

WAS THE INCA EMPIRE A SOCIALIST STATE? A HISTORICAL DISCUSSION

Kevin R. Harris

Before the Spanish conquest of the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Inca Empire spread down much of the modern South American coast in the Andes Mountains. The empire consisted of more than ten million inhabitants and had, at the time, a very unique political and economic system. The government divided land and animals amongst members of the nation, not necessarily equally, and a system was in place to take care of the elderly and sick. Social scientists have been debating how to classify the Inca Empire for centuries. Arguments have been made which classified the Inca Empire as a socialist state. Many elements of socialism existed in the Inca Empire, but can the state really be classified as socialistic?

The Incas moved into the area which is now known as the Cuzco Valley around 1200. Over the next 300 years they became one of the dominant empires in the "New World." Rural Incas lived in small agricultural communities. According to Peter Bakewell, author of *A History of Latin America*, "the basic unit of society, apart from the family, was the ayllu, which seems fundamentally to have been a clan, a group of people descended from some common ancestor."¹ The ayllu played an important role in Incan society; it had landholdings for growing and raising domesticated animals like llamas and alpacas. Families in the ayllu owned their own homes, clothes, utensils, and often a garden or small plot of land. According to George Peter Murdock,

The clan owned collectively, however, all land outside the village. Its members enjoyed equal rights to game, wood, and pasturage on the communal forest and

meadow, and they tilled in common a portion of the agricultural land for the support of the chief, the cult and the aged.²

However, not all land was used for communal purposes all the time. Sometimes individual members of the community used the land for a period of time for personal use. Llamas and alpacas also grazed on the land. These large animals were used for work and their wool was used to make clothing in the Inca State.³ When a common couple was married the community built them a modest house.⁴ It was a custom in Incan society for people to help others in the community who were in need. "People were expected to lend their labor to cultivate neighbors' land, and expected that neighbors would help them in due course. All capable people were collaborated to support the incapable—orphans, widows, the sick—with food and housing."⁵ Inca commoners expected this courtesy from their neighbors. Many in peasant villages and communities depended on mutual assistance for survival.

The Inca had a uniquely divided social structure. The males were organized into groups based on age and ability to work. Healthy men between the ages of twenty five and fifty were placed in a category called *purics*. According to Murdock, "each *puric* was a married man, a householder, and a laborer for the state as well as for himself."⁶ The *purics* were the heart of labor in Incan society. At the top of the chain was the *Sapa Inca*. The *Sapa* was the King of the Inca Empire and seat of all power. Sally Falk Moore, author of *Power and Property in Inca Peru*, describes the political system under the *Sapa Inca*, "below him are the four *apocunas* who ruled the four quarters of the empire, and below

²George Peter Murdock, "The Organization of Inca Society," *The Scientific Monthly* (Mar 1934): 232.

³Ibid.

⁴Louis Baudin, *Daily Life in Peru*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 199.

⁵Bakewell, *A History of Latin America*, 26.

⁶Murdock, "The Organization of Inca Society," 233.

Kevin Harris is a junior History major from DuQuoin, Illinois. He wrote this paper for Dr. Jose Deustua in History 3255, Colonial Latin America in the Fall of 2006.

¹Peter Bakewell, *A History of Latin America* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1997), 26.

them the *t'ogrikoq* who each ruled 40,000 families."⁷ Moore goes on to add that the chain keeps breaking down into smaller groups. She says *hunu* were the next step down and were in charge of 10,000 families. These families were then broken down into groups of 100 families which were divided into groups of 10. She adds, "Inca officials probably were drawn principally from the eleven royal *ayllus*."⁸ An element of hierarchy existed in Inca society. Society consisted of a top down caste and class system in which the people at the top did have preferential treatment, but social mobility was a possibility in the Empire.

Many social scientists have attempted to lump the unique Inca society into modern political and economic categories. Louis Baudin argued that Incan society was socialistic. He claimed that the ayllu system is what classified the Inca as a system of state socialism. Baudin defines state socialism as being "based on the idea of the 'regulative action of a central power in social relations'...the modern state socialists propose to respect the existing order, that is, private property and individual initiative."⁹ Baudin argues that there is a difference in modern Western Europe and Peru during the time of Inca rule. The idea of private property in Europe had been in existence for centuries, but no such idea existed at the times of the Incas. He claims, "in Peru it rested on a foundation of collective ownership which, to a certain extent, facilitated its establishment, because the effacement of the individual within a group prepared him to allow himself to be absorbed."¹⁰ Baudin argued that the higher ranking Incas tried, and succeeded to an extent, to force a degree of uniformity on the common Inca. The Inca were forced to dress similarly, eat the same food, practice the same religion, and speak the same language, Quechua.¹¹ He also states that crops

⁷Sally Falk Moore, *Power and Property in Inca Peru* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 99.

⁸Ibid., 100.

⁹Louis Baudin, *A Socialist Empire: The Incas of Peru* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1961), 89.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 93.

from the community land were supposed to be stored by the State and distributed according to need. The leftovers were then supposed to be given to the State. However, he adds that this would have been a problem in Incan communities. He explains, "very wisely the directors of the State waived the exigencies of integral rationalism and shared out the land and not its produce...the ownership of their land was taken from them, but the fruits of their soils remained."¹²

The government ensured that Inca families would be able to have the means of growing enough food for themselves. When an Inca couple was married, they were given a plot of land to cultivate called a *tupu*. The size of the plot varied depending on its productivity. When a child was born, the couple was given more land to be able to feed the child. For a daughter, the couple received half a plot, and for a son they received a whole plot. Once everyone in a community had a sufficient amount of land to support themselves, the rest of the land in the area belonged to the State. Each Inca family was also entitled to two llamas which would be used for wool, transportation, and the manure was used for fertilizer.¹³ In a review of Baudin's work, Ralph Blodgett describes the system as "[operating] through production quotas, statistical controls, reserve stocks of goods held against emergencies, the rationing of final products, and sever penalties of violations of regulations."¹⁴ This shows that there was a central planning center in the government which was in charge of production and distribution. This is a key characteristic in the communist and socialist nations we have seen in the twentieth century. Blodgett goes on to add that labor service was mandatory and that personal service was used as a tax system. According to *The Communist Manifesto*, a key element in a communist society is, "[payment of] a heavy progressive or graduated income tax."¹⁵ Since there was no real currency or

¹²Ibid., 222.

¹³Ibid., 223.

¹⁴Ralph Blodgett, review of *A Socialist Empire: The Incas of Peru*, by Louis Baudin, in *Southern Economic Journal* (January 1962): 311.

¹⁵Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Verso,

payment in Incan society they could not pay an income tax, so they were required to work for the government as a form of tax payment. *The Communist Manifesto* adds another key characteristic, "Equal liability of all to labour. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture."¹⁶ The majority of non-noble males in Incan society were responsible to pay the government in labor. Nearly everyone was required to work the land. The main form of labor they were responsible for was in agriculture, although some people were required to do other tasks such as building roads or state or religious buildings.

Even though there are examples of socialism in Incan society, not all social scientists are sold on the idea. One main critic was Alfred Metraux. In, "The Inca Empire: Despotism or Socialism?," he lays out his argument against the Incas being socialistic. Metraux starts out by doubting the information people used to classify Incan society. He says, "among the chronicles and reports and documents which Spain, that rummager of old papers, has handed down to us, and in the accounts of the Indians themselves, one finds enough mixed-up assertions and facts to bolster or justify the most diverse interpretations."¹⁷ He also questions the accuracy of the information that the natives gave to the Spanish calling it idealized images and exaggerations. He continues by calling the idea of socialism in Incan society a myth.

The information about the Inca Empire has been interpreted based on a terminology that was not useful for the time. Metraux's argument was, "the Incas combined the most absolute kind of despotism with the greatest tolerance toward the social and political order of its subject peoples."¹⁸ However, this idea seems to be contradictory. Metraux is saying that the Incas were tyrants and ruled tyrannically, but at the same time were very

1988), 60

¹⁶Ibid., 61.

¹⁷Alfred Metraux, "The Inca Empire: Despotism or Socialism?" in Lewis Hanke and Jane Rausch eds., *People and Issues in Latin American History* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing Inc., 1997), 76.

¹⁸Ibid., 77.

tolerant of the social and political order of the Incan people, of the commoners. He also called the system imperialistic and a forced labor system. Another key argument Metraux used to argue against the Incas being socialist is a definition of socialism by Bertrand Russell:

Socialism essentially means common ownership of land and capital under a democratic form of government. It implies production for use and not for profit and distributed, if not equally to all, at any rate according to inequalities justified only in the public interest.¹⁹

The Inca Empire surely did not meet this standard. Inca officials, clergy, and the *Sapa* Inca all had privileges in the Empire. According to Metraux a third of Inca production went to support the clergy and another third went to the government. This left only one third of Inca production to the masses.²⁰ These circumstances under this definition would show that the Inca Empire was not socialistic. The peasants' required service benefited the elite group and not the State as a whole. In addition, aid to the elderly and incapable was the responsibility of the village and not the State. These views strengthened Metraux argument that the Inca Empire was not socialistic.

Baudin himself said that it was a stretch to call the Inca Empire socialistic. According to Blodgett, "[Baudin] concedes that pure socialism does not exist in practice and that the Peru of the Incas was far from a purely socialistic state."²¹ Baudin believed that the rural Inca communities resembled socialism and communalism, but recognized that it was a stretch to view the empire as a purely socialistic state, particularly due to the nature of the ruling upper class.

Some authors have categorized the Inca system as a monarchy. George Murdock, while at the same time laying out arguments for socialism, describes an Inca system that much more resembled a monarchy rather than a socialist Utopia.

¹⁹Ibid., 79.

²⁰Ibid., 77.

²¹Blodgett, review of *A Socialist Empire*, 312.

Murdock suggested that the Chief Inca sat well above the peasants. The *Sapa* Inca was exempt from the labor that others were required to do. He also had a higher standard of living and owned many private herds of animals and landholdings. The position of *Sapa* Inca was also a hereditary one that was passed down from generation to generation, rather than a position that was selected by the masses.²²

By looking at information from various sources it can be seen that many elements of the Inca Empire were socialistic. The most noticeable are the communal ownership of some land by the *ayllu* in rural communities, and the requirement for the communities to take care of the sick and elderly. However, when looking at the Inca system as a whole it can be concluded that the Inca Empire was not a purely socialist state and that it even had elements of other social and political systems such as a monarchy. Socialism is a modern term that was invented in the 18th century, well after the fall of the Inca Empire. The Inca system was very unique and cannot be classified in any one modern political term. The Inca system stands alone and needs to be classified as its own political and economic system, "Incaism" perhaps.

²²Murdock, "The Organization of Inca Society," 233.