

# The anarchy and collectivism of the 'primitive other'

Marx and Sahlins in the Amazon

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‘Primitive communalism’ and ‘primitive anarchy’ are Western constructs about imaginary others. They are categories much more telling of Western evaluations and political desires than of the understandings and practice of peoples to whom they have been applied. From the ethnography on the tropical forest groups of South America, we see that for many of these peoples the choice between ‘collectivism’ and ‘anarchy’ is inappropriate: for them sociality is premised upon an assumption of personal autonomy, and thus ‘unity’ and ‘freedom’ are not opposed as valuations in their own political philosophies. However, in many analyses of so-called primitive or pre-capitalist economies and politics the reader has been given the either/or choice of ‘the tribal’ *either* as herd animal *or* as anarchist, intractable to social control.

There are strong political undertones to such classifications, and the application of them is often a means for making subtle and complicated judgements about the West, and what *it* should or should not be. Apparently straightforward labels become multi-layered, rich in evaluative connotations and chains of associations that can be difficult to unravel because they are part and parcel of specific understandings about what is natural or good in the world. Marx, for example, in his essay on pre-capitalist economic formations, makes the obvious factual generalization that capitalist society is marked by productive progress in a way that the pre-capitalist world is not. He then makes a leap that links productive progress, through the division of labour, with the growth of individualism. This conclusion leads him to expand his original distinction (societies involved in productive progress and those which are not) to include the contrast of individualism and communalism—and of maturity and immaturity. For Marx, productive progress and the individualism that grew with it entailed a maturity, an elaboration of the ‘creative disposition’ (albeit ‘vulgar and mean’ in its bourgeois manifestation), that the ‘childlike world of the ancients’ with its attachment to the communal form could not attain (1965 [1857—58]:84— 5).

Since such labels as ‘collectivity’, ‘communalism’, ‘individualism’, ‘freedom’, and ‘order’ are all loaded ones within our own history of debates, the question of their relevance to the political understanding of, say, the peoples of the South American rainforest is yet another matter. It can be as difficult to make a fit between the Amazonian valuation of the social and anthropological discussions of ‘collectivity’ as it is to find any common ground between the personal autonomy they value in daily life and Western ideals of individualism. Moreover, the very contrast of ‘priority upon collectivity’ versus ‘priority upon the individual’ belongs to the domain of Western discourse and as such is basic to tensions within our own political heritage.

Because any classification of the pre-capitalist world as ‘anarchic’ or ‘collectivist’ is to a certain extent based upon constructs emerging from our own distinctions of worth, it is not surprising that interpretations through them of ostensibly similar ethnographic facts can be highly contradictory. Marx places pre-capitalist production firmly on the side of community, while Sahlins argues for its anarchic and therefore asocial base. It is therefore worthwhile comparing the logic of Marx, in *Precapitalist Economic Formations*, with that of Sahlins, in *Stone Age Economics*, in their respective discussions of

pre-capitalist production and sociality. Their analyses are of particular interest because of the influence both have had on anthropological interpretations.

Marx stresses the importance of the relation between work and community in pre-capitalist production, but he over-states the hold of community over its members, and therefore speaks of the 'sheeplike' nature of the tribal consciousness.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, there is no community in Sahlins' pre-capitalist society until its anarchic domestic mode of production is transcended through non-economic strategy. While Marx classifies 'the tribal' as free (in work) and social, but unproductive, uncreative, pre-political and not very bright, Sahlins categorizes those living in conditions of the 'domestic mode of production' as free, affluent and leisurely, but basically asocial, under-productive and therefore irrational from a narrow economic point of view.

Although Sahlins states clearly (1972:76) that his analysis of primitive economy is meant to be '*chez Marx*', the conclusions of Marx and Sahlins are irreconcilably opposed, in particular those concerning the relation between the economy and the community. Marx's emphasis is first and foremost upon the social nature of his category of original proprietorship, while unity, or the social relations of community life, far from being a precondition in Sahlins' 'domestic mode of production', becomes a feature that stands opposed to it. Why, we may ask, the difference? In part it is because both interpretations carry evaluative judgements, positive and negative, about the 'pre-capitalist' and about us. They are judgements that are ultimately structured by specific views about what the author thinks should hold in general about 'good work', 'good sociality', and 'the adult life'. They are, in other words, judgements about the nature of 'proper' power, 'proper' production, 'proper' freedom, and, indeed, 'proper' rationality.

The peoples of tropical forest South America also make their own judgements about work, sociality, adulthood, power, freedom, and rationality. Although Marx had little ethnography available to him through which to understand tribal production, he was nevertheless able to make an imaginative leap into the 'tribal' world that led him to grasp some of its values better than Sahlins was able to do. The reason for this is that Marx's own judgements about 'proper sociality', 'proper power', and certainly 'proper work', are closer to those of the Amerindian than are those of Sahlins. Marx's complex sketch of 'original proprietorship' is subtle and powerful. Nevertheless, there is much in it that remains unclear, and modern ethnographic work among Amazonian peoples has not yet teased out the answers, yea or nay, to many of the more interesting questions he raises concerning proprietorship and production.

Both Sahlins and Marx stress personal autonomy in work as being a characteristic of the 'tribal' world. This freedom from being coerced or commanded to work is reported time and again in the ethnography of lowland South America, and the case can also be made with relative ease for the high valuation by Amerindians of personal autonomy in other areas of their life. More troublesome, especially for the 'loosely structured'

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<sup>1</sup> For example see Marx and Engels (1970 [1845-46]:51).

and relatively egalitarian native peoples of the Guianas, is the notion of ‘collectivity’. The structure of the Guianese community, its order, has been very difficult to capture through ordinary anthropological vocabulary, because the very notion of ‘collectivity’ is so often predicated in anthropological use upon principles of coercion, hierarchy, and difference. For the native peoples of the Guianas, ‘collectivity’ as a value, far from being predominantly associated with the constraints of relations of domination and subordination, is in contrast—and this will be central to my argument—a ‘collectivity of the intimate and the informal’.

If the very description of Guianese social order taxes ethnographic ingenuity, one would think that the Marxist notion of the ‘community’ as a force of production would be even more problematic. Yet once the Amerindian understanding of proper sociality is unfolded, it becomes clear that ‘collectivity’—but not in the Western sense of constraint and hierarchy—is in fact a force of production in lowland communities. The ‘puzzle’ of Guianese collectivity will be examined further below. Before turning to the ethnography, I shall discuss in more detail aspects of Marx’s notion of ‘original proprietorship’ and Sahlins’ construction of ‘the domestic mode of production’. Of specific interest will be the way Sahlins departs in understanding from Marx on the relation between production and community in tribal economies. A related question concerns how personal autonomy in work fits in with the ties of community. What will become clear through the data on Amazonia is that the principle of informality so salient in the ordering of their production and their community life is often associated with a highly egalitarian political creed. Any classification of this creed will inevitably be influenced by the analyst’s own particular distinctions of worth.

## ‘Original Proprietorship’ and the Preconditions of Pre-Capitalist Appropriation

In ‘Precapitalist economic formations’, a chapter of *Grundrisse*, the primary concern of Marx is to understand the capitalist formation and to specify its strengths and weaknesses by contrasting it with pre-capitalist modes of production from their foundation in the tribal community. He stresses the unity of pre-capitalist modes of production in order to highlight their radical discontinuity with capitalism and wage labour.<sup>2</sup> In Marx’s view, pre-capitalist modes of production have two distinct advantages over the capitalist which have to do with the relationship of the individual first to his own labour, and secondly to social collectivity. Thus his emphasis when describing them is upon proprietorship as a right *and* as a social relationship. He claims, for instance, that the tribal regards the land—its raw materials, its soil—as his own, and therefore labours as its proprietor. Thus each person’s access to the use of natural resources, their appropriation, is taken for granted, as too it is taken for granted that one

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<sup>2</sup> See the discussion by Lefort (1986:142).

has mastery over one's own labour in such appropriation (see 1965 [1857—58]:67, 97).<sup>3</sup> This assumption of access was how Marx defined property in the tribal community.

The *precondition* of such property is, however, collectivity. In Marx's scheme of the history of production, the community, based upon a communality of blood, language, and customs, is the primordial prerequisite of all pre-capitalist appropriation, and, as such, a force of production (1965 [1857—58]:68—9). In his understanding, one could be a proprietor in pre-capitalist modes of production *only* by virtue of being a member of a community, where at the same time people labour only in so far as they participate in the community. The purpose of such labour, Marx says, 'is not the *creation of value*', but 'the maintenance of the owner and his family as well as of the communal body as a whole' (1965 [1857—58]:68, his italics).

Marx also argued that in pre-capitalist formations labour is not at the origin of property, but rather property is a precondition of labour: rights of possession and use are given 'naturally' and not through the process of labour. On this point the Amazonian understanding of personal possessions would confound him. The preconditions of appropriation for the native peoples of lowland South America are complex, but, very briefly, the following four principles of proprietorship are usually recognized: (1) no person and no group of people can own basic resources, neither of the forest nor of the rivers; (2) everyone has access to these resources for the purpose of providing for self and others; (3) it is open to everyone to acquire the skills for transforming the earth's resources for use; and finally, (4) the individual, and not the group, possesses the products of his or her labour. Despite the last principle of proprietorship, the point that Marx was emphasizing—that the individual as one who is given the status and identity of *worker*, is a product of history—could not be disputed.<sup>4</sup>

Although Marx understands tribal proprietorship to be superior to the capitalist in the two respects mentioned, he sees the 'childlike world of the ancients' as falling short in its possibilities for progress—progress both in humankind's capabilities for the domination of nature and for the development of the individual. For Marx the 'free and full development of individual or society' is inconceivable in the ancient world. Such evolution, allowing for the elaboration of creative dispositions, stands in contradiction to the original relation of the individual to community (1965 [1857—58]: 83–5). The individual, though free in work, originally 'appears as a *generic being, a tribal being, a herd animal*'; and it is the development of exchange, Marx argues, that makes the herd animal superfluous and dissolves the links that 'chain' one to community (1965 [1857—58]:96, his italics). Thus the historic process that dissolves the ancient forms, where 'the labourer is an owner and the owner labours' (1965 [1857—58]:97), is ironically the

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion of Marx and Engels in *German Ideology* (Part 1: Feuerbach) on gender relations makes clear that Marx in his discussion of original property was referring especially to one's freedom in disposing of one's own labour. However, they also maintained that women never had such autonomy (see 1970 [1845–46]: 44, 52).

<sup>4</sup> See also the discussion of Lefort (1986:143).

same as that which allows for the freedom and full development of the individual —and for productive progress.

Because of later interpretations that stress the coerciveness of social unity for individuals in tribal societies, it is important to state what Marx does *not* mean. His ‘tribal herd being’ is not chained politically to the community. Indeed, Marx tends to view the ‘tribal’ as both naive and apolitical, or pre-political. He does not state the mastery the individual has over time and labour as political freedom. On the other hand, he does not equate the high valuation of community in tribal life with submission to authority and hierarchy, but with an existence that is very restricted. For Marx it is not the coerciveness of community in precapitalist formations that prevents both the forces of production and individualism from taking off, but the attachment to the particular social structure and the desire for its preservation. His rhetoric about the brutish and naive ‘herd animal’ of the tribal commune reflects his ethnocentric belief that the full development of individual and societal powers, with respect to any sort of knowledge or capabilities, could only be achieved within societies where priority was placed upon productive progress.

## Sahlins on Unity and the Autonomous Household

While Marx understands the community to be a force of production in tribal societies, Sahlins argues that the primary unit of tribal production is the autonomous household, and *not* a community of relations. Indeed, any unity the community establishes stands opposed to the independence of the household unit (his primary unit of production) and to its centrifugal relations with other domestic units (Sahlins 1972:77). In Sahlins’ interpretation, political and kinship ties beyond the primary domestic unit of production enter the economic scene surreptitiously, so to speak, and through non-economic means they create a unity and social order that is in contradiction to the anarchy of the original ‘domestic mode of production’. In his view, it is because of the economic autonomy of the household unit that tribal production is at its base unpoliticized. The aspects of the ‘domestic mode of production’ that Sahlins ostensibly views with a positive eye are, however, similar to those that Marx also noted in his sketch of ‘original proprietorship’. Production is for livelihood, with a view toward domestic contentment. It is for the benefit of the producers only. The members of the household have freedom over work: they retain primacy of appropriation in its relation to productive resources and priority in the disposition of the products of their work (1972:93). Because the purpose of such a ‘domestic mode of production’ is for use, it is also sparing of labour power (1972: 77, 84).

Sahlins comes then to the highly significant conclusion that in tribal societies ‘the economic’ is a ‘*modality of the intimate*’ (1972:77)—but it is one of which he clearly

disapproves.<sup>5</sup> Although he makes the case, and strongly so, that this modality leads to an affluent life from a social point of view (the individual has both freedom and leisure), Sahlins nevertheless scolds. The ‘domestic mode of production’ is at once too simple and *too* leisurely. His is a ‘Protestant ethic’ judgement: primitives just do not work hard enough; they value their leisure too highly. Production in ‘the domestic mode’, he complains, ‘has all the organization of the so many potatoes in a certain famous sack of potatoes’ (1972:95). As a type of production, it is ‘anti-surplus’ (1972:82) and therefore has a ‘profound’ tendency to *under-produce*. Because labour power is ‘unexploited’ there are ‘wasteful’ limits to production (1972: 88). In short, Sahlins argues that as a system the ‘domestic mode of production’ is predicated upon the ‘underuse of labour’, the ‘underexploitation’ of resources, and an uncertain household base (1972: 82, 98—9). As a result, tribal economies ‘do not realize’ their own economic capacities (1972:41). The basis for his judgement would seem to be determined by his own high evaluation of the economic organization of state societies, which is predicated upon a principle of hierarchy that incorporates relations of domination and subordination in both economic and political life.

Reminiscent of Freud’s laments about the childishness of human nature with respect to work in *The Future of an Illusion*, Sahlins remarks that the greatest political challenge in tribal societies is that of ‘getting people to work more, or more people to work’ (1972:82). The reason for this is that the ‘domestic mode’ is ‘refractory to the exercise of political power and the enlargement of production’ (1972:42), and in itself provides no mechanisms for holding a growing community together. It is Sahlins’ conclusion that economically primitive society is founded on anti-society. As such, it is flawed, and unless the ‘domestic mode’ is forced beyond itself, the ‘entire Society’ does not survive (1972: 86, 97). Thus the problem for the polity is to achieve the public economic goal, which is always over and against the ‘petty, private self concerns’ of the household economy (1972:131).

In Sahlins’ view, society is achieved among tribal peoples only in so far as the ‘economic defects’ of the ‘domestic mode of production’ are overcome. In effect, what this means is that the economic values of autonomy and equality must be undermined before the social can be created (1972: 130—4), a job basically to be done by the political leader. It is he who is able to encroach ‘upon the domestic system to undermine its autonomy, curb its anarchy, unleash its productivity’ (1972:130). According to Sahlins, not only is political action a necessary stimulus to production, but chiefly ‘liberality’ and rhetoric of reciprocity (all in line with the primary economic values of domestic intimacy) are but a cloak for what is in fact (a necessary) exploitation.

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<sup>5</sup> Sahlins conflates throughout most of his discussion in *Stone Age Economics* what in ordinary anthropological parlance would be separated as ‘hunters and gatherers’ and ‘horticulturalists’. I am not opposed to such conflation.

At this point in his argument, on the subject of mystification, Sahlins sets aside his original contrast of the tribal and the capitalist modes of production, and moves instead to a position that cites exploitation as a universal of the human condition:

the conjunction of a norm of reciprocity with a reality of exploitation would not distinguish the primitive political economy from any other: everywhere in the world the indigenous category for exploitation is ‘reciprocity’.

(Sahlins 1972:134)

Sahlins *must* take this position on the universality of the political economy. For him social order, and thus the state of sociality itself, is only possible through the action forthcoming from institutions of hierarchy. It is only through exploitation that people can be pushed beyond the original asocial and anarchic domestic mode. Sahlins (1972:132ff.) thus looks with a cynical eye at the observations by Levi-Strauss on the plight of the generous chief among the Nambikwara of Brazil who was at the mercy of collective greed. In his article on Nambikwara chieftainship, Levi-Strauss (1967 [1944]) had concluded that it was a relation of reciprocity, and not one of subordination/domination, that bound the group as a recognized collectivity to its chief.<sup>6</sup> Given the data presented by Levi-Strauss, it is difficult to detect chiefly exploitation. Sahlins does not quote passages from Levi-Strauss where he details the ways in which the chief had to *work* harder than anyone else, and how it was through his own personal labour that he provided in times of economic disaster (see Levi-Strauss 1967[1944]). The chief’s skills and initiative were greater than those of other people. At the same time he had no power to order the labour of members of his group, nor could he reprimand disorderly conduct or laziness. In sum, he had no coercive power at his disposal (1967[1944:53]). Levi-Strauss explains that for the Nambikwara consent was at the origin of leadership and the only measure of its legitimacy. Indeed, the difficulties of leadership were so great, the duties of the leader so exacting and tiresome, that Levi-Strauss wonders why anyone accepted the role of leader in Nambikwara society—was the prize worth the trouble?

It is easy, on the other hand, to see why the Nambikwara group, given its own conditions for leadership, wanted a leader. The weight of the welfare of the group was on his shoulders. It was also because of *its desire for collectivity* that the group desired the leader. Sahlins, on the other hand, writes as if leadership is *imposed* upon the group, and for the sake of the collectivity so acquired household units must sacrifice their autonomy and their leisure—they must bow to exploitation. It is difficult to understand why people would accept political leadership under such conditions. The Nambikwara, far from displaying any acceptance of relations of subordination for the sake of collectivity, would have left any leader whom they understood to be using

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<sup>6</sup> Sahlins quotes only from *Tristes Tropiques* (1961), and not from Levi- Strauss’s article on Nambikwara chieftainship, which was first published in 1944.

coercive techniques. They did, however, recognize leadership as a force that brings about collectivity. Levi-Strauss tells us that their word for chief, *Uilikande*, seemed to mean ‘the one who unites’ or ‘the one who joins together’. He concludes that ‘the leader appears as the cause of the group’s willingness to aggregate rather than as the result of the need for a central authority felt by a group already constituted’ (1967:53). The critical question is the *nature* of this collectivity that the Nambikwara desired. What was it for? Levi-Strauss gives us a good clue when he states that a major duty of leadership was to create high morale within the group: ‘the chief must be a good singer and dancer, a merrymaker always ready to cheer up the band and to brighten the dullness of daily life’ (1967:55).

To summarize briefly, for Marx *all* modes of production are social ones, with community the hallmark of all pre-capitalist production. For Sahlins, tribal social order is achieved to the degree that exploitative political forces through the means of mystification overcome the asocial structure of production. His argument depends in part upon a rather arbitrary separation of ‘the domestic’ from ‘the public’. Although such a split clearly fits our own understanding of the relation between family and state or civil society, its saliency is not always so clear-cut for the indigenous peoples of Amazonia. Moreover, given the stress that they often place on the freedom of the *individual* in work, the primary unit of production could just as well be, not the household, but the individual person, male or female, adult or child. It can equally be said (somewhat *chez* Marx) that the community itself, especially for the peoples of the Guianas, constituted a basic unit of production.

## Collectivity as a Modality of the Intimate and the Informal: The Guianese Example

The social unity valued by the indigenous peoples of the Guianas bears little resemblance to the ‘collectivity’ envisaged as necessary to their wellbeing by Sahlins. It is also a type of social linkage that can be difficult for the ethnographer to describe. Riviere has recently argued (in press) that the community, a settlement of people that typically dwelt within a single multi-family communal dwelling, was the basic social unity in the Guianas. He states that as a unit this community was politically autonomous, and in ideal socially and economically self-sufficient. He stresses, however, the ephemerality of these communities and the fluidity of their social arrangements. Thomas, who writes on the Pemon of Venezuela (1982), similarly emphasizes the difficulty of seeing ‘collectivity’ as a strong factor in the social organization of this Guianese people. He comments that in the Pemon case, order and solidarity were not associated, for their emphasis was so strongly upon the principles of personal autonomy and egalitarianism. Thus Pemon attachment to community was not to a concrete solidary entity; nor did the settlement in any convincing way impinge upon its members as ‘the community as

a whole' (1982:235—6). The Pemon were a peaceful people—a peacefulness, Thomas suggests, that was to a large extent a function of 'the community' having a minimal constraining effect, in structural terms, upon the individual. Each person, beyond the level of nuclear family and sibling set, defined his or her own unique social field for both work and residence. The first response of a Pemon to insult, injury, or personal friction was *to move*; the response to dissension was felt to be *in one's own hands*. Because the community was not a decision-making body, it could not achieve hegemony over the individual in concrete economic or political terms. Yet at the same time Thomas comments that for the Pemon 'autonomy is not being alone' (1982:236). Thus, we return to my opening comments about sociality for the tropical forest peoples of South America being predicated upon the principle of personal autonomy. For them, autonomy is a highly social state, and this seems to be the puzzle for the Western analyst.

Collectivity of a very important type did obviously characterize life in a Pemon settlement, and the order for which they strove was not simply a figment of the tropical imagination. Settlements did have physical existence on one site over a twenty-year time span. Thomas, almost inadvertently, places his finger upon the primary characteristic of Amazonian collectivity when he stresses the intimacy achieved between members of a settlement. He notes that 'the conditions of constant interaction and solidarity within the Pemon household and settlement are conducive to a heightened awareness of others' moods and needs and of the necessity of adapting oneself to them' (1982:235). The persistent destabilization of hierarchy in Pemon social relationships—as, for example, might hold between father-in-law and son-in-law—is another lead that should guide us to their understanding of sociality. The institutionalization of hierarchy is not conducive to informality, nor to relations of intimacy, and the *only* collectivity with which Pemon individuals were comfortable was that conducive to the establishment of the intimate and the informal.

As already mentioned, Sahlins describes his 'domestic mode of production' as a 'modality of the intimate', which from his point of view embodies the anarchy of nature. The indigenous peoples of the Guianas, on the other hand, understand such a modality as a highly desirable *social* state to be achieved. It is my argument that sociality for them was the *accomplishment* of the principles of intimacy and informality through the everyday activities of community life. In contrast to peoples who believe that their communities have temporal existence through such mechanisms as the corporate ownership of property and the jural rules of such corporation, the Guianese community had existence through time as a political, economic, and social unit to the extent that its members were able to achieve, on a daily basis, the goals of intimacy and informality. Community for them was a process of existence that had to be *daily* achieved by individuals through both tact and work (see Overing 1989). The question remains of how a collectivity based upon such principles might also be conducive to production.

## The Community as ‘a Force of Production’

Many of the attributes of Sahlins’ ‘domestic mode of production’—leisure, affluence, the freedom to choose how and when one works—can be dependent upon community. For a large number of indigenous peoples of the Amazon, the community is an obvious unit of production.<sup>7</sup> When I conducted fieldwork among the Piaroa, the local group was usually composed of six to seven families living together within a large communal house. Informal work organization that cross-cut household boundaries typified the rhythm of daily work. A husband and wife were careful to discuss with each other their daily plans. But, although they jointly owned their garden plots, or shared the ownership of such plots with another couple, daily production and consumption patterns did not closely conform to the family unit. A woman could be accompanied to her field by daughter, daughter-in-law, mother, sister, sister-in-law, and female visitors. Young girls worked with mother, father’s sister, mother’s sister, brother, sister, potential sister-in-law, and father. A boy could choose to work with his father, his mother’s brother, his sister or his mates—or not at all. Men went hunting alone or with whomsoever they pleased. If large peccary were sighted, a man would join a hunting party comprised of all the men in his community. Collecting parties were frequently spontaneous affairs that cross-cut family units. The household, although a hearth-owning unit, was no more a primary unit of consumption than it was for production. Because each game species was subject to specific culinary rules, consumption patterns within the community could be complicated. Depending upon age and gender, people could eat certain parts of an animal, but not others. Thus for some meals young men might cook and eat together, while women and children ate separately from a common pot, as too might the adult men as a group.

As these examples indicate, daily production and consumption for the Piaroa was loosely organized, and work usually reflected the personal moods and preferences of the individuals involved. As with the Pemon, right of preference referred both to the personal choice of co-residents with whom one found it most congenial to spend time and to the type of task itself. The Piaroa stated explicitly that the affluent community was the one that could take into account on a daily level both flexibility in schedules of work and right to individual preference. Affluence was a matter of achieving personal comfort in work. The achievement of such wealth demanded the establishment of a community that had both the high morale and the size to allow for flexibility and fluid patterns of cooperation.

The Piaroa repeatedly stated the correlation between personal affluence and community size. A very small community of fifteen people simply did not have the membership resources to allow for personal choice and a positive everyday state of mood and health in the carrying out of all the duties required for daily survival—the fishing, the hunting,

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<sup>7</sup> For some Amazonian groups, such as the Achuar of Ecuador, demographic factors make the household a fairly literal unit of production. See Descola (1986).

the collecting of food and firewood, the gardening, the preparation of game and garden produce, the making of tools and clothing, and the conducting of ritual necessary for daily protection. The size of a community and thus its affluence was related to the qualities of its leader, for it was his job to attract into his community a large number of people who could also amiably cooperate on a daily basis (see Overing Kaplan 1975). While the leader of a Piaroa community had no powers of coercion over work, and little weight in the daily organization of economic activities, it *was* his duty (as it was for the Nambikwara chief) to maintain the high morale of his community so that work, and existence generally, remained comfortable for its members.

As Goldman has noted for the Cubeo of the North-west Amazon (1963: 88), the critical difference between the wealthy and the poor community was not a matter of productive accumulation, but of morale. This makes good sense if a primary value of a people is upon personal autonomy and personal comfort in work, a value encompassing the idea that work must cater to individual desires, talents, and dispositions. The important point that Goldman understood about Amazonian social and political organization, and the philosophy of sociality that supported it, was that the very fact of people living together in a community was dependent upon the *daily* creation of high morale among its members. Since linkage to others for both the Piaroa and the Cubeo remained (insistently) on a relatively informal plane and to a large extent subject to personal preference, the group stayed together only so long as its members and its leader achieved and maintained geniality of relationships (Goldman 1963:279–83; Overing 1989: 164). It was through the construction of high morale that collective activities, and indeed all work, could be smoothly carried out. In this respect the community could be viewed as a force of production. As Goldman points out, collectivity and the political work required to create and maintain community were more a matter of the ‘politics of mood management’, than the establishment of institutions of hierarchy incorporating command/obedience relations.

It is important to be even clearer on the relations between community, wealth, and personal autonomy. Wealth for the Piaroa was assessed from the point of view of the individual, and not of the community. Both the capacity to create materially and to act socially were aspects of personal autonomy: the power for both social and material action was in the hands of the individual. Each person was responsible for developing within the self the capacities that allowed for his or her own social and material existence. Individuals were truly wealthy only if their ‘thoughts were awakened’ (*ta'kwa poiaechi*), and therefore the ‘life of the mind’ (*ta'kwaru*) well developed. It was the well-developed ‘life of the mind’ that gave one the powerful means to act materially in the world. The stress in the Piaroa theory of power was upon the agent’s knowledge, capabilities, and will: these qualities, which together formed a person’s *ta'kwaru*, were the source of materially good things in life.

Nevertheless, wealth was a social notion. A wealthy individual by definition lived with many people and enjoyed a certain quality of life that gave both leisure and abundance. The wealthy person had the powers to live tranquilly with others. Tact,

the recognition of the personal autonomy of others, was clearly considered to be an aspect of productive knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Although the stress in the Piaroa theory of power and wealth was upon personal autonomy and creativity, it was also a theory firmly based upon the ideal of sociality and not that of property.

Personal possession as we know it is very different from the Piaroa understanding of it, and several observations about their views are pertinent. Products of work were possessed by the individual, and not the group. They were recognized as manifestations of the particular individual's thoughts, and ownership or personal possession was often expressed through reference to the person's life of the mind (see Overing 1992). The owner also had the privilege of disposal, but not necessarily privileged use. Generosity in sharing (the disposing and distributing of the products of one's labour) was an important social principle for the Piaroa, and in some areas an obligation, such as all products brought back to the house from the jungle. In hunting, fishing, and collecting a person appropriated in large part on behalf of the collectivity. Possession also denoted a relationship of nurture, as with a kinsman. It is significant that the use of kinship terms was in the possessed form. This is logical, for one created kinsmen not only through reproductive capacity, but also through work freely chosen through personal decision. To create kinsmen demanded personal responsibility in a form not so different from that required in the caring for other products of one's work. Kinsmen, as other possessions, required nurturing and protecting. In short, the notion of personal possession among the Piaroa emphasized ownership as a social relationship.

The community as a collectivity of kinsmen living and therefore working together was ideally a community of nurture.<sup>9</sup> The Piaroa, in referring to the membership of their communal house, most often used the phrase '*tutae itsotu*', which literally meant 'the collectivity of like beings to which I belong'. According to the Piaroa, people became physically 'of a kind' through the process of living together. Thus those who were not originally close kinsmen became so over time through proximity. The process of 'becoming of a kind' included working and eating together, and mutual caring for one another through daily work. The work of each adult, and especially that of the leader who possessed the greatest productive skills, contributed to the daily achievement of community, its relatedness, and well-being. Through physical contact, the food one ate affected everyone with whom one lived, as too did one's own personal powers (see Overing 1986). Moreover, the food one ate was usually as much a result of the work of others as of self—and as such a product of *their* thoughts as well as one's own.

It is clear that work, conducted through the modality of the intimate and the informal, was not alienated from the personal relationships of community and their morality. The Piaroa did not distinguish 'work' as a category separable from human living in general. Work, as far as possible, was to be pleasurable. Both intensely personal and

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<sup>8</sup> See Thomas (1982) and Goldman (1963) on the same theme.

<sup>9</sup> The observations of Ingold (1986: chap. 9) on collectivity and personal possession in band societies bear many similarities to my own on the Piaroa. See also Ingold (1986:227) on the 'community of nurture' among hunters and gatherers.

social, it was ideally both a product of pleasurable social relationships and a creator of them.<sup>10</sup> As Gow (1991) has described work for the indigenous peoples of the Lower Urubamba in Peru, it was action that fulfilled the desire to provide for self and the desires and lives of others—of children, spouse, and other members of the community. Only through such work could a proper community and linkage with others be created and maintained. Thus personal work and social linkage were constitutive of each other. Without the tranquil relationships of good community life, one could not work. Without work, one had no community. In other words, work, understood as the daily maintenance of life, was the way in which linkage with others could be achieved.

## Conclusion

What was notable about Piaroa production, within the framework of community, was the informality of its organization and the personal autonomy that such informality allowed. Their vision of the good life was in sharp contrast to Sahlins' understanding of the productive and therefore social community, where through relations of hierarchy resources, labour, and their products could be exploited to their fullest. His yardstick is capitalism: the economic defects of 'the domestic mode of production' must be overcome so that tribal peoples can become workers. But should this occur, as when the indigenous peoples of Amazonia become involved in wage-labour, they are no longer operating within a modality of the intimate and the informal. As Marx understood, the change from one form of sociality (with its attachment to community) to the next (with its focus upon productive progress) was a radical step in general in the history of humankind.

Sahlins, although he captures well the principles of autonomy and intimacy so characteristic of tribal economies, does not give these principles either social or political value. They do have both, and they were values often and vehemently expressed in daily life by individual Piaroa. The *political* choice of the Piaroa was to opt for daily physical and emotional comfort rather than for, let us say, the more abstract stability provided by the rules and regulations ordering past and future inheritance. The primary political goal of the Guianese community was the achievement of the social, but such sociality was dependent upon both the economic autonomy of the individual members of the community and the creation of high morale among them.

It tends to go against the grain in Western analysis to ascribe political freedom to the tribal, or to label as 'political' the freedom that such peoples as those of the Guianas demand in work and their everyday decisions. As already mentioned, Marx tends not to grant political status to such freedom for 'the tribal'. Lefort (1986:153), however, construes Marx's interpretation of the primitive commune to be, in implication at least, no less political than economic. With capitalism, Marx understands the workers' lack

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<sup>10</sup> See Overing (1989), where I describe the Piaroa 'aesthetics of production' which entails a particular relation between morality, the beauty of a person, and productive knowledge.

of freedom (lack of property) as a political fact. Where people do have mastery over their own labour and the products of it (where they *are* property owners in more or less the original sense), would these people in Marx's understanding be politically free? Probably not, but in the light of modern ethnography we can claim they are—or at the very least we can argue that their freedom in work is a political fact.

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