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PROBLEMS OF THE ECONOMY OF HUNTERS-GATHERERS SOCIETIES

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The community was the basic socio-economic institution of the hunters-gatherers society. It was the main form of organisation of primitive collective production, a relatively stable association that owned a certain territory which provided the means for its existence. Ethnography finds this institution among all hunters, gatherers, and fishers, at all the known levels of development of pre-agriculturist society in all geographical regions. This is evidence of its universality, which springs from the place held by the community in the economy of primitive society.

The community must be distinguished from other social institutions of the hunters-gatherers society. The hunters-gatherers communities known to ethnography consisted of several families that, in many cases, were not linked by bonds of kinship. A number of communities formed a tribe. Thus, a community cannot be identified with either a family or a tribe. It cannot be identified with a clan, either. Due to exogamy, the clan could not consist of families. It was formed on the basis of consanguinity while the community consisted not only of blood relatives but also of affinal relatives, and sometimes even of people unconnected by consanguinity and/or affinity. The community consisted of members of several i.e., at least, two clans. The functions of these social institutions were correspondingly different. They could coincide partially, but underwent changes in the process of social development. However, their origin was different.

It is logically necessary to assume that the community emerged together with the emergence of human society itself. Although it probably differed organisationally and structurally from the communities known to ethnographers, it was essentially such and held the same place in the life of society. As an expression of the low development level of the productive forces and, as a consequence, of the weakness of the individual, it was the most natural form of social life at the dawn of human history, a natural form of organising incipient production. Then and later the community was the basis of production.¹

The main economic functions of the primitive *socium* were production, consumption, division of labour, and exchange of activities. These were chiefly the inner functions of the community. The material-technical potentialities of society at that level of development were much too small, while dependence on natural conditions was still much too great to enable society to exist in any other form. Only the forms of the community changed, but in the structure of primitive society it retained its significance as the leading socio-economic institution throughout the history of that society. Here we are dealing with human society, and hence also with human labour organised in a certain way, with a group of toilers jointly producing the means of existence, and with a definite system of the division of labour. This group was the community. It was a naturally shaped group of people in the making and then of definitely moulded ones. Moreover, it was a vital condition for their existence. In this assumption we are guided by the principle of *historico-materialistic monism*, which asserts the priority of origin of material-production and, correspondingly, of the social institutions in which this production was realised.

The essence and functions of the hunters-gatherers community is best of all seen in societies, which by virtue of historical conditions, were more isolated than others and therefore preserved old forms of the socio-economic organi-

sation most fully. The aborigines of Australia and Tasmania belong to such societies. At the time the study of their society commenced, the Tasmanians and some ethnic groups of Australians were at the phase of social development that had been reached by mankind in the Upper Palaeolithic, and the data on their social organisation could be used for a comparative-historical study of human society in the pre-historical period, i.e., at the Upper Palaeolithic stage. An analysis of Australian and Tasmanian ethnographic data, and also of data on the hunters and gatherers of other continents shows that the social structure of these societies was extremely plastic and could universally adapt itself actively to the changing natural conditions and requirements of production. This is what enabled the primitive society to survive in extremal natural-geographical conditions and was the precondition for the settlement of almost the entire planet (with the exception of the least habitable geographical zones) already at the stage of the appropriative economy.

Ethnographic data testify to the fact that the hunters-gatherers community was not only the basic socio-economic but also the key territorial unit of society. As a territorial unit it was more important than the tribe, which, for instance, among the Australians and Tasmanians was only an amorphous sum-total of communities, or local groups speaking one and the same language. Territory was exploited economically chiefly at the level of and through the community. Although for its composition and numerical strength it was relatively stable, at a certain period of the year, when conditions were unfavourable, it split into unstable, dynamic foraging groups or even into individual families that obtained food independently. The foraging group consists of a few families belonging to the given community, and its composition was inconstant and fluid. When conditions become more favourable, the community was restored to its former composition. The sum of the mobile foraging groups, whose composition and numerical strength changed constantly,

was a form of the existence of the community under changing ecological conditions. This was a community in the process of the economic development of a territory.

The ability of the community to split into relatively independent foraging groups rhythmically, in accordance with the natural cycle, and then to re-establish itself was a form of the hunters-gatherers society's social adaptation to the environment and economic activity. The alternation between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies, between dispersion and concentration within the community followed ecologically-conditioned cycles.

The structure we have described was typical for not only the Australians and other hunters and gatherers but also for the Tasmanians, the most backward society that existed up to the time of European colonisation. From this it may be concluded that the same socio-economic foundations underlay Upper Palaeolithic and, possibly, more ancient societies.²

The relationship between the members of the community and their territory represented a dynamic system best suited to the requirements of the hunters-gatherers economy. The community was the key mechanism bringing the society of hunters and gatherers into the best possible correlation with the natural environment. Since it was a social institution whose main task was to develop a certain territory, that territory was regarded as its property also by other communities.

This does not mean that this was an absolute, exclusive property, that other communities had no possibility of obtaining means of existence in that territory. In accordance with historically-shaped traditions they could do so with the permission of the territory's owners or by virtue of other circumstances. For instance, depending on the density of population and availability of natural resources, the territories of communities could be more or less definite, but during a drought the community could seek refuge for many months on the land of another community. Sometimes

communities alternately placed their land with its resources at the disposal of other communities (a form of exchange of resources distributed in time). Nonetheless, the bond of a community with a definite territory may be called the territoriality of the primitive community, and was one of the foundations of the socio-economic organisation of the society of hunters and gatherers.

Primitive society was based on collective, communal property in land as the principal condition and means of production, as the wellspring of the material resources needed by society. Assuming that the community was the primary and basic socio-economic institution of human society, we must also assume that property on land and natural resources was historically the first and basic form of property. The community remains the main subject of communal property in land also in contemporary hunters-gatherers societies and land is the foundation of the existence of these societies.

The Australians believe in the existence of mystical associations linking the members of a totemic clan with their totemic centres, and these bonds play an important role in their life. However, the land on which the totemic centres are situated is developed economically by the community as a whole and not only by members of a clan. Regardless of the clan to which they belong, all members of the community have equal rights to the natural wealth on this land. If within the community there are distinctions in rights to the products of hunting or gathering, these distinctions are determined by affiliation not to a clan, but to the sex or age groups of which the community consists. The land on which the community has the priority right to obtain food and raw materials for implements is the property of the given community, for from the economic point of view the primitive community knows of no other form of realising the right to property. Here we are at another of the earliest stages of the formation of property as economic relations under which private property is still

non-existent and there is no possibility of alienating collectively-owned land. Property here is based on invested labour. Moreover, the economic relationship of a group of people to land intertwines and interacts with so-called totemic, clan property on land. The relationship of the clan to land is not property in the economic sense--here the word "property" may only be used conditionally. At the same time, the territoriality of the primitive community has its origin in the biologically conditioned territoriality of the animal ancestors of man. But this biologically-determined territoriality was socially transformed and became territoriality conditioned socially and economically.

Why does property in the basic means of production--land--sometimes take the clan form, and the clan regards itself as the owner of land? The reason for this is that having achieved a certain level of development, the clan organisation becomes a social regulator appropriating some important social and normative functions. The clan gradually regards itself as the owner not only of totemic centres but also of the land on which these centres are situated. However, this relationship of the clan to the land is not realised economically, and economically the community remains the main subject of property in land.

The forms of socio-economic organisation of the hunters-gatherers societies known to ethnography allow us to go deep into the essence of phenomena, whose contours appear in the course of archaeological investigation. The associations of people in the making, that in their essence and functions are close to the communities known to ethnography, may be called crystallising communities or proto-communities. These collectives were proponents of crystallising relations of production. Ancient dwellings and settlements are the principal source shedding light on this process.

The most ancient traces of hunters' dwellings and camps have been found in Olduvay Gorge, East Africa. The earliest site dates back to 1,750,000 years. Remains have been found

of dwellings measuring 4.6 x 4 metres surrounded by a stone wall. The latter might have been a wind shelter or the foundation for branches forming the roof of the dwelling. Remains of dwellings at places of prolonged habitation have been found elsewhere.³ Later, in the Acheuleen Epoch we find evidence of a spatial division of labour. Most of the camps of that period were not used for the manufacture of stone implements, the evidence being that no waste or blanks of the corresponding rocks have been found, although what may be described as a workshop has been discovered with unfinished artifacts and almost a total absence of finished ones.⁴

Thus, the ancient Archanthropos had permanent camps, to where they returned with game and implements, or blanks for the manufacture of implements. The Archanthropos groups were relatively small, and their camps were located within the hunting grounds used by them. The Archanthropos proto-communities have points of similarity with later historical types of communities: these are not only their function as an economic organism with common interests and aims, and not only their territoriality, i.e., economic link with a definite territory, but also the existence of camps as the centre for the development of that territory. This shows that the economic activity of the Archanthropos was organised regularly in time and in space. The spatial organisation of this activity may be schematically portrayed as a circle with the main camp somewhere within its boundaries, and with paths fanning out from it in different directions marking the movements of the hunters and gatherers. The spatial division of labour was seen in the concentration of the manufacture of stone implements in individual workshops and in the existence of specialised hunters' camps.

In Europe the most ancient dwellings have been found in Terra Amata; their age is about 380,000 years. These were temporary camps of hunters and gatherers, who came to the shore of the Mediterranean, hunted elephants, deer, and other animals, gathered molluscs, fished, and departed soon

afterwards, in order to return in the next year. This is evidence of seasonal habitation at the close of spring or in the early summer. The oval dwellings were from 7 to 15 metres long and from 4 to 6 metres wide. In the huts there were fires, and implements were manufactured.⁵

The fact that the hunters always returned at one and the same time of the year, and that the huts built annually were almost exact replicas indicated that the people who came here belonged to one and the same group, or proto-community. Excavations have produced evidence that economic life followed the seasonal cycle, that the group owned a definite territory where it hunted game, moving from one part of that territory to another, and that the territory was developed rhythmically in accordance with the season. The development level of these people was relatively high, as is shown by the diversity of stone implements, the construction of the dwellings, and the organised use of the habitable space and hunting and gathering territory. Traces of eleven huts built one over another show that one and the same group returned annually over a number of years, and are evidence of the stability of the social structure and of cultural traditions. The economic activity of the group was relatively complex, combining various kinds of labour: hunting large animals, fishing, gathering molluscs, manufacturing implements, and keeping fires going. The Terra Amata proto-community contains clear-cut features of the future community, of the future human society.

The dwelling in the Lazaret Cave is an example of the further development and improvement of the organisation of the habitable space. Its age is about 200,000 years, and it measures 11 x 3.5 metres. It was in a cave, and its purpose was to protect people against wind and rain during the cold season of the year. In the dwelling there were two fires, around which life concentrated; no traces of the manufacture of implements have been found. The people followed a semi-nomadic, or seasonal-sedentary way of life. A study of the

remains of fauna shows that people came here in November and left in the spring, presumably going to summer hunting grounds.⁶ They left with the intention of returning, because when they departed they placed the skull of a wolf at the entrance. They believed that this symbol would guard the dwelling until their return in the early winter.

The life of the inhabitants of the Lazaret Cave, as that of the people in Terra Amata, followed a natural cycle, to be more exact, it was a form of active adaptation to that cycle. They used definite hunting and gathering grounds at specified seasons. Group life in the course of several months, and self-sufficiency throughout these months indicate that this was a proto-community or part of it, a foraging group. The workshop from where the inhabitants of Lazaret Cave brought finished implements was located in some other place. There was probably a sex-age division of labour, which enabled the men to quit the cave for long periods in search of game in the difficult conditions of the environment, leaving women and children behind. The entire way of life of these people points to collective production and consumption, the concrete forms of which can only be surmised. The group's economic activity consisted of different forms of labour, divided in time and space. The relatively high development level of this group of Archantropes is indicated not only by the organisation of their social life and the relative perfection of their dwellings, but also by the existence of religious-magical, perhaps even totemistic notions, e.g., the wolf skull guarding the entrance to the dwelling until the return of its inhabitants.

In the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic we find the same familiar pattern of the economic development of territory, with the difference that it was more sophisticated. In the centre of the territory there was a permanent settlement of the community, around which were the temporary camps of the foraging groups and hunters, and workshops. From the settlement the people went for raw material for implements or for

finished artifacts, or to hunt, or to seasonal nomadic forays during which the hunters lived at temporary camps.

The foundations for further socio-economic development were laid as early as the Palaeolithic. In that epoch we find phenomena such as functioning proto-communities as integral economic units that, when necessary, broke up into foraging groups; collective production and consumption linked with the collective character of the communities; the economic bond of the community with a definite territory; the existence of a permanent, seasonal, or temporary camp as the centre of a territory's organised development in space and time; a spatial inner-community division of labour (hunting camps, workshops); sex-and-age division of labour; cyclic economic activity determined by natural processes; and relatively complex economic activity combining different kinds of labour.

This range of phenomena was the basis for the emergence of later historical types of the hunters-gatherers communities known to us from ethnographic data. We find it here, and also in the most diverse natural-geographical conditions, and this stability of the forms of the economic use of diverse natural environments is evidence that the active social adaptation of man differed fundamentally from the biological adaptation of animals. This ancient range of phenomena was the stable foundation on which later hunters and gatherers built up the entire diversity of social life and culture under different geographical and historical conditions.

The productive economy took shape much later on the basis of the socio-economic structure formed in the pre-agricultural epoch, and was the continuation and development of the process that commenced in the Palaeolithic. The formation of the productive economy, which superseded the economy founded on the appropriation of the ready products of nature, began with hardly perceptible changes in the economic activity of primitive hunters, fishers, and

gatherers, in the bosom of the hunters-gatherers community, and ended with a radical transformation of the entire socio-economic structure.

This change began in the economy, and was linked with one of the features of primitive society--the intertwining of the economy into the very substance of social life. This was a manifestation of primitive syncretism, of the unfragmented character of the functions implicit in primitive society. Despite the uniqueness of the economic relations in the primitive epoch, some of the most general and, at the same time, basic categories of economic science--abstract labour and working time as a yardstick of individual expenditure of labour force in the aggregate labour of the community, the division of social labour, property, production, consumption, exchange of activity, and materialisation of labour in products--remain an instrument for a scientific understanding of and for studying the economy of primitive society. These objective categories retain their methodological significance for any socio-economic system.

NOTES

- ¹ K. Marx, Capital. Moscow, Vol.III, p.810.
- ² V.R. Kabo, Tasmanians and the Tasmanian Problem. Moscow, 1975 (in Russian); V.R. Kabo, "Die australische Lokalgruppe," Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitschrift, Berlin, 1978.
- ³ The Rise of Human Society. The Palaeolithic in Africa. Leningrad, 1977, pp.62-72 (in Russian); M.D. Leakey, Olduvay Gorge. Vol.3, Cambridge, 1971.
- ⁴ The Rise of Human Society. The Palaeolithic in Africa, pp.104-105.
- ⁵ La préhistoire française. Vol.1, Paris, 1976, pp.626-631.
- ⁶ Ibid., pp.636-639.