

A NOTE ON NOMADISM

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Today, when the conditions for traditional nomadic pastoralism are disappearing almost everywhere and the economic, social and cultural integration of the nomads poses numerous practical and political problems, research on nomadism has understandably gathered a worldwide impetus. Due to the realization that there is need for a new approach to the problems of nomadism and that the newly amassed stock of information needs reinterpretation, several multidisciplinary conferences have been held on nomadic economy, political structure and social organization.

The problems of nomadism have been a traditional concern of Hungarian Oriental studies, historiography and anthropology, and, largely due to the influence of the school of Lajos Ligeti, are being dealt with by more and more researchers.

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Marxist research cannot rely on mere laconic passages from the classics even for laying the theoretical groundwork of the problems of nomadism, since they belong to that category of problems which scholars today know much more about than in the last century. According to the concept prevalent in the past century, nomadic stockbreeding preceded sedentary land cultivation, not only in the development of certain European peoples, but also in the universal historical development of mankind. Today we know that even the early forms of nomadic pastoralism developed from the undifferentiated land cultivating and stockbreeding economy of the Neolithic Age, and that nomadism *par excellence*, that is nomadic stockbreeding, emerged and developed probably later, on the peripheries of the Bronze Age agricultural civilizations.¹ The classics of Marxism made several important remarks on nomadism, yet to understand and theoretically utilize them — as is the case with other problems — it is not sufficient to locate quotable statements, instead, their genuine meaning has to be grasped and an attempt has to be made to penetrate

¹ The work most often quoted is Owen Lattimore: *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, New York, 1951.

into the deep layers of Marxian theory, and the texture of the fundamental concepts.

It is the specific character and true merit of Marx's social theory, which differentiates it from bourgeois social science, that in the examination of all social formations it has the courage and the capacity to concentrate on the economic base, that is the fundamental structure of production and ownership. However, for a long time Marxist research was hemmed in by dogmatism: both theory and specialized research were confined to an ineffective and distorted approach. Under dogmatism it was compulsory to straightjacket the nomadic societies at various level of development in the category of either the tribal or the feudal society or to define them as a sort of transition between the two. In the Leningrad «debate» of 1931, the Marxist concept of the Asiatic mode of production was anathematized and thus research on the complex problems of the historical transition from a primitive society to the early forms of civilization and consequently the research of transitory forms became extremely difficult; among other pseudo-theoretical categories, the term «nomadic feudalism» was introduced, which was popularized in Soviet science by B. Y. Vladimirtsov in his valuable book, that was accepted for a long time and finally subjected to criticism.² It is not surprising that Marxist theory and specialized research have paid special attention to the problems of nomadism especially since the re-emergence of the interpretation of the Marxian concept of the Asiatic mode of production and — in this connection — the reconstruction of the classical theory on social formations. It has been clear from the start of the «new debate» on the Asiatic mode of production that for research on nomadism this category paves the way for new approaches, especially when interpreted as a blanket category for several so-called archaic civilizations, «empire» formations that came into being on the basis of primitive societies.³

The most interesting question in this connection is if nomadism, as a form of economy, can and should be seen as a form of ownership of land. This problem emerges only by departing from Marx's theory and by espousing Marx's concept of the unity of production and ownership; for non-Marxist research the problem is nonexistent. In Marxist research the following concept

² The wellknown French edition of the 1934 book of B. Vladimirtsov: *Le régime social des Mongols, Le féodalisme nomade*, Paris, 1948. In 1967 G. E. Markov wrote a book criticizing Vladimirtsov's argumentation (cf. Günter Guhr: «Ur- und Frühgeschichte und ökonomische Gesellschaftsformationen», *Ethnographisch-archäologische Zeitschrift*, 10. Jg., 1969, Heft 2, pp. 201–2), which was published in Moscow: *Kočevniki Azii*, 1976.

³ The definite view of a Hungarian group of researchers who produced *Óstársadalom és ázsiai termelési mód* (Primitive society and the Asiatic mode of production), Budapest, 1976 (an enlarged Hungarian edition: 1982; and an English edition is in the press). For their more recent writings, see *Acta Orient. Hung.* 1981: 2–3.

has gradually gained ground: the form of ownership in nomadic pastoralism is marked by the duality that the land (the pasture) belongs to the tribe, while the livestock belongs to the family, and extended family, etc.⁴ In the definition of the tribal ownership of *land*, the first fundamental form of ownership (and production), Marx included *expressis verbis* nomadism.⁵

Furthermore, it is worthwhile quoting the following summation of Marx's theory on the tribal ownership of land: «Among nomadic pastoral tribes — and all pastoral peoples are originally migratory — the earth, like all other conditions of nature, appears in its elementary boundlessness, e.g., in the Asian steppes and the Asian high plateaux. It is grazed, etc., consumed by the herds, which provide the nomadic peoples with their subsistence. They regard it as their property, though never fixing that property. This is the case with the hunting grounds of the wild Indian tribes of America: the tribe considers a certain region as its hunting territory and maintains it by force against other tribes, or seeks to expel other tribes from the territory they claim. Among the nomadic pastoral tribes the community is in fact always united, a travelling party, caravan, horde, and the forms of higher and lower rank develop out of the conditions of this mode of life. What is *appropriated* and *reproduced* is here only the herd and not the soil, which is always used in temporary commonalty wherever the tribe breaks its wanderings.

«Let us pass on to the consideration of settled peoples. The only barrier which the community can encounter in its relations to the natural conditions of production *as its own* — to the land — is some *other community*, which has already laid claim to them as its inorganic body. War is therefore one of the earliest tasks of every primitive community of this kind, both for the defence of property and for its acquisition. (It will be sufficient to speak of original property in land, for among pastoral peoples property in such natural products of the earth as, e.g., sheep is at the same time property in the pastures they pass through. In general, property in land includes property in its organic products.) Where man himself is captured as an organic accessory of the land and together with it, he is captured as one of the conditions of production, and this is the origin of slavery and serfdom, which soon debase and modify the original forms of all communities, and themselves become their foundation. As a result the simple structure is thereby determined negatively.

«Thus originally *property* means no more than man's attitude to his natural conditions of production as belonging to him, as the *prerequisites of his own existence*; his attitude to them as *natural prerequisites* of himself,

⁴ Cf. the descriptions in the above mentioned work of G. E. Markov.

⁵ Cf. Karl Marx: *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, ed. by E. J. Hobsbawm, London, 1964, pp. 68–9.

which constitute, as it were, a prolongation of his body. In fact he stands in no relation to his conditions of production, but has a double existence, subjectively as himself and objectively in these natural inorganic conditions of his being. The forms of those *natural conditions of production* have a double character: (1) his existence as part of a community, which in its original form is a tribal community, more or less modified; (2) his relation to the *land* as to his *own*, in virtue of the community, communal landed property, at the same time *individual possession* for the individual, or in such a manner that the soil and its cultivation remain in common and only its products are divided. (However, *dwellings*, etc., even if no more than the waggons of the Scythians, nevertheless appear to be always in the possession of individuals.) Membership of a *naturally evolved society*, a tribe, etc., is a natural condition of production for the living individual. Such membership is, e.g., already a condition of his language, etc. His own productive existence is only possible under this condition. His subjective existence as such is conditioned by it as much as it is conditioned by the relationship to the earth as to his laboratory. (True, property is originally *mobile*, for in the first instance man takes possession of the ready-made fruits of the earth, including animals and especially those capable of domestication. However, even this situation — hunting, fishing, pastoralism, subsistence by collecting the fruit of the trees, etc. — always assumes the appropriation of the earth, whether as a place of fixed settlement or a territory for roaming, a pasture for his animals, etc.)⁶

Consequently, the *differentia specifica* of nomadism is that it is basically a form of the ownership of land, which, however, is not «fixed», and movable property assumes special importance in it.

Interestingly enough, this recalls the importance of property in land by the etymology of the Greek words *nomas*, *nomados* as follows.

Writing about the Scythians, all Herodotus wished to mean with that term was that the Scythians were «not cultivators, but herdsmen»;⁷ yet to explain the relationship of the words *nomós* «pasture» and *nómos* «law», Emile Benveniste gave the following interpretation of the verb *némó*: «partager selon la convenance ou la loi», «partager légalement», «obtenir légalement en partage».⁸ This etymology of the word probably refers to the division of pastures among the tribes.

It is nevertheless remarkable that the division of territory is also mentioned in the Chinese report about the first major nomadic people of the Far East. Ssu-ma Ch'ien wrote in his *Historical Records*, in the chapter about the

⁶ Ibid. pp. 88—90.

⁷ οὐ γὰρ ἀρῶται εἰσὶ ἀλλὰ νομάδες: Herodotus, IV, 2—3.

⁸ Emile Benveniste: *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Paris, 1969, t. I, p. 85.

Hsiung-nu: 隨畜牧而轉移; 逐水草遷徙毋城郭常處耕田之業然亦各有分地 «they move about in rotation according to (their) stockbreeding», and «they change places in search of water and grass [= watering places and pastures], [and] there are no walled cities, permanent dwellings and cultivation of land in their way of life, yet each [which certainly means: every tribe] has its share in land (a territory)».⁹

Several researches have established that nomadic pastoralism never meant roaming at will over the steppes, instead, in a similar manner to the cultivation of land, it was bound to the earth as dictated by the requirements of the change of pasture, the only difference being reliance on pastures and not on ploughlands. It evidently follows from this simple fact that when in the vast nomadic empires the tribes were ordered to adhere to definite areas of land, it simply meant the adding of new, greater dimensions to the tribal ownership of land and made tribal ownership the basis of state organization.

By interpreting nomadic pastoralism as a form of production and ownership in a similar manner to the mode of production in the agricultural empires — a variant of tribal landed property in the Marxian sense — instead of blurring the specific character of nomadism, room is assured for defining its historical status. To understand the emergence and development of nomadism, one has to study the agricultural civilizations; and to understand the inner structure and dynamics of its form of ownership as a mode of production, it is necessary to grasp the key importance of the territorial division. Although the basis of the process was identical, due to historical, ecological and other causes, a wide variety of nomadism evolved. Extensive further research will be needed for the historical and typological survey of those varieties.

At this point, a recent attempt should be mentioned to characterise the mode of production of the nomads, not with the earlier quoted Marxian passage, but relying on a later passage of the same text, to relate it to the «German» form of landed property. Pierre Bonte proposed using the description of Marx for the type of community prevalent in the «German» form of land ownership to characterise the nomads' relatively free and flexible communal organization.¹⁰ However, Marx had only a reference material of questionable quality, when he expressed that characterization of the «German form». Bonte's analogy, based on formal typology, can be regarded — methodolo-

⁹ *Shih-chi*, chapter 110. Later on in the text a historical anecdote appears at the end of which the ruler Mao-tun says: 地者國之本也 «the basis of the *kuo* (country, kingdom) is the *ti* (territory, land).»

¹⁰ Pierre Bonte: «Organisation économique et sociale des pasteurs d'Afrique Orientale», *Etudes sur les sociétés des pasteurs nomades*, II, *Cahiers du centre d'études et de recherches marxistes* 110, pp. 76–80. See the idea also in the important work: *Pastoral Production and Society — Production pastorale et société*, Paris, 1979.

gically, too — as mistaken. That is how nomadic society was previously mistaken for feudalism. On the other hand, it would be an authentic and productive venture if Marx's theory on the pre-capitalist economic formations, that is the typology of the development of the tribal-Asiatic, antique and German forms of property in land, were examined in relation to the historical ebb and flow of the primitive societies. In brief, the European, i.e. antique and German forms of the private *ownership* of land emerged not from a void: they had their long antecedent in the various forms of land *tenure* in the communal tribal ownership.

In general, it is certain that nomadism played a distinguished role in the emergence and interrelations of the various forms of tribal property in land, that is in the protracted and extensive historical motion that paved the way for and produced the social formations of European antiquity, and then of feudalism. It is necessary for anyone attempting to write a Marxist history of the world to explore how this happened.