

## How We Might Live Together Differently – Our Economic Life

**A Different Economy**

We have grown up in and lived all of our lives in a competitive capitalist economy and we take it for granted. Not only that, but the countries in which we grow up have had capitalist economies for hundreds of years, and consequently those economies and societies seem completely normal and natural. We are born and grow up in an existing world of buildings, streets, highways, seaports and airports that we take for granted. We are confronted everyday by corporations and surrounded by commercial advertising. We simply cannot imagine another world. How else would people live? It seems that some people have always owned the land or business, while others worked for their keep if not for wages. All societies had markets, had merchants, had rich and poor. Economic life may not be fair, but it is all we human beings have ever known. It's human nature—isn't it?

We have always known capitalism, and we take it for granted, take it to be natural. Yet during the 10,000 years of human history, only 500 years have been lived under capitalism. For thousands of years humans organized their economic life differently, and often in ways that involved not markets, but rather cooperation, reciprocity, and the commitment to care for all. Even when later kingdoms developed and social classes began to evolve, those kingdoms were still for many centuries imposed on societies based on a reciprocal and cooperative social life. If the ancient kings were oppressors and exploiters, ancient peoples tended to be cooperators with each other.

**Andean Societies**

In the Andes a thousand years ago indigenous groups developed complex systems of cooperation and reciprocity in order to grow and exchange food and other products. The first settlements based on sedentary agriculture developed in many parts of the Andes in what would one day be the nation of Peru between 6000 and 1800 BC. These Andean societies that existed for hundreds of years before the Inca and long before the Spanish Conquest taught themselves how to exploit the different ecological niches of the Andes mountains, plateaus, valleys, foothills and coasts of the Northwest of South America. In a system that historians and anthropologists called “verticality,” the indigenous peoples converted the various ecological zones at different altitudes into specialized production zones where different people grew maize, amaranth, quinoa, potatoes, or greens and many sorts. Still other individuals raised llamas and alpacas, fished or hunted.

The indigenous people developed in the Andes a complex agricultural world that required complicated social organization based on colonization of the various ecological niches. For the good of the community, group would send its members many miles away to another area to colonize, to cultivate, and later to exchange. The products were exchanged up and down the mountains through relationships of reciprocity between members of the same ethnic groups, and with members of other groups as well. Some anthropologists have compared these reciprocal exchanges to mutual gift giving, though

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that term may oversimplify the relationships. The reciprocal exchange was a cultural, social and economic practice involving language, ritual and symbolism. The relationships served both to deliver the goods, and also to bond people together in a supportive community. Polo de Ondegardo, an early European chronicler of Peru, wrote that the indigenous people distributed corn from one area to another in such a way that “not one of them is wronged.”

The Indian groups of those times had no private property and no buying or selling of land, water, grazing land, or labor. While some trading may have existed between Indian groups, and even within the same groups, it seems to have involved barter for minor luxuries, and to have been subordinate to the dominant system of cooperation and reciprocity. Garcilaso de la Vega, one of the greatest of the early historians of the Andean societies, wrote, “Nothing was bought or sold for gold or silver,” since it was not useful for human survival. In fact, this is not quite true, there were some markets and there was barter and some buying and selling, but it apparently existed on the margins of such societies based on reciprocity. These societies did not depend on markets or money, yet for hundreds of years they thrived, feeding and caring for their people, and producing textiles, pottery, and other crafts, as well as beautiful works of art.

The early Andean system, that is before the rise of states and eventually the rise of the Inca empire, was probably not without some caste differences. A local leader or priest might be entitled to labor services from members of the group, but that represented only a very small part of all production. Most labor in these ethnic groups was cooperative, just as most exchange was reciprocal. Consequently there was virtually no exploitation, that is, no one living off the labor of others. In such a system, where all worked together for the common good, and where products were exchanged more or less fairly between people, there was no poverty. Everyone was entitled to his or her share of the common wealth. Where no individuals or group owned property and no substantial wealth was acquired and accumulated by individuals or families, there was no struggle over wealth and property, and consequently there was no need for a state, no army and no police to defend the wealthy against the propertyless.<sup>1</sup>

Before the rise of states, such as that created by the Inca, the indigenous groups of the Andes at the grassroots level did not have private property as we know it; rather, property was communal or collective. For many centuries the economic and social basis of Andean society was the *ayllu*, an alliance of real or fictive kin and households who exchanged labor and jointly owned the land and other resources. The *ayllu* made possible the survival of social groups that had to live scattered among the various ecological niches and production zones. The *ayllu* was not only based on reciprocally exchanged labor and collectively owned the land, but it also “managed pastureland, farmland, canals, water and other assets.” The *ayllu* was divided into two *moiteys* (halves) and members could marry a person from the other *moitey* of the *ayllu*, a practice which preserved the group’s collective property and other assets. The labor in the *ayllu* was based on the sort of reciprocal arrangements we have discussed above. “Ideally, the type of labor rendered

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<sup>1</sup> Enrique Mayer, *The Articulated Peasant: Household Economies in the Andes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books Group, 2002), “Redistribution and Trade in Inca Society,” 45-74.

is the same type of labor that will be returned. Strict accounting is involved.” Work, even when it is large scale work such as plowing large field or erecting a wall, is divided into discreet tasks assigned to specific individual and groups. In this way it is possible to account exactly for the reciprocal exchange of labor. Sometimes labor may be exchanged for food, or one form of labor for another, but the idea is that it will be equaled out in the end, even if that takes place across generations.<sup>2</sup>

The indigenous communities, kinship groups or tribes, must have existed for hundreds or even thousands of years with such communal organization of labor, until the rise of the states and most important, the Inca. Under the Inca empire, the Inca himself and members of the nobility came to control the *ayllus* and to allocate labor in the interests of the ruling class and its project of imperial conquest and expansion. Yet, the *ayllu*, the collective ownership of land and reciprocal distribution of labor, remained the base of the more complex Inca empire, suggesting that collective workership and shared labor represented a particularly durable form of social and economic organization.

After the Spanish conquered Peru, they established private property, distributing land to the conquerors and later to other Spaniards, and assigning land to certain Indian leaders while taking land from others. The Spanish brought Peru into the world capitalist market, shipping gold and silver back home to Spain where it soon passed into the hands of Italian and Austrian bankers, and then financed the development of trade and industry in Europe. In Peru itself the Spanish also introduced markets, money, and merchants who competed with the system of exchange by reciprocity. Over time the Criollos (Spaniards born in the new world) and mestizos (persons of mixed race) provided the merchants who dominated the market system, while Indians were generally excluded by virtue of their race. Remarkably, however, despite the massive social upheaval of the conquest, and throughout the colonial period the *ayllu* and collective property continued to exist at the base of the society for hundreds of years. Collective ownership and reciprocal labor exchange proved to be enduring and functioning parts of indigenous community life until quite recently.

We are not arguing here that life among the Andean people before the coming of high civilizations and states was some sort of ideal sharing society.<sup>3</sup> We do not know enough about these societies to say that. What we can say is that the indigenous peoples of the Andes lived together differently than we do. In the Andes they created *a different sort of economy*, one where there was *no private property and no accumulation of wealth*. Moreover, it was an economic and social system that lasted longer than modern capitalism, and proved just as viable a system, apparently maintaining the indigenous people of Peru in a state of relative health and well being. What it did not do, of course, was create a system that invented radically new techniques or new forms of social

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<sup>2</sup> Michael E. Moseley, *The Incas and their Ancestors: the Archaeology of Peru* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), revised edition, 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Baudin, *A Socialist Empire: The Incas of Peru* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1961), translation of *L'empire socialiste des Inka* (Paris, Institut d'ethnologie, 1928), argued that the collective property of the Inca formed the basis for a state socialist system. Baudin based his views on earlier understandings of Inca property and labor, and while this remains an interesting and suggestive book, subsequent research had undermined its foundations.

organization, so that over hundreds of years there was relatively little change or development. This was no doubt a life of hard work and relatively few comforts. Manual labor in agriculture, weaving, pottery, and metal work remained throughout hundreds of years the basic form of economic production. Whether or not such collectively organized societies could have discovered new technologies and new forms of collective social organization and have developed economically we do not know. We do know that they did not. They seem to have evolved into states, as had happened in other parts of the world, and eventually into the Inca empire.

### **Mesoamerican Societies**

Mesoamerica, the region between southern Mexico and Panama, also seems to have developed similar collective landholding patterns. Agriculture in Mesoamerica developed between 5000 and 1500 BC with the cultivation of corn, beans, squash and other plants. The cultivation of crops led to sedentary societies, a rise in population, and greater social specialization. At the base of the Mesoamerican societies was the institution of communal land ownership. In Mesoamerica a kinship group or lineage called a *calpulli* (plural *calpullec*) had control over certain land used for planting. The land belonged to the kinship group and its descendants, and it could not be sold, could not be alienated. While the land was owned collectively by the clan or lineage, it was worked by families or individuals. The individual's hereditary right to the *calpulli* was based on the obligation to cultivate the land, and if a person failed to cultivate the land for two years, he could lose that right which would revert to the kinship group and the land would be redistributed to another person. We speculate that more collective and egalitarian landholding existed earlier, becoming more unequal and more hierarchical and more privatized over time, and especially after the rise of the Aztec state. Nevertheless the communal and corporate (in the sense of group) landholding remained significant.

As in the Andean regions, in Mesoamerica the powerful states—Olmec, Toltec, Zapotec, and finally the Mexica or Aztec—subjugated the smaller, weaker tribal organizations, subordinating their collective land and reciprocal labor to the larger purposes of the ruling class and its imperial ambitions. Yet the *calpulli* with its common land ownership appears to have remained the base of society under the Aztecs (in fact our knowledge of this collective form comes from records of Aztec society, and *calpulli* is a Nahuatl word, the language of the Aztecs).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Historians have carried out quite an extensive debate on the nature of the *calpulli*. Alfonso de Zorita's *Brief Relation* written before 1570 and translated by Benjamin Keen as *Life and Labor in Ancient Mexico: The Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1971), suggests that this was communally owned land (105-108). Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1964), discusses the importance of such communal land (267-70). James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), argues that more recent research has shown much land was private and inherited and communal land was held in unequal amounts, though there were still strong corporate tendencies (141-166). Rudolph van Zantwijk, *The Aztec arrangement: The Social History of Pre-Spanish Mexico*, with foreword by Miguel Leon-Portilla, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, c1985) argues that the *calupulli* together with other institutions developed into seigniorial and then into guild-like corporate organizations later under the Aztecs (16-17, 272-74).

After Hernán Cortez's conquest of the Aztecs, the Spanish created institutions of private land ownership and markets, and brought New Spain, as they called Mexico, into the world capitalist market principally through mining gold and silver. Still the indigenous communities or *pueblos libres* survived with their communal land ownership until the nineteenth century. Mexican liberals like Benito Juárez and later dictator Porfirio Díaz and his liberal and positivist advisors, *los científicos* (the scientific ones) worked with modern hacienda owners producing for the world market to dispossess Indians of their land, taking virtually all of it by 1900. During that period the Indians' traditional collective property virtually disappeared. But then, during the course of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1940, the revolutionary governments reestablished communal land ownership by Indians and peasants. The Constitution of 1917, Article 27 permitted the state to give land to those Indians and peasants in the form of the *ejido*, state-owned land donated in perpetuity to the communities who in turn usually divided up the land to be worked by particular families. In the 1930s, president Lázaro Cardenas eventually distributed almost 20 million hectares (40 million acres) of land to three-quarters of a million peasants in the form of *ejidos*. Communal land ownership proved to be such a strong institution in the experience and minds of the Mexican people, that 100 years of economic liberalism and more than a decade of revolution could not erase it from the collective consciousness, and the *calpulli* returned in the form of the *ejido*.

### **Was the collective labor on communal land voluntary? Was there freedom?**

Returning to the ancient communal lands, an interesting question arises, namely: Why did people work? Clearly they did so out of necessity, to grow food to maintain themselves and their communities at the established cultural level, a level which provided not only food, but also housing, woven cloth, and pottery, and perhaps some other amenities such as musical instruments and jewelry. But that is true of people in all societies, that is that they work to sustain themselves and their society. Though they do not all work for the same motives. Slaves work driven by the lash, serfs work under the watchful eye and the implicit threat of the lord's sword, people in capitalist societies work driven by the lash of hunger and the desire for more. The sociologist Max Weber argued that we internalized a "Protestant work ethic" which coincided with and facilitated the rise of capitalism. But what made the people of these early traditional societies of the Americas get up and go to work in the morning, since there was no private owner or state to coerce them? We might say that what made them work was the collective pressure of their peers, of their society and that society's rigid and seemingly inexorable rules. But those were societies and rules infused with profound religious meanings and feelings.

Traditional societies seem to have a profound sense that things have to be done according to religious beliefs, to long-accepted rules and customs which, like the Protestant work ethic, have been internalized in the minds of their peoples. The idea of breaking with tradition may seem simply inconceivable in such societies until some ecological or social crisis develops as happened with the rise of the ancient states or the Spanish conquest. We might even call such societies "totalitarian," not in the sense that a state bureaucracy controls all aspects of life—for in these very ancient societies there is no state or

bureaucracy—but in the sense that religious and customary rules tend to encompass the totality of social life. The religious ideologies of these societies accounts for everything: for the creation, for the gods who rule creation, for the rites that propitiate these gods. Religion arises as a worship of the life-giving forces of the world: sun and water, seed and soil. The forces become anthropomorphized, personified in human-like gods. But the worship of the gods is not confined to the temple and does not exist solely in the hands of the priests, but permeates the entire society. The propitiation of these gods both through rituals and through following tradition in life and labor was a responsibility in which all individuals participated collectively. In such societies religion and its rites occupy virtually all of time and space. Every time is a sacred time. Every place a holy place. Every act is in a sense a religious act so that life becomes totally controlled, not by an individual or an elite, but rather by a system of religious beliefs. While these societies have collective property and reciprocal labor and a sense of communality, they do not have what modern people for the last seven hundred years or so have called “freedom.”

### **How did the ancient collective groups make decisions? Was there democracy?**

We do not know much about how ancient societies were organized before the rise of the state and the development of writing. We do have other people’s accounts of these civilizations both from ancient and modern times. We know that traditional societies that survived into modern times have generally been led by a council of elders, usually elder men but sometimes balanced and checked by a council of elder women. The council may have been “elected,” but often on the basis of seniority, prestige and certain obligations, and in some cases the positions may have simply been inherited. In relatively small and transparent groups, the council no doubt must have taken into account the views and feelings of the people of the group. Members of the group as a whole may in some way have participated in ratifying the decisions of the council, so that there was some level of popular participation in this political process. Nevertheless, while they had some democratic characteristics—election, consultation, participation—we would hesitate to call these bodies democratic in the modern sense of the word. If modern traditional societies give any indication, the traditional council of elders was often less a democratic than an authoritative (if not authoritarian) body. Traditional communal societies were not democratic in the modern sense of the word, but they did have elements of representation and popular participation. We should also note that the peoples of those societies did not face the institutional power that results from the fusion of private property and the state.

### **What conclusions do we draw?**

Probably many ancient peoples around the world, most peoples perhaps, lived in communities based on shared land and labor. [Expand this with other examples, Russian obschchina, etc.]

We do not know much about what life was really like in the Andean communities that existed a thousand years ago. Much less do we know how it *felt* to live in those communities held together by bonds of common ownership and reciprocal labor. Yet perhaps we can imagine what it was like and how it felt by thinking about our own

experiences of voluntary collective labor and common ownership. Modern American ideology argues that the family, one of our few collective institutions, forms the basis of society. We know that for ourselves, we often enjoy collective activities that we undertake voluntarily together with our families and friends. But even beyond our families, we find joy in collective labor. Whenever we get together to work voluntarily, whether it is to stuff envelopes for some organization or to help out painting the children's school, we find the work enjoyable precisely because it is a communal experience. We like working to help our friends put in the patio in their backyard. We enjoy going out together as a family to rake the leaves or shovel the snow. We enjoy the common labor in the community garden. We enjoy working together to move friends into an apartment. We often end those experiences with beer and pizza, the potluck supper or the backyard barbecue, not just because of the food and drink, but also to recognize, celebrate and cement the experience of collective labor. When there are natural disasters, even in the midst of calamity people enjoy the common labor of building the levee to hold back the river or clearing an area as a firebreak to stop the forest fire. These experiences suggest that human beings need, desire and enjoy such communal experiences. The fact that we constantly attempt to recreate such experiences and that we so deeply enjoy them, suggests that they have an important place in our collective consciousness, in our fundamental psychology.

Similarly with collective property. Even in our society based on private property, competition, markets in commodities and labor, and the accumulation of wealth, we often take greatest pride in our commonly held property: our home, which is the property of our family; our neighborhood or community which is the property of many families; our schools or places of worship, which are the property of large collectives. We might even say that patriotism represents a sense of collective ownership of the nation, even if the class inequalities and other inequities mean that we own or control very little of it. The value of common property and collective labor forms an important substratum of our collective consciousness, our values, and our ideals, and one which we should elevate to a higher position in our work toward a better society.

All of these things taken together--that is, the ancient experiences of collective labor and communal ownership at the dawn of history, the survival of those institutions with the beginning of class societies and the state, and our contemporary experience of joy in collective labor--suggest that we might live together differently. The early experiences at the dawn of history suggest that, given the malleability of human beings, we might be able live together without private property and without some commanding the labor of others. We might together reorganize our society in such a way that we collectively owned agriculture and industry and worked together collectively for the common good. Such a system could mean the end of social classes and open up the possibility of eliminating racial and gender differences as well.

This, of course, raises other problems we will have to go on to address. Wouldn't some stronger personalities still tend to dominate? Couldn't social groups still form that would attempt to control land or to command labor? Wouldn't the administration of such a society tend to create a bureaucratic class that dominated the society? All of those are

important questions to which we will return. But for the moment, we will simply conclude that the experience of the ancient world and our own experience suggest that in economic we might live together differently.