DISCUSSION

There is much to disagree with in Gary Nicholls’ article “Interpretations of Black History” (ALR No. 47, July 1975) but I dissent specifically from his assumption that aboriginal society is “but one more instance of the process that precedes capitalism” (p.51), i.e. simply an earlier stage in the system of human progress leading to capitalist society; and that a reconstituted aboriginal society has no right to existence in the 20th century and has no role in challenging the hegemony of capitalist society (p.51).

The first assumption - that aboriginal society can be seen as an earlier stage in a system of progress towards capitalist society is satisfactorily dealt with by Levi-Strauss in Structural Anthropology where he writes of the intoxification of our society with the belief that all societies preceding capitalism, during tens of milleniums, did nothing more than prepare the ground for its advent. He quotes Marx thus:

“The so-called historical development amounts in the last analysis to this, that the last form considers its predecessors as stages leading up to itself and perceives them always one-sidedly, since it is very seldom and only under certain circumstances that it is capable of self-criticism ...." (Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Chicago 1904, p.301).

There is no necessary imperative within marxism to see "primitive" societies as preparing the way for more progressive societies, though there is such an imperative in regard to class societies. There is no imperative to see progress as a universal concept as opposed to "the internal property of a given society". Indeed Marx has acknowledged the unchanging nature of some societies:

“The simplicity of the organisation for production in those self-sufficing communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same spot, and with the same name - this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the unchangeableness of Asiatic societies, an unchangeableness in such striking contrast with the constant dissolution of Asiatic states and the never-ceasing changes of dynasty." (Capital: N.Y. 1906, pp.393-4).

Given that they are governed by kinship rather than economic relations, such societies might endure indefinitely - unless destroyed from without (Levi-Strauss, p.337).

Aboriginal society has been substantially destroyed by past and current attempts to impose European values and systems on a non-European people in the name of that “progress” (the same term, if not the same content) which Nicholls would use to ‘proletarianise’ the Aboriginal population.

Given his premise - that progress is a universal concept - it is easy to see why he regards attempts to revive traditional life styles as 'an attempt, initiated by the bourgeoisie, to maintain a ‘permanent living museum’ in certain areas (e.g. Arnhem Land) and as a way of mystifying Blacks in areas where militant demands seem more dangerous (e.g. NSW)."

There is, currently, amongst Northern Territory and other Aboriginal people, a trend to move away from contact with European-Australian society back to traditional economy and life styles. A possible consequence of such a trend is the redevelopment of self-sufficiency by Aboriginal people. This in itself would constitute a break from the dependence on welfare, fostered by successive governments in an attempt to find for the Aborigine a place in capitalist society, if only as a consumer of services. This movement, from an “administered life” to a self-sufficient Aboriginal hunter-gatherer economy contains the possibility of establishing conditions which have never existed in the old and advanced industrial societies, in which (given the material plenty of the Arnhem Land environment) self-determination would proceed from the economic base. This is a far cry from “the oppressed and helpless state” which Nicholls envisages as resulting from the revival of traditional life styles.

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