Marx's Productive Forms Revisited


The three books being reviewed provide a learned and comprehensive exposition of Marx’s understanding of forms of production. Citing extensively The German Ideology, the Grundrisse, and Capital, they reconstruct in detail his picture of the evolving relationship between property and social organization. Despite the focusing of Capital on modern Western economic development, Tökei stresses Marx’s persistent interest in primitive and Graeco-Roman forms of production. For Marx the productive organization of labor and property did not by any means originate with what he called “die germanische Produktionsweise” and viewed as characteristic of medieval Europe. In fact, he interpreted the medieval productive system as being a point of entry into a capitalist world built upon private property and alienated labor. In ancient times property and labor had been identified with the community, but in the Middle Ages land was settled and cultivated either individually or in families. Unlike ancient slaves, medieval serfs were not simply defined as instruments of toil, but invested with landed property. Among Germanic peoples, tribal unity was maintained not through joint control or ownership of property, but by integrating land-holding family heads into a shared framework of ritual and custom.

While the Germanic mode of production prefigured capitalist private property, two more ancient economies set the stage for Germanic society. The earliest phase of production, and from Marx’s theory the most durable outside the West, is marked by collective control of both labor and property. Once abandoning their nomadic existence, primitive men bestowed a communal character upon the territory they settled and farmed. They also vested ultimate power over life and the disposition of their possessions in a ruler who thereafter functioned as an awesome family head. In the absence of new material challenges or of subsequently imposed cultures, this Urgemeinschaft was able to endure for millennia and was discussed by Marx in terms of an almost immutable “Oriental form of production.”
In Graeco-Roman society, however, there arose an alternate form of property relations which served to undermine the older mode of production. Sometime after the Doric invasions, the Greek city states began to transfer their common tribal holdings to the heads of families. Although preserving representation for the ἀρχαῖα, or founding clans, by means of the ἄθροισις, or assembly, the Greek πόλες, like the later Roman republic, yielded control over its economy increasingly to families and individual citizens. It did this, however, without altering the appearance of a communally-based property. By justifying allocation of lands in terms of use and by requiring citizenship of all property-holders, the city state would continue to define itself along older tribal lines. Marx viewed the institution of slavery among the Greeks and Romans as being a logical outgrowth of the process by which the private sphere (τὸ διώρισμα) became divorced from the public (τὸ δημοσίον). The slaves, often descended from war captives, were never designated as public property who only later were consigned to households. Instead they were seen in accordance with Aristotle's dictum as being “life-possessing instruments”: productive tools attached to specific families in the same way as were the work animals and farming utensils. Thus the Greek city state adopted a perspective on slavery that fitted the needs of a private economy. It was also one that enabled the citizens to circumvent any applications of the principle of communal property.

The Germanic mode of production continued the movement toward private possession and helped furnish the conceptual framework for capitalism. Because the Germanic settlers of Europe had no scruples about acknowledging private ownership in their territory, they served as a bridge to the capitalist form of production. Nonetheless, lacking a modern technological and industrial base, the leaders of early medieval society had to adapt their principle to an impoverished rural economy. In time they adopted serfdom to meet their material needs, while their intelligentsia constructed an other-worldly theology for expressing human self-alienation in a harsh economic environment.

Once having stated Marx's view of the inherent limitations of pre-capitalist society, Tōkei then provides the true context for the assessment in the Grundrisse of the historical importance of capitalism compared to that of earlier modes of production. According to Marx: “The universal tendency of capitalism distinguished it from all preceding stages of production. Only capitalism allows for a free, unfettered, progressive, and universal development of all productive forces. . . . Measured against capitalist production, the three earlier evolutionary stages seem like so many local developments of humanity and indeed, like forms of nature worship.” This paling of the past in relation to an emerging society would occur even more dramatically with the advent of socialism. With the fifth and last form of production, the capitalist division between private property and estranged labor would vanish, as expanding indus-