In the last few years of his life, Marx returned to two important themes that he had studied in his earlier works: precapitalist societies and gender. While Marx was not able to write up and publish his research on these topics, his notebooks provide a great deal of insight into his thinking during this period. Marx took extensive notes on a number of anthropological studies including those of Lewis Henry Morgan, Henry Sumner Maine, Ludwig Lange, John Budd Phear, John Lubbock, and Maxim Kovalevsky. This chapter will address only the first of these, and compare Marx’s notes to Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, in which Engels consulted Marx’s notebooks on Morgan. The following chapter will discuss Marx’s notes on Maine and Lange as they relate to gender and the family.

It appears that, in these notes, Marx was returning to some of the issues that he raised in the *Grundrisse*, especially in the section ‘Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations’. Particularly important was the way in which the development of property facilitated the individuation of human beings. Marx, to some extent, does address this issue and the particular forms that individuation takes with regard to gender and the family. These notes suggest that, for Marx, the development of class-society and women’s oppression are part of the same historical process, but in a
somewhat different way from that described later by Engels in his *The Origin of the Family Private Property and the State*. For Marx, there had been no ‘world-historic defeat of the female sex’. The condition of women in society is and has varied. This is just as true of the time before the introduction of patriarchy as in the period of patriarchy. Instead of seeing this development in a linear way, Marx appears to have been working out a dialectical history of these processes.

This chapter will examine Marx’s notes from Morgan and provide an analysis of the general direction that he seems to have been taking with them. Before delving into a discussion of Marx’s notes themselves, I will provide a short discussion on the history of the notebooks and their relation to Engels’s *The Origin of the Family*. After a brief overview of Morgan’s basic argument, I will discuss the major points of Marx’s notes on Morgan as they relate to gender and the family. Finally, I will compare Marx and Engels’s views on these issues in light of feminist criticisms of their work.

**Marx’s notebooks and the history of Engels’s *The Origin of the Family***

Of all Marx’s notes taken in the 1880s, those on Morgan’s *Ancient Society* have become among the most significant. After Marx’s death, Engels found this notebook and eventually used it, along with his own reading of Morgan, to write *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. In a letter to Kautsky on 16 February 1884, Engels discussed the importance of the book:

> There is a *definitive* book – as definitive as Darwin’s was in the case of biology – on the primitive state of society; once again, of course, Marx was the one to discover it. It is Morgan’s *Ancient Society*, 1877. Marx mentioned it, but my head was full of other things at the time and he never referred to it again which was, no doubt, agreeable to him, wishing as he did to introduce the book to the Germans *himself*; I can see this from his very exhaustive extracts. Within the limits set by his subject, Morgan rediscovers for himself Marx’s materialist view of history, and concludes with what are, for modern society, downright communist postulates. The Roman and Greek gens is, for the first time, fully elucidated in the light of that of savages, in particular the American Indians, thus providing a firm basis for the history of primitive times. If I had the time to spare, I would work up the material, together with Marx’s notes, for the feuilleton of the *Sozialdemokrat* or for the *Neue Zeit*, but it’s out of the question.¹

¹ Engels 1975–2004a, p. 103.