

# THEORY *in* SOCIAL *and* CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

EDITORS

R. Jon McGee  
Richard L. Warms  
*Texas State University*

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## MEILASSOUX, CLAUDE

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Claude Meillassoux (1925–2005), born in northern France, exerted a major influence in anthropology through his work on West African farm communities, slavery, premodern trade, gender roles, and the theory of imperialism.

In the 1950s, after participating in militant Third World study groups, he was initiated to Anglo-Saxon social anthropology by Georges Balandier and conducted fieldwork among Gouro-speaking farmers in Côte d'Ivoire. Subsequently, he spent his career in the French National Research Center and carried out longer stretches of fieldwork among the Soninke and Marka populations in Mali and Senegal. In the 1960s, he came to be known as a pioneer of Marxist anthropology and an economic anthropologist, but he also wrote on Mande culture history, voluntary associations, comparative kinship, child labor, and apartheid South Africa.

In his first pathbreaking article of 1960, Meillassoux presented a model of farm communities producing most of their needs (self-provisioning), based on his Gouro fieldwork. The model assumes that all members have access to land, and tools are simple and easy to find; the division of labor follows sex and age. Even so, production techniques are complex and necessitate a long apprenticeship. Senior men at the top of the hierarchy act as the organizers. Younger men work the farms and produce most other necessities but “yield” the produce to the elders, who then distribute it according to norms and needs. This dependency finds expression

in kinship and corresponds to filial relations within the household; therefore, it is consensual but also fraught with potential antagonism. Senior men's authority stems ultimately from their control of knowledge and also the farming conditions: Until harvest time, previous years' stored crops are needed for sustenance; older men appear as the providers, setting the principle of anteriority supreme. Yet the resulting social ranking is not simply inscribed in the natural order. The elders reinforce their hold by limiting the transmission of the requisite knowledge through cultural means or extending its range beyond the technical to ritual and the supernatural, to delay or constrain the emancipation of junior men. Furthermore, they control junior men's social progress by regulating marriage, because young men can only obtain dependents and set off in the path of autonomy by establishing their proper household.

Senior elders provide spouses for young men by engaging in delayed exchanges with other groups, in which the surrender of bride wealth goods, an assortment of diverse rare objects, serves as a safeguard for later reciprocation. The elders keep these treasures out of reach of the juniors. When the development of monetary relations threatens their easier availability, they resist the conversion of bride wealth to money. The broader powers they gain with their ability to control marriages allows them to delegate local tasks such as the distribution of food to younger seniors heading house groups. This complex political organization that rests on farming can evolve into stratified village polities. The worsening of general security, the rise of militarized groups, or invasion by foreigners can further lead to centralized power. More frequently, these communities trade with foreign professionals. Usually, the senior elders monopolize trade, isolating the rest of the community from the exchanges. If their control collapses, the young men and women sell their products directly, price equivalencies emerge within the community, and the entire social order starts changing.

Meillassoux ethnography of the Gouro, published in 1964 and based on a survey of four villages; the intensive study of published sources; and the ingenious use of aerial mapping, put greater emphasis on farmers as cash croppers. In 1975, in a theoretical synthesis translated as *Maidens, Meal and Money*, he elaborated that women were valued more for giving birth than as agricultural workers;

if there was subjugation, it lasted only during their procreative years, primarily to control the offspring. The book also considered wage work in colonial situations and internal migration. The workers who travel to take up mining or factory jobs are raised in farm communities, which also reabsorb them when they return worn out, making it possible for the industries that employ them to pay lower wages. This explains the paradox that imperialist systems deliberately maintain labor reserves and community areas, instead of fully integrating them into the capitalist system.

Meillassoux's originality lay in focusing on farm production and theorizing family and community in terms of "relations of production," a Marxist inspiration. His bride wealth analysis revealed that restrictions on the circulation of objects had political consequences, laying bare the triteness of earlier discussions on bride purchase; his contrast between juniors and seniors opened up new interpretive horizons. Meillassoux sways in his early writings between describing self-provisioning farm communities as a step in historical evolution and as fieldwork reality, but his 1975 book settled on the latter perspective. Meillassoux provided an impetus for a lively debate in the 1970s known as the "modes of production controversy" (the term having been given currency by the philosopher Louis Althusser), but he responded by avoiding its use.

Between 1960 and 1977, in his Senegal and Mali fieldwork, Meillassoux encountered complex, stratified savanna societies, and his writing took a historic turn. *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* synthesized 19th-century travel literature and earlier 20th-century ethnologists' and historians' contributions to produce an intricate canvas of connections between production and commerce in West Africa. He distinguished long-distance commerce in high-value items from women's retail food trade. Until the 20th century, this commerce surpassed the Atlantic trade in volume. War provided a means of payment and markets for this trade. Commerce involved, however, only products, not labor or capital; as prices across the region remained uncoordinated, trade profits had no systematic influence on production conditions. A major discovery of the book was slavery's significance in several 19th-century savanna societies, as in many others

elsewhere in the world since antiquity. While slavery assumed different forms, across regions and local cultures, slaves served as a major commodity and were employed to produce food and goods supplied to long-distance trade. These insights were pursued in his edited *Slavery in Precolonial Africa* (1975), which was the first major discussion of African slavery by anthropologists, and developed in *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*.

Meillassoux noted that because slaves were captured from the outside, their work was less costly to the capturers than internally raising the equivalent population. This way, resources got transferred from birth communities to those of forcible incorporation. But the captured needed to be moved far away in order to reduce their chances of being delivered or escaping, giving rise to extensive trade networks. The use of slaves in agriculture, war, tax collection, and government subsidized the military establishment of enslavement. In contrast to full members of the community, the exploitation of slaves in agrarian conditions absorbed their life energies, hampering their self-reproduction. They were replenished only by ongoing capture. A slave society could not be self-contained—a significant amendment of Marx and Engels and of the earlier Marxist tradition, which considered slavery a type of society, or "mode of production." But the demand for slaves was bound to exceed the demographic capacity of the pilfered population to supply them, extending the catchment area to exhaustion. If in successive generations slaves were transformed into serflike communities paying a product-rent, exploitation was subdued. Commerce allowed some West African areas to increase the number of dependents through purchase, generating profits and feeding the monetized long-distance trade economy, as well as the overseas Mediterranean and Atlantic markets.

This comprehensive theory revealed the shortcomings of earlier studies on slavery based on information from 19th-century America, because the banning of the transatlantic slave trade by then had altered the circumstances. Meillassoux's analysis of slavery is one of the greatest anthropological contributions to general social theory.

Meillassoux's later publications focused on child labor, emphasizing its wage-lowering effect at the expense of adults staggering under high

unemployment rates. His final book, *Mythes et Limites de l'Anthropologie* (Myths and Limits of Anthropology, 2001), argued that the naturalist model of kinship emerged in warrior-aristocratic cultures, where power holders sought to limit succession to persons in their household whom they could dominate personally.

In economic anthropology, Meillassoux was influenced by Karl Polanyi and Paul Bohannan, but his sweeping vision linking political and economic phenomena and his ability to recognize broad patterns that eluded others, both partly inspired by his Marxian focus on social reproduction, led him quickly to leave behind their typological approach to produce strikingly original contributions.

*Mahir Şaul*

*See also* Althusser, Louis; Bohannan, Paul; Marxist Anthropology; Polanyi, Karl

#### Further Readings

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## MINTZ, SIDNEY

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Sidney W. Mintz (1922– ) is an American anthropologist known for his pioneering ethnographic and historical research on the Caribbean, Afro-American cultures, cultural creolization, and food systems. Mintz is the author and editor of several books and many scientific articles on these and

related themes. Caribbeanist anthropologists typically study only one society or societies speaking the same language in the region. Mintz chose to do fieldwork in three Caribbean societies with three different colonial legacies and languages: Puerto Rico (1948–1949, 1953, 1956), Jamaica (1952, 1954), and Haiti (1958–1959, 1961). He later worked in Iran (1966–1967), where he did fieldwork with his wife, Jacqueline Wei Mintz, and in Hong Kong (1996, 1999).

### Biography and Theoretical Directions

Mintz was born in Dover, New Jersey, one of four children of Eastern European Jewish immigrant parents. Arriving in New York at the beginning of the 20th century, his father, Solomon, was a die-maker and clothing salesman; his mother, Fanny, became a seamstress and Industrial Workers of the World organizer. With the onset of the Depression, Solomon lost the restaurant he had eventually come to own there, opened a diner, and became a cook. Mintz attended Brooklyn College, and in the summer months, he worked the midnight shift at an arsenal near Dover. After receiving his BA in psychology in 1943, he was drafted into the U.S. Army Air Corps, where he taught celestial navigation. After the war and with the aid of the G.I. Bill, he enrolled in graduate studies in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University in September 1946. During 1947–1948, he was an assistant to Ruth Benedict, whom he admired. At Columbia, he encountered fellow veteran graduate students who were interested in leftist/radical politics and in applying Marxist/materialist approaches to anthropological theory. They formed a study group called the Mundial Upheaval Society, many of whose members, including Mintz, Stanley Diamond, Morton Fried, Robert Manners, John Murra, Elman Service, and Eric Wolf, became prominent professionally.

At Columbia, a major influence was Julian Steward, whose models of multilineal evolution provided a critique of the ethnographic particularism of many followers of Franz Boas and a counterpart to Benedict's culture and personality approach. With funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and the University of Puerto Rico, Steward assembled a team of graduate students from Columbia and from the University of Chicago, whose members