CHAPTER 2

Ethnology and Forms of ‘the Common’

If capitalism is the universal truth, it is so in the sense that makes capitalism the negative of all social formations: it is the thing, the unnameable, the generalized decoding of flows that reveals a contrario the secret of all these formations ... Primitive societies are not outside history, it is capitalism that results from a long history of contingencies and accidents, and that brings on this end

GILLES DELEUZE and FÉLIX GUATTARI, Anti-Oedipus

The ‘New’ Anthropology of Capitalism: From the Grundrisse to Capital

In this chapter I shall take into consideration Marx’s study of precapitalist forms, or indeed noncapitalist situations, some characteristic elements of which became apparent at the end of the previous chapter. Within this perspective, I will also shine a light on the so-called Ethnological Notebooks, giving due credit to their importance, albeit without indulging in any idealisation of the structures that we mentioned just previously. Indeed, a distinctive characteristic of Marx across his entire trajectory was his search for individual realisation, antithetical to any type of ‘communitarianism’. It is not always very clear in what sense we ought to understand the term ‘anthropology’, and that goes for Marx, too. The nineteenth-century birth of anthropology as a science and its development in the twentieth century further complicate the picture: and the encounter between Marxism and anthropology has been an intense one indeed. In Marx himself, we can identify two different meanings of anthropology. The first, philosophical sense defines anthropology as a discourse on man and his key attributes. The second, however, conceives anthropology in a manner analogous to that adopted by anthropology as a science, and is thus employed with particular reference to precapitalist situations and the communitarian structures present therein.¹ We will begin by addressing the former

¹ For a differentiation between two different declinations of anthropology, see Sartre 1972. For
Marx’s reflection was sustained by an emphasis on the individual element, as the distinctive trait of the capitalist system with respect to previous forms of production. As we already underlined in the last chapter, we cannot properly speak of the individual when it comes to precapitalist structures, since man was attached to the community as if by an umbilical cord, through the mediation of land. Such transparency in the relation between men and things, even if it is characterised by rigid hierarchies, seems wholly opposed to the fetishism that characterises capitalist society. At the base of capitalist society stands the individual, with her independence and characteristic potential for movement; this dynamism\(^2\) must, however, be conceived in all its ambivalence, since while the single human can now take charge of her own activity, she is now developing in the context of enslavement to the social power of money and capital. Even if such an approach is present throughout Marx’s entire trajectory, even from his first writings, it is without doubt in the *Grundrisse* that this logic is most fully explicated. The individual dimension here becomes central, through an irrecoverable rupture with the ‘communitarian’ scenario that appeared in earlier social forms.\(^3\) According to Marx in the *Grundrisse*, what we have here is capital’s ‘permanent revolution’ against the bonds that hold back the full development of the single person.

Such a framework presents something of a ‘nineteenth-century’ limitation, indulging in a ‘grand narrative’ with wide historical scope yet simplifying certain aspects of the situation. I do not believe that what we have here is a true and proper definition of a philosophy of history, even beyond the fact that what is meant by such a term is often opaque and far from immediately clear. In any case, it is on this basis that we find the element – present ever since the ‘beginning of the epoch’ in the second half of the eighteenth century – of the passage from plural *historiae* to the modern declination of history as a ‘collective singularity’.\(^4\) Certainly the *Grundrisse* present an excessively schematic

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\(^2\) See Krahl 1971.

\(^3\) See Basso 2008a, pp. 153–215; Di Marco 2005; Bellofiore, Starosta and P. Thomas (eds.) 2013.

\(^4\) Koselleck 1979; Duso 1999, pp. 21 ff.