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Towards a Class-Struggle Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: Dancing between review and argument this paper lays out a foundation for a class-struggle anthropology—that is, an anthropological practice that can be linked to the ultimate goal of achieving a classless society. To this end we will review those anthropologists who have gone before us, pulling out those works of theirs that we see as critical in (re)building a class-struggle anthropology. As part of this process we discuss the relationship between what has stood as Marxist anthropology in North America, the idea of socialism, the political development of the world working class during the nine decades since the October Revolution, and the challenges of intellectual continuity in the face of differing generational experiences of Marxist anthropologists. Ultimately we argue that a progressive anthropology necessarily involves political activism in our work, communities, and schools.

Keywords: Marxism, class struggle, political economy, social justice

RÉSUMÉ. Alternant entre le synopsis et l'argumentation, cet essai met en place une fondation pour une anthropologie de la lutte des classes, à savoir une pratique anthropologique pouvant être reliée au but ultime qu'est la réalisation d'une société sans classes. À cette fin, nous faisons un survol des anthropologues qui nous ont précédé, et de ceux d'entre leurs travaux que nous considérons cruciaux pour la (re)construction d'une anthropologie de la lutte des classes. Ce faisant, nous examinons les relations entre l'anthropologie marxiste en Amérique du Nord, l'idée du socialisme, le développement politique de la classe ouvrière mondiale au cours des dix décennies qui ont suivi la Révolution d'octobre, et les défis de la continuité intellectuelle face aux différentes expériences générationnelles des anthropologues marxistes. Finalement, nous soutenons qu'une anthropologie progressiste implique nécessairement l'activisme politique dans notre milieu de travail, nos communautés et nos écoles.

Mots-clés: Marxisme, lutte des classes, économie politique, justice sociale

"The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles."
Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."
Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

For Marx social class is at the centre of understanding and organizing social change. As interpreted by Lenin the working class, organized by its politically advanced vanguard, constituted the

path toward emancipation and the realization of human potential. Rosa Luxemburg emphasized—among other things—the critical power of the combined force of the working class, engaged in a general strike, in overthrowing capitalism. Trotsky, through his analysis of combined and uneven development and the thesis of permanent revolution, pointed the way forward toward a global socialist society (even if the revolution began in the most backward of countries).

Anthropology, by contrast, has tended to draw upon the more conservative theoretical frameworks of mainstream scholars such as Emile Durkheim

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