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MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

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The value and extent of Marx's influence on modern historiography are rarely denied, even by those who reject his economics, politics and philosophy.[1] Yet the precise nature of Marx's impact influence on later Marxist historians or on historians in general is rather more difficult to specify. Too often Marx's theory of history ('historical materialism') is reduced to a general emphasis on the importance of class struggle or on the role of the 'economic factor'.[2] It is impossible in the space available here to provide a comprehensive survey of Marxist historiography, which would virtually amount to writing a history of the world. Instead, this chapter examines Marx's major claims about social structure and historical change, explores how and to what extent Marxist historical writing differs from orthodox historiography, and offers a general assessment of the Marxist approach.

MARX AND ENGELS'S 'HISTORICAL MATERIALISM'

One problem in specifying Marx's influence on later historians is that Marx and Engels themselves employed a number of different historical approaches and offered a variety of specific historical interpretations which were by no means necessarily mutually compatible.[3] In general, as Fleischer has shown, Marx and Engels worked within at least three overarching historical outlooks: the anthropogenetic, the pragmatological and the nomological. In their early works, Marx and Engels saw history in Hegelian, or 'anthropogenetic' terms. Here history is seen as the overarching, dialectical progression through which humanity comes to its full self-realization, passing through a necessary negative phase of self-alienation and social

1 Popper 1966:106–10; Kolakowski 1978:I, 369–70, III, 524; Leff 1961:7; Rigby 1992b: 14.
2 Hobsbawm 1972. As Marxists have been keen to point out, 'economic determinism' is not a sin which has been confined to Marxist historians: Hill 1968:21; Thompson 1971:78; Genovese 1972:319.
3 On the contradictory nature of Marx and Engels's legacy, see Gouldner 1980.

atomization before achieving a fully human, free and rational community.[4] In their works of the mid-1840s, such as *The Holy Family*, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels then shifted to a 'pragmatological' outlook, one more in line with orthodox notions of historical agency. Here the anthropogenetic conception of social development as a logical unfolding towards some particular goal is replaced by a view in which history is seen as 'the outcome, more blind than the result of any tendency to a specific goal, of the actions of individuals and of groups impelled by their needs in the situations in which they find themselves'.[5] Jon Elster has even claimed that the works of this period are characterized by a methodological individualism (the belief that all social phenomena are explicable 'in ways that only involve individuals', their properties, goals, beliefs and actions), although it should be stressed that Marx and Engels always insisted that 'real living individuals' were themselves the products of 'given historical conditions and relations'.[6] Finally, whilst never explicitly abandoning the pragmatological outlook, Marx and Engels's later works, such as *Capital* (1867) and *Anti-Dühring* (1878), also adopted a 'nomological' perspective in which historical development is seen as analogous to a natural process taking place in accordance with 'inner hidden laws' which it is the task of the historian to uncover.[7] Here the emphasis on human agency of the pragmatological outlook is replaced with a structuralist approach which sees the development of the economic formation of society as 'a process of natural history' and in which individuals are presented as 'the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests'.[8] This outlook was generalized by later Marxists into the philosophi-

4 Marx and Engels 1975–6, II:476, III:172–4, 395, 419–42, 463–72, 475–6, 485, 491–2, 499; Fleischer 1975:12–16; Adamson 1981; 1985: ch. 1; Tillich 1970; Rigby 1992a; Maguire 1972; Kain 1986.

5 Fleischer 1975:13; see also Marx and Engels 1975–6, IV:93, 298, 583; 1982:12; V:36–7, 39–41, 56–9, 88; 1962:247; Rigby 1992a: 47–63; Benton 1977:151–3; Miller 1979:29–32; Kain 1986: ch. 2.

6 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:37, 39, 51–2, 76–8, 183, 215, 323, 329, 375–6, 378–9, 410, 413, 436–8, 442, 464, 479–80; Elster 1982; 1985:5, 7, 109–10. For discussions of Elster see the articles in *Inquiry* 29 (1986): vol. 29, pp. 3–77 and Theory and Society 11 (1982): vol. 11, pp 483–539 and Callinicos, 1987. Carling presents Elster's methodological individualism as a central part of the emergence of 'rational choice Marxism', which has replaced French structuralism as the dominant paradigm within Marxism and which works from the assumption that 'actors decide what to do by applying principles of optimization to a set of alternatives for action' (Carling 1991:27). See Carling 1986; Levine *et al.* 1987; Carling 1990; Callinicos 1990; Wood 1990; Rigby 1993.

7 Fleischer 1975:13; Krieger 1953:386–7, 403; Marx and Engels 1962:246; 1949:153, 354–5; Marx 1976–81:I. 90–3, 101–2, 928–30; Engels n.d.: 15, 147–61, 209–10, 305; Marx and Engels 1975:442, 455; McLellan 1976:423; Lichtheim 1964:236, 243; Rigby 1992a: 187–95; Kain 1986: chs 3 and 4. This emphasis on history as a law-bound process was the basis of Soviet-Marxist historiography, see Acton 1990: chs 2 and 3.

8 Marx 1976, II:92; Althusser and Balibar 1975:180; Burris 1987. The debate between Miliband and Poulantzas on how to account for the class nature of the capitalist state provides a classic instance of the clash between the pragmatological and the structuralist concepts of agency. See Miliband 1973; Poulantzas 1973; Miliband 1973; Laclau 1979: ch. 2. See also the references in Miliband 1983:26. A pragmatological emphasis on agency formed the basis for E.P.Thompson's attack on structuralist notions of class. See Wood 1982, and see the references in n. 102.

cal system of ‘dialectical materialism’, but it should be stressed that such dialectical materialism was neither chronologically nor logically prior to the empirical social theory developed by Marx and Engels in the mid-1840s: historical materialism is not an ‘application’ of dialectical materialism.[9]

Even in their analyses of particular historical conjunctures, it was inevitable, given that they were writing over a long period of time and in a variety of historical circumstances and literary genres, that Marx and Engels would produce a range of differing and even contradictory historical interpretations. There is, for instance, a contrast between the account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism offered in works such as *The German Ideology* (1845–6) and the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), where Marx and Engels focus on the rise of towns, trade and an urban bourgeoisie, and the increasing emphasis on the transformation of agriculture and the expropriation of the peasant producers contained in the *Grundrisse* (1857–8) and *Capital*.[10]

Yet, despite the ambiguous and often contradictory legacy bequeathed to later Marxists by Marx and Engels, and even though, as we shall see, Marxist historians often disagree violently with each other about specific issues, it is possible to identify a distinctive school of Marxist historiography. If, as E.P.Thompson (1978:236) argued, the methodology and epistemology of historical materialism do not differ from the orthodox historical procedure of formulating hypotheses which can be tested against empirical evidence, Marxist historians can be distinguished from their non-Marxist colleagues in terms of their common vocabulary and concepts, and their shared body of interests, questions, hypotheses and historical emphases.

In *The German Ideology* (co-written with Engels in 1845–6) and the ‘Preface’ to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx set out a comprehensive account of social structure and of historical change. For Marx, all social life is based upon the material production necessary to satisfy humanity’s subsistence needs. This process involves the transformation of specific raw materials by means of particular instruments of production, human labour-power, and scientific and technological knowledge within a given specific technical division of labour, i.e. by means of society’s ‘productive forces’.[11] A particular level of development of these productive forces forms the basis for specific ‘relations of production’, i.e. relations between people (as in the case of the class relation between an employer and his employees), or between people and the productive forces (as in the case of the

9 Stalin 1951:5; Dorpalen 1985:35–45; Cornforth 1968:126; Meikle: 1985:1; Croce 1981:3, 1621–1629, Hilferding 1981; Korsch 1938:51–2, 168–71; Rigby 1992a: chs 6–8; Jordan 1967:297. That historical materialism does not logically require dialectical materialism has not prevented Marxists identifying a’dialectical progress of history’ at work in events such as the French Revolution. See Lefebvre 1967:360.

10 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:32, 64–74; VI:485–90; Marx 1974b:506, 508–12, 589; Marx 1976–81, I: chs 26–32; III: ch. 20; see Mumy 1978–9; Brenner 1977:27, 33–8; Hilton 1976:23.

11 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:41–2; Marx 1971:19–23; Marx 1976–81, I:284–90; 1974:560, 699; McMurtry 1978:55; G.A.Cohen 1978:32.

employer's ownership of a factory). These relations of production, or property relations, determine people's access to the productive forces (for instance, the wage-labourer's access to the productive forces is dependent upon being employed by the capitalist) and to the products of the labour process (in the form of wages in the labourer's case, or as the ownership of those products which are to be sold for profit in the employer's case) (Hilferding 1981:127–8; G.A.Cohen 1978:3).

Although Marx's own terminology was by no means consistent, Marxists usually refer to a combination of specific relations of production with a specific level (or levels) of development of the productive forces as a 'mode of production', each mode of production being defined by its relations of production (feudal, capitalist, etc.).[12] For Marxists, the class relations of modes of production based on private property (as opposed to the communal property of primitive communism) are necessarily 'exploitative' since they involve the appropriation of specific forms of 'surplus labour' from the producers by a class of non-producers, as in the feudal landlord's appropriation of rent from his peasants.[13] Such exploitation inevitably generates class conflict as the producers seek to limit the level of exploitation and the non-producers seek to maximize it.[14]

Marx and Engels frequently claimed that society's relations of production 'corresponded' to the level of development reached by its productive forces,[15] a claim which they illustrated for each stage of historical development, from primitive communism,[16] through the ancient,[17] Asiatic,[18] feudal,[19] and capitalist[20] modes of production. As society acquires new productive forces, a transhistorical tendency which Marx and Engels largely took for granted[21] a stage is eventually reached

12 Mishra 1979. For Marx's own varying usage of the term 'mode of production', see Marx and Engels 1975:V, 43, 53; 1976:175; Marx 1971:203; Marx 1976–81:I:505, 196; III:373, 753, 734, 755, 759, 1019–1021; 1968:429–30.

13 Marx 1976–81, I:313, 324–5, 345–8, III:763–5, 917–50; Marx and Engels 1975, V:409. The concept of exploitation has been the subject of a highly abstract debate amongst Marxist theoreticians. See Roemer 1982, Lukes 1985 and M.Cohen *et al*. 1980. For bibliographical guidance see Geras 1985 and Carling 1991: chs 5 and 6. If, as Croce and Roemer have emphasized, the notion of exploitation implicitly involves the concept of some alternative, non-exploitative social arrangement, the concept of 'exploitation' as possessing an objective, measurable existence becomes a rather more problematical idea than Marx and Engels themselves realized. See Croce 1981:127; Roemer 1989; Dalton 1974 (and see the subsequent debate, in *American Anthropologist* vols 77–9); Rigby 1992a:214–19.

14 Marx and Engels 1975–6, VI:482–5; 1975:307; Marx 1976–81, I:344, 553–4, 699–700; De Ste Croix 1984:99–100.

15 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:35–6, 43, 59–60, 63, 81–2, 89, 231; Marx 1974b:89; Marx 1971:20, 220; 1976–81, I:286, 325; 1970:28; Marx 1973a:95, 106–7, 156–7, 161, 171; Marx and Engels 1975:356–441; McMurtry 1978: ch. 8; Rigby 1987: ch. 3; A.W.Wood 1981:68–79.

16 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:32–3; Marx 1974b: 496; Engels 1968:20–8.

17 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:33, 159; Engels n.d.: 182–3; 1968:157–60.

18 Marx 1976–81, I:173, 479; 1973:83, 304–6.

19 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:74–5; Marx 1976–81, III:929–30.

20 Marx 1969:384; Marx 1974b:277, 699.

21 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:52–3, 82–3, 89; Marx 1971:20–1; Marx 1973a:96, 107, 157; Cohen 1978:31; Shaw 1978:65; McMurtry 1978:65.

where its relations of production lag behind its developing productive forces and become fetters upon them. In order that the productive forces may continue to develop, society's antiquated relations of production are cast aside and new relations of production brought into being, a process accompanied by social revolution, such as the bourgeois revolutions which marked the triumph of the capitalist class over the feudal aristocracy.[22]

If society's productive forces form the foundation for its relations of production, then, in turn, these relations of production form the 'economic base' for society's legal, political and ideological 'superstructure'.[23] The state and forms of social consciousness are 'determined' or 'created' by its relations of production or, more broadly, by its mode of production. The state and ideology are thus said to 'spring from', 'correspond' to, 'reflect', 'echo' or 'express' social relations.[24] More specifically, the state usually serves to defend the power and common interests of the propertied,[25] whilst specific forms of social consciousness are determined by the interests and position of particular social classes.[26]

Marx and Engels thus offered a three-tier model of social structure (the productive forces; the relations of production; and the political and ideological superstructure), and provided a 'functional explanation' of the relations between these three levels. A functional explanation is one which accounts for the existence of some particular arrangement or process in terms of its beneficial effects for something else, as when the long neck of the giraffe is explained by its advantages for the giraffe's survival and reproduction or the rain-dance performed by the Hopi Indians is explained by its tendency to promote social cohesion.[27] For Marx, society's relations of production are functionally explained by the development of the productive forces: 'in order that' society will not be deprived of the benefits of the growth of the productive forces, relations of production corresponding to the new level of development of social productivity have to be brought into existence (Marx 1973a:197; 1971:21). Similarly, Marxism offers a functional explanation of

22 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:33–4, 52, 74, 82; VI:212, 33; Marx 1973a:106–7; Marx 1974b: 540; Marx and Engels 1967:85; Marx 1973b:192–3; 1971:21; 1976–81:I, 875; III:449–52, 1023–4; Engels n.d.: 300; 1968:6; 1978:19–24; Bertrand 1979:71–2, 185–6; Furet 1988: ch. 2; Löwy 1989.

23 Marx 1971:20–1; Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:53, 55, 57, 89, 329, 355–6, 373. The metaphor of base and superstructure is also implicit in Marx and Engels's critiques of the Hegelian 'inversion' of human consciousness and social activity. See, for example, Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:30, 36, 61, 107–9, 126, 159.

24 Marx 1976–81, I:95; 1974a:335; 1973a:156; 1973b:250; Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:36, 52, 59, 90, 193, 196, 250, 356, 410, 420, 463; 1975:400.

25 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:52, 90, 92, 329, 355–6, 359, 361; Engels 1968:168; Marx 1972a: 28, 30, 32, 35, 81, 102, 121–3; Marx 1972a:28, 30, 32, 35, 81, 102, 121–3; Marx 1973a:137; Marx and Engels 1967:85, 100, 137; Marx 1973b:261; Marx 1972b:105.

26 Marx 1971:20–1; Marx 1973a:95, 100, 109; Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:36–7, 74, 159, 183, 250, 438, 462; Marx 1974b:540; Marx and Engels 1975:401; Engels n.d.: 23; Marx 1972b:37–8, 40; 1972a:33, 48.

27 Rigby 1987: ch. 6. For functional explanation in Marx, see Giddens 1979a, esp. 210–14, and G.A. Cohen 1978, esp. chs 9 and 10. For functional explanation in general see Merton 1962:19–84.

the political and ideological superstructure in terms of its benefits for society's class relations which the state and ideology help to stabilize and to legitimize.[28]

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In accordance with the theoretical legacy bequeathed to them by Marx and Engels, Marxist historians have tended to concentrate their attention on a number of key issues: on tracing the growth—or lack of it—of society's productive forces; on characterising particular societies in terms of their dominant relations of production; on exploring the extent and nature of class conflict; on explaining the crises of particular modes of production and the transitions between them; and on establishing the relationship between class relations on the one hand and political power and social ideologies on the other.

Of all of Marx's historical theories, it is his claim for the social primacy of the productive forces which, despite its defence by Marxist theoreticians from Kautsky and Plekhanov, through Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin and Stalin; to Cohen, Loone, Shaw, Callinicos and Sayer,[29] has proved least fruitful for later Marxist historians.[30] This is not surprising, since even within Marx and Engels's own works there is a contrast between their general, programmatic statements, such as Marx's '1859 Preface', and their actual analyses of specific historical periods. The former tend to emphasize the primacy of society's inexorably developing productive forces in explaining historical change; the latter recognized that, under the impact of particular relations of production, society's productive forces could stagnate or even regress and thus laid a far greater stress on the role of class relations and class struggle in bringing about social change.[31] Indeed, certain Marxists, unwilling to saddle Marx with views which they themselves cannot accept, have even attempted to deny that Marx ever claimed a social primacy for the productive forces in the first place.[32]

Far from emphasizing an inexorable tendency for the productive forces to expand and develop, Marxist historians have taken to heart Marx's warning that it is wrong

28 See references to the state and ideology above, and also G.A. Cohen 1978:216–17, 278–80.
29 Kautsky n.d.: 120–37, 144–5, 161–71; 1988:xxxviii–ix, 227; Plekhanov 1972:123–33, 147, 159–72, 216–18, 262; 1969:49, 62, 64; Lenin 1969:7, 21–3; Trotsky 1970:9; Trotsky 1971:169; Bukharin 1969:120, 134, 140, 249, 257; Stalin 1951:33–56; Cohen 1978: ch. 6; 1988: chs 1, 5, 6, 8, 9; Loone 1992:163; Shaw 1978: ch. 2; 1979. See also Callinicos 1987:91–5; Sayer 1987:31–5.
30 For the attempt by the archaeologist V.Gordon Childe to apply this approach to historical development, see Childe 1947, esp. chs 2 and 7; 1941:6; 1954:23–6; Green 1981, esp. 78–83.
31 Marx 1971:20–1; Miller 1991; Adamson 1980; Rigby 1987:28–55, 144–60; Katz 1989:3–4, 173–83; Lekas 1988:105–6, 138, 153 and ch. 9, *passim*. For an attempt to reconcile these two approaches, see Miller 1981; Miller 1984.
32 Saville 1974:7; Bettelheim, 1976:23; J.S.Cohen 1978:31; Rosenberg 1981; Levine 1987. T. McCarthy (1978:24), though not a Marxist himself, also rejects the 'technological determinist' interpretation of Marx.

to apply to *all* modes of production the laws of development specific to capitalist society. Unlike capitalism, where there *is* a powerful, indeed historically unprecedented, tendency for the productive forces to develop, all pre-capitalist modes of production were, as Marx himself argued, inherently conservative.[33] In practice, it is the control which society's relations of production exercise over its productive forces and the class struggles which result from particular relations of production, rather than the autonomously developing productive forces, which enjoy pride of place in Marxist accounts of change and crisis within, and the transitions between, particular modes of production.[34]

Thus, for Walbank, it was precisely the failure of the productive forces to develop which underlay the decline of the Roman Empire. The level of the productive forces in the late Empire was essentially the same as it had been in the Greek world. Yet, from the second century AD, an Empire on the defensive faced the mounting costs of defending its frontiers, paying its bureaucracy, feeding Rome and so on. Once the Empire ceased to expand, the army was no longer a source of profit to the state but a burden which had to be supported by the population: the inevitable result of the *Pax Romana* was legalized extortion. In the short term, as under modern fascism, rulers such as Diocletian (284–305) turned to increased state regulation and control in an attempt to maintain a social system which was in crisis. In the long term, this ever more top-heavy political superstructure, with no adequate economic base of its own, was doomed to failure. The key to this failure of the productive forces to develop was the prevalence of relations of production based upon slavery, which deprived slaves of the incentive to innovate, induced a contempt for all forms of labour amongst the propertied and reduced much of the population to the edge of subsistence, thereby diminishing total demand and limiting the possibilities of economies of scale (Walbank 1946:22; 1969:40–80, 109–10; Engels 1968:145). Thus, despite the obligation of historians in Stalinist regimes to explain the end of the Roman Empire by the universal law of the expansion of the productive forces (Oliva 1962:171ff.; Gandy 1979:29), most Marxist analyses of the ancient world have stressed the *failure* of the productive forces to develop and have given a historically specific explanation of such stagnation or regression in terms of society's relations of production (see also Konstan 1975:149).

Robert Brenner's account of the crisis of feudalism also rejects any inherent tendency of the productive forces to develop and presents feudal social relations as a powerful brake on the growth of social productivity. For Brenner, feudal relations of production between peasants and lords inhibited agricultural innovation and thus

33 Engels n.d.: 167–8; Marx 1976–81, I:101, 617; Wood 1995:4, 110–27; Callinicos 1995:101–2.
34 Hilferding 1981:127–8; Hook 1934: ch. 12; Dobb 1951; Althusser and Balibar 1975:235; Hindess and Hirst 1975:9–12; Hilton 1976:115; 1984:88; Brenner 1976; Dockès 1982:182; Joshua 1988, esp. 361–8; Rigby 1987: ch. 8; Larrain 1986:82–9; E.M.Wood 1989b:59–60; Katz 1989:173–83; Jordan 1967:94; J.S.Cohen 1982; Levine and Wright 1980; Smith 1984; Genovese 1972:324.

generated the tendency towards over-population, declining living standards and demographic crisis which Malthusian or neo-Ricardian historians see as typical of feudalism. Unlike capitalism, which not only permits but, through competition on the market, positively encourages productive advance, feudalism offered little stimulus to investment or innovation. On the one hand, peasants lacked the resources or incentives to innovate. On the other, landlords, with the extraeconomic coercive powers of serfdom and the manor available to them, were able to increase their share of the social product by enlarging their share of total production, through raising rents, tallages and entry-fines, rather than through increases in productive investment. In Marx's terms they resorted to 'absolute' rather than 'relative' surplus labour.[35] Similarly, for Genovese, the 'immanent contradictions' of the slave-economy of the American South meant that it too was destined for crisis, its low-level of labour productivity, lack of capital formation, limited home market and the restrictions which it imposed on the vitality of the mercantile and industrial bourgeoisie all retarded economic development and paved the way for political secession and, eventually, for military defeat (Genovese 1965:3, 8–9, 43–61, 158).

Marxist historians still see a tendency towards productive advance as characteristic of capitalism, but they have abandoned such expansion as a universal historical law and have emphasized instead the need to identify the historically specific tendencies and laws of pre-capitalist modes of production.[36] As Perry Anderson (1977:204) put it, far from vigorous forces of production bursting triumphantly through retrograde forces of production, 'forces of production typically stall and recede within the existing relations of production…. The relations of production generally change *prior* to the forces of production in the epoch of transition and not vice versa'. What remains of Marx's claims is the idea of each mode of production being bound for crisis through its own inherent tendencies and, in particular, of social crisis as emerging from the clash of productive forces and the relations of production.[37] It is such *internal* problems and endogenous causal factors, rather than external forces, which create social crisis and transition. The Roman Empire, for instance, did not collapse because of the barbarian invasions but rather from its own internal contradictions.[38] Paul Sweezy was, therefore, rather unusual amongst Marxists when he sought an explanation of the dissolution of feudalism and the transition to capitalism in

35 Brenner 1976; 1982:16–17, 24–41, 48–50; Brenner 1977:42–6; 1989:288–90. See also Hilton 1974: ch. 10 and Wickham 1981:92–3. For Marx's distinction between 'absolute' and 'relative' surplus value, see Marx 1976–81:I, 643–72. On the crisis of feudalism, see also Kosminsky 1955; Dyer 1989:6–7, 109–40; Bois 1976. For a critique of Bois, see Brenner 1982:41–60.
36 Brenner 1977:31–8, 52; Kula 1976:54–6, 107–11; Wood 1984:97–8, 101.
37 Wood 1995:122–40. It was such fettering which, for Hobsbawm (1965), underlay the 'general crisis' of the seventeenth century, 'the last phase' of the transition from feudalism to capitalism.
38 J.S. Cohen 1978:30–1; Wright *et al.* 1992:57–8; Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:32, 83–5; Dockès 1982:159.

'causes external to the system', such as the rise of towns and trade.[39] Most Marxists have preferred to find some 'internal' prime mover of transition, such as the inefficiency of the feudal mode and its inherent tendency towards crisis, or the effects of feudal class struggle.[40]

Having abandoned Marx's claims for the primacy of the productive forces, Marxists have naturally paid little attention to Marx's claim that societies should be classified in terms of their characteristic productive forces and have concentrated, as Marx himself suggested, on distinguishing societies in terms of their relations of production (Marx 1976–81:I, 286, 325; II, 120). This is not to say that Marxist historians have necessarily agreed with Marx and Engels or with each other on the class-character of specific societies.[41] The very existence of an 'Asiatic' mode of production, where the state enjoys a monopoly of land so that the peasant producers hand over surplus labour in the form of tax, has proved extremely controversial.[42] In the early 1930s, the concept of the Asiatic mode was removed from the theoretical canon of Soviet Marxism whilst more recently Hindess and Hirst have denounced it as theoretically incoherent.[43] For Godelier, the Asiatic mode represents a form of the transition from primitive communism to class society, whereas Marx himself was happy to apply the term to Mogul India, a society which Godelier characterizes as a form of feudalism. Certainly, since defenders of this concept have seen societies in Africa or pre-Columban America as possessing 'Asiatic' relations of production, and since a state monopoly of land was by no means to be found in all pre-industrial Asian societies, 'Asiatic' may not be the best term for this mode of production (Godelier 1977:64, 116–17; 1981:264–7).

The class relations and dominant mode of production of the Ancient world have also proved a controversial issue amongst Marxist historians. Traditionally, despite Marx and Engels's references to the communal property of the ancient city-states, Marxists have placed a great emphasis on slavery as the class basis of the ancient world and, as in Walbank's analysis, as the chief obstacle to productive advance.[44]

39 Sweezy 1976; Hilton 1976:115; Dobb 1963:39–67, 124–6; Brenner 1977:38–53; Brenner 1976:31–2. Paradoxically, those who reject towns and trade as the prime movers of the transition to capitalism also tend to deny their external status with regard to feudalism. See Merrington 1976; Hilton 1985: ch. 13; Hilton 1992, esp chs 1, 2; Hibbert 1978:91–104. For attempts to reconcile Sweezy's emphasis on the role of towns and trade in the transition to capitalism with those who stress the integral role of towns within feudal society, see Katznelson 1992:161–3, 175–91 and Torras 1980.

40 Callinicos 1995:116–25 argues that even inter-societal conflicts, such as military competition, can be related to the pattern of society's internal economic development and class relations.

41 The social character of the Soviet Union and other state-socialist societies proved to be a particularly contentious issue. See Bellis 1979 for a survey of views.

42 Marx 1976–81:III, 927. For Marx and Engels on the Asiatic mode, see Avineri 1964; Krader 1975; Anderson 1979; 473–83; Hobsbawm 1964b: 32–8; Sawer 1977; Lubasz 1984; Rigby 1987:221–4; Rigby 1992a:196–7. Marx's views are complicated by the red herring of his definition of the Asiatic mode in terms of the provision of agricultural irrigation by the state. See Marx 1973c: 303.

43 Dunn 1982; Hindess and Hirst 1975: ch. 4.

44 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:32–3, 84, 89; Marx 1976–81, III:449–50; Engels 1968:145–7; Walbank 1946:24–7; 1969:42–7, 104; Anderson 1977:22.

Wood (1981) has challenged this approach on the grounds that the bulk of the population in the ancient world were peasant producers and independent craftsmen rather than slaves (see also Hilton 1977:10; Marx 1976–81:III, 942). However, De Ste Croix, in an ambitious attempt to show the utility of Marxism for the study of the ancient world, argues that the key issue in characterizing the class nature of the ancient world is not simply the occupations of the majority of the population but rather that of the dominant form of surplus labour which provided the income of the propertied class.[45] His argument faces two main problems. First, it is by no means clear that slaves *were* the major source of surplus labour in antiquity; the prevalence of chattel slavery, even in ancient Athens, seems to have been rather limited in time and place.[46] Second, as Hindess and Hirst have argued, there is no need for us to identify an economic unity underlying antiquity. The cultural unity of the ancient world was perfectly compatible with a variety of relations of production, ranging from slavery and serfdom to the appropriation of surplus labour by right of citizenship.[47]

Feudal social relations have proved less controversial.[48] Nevertheless, Marxists have been divided over whether or not to accept Marx's claim that under feudalism the peasant producers *possessed* the means of production, and thus of their own subsistence, which meant that surplus labour in the form of rent could only be extracted by extra-economic means, by the landlords' legal, political and coercive powers embodied in serfdom and the manor. In this perspective, serfdom and extra-economic coercion become defining features of the feudal mode.[49] Other Marxists, by contrast, have argued that, since landed property assumes the monopoly of certain people over certain parts of the globe and the exclusion of others, the peasants' payment of rent should be seen as a result of their *separation* from the means of production and that serfdom, rather than constituting a universally defining feature of feudalism, requires a historically specific explanation.[50]

Marx's account of capitalism in terms of the labour theory of value has come in for much criticism, even from those who are sympathetic to his general outlook.[51]

45 De Ste Croix 1975:16 (the whole of the 1975 issue of *Arethusa* is devoted to the question of Marxism and the ancient world); De Ste Croix 1984:107; 1981, esp. 52, 54, 113, 173, 179. For appreciative reviews, see Browning 1981; Anderson 1983; Brunt 1982. Bois argues that, in the sense that slavery was the dominant relation of exploitation, if not the major form of production, 'Frankish society remained a slave-based society' until the end of the tenth century, although these were slaves settled on holdings: Bois 1992:19–24, 157–8. Cf. this work, chapter 6.
46 Shaw 1984; Wickham 1988b:183–93; E.M.Wood 1989a:1–2, 39–40, 64–8, 78–80.
47 Hindess and Hirst 1975:85–6; 1977:40–1. Such cultural unity on the basis of diverse economic bases would, of course, pose problems for the metaphor of base and superstructure.
48 For a brilliant account of the short- and long-term dynamics of feudalism, see Kula 1976.
49 Marx 1976–81, III:926; Dobb 1976:165–6; Hilton *et al.* 1976:165–6; Hilton 1985:123; Anderson 1977:147–8; Brenner 1993:651.
50 Hindess and Hirst 1975:236–7; Martin 1983:16–17. For an empirical emphasis on the importance of free peasants in medieval England, see Kosminsky 1956:92–4 and Hilton 1967; 140–3. Barg 1991 shows that many freeholders were non-peasants who must often have sub-let their land.
51 Böhm-Bawerk 1975; Robinson 1962:34–46; 1966:17; Steedman 1975; 1977; Steedman *et al.* 1981.

What Marxists have retained from Marx is his distinction between the 'manufacturing' period, which for Marx prevailed from the mid-sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, and the era of industrial capitalism, which followed. In the former, production remains on a handicraft basis but independent artisans are replaced by a number of wage-labourers concentrated in a single workshop. At first, workers still produce an entire product, although now under the supervision of a single capitalist (the 'formal' subsumption of labour to capital), although there is eventually a tendency for the concentration of production to be accompanied by the intensification of the division of labour by process. This 'real' subsumption of labour to capital reaches its extreme form with mechanization and the reduction of the worker to being an 'appendage of the machine'. In other words, a specific mode of production is defined by its invariant relations of production, but such relations may be compatible with a variety of forms of productive forces (Marx 1976–81:I, 429, 445–8, 453, 456, 480–1, 492, 590). More recent Marxists have emphasized that in the era of pre-industrial capitalism, the 'putting out' of raw materials to rural workers, so-called 'proto-industrialization', was more common than centralized manufacturing.[52] Furthermore, industrialization proper is now seen as a much more recent development. Only with the age of railway construction, from the mid-nineteenth century, did industrialization spread beyond textiles, the area of its initial breakthrough in the period 1780–1800. Even after 1850, mechanization, particularly in low-wage economies, made only slow progress.[53]

For Marxists, all of these modes of production are based on the appropriation of surplus labour by the propertied class, a process which inevitably generates class conflict as the propertied come into conflict with the producers. De Ste Croix (1981:44) usefully reminds us that class struggle is not merely the product of the actions of slaves, peasants and workers, but that measures taken by the ruling class in its own interests are also forms of class struggle: the employer's lock-out is as much an instance of class conflict as the workers' strike. Nevertheless, in practice, Marxist historiography has tended to concentrate its attention on popular social movements and forms of unrest. For the medieval period, Hilton (1985:7, 9, 11, 17; 1977: *passim;* 1975: ch. 4; 1967:154–61; 1990:183–4; 1992: ch. 6), Dyer (1981; 1992) and Razi (1979; 1983) criticize those historians who have seen feudal social relations in terms of consensus and argue that class conflict was the inevitable consequence of medieval social relations in both town and country. Similarly, Christopher Hill (1974:181) has argued that class hostility was a 'simple fact' of the social world of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Even in the American South, which lacked the slave rebellions found in Brazil and the Caribbean and where the slaves have often been seen as brutalized or bribed into submission, the overseers and plantation-owners did not have absolute power, since the Southern slaves *did* exhibit an 'impressive solidarity and collective resistance to their masters'. The slave-owners' 'paternalism' did not just mean obedience on the part of the slaves,

52 *Kriedte et al.* 1981:1–11. For critiques, see Hudson 1981; Coleman 1983.
53 Hobsbawm 1962:45–6; 1969:68–72, 109–10; Samuel 1977.

but involved a negotiated set of practices which had to take account of the slaves' ability to frustrate their masters' wishes.[54]

Naturally, much Marxist historiography has been concerned with the emergence of the labour movement under modern capitalism. On the one hand, Marxists have been keen to show that the historical role which Marx and Engels ascribed to the proletariat was not sheer wishful thinking. Thus John Foster identified the existence of a revolutionary consciousness amongst the Oldham working class of the 1830s and 1840s, as the community's 'revolutionary vanguard' guided the workers from a trade-union defence of standards of living to a realization that what was needed was a 'total change of the social system'.[55] Likewise, Tim Mason (1981) argued that even after the Nazis had smashed the German labour movement, the actions of the working class, or the threat of such action, could force employers to give way and, even after the outbreak of war, disrupted economic activity. On the other hand, given the absence of revolution in the advanced capitalist countries, Marxists have sought some factor to explain the proletariat's failure to carry out its world-historic role, the emergence of a 'labour aristocracy', which 'implanted accommodationist responses to capitalism and subsequently transmitted them to a broader class movement', being a favourite candidate for this factor.[56]

In general, however, the Marxist historiography of popular struggle has been frankly celebratory, aiming, as E.P.Thompson famously put it, to rescue the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan and the 'deluded' follower of Joanna Southcott 'from the enormous condescension of posterity'.[57] Thus for Rodney Hilton, modern values of equality, liberty and freedom are a contribution to world history not of the bourgeoisie, but have their origins in peasant resistance to feudal subordination.[58] George Rudé has criticized those historians who see the 'crowd', the typical form of popular protest in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as an irrational mob made up of the socially marginal. The 'Swing' rioters in England or the Parisians who stormed the Bastille turn out to have been mainly

54 Kaye 1979:413–14; Genovese 1974:3–7, 585–660; 1979:xvi, xxii, 4–42. For the Caribbean, see James 1969; Blackburn 1988:161–260; Campbell 1988.

55 Foster 1974:6–7, 74, 99–100. For critique from Left and Right, see Jones 1987:62–75 and Musson 1976, with a reply by Foster 1976.

56 Engels 1969a:30–5; Lenin 1966a:99–102; 1966b:8–17; Hobsbawm 1964a: ch. 15; Hobsbawm 1970; Foster 1974:203–4, 228–9, 237–8, 246, 254; Gray 1976:1–4, 184–90; Crossick 1980:14–20, 199–211, 251–4; Gray 1981. For critiques of the labour aristocracy thesis, see Moorhouse 1978 and Musson 1976.

57 Thompson 1972:13. For the roots of this approach in a tradition of radical 'people's history' and of Communist Party populism, see Samuel 1980:37–9 and Schwarz 1982:55–6, 71. For an early version of this approach, see Morton 1938: whose achievement is praised in Kaye 1992: ch. 5. Marxist historians have thus tended to neglect popular political forms of which they disapprove, such as patriotism, even where patriotism provided a language of radical political opposition. See Cunningham 1981:8–9.

58 Hilton 1977:235; 1984:97–8; Kaye 1985:19.

respectable labourers and craftsmen of settled abode and fixed occupation.[59] Similarly, for Thompson, the food riots of the eighteenth century were not simply an excuse for crime or an instinctive reaction to hunger but constituted 'a highly complex form of direct political action, disciplined and with clear objectives' in their defence of a 'moral economy of the poor' against the emerging political economy of the market place (Thompson 1971:76–9, 131–6).

Nevertheless, the Marxist interest in class struggle is not simply the product of a commitment to a 'history from below' and a political belief in the value of the experience and struggles of the mass of the population. Rather, Marxists have argued that class struggle is not only of interest to us today, but that it was also of decisive importance in determining social change in the past. Thus Brian Manning argues that whilst most accounts of the English Civil War have been dominated by the aristocracy and gentry, it was in fact the 'middling sort', who expressed their class consciousness through Puritanism, whose grievances and actions were 'the main force behind events'. It was, for instance, fear of social protest and popular movements which was decisive in splitting England's ruling elite in the period 1640–2, allowing Charles I to overcome his political isolation and to create a Royalist party, and thus making civil war a practical possibility.[60] More broadly, Marxist historians such as Hilton (1969:32–43, 57), Brenner (1976:47–75) and Martin (1983:56–7; see also Dyer 1981:194; Rigby 1995a: 124–44) use the class perspective to criticize the dominant historical orthodoxy which explains pre-industrial social change in terms of the rise and fall of population. Instead, they argue that it was the varying outcomes of the struggles between peasants and lords that determined which path of social and economic development was taken in particular regions of Europe in the late medieval and early modern periods: serfdom in eastern Europe, an independent peasantry and absolutism in France, agrarian capitalism in England (Lis and Soly 1982:97–104).

A classic instance of Marxist claims for the epochal significance of class struggle is Marx and Engels's interpretation of events such as the English Civil War and the French Revolution as 'bourgeois revolutions', as movements through which, with their destruction of feudal property relations, the bourgeoisie created a new social order (see refs. on p. 893). Marxist historians have attempted to defend Marx and Engels's views on such movements. Christopher Hill, for instance, argued that the English Civil War was not just a constitutional conflict or a religious squabble but was

> a class war, in which the despotism of Charles I was defended by the reactionary forces of the established church and feudal landlords. Parliament defeated the king because it could

59 Rudé 1959:2–5, 186–9, 232; 1965:179–84; 1964a:5–7, 258–60; 1974b:28–30; Hobsbawm and Rudé 1973:209–11; Kaye 1992:36–8. For a sympathetic critique of Rudé, see Holton 1978.

60 Wood 1995:52–3, 108–11; Manning 1976; Manning 1973:76, 80, ibid. 82, 122–3; Manning 1970. See also Montgomery 1987:1, 7 for an emphasis on the role of class conflict in the formation of modern America.

> appeal to the enthusiastic support of the trading and industrial classes in town and countryside, to the progressive gentry, and to wider masses of the population whenever they were able by free discussion to understand what the struggle was really about.

In a society that was still essentially feudal, revolution was essential in order to pave the way for the full development of capitalism.[61] Historians such as Lefebvre, Soboul, Rudé and Hobsbawm have offered a similar interpretation of the French Revolution as 'a conflict of social classes', as the product of the mismatch between the traditional social, political and legal pre-eminence of the aristocracy and clergy and the new reality of the economic power of the bourgeoisie. It was the latter, a 'rising new social force' based on the expansion of industry, commerce and finance, whose interests were met by the revolution, even if, as Engels argued, it was the radicalism of the popular movements of artisans and peasants which drove the revolution forward to the complete destruction of feudalism.[62] By contrast, it was the *weakness* of the Russian bourgeoisie, its reliance on the tsarist state and the importance of foreign capital in economic development, combined with a highly concentrated industrial working class, which meant that the Russian bourgeoisie would not lead its own revolution and that this revolution would not restrict itself to bourgeois aims but would become permanent and proceed immediately towards socialist goals.[63]

The Marxist fascination with the great historical revolutions has inevitably been accompanied by an interest in the social 'superstructure' of politics, the state and ideology. Indeed, despite the traditional Marxist claims for the determining role of society's mode of production, many of the most eminent Marxist historians, such as Christopher Hill, are better known for their accounts of religious and political change than for their original contributions to economic history.[64] Certainly, given this interest in society's 'superstructure', it would be wrong to portray Marxist historiography as simply 'history from below'. Hill, after all, has not only produced sympathetic analyses of the Diggers and the other radical sects of the English Civil War, but also a biography of Oliver Cromwell and a study of the economic problems of the Anglican Church and of how its attempts to solve such problems contributed

61 Hill 1940:9, 25, 29–30; 1969:132–4; 1958:154–5; 1974b:11–16; 1986:111. See also Dobb 1963:161–76; 1976:62–4; Manning 1965:252–4. Working with a similar general definition of bourgeois revolution, one modelled on the French experience, Perry Anderson found the English Civil War to be the 'least pure bourgeois revolution of any major European country' (Anderson 1992:6, 17). See, however, Thompson 1978:47.

62 Lefebvre 1969:1–3; 1962:xvii–xviii, 115–16; 1967:360; Soboul 1974a:3–9, 21, 110, 553–62; 1977:1; 1981:25, 29, 71, 73; 1978:50–3, 63–9; McLennan 1981: ch. 9; Rudé 1964b:71–2; 1974a: 314–15; 1974b:63–81; 1989:1–10; Hobsbawm 1962:77–86; Hobsbawm 1990:x–xi, 6–15. Furet 1981:81–131 offers a critique of Marxist interpretations of the French Revolution. For a further criticism of the Marxist position and general bibliographical guidance, see Blanning 1987.

63 Trotsky 1962; 1973; 1967:I, ch. 1; Deutscher 1954:148–63; Liebman 1970:29–33. 64 Johnson 1978:80–1 (see, however, Thompson 1978:396 n. 168; McClelland 1979:104; Kaye 1984:21–2). Marxist historiography shares this concentration on the social superstructure with Western Marxism in general. See Anderson 1976:75.

to the alignment of the two sides in the Civil War (Hill 1972a; 1975; 1973; 1956:xi, 340–6).

As we have seen, Marx and Engels described the state and social consciousness as a superstructure which corresponds to society's economic base. In general they saw the state as the instrument of the propertied, the means by which the economically dominant class became the politically dominant class (see refs. on p. 893). Marx and Engels did, however, also argue that there were particular periods when the state could attain a certain degree of independence from the propertied, ruling class. This was particularly the case in those periods where two rival classes cancelled each other out, as in the absolutist states of early modern Europe whose rulers used the emergent bourgeoisie as a counterweight against the feudal nobility. Nevertheless, even though the state enjoys an abnormal social autonomy during such periods, such autonomy is itself socially determined.[65]

That the state is 'a class state, the state of the "ruling class"' is a commonplace of Marxist social theory and historiography (Miliband 1979:74; Therborn 1980:132). Thus, whilst constitutional and legal historians have placed great emphasis on the development of public authority in medieval England compared with the continued importance of private jurisdictions on the Continent, Hilton argues that it would be wrong to see this as a sign of the state's social neutrality. In England, a politically sophisticated baronage did not seek local independence from the Crown but rather sought to control the Crown through the royal council and Parliament whilst, at a local level, royal officials and justices were drawn from the gentry and nobility and many local courts were seigneurially controlled. The enforcement of law and order 'has never been a purely neutral act of government, especially when the power to do so is held exclusively in the hands of one social class'. What was important 'was not so much what the law was, as who administered it, and in whose interests' (Hilton 1967:218–19, 240–1; 1977:151). For Hill, the Tudor and early Stuart state was 'the main support of the propertied class' confronted with the threat of popular disorder (Hill 1974a:186–7; 1976:118–21). In a similar vein, Anderson even questioned Marx and Engels's claims for the autonomy of the absolutist states of early modern western Europe. Such states were not the product of the class-balance between aristocracy and bourgeoisie, but rather provided a 'political carapace' for a nobility which, with the decline of serfdom, had lost much of its local influence and so was increasingly reliant on the centralized extraction of surplus from the peasantry in the form of taxation.[66]

65 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:90, 92, 195, 200, 361; 1970:102; Marx 1973b:216; Marx and Engels 1967:102; 1975:166; Engels 1969b:21–3, 33; Marx 1970a:65–6, 72, 137, 162, 165, 167; 1972b: 39, 88–91, 103–5, 112–13; Engels 1968:168–9; Elster 1985: ch. 7; Draper 1977:327–9, 417–24.

66 Anderson 1979:1. See also Kiernan 1965:117, 150. For other Marxist interpretations of absolutism, see Littlejohn 1972; Lublinskaya 1972; Lublinskaya 1968 (criticized by Parker 1971); Porshnev 1963:43, 563 (extracts from Porshnev's work are translated in Coveney 1977:78–135); Parker 1990; Miliband 1983:56–62; Brenner 1976:68–72; Brenner 1982:77–83.

Despite this emphasis on the state as a class state, E.P.Thompson has warned against the temptation to see politics and the law in simple instrumental terms as a conspiracy of the rich. To be sure, the law functioned as the central legitimizing ideology in eighteenth-century England and, more practically, reinforced contemporary class relations to the advantage of the ruling class, as shown by Thompson's own study of the Black Act of 1723, which, in response to forest disturbances in southern England, created more than fifty new capital offences. But, ironically, in order to serve such functions, the law did have 'to display an independence from gross manipulation'. In doing so, it helped to encourage the idea of the 'free-born Englishman' who enjoyed an equality before the law and a protection from absolutism, a conception which became a central part of the rhetoric of plebeian radicalism (Thompson 1975:158–69; see also Hay 1975).

Just as Marxists have approached the state and law in class terms, so they have interpreted particular forms of social consciousness, from religious ideologies to political programmes and economic theories, in terms of the needs, interests and experiences of particular social groups. As Marx and Engels put it, there is no such thing as the history of ideas but only the history of the socially specific individuals who produce such ideas.[67] Marxists have therefore criticized those historians who see a religious ideology such as Puritanism as 'an obstinately religious phenomenon' adopted according to personal 'taste and choice' (see Collinson 1982:241; 1983:5–6). Instead, they have sought to identify the social basis and class-specific appeal of particular theologies. Protestantism, particularly in its Calvinist form, is seen as the expression of the interests of the bourgeoisie which 'arose when it did because it was the religion most suited to stimulating capitalist enterprise and enforcing labour discipline'.[68] Hill has argued that the social explanation of religious beliefs does not mean that such beliefs are simply a cynical cloak for vested interests. Protestantism was, after all, a system of thought for which men were willing to kill and be killed. Nevertheless,

> to understand Puritanism we must understand the needs, hopes, fears and aspirations of the godly artisans, yeomen, gentlemen and ministers and their wives, who gave their support to its doctrines…. It seemed to point the way to heaven because it helped them to live on earth.[69]

Despite Marx's use of the metaphor of ideas as 'reflections' of social being, the Marxist theory of ideology does not mean that ideas are simply a passive product of

67 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:36–7, 154, 183, 250; Marx 1972b:37.
68 Engels 1965:41–2; 19–20; Marx 1976–81, I:387, 882; 1974b:232; G.A.Cohen 1978:279.
69 Hill 1940:44–5; 1958:21; 1974a:82, 89; 1969:131, 142, 145, 494–5. Fromm, in contrast to Hill, argues that whilst Protestantism was a response to the social anxieties produced by the rise of capitalism, it was largely a conservative response and that, as Weber claimed, Protestantism's stimulus to capitalism was an unintended consequence of its doctrines. See Fromm 1975:53, 62, 68, 74, 78, 86–8; Weber 1976:90.

social conditions.[70] On the contrary, Hill argues that Puritanism was an active historical force, facilitating the transition from a society where poverty was no longer seen as a holy state but as a sign of wickedness and where the sin of avarice had become the virtue of thrift. Similarly, the upheaval of the English Revolution 'could not take place' without the ideals and new systems of thought needed if men were to risk their lives for the creation of a new order. For Hill, not only the individualistic faith of Calvinism but also the science of Sir Francis Bacon, the history of Sir Walter Ralegh and interpretation of law offered by Sir Edward Coke helped to pave the way for revolution (Hill 1958:215; 1972b:1–3).

The Marxist approach to ideology does not require that the intellectual 'representatives' of particular classes should themselves be members of that class (Hauser 1971:137–8), although Marxists have, on occasion, taken this view of particular ideological outlooks (Howkins 1977:158–9). It is rather that particular forms of ideology will appeal to specific groups and that such groups will interpret intellectual, religious or cultural traditions in their own, socially specific ways. Thus the Puritan insistence on inner faith proved useful to a range of social groups in their resistance to a variety of forms of traditional authority, to the rebellious gentry of Scotland or Hungary as well as to the English middle class; it could be used to justify social order and discipline as well as forming the basis of a radical individualism. Similarly, concepts such as God, Antichrist and the 'Norman Yoke' meant very different things to the different social groups of early modern England.[71]

In this perspective, even works of art can be seen as the expressions of particular forms of social being. Lucien Goldmann, for instance, offered a sociology of literature in which literary texts are seen as the embodiments of particular 'world visions' which, in turn, are the expressions of the interests and position of specific social groups, of which economic classes are the most important. Thus the philosophy of Pascal and the theatre of Racine express the tragic view of life of a particular group at a particular time: the *Noblesse de Robe* of the seventeenth century.[72] For Hilton, the ballads celebrating the deeds of Robin Hood, the ultimate 'social bandit' who engaged in a guerrilla struggle for justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed, expressed the social aspirations of the English peasantry in the century and a half of endemic agrarian discontent which preceded the revolt of 1381.[73] Even the poems of Andrew Marvell, which at first sight seem to bear little relation to the age in which Marvell lived, can be better appreciated when seen in

70 Kaye 1988:37. The inheritance of the problematical metaphor of reflection combined with an awareness of the positive historical role of ideas has even led Marxists to posit the existence of 'active reflections'. See Dobb 1951:4; John 1953:4.

71 Marx 1972b:40–1; Hill 1958:92–3; 1974a:99; 1971:101; 1984:19–20.

72 Laurenson and Swingwood 1972:63–77; Forgacs 1986:183–7; Goldmann 1972; Evans 1981: ch.3.

73 Hilton 1981:221, 232–5; 1977:211; 1980; Coss 1985. For a critique of Hilton, which locates the ballads in an alternative social context, see Holt 1981 and 1989, esp. ch. 6. For Hilton's reply, see his review of Holt's *Robin Hood* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 June 1982. For the concept of the 'social bandit', see Hobsbawm 1971: ch. 2 and 1982, esp. chs 1 and 3.

the political context of his time, not to mention the works of an active participant in the English Revolution such as John Milton (Hill 1958:324–5; 1977:4).

At times, Marx's own comments seem to imply that ideologies are simply cynical deceptions designed to defend particular vested interests (Marx 1972b: 37–8). Yet elsewhere, Marx himself denied that this was the case. As he said of the French petit-bourgeoisie of the mid-nineteenth century, classes tend to believe that the social conditions which are favourable to themselves are those which are most suitable for society as a whole.[74] Nevertheless, Marx and Engels did believe that the propertied classes would propagate ideologies which help to justify and maintain their power and privileges: feudal social relations were presented as ordained by divine will, or capitalism as the expression of human nature or of 'inviolable natural laws'.[75] Marx and Engels even went so far as to claim that 'the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the idea of the ruling class' (Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:59), although this claim can be interpreted in two different ways. First, in its weaker form, it simply means that the ideas of the ruling class constitute the *official* ideas of the age, rather than that such ideas were widely adopted within society. After all, Marx and Engels were highly critical of those thinkers who believed that 'the rule of a certain class is only the rule of certain ideas' (Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:52, 60–1, 292; 1982:78). Thus, although the social doctrine of the essential harmony and mutual interdependence of the social orders was an intellectual commonplace throughout the Middle Ages, Hilton argues that the peasants' willingness to resist feudal exploitation was generally unaffected by priestly exhortation and justifications of 'the existing order in terms of celestially sanctioned harmony'. Indeed, as Marx and Engels themselves argued, it was precisely in those periods when the ruling class was threatened, as in the later medieval period, that the ideology of the ruling class was most forcefully expressed.[76]

Second, in its less-qualified interpretation, Marx and Engels's claim that the ruling ideas of the age are the ideas of the ruling class can be used as an explanation of the failure of the producing classes to rise up against their exploiters. In this perspective, it is the existence of a hegemonic, dominant ideology which forestalls the social conflict which would otherwise result. Ideology thus functions to conceal social contradictions in the interests of the dominant class.[77] As Althusser (1971:139) put it, no ruling class can hold power over a long period purely by means of the Repressive State Apparatus 'without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses'. His views had been anticipated, as Hill points out, by Francis Bacon, for whom there would be perpetual social disaffection

74 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:290, 410–14; Marx 1972b:40. Hill argues that the view of ideas as either irrelevant to history or forms of hypocrisy and rationalization owes more to the historians of the Namier school than to the works of Marx. See Hill 1972:3 and Brenner 1993:645.
75 Engels n.d.: 353; Marx and Engels 1970:100–2; 1975–6, V:154; Engels 1965; 41–2; Marx 1974b: 85–7; 1973a:105–6.
76 Marx and Engels 1975, V:413–14; Hilton 1985:251–2; 1977:53–5; 1984:92.
77 Abercrombie *et al.* 1980: ch. 1; Larrain 1979:60–3, 210.

'except you keep men in by preaching as well as the law doth by punishing'.[78] In the Middle Ages, it was the Church which functioned as the main ideological state apparatus, its theology sanctifying and justifying feudal society, and subordinating the individual to the social system (Althusser 1971:143–4; Gurevich 1985:10, 299–301). Likewise, in Tudor and early Stuart England,

> it was the duty of the church to soften the bitterness of class hatred, to keep the lower orders peaceful and subordinate, to stress the religious considerations which united a hierarchical society against the economic facts which so visibly divided it, to console the desperate
>
> (Hill 1974:189)

even if it was not always successful in this task. When E.P.Thompson (1972:663) maintained that the growing radicalism of the English population meant that by 1816 'the English people were held down by force', Perry Anderson (1980:37–8) replied that military repression, in itself, was insufficient to maintain the English *ancien regime*. The emergence of a counter-revolutionary nationalism, fostered by twenty years of war against the French Revolution and its successor regimes, which replaced religion as the dominant form of ideological discourse, was also crucial for social stability.

THE MARXIST TRADITION: AN ASSESSMENT

The influence of Marxism has been crucial in reminding historians, often caught up in the minutiae of local studies and the difficulties of their sources, of the need to study long-term social change, to examine social crisis and conflict not just functional reproduction, to be aware of the historical impact of class struggle, and to see the political institutions and forms of social consciousness in their broader social context. Nevertheless, despite its many positive contributions to the development of modern historiography, Marxism can be criticized on a number of fronts. One line of critique of Marxist historiography is to launch an empirical attack on its specific historical claims. For example, the Marxist interpretation of the English Civil War and the French Revolution as bourgeois revolutions has come in for much criticism. It is by no means clear that, in Charles I's England, a feudal aristocracy, hostile to capitalism, was confronted by a rising bourgeoisie. On the contrary, Marxist historians themselves, such as Brenner and Neale, have emphasized that the internal transformation of the English landed classes was the key to the transition to agrarian capitalism.[79] In France, 'revisionist' historians have questioned whether the aristocracy and bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century constituted economic classes with clearly opposed class interests and have denied that the Revolution led to a decisive breakthrough in French economic development in either the short or the long term.[80] As a result, many Marxists have abandoned or

78 Hill 1969:111–12; Bergesen 1993; see also Genovese 1974:597, 658.
79 Neale 1985:85; Brenner 1993:640–3, 648–9. For a general survey, see Hughes 1991:3.
80 For a survey of the debate see Blanning 1987 and Lewis 1993.

modified the traditional Marxist account of the bourgeois revolutions. Hill now interprets the Civil War as a bourgeois revolution not in the sense that it was led by the capitalists against feudal aristocrats but because 'its *outcome* was the establishment of conditions far more favourable to the development of capitalism than those which had prevailed before 1640'.[81] Brenner doubts even this claim, arguing that, rather than constituting the decisive turning-point in the transition to capitalism, the Revolution was the political reflection of the fact that society was *already* capitalist (Brenner 1978; 1989:296–304). Marxists such as Régine Robin and Althusser have raised similar doubts about the existence of an inherent class conflict between nobility and bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century France. The difficulty of identifying a capitalist bourgeoisie in pre-revolutionary France has even led Comninel to admit that the validity of the traditional Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution has been 'exploded'.[82] More generally, Wood (1991:160) argues that the concept of bourgeois revolution 'conceals as much as it reveals…. The formula tells us little about the causes of these revolutions or about the social forces that brought them about'. Increasingly the Marxist emphasis is on the *longue durée* of the transition to capitalism rather than the supposed breakthrough of the bourgeois revolution.[83]

Yet such empirical critiques are unlikely to shake the foundations of Marxist historiography. After all, Marxist historians have often disagreed amongst themselves about particular empirical issues. Opponents of historical materialism have thus been obliged to come up with a broader methodological critique of Marx's social theory. Four main theoretical issues have emerged in recent years: the legitimacy of functional explanation; the limited nature of the Marxist conception of social being; the 'interpenetration' of base and superstructure; and the problem of pluralism, i.e. of the 'interaction' of the so-called base and superstructure, each of which will be discussed in turn below.

First, as we have seen, the main claims of Marx's social theory, that the level of the productive forces explains the nature of society's relations of production, and that the nature of society's relations of production determines the nature of its

81 Hill 1980:110–111; Kaye 1984:116. As Hobsbawm said of the French Revolution, it was a bourgeois revolution, 'even though nobody intended it to be' (Hobsbawm 1990:8; see also Morton 1978:4). Callinicos thus defines bourgeois revolutions as ones which 'promote capitalism' rather than ones which are consciously made by capitalists. The French Revolution *was*, he believes, 'carried through under bourgeois leadership' but it is, in general, 'exceptional for the capitalist class to play the leading role in bourgeois revolutions' (Callinicos 1989:122–5). Mooers also attempts to rehabilitate the notion of the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution in terms of its beneficial consequences for capitalism even though his own analysis shows that the Revolution was a very mixed blessing in terms of the development of agrarian capitalism (Mooers 1981:2–3, 61, 64–72, 176).

82 Grenon and Robin 1976, cited in Blanning 1987:16; Althusser 1972:99–106; Comninel 1987:3, 19–20, 180, 195, 203, 205; Price 1993:82. The orthodox view is defended by McGarr 1989. If even France is no longer seen as having experienced a classic bourgeois revolution, it follows that the specific course of modern German history can no longer be explained in terms of its failure to undergo such a revolution. See Blackbourn and Eley 1984:7–21, 39–43, 51–9, 167–76, 287–8.

83 Corrigan and Sayer 1985:85–6; Brenner 1993:648–9; Blanning 1987:16.

political and ideological superstructure, are both instances of 'functional explanation'.[84] For certain writers, functional explanations, whilst the norm in the theory of biological evolution, are invalid in the social sciences, a claim which would automatically invalidate historical materialism.[85] Nevertheless, as is shown by the example of the Chicago School's analysis of the market in terms very similar to those used by biologists to explain natural evolution, functional explanations are not, *per se*, invalid in the social sciences (Elster 1979:31–2; G.A.Cohen 1978:287–8). Their invocation in any particular instance can thus only be assessed empirically, and historical materialism is not inherently invalidated by their use.[86]

Second, even if we accept that social being can be defined independently of social consciousness, so that the former can be said to determine the latter, Marxism has been criticized for its equation of social being with class-position. Sociologists in the Weberian tradition have thus argued that economic class is simply one possible ground of 'social exclusion' and that other forms of exclusion, such as race, gender, status and order, which are by no means reducible to class inequalities, can be just as important. There are thus a number of forms and grounds of social power (economic, political and ideological), none of which can be assumed to have an automatic, universal or necessary social primacy.[87] It is not that Marxists have neglected such non-class inequalities. On the contrary, Marx and Engels themselves distinguished the estates and orders of pre-capitalist societies from the economic classes of capitalism (Marx and Engels 1975, V:69, 73, 89–90; Godelier 1988:245–52), whilst Marxist social theorists have produced a number of studies of non-class inequalities, particularly those of gender.[88] The problem is rather that, as feminist historians and sociologists have argued, Marxists have tended to offer a

84 G.A.Cohen 1978: chs 9, 10; 1980:129–30; 1982a:30; 1982b:486; van Parijs 1993:7, 29.
85 Giddens 1981:17, 215; 1979a:7, 110–17, 211–14; 1979b:17, 25; Elster 1979: ch. 1; Halfpenny 1983. Halfpenny's article is also included in Wetherly 1992, along with a number of other articles on functional explanation and Marxism. For functional explanation and the biological sciences, see Frankfort and Poole 1966–7. A particular problem is that whereas the theory of evolution specifies the 'feedback mechanism' (random genetic variation and the survival of the fittest) which enables us to explain the evolutionary development of a particular species in terms of its functional effects, social scientists (Marxist or otherwise) have no equivalent, universally valid feedback mechanism. As a result, it is easier to explain why functional social arrangements persist than why they appear in the first place. See Elster 1980:126–7; 1983b:103–7; 1979:34; G.A.Cohen 1980:131; 1978:269–70; 1983:119, 24; Sztompka 1964:140, 150, 151; Isajiw 1968:127. For attempts to provide Marxism and the social sciences with a feedback mechanism, see G.A.Cohen 1978:152; Stinchcombe 1975:29; van Parijs 1982:503–4; Torrance 1985:388–9; Bertram 1990.
86 Rigby 1987:90; 1992a:184; Tännsjö 1990.
87 Weber 1978:I, 577, II, 926; Neuwirth 1969; Murphy 1988; Collins 1975; Parkin (ed.) 1974:1–18; 1979a; 1979b; 1982:100–2; Runciman 1969; 1974:55–1; 1989:2–24; Mann 1986; Giddens 1981. For Marxist responses, see Mackenzie 1980:582–4; Barbalet 1982; Wright 1983; Wickham 1988a (on Mann); 1991 (on Runciman).
88 See, for instance, Middleton 1979; 1981; 1985; Hilton 1985: chs 15 and 16; 1975: ch. 6; Hobsbawm 1989: ch. 8. Many Marxist accounts of gender inequalities form an implicit or explicit debate with Engels 1968: For an assessment of Engels's approach, see the articles in Sayers *et al.* 1987; Coontz and Henderson 1986; Rigby 1992a:198–204; Vogel 1983: ch. 6; Bloch 1983:66, 75–6; Godelier 1988:103.

functional explanation of patriarchal social relations in terms of their benefits for the reproduction of particular modes of production.[89] Patriarchy is thus viewed as secondary and derivative from society's mode of production rather than being presented as an autonomous form of social inequality in its own right,[90] or even, as some would prefer to see it, as in-built into society's mode of production as one of its defining features.[91]

Third, much criticism of historical materialism has centred on the issue of the interpenetration of base and superstructure, i.e on whether social being can be defined separately from (and thus presented as the basis of) social consciousness, politics and legal relations.[92] As we have seen, Marx's model of social structure assumes that the state, law and forms of social consciousness 'correspond' to the form taken by its relations of production. Critics such as Acton, Plamenatz, Leff and Lukes have countered such claims with the argument that so-called 'superstructural' phenomena such as politics and ideas do not merely reflect society's economic base or just interact with it; they are actually a constitutive part of society's economic 'base'. But if the distinction between base and superstructure is untenable, it is illegitimate to derive the latter from the former: one cannot say that *x* produces *y* if *y* is actually a part of *x* in the first place.[93] Furthermore, if it is impossible to locate some pure economic level of society, separate from politics, law and forms of social consciousness, it follows that the concept of the economic base is simply an analytical abstraction. To abstract a concept from reality, and then to invert this process and present this abstraction as the basis of reality, would seem to be a classic instance of the procedure which Marx and Engels themselves rightly condemned as 'idealist' when resorted to by the Hegelians. Ironically, what presents itself as the most materialist analysis of society turns out to be, with true dialectical irony, its exact opposite: pure idealism.[94]

In reply, certain Marxists have attempted to offer a defence of the

89 Middleton 1981:151–2; Adamson *et al*. 1976; Gimenez 1987:48; Barrett 1984:132–3; Cockburn 1986:81–2.

90 De Beauvoir 1974:87; Firestone 1979:15; Millett 1985:38; Delphy 1984:38–9, 74–5; McDonough and Harrison 1978:31–2; Davin 1981:180.

91 Hartmann 1981:10–11, 17–19, 29: Middleton 1974; 1983:13–14; Eisenstein 1979:5, 28; Seccombe 1983:19; Himmelweit 1991:217–19; Hearn 1991:239; Fox-Genovese 1982:15.

92 Ironically, Engels himself advocated the notion of dialectical interpenetration in his philosophical works whilst adopting the more limited notion of the *interaction* of base and superstructure in his defence of historical materialism. See Engels n.d.: 28–9; 1964:17, 63, 214–24, 264; Marx and Engels 1975:394–5, 399, 401, 442; Jakubowski 1976:38; Rigby 1992a:112–13; 126–7, 132–4.

93 Acton 1955:164–8, 177, 258; Plamenatz 1963:283–9, 345; Leff 1969:144–51; Wokler 1983:231–7; Lukes 1983:103–19. Graham usefully distinguishes two separate readings of the Acton-Plamenatz position. The first is that base and superstructure are conceptually inseparable; the second is that even if the two can be distinguished, they coexist and interact, which undermines the claim for priority of the so-called base (see the discussion of pluralism, pp. 911–15 below): Graham 1992:52–4.

94 Marx and Engels 1975:434; Marx and Engels 1975–6, IV:7, 59–60, 82, 159, 192; V:29, 36–7, 44–5, 55, 57, 59–62, 128–34, 144–5, 159–60, 168, 176, 236, 269, 274–5, 282, 287, 419, 434; Rigby 1992a:174–5.

'traditionalist' Marxist distinction between the economic base and the political and ideological superstructure.[95] However, such traditionalist defences of the distinction between base and superstructure generally seem less than convincing, even to those within the Marxist tradition. After all, Marx and later Marxists have explicitly accepted the existence of such interpenetration,[96] as when they have presented the relations of production of the Asiatic mode of production and of feudal and ancient society as constituted by 'extra-economic' coercion[97] and have seen the state itself as a key extractor of surplus labour in a number of precapitalist societies.[98] Indeed, some Marxists have gone so far as to argue that far from the conception of society as an 'organic totality', in which the social parts are interdependent and mutually dependent, constituting a *challenge* to Marxism, it is historical materialism itself which (at least on its strongest reading) offers precisely this model of social structure." The notion of society as an organic totality is, in certain respects, an attractive one (provided that it does not dissolve all analytical distinctions and causal claims). The problem with such holism, at least from a Marxist perspective, is simply that it is rather difficult to see what is specifically Marxist about it.100

Perhaps a more useful response to the problem of interpenetration of base and superstructure is Godelier's reformulation of Marx's metaphor of base and superstructure into a claim for the primacy of society's relations of production, conceived in their broadest sense, over those aspects of politics, the law and ideology which are not constitutive elements of class relations. Society's base thus includes those aspects of law and politics, such as the medieval landlords' manorial powers, which are defining elements of contemporary class relations. It is such broadly defined relations of production which constitute the base for those residual elements of the law, politics and ideology which make up the social superstructure. Base and superstructure are no longer seen as separate institutions but are instead defined by their different *functions* (Godelier 1978; 1988: chs 3–6; Wood 1981:79).

Fourth, and finally, if Godelier's approach provides a response to those critics who raised the problem of the interpenetration of base and superstructure,

95 G.A.Cohen 1974:88; 1970:121–4; 1978:223–4; 1988: chs 2 and 3; Lowe 1985.
96 Kautsky 1988:228–30; Hilferding 1981:131; Genovese 1972:21, 32–3, 323–4.
97 Marx 1976–81; III, 926–7; Lekas 1988:3, 81, 153, ch. 8; Hilton 1985:123; 1984:85–6; Gottlieb 1984:4, 36; Bak 1980:13–14; Amin 1976:13–21; Hindess and Hirst 1975:82–91; Given 1984:11; Wickham 1988c:76.
98 Wickham 1978:72; 1984:9, 20, 27–8; Brenner 1976:68–9; Anderson 1979: ch. 1; De Ste Croix 1984:105–6; Given 1984:44.
99 For those who prefer the metaphor of society as a totality or an organic totality, as opposed to base and superstructure, see Rader 1979: ch. 2; Jay 1984; Gramsci 1977:377; Jakubowski 1976:102–3; Lukács 1974:27; Korsch 1938:241; Korsch 1938:241; Althusser and Balibar 1975:98; Hall 1977; 1972:8–10; Kaye 1979:405–19; 1984:56–7, 107, 116–17, 159, 220; Genovese 1972:322–3; Hill 1958:39; J.S.Cohen 1978:31; Sayer 1987:145; Ryan 1986:83–7, 98–100; Corrigan and Sayer 1985:2; Ollman 1972:15; Williams 1979:118; Clarke 1979.
100 Williams 1973:7; Rigby 1990:829; Hellman 1979:148–50, 161; Kiernan 1987:107; McLennan 1979:162).

historical materialism faces even greater difficulties when confronted with the far more straightforward issue of the *interaction* of base and superstructure. As early as *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had referred to the 'reciprocal action' of the productive forces, class relations, politics and ideology but, since they described society's superstructure as the 'expression' or 'reflection' of its economic base, it was easy for their critics to accuse them of presenting the economic factor as the only determining one and of ignoring the active historical role played by politics and ideas. From the time of Engels's famous letters on historical materialism of the 1890s, Marxists have thus been obliged to reject the charge of economic reductionism and to acknowledge the 'dialectical interaction' which takes place between base and superstructure (whether defined in the traditional sense or that of Godelier).[101]

The problem is how to acknowledge an awareness of the active role of politics and ideas without abandoning the primacy of society's mode of production which is, after all, the claim which gives Marxism its distinctiveness as a theory of the social world and of history. This dilemma can be seen in the structuralist version of historical materialism offered by Louis Althusser. Ironically, whilst Althusser's theory been attacked by E.P.Thompson for its economic reductionism, it would be truer to say that Althusser's theory actually founders (at least as a form of Marxism) on its recognition of the complex interaction involved in historical explanation. Far from reducing society to its mode of production, Althusser redefined the mode of production to include economic, political and ideological levels (or practices), each of which is 'relatively autonomous' and possesses its own chronology of development. Instead of positing a one-way determination of politics and ideology by economics, Althusser argues that specific relations of production may presuppose elements of the legal, political and ideological 'superstructure' as a condition of their existence.[102] Many historians and social theorists would be inclined to accept such a view. It is simply that, once more, it is rather difficult to see what is distinctively Marxist about it. In other words, the problem of reductionism cannot be solved simply by invoking the concept of the 'relative autonomy' of the state and ideology[103] (even if qualified by a determination by the economic 'in the last

101 Marx and Engels 1975–6, V:40, 52–3; Marx and Engels 1975:390–402, 433–5, 441–3; Rigby 1992a:165–9; Kautsky 1988:229, 232–3; Gramsci 1977:407, 437; Genovese 1972:322; Loone 1992:164–5. Engels's letters are still appealed to today by Marxists keen to reject the accusation of reductionism. See Hilton 1990:178; Thompson 1978:261; Delany 1990:43; Kirk 1994:222, 227–8.
102 Lovell 1980:27–8; Thompson 1978:254, 355, 360; Althusser and Balibar 1975:97, 100, 104–5, 177–8, 183, 187, 220–4; Althusser 1977:96–101, 113; Gordy 1983. Althusser is presented as an *anti*-reductionist in Blackburn and Jones 1972:369–74; Hall 1977; Bennett 1979:40–1; Anderson 1980:66–77; Hirst 1985:22–3; Milner, 1981:8. There is now a massive literature on Althusser, for which Elliot 1987 is a useful starting-point. For critiques of Althusser, see Clarke 1980; Geras 1978; Glucksmann 1978; Hindess and Hirst 1977; Rigby 1987:194–8.
103 Miliband 1983:56–62; Bennett 1979:40–1; Althusser and Balibar 1975:100–1; Eagleton 1991:153; Williams 1983:12–13, 32–3.

instance').[104] Neither is it a solution simply to abandon the metaphor of base and superstructure, perhaps by blaming it on Engels rather than on Marx himself.[105] It is not the *metaphor* of base and superstructure which is the problem but rather the idea which it seeks to express, i.e. the claim for a hierarchy of social elements or causal asymmetries which gave Marxism its specificity and separate identity as a form of social theory.[106]

Thus, in rejecting reductionism, Marxist theorists constantly slip towards an implicit pluralism by which Marxism dies the death of a thousand qualifications. This tendency is even more pronounced in the complex historical analyses offered by Marxist historians. For instance, Brenner's account of why the eastern European peasantry was enserfed in the late medieval period and early modern periods, when the peasantry in the West was winning its freedom, rejects explanations in terms of the population change and offers instead an analysis which is explicitly based on a Marxist claim for the primacy of class struggle. He argues that it was the strength of the western European peasant community which allowed it to resist the seigneurial offensive of the late medieval period and thus to win its freedom, whereas the weakness of the peasant communities in the East meant that they were unable to counter the landlords' pressure, thus opening the way to serfdom. The problem is that when he comes to explain why the peasant community was weaker in the East than in the West, Brenner lists a host of factors which cannot be reduced to expressions of class structure or class struggle, such as the absence of common land in the East, the prevalence there of individualistic methods of farming rather than of highly evolved common-field systems, the small size of eastern villages, the lack of villages of divided lordship, the effects of political conquest and the emergence of particular state-forms. The outcome of class struggle thus ceases to be simply an explanation and itself becomes something to be explained in terms of a variety of factors.[107] There is a comparable pluralism at work in Brenner's account of how strong peasant property and the absolutist state developed in early modern France 'in mutual dependence upon one another',

104 Marx and Engels 1975:393–6, 399, 401–2, 441–2; Kautsky 1988:xlii, 3–4, 227, 232–3. As Althusser famously put it: 'From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the last instance never comes' (Althusser 1966:113). However, Althusser developed his own reading of determination in the last instance by the economic level which he saw as assigning the other social levels their specific effectivity. Thus, in the feudal mode of production, the economic level 'determines' that the political level should be 'dominant' (Althusser and Balibar 1975:97, 177–8, 220–4). For a critique, see Hindess and Hirst 1977:55–6.

105 Colletti 1972:65; Rader 1979:xx, 70, 75–6, 78, 82, 181, 183–4; Thompson 1978:79–85, 119–121; Sayer 1987:91–2, 148; Genovese 1969:ix; Kaye 1984:117, 191–2, 205, 234.

106 Korsch 1938:225, 230; Lovell 1980:28; Geras 1990:9–11; Anderson 1980:66, 81; Genovese 1972:19, 323; 1969:ix; Haldon 1991:28; McDonnell and Robins 1980:215; A.W.Wood 1981:64–5; Miller 1991:101; Genovese 1972:324; van Parijs 1979:87, 91; Kiernan 1987:107; Hobsbawm 1984:44–6; Wright *et al.* 1992: chs 3 and 6.

107 Brenner 1976:57–60; 1982:72–6. Guy Bois complains about Brenner's implicit pluralism in 'Against the neo-Malthusian orthodoxy' (1978:67).

which suggests that absolutism was more than simply the 'expression' of social change, as Brenner also claims, but was itself an active agent in bringing such change about. (Brenner 1976:71; 1982:81).

Nor is such pluralism confined to the works of Brenner. Rather, it can be seen in Corrigan and Sayer's (1985:85) explanation of why modern capitalism first triumphed in England in terms of 'the singularity of English state formation and state forms' and in Genovese's (1972:322–3) attempt to square the circle by claiming that the social superstructure is 'generated' by the base of the mode of production but that it also develops according to a logic of its own and reacts back upon the base. Similarly, Parker, in an essay explicitly intended to *defend* the metaphor of base and superstructure, argues that the motor of historical change in the early modern period was not to be found in class struggle or in any aspect of the economy, 'but in the activities of the state', in particular, the rise of the absolutist state under the pressure of warfare and religious antagonisms.[108] In practice, such accounts present us with a multiplicity of interacting forces, an 'infinite variety of local factors',[109] which together bring about a particular historical outcome, a picture of history which is familiar from non-Marxist historiography and from Weberian sociology,[110] but which sits uneasily with the Marxist claims for the primacy of the economic base (even when redefined in Godelier's terms). As Kitching put it, commenting on the high quality of Marxist historiography: 'Engaging in a professional practice which is more sophisticated than its theorization is in fact very likely to coexist with a trained inability to either recognize or express that sophistication formally or explicitly'.[111]

The threat which such pluralism poses for Marxism cannot be avoided merely by changing historical materialism from a claim for the primacy of a narrowly defined 'economic' level to a more broadly conceived 'class determination'.[112] Nor is explanatory pluralism only implicit in the Marxist tradition which emphasizes

108 Parker 1990:287, 297–8; 1983:60–4, 74, 147–9. Parker thus recommends the application to western Europe of Anderson's account of the rise of Eastern absolutism in terms of international rivalry (Parker 1983:297–8; Anderson 1979:195–202, 212–16). See also the discussion of absolutism, p. 903 above.

109 Haldon 1991:88–9. This variety of local factors can be seen in the treatment of the role of 'great men' in history, where the emphasis of Marxist historians on the indispensable role of particular individuals provides a contrast with Engels's (untestable) claim that 'if Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place' (Marx and Engels 1975:442; Deutscher 1954:vii; Rodinson 1973: ix–x, 298).

110 Bailey 1989:1, 321–2; Glennie 1987:300; 1988:33–6; Holton 1985:220–1.

111 Kitching 1988:225. Breuilly (1987) makes a similar point about the pluralist-Marxist accounts of the making of the German working class offered by Jürgen Kocka and Hartmut Zwahr.

112 Wood 1995:175; Genovese 1969:ix, 19, 103; 1972:323–4; Kaye 1979:415–19; Clarke 1979:144; Williams 1979:118; Kaye 1984:232–41; Thompson 1972:9–11; 1978:85, 298–9. When class becomes an economic, social, political, psychological and cultural phenomenon (Genovese 1972:323–4), there is a danger that this concept 'turns into a synonym for the social structure itself, occasionally masquerading as one of its principal parts' (Parkin 1979a:8).

the primary role of the relations of production and of class struggle rather than of the productive forces (McLennan 1980:39–40; 1989:70–7). Rather, pluralism is an insoluble problem for *any* brand of Marxism which rejects reductionism and which seeks to explain historical change in terms of the interaction of a variety of historical forces.[113] As philosophers in the tradition of John Stuart Mill have argued, it is impossible to claim an objective explanatory primacy for any of the multiple factors which bring about a particular event. Causes have an objective existence in the real world, but which we choose to emphasize and which we take as given will largely depend upon our own subjective purposes, upon the knowledge which we think we can assume on the part of our audience, or on some new piece of the historical jigsaw which we have identified and to which we wish to draw attention.[114] In this perspective, it is not just the Marxist claim for the primacy of the economic which is doomed but *any* attempt to ascribe objective primacy in historical explanation. In other words, whatever our explicit theory may be, we cannot help, in practice, but be pluralists. It is precisely this fact which allows the piece of the historical jigsaw discovered by Marxist historiography to be so easily subsumed into orthodox history. As the high quality of Marxist historical writing suggests, Marxists have easily avoided the Scylla of reductionism, upon which its critics have usually seen it as foundering. Yet this danger has only been avoided at the expense of being drawn into the Charybdis of pluralism. I have argued here that there is no way in which Marxism can successfully navigate between these two fates.

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113 Johnston 1986:8, 50, 66–7, 69, 80–1, 122. Since 'reductionism' is a term of abuse which no one applies to themselves, this means, in effect, all versions of Marxism. After all, even Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* emphasized the 'reciprocal' influence of the social superstructure on the economic base and argued that, far from denying the role of the state and ideology in history, Marxism 'stresses the important role and significance of these factors in the life of society' (Stalin 1951:26–97).
114 Mill 1970:214–17; Hospers 1973:292–6; Ryan 1974:74–9; Skorupski 1989:175–7; Ryan 1987:41–50; Hart and Honoré 1985:xxxiii, 15–22, 28, 33–7; Ryle 1963:50, 88–9, 113–14; Runciman 1983:193; Gorovitz 1965:701–2; Veyne 1984:91–2, 101; Dretske 1972; Gardiner 1961:10–11, 99–112; Dray 1957:98–101; Putnam 1979:41–4; 1983:211–15; Garfinkel 1981:3–5, 21–34, 138–45, 156–74; Anderson *et al.* 1986:171; Brodbeck 1962:239; Will 1974:24, 273–5; Atkinson 1989:159–64; Heller 1982:159–60; McCullagh 1984:208–11; Popper 1969:151; Scriven 1966:254–8; Rigby 1992a:177–82; 1995a:141–3; 1995b.

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