

For Natasha

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The Violence of Abstraction

*The Analytic Foundations
of Historical Materialism*

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The historicity of concepts

I

Let me now try to pull together some of the major arguments of this book. Since my main concern has been with the fundamental concepts of historical materialism – forces of production, economic structure/relations of production, and superstructure – it is worth reminding ourselves, to begin with, how Marx himself regarded theoretical categories. They were not free-floating analytic devices, innocent of historical content. Rather, for him *'ideas, categories'* are but *'the abstract ideal expressions of . . . social relations. Indeed, the categories are no more eternal than the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products'* (1846b: 189). Hence, *'in the succession of the economic categories, as in any other historical, social science, it must not be forgotten that their subject – here, modern bourgeois society – is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality, and that these categories therefore express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence'*. Marx adds, with emphasis: *'this holds for science as well'* (1857: 106). There is no theoretical Archimedean point, from which scientific analysis could commence, which lies outside the history and societies of which historical materialism tries to make sense. For Marx, our categories of analysis inescapably partake of the social reality they seek to depict; they *'bear the stamp of history'* (1867a: 169).

This remains the case even for – and perhaps especially for – the most apparently pure and simple of abstractions, like the Hegelian concept of property, ostensibly *'the subject's simplest juridical relation'*, discussed in chapter 3. Such abstractions always presuppose some

definite *'concrete substratum'* (1857: 102). Similarly with the idea of the *'abstract individual'*, discussed in chapter 4. Indeed Marx argues that *'as a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all'* (ibid.: 104). *'Simple'* categories are latecomers on the historical stage. The historicity of such analytic categories is not, however, by any means always apparent. They appear as, precisely, abstractions – concepts whose content and validity are not circumscribed by time or place, which may therefore be applied quite legitimately to the analysis of any mode of production or social formation. Marx questions this appearance of *'pure'* abstraction, and denies such universalistic pretensions.

In the 1857 General Introduction, he considers this question at length with regard to the conceptual fundamentals of political economy. He identifies a persistent ambiguity of reference in economists' categories. The *'abstraction of the category "labour", "labour as such", labour pure and simple'*, for instance, in one sense *'expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society'*. At the same time, Marx maintains that the concept *'achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society'*. It becomes *'thinkable'* in such abstraction only in *'a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind of labour is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference'* (1857: 104–5). In *Capital* Marx suggests that Aristotle was precluded from developing a concept of value based on labour because of the absence of this material presupposition (1867a: 59–60); *'Greek society was founded upon slavery, and had, therefore, for its natural basis, the inequality of men and their labour-powers'*. Elsewhere he develops similar arguments to explain the physiocrats' limitation of the category of value-producing labour to agricultural labour alone (1863a: ch. 2; 1857: 104), and Petty's restriction of the labour theory of value to labour which produces gold and silver (1859b: 54). The 1857 Introduction draws this general conclusion:

This example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations. (1857: 105)

Though Marx briefly goes on to entertain the idea that 'the bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc.', by virtue of its provision of such abstractions, he severely qualifies this. It is not to be taken, he says, 'in the manner of those economists who smudge over all historical differences and see bourgeois relations in all forms of society. One can understand tribute, tithe, etc. if one is acquainted with ground rent. But one must not identify them . . . Although it is true, therefore, that the categories of bourgeois economics possess a truth for all other forms of society, this is to be taken only with a grain of salt.' There is 'always . . . an essential difference' (ibid.: 105-6). Ignoring such essential differences leads to implicitly teleological approaches to history, in which 'the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and . . . always conceives them one-sidedly' (ibid.: 106).

Elsewhere I have argued that subsequently Marx considerably hardened up these latter reservations (Sayer, 1983: 96-103, 146-8). In the 1859 *Critique, Theories of Surplus Value*, and *Capital*, he does not use historically ambiguous categories like labour 'pure and simple', but develops a new conceptual apparatus founded upon the scrupulous distinction of the historical and transhistorical referents of such notions. This is a systematic feature of the methodology of *Capital*. Thus those senses in which the abstraction 'labour' does genuinely apprehend 'an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society' are grasped in the transhistorical concept of useful or concrete labour: labour which yields use-values, products which satisfy human needs of one sort or another. This concept, incidentally, is no more void of social content than any other, but its content is what is genuinely a social universal: the 'material side' which all human labour possesses irrespective of its social form. Marx makes clear, however, as we saw in chapter 2 with respect to his concept of the labour process, that such transhistorical categories are abstractions: they do not in themselves immediately or adequately describe any empirical realities. This is the corollary of their very generality. All human labour is useful, but it is never only this, and no empirical form of human labour can therefore be sufficiently described by its useful features alone.

Meanwhile, those senses in which labour is 'as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction' (1857: 103) are grasped in the historical category of abstract labour:¹ labour

which produces exchange-values. Abstract labour is labour conceived merely as the quantitative expenditure of human labour-power, irrespective of the particular useful or concrete form in which this expenditure takes place. It is such quantitatively equatable labour, as distinct from the different and qualitatively incommensurable labours which produce different use-values, which is expressed in the relative exchange-values of different commodities. The concept of abstract labour, unlike that of useful labour - which is merely the concept of what all human labour has in common, a class concept in my earlier terminology - designates what for Marx is a definite historical reality, a particular social form in which 'labour' actually exists empirically. 'Labour which creates exchange-value', he says, is social 'not in the general sense but in the particular sense, denoting a specific type of society' (1859b: 31-2). The 'abstraction' of labour 'pure and simple' from its multiple concrete forms is, for Marx, a process that really takes place when, and only when, commodities are exchanged and it is this feature of modern bourgeois society which alone makes an abstract concept of labour possible.

And more generally, 'labour' is henceforth always specified in Marx's writings in one or another such form - wage labour, slave labour, communal labour, and so forth - save where (rarely) he is genuinely speaking of what pertains to human labour transhistorically. Political economy is correspondingly, and repeatedly, criticized for ignoring these distinctions of form in its conceptualizations. Indeed Marx says of the concrete/abstract labour distinction that it is 'the pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns' (1867a: 41), 'the whole secret of the critical conception' (1868a; cf. 1867c). Use-value and exchange-value, or technical and value-composition of capital, are similar distinctions of transhistorical and historical; the same analytic strategy is at work in Marx's clarifications of Smith's ideas on productive and unproductive labour (1863a: ch. 4, sections 3 and 4) and Ricardo's confusions between fixed and circulating, and constant and variable capital (1878: ch. 9).

I have mooted this distinction of transhistorical and historical categories in earlier chapters. But I stress it particularly here, because it indeed does seem to me to lie at the heart of Marx's 'critical conception', and says much about what is most distinctive in his perspective on theoretical concepts. The categories of political economy (and of bourgeois disciplines more generally: it is not hard to see

how similar arguments could be developed regarding the legal subject of jurisprudential theory, or the state in political theory) systematically conflate the historical and transhistorical dimensions of their objects, in ways that are doubly ahistorical. On the one hand, the specifically historical anchorage of these 'simple abstractions' (and indeed of economics as a discipline) in bourgeois society is obscured. 'Labour as such', something which for Marx has tangible reality only as a relation of capitalist society – the abstract labour which produces exchange-values – is falsely identified with what is universal, the useful labour which produces use-values. The 'essential difference' of abstract labour is thereby lost in its identification with its antecedent social forms. And on the other hand, a quality specific to labour in capitalism – its abstract, merely quantitative comparability – is equally falsely predicated of human labour *per se*. Through this double slippage, the historicity of the phenomenon is totally obliterated in the unitary bland abstraction 'labour'. This is the same kind of conceptual slide, of course, found in the various fetishisms criticized throughout this book. It is hardly surprising that theories built on such abstracted conceptual foundations lack all historical purchase.

II

As argued in chapter 2, such fetishisms are not mere intellectual errors. They are – so far as Marx is concerned, at least – grounded in capitalism's phenomenal forms, the ways in which the social relations of bourgeois society present themselves to the consciousness of its participants. Neither the social presuppositions, nor the historicity, of 'natural, self-understood forms of life' like 'labour', commodities, money or capital, are immediately evident in their appearance. Such forms seem, rather, to be natural, obvious and universal, and are accordingly conceived in ordinary language and political economy in fetishistic ways: precisely as pure ahistoric abstractions.

As we have seen, Marx persistently relates the abstraction of social phenomena from their historic integument – he speaks of the abstraction of the state, abstract labour, the abstract individual, and so on, in ways that are too consistent and too frequent to be coincidental – to the particular social conditions of capitalist production and the world of fetishized appearances they sustain. Reification is for him a real

social process. It is, then, the nature of bourgeois reality itself – the discrepancy between its appearance and its reality, its real and its ideal forms – which renders a scientific analysis of such forms necessary, and which simultaneously makes that science necessarily a critique. To show capitalism's phenomenal forms to be mystifying is implicitly to criticize the immediate 'social forms of consciousness' – and the theories and ideologies predicated on their plausibility – in which these forms are 'spontaneously' grasped. Marx's own theoretical concepts, in short, are grounded in a critique of appearances, of 'natural, self-understood forms of social life' and their corresponding categories.

Having written on this at book length elsewhere (1983), I do not intend to elaborate too far on (or defend) what I see as involved in this form of analysis. But briefly, I see Marx's critique, analogously to Kant's, as entailing an excavation of the conditions of 'possibility or impossibility' and therewith the 'origins, extents and limits' (Kant, 1969: 3) of its object. Marx's object – his severally declared starting-point² – is not production in general, but the specific social forms in which, in any given instance, productive phenomena manifest themselves to our experience. Given his materialist assumption of 'correspondence' between phenomenal forms and categories of thought, such an analysis of the conditions of 'possibility or impossibility' of the forms themselves is simultaneously an exposure of the 'origins, extents and limits' of the theoretical categories in which they are conventionally apprehended. Not only propositions, therefore, but the very terms in which they are framed – categories and concepts – for Marx have a truth-value. Definition can accordingly never be a merely nominal operation. A difficult notion for analytic philosophy to accept, this idea would not be at all odd to a Hegelian.

The conditions of possibility at issue will for Marx be a given set of production relations – between people, and to nature – related to a given level of development of productive forces (in my sense of both terms): what he calls the 'material groundwork, or set of conditions of existence' (1867a: 80) of society, its 'essential relations'. Marx's critique, he says in the General Introduction, thus moves from the 'imagined concrete' – the given world of phenomenal forms – to the 'abstract' – the concepts of the essential relations which explain these forms. Equally importantly, however the critique then moves back again, to 'a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought' (1857:

100–1). As Marx says of his procedure in *Capital*, ‘the various forms of capital, as evolved in this book . . . approach step by step the form which they assume on the surface of society . . . and in the ordinary consciousness of the agents of production themselves’ (1865a: 25). I see this second stage of analysis as being above all a historical enterprise (Sayer, 1983: Afterword). Essential relations are concretized through a genuinely historical analysis of the actions of ‘real, living individuals’ in which, in the end, they entirely consist, and this is this ultimate explanatory (and demystifying) level of Marx’s theory. Let me exemplify.

On ‘the surface of society’, in immediate experience, ‘capital’ is encountered simply as a sum of money which when productively invested is capable of expanding its value: the mysterious formula $M - M'$. Marx asks how this expansion is possible. Otherwise put, what conditions are necessary in order that mere possession of a sum of value grants access to surplus-value. His answer is furnished by the theory of surplus-value. The increment, the surplus-value, the capitalist’s profit or interest derive from the discrepancy between the value of labour-power (variable capital) and the value added in the productive employment of labour-power, which exceeds that of the reproduction costs of the variable capital. The possibility of this occurring stems from a unique capacity of the commodity labour-power: more value can be created in its productive consumption than it itself embodies. But for this process to take place, certain conditions are necessary.³ First, the society must be a commodity-producing one. This supposes a definite historical form of social division of labour. Second, labour must be ‘free’ in Marx’s double sense: free from constraints of serfdom or slavery, and free of means of production of its own through which it could reproduce itself without entering the wage relation. Only then will labour-power become a commodity. Third, the means of production must be constituted as the private property of capitalist employers. Only then will labour-power have a buyer capable of profiting from its unique capabilities. All of these, as Marx makes clear, presume a requisite level of development of the productiveness of labour. He concludes thus:

One thing . . . is clear. Nature does not produce on the one side owners of money or commodities, and on the other men possessing nothing but their

own labour-power. This relation has no natural basis, neither is its social basis one that is common to all historical periods. It is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older forms of social production. (1867a: 169)

Marx goes on from here to argue that capital *is* in fact a social relation: contrary to its appearance, it is ‘not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a definite social character’ (1865a: 814). He elaborates:

A negro is a negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes *capital* only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold in itself is *money* or sugar the price of sugar. (1847b: 211; Marx quotes the same passage again, evidently not having changed his mind in the intervening twenty years, in 1867a: 776n)

Capital is not then the means of production or money as such, but specifically ‘the means of production monopolized by a certain section of society, confronting living labour-power as products and working-conditions rendered independent of this very labour-power, which are personified through this antithesis in capital’ (1865: 814). It is thus ‘command over unpaid labour’ (1867a: 500), ‘a coercive relation, which compels the working class to do more work than the narrow round of its own life wants prescribes’ (ibid.: 293). Recall here *The German Ideology*’s view of what is ‘property’.

What Marx does here is to reconceptualize capital in terms of the essential relation which explains its phenomenal form $M - M'$, self-expanding value. In his own words, ‘severance of the conditions of production, on the one hand, from the producers, on the other, forms the *conception* of capital’ (1865a: 246, emphasis added). This analysis is paradigmatic. Marx does the same when he argues exchange-value – in appearance a property of things – to be ‘a cipher for a social relation’, or that thing-like entity ‘the state’ to be an abstracted, idealized form of class power. Ostensibly natural and universal ‘self-understood forms of social life’ are revealed as more or less mystified forms of historically specific relationships between people, and reconceptualized accordingly.

Instructively – to return to Cohen for a moment – Cohen denies that capital is literally a relation. He says it is a thing which has relational properties. This entails identifying capital with the things in which it is materialized, albeit things which acquire the properties of capital only within particular social relationships. Cohen reasons that to say capital is a relation is akin to saying that a husband is the relation of marriage by virtue of which he acquires the relational status of husband (1978: 90). Here, as elsewhere, he purports to express Marx's thought in a less 'untidy' form than Marx himself does. But if Marx's formulation is thought confusing (I myself find it transparently clear) it would palpably be more in accord with his intent to reserve the term 'capital' for the essential relation at issue, and use another word for money, means of production, the wage-fund, commodities, and so on, within the relation. For Marx, the latter are merely aspects of the capital-relation, forms it takes in the course of its 'circuit' (see 1878: chs 1–4). Marx's concept of capital *includes* wage-labour. As so often Cohen spectacularly, if elegantly, misses Marx's point. What Cohen sees as a rather irritating category error – the apparent confusion of a relation with one of its terms – is precisely the fetish Marx is analysing.

In this context, we might pause to note the significance of another issue on which, notwithstanding his avowed 'traditionalism' and 'respect' for 'what Marx wrote' (1978: ix), Cohen chooses *en passant* to depart from Marx. He attempts, he says, to state Marx's 'theory of history' in a way which involves no commitment to the labour theory of value (*ibid.*: 353). The labour theory may indeed have difficulties. But whether it can be so easily dispensed with in characterizing Marx's thought is questionable. For it is on the basis of that theory that the fetishes of commodity and capital are identified. Seeing value as a property of things is fetishistic only if, as the labour theory maintains, exchange-value is in fact a manifestation of relations between people's labours. Colletti (1972: 91) argues an 'organic unity' between Marx's theory of value and his theory of fetishism. Rubin (1972: 5) goes still further, claiming that 'the theory of fetishism is, *per se*, the basis of Marx's entire economic system, and in particular of his theory of value'. Whether either can be coherently stated independently of the other is exceedingly dubious. Alternatively we might say that Cohen's ability to write a book on Marx's theory of history in which 'the theses of the labour theory of value are not presupposed or

entailed' (1978: 353) is as good an indication as any of how far his peroration does 'respect' what Marx actually wrote. The labour theory, of course, may well be wrong. But that does not justify simply ignoring it in a purported commentary on Karl Marx.

To come back to Marx's critique. Having 'deconstructed' immediate phenomenal forms into their constitutive relations, Marx now has a basis from which he is then able to go on to develop an historical account of what these relations in fact comprise. In the case of capital, for instance, an historical analysis not informed by this prior critique would remain blind to the historical significance of, say, the Enclosure Acts. So long as we remain at the level of appearances, and continue to see capital, fetishistically, as a thing, the search for the origins of capitalism will be limited to such factors as the influx of precious metals – the material substance of money – from the Americas into early modern Europe, the abstemious 'puritanism' of early entrepreneurs who saved and invested the supposed thing 'capital', or the development of industrial technology, capital's palpable embodiment. I am not asserting that any of these do not have their place in a causal account. Manifestly they do. But if Marx is right about what capital is – a social relation – the central historiographic problem must be the origins of that relation itself, the processes which led to the '*Decomposition of the Original Union* existing between the Labouring Man and his Instruments of Labour' (1865b: 45). We need to focus on how those abstractions 'labour' and 'property' were historically brought into being.

Marx's critique in other words accomplishes a radical shift of historiographic terrain. Once 'capital' is reconceptualized as a relation, not the thing it originally appears to be, we are directed to a buried history, that of class formation and struggle. The possibility is thereby opened up of moving back again, to the 'imagined concrete' of the surface of society, but this time grasped as 'a rich totality of many determinations and relations' (1857: 100). Instead of operating with analytic categories which replicate the misplaced concreteness of reified forms like value and capital as conventionally conceived, we can begin empirically to recover the material ways in which, through time, these forms were constructed in the intercourse of 'real, living individuals'. Marx is clear, we should note, that such historical inquiry is 'a work in its own right' (1858a: 461) – we cannot deduce the empirical specifics of social formation from its bare concept. This

is important; reification of the concepts of essential relations is as pernicious as fetishism of phenomenal forms, and by no means unknown to Marxism.⁴ Recovering 'the real history of the relations of production' (ibid.) is an ineluctably empirical enterprise.

Thus, in *Capital*, in pages vivid with empirical detail, Marx brings 'primitive accumulation' to life as the story of enclosures, clearances, theft of church property, vagrancy legislation, and Combination Acts (1867a: part 8). He traces the career of absolute surplus-value in struggles over the length of the working day (ibid.: ch. 10) and relative surplus-value in 'the strife between workmen and machine' (ibid.: ch. 15), a narrative of Luddites and Factory Acts: the history of class struggles. Such, I believe, is the ultimate explanatory level of Marx's work, and what alone justifies its claim to be historical and materialist. Contrary to Cohen, Marx's concepts of forces and relations of production – of essential relations – do not then denote 'items' which are 'more basic than actions' (1983b: 123). The structure/action opposition is a false one.⁵ These 'items' are actions – forms of human relationship – and the whole point of Marx's critique is to unmask them as such. Behind the authorless theatre of fetishism lie 'real living individuals'; for Marx the true and the only subjects of history.

I offer no apologies for this humanist lapse. It is time, rather, to stress the intimate connection between this critical analytic method and Marx's emancipatory commitment. He himself had no doubts on the matter. Speaking once again of capital, he wrote:

The economists do not conceive capital as a relation. They *cannot* do so without at the same time conceiving it as a historically transitory, i.e., a relative – not an absolute – form of production. (1863c: 274)

But:

From the moment that the bourgeois mode of production and the conditions of production and distribution which correspond to it are recognised as *historical*, the delusion of regarding these as natural laws of production vanishes and the prospect opens up of a new society, [a new] economic social formation, to which capitalism is only the transition. (ibid.: 429)

I would argue that the same applies to state, law and all the other social forms historical materialism analyses. All that is apparently

solid melts, if not into air. And only in that melting – that deconstruction of sedimented social forms into historical process, the actions of real living individuals – does the possibility of people getting 'exchange, production, the mode of their mutual relation under their control again' (1846a: 48), human emancipation as Marx conceived it, begin to look graspable.

III

Marx's understanding, and use, of theoretical categories, is, then, intimately and necessarily bound up with his substantive historical sociology – his appreciation of the historical specificity of bourgeois society itself. Given his views on the material basis of 'ideas, categories', it could hardly be otherwise. Marx is of course not alone in his concern with the 'essential differences' of bourgeois society. A pre-occupation with the nature, origins and consequences of what is modern in 'modernity' (see Frisby, 1986) has been a constitutive problematic of social theory from Adam Smith to Georg Simmel and beyond. Marx himself, as I have indicated at various points in this book, comprehensively contrasts bourgeois society with all that preceded it. His major contrast, at the level of social relations, is between social orders founded upon personalized dependency – taking a multiplicity of forms in history – and the ostensibly impersonal 'objective dependency-relations' of capitalism. The latter are historically unprecedented – at least as the basis for an entire society – and for Marx are what explain most that is characteristically modern in modernity.

In bourgeois society, 'abstract' individuals dominate one another, as 'economic' classes, not social-political-legal estates, through the impersonal medium of 'property'. Dominion over people is established through and expressed in command over things; above all means of production and labour-power. Cohen is right, at the phenomenal level, about what property is in capitalism. The essential relation behind this is a particular form of social division of labour, of which Marx analyses class formation as an aspect. This relation constitutes the market as an apparently *sui generis* realm, governed by quasi-natural laws of its own and standing over and against individuals: 'the economy' as ordinarily conceived. But a range of other social forms are implicit in – or internally related to – this. Though

Marx's sociology of such forms is sketchier than his critique of the economic categories, he clearly identifies both the individualization of people within the 'private' world of 'civil society', and the complementary formation of a 'public' realm, the 'political state', as part of this same nexus of relationship. He also locates key figures of bourgeois discourse – notions of individual freedom, human rights, formal equality, all of which have as their dual reference points the abstract citizen and the ideal community – in this same repertoire of social forms (see Corrigan and Sayer, 1981; Sayer, 1985).

Other sociologies have picked up on this complementarity of individualization and state formation, and the connection of both with capitalism, and in some cases elucidated its phenomenology more thoroughly than does Marx. I think of Foucault and Elias, as well as Weber and Durkheim. Marx's distinctiveness lies in rooting the totality in people's 'materialistic connection' (though, I have argued, characteristically as forms of this connection itself, rather than as its epiphenomenal or secondary consequence). Weberian themes of the pertinence of individualist Protestantism to the bourgeois ethos, or the development of rational law and bureaucracy, or the more general cultural configuration of *Zweckrationalität* in the modern West – formal, instrumental rationality, whose paradigm (as Weber is explicit) is the capitalist market – can evidently be addressed within this problematic. So can Durkheim's concerns with the moral foundations of social order in 'organic' societies, the pre-contractual conditions of contract, or the relation between state formation and the sanctification of the human individual as the moral subject of the modern world order. Likewise Simmel's wide-ranging and insightful phenomenology, in *The Philosophy of Money*, of the lived world of commodity-exchange, and its connections with – to quote Siegfried Kracauer – 'ownership, greed, extravagance, cynicism, individual freedom, the style of life, culture, the value of the personality, etc.' (Frisby, 1984: 93–111). But I digress.

The main point I wish to stress here is that what was argued above for Marx's 'economic' categories – 'labour', value, capital, and so on – applies with equal force to his 'sociological' concepts. I have provided ample evidence throughout this book to show that Marx himself was well aware that 'simple' sociological abstractions – individual, class, economy, polity, state – were no more devoid of historical anchorage and reference than a concept like 'labour'. In 'the specific character of

their abstraction' these too are historical categories. In one sense, just as with 'labour', the very abstractness of these concepts indeed does enable them to illuminate antecedent forms of society. We may, for instance, use the concept of class as developed for capitalism to illuminate what is involved in serfdom. Like the wage-relation, the latter is a relation in which direct producers are exploited, contrary to its appearances as a relation of reciprocal patriarchal obligation founded in natural or God-given hierarchy. But this is not to identify the two, or to say that a feudal estate is a class in the same sense as the modern bourgeoisie (Godelier, 1984).

Once we make this identification, we lose sight of the specificity of both forms of society, and the 'essential difference' between them. For Marx the bourgeoisie is the first true ruling class in history, and this is a very important fact about it, telling us much about what its social power comprises and the forms in which that power is constituted. In this sense Laslett may be quite right to describe pre-capitalist England as a 'one class society', as he notoriously did, to much Marxist ire (1973). His concern was not to deny the fact of inequality or exploitation, but to point to the absence of classes in the modern sense of the word. Likewise with the state. Of course, in a general sense, we can find similarities between governance in all societies. Marxists would concur that in most cases 'political' power is exercised by those who command surplus labour. But it remains true, and it remains important – if, that is, we are to understand how real societies actually work – that neither feudal monarchies, nor the ancient *polis*, nor 'Asiatic' despotisms, were states in the same sense as the bourgeois polity is. We are dealing, in fine, with entirely different relations, which take different phenomenal forms, and demand appropriate and specific historical categories for their analysis.

We need, then, to carry out the same sort of critique of the 'simple abstractions' of sociology (or political science, or jurisprudence) as Marx himself did in *Capital* of the elementary categories of political economy. We need to disentangle what is genuinely abstract and transhistorical in such concepts from what merely generalizes from the phenomenal forms of bourgeois life, and we need to be as sensitive to the possible illusoriness of the latter as was Marx himself. There is ample indication in Marx's work that this was his intention, even if his focus narrowed after the 1840s. Indeed, it is abundantly clear that he regarded the conceptual fundamentals of what have

since become other bourgeois 'social sciences' as quite as fetishized and 'idealistic' as the abstractions of political economy. He was suspicious, in particular, of the related abstractions of the 'natural individual' (whom we encounter in economics as the sovereign consumer, in politics as the voting citizen, in sociology as the meaning-giving actor, and in jurisprudence as the legal subject) and the 'ideal community' (polity, society, law). Elsewhere (Frisby and Sayer, 1986: ch. 5), I have argued that Marx attempted to transcend the individual/society dichotomy fundamental to most sociology on exactly these grounds.

'Abstraction', 'idealization', reification were for Marx – to say it again – intrinsic to the perverted 'logic of essence' of capitalism, characteristic of the estranged, alienated ways in which bourgeois social relations manifest themselves to consciousness in all spheres of life. Arguably it is just such reified forms which underpin and give phenomenal sense to the boundaries between modern social science disciplines – boundaries which, in so far as those disciplines do succeed in penetrating beyond 'the surface of society', they themselves comprehensively protest. 'The economy' – itself one such reification, and perhaps the most bedazzling and spectacular of all – is far from the only production in this theatre of illusion. Nor is 'it' itself explanatory of the mystification. Our social relations are.

Historical materialism needs to be as aware as Marx himself of the historicity of the analytic categories it brings to bear on the world. I mean this in two senses. First, it must recognize the origins of theoretical concepts in forms of experience, which may – if Marx is right – be misleading. Though they furnish the necessary starting-point for analysis, such categories may systematically misrepresent the reality they seek to depict. They are first of all explananda for historical materialism – an integral part of the object of investigation – not unproblematic theoretical resources. Before they can be used they need to be critically interrogated and historically situated, just as Marx did with the categories of political economy. Second, Marxism needs equally to be aware that there are historical boundaries to the legitimate employment of concepts, and theories built upon them. We can no more universalize the concept of the state, or property, or the individual, appropriate to the phenomenal forms of capitalist life than we can the concept of value or capital. 'Simple abstractions', in short, are neither so simple nor so abstract as they at first sight

appear. They always articulate, even as they obscure, some more concrete 'substratum' – dare I say it, some material basis?

IV

To some readers the foregoing may appear banal and elementary sermonizing. But my central argument against much 'orthodox' Marxism in this book – using Cohen as my exemplar – has been that it lacks precisely this sort of critical analytic foundation. It proceeds immediately from summaries like the 1859 Preface, interpreting the concepts employed there in ways that are inconsistent both with Marx's substantive practice and the critical methodology which informs it. Impatient for certainty, for tidiness, for system, 'orthodox Marxism' demands a theory of history, understanding by the latter something which is radically incompatible with a methodology within which substantive concept formation and explanation are ineluctably *a posteriori* and necessarily historically bounded. It is tempting to speculate on the reasons for this. Colletti (1972) suggests the influence of the late nineteenth-century positivistic and scientific intellectual milieu, in which Marxists were constrained to combat ideologies like social Darwinism on their own terrain. I believe the transformation of Marxism into the official ideology of mass parties and latterly of 'socialist' states to have had as much to do with this mutation of Marxism from method to dogma. Not, perhaps, always directly, but more in the provision of an authoritative set of parameters for discourse, paradigms in Kuhn's sense, like the 'orthodox' – and generally unsubstantiated – taken-for-granted interpretations of Marx's basic concepts criticized here. Be that as it may, my immediate concern here is with what results.

These standard interpretations of the fundamental concepts of historical materialism, I have sought to show, are exactly like the fetishistic concepts Marx criticized in political economy in that they are built upon specifically capitalist appearances, which are then generalized. A determinate historical – and fetishistic – content is surreptitiously carried over into ostensibly transhistorical abstractions, apparent pure 'definitions'. As with the economists' concept of 'labour', historical and transhistorical are conflated. That same double dehistoricizing is manifest: ignoring of concepts' roots in a

particular form of society goes along with universalization of properties of that society under the guise of pure conceptual abstraction. Just like political economy, 'traditional' Marxism endlessly moves in the charmed circle of 'natural, self-understood forms of social life', seeking to decipher 'not their historical character, for in [its] eyes they are immutable, but their meaning' (1867a: 75). Theories are spun through philosophical ratiocination alone. There is simply no conception of the possible historicity of his own categories, the 'invisible threads' which connect the languages of philosophising with the real world, in a work like Cohen's.

This historicity, as with the concepts of bourgeois thought more generally, may indeed not be immediately apparent, because of the level of generality – precisely the apparently abstract, timeless quality – of the categories at issue. But Marxists with an inkling of concern for their mentor's method should have been alert to it. I have argued the case in detail in chapters 2–4 for each of the three key concepts, conventionally understood as separate 'levels' of social reality, invoked in Marx's 1859 Preface: forces of production, relations of production/economic structure, and superstructure. 'Traditional' definitions – epitomized by Cohen, but far from confined to his work, or his functional determinist school of Marxism – are, I hope I have sufficiently shown, founded in the universalization of what Marx at least analysed as the apparent characteristics these phenomena exhibit within the specific historical parameters of capitalism, at the same time as these categories are wholly abstracted from the historic conditions which gave them birth.

Thus where for Marx productive forces were capacities of people in association, 'tradition' defines them in their capitalist, alienated appearance as things: 'those facilities and devices which are used in the process of production: means of production on the one hand, and labour power on the other' (Cohen, 1983b: 112). Where for Marx production relations are 'the social relations within which individuals produce', which 'in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society' (1847b: 212) – an extremely broad conception – 'tradition' founds the category on the notion of property as it appears in capitalism, as a relation of ownership between individuals and things: 'relations of . . . economic power people enjoy or lack over labour power and means of production' (Cohen, 1983b: 113). And where for Marx the 'superstructure' is the set of phenomenal forms

the 'base' itself assumes in social consciousness, whose 'ideality' in capitalism lies precisely in its appearance of separation from people's 'materialistic connection', 'tradition' takes this separation at its face value and enshrines it as a theoretical axiom. The subsequent construal of Marx's 'guiding thread' as a theory of history, in which the entities thus defined are seen as externally and causally related – whether deterministically, functionally, structurally, or within 'relative autonomy' models – rests on this initial reifying abstraction of these terms themselves. Having once sundered Marx's 'organic unity', and constructed these fictitious subjects, the 'correspondences' he posits cannot be restored – however implausible, however historically absurd, the attempt – in any other way.

The consequence of this fetishism of Marx's concepts is twofold. First, and most evidently, because this universalization of capitalist phenomenal forms is profoundly ahistorical, historical materialism loses all empirical purchase once we move outside of capitalism's parameters. This is well brought out in the anthropological work of Godelier or Meillassoux, or the historical studies of Thompson, Hill, Hilton or Bloch. The conventional concept of productive forces sheds little light on how pyramids were built or China irrigated, that of 'economic structure' (or 'property') is of scant use for comprehending societies where surplus extraction is organized through personalized relations of kinship, *Herrschaft*, or *civitas*, and it is pretty meaningless to attempt to demarcate superstructures as 'non-economic institutions' in historical contexts where a clearly isolatable 'economy' itself does not exist. In short, for societies other than capitalism, 'traditional historical materialism' excludes by conceptual fiat from people's 'materialistic connection' much that is demonstrably essential to it, and was, as I have repeatedly shown, freely acknowledged as such by Marx himself. This seriously jeopardizes Marxism's claims to be either historical or materialist in any empirically pertinent sense. It also thoroughly effaces Marx's own keen understanding of what is so distinctive about capitalist society.

Second, and equally importantly, because of their phenomenal basis 'traditional' Marxist categories are of limited use (but, like the concepts of political economy, have immense, and immensely dangerous, superficial plausibility) in comprehending the anatomy of bourgeois society itself. I would argue, for instance, that to construe productive forces as things – in this context, industrial technology – is

to travesty Marx's own appreciation of the nature of the forces/relations conflict in capitalism, and its pertinence to socialism. For him the contradiction was between the capacities – ultimately of individuals – capitalism had developed in so far as it had socialized labour, and the restrictive forms this socialization took under the aegis of private property. Industrial technology is problematic for socialism in this view, precisely because it is simultaneously an embodiment of social productive forces and a materialization of oppressive social relationships: both a force and a relation of production. It cannot therefore simply be 'developed', in the framework of a new set of property relations (like the nationalization of the means of production, distribution and exchange), to deliver socialism. Its very forms – the divisions of mental and manual labour, the hierarchy of authority and subordination, embodied in the social logic of production lines – are part and parcel of the capitalist relations socialism seeks to transform. Braverman's work needs to be recalled here. The same is true more broadly of capitalism's household/enterprise separation, and the definitions of 'work' (waged labour) materialized in this social geography, its town/country separation, and the many other differential divisions of labour on which it rests. As I have argued, with others, elsewhere (Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer, 1978; 1979; 1981), 'traditional' conceptions of what 'development of the productive forces' entails have placed enormous restrictions on human emancipation in this century, when embodied in the planning strategies (and very material apparatuses) of ruling parties in post-revolutionary societies. Marx spoke of the violence of things; the violence of abstractions can be equally devastating.

Similarly, to equate production relations with ownership, and define capitalism's economic structure in these terms alone, is to replicate bourgeois illusions as to what property is – an unmediated relation of individuals to things – and comprehensively obscure the wide range of relations, the labyrinth of forms and foci of social power, through which so apparently simple a thing as 'property' is actually constituted, regulated, legitimated, and made natural and 'obvious': precisely 'simple'. Foucault's work on the microsociology of 'power' is pertinent here; so is the rich vein of modern feminist historical scholarship (MacKinnon, 1982). Such forms of power centrally include (though they are far from exhausted by) that which we summate as 'the state', and its 'orderly oppression of law' (Smith),

which 'traditional Marxism' equally – and in defiance of the subtleties of Marx's own analysis – takes at its face value as an ostensibly independent 'superstructure'.

Ironically, bourgeois radicals have been far more aware – for some time! – of the imbrication of the 'non-economic' in making capitalist economy possible (and its naturalistic appearance passable), perhaps because for them it was always a practical rather than a merely theoretical problem. I have already quoted Adam Smith (above, p. 52); for Jeremy Bentham, 'Law alone has accomplished what all the natural feelings were not able to do; Law alone has been able to create a fixed and durable possession which deserves the name of Property' (quoted in Halévy, 1972: 503). Smith, like Durkheim, also knew that contract had a basis in trust, that capitalism was amongst other things a profoundly *moral* order. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* preceded the *Wealth of Nations* (Frisby and Sayer, 1986: ch. 1; Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 104–9). Christopher Hill (1967) and Edward Thompson (1971 and *passim*), amongst many others – and following Marx (1864) – have recovered for us the struggle of moral economies in capitalism's formation. But one could as well read Blake, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, or, come to that, Disraeli's *Sybil* for comparable enlightenment.

In citing early sociologists of capitalism (for such they were) like Smith or Bentham, I am not trying to restore idealism. Law or morality were never, for Marx, independent of people's 'materialistic connection'. The point is that for him law was not a superstructure, as tradition understands the term, external to and causally determined by the economy, either. Rather, it is one of the myriad forms the social relations which premise that economy empirically take. Marx's achievement lies in comprehending law, like the state, as such a form, rather than in its ideal, abstracted independence. In this sense he indeed does find the anatomy of civil society in political economy. This is a far cry, however, from traditional ideas of what superstructures are, and how they relate to bases. It is also not without its implications for conceptions of socialism: the facile but enduring idea, for instance, that 'the state' is the sort of 'thing' which can be 'seized', 'used' (and as Lenin once said (1919: 488), then 'thrown on the scrapheap' of history) – or even, in that favourite apocalyptic Marxist image, 'smashed'. As a long and sad history from Kronstadt to Solidarity bears witness, this particular abstraction has been

bloodily violent in its practical implications.

A major casualty of 'traditional' definitions of production relations, worthy of particular comment, is the concept of class – the centre-piece of Marx's sociology. For Cohen class can be defined as a 'purely economic' relation, which then obliges us to seek causal connections between this economic 'essence' of the relationship and the real empirical forms which class identity, consciousness and action actually take in history. Other Marxists, like Eric Olin Wright, give us ever more labyrinthine schemata of the same ilk. In some justly famous remarks E. P. Thompson has derided such 'hypostatising [of] class identities':

When, in discussing class, one finds oneself too frequently commencing sentences with 'it', it is time to place oneself under some historical control, or one is in danger of becoming the slave of one's own categories. Sociologists who have stopped the time-machine and, with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine-room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status-hierarchies and the rest. Of course they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion – not this interest and that interest, but the *friction* of interests – the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise. Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of *time* – that is, action and reaction, change and conflict. When we speak of *a* class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same categories of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-system, who have a *disposition* to *behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening. (1965: 85; cf. his 1968: Introduction; 1978b)

On the conception of social relations of production which I have argued was Marx's, it could not be otherwise. 'Economic' classes are made – and can only *then* be conceptualized in their pristine 'economic' purity, 'almost mathematically – so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production' (Thompson, 1968: 9) – over time, and through a multiplicity of social media. A national parliament, the county bench, Magna Carta, Hakluyt's voyages and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, suppression of disorderly alehouses and

regulated 'encouragement' of 'rational amusements', all of these and much else were amongst the forms through which the 'economic' power of the English ruling classes came to be made, not its 'super-structural' epiphenomena (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985).

When Marx wrote that 'every *social* form of property has morals of its own' (1871: 169), or conversely, 'the opposition between political economy and ethics is only an *apparent* opposition . . . political economy expresses moral laws *in its own way*' (1844a: 311), it was, I think, this sort of 'nexus of relationship' he was getting at. He was not remotely speaking of an external relationship between economy *here* and morality (or legality, or polity, or civility) *there*, as 'traditional historical materialism' would have us, ludicrously, believe.

v

It remains to say that none of this is to deny the centrality, within historical materialism, of 'the production and reproduction of real life'. The issue is rather of what that production and reproduction entails, and how it may most appropriately be analysed. My approach, I believe, opens up the possibility of giving what is empirically essential to people's 'materialistic connection' – and recognized as such in Marx's own concepts and texts – greater centrality than any schema like Cohen's ever can. 'Traditional historical materialism' shuffles reified categories, between which it posits more or less implausible connections at the level of a general theory. I argue rather for a minimum of *a priori* theory, and the use of empirically-open general categories which are analytically capable of letting the real world in. Thus there are no theoretical obstacles (of the sort which have occasioned entertaining contortions in recent years amongst Marxists) to recognizing co-operation as a productive force for nascent capitalism, or jurisdiction as a production relation in feudalism, which on any reasonable view of the evidence they surely were. The corollary is a commitment to an empirical method of inquiry – albeit, importantly, not an empiricist one – in which purportedly explanatory statements have in the end to be concretized, historically, as descriptions of the actions of 'real, living individuals', and validated accordingly. Such a perspective is perfectly capable of producing rigorous and determinate concepts and theories. But it does so not at

Notes

Preface

- 1 M. Desai, review of Shanin (1984), in *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13 (3), 1986; P. Binns, review of Kolakowski (1981), in *Socialist Review* (11), 1979.

Chapter 1 Prologue: Marx's 'guiding thread'

- 1 Though it should be remembered that Engels's *Anti-Dühring* had Marx's imprimatur; indeed Marx wrote a chapter for it. On the Marx/Engels relationship see Carver (1986).
- 2 Marx wrote to Engels on 30 September 1882, 'the "Marxists" and the "anti-Marxists" at their respective conferences . . . have done everything possible to spoil my stay in France'. His letter to Jenny Longuet of 11 April 1881 relates his first, distinctly unfavourable impressions of Kautsky. His letter to Sorge of 5 November 1880, dismisses the *soi-disant* 'Marxist' Black Repartition group in Geneva (whose founder was Plekhanov) as 'doctrinaires', contrasting them unfavourably with the 'populist' People's Will group. See Shanin (1984). The well-known attribution to Marx of the statement 'all I know is, I am not a "Marxist"' is Engels's.
- 3 See the works of Althusser, and Hindess and Hirst, listed in my bibliography; Cutler *et al.* (1978); Godelier (1973; 1984); Hilton (1985).
- 4 Similar problems arise in trying to use traditional Marxist categories to make sense of present-day 'socialist' societies. Mao Zedong, that most unorthodox of twentieth-century Marxist thinkers and doers, often stretched such concepts to breaking-point (see Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer, 1979). Among western commentators on the historical experience of socialist construction, Charles Bettelheim (see Bibliography) has been more aware than most of the need to rethink Marxist analytic categories.

- 5 See my 1983: ch. 1, and below, ch. 3, section II, and chapter 4, section II, for elaboration and exemplification.
- 6 As will become clear I do not believe Marx was an empiricist in the standard philosophical sense. He is better characterized as a realist. But basic to Marx is the notion that empirical phenomena are the starting-point of analysis, in the course of which scientific concepts and theories are developed *a posteriori*, and the capacity of theories actually to explain such phenomena remains the ultimate criterion of their validity. 'Theory' is thus always empirically grounded and validated. I argue this, against Althusser, in my 1979, and in more formal terms in my 1983: ch. 5. See also Thompson (1978a).
- 7 I detail this in my 1983. See also Wada in Shanin (1984); Marx (1879a, b; 1882a), Krader (1975), and Dunayevskaya (1982).

Chapter 2 Productive forces

- 1 See for instance Balibar in Althusser (1970), and subsequent discussions in the writings of Hindess and Hirst. Construing mode of production in such abstraction has often led to the need to differentiate 'social formation' – conceived as a concrete society – independently. One implication of my argument is that such a distinction is misplaced, or at least needs very careful handling. Modes of production exist only in and as concrete social formations. Whilst it may be legitimate to abstract the concepts of mode of production for some analytic purposes, there is a persistent danger of reification in so doing.
- 2 Marx makes this clear in the 1859 Preface. Marx's rude awakenings as to the import of 'material interests' in social life can be traced through his *Rheinische Zeitung* articles (in *Collected Works*, vol. 1), especially those on thefts of wood (1842) and the plight of wine-growers in the Mosel (1843a). Too often the evolution of Marx's ideas towards materialism and communism is traced as a purely philosophical journey; in his superb study, Draper (1977) breaks away from this, stressing the formative import of Marx's own political experience. What is most striking in the Mosel piece is the way Marx simply counterposes the phenomenal reality of the Prussian state – the one which was to close down his newspaper – against its philosophical concept, and this discrepancy is what led him to undertake his critique of Hegel. The impact on Marx's ideas shortly after this of Engels – who was at that stage of their lives very much better acquainted with industrial conditions, both in Germany and Britain (see *Collected Works* 2, especially the early 'Reports from Bremen', and the articles on England) – is also not to be underestimated.
- 3 Cohen himself admits this with regard to the relations of correspondence Marx posits in the Preface, but he does not extend the argument to the entities related.

- 4 I have argued this at length in my work with Philip Corrigan and Harvie Ramsay.
- 5 I make the qualification 'social' because I believe the internal relations perspective more defensible for the social world than the natural, on grounds elaborated as much by Wittgenstein or, seminarily, by Winch (1958), as by Marx. I do not think historical materialism needs to be grounded in a philosophy of nature, though it may well be compatible with one. Marx and Engels themselves, however, fairly evidently did subscribe to a dialectical view of reality *per se*. Engels developed this most explicitly, in *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*, but Marx explicitly endorsed the former and was well aware of Engels's work for the latter.
- 6 Patrick Murray (1983) has drawn attention to my neglect of the Hegelian legacy in *Marx's Method*. I think he is right. In that book I was more concerned with Marx's epistemology than his ontology, and was – to say the least – somewhat evasive about what the latter was. I now believe the critical epistemology I ascribed to Marx there is comprehensible only in the context of the kind of ontology proposed by Ollman. We cannot make sense either of Marx's treatment of categories as 'expressing' relations, or of the discrepancy between those relations and their 'forms of appearance', otherwise. Somewhat belatedly, I am persuaded of the truth of Lenin's maxim that 'it is completely impossible to understand Marx's *Capital* . . . without having thoroughly studied . . . Hegel's *Logic*'. One implication of this, of course, is that analytic philosophy is perhaps the worst of all philosophical frameworks in which to try and force Marx's thought. Two features of the analytic school are particularly problematic in trying to make sense of Marx: first, its hard and fast analytic/synthetic distinction (Quine, 1953), which renders any notion of internal relations in the world as distinct from among propositions simply meaningless; and second, its persistent phenomenalism (which leads to a conception of definition which Kolakowski (1972) summates as the 'rule of nominalism'), which rules out appearance/essence distinctions. Cohen (1978: ch. 1) gives Hegel his due for having supplied the paradigm for Marx's 'image of history', but shows no awareness of how the Hegelian legacy might have influenced Marx's conceptual usage at any deeper level.
- 7 See chapter 4 below, where I argue that both the 'abstract individual' of civil society and the 'political state' are in the same sense implicit in the 'economic' relations of commodity production.
- 8 On grounds of the logical, as distinct from ontological, presuppositions of Marx's method; though as I have said in note 6 to this chapter, I now see the former as requiring the latter. See my 1983, ch. 5, Afterword, and *passim*.
- 9 Marx's frequent references to language, in elucidating his idea of production and society, suggest another intriguing set of possible parallels. Wittgenstein's later work – which was highly critical of the logical atomism, and correspondence theory of meaning, in his earlier *Tractatus* – roots concepts in 'forms of life'. That same work is also highly critical of

- reification of generic abstractions in ways which are strikingly close to Marx's criticisms of 'speculative construction' (below, ch. 3, section II). The best-known sociological elaboration of this Wittgensteinian position on language is to be found in the work of Peter Winch, who argues that 'the relation between ideas and context is an *internal* one', and the 'very categories of meaning, etc., are *logically* dependent for their sense on social interaction between men' (1958: 107, 44). Durkheim's later writings argued something very similar in their thesis of the social origin of the logical categories: a position strikingly anticipated by Marx – with due homage to Hegel – in his letter to Engels of 25 February 1868, where he wrote *à propos* the concepts *Allgemeine* and *Besondere* (universal and particular) that 'the logical categories are . . . damn well arising out of "our intercourse"'. These parallels are not fanciful or over-extended. Certainly Marx differed from Winch or Durkheim in insisting on the material rootedness in humanity's relation with nature of 'forms of life', and with this their specific historicity, but his appreciation of the relationship between ideas and social relations as internal is as fundamental to his sociology as it is to the more familiar idealist variants of the same thesis. Again we need to take cognisance of Marx's Hegelian background. See further ch. 4, section II, below; Frisby and Sayer (1986).
- 10 I should clarify this. It is, I think, conceivable that say, a particular material labour-process – for instance, modern factory production – is compatible with a range of possible social relations, in at least some respects. Modern industry is materially organized in not dissimilar ways in the present-day USA and USSR. To this degree we may analytically distinguish the material labour-process from the wider social integument. But *in any given empirical instance* these two will be internally related, in the sense in which I am using the term here: the one will exist only in and through the other, as aspects of the same totality. The necessity at issue is substantial (material production can only take place in definite social relations), not logical. The problem with much Marxism is its persistent reification of such analytic distinctions; a reification which *must* be undertaken if the entities in question are to be related causally and externally.
- 11 There are exceptions here. Balibar (in Althusser, 1970) is amongst the more significant, correctly arguing the relational features of Marx's concept.
- 12 Cohen's dismissal of this as rhetorical (1978: 44-5) is based on highly selective quotation from Marx.
- 13 See, *inter alia*, Marx (1867a: 430; 1863c: 490-1; 1865a: 879-80; 1878: 119-20). Compare Weber (1966: 207-9).
- 14 Weber (1966: final chapter; 1974); Hill (1961; and more generally his 1958 and 1974 collections); Thompson (1967).
- 15 I gave a more detailed account of Marx's critiques of the fetishism of commodities and capital in my 1983: chs 2 and 3, respectively.

- 16 Against the whole Althusserian tradition – evincing again so much modern Marxism’s profoundly ahistorical use of concepts. For Marx ideology arises *only* where social relations (or the natural world) manifest themselves to experience in misleading forms, and the critique of ideology accordingly involves showing – materially – why this should be the case. For Althusser, ‘the ideological instance’ is (*a priori*) a social universal. Cohen (1978: Appendix) usefully demolishes this travesty of Marx.
- 17 Marx says this in several places, amongst them 1863c: 484; 1865a: 790 f.; 1865b: 50-2; 1867a: 77, 236 f., 539-40, 568 f.
- 18 1978: ch. 5.
- 19 There is reason to believe Marx modified his picture of Indian stasis, and optimistic assessment of the impact of English penetration, subsequent to 1853. In part this may have been occasioned by his awareness of the destructive consequences of capitalist penetration in Ireland. See Sayer and Corrigan (1983), and in more detail Watkins (1985). Shanin (1984, first essay) sees this as part of the novelty of ‘late Marx’. The issue is of some contemporary importance, given the influence today of Warren’s reading of Marx, which ignores such issues, taking the 1853 articles on India as Marx’s last word on the subject.

Chapter 3 Relations of production

- 1 In his 1970 Cohen differentiated two sorts of production relation, work relations (the ‘material relations between producers’ of his 1978) and ownership relations. His 1978 denies that the former are social relations of production *strictu sensu* (p. 35, note).
- 2 Hill (1965); Hilton (1985); Thompson (1977); Hay (1977); Corrigan and Sayer (1985).
- 3 See *inter alia* Benton (1977); Bhaskar (1975; 1979); Keat and Urry (1975); Hanson (1969); Kuhn (1969).
- 4 The relevant chapter in the joint work *The Holy Family* was written by Marx, not Engels.
- 5 For further exemplification of Marx’s critique of such transformations, see especially the opening 20 pages or so of his 1843b; also the last section of his 1844a.
- 6 Marx carefully distinguishes (within commodity production) division of labour ‘in the workshop’ and ‘in society’, in his 1867a: ch. 14.
- 7 Balibar’s distinction between the ‘property connection’ and ‘material appropriation connection’ between producers and their means of production (in Althusser, 1970) is open to similar sorts of objection.
- 8 See the works of Godelier and Meillassoux cited in my bibliography.
- 9 As Marx notes. Of course, kinship relations are *always* social – ascriptive – rather than merely biological relations of ‘blood’, no matter how ‘primitive’ the society. Marx tends often in this text to treat them as quasi-natural. I suggest below, this chapter, final section, that Marx’s

- sociology of family forms is both underdeveloped and, in key respects, wrong.
- 10 Cited out of context – as it frequently is – this passage is tailor-made to suit readings of Marx like Cohen’s. We should therefore particularly note the context in which it occurs – that of the analysis of feudalism I discuss below.
- 11 Marx’s point should not be taken to obscure the degree to which the existence of such ‘purely economic’ relationships in capitalism rests on much that is ‘non-economic’ in this present sense. I discuss this further in chapter 4 below, with reference to Marx’s own analyses of state and law. In Corrigan and Sayer (1985) I argue the case substantively for the key role of state formation and moral regulation in the history of English capitalism.
- 12 See reviews of *Marx’s Method* by Arthur (*Sociology*, 14, 1980), and McLelland (*New Society*, 12 July 1979).
- 13 See my 1983, ch. 5, for elaboration of Marx’s procedures of concept formation.
- 14 Because his analytic starting-point is in mode of production as traditionally conceived.
- 15 See *inter alia* the essays in Amsden (1980); Newton (1983); Burman (1979); Barker and Allen (1976); Kuhn and Wolpe (1978); Barker and Allen (1976); as well as Barrett (1980); Barrett and McIntosh (1981); Brenner and Ramas (1984); Humphries (1977); Brueghel (1979); Davidoff (1973); Lewenhak (1978); Pinchbeck (1981); Smith (1983); Anthias (1980); and for an earlier period Middleton (1979; 1981).
- 16 See Corrigan and Sayer (1985) for elaboration, and references there.
- 17 See this chapter, note 9, above.

Chapter 4 Ideal superstructures

- 1 This sentence, as Neale remarks (1985), is in fact the only unambiguously ‘determinist’ one in the whole of the 1859 Preface.
- 2 I elaborate these arguments further in my 1983: ch. 1.
- 3 E.g. those given here, pp. 55, 108. In his 1843b: 31, Marx describes ‘property, etc.’ as ‘the entire content of the law and the state’.
- 4 This is a central argument of my 1983, and I reference and exemplify Marx’s use of the distinction copiously there.
- 5 For Marx such a discrepancy is not universal; whether or not it occurs depends on the relations at issue. See above, p. 42.
- 6 See criticisms of my 1983 cited in chapter 3, note 12, plus the review by Murray (1983).
- 7 The sense is Aristotle’s, in his first category of cause in the *Metaphysics* (with which Marx was very familiar): ‘that from which (as immanent material) a thing comes into being; e.g. the bronze of a statue, the silver of a drinking bowl’ (1970: 4). See my 1983, ch. 5, note 15.

- 8 Letter to Kugelmann, 28 December 1862. See further my 1985.
- 9 The metaphor is interesting – not least in the difference in its connotations from that of ‘basis’ and ‘superstructure’.
- 10 Marx repeatedly attacks this atomized, individualized view of ‘man’, in early and late works alike. I give detailed references in Frisby and Sayer (1986: 91–3).
- 11 See Frisby and Sayer (1986, ch. 1); Corrigan and Sayer (1985, chs 5 and 6) substantiates this argument for England.
- 12 Maurice Godelier, in his 1984, discusses Marx’s twofold usage of the term class – as a transhistorical and an historical category – in detail. He is amongst the few commentators to have picked this up or appreciated its significance, perhaps because he is an anthropologist used to dealing with societies where class is not an evidently applicable category. E. P. Thompson (1978b) muses over the same problem in the context of eighteenth-century England; so does Laslett (1973).
- 13 A well-known passage in *Capital* suggests that while regulative use of state power – to control wages, the working-day, and so on – is ‘an essential element in the so-called primitive accumulation’, thereafter ‘direct force’ is used only exceptionally, and ‘the dull compulsion of economic relations completes the subjection of the labourer to the capitalist’ (1867a: 737). Acknowledging the ways in which this is true should not obscure the massive extent to which – as Philip Corrigan and I try to show (1985) – state regulation remains essential to ordering a *society* in which economic relations *can* routinely and dully compel.

Chapter 5 Interlude: the giraffes among the acacias

- 1 I discuss them mainly as they arise in his 1978, and ignore the subsequent debate.
- 2 In particular, the ‘capital-logic’ school, whose frequent insightfulness is marred by tacit teleology.
- 3 See their 1975, 1977; and Cutler et al. (1978); Corrigan and Sayer (1978).
- 4 See his 1961 and 1965 respectively.
- 5 See, in particular, the work of Bhaskar, also Keat and Urry.

Chapter 6 The historicity of concepts

- 1 I develop a more detailed argument for abstract labour being a historical category in my 1983, ch. 2; see also Rubin’s seminal 1972 on this concept.
- 2 See above, pp. 24, 40–42; additionally the opening pages of 1859b, and the Preface to the first German edition of 1867a.
- 3 See above, chapter 2, note 13, for references.
- 4 See above, chapter 5, note 2.
- 5 See further my criticisms of Bhaskar on this issue in my 1983: Afterword.

Bibliography

With one or two exceptions, only works directly cited in text and notes are listed here. Works of Marx are cited by date of composition rather than first publication. In cases of posthumously published manuscripts (like *Capital* vols 2 and 3) I have, as far as possible, given the last date touched: thus *Capital 2* is cited as 1878, even though most of it dates from the early 1860s. Writings of other authors are normally cited by the publication date of the edition referred to.

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A Collections

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- Letters of Karl Marx*, ed. S. Padover, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1979. Cited as LKM.

B Texts

- 1842 Proceedings of the 6th Rhine Province Assembly . . . Debate on the law on thefts of wood. CW 1.
- 1843a Justification of the Correspondent from the Mosel. CW 1.
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