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Abstract: This paper looks at the way in which a number of different postmodern directions are linked through their constructivist and post-structural understanding in a number of more or less relativist approaches to the research of History and Society. Not only from an academic perspective, but from a political point of view this shapes the world in which we think. The concepts of historical materialism have been developed 150 years ago. They have been used widely. Their meaning has changes with the different usages. What is attacked by postmodernism in the theory of Historical Materialism are these concepts and the method that they make up. They are attacked for being part of a meta narrative. Through these attacks we in postmodernism experience a randomization of history which in the political sphere leads to a attenuation of truth. To cope with this challenge, we have to look at concepts in a new way. By establishing the impossibility of breaking linguistic structures through linguistics themselves, the concept of class struggle is through the understanding of practice, again placed at the centre of theory.

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

"I don't much care where –"

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

Lewis Carroll – Alice in wonderland

Introduction

Times are ever changing. Not only lived time, but equally the understanding of historical times on which we base our ideas of the present. Materialism and idealism, rationalism and romanticism, modernism and postmodernism, have all played their role on the battlefield of ideas. Throughout different periods in the history of the historical sciences, different explanatory strains have played a greater or lesser role, reflecting societal changes as well as ideological and scientific changes internal to the field.

When, couple of decades ago, the Marxist understanding of history - historical materialism - played a hegemonic role as a method in historical science, it represented a common understanding across traditions as to how to do historical research. The historical materialism approach has as a premise that humans create their own irreversible and irrevocable history. It acknowledges that only to the extent that we understand what is going on – our history - we are able to act freely and effectively with it. Otherwise it will take us by surprise. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm in his *From Social History to the History of Society* (1971) writes that there was a common understanding of the basis for the historical research at that time:

"One starts with the material and historical environment, goes to the techniques of production (demography coming somewhere in between), the structure of the consequent economy – division of labour, exchange, accumulation, distribution of surplus and so forth – and the social relations arising from these [...]. The practice is thus to work outwards and upwards from the process of social production in its specific setting."¹

¹ Hobsbawm 2013: 108

Here we see the basis, not of a necessarily Marxist but of a generally materialist approach to the historical research. An approach with its own particular merits. The questions raised specifically by historical materialism are questions about the transition from one society to another, or from one era in history to the next. It is not a theory that can explain the whole of history from the philosophical corner of Stoicism to Renaissance art in the Netherlands. It is first and foremost an understanding of history. An investigative method to explore the driving forces. One should not easily assume that historical materialism is an all-encompassing paradigm through which we can understand the whole world and its history. Instead, it is a method of answering some specific questions about some specific problems in the social fabric. Issues that are largely ignored or marginalized by other scientific approaches.

Every research, and especially a historical one, must be empirically based. At the same time, a methodological examination of facts and data is impossible without a theory. Reality is so multifaceted and rich in data that one can get hopelessly lost in its undercurrent of facts. Historical materialism, therefore, continues, on a materialistic basis, the Hegelian method of moving from the abstract to the concrete, and therefore takes over Hegel's criticism of the conceptless empiricism.²

The task of the theory must be to create a broad outlook so that it becomes possible to distinguish the essential from the nonessential, cause from effect. It is in the theorizing of the interaction between basis and constructions formulated in the temporal divisions of modes of production and societal formations that the materialistic history research takes place.

The structure imposed on our society through the necessary reproduction of both people and society cannot be overcome by intellectual constructions. Precisely because the actors cannot become fully aware of the social structures in which they act and because our consciousness and ideology are aspects of the structure, the constraints which are constituted by the other aspects of the structure are crucial in understanding that hope and prediction are not the same.³ By emphasizing the constructed aspect of history, modern historians are led to believe that any construction is possible, without understanding the limitations that are imposed on us by history.

² Schmidt 1983: 38

³ Joseph 2002: 73

Through the focus on both a structural as well as an actor's-based analysis, the users of this historical method focus on the dialectic between societal behaviour (gesellschaftliches Verhalten) and societal relations (gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse), thereby seeking to create a methodological space between reductionism and pluralism. For where reductionism negated the study of history, pluralism tends to dissolve its research into simple empirical descriptions of events of no greater analytical value. Marcel van der Linden summarizes this in the preface to *Theory as History*:

"If we disregard this necessary dialectic of the abstract and the concrete, one or two kinds of error is likely to result. Either we remain entrapped in a descriptive narrative of a mass of empirical details, failing to reach the abstract determinations that identify and convincingly explain the real nature of a historical process in its totality. Or, we superimpose forced abstractions' on history, which are not grounded in a thorough analysis of its concrete specifics, and which, therefore, are to a large degree arbitrary and superficial or even purely subjective preferences."⁴

Times come and pass. And although not completely absent, the research outlines given by Hobsbawm have receded to the background. Through a process which we will follow shortly, postmodernism came to dominate, both in History as a discipline, as well as the societal movements that ground their ideology in a historical understanding. What Postmodernism shows us is that a multitude of analyses can be constructed for each field. There are no final answers nor even final questions. This creates for a diversified and disunited field of examination. If a post-modern hegemony exists, it consists of different directions, linked through their constructivist and post-structural understanding of the subject field of science and degree-varying relativism. But postmodernism's relativism also comes through in its hegemonic form: "In fact the ideology of postmodernism could be said to be less of a coherent hegemonic ideology of the ruling class, more a deliberate attempt to de-hegemonise any potential opposition."⁵ as formulated by Jonathan Joseph.

⁴ Banaji 2011: xi

⁵ Joseph 2002: 50

This paper will explore the development of historical research from Marxist structuralism to postmodernism, will describe the criticism levied from postmodernism against the possibility of historical materialisms concepts and will lastly reformulate these classic concepts in response to the demoralizing ideas of postmodernism. I have developed the analysis presented in this paper in greater length and more detail in my soon to be published book.⁶

The problem

So, what is the problem with the prevailing approaches? Is it not a sign of health to critically consider the possibility of value-free research? Absolutely. But we should be able to do this, while simultaneously salvaging those concepts that shield us from relativism.

Perry Anderson in his *In the tracks of historical materialism* raises a threefold critique of postmodernism. According to Anderson this theoretical direction results in an absolution of language where ideological challenges are seen only through the lenses of language theory. Furthermore, he identifies an attenuation of truth, based on the many equally valid answers that can be given. Since the language paradigm consists of a series of signs that are not related to the real world, this sets no structural limits to the theory. Through discourse, the social world is permeated by a structure that reproduces itself in a myriad of ways that are random and arbitrary. Thereby, the structure is treated as a cause rather than effect. For the postmodernists, there is no History, only a series of histories. Further, this myriad of stories suggests that none of them are true.⁷ This in itself leads to a randomization of history.⁸ In removing the internal hierarchy between events in which issues of determination and domination are replaced by equilibrium dependency, in the same way that it is claimed to exist in language. Thereby, not only is there no absolute determination, there are no determinants, opportunities, relationships, boundaries or pressures. This makes it impossible to distinguish between reality and our perception of it.

⁶ Reinout Bosch, *Historisk materialisme. Materialistisk historieteori under postmodernismens hegemoni* (København: Frydenlund, 2020).

⁷ Callinicos 1990

⁸ Anderson 1983: 48

History after modernity

The ruling postmodern discourse has many sources. Its emergence can be described both socially and scientifically from many angles. For the question at hand it appears most relevant to start this enquiry in the development of Marxist theory itself, as this is at least one of the sources from which post-modernism has risen.

Taking the earlier Hobsbawm quote as a temporally starting point, the previous decades had been marked by the rise of structuralism as a theory. It had not been difficult to link Marx's thinking about the systematic connections of capitalism with the structuralists' insights. For while Marxism was far from the only structurally functionalist theory of society, it had a good claim to be the first.⁹

Rather than starting with man as existentialism had done, all societal structures for Lévi-Straus - the most prominent of the structuralists - began with configuration and relationships. He thus tried to solve the age-old problem between structure and subject, by raising the subject above what can be understood scientifically.

At its heyday, structuralism was incorporated by the most vital of Marxist trends Althusserianism.¹⁰ Althusser the founding father of this movement rejected the humanistic view that humans make their own history. Instead he saw history as a process without a human subject. The true subject of history was to be found in the relations of production.¹¹ Althusser, with the goal for his theoretical exercise to remove the Hegelian idea of thought from Marxism, created for the first time a science based solely on materialism. A science moved forward by the objective developments in society, rather than by the whims of the researcher. What Althusser feared was that, if all people both in the past and the present live their lives through lived ideological notions, this also applies to the researcher who cannot free herself from such influence, or who at least cannot know if she/he is subject to an ideological view or not. Therein lies the fear that it is the researcher's own values that govern which problems are investigated. And what is worse: that the conclusions of the investigation are shaped ideologically rather than scientifically. The bigger questions we try to answer, the bigger the problem

⁹ Hobsbawm 2013: 196

¹⁰ Blackledge 2002: 14

¹¹ Althusser & Balibar 2009: 187

becomes. For the higher the degree of theoretical abstraction one engages in, the greater the chance of moving away from the real and into the world of 'performances'. That is, elements of theory formation that cannot be subject to verification / falsification procedures.¹²

In a structuralist approach that constantly sought to deepen its understanding of the relational categories, the categories were characterized by ideological illusions that in themselves constituted a substitute for the human subject. By basing its historical understanding on the structures alone, the theory was given too much weight while the necessary empirical approach was under-prioritized. The boundary that the empirical research otherwise sets for historical hypotheses was abandoned in favour of a theory based on the structures revealed in Marx' *Capital*. The methodological defect in this is that theory inevitably provides abstract concepts, a reality the concepts do not possess. Thereby starting to blur the boundaries between theory and structure. And without these limits, the Althusserians theoretical categories could reproduce endlessly. Despite trying to avoid just this, these categories were also ideologically conditioned and, instead of definitive objective science, expressed yet another time-bound attempt to overcome the trap of ideology. The theory resulted in structures emptied of content. For if structure alone secures a world beyond all subjects, then what does its objectivity ensure? - as Anderson so aptly asks.

The result was radically destructive. Once the structures were freed from any subject, they were left to their own game and thereby lost what characterizes them as structures - that is, some objective requirements at all. What was created was subjectivism without subjectivity. This created an insurmountable problem for scientific Marxism. In the southern European countries, where the historical materialist theory was strongest, the theoreticians failed to find an answer to the question of the relationship between subject and structure in history and society. This was not only a challenge to scientific Marxism, but resulted in a crisis for the entire structuralist movement:

"Althusserianism was always constituted in an intimate and fatal dependence on structuralism that both preceded it and would survive it [...] subjects were abolished altogether [...] But in an objectivist auction of this kind, he (Althusser) was bound to be outbid."¹³

¹² As is seen most clearly in Baudrillard 2008: xii

¹³ Anderson 1983: 38

Throughout human science, it meant a transition from structuralism to post-structuralism as ruling discourse – a term picking up at this time.

Adorno, who had foreseen this development, often remarked that any theory attempting to completely deny the subject's illusory power would end up restoring this illusion, more than a theory that overestimated the subject's role.¹⁴

He appeared to be right. One of the attractions of the post-structuralism that rose from the ruins of Althusserianism was the acceptance of the unpredictability, uncertainties and instabilities of history. Instead of a rigid schema that could explain the positions of all actors in the overall structure, the positions of floating sizes and the network that connected them to the Saussurian structuralists began to slowly dissolve. Nevertheless, while breaking with structuralism, the language theory that spearheaded it was retained and elaborated.

Lacan continued inside semantics by identifying the different signifiers within the language structure. Thereby, language becomes a process in which 'every signified is also in the position of signifier' - that is, a system of floating signs with no relation between them, which can be definitively determined, where words and concepts dissolve as categories into each other.

This increasingly abstract theorizing became relevant for the other sciences because the ideologies, and thus our own basis for scientific understanding, expresses itself linguistically and are therefore constituted similarly by a network of signs in relations to each other. This means that we must acknowledge that the sciences can neither be free of ideological conditions or more radically, that science itself is an ideological practice. And with postmodernism in hand, one might ask: When the signs, or rather, the knowledge we have of the world, are merely references to one another, then how can objectivity be claimed?

These developments in postmodernist theory led, on one side of the spectrum, to the now largely uncontroversial position that there cannot be a completely objective and value-free science and, on the other, the position that everything in science from its approach to its concrete discovery and theories is divided ideologically in exactly the same way as other worldviews are.

On this basis we must at least distinguish between a moderate and radical variant of postmodernism. Where the first, that society is something that man

¹⁴ Adorno 1982: 72

continually constructs in contrast to the structuralists' immobile models, is plausible; the second variant is founded in a decidedly anti-realistic way of thinking. Thus, it is also part of the historical understanding of historical materialism that the discursive act is a form of social act which helps to construct the social world. But this construction takes place only in our cognitive structures while it is human practice that changes the world around us, in the light of this.

In the latter of the two understandings, one should criticize the proposition that our access to reality always goes through language (with language understood in its broadest form). By depriving the world of the importance of human practice other than communication, one of the oldest idealistic representations is achieved: the fusion of subject and object.¹⁵

The historical counter-argument raised against these forms of relativism is that if abstractions do not exist in reality, historical facts do, as expressed by British historian Geoffrey Elton in his *Practice of History* (1967). This notion gives historical concepts a real basis. But Elton ignores that these facts do not exist immediately in the world. It is the historian who selects the facts and makes sense to them by placing them in a constructed literary discourse, as also the British historian E. H. Carr noted in 1961:

“The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context [...] a fact is like a sack -it will not stand up until you 've put something in it [...] The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which is very hard to eradicate.”¹⁶

What E. H. Carr writes does not mean that the past has not occurred, but that the knowledge we have about the past is sporadic, selective and based on a reflection mediated through sources and relics. This mediation applies to both our own memory and the memory of historical actors, but extends to the selection of sources and who writes these down. Therefore, it is crucial who narrates a given story. Memory of experiences is not infallible. Furthermore, memory is not something the individual has independent control over. It is influenced by our surroundings; by family, class and wider social circles. In each field, memory

¹⁵ As is seen most clearly in Baudrillard 2008: xii

¹⁶ Carr 1961: 5–6

works differently.¹⁷ The past is thus not the same as history. Writing and telling a story is the only way to create it. It does not exist unless it is constructed. What is not recorded is forgotten.

Science finds no facts in the world outside, but instead constructs abstractions in the form of concepts through which we as humans can understand the world.¹⁸ These abstractions are indeed constructed through language.

On the other hand, it is also a fundamental premise that if the objects on which our knowledge is based exist and act independently from our knowledge of them, it must mean that the knowledge we possess always exists in historically specific social forms. It also means that knowledge is always communicated linguistically. Here, language plays the role for the human sciences, which geometry plays in physics. Precision in description being for these, what precision in measurement is for physics. This is why the clarifications of concepts must play such a big role.

Concepts as ideal types

The essence of any science is not to describe everything in detail, but to simplify as to make the most important aspects come to the fore. To do this we are forced to work with abstractions which captures the diverse aspects of reality and simplify them to make them understandable and manageable. Concepts that try to cut away strings of coincidences in phenomena in order to reach what is general and substantial.

The use of constructed concepts makes up the method of the theory. In other words, if we are to have a possibility of describing what we are examining, we need concepts. These make up the elements of our understanding and predate any theory of this.

This is a central point, as it is exactly the relevance of the historical materialist concepts that is disputed by the reigning postmodern societal and scientific discourse. This happened as a result of the conceptual challenge created by the evolution of the concepts themselves, which led them in another direction than

¹⁷ Sand 2017: 108

¹⁸ As Bruno Latour has shown is also the case in the natural sciences Latour 1993: 18 & 28

one that originates in the concept of practice.¹⁹ Any theoretical construction which tries to grasp what is seen as 'substantial' or 'fundamental' will always involve simplification. No model and no theoretician can span all of realities' detailed multiplicity. It will always highlight some elements and omit others. Any explanation that is illuminating will at the same time tend to narrow the overview. And vice versa: The more you put into a model to make it more realistic, the more it will collapse in itself and become a pure description of the actual course of events, until we are left with scattered reports consisting of impressionistic imprints of a kaleidoscopic reality and all explanation we give, is the undoubtably true but nevertheless useless description, that reality consists of immeasurable amounts of factors and relations - to paraphrase the Danish historian Curt Sørensen.²⁰

It is possible to distinguish between different abstractions, based on their degree of abstraction. The most concrete concepts are nothing more than real objects. However, both the more concrete and the more abstract concepts are part of a thought process.

By identifying a social phenomenon, the phenomenon itself is removed from the history it develops within.²¹ Thereby, the phenomenon is detached from the relationships with other phenomena in the totality. However, the phenomenon can only be understood in its context. Phenomena cannot be defined exhaustively once and for all, but must always be related to actual relations and to other conditions.

This also means that social phenomena do not have an essence that can be expressed in static concepts. The 'essence' of the phenomenon is only as long-lasting as the conditions under which it exists. As Marx formulated it: An object with four legs that is a chair in a social situation can be a throne in another situation. Whether the object is a chair or a throne is not determined by its essence but by the social relationship in which it is included.²²

Martha Gimenez points out that Marx argues that if we start our study from aspects of society that seem most real and concrete to us, such as the family, then we actually start with a very vague notion of a complex whole. Instead, we

¹⁹ Practice as understood as Marx' notion of *Tätigkeit*.

²⁰ Sørensen 2002: 19

²¹ Kircz 2014: 172

²² Frank Furedi: Introduction to Jakubowski 1990: xiv

produce knowledge of reality as we move from 'imaginary concrete concepts' such as the family to further simplified concepts or abstractions such as domestic work. Such abstractions must then be investigated at an empirical level whereby their historical limitations are considered in the analysis. Then a reverse theoretical movement must take place. We must return to the phenomenon that we started with, which can now be understood as a totality that contains many influences and conditions. The concept now becomes really concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thereby representing a unity of the various aspects.²³ This is an approach that focuses on emergence and change. It is in the abstract - in Hegelian understanding - something conceptually unspecified and poor in content, from which an ascent is made with an inner necessity in the direction of more concrete and more differentiated knowledge through very subtle abstractions.²⁴

But in Marx's words at the time of *The German ideology*, abstraction cannot stand alone:

"Diese Abstraktionen haben für sich, getrennt von der wirklichen Geschichte, durchaus keinen Wert. Sie können nur dazu dienen, die Ordnung des geschichtlichen Materials zu erleichtern, die Reihenfolge seiner einzelnen Schichten anzudeuten. Sie geben aber keineswegs, wie die Philosophie, ein Rezept oder Schema, wonach die geschichtlichen Epochen zurechtgestutzt werden können."²⁵

In this context, the historian's role is to clarify her abstractions and place them in a coherent analysis. Part of this is to investigate phenomena, not just as they appear immediately, but to understand the movements that underlie the phenomena.

What is therefore needed in order to enable a description of history is not the concrete historical phenomena that cannot be seen in retrospect, but instead a form of ideal types such as those Max Weber analyzes. That is, theoretical constructions that illustratively use empirical material. The ideal type is formed, in Weber's own words, by the accentuation of one or more points of view and by

²³ Bhattacharya 2017: 16

²⁴ Schmidt 1983: 49

²⁵ Marx 1978: 27 "Viewed apart from real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. "

the synthesis of a large number of diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, arranged according to the unilaterally highlighted views for a total analytical mental image [Gedankenbild].²⁶ Ideal images are understood here as sociological categories that, within a spectrum of different lifestyles, create analytical boundaries. The creation of a unilateral focus happens when we go from asking overall questions to history - what has happened? - and go on to have a precise focus, like Weber's own analysis of the role Protestant ethics played in the transition to capitalism. In this analysis, both concepts are neither phenomena that can be seen with the naked eye, nor existing phenomena that can be described exhaustively. These are abstractions that contain many more facets than can be described linguistically, but can only be used as analytical tools if made into ideal types.

Marx's historical categories can also be understood as such ideal types. The ideal type is not a moral abstraction, but an intellectual construction based on real aspects that at no point exactly coincides with anything concrete historically. The constructions of many events thus forming a tendency are determined by the phenomena under study. In this way, the method forms concepts that extend beyond the existence of the phenomenon in a historical situation. Ideal types are not derived from abstract concepts, nor are they subordinated to them by merely being expressions of their generality.²⁷ It is on the basis of these abstractions that historical materialism attempts to extract understanding from the complexity of history.

In this way, it must also be emphasized that even though the conceptual categories that have previously been developed can no longer be filled with the same content as in the nineteenth or twentieth century, this does not deplete them as categories. Instead, our own historical moment requires that we thoroughly engage these concepts and make them represent our own contemporaneity.²⁸ Concepts cannot be firm and rigid. Because the world is not.

²⁶ Weber 2011: 90

²⁷ Poulantzas 1978: 13

²⁸ Bhattacharya 2017: 19

Signs of the time

There is a non-negligible truth in the uncertainties related to the inevitable use of concepts, even with the theoretical explanation of ideal types. These help us overcome the worst difficulties, but there is another consideration that differentiates the Marxist idea of concepts, with the one that through Saussurian semantics is unfolded in postmodern theory.

Saussurian semantics argue that signs do not refer to objects and events in the world but to other signs in a linguistic structure. To argue as Saussure does in *Cours de la linguistique générale* that the true medium of communication is not speech (parole) - a medium that can be immediately perceived in reality - but language (langue) - which is a system of objective relations that allows both the creation and decoding of discourse - is to turn the whole relationship upside down, by subjugating the very substance of communication, which appears as the most visible and real aspect, under a pure construction of which there is no experience whatsoever.²⁹

Marxist language philosophy, on the other hand, argues that the sign can never be detached from the relationships in which it is used, but that the sign is constituted in the context of the outside world. Language is a form of practice and does not exist outside its material expressive practice. The understanding of language should not be based solely on the study of grammatical structures or sign systems, but in the living, used and historical language, in the language as a practice. Signs do not have a simple defined meaning or reference, but are instead multi-accented. Each word has a different meaning according to the context in which it is used. Each sign is multi-accented not only because each sign has several possible meanings, depending on how it is said and in what context, but because it is historically constituted, in that it incorporates previous uses of a word. To utter a linguistic sign is to participate in a series of voices that limit the meaning the term can take.

It is therefore to turn the question around when it is stated that we cannot understand history because we understand it through language. Au contraire - we cannot understand language unless we understand it through history. In doing so, the creative expression of language is not determined by a set of rules (which can then be dissolved), but by the ideological-historical content that the

²⁹ Bourdieu 2014: 30

speech act emits in its encounter with the outside world. As Marc Bloch noted, it is the historian's great despair that humans do not change their vocabulary every time they change their habits.³⁰ Their actions change while the description remains the same. In this way, the meaning of the words changes as changes in relations of production occur. If we do not consider these conditions, we become unable to understand the expression of the historical actors. So, while the discourse changes our way of seeing the world, the alteration of our actions changes the meaning of the discourse. This means that language cannot be explored outside of history.

The signs that make up the language do not exist outside of social interaction and are historical in the sense that they always carry traces of a previous discourse. They are the bearers of the social contexts reflecting ways in which they have been used in the past and in this sense are collective rather than individual expressions. This means that the use of the language is not only caught up in the current dialogue but contains deposits (what the French linguist Lecerle has called sedimentation) from past dialogues as well as expectations of future dialogues.

It is the ideological constraints that arise through the sedimentation of language and the interpellation of the speaker that are subject of creative exploitation³¹ Therefore, the language associated with man's other forms of praxis opens up quite different perspectives than the abstract one-sided focus on discourse. For what is fascinating is not only the changeability of language but also its immutability.

Concepts

Before finally looking into the central concepts of the field mediated through a post-modern understanding, there remains some remarks on the relations between the different concepts. Concepts are to be understood not only as having a relation to each other but also as being unequal. Some phenomena predate others. Some have a short temporal effect while others linger. This means that some phenomena determine others stronger than vice versa. I will state, as a starting point, that everything that happens has a cause or several causes, and

³⁰ Bloch 2015: 28

³¹ Lecerle 2009: 109–114

that events would not have occurred in a different way than they happened, unless their causes were different. In other words, causal explanations exist whether we know them or not. Determinations in this sense should not be confused with any theories that are, in a condemning way, described as deterministic in the absolute sense. These theories claim to be able to predict the outcome of an event because the causal chain of effect they use leads to a result. I claim nothing in that sense, as it is about opportunities rather than certainties. This is no mere oppositional exercise. Instead as we shall see, the determinism of phenomena lies at the heart of the clarification of the concepts we need. Because of this I shall present the concepts moving from lesser to more severe abstractions.

In order to proliferate, all human societies must have the necessities of life created through 'productive work'. The premises of materialism in history is that the acquisition and distribution of necessities is essential for understanding societal development. From this, springs a societal relationship based on the sharing of work and the sharing of results of the work process. Obviously in a specific concrete form - be it in the production of rye or of shoes, in birth or in upbringing. Work however can only in theory stand as an abstraction. In reality, most work requires tools situated between the practitioner and her object of labour.

These tools both in the form of a shovel and in the form of a computer programme are considered means of production if meant to be used productively. Together with the objects of work, the forces of labour and the knowledge and technology that are also necessary for at production process these constitute the 'forces of production'. The relationship arising between people and their tools and between people and other people in connection to work are then 'relations of production'. These relationships not only regulate the relationship between humans and productive forces, but also affect the relationship between people. Relations of production are an organizing of who should work and which occupations people should be made to enjoy or suffer. It raises the questions of how productive forces are applied. Who supplies the labour, what work object is used, what means of production are used and who has the knowledge necessary for this usage? Production is thus a social activity structured through the distribution of the means of production through relations of production. In unison these concepts feed into the concept of 'modes of production', to which I shall return.

Productive forces in the classic Marxist narrative, touted by the likes of the second and third international, appear to be determinative in the development of relations of production, while they are not creative. This means that the means of production limit how many work-related tasks there can be. As each tool has a limited number of uses. And accordingly, that the development of a new mean of production opens up new possibilities unknown beforehand. But it must be clear that while new productive forces create opportunities for both new division of labour and new relations of production, there is no certainty that this will happen. It is only because members of society actively choose to enter into the new relationships that it becomes reality. This possibility is realized only if historical actors use the new opportunities. More crucially, the emergence of new opportunities does not imply a particular kind of development, it offers a number of limited opportunities, but it is the interaction between the actors – the class struggle - that determines in which direction and to whose advantage this change takes place.

Moving onwards past the production process, 'superstructure' is defined by social relations of a particular kind that arise in connection with a particular form of human enterprise that differs from material production. Those conditions that transcend human relations with the productive forces and the resulting relationships between people, understood in a way so that both social consciousness and ideological as well as social institutions are included in the concept. These form another relationship because they do not relate to human survival and reproduction per se, but instead to man-made structures, independent of their material needs.

This leads to a distinction between 'basis' (relations of production) and superstructure. This distinction is not between the material and the mental, just as it is not a distinction between separate institutions.³² It is a distinction between the conditions necessary for the existence of a mode of production, and the institutions which we construct in extension of these.

Basis and superstructure are primarily related in an internal relationship with one another. Basis are mechanisms in human relationships, while superstructure is the form that they assume. Therefore, any discussion of basis and superstructure in a cause-effect relationship is meaningless. The basis is basically the revolutionary moment while the form is mostly conservative since the

³² Rigby 1998: 19

function of the form is to encapsulate the content. But there is no question of form without content or vice versa. We cannot, therefore, speak of basis as the most basic element of society. The question of how basis defines superstructure makes no sense as the question presupposes a division of social reality into two independent spheres. As MacIntyre has put it: "creating the base you create the superstructure. These are not two activities but one."³³

Instead, basis should be defined based on all the elements that make up the relations of production (including law, politics and ideology). These elements cannot be confined to the superstructure but are constitutive aspects of all forms of social enterprise. Basis is not the tools used, but the people who work together to use these tools, in ways necessary for their use. Superstructure is the social consciousness that is formed by this cooperation and the institutions needed to maintain it. This does not just mean that the economic base is reflected or maintained by certain superstructural institutions, but that the economic base itself exists in social, legal or political forms - especially in real estate and domination.³⁴ The difference between one society and another is not just the difference between base and a corresponding difference between superstructure, but also a difference in how base and superstructure are interconnected.³⁵

The base-superstructure relationship is a dead metaphor that should be understood as an analogy that draws our attention to a particular relationship where superstructure is determined by basis. The metaphor implies that basis already exists before superstructure. To draw this conclusion would be inconsistent with the mutual determinism and dialectical interaction between the two that has been implied so far. Marx and Engels also use other metaphors in their texts to explain this relationship, such as the state and political economy "have their root in", "stand on the ground" or "spring from the soil" of society.³⁶ With this imagery, they are looking for an analogy that gives the basis primacy, but which at the same time allows the interaction between social relations, ideas and politics. There might not be a metaphor appropriate for this task.³⁷

Similarly, the distinction between basis and superstructure cannot take place on the basis of the contradiction between the material and the social if one

³³ Knight 1998: 39

³⁴ Wood 2016: 22

³⁵ Knight 1998: 38–39

³⁶ Marx 2010: 335

³⁷ Rigby 1998: 182

incorporated scientific and technological ideas as productive forces. This creates an artificial division between elements that intertwine.³⁸ Doing so, the conscious enterprise of man is detached from the development of the production forces and becomes isolated to relate to the relationship, whereby a dichotomy arises between man and technology - between the social and the material. This understanding does not convincingly capture the historical complexity. Therefore, if we are looking for a way out of this impasse, we must identify the contradictions elsewhere. The distinction must be between conditions that depend on production and those that do not.

We must reverse the orthodox statement, emphasizing that it is in the active practice of man and not in the autonomous development of productive forces that we must find development. Through this reversal, it can be shown that it is precisely the success of the relations of production over the productive forces that leads to a crisis in a mode of production, rather than the internal development of the forces that create these conditions.

A clear example is the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which is marked by a growth in productive forces, not before the transition to another form of society, but precisely after capitalist class relations had established themselves.³⁹ Changed material and political conditions had led to the emergence of a new class that, through its common enterprise, managed to change the mode of production. As Perry Anderson describes it:

“Contrary to widely received beliefs among Marxists - that the characteristic ‘figure’ of a crisis in a mode of production is not one in which vigorous (economic) forces of production triumphantly break through retrograde (social) relations of production and promptly establish higher productivity and a corresponding society on their ruins. On the contrary, forces of production typically tend to stall and even recede within the existing relations of production; these then must themselves first be radically changed and reordered before new forces of production can be created and combined for a globally, new mode of production. In other words, relations of production generally change prior to the forces of production in an epoch of transition and not vice versa.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Harmann 1982: 3–44

³⁹ Rigby 1998: 131–132

⁴⁰ Anderson 2013: 204

Thus, class relations do not exist based on the production process's need for an organization. The *need* is only the practice of the classes themselves.

Opposition, crisis and conflict

In the orthodox theory of historical materialism there is an assumption that structural contradictions exist between basis and superstructure as well as between the forces and relations of production. These contradictions are seen as a driving force in societal development. However, it is not clearly explained why the destabilizing effects on the relations of production, as a result of the development of productive forces, are necessarily stronger than the stabilizing effects of the superstructure. The model is unable to include the different ways in which different classes relate to different modes of production, the different ways in which their respective institutions, ideologies and cultures 'express' the mode of production.

Instead I would like to offer two other assumptions. Firstly, that the destabilizing element of a mode of production represents a potential rather than a certainty, but that depending on the mode of production there are limits to what kind of development is possible.

Secondly, that the mechanisms that create change, from one mode of production to another, are not only internal to the mode of production, but that these can also arise externally in the connection and interaction of societies that are structured differently.⁴¹ Understood in this sense, all development is mixed. In examining history, we should therefore not only look for the specific conditions that at one point caused a mode of production to arise or evolve, but at the whole chain of events and cross-reactions that have led to the level of development at which these communities have come to. Historical changes do not take place because changes in base affect changes in superstructure, but because changed material conditions open up new areas of struggle.

To contrive a revised version of the classical view, we must turn to the Swedish sociologist Eric Olin Wright again. He suggests that instead of focusing on the concepts of basis-superstructure, we should focus on opportunity-creating and restraining factors in society. For him, it is not about the development of

⁴¹ Hobsbawm 2013: 220

insurmountable contradictions, but rather that there are some combinations where the basis and superstructure are inconsistent, in the sense that they create systemic instabilities. When such incompatibilities occur, something has to give - either the conditions must change, or the superstructure must change. So, it is not just a one-way relationship, where development progresses in the direction of more complexity. Just as it is also not the case that the form must necessarily burst by the development of the productive forces. The power of the ruling class is such that it is generally capable of preventing changes in relations of production which are not in their favour, thereby maintaining their position. Therefore, there will be a greater tendency for political institutions and policies to change to ensure the compatibility of the economic structure than vice versa.⁴²

To give an example, some productive forces can strengthen the direct producer's autonomy and increase the ability to resist exploitation, thereby making the relationship between forces and relations unstable. In such a case, the use of productive forces will tend to destabilize relations of production. Likewise, it is not only the development of productive forces that can create this instability, but also changes in conditions or changes in the superstructure. Instead of talking about basis and superstructure and their mutual contradictions, Olin Wright uses another imagery inspired by Marx, namely about a system as a fetter on development. Olin Wright therefore investigates which phenomena fetter the development of productive forces and which strengthen them. For, Olin Wright admits, historically there is a weak tendency for technological development throughout history. The question then is, which tendencies are driving the development? These tendencies are not found in structural systems, but in the human interests and actions that constitute them.

Therefore, there is no immanent contradiction between the altering and the preserving forces, but only the potential for such contradiction to arise. Here, a process is established where productive forces and relationships become less compatible and thereby become fettered or become more compatible and thereby unfettered. We must be aware that not all the fettering of productive forces happens to forces in existence. One can imagine that certain ideas are suppressed in a particular mode of production, or that certain layers in society are. In particular, if we try to find solutions to the problems, we ourselves face, it follows that certain classes have a greater chance of asking certain questions, and

⁴² Wright m.fl. 1992: 95

thus come up with a certain kind of ideas. These ideas will only emerge under a different mode of production, where either they are no longer suppressed or the layers in society that have the potential to develop them to occupy a new and different position.

The fettering and unfettering of development is probably a by-product of user compatibility, rather than a crucial discrepancy that explains relations of production.⁴³ This means that it is more about how different productive forces are put into use and by whom, than whether this can be done. In doing so, the claim that relations of production will adapt to the needs of productive forces ceases to be a historical law and instead becomes a conditional statement. In other words, if the productive forces are to be developed, then certain relations of production must be present. Whether this is going to happen is historically contingent.

Ellen Meikesin Wood suggests that the way in which production is constantly changing is matched by the different strategies of the classes to optimize or reduce exploitation. What we should notice about in transitions from one mode of production to another, she suggests, is therefore a crisis in exploitation strategies. What triggers a crisis within a mode of production is not that relations of production prevent further development of productive forces. In particular, the dominant classes within the existing relationship (the interaction between the forces and the relationships) can no longer effectively pursue their normal reproduction strategies. Once a class's strategy framework is outdated, it must be replaced by a new strategy. Since reproduction strategies are not created in isolation but are determined in the relationship between producers and exploiters, classes must be examined in a process rather than based on transition points.

The evolution of productive forces does not occur based on a transhistorical principle of human practice. The rhythm and patterns of development are determined to a larger extent by the development of society. While we may assume a trend for development, this trend tells us nothing about the probability, frequency, speed, or extent of change. Nor does it contradict Marx' statement that developmental inertia has been more the rule than the exception. But this belief is historically conditioned. Progress is an abstract term that cannot be bound by anything other than our subjective judgment based on the time we ourselves live

⁴³ Wright m.fl. 1992: 26

in. The concrete goals of human beings differ from period to period through the historical process, not from an outside source. To understand progress, it must be understood as a process that each historical period fills with its own content. This means that it must be understood ideologically. Progress can only be understood as a goal that we set ourselves in the future and that we can see as historical processes have moved towards.

Modes of production

This brings us to the overarching concept of 'mode of production' which is a synthesis of the earlier concepts. A mode of production embodies both a specific production program (a way of producing, on the basis of a particular technology and sharing of productive work) and a specific historical set of conditions through which work is used to subjugate nature. It is through the mode of production that the socially produced surplus is circulated, distributed and used for accumulation or other purposes.

Human experience has learnt that production methods exert determinative pressure on other activities. Since human experience is governed by the society in which it operates, man, based on his experience, reproduces the parts of society with which he is in contact. The life span of human experience is far shorter than the existence of the mode of production, therefore the accrual occurs when large groups reproduce conditions under which they have gained experience. This results in shorter or longer periods of similar history where human practice acts in similar ways and where different social logics apply. When a breach occurs in the conditions, there also follows a breach in the reproduction.

A mode of production can also be understood as the way in which society recreates itself - a tendential reproductive process. Each mode of production has an embedded *modus vivendi* that emanates from the prevailing relations of production. No mode of production depletes human potential or human enterprise. Thus, production methods not only create opportunities, but also exclude certain types of practice. By using modes of production as a methodical tool, we free ourselves from the prevailing view that there exists only one form of economic logic (the current capitalist), and assume that each mode of production is governed by different economic trends. But modes of production are not primarily the expression of various economic, social conditions. They represent the forms of practice that have been possible. Each mode of production is

governed by dominant trends in the production relationship that shape human activity. On the basis of the organization of production, mechanisms exist in connection with the reproduction of society, which are applicable across societies with the same mode of production. These mechanisms are in fact relationships between humans, or between humans and their productive forces, but appear as we often see as alien to the historical actors.

A mode of production can best be described as a combination of specific relations of production with variable kinds of productive forces. The mode of production is not the same as society, as a society is a system of human relations - or to be more precise - relationships between human groups. The concept of mode of production helps as a guide as to understand the organization of these groups. The concept is also not identical to the economic structure (relationship of production), because a mode is not a relation.⁴⁴ The mode of production is therefore an abstraction of the longer-lasting conditions under which it is produced. These conditions are actually interchangeable but have similarities that allow them to be summarized in a mode of production.

While there is no hierarchical order between the different modes of production, there are some modes of production we cannot imagine before other. For example, those who have commodity production and steam engines before those that have not. In addition to mankind's earliest society, we can see that different modes of production have co-existed and interacted.

So what are the divisions one can imagine?

In the preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx presents the modes of production that he believed existed in large outlines. This is an Asiatic, an antique, a feudal and a modern - that is, a capitalist mode of production. In his work, Marx gives some outlines, but he did not have the empirical basis to examine them.⁴⁵ In the text *Forms Prior to Capitalist Production*, Marx writes about an Asiatic mode of production based on village communities where tributes are extracted by the state in the form of taxes - the direct opposite of what happens under capitalism, an antique mode of production based on slavery and city states, and the Germanic mode based on self-sufficient peasants.

⁴⁴ Cohen 1980: 79

⁴⁵ Althusser & Balibar 2009: 231

There is therefore no stringency in the modes defined or in their order. In Marx's study of landownership, it becomes clear that what he is comparing here is a number of geographically distinct types, whereby the question of the temporal succession of the modes of production slides into the background.⁴⁶ Likewise, modern research does not provide a basis for accepting the division proposed by Marx either successively or geographically.

The strength of the above described approach is that we examine each mode of production in relation to others. This directs our attention to the transitions from one mode of production to another. These transitions cannot be seen as the progress of history following an overhistoric logic (as in the DIAMAT in Soviet Marxism) but must be based on the dynamics of each mode of production. If one wants to understand a mode of production and the dynamics that govern it, it may be beneficial to ask the question: What is it in the mode of production that keeps reproducing itself? In the earliest societies it is genealogical, under feudalism it was concepts of fidelity and obligation while under capitalism it is the market. These dynamics do not take place on their own, but originate from the historical practice. It takes people for their maintenance and change.

The 'class struggle' as a tool for analysis plays a crucial role here, because it cannot be a single narrative. The notion of the concept lies in the acceptance of many different worldviews and narratives that compete. Its basis is a rejection of the one-sided storytelling of good and evil, order and chaos, in favour of an understanding that emphasizes that every judgment depends on the one who asks and their own placement in the historically created structure. It is precisely the task of science to show how narratives are ideologically disposed, to explain the emergence of ideological notions, and to show how they have arisen from reality and only show us one aspect of it. Just as we must learn to understand the ideology we ourselves are subjected to and have to.

The immediate explanation for major social change is often found in the struggle between classes, but this is not in itself an explanation for social change. If the question is what creates social change, no one can be satisfied with the explanation that it is because there is a struggle. The critical investigator wants to know who is struggling, what their strengths are and what opportunities the parties have for struggling. When in Marxist research the class struggle is

⁴⁶ Schmidt 1993: 187 Marx draws attention to the fact that his sketch of the development of capitalism in Western Europe is not a general path laid out for all the people of the world in his answer to Mikhailovsky (1877).

referred to as the engine of history, it must be understood as an analogy and should not be taken literally - the class struggle is the process and the classes are the body through which the processes take place - history is thus its own engine.

Through the looking glass

This lastly brings us to the concept of 'classes'. There is a reason why these have always stood central in any Marxist analysis. Only if the language cannot be detached from what is expressed in it, it is possible to understand what an actor is saying, and only if we understand the context within which the words have been expressed. To understand this, we cannot get stuck in word games, but we must turn to needs that are materially conditioned. It also means that we must turn to the groups whose actions form the structure.

The defence against this reductionism must be to maintain the great divergence between human forms of practice and to distinguish between appearance and being. All human practice expresses itself as communication, but that does not mean that all communication is text or that all practice is nothing but communication. The major problem for the postmodernists is therefore that they only analyse the form of communication and not the other forms of practice. For there is a big difference between practice such as linguistic and textual communication and practice like work, learning and play. They are all part of different systems and interdependent in terms of determination and dominance. By limiting the analysis to the communicative aspect of practice (such as discourse and ideology), only its form is analysed, but not its content.

Within the political, economic and social structures, groups can exert great change. They are able to change their own circumstances and answer their own needs. The problem, however, is that in the hands of postmodernists, the materially productive and reproductive part of society, with its determinations through the production relationship, disappears as an object of analysis and is replaced by a complexity beyond any kind of analysis and conclusion, and therefore beyond any (theoretical) and practical) intervention. Language implies a duality in which it reorganizes our experiences, but at the same time constitutes the understanding of the present. Here, narratives are created in the collectives, but this is based on the ingenuity of the individual subject rather than through joint action. For how does one break the linguistic structure that is a barrier for a

historical actor? It can only be broken by the breakdown of non-linguistic structures. From this we can ask: What interests create the basis for change?

Revealing narratives as being constructs explains nothing in itself. It is necessary to examine which actors make use of which narratives, what their interest might have been in this, and from what material circumstances this interest originates. If this is done, it will be possible to demonstrate how identity and discourse have a basis and presuppose a set of power relations and how these relationships could be different from what they are. In other words, it becomes possible to see how ideology is dependent on class. This insight allows the historian to ask quite different questions: From what interests does a given ideology arise? What relationships does a group with these interests constitute? How do these conditions arise and change? ... All questions that historical materialism tries to answer.

The possibility of these analyses is determined by the real existence of the study field, but this existence is infinitely complicated, at least as far as the human understanding of it is concerned. Therefore, a guideline is needed in relation to which questions should be asked to the field. The shifts in research areas since the creation of history as a subject reflect precisely such a shift in the interest of researchers in their own time. As well as a shift of class and group interests within this time. There have been attempts to answer questions about which the contemporaries have been concerned, understood in the way that they have somehow dealt with contemporary problems. We cannot set up a program of questions that will capture our interest in the future or questions that can answer the societal issues of tomorrow. But we can in the present, with the words of Chernyshevsky and Lenin, pose the question: What is to be done?

Change requires action, but knowledge of the circumstances in which the action takes place is not immaterial. If historical materialism is anything but a transiently curious field of research, it must be applied to answer the challenges of today. We must allow today's problems to guide what questions we ask about the past, while materialism can be a way of analysing today's problems. In Marx's words, it is not about interpreting the world, but about changing it. This means, first of all, that a counter-hegemony must be created based on a materialistic project, i.e. the desire for change, and since then this project must strive to become the ruling but constantly challenged scientific-theoretical hegemony, not only in the educational places, but also in society as a whole.

This is precisely why the question of history writing and understanding history is also relevant today. Relativization in the understanding of history means not only a relativization of the past, but also a relativization of the future. Looking to the future, it is not insignificant which actors are positioned as to be able to bring about change. The problem for the humanities is therefore not the impossibility of studying its field from the outside, as the researcher is always a part of what is examined, it is precisely the insight of the field, that there is no final theoretical conclusion, but that history is a political battleground where people and interests struggle. History must therefore not become an antiquarian collection of facts or a comparison of balanced stories. It must investigate the development of groups, actors and classes, their relations to each other and the world on which they depend and follow their interests, in the pursuit of answering, which possible changes and developments the future holds, and who can position themselves to affect this.

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