

## HUMANS HAVE LIVED WITHOUT MONEY – AND WE WILL AGAIN

In the early dawn hours of May 24, 1796, members of the Conspiracy of Equals stood on the Bridge Notre-Dame in Paris. They boldly distributed pamphlets to the masses rushing to work, urging the overthrow of the government. In the following days, women agitators took the lead in urging the troops to join in an insurrection to abolish bourgeois rule and private property.

Seventy-five years would pass before Paris workers could seize power and establish (briefly) the Paris Commune. But we are the descendants of the Conspiracy of Equals, and to us falls the world-historic task of mobilizing the masses for communism.

Early human societies existed for tens of thousands of years without money, exchange, or private property. This was once called “primitive communism,”

but the word “primitive” wrongly suggests that such societies were simple and rudimentary. Actually they often had complex, stable social relationships and cultural practices. Some, but not all, of these social systems developed into the class societies of recorded history.

As class society and exploitation emerged, so did the movement to abolish them. The communist slogan “No privilege - From each according to ability, to each according to needs!” has been expressed in many forms, for thousands of years. It has inspired and motivated people on every continent.

The manifesto of the International Communist Workers’ Party, *Mobilize the Masses for Communism*, describes our roots in the communist-led revolutions from the Paris Commune of 1871 through the twentieth century. This article is the first in a series about the early history of communism, the red thread running through the tapestry

of human history.

### Non-Class Societies Survived into the Twentieth Century

Sometimes we incorrectly speak of “early communism” as though it disappeared long ago, as it did in some parts of the world.

The !Kung San people of the Kalahari Desert

in Africa maintained egalitarian society almost to the present, though in a steadily decreasing area.

Much work in !Kung San society is collective (gathering expeditions, hunting large animals). The products of such work are shared according



Communist members of Conspiracy of Equals try to incite soldiers to mutiny.

to definite rules. In a hunt, the owner of the poison arrow decides how to divide the meat, even if the owner wasn’t present at the kill. When a woman lends her sack to others to carry back nuts, she shares out the nuts. In contrast, we mobilize for a communist society where nobody “owns” the means of production. We will collectively decide how to share according to need.

Men and women do different work, all of which is valued and valuable in their harsh environment. However, !Kung San society does not exist at a bare subsistence level. Women can often gather enough food in three days to feed everyone for a week. They probably could accumulate surpluses, but these would be a disadvantage in a highly mobile society. Music, dance, and joking around are all-important to the !Kung San: they solidify the social relationships at the heart of their system.

In !Kung San society there is no “exchange”

in the sense of barter or trade. Instead, gift-giving strengthens community ties. This gift-giving differs from disguised trade, for example among the Iroquois, where someone who isn’t satisfied with a return gift may take back the original gift.

Anthropologists call societies like the !Kung San “gift economies,” in contrast with (and in conflict with) market-based economies. Many Pacific Islanders had gift economies until the 19th century and some such practices remain today. People of Tokelau, for example, share all food resources in each atoll based on egalitarianism (*inati*). People of Anuta call a similar practice *aropa*. Reciprocal gifts (although now distorted by the dominant market economy) remain important culturally to Samoan and Tongan people in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.

The Raramuri people in the Sierra Tarahumara of northwestern Mexico still honor the custom of *kórima*: each person must share his or her wealth with anyone who needs it. Within living memory, however, Mexican capitalism has almost destroyed traditional Raramuri life.

Globally, class society emerged some 8,000-10,000 years ago (in different regions, in different ways). It enabled the mobilization of labor and other resources that would let it overpower gift societies wherever the two social systems clashed. However, the long-term persistence of gift societies reminds us that communism is possible. Indeed, scientific evidence suggests that the ability to cooperate and share was fundamental to human evolution.

The mobilization of the masses for communism is based on an ever-deepening scientific understanding that prepares us to unite the whole world into one interconnected communist society. Mass communist consciousness will prevent forever the re-emergence of private property and class society.

**Next article:** *Egalitarianism against slavery in ancient China*

## Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part II

### **ANCIENT CHINA: “KINGS SHOULD PLOW THE FIELDS”**

Slavery developed in China over 4000 years ago, as it did at other times and other places from India to Greece to the Americas. Few if any slaves in these ancient societies left written records of their ideas and aspirations. The rise of class society divided manual labor from mental labor such as reading and writing. However, we know that there were slave revolts. And egalitarian movements arose again and again in opposition to slave systems.

Slavery (or chattel slavery) meant that some people “owned” other people in the same way that they “owned” oxen or goats. That is, the legal system (including armed bodies of soldiers or police) enabled the “owners” to use and abuse the “slaves” 24/7, in almost any way they wanted. In China, slavery existed at least by 2100 BCE (the

Xia Dynasty) and lasted thousands of years. Most slaves did back-breaking work in the fields, the main form of production. Sometimes slaves were buried alive with their dead masters.

The Nongjia movement (Agriculturalism or Agrarianism) arose in the 8th century BCE. It advocated a form of peasant communism. It celebrated the folk-hero Shen Nong, a king who was portrayed as “working in the fields, along with everyone else, and consulting with everyone else when any decision had to be reached.”

The best-known Agriculturalist was the philosopher Xu Xing. One of Xu’s students reportedly criticized the Duke of Teng in these words: “A worthy ruler feeds himself by plowing side by side with the people, and rules while cooking his own meals. Now Teng on the contrary possesses granaries and treasuries, so the ruler is supporting himself by oppressing the people.”

In other words, the “king” should be a leader, not a boss or exploiter. Today, communists understand that our revolution will sweep away all bosses and exploiters. There won’t be one “leader,” even one who “consults with everyone else.” Instead, one mass communist party will reach, carry out, and evaluate all the decisions that af-

fect our lives. The role of this leadership, now and in the future, is to mobilize the masses for communism.

Agriculturalism was limited by its individualistic peasant outlook. It assumed that each family unit could and should be self-sufficient, instead of advocating collective work for the common good. And it didn’t criticize money or a market economy, which made inequality possible. It called instead for fixed prices for similar goods.

As far as we know, the Agriculturalist philosophy remained the property of an educated elite. We have no evidence that Xu and his followers ever tried to mobilize slaves, or any other elements of the masses, around their ideas. Their movement looked backward, not forward. However much they wanted an egalitarian society, it was impossible for them to attain it.

Agriculturalism died out in China around the 3rd century BCE. The dominant ideology became Confucianism, a philosophy that openly justified class society and its gross inequalities, including slavery. Any slave rebellions that occurred in China during this period have been erased from the written records.

Slavery in China survived the rise of feudalism and even of capitalism. It was smashed by the communist-led revolution of 1948-49. Sadly, remnants of slavery still exist under capitalism in the 21st century – even in now-capitalist China.

*Next article: The fight for equality in ancient Greece*



## Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part III

### ANCIENT GREECE: FOR “EQUALITY AND COMMUNITY OF POSSESSION”

We’ve seen that Chinese radicals of the 8th to the 3rd century BCE wanted their “king” to work alongside the masses and consult with them. Now we travel five thousand miles from China to Sparta, Greece, still in the 3rd century BCE. There’s no evidence that these societies communicated with each other, but they had many similarities.

Forget the so-called “glorious democracy” of ancient Greece. Its famous city-states ran on slave labor. Plato, Aristotle, and every other Greek writer considered slavery an unalterable fact of nature. Even when they imagined utopias without private property, or with women in power, slaves did the work.

And forget the myth that Greek slaves were “not treated so badly.” Beatings and threats of beatings were common. Slaves in the brothels and the Laureion mines endured a particularly brutal existence.

As in China, no records of slave rebellions survive. But we know that slaves ran away, because Antiphanes wrote a comedy called *The Runaway-catcher*. Twenty thousand slaves, encouraged by Spartan soldiers, escaped Athens in 404 BCE after the Peloponnesian War.

In Sparta, the helots of Messenia (publicly-owned slaves) would in turn be freed when Thebes defeated Sparta in 371. But chattel slavery remained. Wealth was rapidly concentrating into the hands of 100 Spartan families whose huge estates depended on slave labor. By the time twenty-year-old Agis IV became co-King of Sparta in 245 BCE, the “free” masses were drowning in debt.

According to the historian Plutarch, Agis “tried to exalt the people and incurred the hatred of the nobles.” He planned to “establish equality and community of possession among the citizens” and the free non-citizens – but not the slaves.

Agis and his allies convened a popular assembly to consider his plan. Agis contributed his own huge estate to “the common stock.” He convinced his mother and grandmother (two of the wealthiest Spartans) and others to do the same.

Most of the Spartan rulers (including Agis’s co-King Leonidas II) organized against him, but the masses were with him.

His popularity increased after his forces burned a huge pile of mortgage notes and other papers, wiping out the debts. “And now,” wrote Plutarch, “the multitude demanded also that the land should at once be divided.”

Before this could happen, Agis was sent on a military expedition. People were amazed by the discipline of his poor but now debt-free soldiers as “they marched through the Peloponnesus without doing any injury, without rudeness, and almost without noise.” Agis lived, dressed, and armed himself as the common soldiers did. The rich feared “that they might prove a disturbing force and set a bad example among the common people everywhere,” reported Plutarch.

Agis returned to Sparta amidst “much commotion and a revolution.” In his absence, other rulers had taxed and oppressed the people harder than ever. The land hadn’t been divided as promised. Agis sought sanctuary but was captured and im-



Ancient Greek pottery shows slave miners.

prisoned. Refusing to renounce his policies, he was quickly executed along with his mother and grandmother, shortly before a crowd arrived to attempt a rescue.

Cleomenes III, king of Sparta from 235 to 221 BCE, took up Agis’s cause. He emancipated the helots of Laconia – but still not the chattel slaves. Defeated in battle in 222-221 BCE, Cleomenes fled to Alexandria, Egypt, where he tried to organize a revolt. Failing, he committed suicide.

Like the Chinese Agriculturalists, Agis and Cleomenes tried to turn back the clock to a society based on small farmers. They didn’t see slaves as allies (much less leaders) of those they called the “common people.” They mistakenly thought that political reforms could create a more equal society, even on the backs of the slaves

Next: *Revolution versus Reform in Ancient Rome*

# Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part IV

## **REVOLUTION VERSUS REFORM IN ANCIENT ROME**

Like ancient Greece, Rome depended on slave labor. About one third of the people were slaves who worked the land, fought in the famous legions, built the viaducts, and served the wealthy. For most, it was a harsh existence. The life expectancy of a slave was about 20 years.

Land conquered by the Roman army was assigned to poor and indigent citizens. Laws prohibited the rich from accumulating too much, but rich landowners evaded these laws. They evicted citizens (plebeians) who worked the land and replaced them with slaves who were mostly captured in conquest. These slave plantations increasingly dominated the Roman political economy. In 135 BCE the First Servile War (centered in Sicily) erupted in a massive challenge to the slave system.

Two years later, the young tribune Tiberius Gracchus drew up his “Agrarian Law.” Roman tribunes were elected by the plebeians. Tiberius came from an aristocratic family, but he sided with the masses.

According to the historian Plutarch, who compared Gracchus to King Agis IV of Greece (see last article) Gracchus was motivated mainly “by the people themselves, who posted writings on porticoes, house-walls, and monuments, calling upon him to recover for the poor the public land.”

This was only a reform: landowners were to be compensated, and slavery itself was not questioned. However, wealthy citizens accused Tiberius of “stirring up a general revo-

lution.” Very sharp conflict – including armed struggle – ensued.

Plutarch’s account of the Agrarian Law conflict makes it clear that Tiberius was indeed trying to mobilize the masses against the rich and powerful land- and slave-owners who dominated the Roman Senate. He orated that wild beasts have caves or dens, “but the men who fight and die for Italy enjoy the common air and light, indeed, but nothing else; houseless and homeless they wander about with their wives and children.”

Tiberius exposed the lies told to get soldiers to fight, declaring that “they fight and die to support others in wealth and luxury, and ... have not a single clod of earth that is their own.” Knowing that the Senate would oppose him, Tiberius took his cause to the Popular Assembly.

Tiberius was killed in 132 BCE (the same year

that the slave rebellion was squashed). His brother Gaius Gracchus took up the cause. However, his strategy was not to mobilize the masses but to empower the rising business class (equestrians) against the landowning nobility. He gave them the right to collect taxes in Asia, and spent huge amounts of money on roads and harbors, to benefit trade.

Gaius tried to extend full Roman citizenship (including voting rights) to free people outside of Rome itself. This brought him into conflict with former supporters, and Gaius was later forced into suicide. Some consider the deaths of the Gracchi to be the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.

“Gracchus” Babeuf, one of the first modern communists, took this name in honor of Tiberius Gracchus, the Roman champion of land reform.

But Tiberius Gracchus, like Agis and the Agriculturalists in China, looked backward and fought for a society based on small farmers. His brother Gaius looked forward but only as far as a society based on merchants. Neither saw slaves as allies (much less leaders) of the citizens they called the “common people.”

There was a Second Servile War (also in Sicily), and a Third (led by Spartacus) that shook Rome itself. The written records left to us are but a pale reflection of the power of egalitarian ideas in the ancient worlds.

Next article: *Egalitarianism in Judaism, early Christianity, and Hinduism*



**Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus**