidence? Because many people think that it's a bit of a historical phenomenon.

Is there something, I mean, where does it come from? I'm asking.

Camilla: Did Zoom hear that question? How do gentlemen feel confident enough to call themselves communists or to identify with that?

Jacob: Well, I think, you know, I think it goes back to what kind of Sartre said when he said, you know, communism is still the only horizon that hasn't been replaced.

Different forms may have, you know, put and gone but the as a Horizon of you know human General universal emancipation that Horizon hasn't gone and the imperative is then to think how do you you know reach the concrete analysis of a concrete situation how do you develop the right organizations strategies and tactics which you know has been the name of the game of of communism but I think emphasizing the word communism more than say Marxist is important because here Engels would not have called himself a Marxist and of course, and Marx never did.

What they called themselves was communist and likewise, the different people that we mentioned, when push comes to shove beyond all their differences, would use that word.

So I think it's actually a really unifying word, and maybe we're far enough out of the Cold War that it can probably is rehabilitated, I think, even in kind of public discourse by now at least.

Camilla: Wonderful. Thank you. I think it's time to say thank you so much for this amazing and refreshing update.

Anne Monk & Jacob Seagrave
Young Engels and the Politics of the Encounter
March 31, 2026

Radical Anthropology Group's Vimeo. <www.vimeo.com/1180448693>