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Beyond Morris: The Norse world in classical socialist thought

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Abstract: This article surveys and analyzes the representation of Norse themes in a selection of key authors broadly associated with the political left during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It examines writers of diverse educational, political, and national backgrounds, grouping them into two principal ideological currents: Marxism and Anarchism, alongside a smaller number of figures who do not fit neatly within either category. The study considers major thinkers from across Europe, from Spain to Russia, while deliberately excluding British and Nordic authors, and the extensively studied figure of William Morris. The article argues that, with relatively few exceptions, these authors share a common intellectual framework grounded in various forms of evolutionism, a dominant paradigm within the social sciences of the period. At the same time, notable differences emerge in their moral evaluations of Norse societies: anarchist writers tend to adopt a more favorable interpretation, whereas Marxist authors generally articulate a more muted stance.

Keywords: Norse medievalism; Marxism; anarchism; social sciences.

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Além de Morris: O mundo nórdico antigo no pensamento socialista clássico

Resumo: Este artigo examina e analisa a representação de temas nórdicos em uma seleção de autores-chave amplamente associados à esquerda política durante os séculos XIX e início do XX. São considerados escritores de diversas formações educacionais, políticas e nacionais, agrupados em duas principais correntes ideológicas: o marxismo e o anarquismo, além de um número menor de figuras que não se enquadram claramente em nenhuma dessas categorias. O estudo abrange importantes pensadores de toda a Europa, da Espanha à Rússia, excluindo deliberadamente autores britânicos e nórdicos e a figura amplamente estudada de William Morris. O artigo argumenta que, com poucas exceções, esses autores compartilham um quadro intelectual comum fundamentado em diversas formas de evolucionismo, um paradigma dominante nas ciências sociais do período. Ao mesmo tempo, emergem diferenças significativas em suas avaliações morais das sociedades nórdicas: os escritores anarquistas tendem a adotar uma interpretação mais favorável, enquanto os autores marxistas geralmente articulam uma posição mais moderada.

Palavras-chave: medievalismo nórdico; marxismo; anarquismo; ciências sociais.

Introduction

Studies about how right-wing ideologists and writers represented (and misrepresented) the Norse world are abundant, constituting a considerable subset of the studies of the field of reception recently defined as "Boreal Medievalism" (Stahl, 2023).[1] That subset spans the whole range of ideological varieties from the plethora of fascist and national-socialist far-rights obsessed with the vikings, moving into conservatives such as Tolkien and Borges, and reaching the anarcho-capitalist libertarians who see the vikings as pioneers of entrepreneurship and champions of private property.

By contrast, much less scholarly attention has been devoted to how those on the left have represented the issue. For example, the issue is largely absent from studies like those of Jón Karl Helgason (2017), Heather O'Donoghue (2024) and the studies in the volume edited by Nicolas Meylan and Lukas Rösli (2020). There are, however, a few important exceptions. Włodzimierz Gogłoza wrote an article on anarchists, discussing both the right-wing libertarians and left-wing communitarians. For the

latter group, he focuses on a recent militant group (the AFAQ) and briefly discusses Kropotkin as their main inspiration (Gogłoza, 2018, p. 58).[2]

A single figure, William Morris represents the most important exception, and his work has been widely studied by several generations of scholars. He is well known both for his enthusiastic work inspired by the Medieval North and for his active socialist commitment.[3] He was, however, a rather unusual ideological figure amongst the Victorian-era scandinavists. Andrew Wawn summarises the ideological standpoint of his contemporaries, which highlight how unusual Morris was: "Stanley the Whiggish gentleman in rural retreat, Stephens the fiery ex-patriate brother of a Chartist-sympathising methodist; Carlyle the Tory Patriarch; Dasent the Darwinian Maverick" (Wawn, 2000, p. 276). Only George Stephens among them has some link to the left, mostly due to the influence of his rebellious brother, the preacher Joseph Rayner Stephens, who also introduced him to the Nordic literature (Wawn, 2000, p. 222), but their political positions differed greatly (Cusack, 1984, p. 40).

However, interest in Norse sources can be found in a broad number of left-wing intellectuals of the era, even if their interest never is as keen as that of Morris. The aim of this article is to briefly summarise and discuss the contributions of each of them, roughly divided by their broad political affiliation. I will exclude the well-studied Morris, but also British and Nordic authors, as these are naturally a much wider group as Norse literature was entwined with their own national historical traditions, but consider authors from other Western nations in the short century roughly placed between the mid-nineteenth century and up to the interwar period, that is, the eight decades roughly covering from 1850 to 1930. While some of these people (who were overwhelmingly men) are still familiar names to most readers interested in the humanities and social sciences, some are nowadays less remembered. My aim is to briefly discuss the uses of the Norse themes in some representative works, without any claim to comprehensive reporting. I discuss, broadly speaking the two main trends that became dominant (and antagonistic) around the time of the First International: Marxists and Anarchists, Hobsbawm, (1977, p. 136-137); for a detailed account, see Eckhardt (2016). Only two other figures are discussed, largely due to their major impact in the history of the social sciences (Mauss and Veblen). This excludes other radical groups, such as the diverse branches of Chartism and similar ideologies. The final part of the article attempts to find common themes that unite these authors within the frame of the intellectual tendencies of the era.

It should be noted that this article is best understood as a preliminary survey of the evidence that proposes a broad initial hypothesis rather than a dedicated, in-depth analytical article (which would indeed require a much lengthier project).

Moreover, it should be understood as a rather traditional text in the field of intellectual history than as about medievalism, given that many of the figures discussed here were either scholars themselves or close to scholarly milieus, rather than just left-wing political militants.[4] These people largely had an analytical perspective rather than an aim to recreate aspects of the medieval past.

The Marxists

The first group of thinkers discussed here includes those directly associated with the figure of Karl Marx, most likely the most influential of all the thinkers here, both inside and outside academia. It should be first noted that he showed only occasional interest in Norse sources. This is unsurprising, given that Marx was generally not focused on any precapitalist social formations and only treated them briefly, except for the crucial moments in the development of capitalism, the well-known process of "primitive accumulation" discussed in detail in the first volume of *Capital*. It was for him mostly a late medieval and early modern process and thus happening well beyond the setting of Norse literary and historical processes.

However, he took notes on Scandinavian feuding and read George Webbe Dasent's English translation of *Njáls saga* (Krader, 1974, p. 321–322), even if he seems not to have engaged directly with Norse material for his scholarly and political texts. Despite Marx's apparent disinterest on the issue, others in his milieu had a keener interest on Norse material, not least because socialising with the always enthusiastic William Morris, as can be seen in this short letter sent from Engels to Laura Marx Lafargue in November 1884:

> Morris, who was here the other night and quite delighted to find the Old Norse Edda on my table — he is an Icelandic enthusiast — Morris read a piece of his poetry (a "*refonte*" of the eddaic *Helreid Brynhildar* (the description of Brynhild burning herself with Sigurd's corpse), etc., etc., it went off very well (Marx; Engels, 1976, p. 342).

Unlike Marx, Engels engaged directly with Old Norse material in his analysis of Germanic and Celtic kinship in his book-length commentary on Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*, called *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* and first published in 1884. There, he analysed two verses from stanza forty-four of *Vǫluspá*, in his discussion of how kinship (in the form of *gentes*) was central for the social organisation of these groups. His analysis uses philology to defend the idea of ancestral mother-rights. He argued these were traceable in Tacitus, and continued in Norse times:

"Still more decisive, because it comes about eight hundred years later, is a passage from the Old Norse poem of the twilight of the gods and the end of the world, the *Völuspá*. In this 'vision of the seeress'", into which Christian elements are also interwoven, as Bang and Bugge have now proved, the description of the period of universal degeneration and corruption leading up to the great catastrophe contains the following passage:

"Broedhr munu berjask ok at bonum verdask, munu systrungar sifjum spilla". Brothers will make war upon one another and become one another's murderers, *the children of sisters* will break kinship." *Systrungar* means the son of the mother's sister, and that these sisters' sons should betray the blood-bond between them is regarded by the poet as an even greater crime than that of fratricide. The force of the climax is in the word *systrungar*, which emphasizes the kinship on the mother's side; if the word had been *syskina-börn*, brothers' or sisters' children, or *syskinasynir*, brothers' or sisters' sons, the second line would not have been a climax to the first, but would merely have weakened the effect. Hence even in the time of the Vikings, when the *Völuspá* was composed, the memory of mother-right had not yet been obliterated in Scandinavia (Engels, 1909, p. 165–167).

Kinship is again the reason for his other reference to Norse texts: a later footnote refers to the "Oegisdrecka" (the Eddaic poem called nowadays *Lokasenna*) and *Ynglinga saga* as sources for debating the notion of primeval incest (Engels, 1909, p. 45), in footnote. Finally, another discussion compares the ancient Germanic languages on the words for the *gens* (the two main terms being the families of terms around *kin*, and around German *Sippe*), which affirms his good command of historical semantics; it also quotes several Norse words, like *kona* and *sifjar* (Engels, 1909, p. 163).

Moreover, a section called *Old Ireland*, drafted for his unfinished history of Ireland, has several mentions of Norse sources. He first discusses the figure of Ragnarr hairy-breeches in the poem *Krákumál* (Engels, 1971, p. 285-286), which again appears in the original and translated, with philological notes which make clear that Engels was familiar with the Old Norse language. The same section briefly mentions "Snorri's *Haraldssaga*" (this must be *Haralds saga hárfagra* in *Heimskringla* (Engels, 1971, p. 284), in footnote. Later, there are two references to *Njáls saga* (Engels 1971, p. 286, 288). One further reference, within his chronology of the history of early Ireland, also reinforces the idea that Engels had good working knowledge of Old Norse: the footnote mentions *Njáls saga* as quoted by Dietrich, which must be Franz Dietrich's voluminous introductory *Altnordisches Lesebuch*, originally published in 1843 (Engels, 1971, p. 296). In short, Engels used Norse sources as documents, using them both for broad sociological arguments on the evolution of humankind (which parallel and

expand those of Morgan, who largely ignored the ancient Germanic sources), but also for a more traditional historical work on Ireland.

The engagement with Norse literature extended to another key figure in that socialist intellectual circle: Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue analysed reciprocal *do-ut-des* sacrifices to Odin in his chapter on feudal ideas in *The Evolution of Property*:

> Greatness was dangerous: the Scandinavians, in great calamities — in a pressing famine, for example — sacrificed their king, as the highest price with which they could purchase the Divine favour [...]. In this manner the first king of Vermaland, a province of Sweden, was burnt in honour of Odin, to put an end to a great dearth. Earl Hakon, of Norway, offered his son in sacrifice to obtain of Odin the victory over the Jomsburg pirates (Lafargue, 1890, p. 91–92).

He proceeds to compare these examples with similar phenomena in the Bible, among villages in India, in early Greece and in Frankish tribes, all being labelled together as "barbarians". Unlike many of his politically engaged contemporaries, he generally makes his references clear and easy to trace. Lafargue read widely, and academic names familiar to students of social evolution (like Henry Maine, Fustel de Coulanges, Laurence Gomme and John Locke), intermingled with commentaries on militant authors such as Bakunin, ethnographic reports such as the *The Malay Archipelago* by the English Naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace and classical and medieval sources. Unfortunately, he is not clear on what is the exact source for his statements on the "Scandinavian barbarians", whom he also insisted still showed traces of primitive communism in their use of land (Lafargue, 1890, p. 40).

A later book (originally published in 1909) traces the origins of certain concept through an economic Marxist lens, in a manner reminiscent of how Engels treated Morgan's work. There he argued that the replacement of blood revenge with monetary payment was a central moment of social evolution, which he attributes to the influence of Roman civilization on the north. He therefore interprets the myth of the ransom of Otr as a cautionary tale on the payment of wergilds, stating that "superstition attached a curse on blood money" (*la superstition attacha une malédiction à l'argent du sang* (Lafargue, (1928, p. 119). He also refers to similar ideas in Saxo but then compares with a worldwide array of customs around the world, from Turkestan and Afghanistan to the Balkans and the Bedouins, just to finish back in the north, discussing Icelandic sagas and *Grágás* law (Lafargue, 1928, p. 120-121).[5] Here he makes his source explicit, as he is (unsurprisingly) following the widely known work of the eighteenth-century scholar, Paul-Henri Mallet, who had studied the Nordic world partly following his own (constitutionalist) political agenda (Wood, 2013, p. 41-45).[6]

Two non-Marxist socialists

The similarities are evident between these works of Lafargue with the famous study on gifts, the *Essai sur le don*, written by one of the key figures of anthropological science and socialist militant, Marcel Mauss. The line between both Frenchmen can be traced directly: Mauss in his youth assisted in editing some of Lafargue's work for the socialist journal *Le Devenir Social*, and later he belonged to the circle of *Mouvement socialiste*, another journal edited by Lafargue's nephew (and Marx´s grandson) Jean Longuet (Fournier, 2006, p. 34, 100). The *Essai* opens with a discussion of the *Hávamál* (Mauss 2016, p. 55-57), which proceeds along its pages in a way reminiscent of the essays by Lafargue, by commenting on a wide range of evidence from ethnographic reports, ancient literature and scholarly works, united by a similar evolutionist framework. Mauss discussed further Eddaic material in his section on Germanic law within the Essai, which quotes a stanza of *Reginsmál* (Mauss, 2016, p. 169-175) among a range of references that go to peasant customs of his time, German legal historians and Tacitus. He devoted a lengthy footnote to explain why this procedure was to him scientifically correct (Mauss, 2016, p. 104, 169-170).

One aspect, however, is different, as Mauss was clearly not a Marxist but a Durkheimian, so the economic determinism lurking behind the ideas of Lafargue is largely absent.[7] Yet, the entwining of explicitly political debate with scholarly pursuit is similar in both of them: while Lafargue often criticised the anarchist viewpoints, Mauss was highly critical of the Bolsheviks of his time (Mauss, 1924), and it has been argued that the *Essai* itself was written as an answer to the rise of Bolshevism in Russia (Kalb, 2025, p. 327-329). It is thus unsurprising that his stage-model was not based on subsistence modes but on kinship as a mode of social organisation, such as in this passage in the conclusions:

> All the societies that we have described above, except our own European ones, are segmented. Even the Indo-European societies, Roman society from before the Twelve Tables, the Germanic societies up until the writing down of the Edda, or Irish society before the drawing up of its main literature, were based on clans, or at least great families that were internally more or less undivided and externally more or less isolated from one another (Mauss, 2016, p. 195).

In a parallel transatlantic context, Mauss's American contemporary Thorstein Veblen translated and commented on *Laxdæla saga* (Veblen, 1925). Veblen's translation contrasted markedly with the style of Morris, by preferring a colloquial, modern style to the archaisms of Morris (Kennedy, 2007, p. 124-125). Veblen saw the saga as "an

ethnological document of a high order [...] of prime significance for any understanding of that peculiar phase of culture that makes up its setting" (Veblen, 1925, p. vi).

The phrase "phase of culture" there easily rings a bell of evolutionism. But the attitude here seems different, as noted by Eric Stockton: "Veblen's thinking was permeated with his knowledge of primitive cultures early and late. With his nimble use of a relativistic anthropology, he never tired of describing modern society in terms of barbarism" (Stockton, 1954, p. 2). This seems akin to the attitude of the anarchists analysed below, who, while still largely evolutionist in their ideas about material progress, were often less keen to see moral progress in their own time, which means both that modern and ancient people could be of any moral character. This is consistent with his anti-elitist outlook.

Moreover, Veblen discussed medieval Iceland in his *The Nature of Peace*. His tone is one of subtle admiration at the Icelandic Commonwealth (or Republic, as he also calls it), but he nevertheless sees it ultimately in terms of stages and survivals, even if in slightly different wording: "the new commonwealth was necessarily erected on the premises afforded by the received scheme that had come down out of pre-feudal conditions, without having passed under the discipline of that regime of coercion which the feudal system had imposed on the rest of Europe" (Veblen, 1917, p. 12-13). It however can be noticed that such lack of change was not judged negatively at all, which might be read as perhaps a departure from the narrative of continuous progress usual amongst pure evolutionists. In any case, Veblen remains the most elusive of the people discussed here in ideological terms. A dedicated book analysing his political thought highlights that "among its greatest defects are a conspicuous reluctance to approach political matters in a systematic way" (Plotkin; Tilman, 2011, p. 208). However, they find some consistent traits, arguing that

> Veblen completely embraces relativism in respect to habits of thought and practice, including scientific thought. In reference to the perspective of generic human needs, though, the human imperatives that drive or motivate the life process, Veblen is unrepentantly universalistic. Veblen examines particular societies or cultures [...] from an outside position that recognizes differentiation and specificity among singular cases, but within a frame governed by the idea that human beings share fundamental biological or metabolic commonalities and needs (Plotkin; Tilman, 2011, p. 199).

Such attitude is akin to the perspective of the leading anthropologist in the United States of his time, Franz Boas, whose cultural relativism was at the same time universalist and humanist, and distances him from the evolutionism of most of the authors discussed here, perhaps too attached to the enlightened narrative of the progress of civilization. Moreover, Veblen identified "religion and partisan solida-

rity—or its later version, patriotism—as bulwarks of power", a point of view which connects him with the anarchists (Plotkin; Tilman, 2011, p. 153).

The Anarchists

The last group discussed here concerns those on the left who largely rejected state-based forms of social order. Amongst these anarchists, the work of Élisée Reclus left perhaps one of the most surprising influences in the field, as he seems to have been among the earliest to portray Iceland as some sort of country-wide community without a State, an anarchist political order of sorts. Variations of this theme which have been reused by both politically-motivated libertarian praxeologists largely read outside the field of Norse studies (such as David Friedman) and by well-known scholars within it (such as Jesse Byock).[8] Reclus wrote a monumental book called *L'Homme et la Terre*, which was published in six tomes in 1905-1908 (most volumes actually being posthumous). Several pages in the third volume (Reclus, 1905, p. 506-516) discuss the Atlantic island, and they contain statements such as:

> And, despite these extreme difficulties that nature put up against the islanders, they managed to first rise, from an intellectual and moral point of view, to one of the foremost ranks in the world, if not the foremost, considering their relatively small number. Effectively protected by the extension of the seas for nearly three and a half centuries, the *buendi* of Iceland, happier than those of Trondhjem, completely succeeded in maintaining their dignity of free men, with neither kings, nor feudal princes, nor hierarchy, nor any military establishment. Common interests were discussed publicly among all the inhabitants clad in their armors, a symbol of the absolute right of personal defense belonging to each individual (Reclus, 1905, p. 509-510).[9]

An earlier section (Reclus, 1905, p. 490-491), devoted to the Norwegian Norsemen, already portrays them as freedom-loving, self-sufficient egalitarians, but under the threat of tyrannical monarchs. The founding of Iceland frees them from those threats, and allows from a new social order, in a narrative that strongly echoes some well-known medieval accounts (like as the opening chapters in *Egils saga*).

It is interesting to note that the recurrent reference for this section on Iceland is Ernest Nys, a Belgian legal scholar who was a friend of Piotr Kropokin and collaborated with his research.[10] A key historian of anarchism, Max Nettlau, identified Nys as belonging to the circle around Reclus, and also as close to Kropotkin (Nettlau, 1996, p. 230, 395). In his extensive biography of Reclus, he adds further precisions: he argued that several members of the *Université Nouvelle* in Brussels (which later was absorbed by the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*) were close to Reclus, as well as some

other scholars and intellectuals, including Ernest Nys, who however taught at the *Université Libre* (Nettlau, 1929, p. 221). It is nevertheless hard to guess who influenced who on this matter, as both Reclus and Nys were already influential thinkers when they met (Reclus was two decades older than Nys). The same essay by Nys, *Le haut Nord* is quoted by Kropotkin in *Mutual Aid*, and in turn Nys also quotes Reclus work on that essay (Nys, 1896, p. 106).

The portrayal of the Norsemen created by Nys is also similar to the ones made by his two anarchist friends. He says: "She [Iceland] owes her existence to the most beautiful of feelings, the love of liberty: he [love of liberty] has created remarkable political institutions" (*Elle doit son existence au plus beau des sentiments, l'amour de la liberté: il s'est créé des institutions politiques remarquables* (Nys, 1986, p. 103). Later, commenting on what sagas teach, he goes even further along that line:

> They make us understand, they make us love freedom. Authority disappeared: the individual is in the foreground; despotism is hardly known and, when it appeared by exception, it is as a monstrous regime, that is repugnant to human nature [...] The *buendi*, the free man, is the unit; it is around him, it is through him that all political association is constituted (Nys, 1896, p. 107).[11]

Unlike Reclus, however, he portrays Iceland as a more advanced form of what happened in Norway, whose monarchy is depicted as being the effect of popular will (being compared with the Spanish *Fueros de Aragón*).[12]

There is also an interesting discussion of the Vinland expeditions in the work of Francisco Pi y Margall, one of the leading intellectuals and briefly president of the First Spanish republic in 1873. He was deeply influenced by Proudhonian mutualism; in turn, was very influential in the subsequent generations of Iberoamerican anarchists. Beyond his political roles, his learned production was copious. In his *Historia General de América,* he dedicates a whole chapter to the Norse expeditions to the New World, Pi y Margall (1878, p. 11-20), which seems to be largely based on Rafn's *Antiquitates Americanae*.[13]

The text is largely descriptive (retelling the material in the Vinland sagas). Pi y Margall saw the Norsemen as superior to the natives, who are portrayed as needing to be civilised.[14] However, Pi y Margall (1878, p. 13), at the same time portrayed the newcomers as lacking bravery and perseverance:

> Unfortunately the Scandinavians that up to that point went to Vinland did to my knowledge nothing to civilise them [the natives]. Lacking the bravery of the conqueror and the perseverance of the settler, even if they twice had the spirit to set in it their seat, as many unpitched their tents at the first change of fortune. It is true that simple individual agents, even if rich and powerful, could not

> rely for their troubles nor in their perils with the protection of the State.[15]

This theory of lack of State support as the reason for the failure of the Norse colonies reappears later in the same chapter: "The influence of the Europeans in North America was not larger because there, as in Vinland, they did not only lack the strength or the treasuries of any State, but they did not either establish ties of any sort with their own fatherland" (Pi y Margall, 1878, p. 17).[16]

Even if insistence on the State support for the successful conquerors, which is what contrasts the Norsemen with the later Iberian *conquistadores* is largely novel in the group of texts discussed here, the broad framework of interpretation is however familiar. In the *Historia General,* indigenous American groups are divided between civilised and barbaric peoples, with the author assigning a book of his first volume to each of them. In coherent line with his other arguments, the defining factor dividing both groups is typically the presence of the State, but he also tends to consider the degree of material development.

Finally, Norsemen play a role in the work of the Russian anarcho-communist Piotr Kropotkin, who used Norse material (and that same translation of *Njála* by Dasent read by Marx) in his discussion of "barbarian" mutual aid (Kropotkin, 1917, p. 91-117). The book *Mutual Aid* is structured following a strongly evolutionist pattern, here extending into the pre-human world, as it begins with mutual aid among animals. Then it follows sequentially on savages and barbarians, before moving to the medieval period (here defined by the resurgence of urban life) and there to his own contemporary era. Kropotkin, even if he was not a professional scholar, was very well-read and quotes books, often of a scholarly sort, in almost all the major European languages. Overall, his approach reminds of the materialist focus on property and economic relationships, and the book has many points in common with the work of Engels and Lafargue (who, however, are not mentioned, nor is Marx), while names like Charles Darwin, Konrad Maurer and Henry Maine are referred to frequently. He also refers to Nys and Reclus as authorities.

Kropotkin emphasised how these stages are universal perhaps even more than most other authors discussed here. For example, he states that the village community that he saw as typical of barbarian peoples "was not a specific feature of the Slavonians, nor even of the ancient Teutons", proceeding to list examples in Europe, mentioning the British Isles, France, Italy, Slavonians, Scandinavians, Finns, Coures (Courlanders), Lives (Livonians), India, the Afghans, Mongolians, Javanese, Kabyles, Malays, Abyssinians, Soudan and "natives of Both Americas", the small and large tribes of the Pacific archipelagos, to conclude that "in short, we do not know

one single human race or one single nation which has not had its period of village communities" (Kropotkin, 1917, p. 95-96). This seems to have been a central them for Kropotkin, who wanted to reject the theory that the village community was an obsolete institution and an evolution of servitude (and thus indirectly of State power), a position held by influential Russian Marxists like Georgi Plekhanov, who despised such views as *narodnik* populism.[17] Kropotkin paints instead a very positive moral image of the people in these early stages, writing for example that "the imaginary barbarian — the man who fights and kills at his mere caprice — existed no more than the "bloodthirsty" savage. The real barbarian was living, on the contrary, under a wide series of institutions" (Kropotkin, 1917, p. 102). Within this framework, Kropotkin says that "one of the chief preoccupations of the barbarian village community always was, as it still is with our barbarian contemporaries, to put a speedy end to the feuds", and thus sees the Norse assemblies as a solution for this problem: "Thus in Iceland, and in other Scandinavian lands, at every *Allthing*, or national folkmote, a *lovsogmathr* used to recite the whole law from memory for the enlightening of the assembly" and drawing a parallel with the "Norman *varingiar*" who were called as judges and commanders in early Russia (Kropotkin, 1917, p. 121-122). Like for Reclus and Nys, for Kropotkin the Norsemen were able to sort their social order without need for rulers, but the focus here is not on the individual (as in Nys) but in the collective, which is coherent for a communitarian like Kropotkin.

Final Remarks

Most of the authors discussed here can be better understood in the framework of nineteenth-century social evolutionism, a dominant approach for understanding social order and the most enduring school of thought in early sociological thought, particularly in Europe.[18] A central landmark here seems to be the publication of *Ancient Society* by the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan in 1877, as it influences the Marxist ideas about earlier societies (often through Engels), and thus those on the left who opposed them in intellectual terms, such as Mauss and Kropotkin. However, it is important to notice that Morgan does not refer to the Norsemen at all in his book, and his few references to early "Germans" seem to follow classical authors like Julius Caesar and Tacitus.[19]

It is perhaps possible to explain why the authors discussed above were able to easily place the Norsemen within the evolutionary model of Morgan, given that the American anthropologist based his stages on the earlier ideas of Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, the Danish antiquarian who invented the traditional "Age system" for ar-

chaeological dating, which was originally coined using Scandinavian evidence. Morgan takes the technology-based periodization of Jürgensen Thomsen and extends it to all domains of society and culture: his Upper Barbarism is thus unsurprisingly where pre-Christian Norsemen are typically placed, precisely because it corresponds to the Late Iron Age coined by the Danish antiquarian based mainly on evidence from that time and place.[20] There is however a subtle difference between the archaeological tradition of the nineteenth century and Morgan's perspective: for Morgan, the goal was to incorporate *all* human societies within his evolutionary scheme, and not to develop regional periodisation (which is the usual method in much archaeological sciences).[21] This might have contributed to make it an attractive model for leftist scholars, whose aims were global (such as the union of all the workers of the world towards revolution) rather than the local or regional models that did not necessarily (implicitly or explicitly) rest on the idea of fundamental human equality.[22]

Most of the authors discussed above, whatever their views on empirical history, largely adopted the evolutionary model, sometimes very explicitly. If they were believers in the inherent, basic equality of all humans, they were at the same time believers in that societies were similar to others at the same level of development. Veblen is perhaps the most obvious exception to this second notion, even if partly because his somewhat unsystematic approach. The other possible case, Mauss, is best seen as a transitional figure between the historicism of evolutionism and the largely synchronic approaches of the structuralist school,[23] but his views on the Norsemen remain largely anchored in the evolutionist paradigm. This is largely expected, given the evolutionist stance of his mentor, Émile Durkheim, on what concerned social change (Hinkle, 1976).

However, if evolutionism remains the overall framework of the thinking, it is possible to perhaps divide the two main groups, Marxists and Anarchists, by a subtler difference on the moral stance of the early peoples, and thus of the Norse "barbarians". The Marxists saw the Norsemen as part of a bygone, darker era, and did not give much thought to their moral standing. Anarchists, by contrast, mostly depicted them as virtuous in their love of freedom, and not as inherently morally more backwards than other humans, ancient or modern, regardless of which step in the scale of material progress they were standing on. Moreover, including the Norse past within a scientific theory that aimed to include all humankind creates an implicit counterpoint with many of the views in the far right, which often highlighted cultural or pseudobiological uniqueness.

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Notes

1 This line of research keeps being highly productive. For example, as this article was revised, a major new book was published (Heß *et al.*, 2026).

2 He mentions Reclus in passing (Gogłoza, 2018, p. 49) in footnote 14.

3 Much has been written on the relationship between Morris and the Norse world. Some recent major works and overviews are Felce (2018), Acker (2021), Stott (2021) and Boos (2024).

4 They were not, as it is common in studies of right-wing groups, members of nativist cults or racist associations.

5 The pattern is the same in the other reference to Norse matters. He mentions primitive survivals of incestuous marriages between father and daughter, including Brahma and Saravasti from India, Amon and his mother in Egypt, and Odin and "his daughter Frigga" (*sa fille Frigga*) (Lafargue (1928, p. 56). It is unfortunate that there is no reference to from where he got this (quite mistaken) idea on the tie between these Norse gods. But the statement which follows that short list is a very clear illustration of the "survivals" evolutionist approach: "Ces mythes, que l'on pourrait retrouver dans toutes les religions primitives, ont une valeur historique: les légendes et cérémonies religieuses préservent le souvenir d'époques depuis longtemps ensevelies dans l'oubli". These myths, which can be found in all primitive religions, have one historical value: the legends and religious ceremonies preserve the memory of eras long buried in oblivion (Lafargue 1928, p. 56).

6 Occasionally, even figures of the left less prone to scholarly inquiry of the past used Norse references, such as Rosa Luxemburg likening the proletarian revolution to the hammer of Thor (Luxemburg, 1972, p. 372). Similarly, the French anarcho-feminist teacher and political exile Louise Michel compared New Caledonian legends to the *Edda* and the sagas in the opening pages of her collection of Kanak traditions (Michel, 1885, p. 3).

7 However, the emphasis placed on kinship in Engels makes for some surprising points of contacts on how both he and Mauss imagined archaic societies.

8 See for example the article on private legal enforcement by Friedman (1979) and the section on devolved political order in Byock (2001, p. 63-80).

9 My translation. The original text reads: "Et, malgré ces extrêmes difficultés que la nature oppose aux insulaires, ceux-ci réussirent à prendre tout d'abord, au point de vue intellectuel et moral, un des premiers rangs dans le monde, sinon le premier, eu égard à leur nombre relativement si faible. Protégés efficacement par l'étendue des mers pendant près de trois siècles et demi, les *buendi* d'Islande, plus heureux que ceux de Trondhjem, réussirent complètement à maintenir leur dignité d'hommes libres, sans roi, ni princes féodaux, ni hiérarchie, ni aucun établissement militaire. Les intérêts communs étaient discutés en plein air entre tous les habitants revêtus de leurs armures, symbole du droit absolu de défense personnelle appartenant à chaque individu."

10 Nys is thanked for that in the preface of Kropotkin´s book on the French Revolution (Kropotkin, 1909, p. vii).

11 The original reads: "Elles font comprendre, elles font aimer la liberté. L'autorité disparaît; l'individu est au premier plan; le despotisme n'est guère connu et, quand il apparaît par exception, c'est comme un régime monstrueux, qui répugne à la nature humaine [...] Le *buendi*, l'homme libre, est l'unité; c'est autour de lui, c'est pour lui que toute l'association politique est constituée." My translation. Much of this argument is repeated, in a highly rhetorical style, in the conclusion to the article (Nys, 1896, p. 125-126).

12 He then blames Christianity as the force bringing an end to the freedom-loving culture of the Norsemen, forcefully imposed on the population by the kings (Nys, 1896, p. 123).

13 Rafn was quite influential in Spain due to the expected interest in the conquest of the Americas in Iberian learned circles. See Manrique Antón (2021).

14 This portrait is applied to certain groups, but it does not imply any sense of general superiority of the Europeans, as many other pre-Columbian societies are considered along the book as possessing advanced civilisations.

15 My translation of: "Desgraciadamente los escandinavos que hasta aquí fueron á Vinlandia nada que yo sepa hicieron por civilizarlos. Faltos de la osadía del conquistador y la perseverancia del colono aunque por dos veces llevaron ánimo de fijar en ella su asiento, otras tantas al primer cambio de fortuna levantaron tiendas. Es verdad que simples particulares, aunque ricos y poderosos, no podían contar en sus quebrantos ni en sus peligros con la protección del Estado".

16 My translation of: "No fue mayor la influencia de los europeos en la América del Norte, porque aquí como en Vinlandia, no sólo no dispusieron de la fuerza ni de los tesoros de ningún Estado, sino que tampoco establecieron con su respectiva patria relaciones de ningún género." Pi y Margall (1878) believed there were also colonies much further south, near the Gulf of Mexico.

17 See for example his extensive criticism in the essay *Our Differences*, originally published in 1885 (Plekhanov, 1974, p. 238-274).

18 It is perhaps telling that the less evolutionist of the authors discussed here was Thorstein Veblen, who is not only amongst the latest, but also an American, whose anthropological tradition was indebted to German diffusionism through the influence of Franz Boas. For a brief overview of these early schools of thought in the history of anthropology, see Hylland Eriksen and Sivert Nielsen (2013, p. 21-45).

19 There are extensive (but hardly cohesive) notes on Morgan (and on other early theorists of social evolution such as Henry Maine and John Lubbock) by Karl Marx, but his so-called "Ethnographic Notebooks" largely lack references to the Norse world. See Krader (1974) and Parreira Álvares (2019).

20 This somewhat circular effect is not alien to later Medieval Scandinavian studies, as in the many books discussing reciprocity and gift-giving in the last decades, which ultimately derive from ideas coined by people like Mauss and Jakob Grimm, who had partially grounded their theory on gifts on evidence from Eddic poetry.

21 The divide is brilliantly discussed by Renfrew (1980).

22 However, it should also be noted that Morgan's scheme of evolution is best understood not as a work of empirical history, but as a model for a theory of historical development. The confusion of both can lead to a very schematic, rigid picture of social evolution, which is for example to be found in Stalinist scholarship (Tolstoy, 1952). Naturally, this places all the authors discussed here at the opposite side of the world from far-right thinking, who imagine some essential differences between peoples as a general principle.

23 Lévi-Strauss claimed Mauss as a precursor of the structuralist approach in a widely read essay originally published in 1949 as an introduction to the work of the author of the Essai sur le Don (Lévi- Strauss, 2012).

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