HISTORY, LABOUR, AND FREEDOM

Themes from Marx

G. A. COHEN

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I

FORCES AND RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

1. In the first section of this chapter I present, in summary form, the interpretation of historical materialism which I offered in my book on *Karl Marx's Theory of History.*[1] I define and connect the concepts of forces and relations of production, and I maintain that the basic explanations of historical materialism are *functional* explanations. Section 2 places the idea that all history is the history of class struggle in the framework of the theory expounded in section 1. A central claim of that theory is the *Development Thesis*, which says that the productive forces tend to grow in power throughout history. In section 3 I try to dispel a widespread misconstrual of my argument for the Development Thesis, and in section 4 I explore ways of modifying both that argument and our understanding of what the Development Thesis implies.

KMTH says, and it says that Marx says, that history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and that forms of society (which are organized around economic structures) rise and fall according as they enable and promote, or prevent and discourage, that growth.

The canonical text for this interpretation of Marx is his famous 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, some sentences of which we shall look at shortly. I argue (in section 3 of chapter 6 of *KMTH*) that the Preface makes explicit the standpoint on society and history which Marx occupied throughout his mature writings, on any reasonable view of the date at which he reached theoretical maturity. In attending to the Preface, we are not looking at just one text among many, but at that text which gives the clearest statement of the theory of historical materialism.

The presentation of the theory in the Preface begins as follows:

> In the social production of their life men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which *correspond* to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations constitutes the economic

[1] This work is referred to hereafter as *KMTH*.

structure of society, the real *basis, on which arises* a legal and political superstructure . . . [2]

These sentences mention three ensembles, the productive forces, the relations of production, and the superstructure, among which certain explanatory connections (here indicated by italics) are asserted. I shall first say what I think the ensembles are, and I shall then describe the explanatory connections among them. (All of what follows is argued for in *KMTH*, but not all of the argument is given in what follows, which may therefore wrongly impress the reader as dogmatic.)

The productive forces are those facilities and devices which are used to productive effect in the process of production: means of production on the one hand, and labour power on the other. Means of production are physical productive resources: tools, machinery, raw materials, premises, and so forth. Labour power includes not only the strength of producers, but also their skills, and the technical knowledge (which they need not understand) they apply when labouring. Marx says, and I agree, that this subjective dimension of the productive forces is more important than the objective or means of production dimension; and within the more important dimension the part most capable of development is knowledge. Hence, in its later stages, the development of the productive forces is largely a function of the development of productively useful science. If you want to turn a productively advanced society into a backward one, you will not achieve much by destroying its physical instruments of production. As long as its productive know-how remains intact, the society will before long restore itself, as Germany did when, according to a once prevalent view, its industry had been devasted by the Second World War. Some think that Germany suffered less material destruction than the word 'devastated' suggests, and perhaps they are right. But the old view about the German recovery was not a ridiculous one, and the reason why it was not ridiculous is because there is, as I am here maintaining, no inherent barrier to reconstituting the physical side of productive power, as long as its cognitive side is undamaged. If, by contrast, you somehow remove productive know-how from the heads of producers, but spare their material facilities, then, unless they import knowledge afresh from abroad, their advanced facilities will decay and they will need centuries to recoup.

[2] *Critique of Political Economy*, 20 (my emphases).

Note that Marx takes for granted in the Preface, what elsewhere he asserts outright, that 'there is a continual movement of growth in productive forces'.[3] I argue (in section 6 of chapter 2 of *KMTH*) that the right standard for measuring that growth in power is how much (or, rather, how little) labour must be spent with given forces to produce what is required to satisfy the inescapable physical needs of the immediate producers.[4] This criterion of social productivity is less equivocal than others which may come to mind, but the decisive reason for choosing it is not its relative clarity but its theoretical appropriateness: if relations of production correspond, as the theory says they do, to levels of development of productive power, then this way of measuring productive power makes the theory's correspondence thesis more plausible.[5]

I do not say that the only explanatory feature of productive power is how much there is of it: qualitative features of productive forces also help to explain the character of relations of production. My claim is that in so far as quantity of productive power is what matters, the key quantity is how much time it takes to (re)produce the producers, that is to say, to produce what they must consume to be able to continue working (as opposed to what they actually consume, which generally, and in contemporary capitalist society considerably, exceeds what they must consume). It is the amount of time available beyond, or surplus[6] to, that historically dwindling requirement that is so fateful for the form of the second ensemble we need to describe, the relations of production.

Relations of production are relations of economic power, of the economic power[7] people enjoy or lack over labour power and means of production. In a capitalist society relations of production include the economic power capitalists have over means of production, the economic power workers (unlike slaves) have over

[3] *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 166.

[4] As opposed, for example, to their socially developed needs, reference to which would be inappropriate here (though not, of course, everywhere).

[5] For a set of correspondences of relations to forces of production, see *KMTH* 198, and pp. 155–6 below.

[6] This is not the only important concept of surplus in Marxism, but I invoke it here because it is a concept of something purely material, and I conceive historical materialism as an attempt to explain the social by reference to the material: see *KMTH* 61, 98, and ch. 4 *passim* for defence of the distinction between material and social properties of society.

[7] I call such power 'economic' in virtue of what it is power over, and irrespective of the means of gaining, sustaining, or exercising the power, which need not be economic. See *KMTH* 223–4 and ch. 2 below *passim*.

their own labour power, and the lack of economic power workers have over means of production. Immediate producers may have no economic power, some economic power, or total economic power over their own labour power and over the means of production they use. If we permit ourselves a measure of idealization, we can construct table 1, which rather neatly distinguishes the relations of production of historically important immediate producers.

TABLE 1

	Amount of economic power over	
	His labour power	The means of production he uses
Slave	None	None
Serf	Some	Some
Proletarian	All	None
Independent	All	All

The table names three subordinate producers, and one independent. Since one may have no, some, or total economic power over one's labour power and over the means of production one uses, there are nine cases to consider. I think it is diagnostically valuable to inquire which of the remaining five cases are logically or otherwise possible, and which in turn of those are actual, but I shall not enter on that discussion here.[8]

Now the sum total of relations of production in a given society is said to constitute the economic structure of that society, which is also called—in relation to the superstructure—the basis, or base, or foundation. The economic structure or base therefore consists of relations of production only: it does not include the productive forces. It is true that to exclude the productive forces from the economic structure runs against the usual construal of Marx,[9] but he actually said that the economic structure is constituted of relations of production, and he had systematic reasons for saying so.[10] People mistakenly suppose that the productive forces belong to the economic base because they wrongly think that the

[8] The discussion is pursued at *KMTH* 66–9.

[9] See *KMTH* 29 n.2 for a list of authors who take for granted that productive forces belong to the economic structure.

[10] See *KMTH* 28–9. I have now, alas, noticed a passage which seems to locate the forces within the economic base, but I shall continue to situate them outside it, since

explanatory importance of the forces ensures their membership in it. But while the forces indeed possess that importance, they are not part of the economic base.[11] To stay with the spatial metaphor, they are below the economic foundation, the ground on which it rests.[12] (Since it consists of relations of economic power, the economic base would be obliterated by a fever of social disobedience in which all economic power melted away, yet means of production and technical knowledge, and, therefore, the productive forces, remain intact in that fantasy. Total social disarray eliminates economic structure while leaving the productive forces entirely unchanged.)

The Preface describes the superstructure as legal and political. So it at any rate includes the legal and state institutions of society, or at least some of them. It is customary to locate other institutions within it too, and it is controversial what its correct demarcation is: my own view is that there are strong textual and systematic reasons for supposing that the superstructure is a lot smaller than many commentators think it is.[13] It is certainly false that every non-economic social phenomenon is superstructural: artistic creation, for example, is demonstrably not, just as such, superstructural for Marx. In this exposition I shall discuss property law only, which is uncontroversially a part of the superstructure.

So much for the identity of the three ensembles mentioned in the Preface. Now relations of production are said to *correspond* to the level of development of the productive forces, and in turn to be a *foundation* on which a superstructure rises. I think these are ways of saying that the level of development of the productive forces explains the nature of the production relations, and that they in turn explain the character of the superstructure co-present with them. But what kind of explanation is ventured here? I argue that in each case what we have is a species of functional explanation.

the theoretical reasons for doing so strike me as overwhelming. (The recalcitrant passage is at the foot of *Capital* i, 175).

[11] And, in my view, they are not *economic* phenomena of any kind: my reasons for denying that they are will be found in *KMTH*, ch. 4, sect. 1.

[12] See *KMTH* 30 for a distinction between the material and the economic bases of society: the productive forces belong to the former and are therefore not part of the latter.

[13] I criticize the common practice of overpopulating the superstructure in my review of Melvin Rader's *Marx's Interpretation of History*. For a systematic way of confining the superstructure, see ch. 9 sects. 6, 8 below.

What is functional explanation? Here are two examples of it: 'Birds have hollow bones because hollow bones facilitate flight', 'Shoe factories operate on a large scale because of the economies large scale brings'. In each case something (birds having hollow bones, shoe factories operating on a large scale) which has a certain effect (flight facilitation, economies of scale) is explained by the fact that it has that effect.

But now let me be somewhat more precise.[14] Suppose that *e* is a cause and *f* is its effect, and that we are offered a functional explanation of *e* in terms of its possession of that effect. Note first that the form of the explanation is not: *e* occurred because *f* occurred. If that were its form, functional explanation would be the exact opposite of ordinary causal explanation, and it would have the fatal defect that it represented a later occurrence as explaining an earlier one. Nor may we say that the form of the explanation is '*e* occurred because it caused *f*'. Similar constraints on explanation and time order rule that candidate out: by the time *e* has caused *f*, *e* has occurred, so that the fact that it caused *f* could not explain its occurrence. The only remaining candidate, which I therefore elect, is: *e* occurred because it would cause *f*, or, less tersely but more properly: *e* occurred because the situation was such that an event like *e* would cause an event like *f*.

Now if this account of what functional explanations are is correct, then the main explanatory theses of historical materialism are functional explanations, for the following reasons: Marx never denied, and he sometimes asserted, and it is, moreover, manifestly true, that superstructures hold foundations together, and that relations of production control the development of the productive forces. Yet Marx also held that the character of the superstructure is explained by the nature of the base, and that the latter is explained by the nature of the productive forces. If the intended explanations are functional ones, we have consistency between the effect of *A* on *B* and the explanation of *A* by *B*, *and I do not know any other way of rendering historical materialism consistent.*[15].

[14] But not as precise as in *KMTH*, ch. 9 sects. 4, 7, and ch. 10, where the structure of functional explanation is described in greater detail.

[15] The only author who, to my knowledge, shows a complete understanding of the problem but attempts a different solution to it is Philippe Van Parijs, whose solution to the problem I do not understand. See his 'Marxism's Central Puzzle', and my comments in 'Reply to Four Critics', 204–6.

I shall now expound in greater detail one of the two functional explanatory theses, that which concerns base and superstructure.

The base, it will be recalled, is the sum total of production relations, these being relations of power over labour capacity and means of production. The capitalist's control of means of production is an illustration. And the superstructure, we saw, has more than one part, exactly what its parts are being somewhat uncertain, but certainly one *bona fide* part of it is the legal system, which will occupy us here.

In a capitalist society capitalists have effective power over means of production. What confers that power on a given capitalist, say an owner of a factory? On what can he rely if others attempt to take control of the factory away from him? An important part of the answer is this: he can rely on the law of the land, which is enforced by the might of the state. It is no great oversimplification to say that it is his legal right which causes him to have his economic power, since what he is effectively able to do depends on what he is legally entitled to do. And this is in general true in law-abiding society with respect to all economic powers and all economic agents. We can therefore say: in law-abiding society people have the economic powers they do because they have the legal rights they do.

That seems to refute the doctrine of base and superstructure, since here superstructural conditions—what legal rights people have—determine basic ones—what their economic powers are. Yet although it seems to refute the doctrine of base and superstructure, it cannot be denied. And it would not only seem to refute it, but actually would refute it, were it not possible, *and therefore mandatory* (for historical materialists), to present the doctrine of base and superstructure as an instance of functional explanation. For we can add, to the undeniable truth emphasized above, the further thesis that the given capitalist enjoys the stated right because it belongs to a structure of rights, a structure which obtains because it sustains an analogous structure of economic power. The content of the legal system is explained by its function, which is to help sustain an economy of a particular kind. People do usually get their powers from their rights, but in a manner which is not only allowed but demanded by the way historical materialism explains superstructural rights by reference to basic powers. Hence the effect of the law of property on the economy is not, as is often supposed, an embarrassment to historical materialism. It is something which

historical materialism is committed to emphasizing, because of the particular way in which it explains law in terms of economic conditions.

Legal structures rise and fall when and because they sustain and frustrate forms of economy which, I now add, advance the development of the productive forces. The addition implies an explanation why whatever economic structure obtains at a given time does obtain at that time. Once more the explanation is a functional one: the prevailing production relations prevail *because* they are relations which advance the development of the productive forces. The existing level of productive power determines what relations of production would raise its level, and relations of that type consequently obtain. In other words: if production relations of kind *k* obtain, then that is because *k*-type relations are suitable to the development of the forces, in virtue of their existing level of development: that is the canonical form of the explanation in the standard case. But I should also mention the transitional case, in which the relations are not suitable to the development of the forces but, on the contrary, fetter them. In transitional cases the prevailing relations obtain because they recently *were* suitable to the development of the forces, and the class they empower has managed to maintain control despite their no longer being so: it is because ruling classes have an interest in the maintenance of obsolete relations that their *immediate* replacement by freshly suitable relations is not to be expected. People do not rush towards the dustbin of history just as soon as they have played out their historical role.

Now since

1. the level of development of productive power explains why certain relations, and not others, would advance productive power,

and

2. relations which advance productive power obtain because they advance productive power,

it follows that

3. the level of development of productive power explains the nature of the economic structure (of, that is, the sum total of production relations).

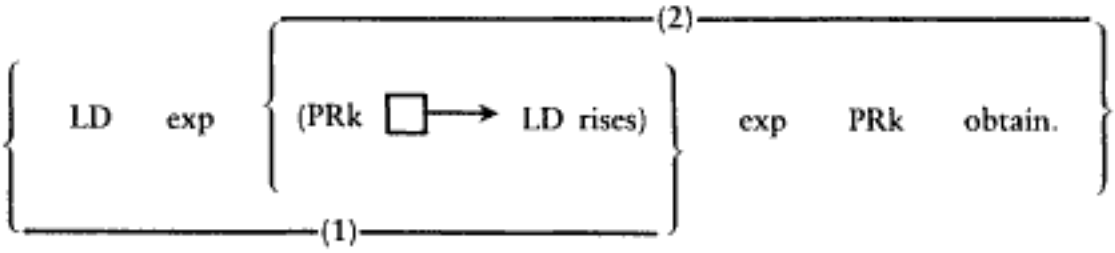
Proposition (3) assigns explanatory primacy to the productive

forces. Note that neither (1) nor (2), taken separately from the other, establishes that (3), the Primacy Thesis, is true. It should be evident that (1) does not assign explanatory primacy over the production relations to the productive forces, since (1) says nothing about what sort of economic structure will in fact obtain. And, although it is less evident, it is also true that (2) does not confer explanatory primacy on the level of development of the forces. The reason why (2) does not do so—the reason, that is, why (2) is insufficient to establish (3)—is that (2) is consistent with (3)-defeating non-(1) explanations of the character relations must possess to advance productive power. One such non-(1) explanation would be:

4. The dominant ideology, which is not explained by the level of development of the productive forces, determines what relations would advance that development further.

Figure 1[16] shows how (3) is derived from (1) and (2): (1) says that the level of development of the productive forces explains why relations of kind *k* would now raise that level, and (2) says that the fact that relations of that kind are apt to raise the level of development of the forces explains why just such relations obtain. Proposition (3) is derived through deletion of the middle portion of the schema, and it is justified, given (1) and (2), by the transitivity of explanation.

Now to say that *A* explains *B* is not necessarily to indicate *how A* explains *B*. The child who knows that the match burst into flame because it was struck may not know how the latter event explains the former, because he is ignorant of the relationship between friction and heat, the contribution of oxygen to combustion, and so on. In a widely favoured idiom, he may not know the *mechanism* linking cause and effect, or, as I prefer to say, he may be unable to *elaborate* the explanation. In the relevant sense of 'how', we require



[16] It comes from p. 220 of my 'Walt on Historical Materialism', an article which provides further clarification of the *KMTH* claims about the relationship between forces and relations of production.

an answer to the questions: *How does the fact that the economic structure promotes the development of the productive forces explain the character of the economic structure?* and *How does the fact that the superstructure protects the base explain the character of the superstructure?* Recall the functional explanation of the hollow bones of birds: to say, correctly, that birds have hollow bones because the feature is useful for flight is not to say how its usefulness accounts for its emergence and/or persistence. To that question Lamarck gave an unacceptable answer and Darwin an excellent one, which was later rendered even better, through developments in genetic theory. To corresponding questions about explanations of large scale in terms of economies of scale one may answer by referring to conscious human purposes, or to an economic analogue of chance variation and natural selection, or to some mix of the two.[17] But no one has given good answers to the similar questions (italicized above) about historical materialism. I offer some not very satisfactory answers in chapter 10 of *KMTH*. This seems to me an important area of future research for historical materialists, since the functional construal of their doctrine is hard to avoid.[18]

Let me now summarize my argument for the thesis that the chief explanatory claims of historical materialism are functional in form. Those claims are that

3. the level of development of productive power explains the nature of the economic structure

and

5. the economic structure explains the nature of the superstructure.

I take (3) and (5) to be functional explanations because I cannot otherwise reconcile them with two further Marxian theses, namely that

6. the economic structure promotes the development of the productive forces

and

7. the superstructure stabilizes the economic structure.

(6) and (7) entail that the economic structure is functional for the

[17] See *KMTH* 287–9.

[18] For valuable work on the problem of the mechanism in functional explanation, see Van Parijs, *Evolutionary Explanation in the Social Sciences*.

development of the productive forces, and that the superstructure is functional for the stability of the economic structure. These claims do not by themselves entail that economic structures and superstructures are *explained* by the stated functions: *A* may be functional for *B* even though it is false that *A* exists *because* it is functional for *B*. (The bridge of my nose is functional for my vision, since it helps to support my spectacles, but, unlike my right eye, it does not exist *because* it is functional for vision.) But (6) and (7), *in conjunction with* (3) *and* (5), do force us to treat historical materialist explanation as functional. No other treatment preserves consistency between the explanatory primacy of the productive forces over the economic structure and the massive control of the latter over the former, or between the explanatory primacy of the economic structure over the superstructure and the latter's regulation of the former.

I hold that the central explanations of historical materialism are functional explanations, and I defend functional explanation as an explanatory device, but I do not defend the sloppy functional explanatory theorizing in which so many Marxists engage.[19]

Many Marxist exercises in functional explanation fail to satisfy even the preliminary requirement of showing that *A* is functional for *B* (whether or not it is also *explained* by its function(s)). Take, for example, the claim that the contemporary capitalist state functions to protect and sustain the capitalist system. Legislation and policy in the direct interest of the capitalist class can reasonably be regarded as confirming it. But what about putative counter-examples, such as social welfare provision and legal immunities enjoyed by trade unions? These too might be functional for capitalism, in an indirect way, but that is something which needs to be argued with care, not just asserted. But those who propound the general claim about the state rarely trouble to say what sort of evidence would falsify or weaken it, and therefore every action of the state is treated as confirmatory, since there is always some way, legitimate or spurious, in which the action can be made to look functional.

Methodological indiscipline is then compounded when, having satisified himself that state policy is functional, the theorist treats it, without further argument, as also functionally explained. He proceeds from '*A* is functional for *B*' to '*B* functionally explains *A*'

[19] For an impressive catalogue of methodologically lax uses of functional explanation, see Jon Elster's 'Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory'.

without experiencing any need to justify the step, if, indeed, he notices that he has taken a step from one position to a distinct and stronger one.

2. 'The history of all hitherto existing society,' says *The Communist Manifesto*, 'is the history of class struggles.'[20] Yet class struggle was hardly mentioned in the foregoing outline of historical materialism. Therefore, a critic might say, either Marx had more than one theory of history, or that outline misrepresents his views.

One response would be to deflate the theoretical value of the quoted remark by emphasizing its political role as the first sentence of the main body of an insurrectionary text. But I prefer to leave the sentence intact and accommodate it. I do not want to deny that all history is the history of class struggle.

Why, then, did class struggle receive so little attention in section 1? Because that section was devoted to the fundamental explanations of the course of history and the structure of society, not to the main events of that course and the surface relief of society, where class struggle looms large.

There are two ways of accepting the *Manifesto* sentence without sacrificing the theory of section 1. The first, and less interesting, way is to take it as saying that *there is always a class struggle going on*. One may claim, in that spirit, that all history is the history of class struggle, without implying that that is all that history is, or even that that is what history most fundamentally is.

In the second way of taking the sentence, all history is the history of class struggle in the more important sense that *major historical changes are brought about by class struggle*. Yet that is consistent with the doctrine of section 1, since (so historical materialism says) if we want to know why class struggle effects this change rather than that, we must turn to the dialectic of forces and relations of production which governs class behaviour and is not explicable in terms of it, and which determines what the long-term outcome of class struggle will be.

Things other than forces and relations of production, such as the interactional structures studied by game theory,[21] help to explain

[20] *The Communist Manifesto*, 482.

[21] Jon Elster has persuaded me that game theory is supremely relevant to certain Marxist concerns, but I deny that it can replace, or even supplement, functional explanation at the very heart of historical materialism.

the vicissitudes of class struggle and the strategies pursued in it, but they cannot give a Marxist answer to the question why class wars (as opposed to battles) are settled one way rather than another. *Marx finds the answer in the character of the productive forces*: 'The conditions under which definite productive forces can be applied are the conditions of the rule of a definite class of society.'[22] The class which rules through a period, or emerges triumphant from epochal conflict does so because it is best suited, most able and disposed, to preside over the development of the productive forces at the given time. That answer may be untenable, but I cannot envisage an alternative to it which would qualify as historical materialist. It is, moreover, an answer which Marx did not merely give when generalizing about history, but which he applied to cases, as, for example, when he said that

> If the proletariat overthrows the political rule of the bourgeoisie, its victory will only be temporary . . . as long as the material conditions have not yet been created which make necessary the abolition of the bourgeois mode of production.[23]

Note that Marx writes not 'make possible' but 'make necessary', a phrase which limits what can be independently decided by class struggle more than the former one would. *The Communist Manifesto* contains similar phrases,[24] and therefore cannot be recruited to the non-Marxist view that all history is, in the final analysis, *explained* by class struggle.

Prosecuting his contention that Marxism should abandon functional explanation and contract a liaison with game theory, Jon Elster remarks that 'game theory is invaluable to any analysis of the historical process that centres on exploitation, struggle, alliances and revolution.'[25] But for Marxian analysis those phenomena are not primary but, as it were, immediately secondary, on the periphery of the centre: they are among the 'forms in which men become conscious of the conflict [between forces and relations of production] and fight it out.'[26] To put the point differently, we may

[22] *The German Ideology*, 52.

[23] *Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality*, 319; see Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, 250 n. 41 for a list of texts which carry a similar message.

[24] According to the *Manifesto*, the 'economic and political dominion of the bourgeois class' was an outcome of the fact that feudal relations of production had become fetters on productive progress and therefore '*had* to be burst asunder' (p. 489).

[25] Elster, 'Marxism, Funtionalism and Game Theory', 453.

[26] Preface to *Critique of Political Economy*, 21.

say that the items of Elster's list are the actions at the centre of the historical process, but for Marxism there are also items more basic than actions at its centre.

By 'revolution' Elster must mean the political phenomenon of transfer of state power, as opposed to the transformation of economic structure political revolution initiates or reflects.[27] Many facts about political revolutions are accessible to game theoretical explanation, but not the world-historical facts that there was a bourgeois revolution and that there will be a proletarian one (if there will be a proletarian one).

While realizing that I insist on a 'fundamentalist' reading of historical materialism, Richard Miller notes that 'Cohen . . . allows that political and ideological struggle may be essential to the destruction of the old social relations.'[28] Indeed, and I am prepared to go further. I do not wish to deny that class struggle is always essential for social transformation. My position does not prevent me from accepting Marx and Engels' statement that 'the class struggle is the immediate driving power of history'.[29] On the contrary: it is the doctrine expounded in section 1 of this chapter which illuminates the otherwise puzzling occurrence of the word 'immediate' in this important sentence. 'Immediate' is opposed to 'underlying'.

The reader might now agree that the following characterization of my views distorts them:

> Cohen . . . seems committed to the view that the kind of human activity capable of effecting social change would have to be not consciously political activity but technical and scientific activity: the invention of new technology, having as its unconscious byproduct the emergence of new social relations.[30]

[27] A clear distinction between transformation of economic structure and political revolution is made at ibid. 21.

[28] 'Productive Forces and the Forces of Change', 94. But Miller appears to think that this view of mine is an optional and rather arbitrarily added extra, 'readily detachable' from a theory assigning primacy to the development of the productive forces, since such a theory would 'suggest the effectiveness of an alternative to revolution, in which change is brought about by appeals to material desires common to all classes' ('Producing Change', 68). This rather astonishingly presupposes that the material interest of humanity could not conflict with the material interest of ruling class persons. For my part, I expect no one under socialism to be as rich as Rockefeller, and I therefore expect Rockefeller to be hostile to the idea of socialism.

[29] It comes from their letter of 17–18 Sept. 1879 to Bebel, Liebknecht, and Bracke: see *Selected Correspondence*, 307. (The word translated 'immediate' is *nächste*.)

[30] Richard Norman, review of *KMTH* 6.

I do not see how one can wring out of *KMTH* a denial that consciously political activity effects social change. How could an explanation why politics effects this social change rather than that one entail a denial that politics effects social change? Marx was not being untrue to what I claim was his theory when he called on workers, rather than scientists and technicians, to revolutionize society. In encouraging workers to bring about social change he was not asking them to bring about what would explain their doing so: the exhaustion of the progressive capacity of the capitalist order, and the availability of enough productive power to install a socialist one.

I admitted in section 1 that I do not have a good answer to the question how productive forces select economic structures which promote their development. To be sure, we can say that the adjustment of relations to forces occurs through class struggle. But that is not a fully satisfying answer to the stated question, since it does not specify the filiation, or filiations, from contradiction between forces and relations of production to the class struggle which is supposed to resolve it. What activates the prospective new class? What ensures its victory? These are the questions that need attention, and not only for the sake of good theory.[31]

I do not, then, 'downplay' 'the practical political significance', for Marxism, of class struggle.[32] In the Marxism I defend, class struggle has primary political significance, but the political dimension of society is not itself primary. The Marxist theory of history loses its coherence when it ceases to assign primacy to the development of the productive forces.

Milton Fisk would challenge this separation of politics from the development of the productive forces.[33] According to Fisk,

> There is a political factor that enters into the development of the productive forces. The development of the productive forces within a set of

[31] For good criticisms of my failure to deal well with these questions see Elster, 'Cohen on Marx's Theory of History', 124; Levine and Wright, 'Rationality and Class Struggle' 58 ff.; Joshua Cohen, review of *KMTH*, 266 ff. In the rest of this section I deal with less good criticism, which is due to Milton Fisk. My reply to it is of rather secondary interest, and non-zealous readers may wish to move immediately to sect. 3.

[32] Suchting, '"Productive Forces" and "Relations of Production"', 174.

[33] He also disapproves, more generally, of my disposition to achieve clarity through recourse to 'sharp separations': I discuss that methodological question in ch. 3 sect. 3 below.

productive relations has limits set by the willingness of people to cooperate under those relations to develop the productive forces. It would be nice if we could say that their cooperation will be forthcoming when those relations have the potential for developing the forces. But the claim would be circular since the potential of the relations to develop the forces depends crucially on cooperation.[34]

But the stated claim is not, as Fisk contends, circular. For the fact that co-operation is a necessary condition of the relations *actually* developing the forces does not show that co-operation is a necessary condition of *their possessing the potential to do so*, in one pertinent reading of that phrase. Relations might possess the potential to develop the forces in the sense that if co-operation with them is forthcoming, they will do so: co-operation is evidently not necessary to their possessing *that* potential.

What is more, some relations would not develop the forces even if co-operation with them was assured. It follows that this hypothesis, of which the penultimate sentence in the above extract is an inexplicit formulation, is neither trivial nor circular: *co-operation is forthcoming just when, the relations being otherwise suitable, co-operation is crucial to the development of the forces.* (Consider the analogous hypothesis that pilots will man just those planes which are apt to fly when manned. The fact that these same planes would not fly unmanned does not make that plausible hypothesis circular.)

Now the non-circular and substantive claim italicized above is false for periods of transition from one social form to another, since, during such periods, more than one set of relations would, with co-operation, develop the forces, and it is logically impossible for more than one set to obtain. When 'the productive forces have been developed sufficiently under the existing productive relations to sustain a new social order'[35] both the old relations (at least for a time) and the prospective new ones would, with co-operation, develop the forces further, and in such a period which relations prevail indeed becomes what Fisk calls a political question, and one whose answer is not settled by the state of the productive forces. Those who falsely suppose that its answer is objectively available, and does not depend on class struggle, divide, as Fisk perceptively remarks, into 'adventurists [who] accuse opportunists of over-

[34] 'The Concept of Primacy', 192.
[35] Ibid.

estimating the ability of the ruling class to develop the productive forces, and opportunists [who] accuse adventurists of underestimating that ability'[36] I agree with Fisk that both sides in that dispute suppose, wrongly, that there is a theoretical answer to a crucial question of practice.

But not all cases are transitional cases. Let us suppose, with Fisk,[37] that there was no objective answer to the question whether the Western ruling class could still develop the productive forces after 1945. Then either he thinks that there is never such an answer, or he grants that there sometimes is. But if he thinks that there never is, he is no Marxist. No Marxist, indeed no one with a shred of sociological initiation, could think that the British capitalist class might have been overthrown in 1795. A Marxist may think that there are cases of Fisk-like indeterminancy, but not that they are the general case. And I wonder whether Fisk himself really thinks that they are the general case. He refers, as we saw, to a time when 'the productive forces have been developed sufficiently . . . to sustain a new social order'.[38] That reference implies that there are other times when a new social order is impossible because the forces are *not* developed enough to sustain it. But if a new order is impossible for that reason, then Fisk will surely agree that it is impossible for an objective reason, which is independent of human will—in which case his disagreement with me disappears. He can only continue to disagree on the bizarre alternative view that even then the new order is impossible *simply* because people are unprepared to cooperate with it. Such a view combines a Utopian belief that what sort of society we have depends entirely on human will, with an un-Utopian belief that, for no objective reason, the required human will is sometimes necessarily unforthcoming.

The vicissitudes of class struggle decide just *when* a ruling class is supplanted, once a superior social order is objectively possible. But if one goes beyond that and says that the vicissitudes of class struggle decide whether or not the ruling class is supplanted at all, so that there is no objectively grounded answer to the question whether it will, in the end, go, then one denies the parameters within which, for Marxism, class struggle operates.

In my view class war is like war, and in war there are three pertinent possibilities:

[36] Ibid. 194.
[37] Ibid. 193. [38] Ibid. 192.

i. We know that if we engage with the enemy, we shall win.

ii. We know that if we engage with the enemy, we shall lose.

iii. We know neither of these things, either because it it too difficult to know which of them is true, or because neither is true.

It might be thought that (i) and (ii) are not historically important cases.[39] I disagree. To be sure, they are not the cases in which there is likely to be massive class struggle: we will not engage in case (ii), and presuming , as one can, that they know what we know they will not engage in case (i). To the extent that people are knowledgeable and rational, (iii) is the only case in which class struggle will rage. But it is a matter of great historical importance that (i) and (ii) are true, when they are, and that classs struggle is, accordingly, muted. It is absurd to deny the historical importance of non-transitional periods.

3. The second paragraph of section 1 above entails two theses about forces and relations of production, the second of which was designated '3' on p. 10 above and the first of which is here numbered for the first time:

3. The level of development of productive power explains the nature of the economic structure.

8. The productive forces tend to develop throughout history.

In *KMTH*[40] I called (8) the Development Thesis, and (3) the Primacy Thesis: (3) asserts the explanatory primacy of the productive forces over the relations of production. I showed, in chapter 6 of *KMTH*, that Marx advanced both theses, and I then proceeded to argue for them in their own right. In the latter exercise, I began by adducing considerations in support of (8), and then, taking (8) as established, I derived (3) using (8) as a premiss. So my argument for the primacy of the productive forces incorporated an initial argument for thesis (8), the claim that the productive forces tend, inherently, to develop.

Now there is an apparent inconsistency, which I wish here to

[39] So Fisk claimed in the course of a discussion of his article, which he read to the London University Philosophy Group.

[40] p. 134.

expose and resolve, between my *argument* for the primacy of the productive forces (in section 4 of chapter 6 of *KMTH*) and my exposition of the *nature* of that primacy (in sections 5–7)). Section 4 is supposed to argue for a view sections 5–7 expound, but there is an apparent mismatch between the argument and what it is an argument for, which has given rise to an understandable and widespread misinterpretation of my position. That the misinterpretation is natural is shown by the fact that some of my most sophisticated critics have adopted it.

To expose the apparent inconsistency, let us ask: why do the forces of production tend to develop? Why, that is, do existing forces tend to be replaced by better ones? According to *KMTH*, the tendency obtains because superior forces make possible a lightening of the burden of human labour. There is a propensity to progress in productive power because such progress attenuates the material scarcity whose consequence is that people 'cannot satisfy their wants unless they spend the better part of their time and energy doing what they would rather not do, engaged in labour which is not experienced as an end in itself'.[41] This is the reason *underlying* the tendency to advance in productive power, and, consequently, the actual advance in which that tendency is realized.

Now while the tendency to productive improvement is realized if and only if there are recurrent particular instances of improvement, it does not follow that the explanation of each instance must be the same as, or even similar to, the explanation of the general tendency to improvement. The underlying reason for the tendency can explain why there *are* so many instances of improvement without explaining each particular instance of it. This point being crucial, it requires a measure of elaboration.

Whatever may be the underlying reason for productive progress,[42] the immediate mechanism of that progress is the replacement of less good forces by better ones, by human beings who

[41] Ibid. 152.

[42] By 'productive progress' I here mean reduction in labour input per unit output, and, more particularly—see *KMTH* 61–2—per unit output of product required for subsistence. This excludes what has equal right, in general, to be called productive progress, namely, (constant) capital-saving innovations, which could be labour-dissaving. Capitalists will, of course, introduce labour-dissaving improvements where they are profit-enhancing, and will thereby bring about productive regress, in the present confined sense. The key claim, which is not subverted by the distinction just acknowledged, is that capitalism obtains when it does because at that period

favour that replacement. Now the crucial point is that, while the underlying reason for productive progress in general is labour reduction, it does not follow that the reason for a given instance of that progress, the reason operative in the mind of the person(s) who caused better forces to be adopted, is to reduce the labour of some person or group. If a self-employing peasant adopts a superior plough, his reason for thereby improving the forces is indeed similar in content to what I say is the underlying reason for their improvement in general: he does so in order to reduce the amount of labour he must put in per unit output. But if a capitalist adopts productively superior instruments or methods, then he does so to protect or increase his profit, and not at all in order to lighten anyone's labour. Yet the underlying reason for productive progress even here, in my view, retains its role, since, according to that view, capitalism prevails when it does because of the massive contribution it makes to the conquest of scarcity, however remote that end may be from the motivation of forces-improving capitalists.

In sum, the reason for a particular improvement of the forces need not resemble the underlying reason why, in general, they improve, but I am widely misinterpreted as thinking that there always is that resemblance. Attention to my exposition of the nature of the primacy of the forces in sections 5–7 of chapter 6 would dispel such a misinterpretation, but it is fed by a natural misreading of the argument for primacy presented in section 4, to which I now turn.

The argument contains qualifications and auxiliary developments which there is no need here to rehearse.[43] I here repeat only the heart of the argument, which is that the productive forces tend to develop because people

> are disposed to reflect on what they are doing and to discern superior ways of doing it. Knowledge expands, and sometimes its extensions are open to productive use, and are seen to be so. Given their rationality, and their inclement situation, when knowledge provides the opportunity of expanding productive power, they will tend to take it, for not to do so would be irrational.[44]

> capitalist relations are optimal for bringing about labour-saving productive progress, even though they also bring about episodes of what must here be called productive regress. What matters is that capitalism's net effect is labour-saving productive progress, and more of it than any other relations would then precipitate.

[43] I rehearse them briefly in ch. 5 sect. 2, and 10 below.
[44] *KMTH* 153.

In this argument, human beings are rational and innovative creatures who have a scarcity problem, which they contrive to solve by improving their forces of production. It is natural, but wrong, to interpret the argument as requiring that the agents who actually introduce better forces always do so in order that their own burden of labour will be lightened. The picture I regrettably encouraged is of individual producers, or co-operating groups of them, striving to upgrade their skills and means of production, so that labour will lie less heavily upon them, a picture in which global productive progress is explained merely as the aggregrate result of those several strivings. Following Andrew Levine and Erik Wright,[45] we can call this the Rational Adaptive Practices (or RAP) view of the development of the forces. It is not the view I held, but it emerges naturally from the quoted passage. I did not hold it because it excludes the important possibility that the underlying reason for advance in productive power may contrast with the reason for particular instances of it, as is plainly illustrated by the development of the forces under capitalism. The way the forces develop under capitalism contradicts the picture of their development conveyed by the paragraph quoted above when it is read in the most natural way.

How, then, did I intend my argument? In my own construal of it, it was, as I said,[46] 'an attempt to render explicit the premisses' of utterances of Marx quoted at pages 159–60 of *KMTH*. Here is one of them, from his letter to Annenkov of 1846:

> in order that they may not be deprived of the result attained, and forfeit the fruits of civilization, [people] are obliged from the moment when their mode of intercourse no longer corresponds to the productive forces acquired, to change all their traditional social forms.[47]

Texts like the Annenkov letter confer a Marxian pedigree on my use of human rationality as a basis for asserting the primacy of the productive forces, but here that rationality is not applied at the point where it is applied on the RAP view, which such texts do not support. The claim here is not that the producers themselves introduce superior forces to lighten their own labour: that this happens is not denied, but it is not put forward as the general case.

[45] 'Rationality and Class Struggle', 54. For a fuller presentation of the Levine and Wright view, see ch. 5 sect. 4 below.

[46] *KMTH* 159.

[47] *Selected Correspondence*, 31.

Instead, what is said is that, being rational, people retain or reject relations of production according as the latter do or do not allow productive improvement to continue. In Philippe Van Parijs's apt formulation,[48] I do not here posit a 'search-and-selection process which operates directly on the . . . productive forces', but 'one which operates on the relations of production, which in turn control the search-and-selection of productive forces'. This is a non-RAP reading of the argument for the Development Thesis. It is the reading I intended, and, unlike the RAP reading, it is consistent with the exposition of the nature of the primacy of the forces in sections 5–7 of chapter 6 of *KMTH*.

In that exposition relations of production can be what I shall call the *source* of the development of the forces. Relations are a source of development when it is their emplacement in relations of production, and not any interest in reducing labour, which induces agents to improve the forces.[49] That relations are sometimes in this sense the source of the forces' development is compatible with the thesis of the primacy of the forces over the relations, as I elaborate it: the primacy thesis implies that when relations are the source of the development of the forces they obtain precisely *because* they ensure that development. As I wrote:

> The bourgeoisie is a set of men defined as such by their emplacement in the economic structure. It is that emplacement which makes them revolutionize the productive forces: a policy of innovation is imposed by competition. Capitalist production relations are, consequently, a prodigious stimulus to the development of the productive forces. But this is more than compatible with the thesis of the primacy of the productive forces as we have articulated it. It is congenial to the thesis, for we assert that the function of capitalist relations is to promote growth in productive power—they arise and persist when (and because) they are apt to do so.[50]

This is an application to capitalism of the general thesis defended in sections 5–7, that given relations of production have the character they do because of the contribution they make, in virtue of that character, to the development of the productive forces. The

[48] See 'Marxism's Central Puzzle', 96.

[49] It is possible for agents to seek to improve the forces *both* because of their emplacement in relations of production *and* out of an interest in reducing labour, but relations count as a source of development in the present purely technical sense just when the first condition holds and the second does not.

[50] *KMTH* 169–70. I have here added the phrase 'and because' to improve the expression of what I had in mind.

problematic relations for that functional explanatory claim are not such as capitalist ones which, being a source of, evidently contribute to, productive development. The problematic relations for the thesis that relations are functionally explained are the pre-capitalist relations which Marx called 'conservative': not being a source of development, they appear not to contribute to it. I devoted section 7 of chapter 6 to the problem conservative relations pose, and I tried to solve it by arguing that conservative relations could be, at the time when they obtain, optimal for productive development, and in place for that reason, even if they are only forms within which development occurs, rather than, like capitalist ones, its very source.

Now, whether or not conservative relations pose a problem for the RAP view of the development of the forces, capitalist ones pose an insoluble problem for it. Accordingly, I held a non-RAP view when I propounded the argument which has been so widely RAP-interpreted. I have now made the non-RAP reading of it more explicit. If, however, that reading of it should turn out to be unsustainable, then I would give up the argument, rather than the non-RAP view of the development of the forces, which capitalism makes mandatory.

4. The Development Thesis says that the productive forces tend to develop throughout history. That could mean that they tend to develop throughout human history as a whole, or, more strongly, throughout the history of each discrete society (and, therefore, in addition, throughout human history as a whole). The Development Thesis asserted in *KMTH* must be taken in the stronger of the two ways just distinguished. It must, that is, apply to every society taken separately, or, more precisely, to every society which suffers from scarcity,[51] since the premisses of the *KMTH* argument for the Development Thesis apply to all societies under the sway of scarcity. (There are different ways of individuating societies, and I have no particular favourite, but the claims of the present section do not depend for their plausibility on what way of individuating societies one favours.)

[51] It is not intended to apply to societies of the 'Arcadian' kind which are mentioned at *KMTH* 23–4. See, too, *ibid.* 152 n. 2, and, for more on Arcadian exceptionalism, ch. 7, sect. 2 below.

I now sketch an argument for the strong Development Thesis which is somewhat different from the argument provided for it in *KMTH*, and which is immune to some of the criticisms that have been levelled against the *KMTH* argument. The new argument for the strong Development Thesis will lead to a consideration of the weaker version of the Thesis itself.

In *KMTH* I suggested, rather rashly, that, as long as scarcity prevails, people will tend to take whatever opportunities there are for expanding productive power, since it would be irrational for them not to.[52] I now concede that, as many of my critics have urged,[53] rationality does not always favour productive innovation, even where it is possible to achieve it. A ruling class in secure control of the production process might sometimes have good reason not to allow productive innovation and to try to extract more from the immediate producers without improving existing techniques. More generally: since it takes time and energy to introduce innovations, and since the process of introducing them carries opportunity costs and sometimes has unwanted (e.g. cultural) effects, it will, in certain circumstances, be irrational to introduce them.

That being conceded, one might still insist, first, that innovation will sometimes be rational, and will therefore sometimes be introduced, and, secondly, that because of rationality and inertia, achieved innovations are very unlikely to disappear, except when they are replaced by still superior techniques. Although people are not so bent on productive improvement that they will seize every opportunity of effecting it, they will certainly not lightly abandon such improvements as they have in fact effected. The upshot will therefore be a long-run tendency in every society to productive improvement, even if the tendency does not express itself in each period of every society's history.

Consider the case of capitalism. Suppose that productive improvements are introduced under capitalism if and only if they suit the interest of capitalists, and that labour-reducing productive improvement is, for some reason, often against that interest. We may surely nevertheless safely insist that it also often *is* in the interests of capitalists, and that it will virtually never be lost once it

[52] *KMTH* 153: see the quotation at p. 22 above.

[53] See, for example, Joshua Cohen, review of *KMTH*, 268, and Kai Nielsen, 'On Taking Historical Materialism Seriously', 328. It was Nielsen's article which prompted me to write much of the present section.

has been gained. It would follow that capitalism systematically brings about productive progress, and that it might be in place for that very reason, even if it is not always inclined to bring it about.

Under this more restrained use of the rationality premiss, two objections which I myself raised against the *KMTH* argument for the Development Thesis lose some of their force.[54] The first objection was that people might care a great deal about things other than defeating scarcity. The second was that, however much they might care about it as individuals, that which is rational for individuals is not necessarily selected by society. These facts are easier to acknowledge when the Development Thesis is defended in the new way that I have sketched.

An even more restrained use of the rationality premiss leads us to the weaker Development Thesis. Again we concede that there is no universal imperative of rationality to innovate, while insisting that achieved innovations will be preserved. Now, though, we increase the scope of the concession. We allow that a whole society might, even under scarcity, lack an internally generated (that is, not induced by contact with other societies) tendency to productive improvement, because of standing (e.g. cultural) circumstances. As long as circumstances are not always unpropitious in all societies, progress will occur somewhere, and its fruits will be preserved. On this account, (at least) the weaker version of the Development Thesis will be true: there will be a tendency to global improvement, to an improvement in the world as a whole, even if not every society will possess such a tendency.

The improvements here argued for occur globally in the elementary sense that whatever happens in some one place in the world happens in the world taken as a (possibly quite unintegrated) whole, even when its happening where it does has no impact anywhere else. But improving societies are likely, through conquest and other forms of influence, to establish hegemony over laggards, and, when that leads to integration of the latter in the former, then we can predicate the improvement of a larger societal whole, even when it permeates only the advanced part of that whole. Finally, the improvement may indeed permeate the larger whole.[55] If that happens regularly, then one might contend, on a new basis, that

[54] *KMTH* 153.

[55] According to 'underdevelopment' theory (see, e.g., André G. Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment*) this is not what happens, (or not, at any rate, at first) as capitalism spreads across the world.

there is a tendency for the productive forces to develop in every society, either for reasons internal to that society, or, when there are no such reasons, because the society will eventually be dragged into the channel of progress by societies which generate it endogenously.

In the global presentation of the Development Thesis, there need be no society (other than human society as such) which develops the forces from their initial rudiments to the consummation of abundance. There may, instead, be what Ernest Gellner has called a 'torch-relay' pattern of development: having brought the forces up to a certain level, an erstwhile pioneering society retires in favour of another one, *which it has influenced*,[56] and which takes the forces further. And, as Gellner argues,

> parallel replication of the same stages in diverse societies is not merely no longer required by the theory, but becomes positively implausible. The powerful *rayonnement* of the torch-carrying zone . . . changes the rules of the game so much that societies lagging behind will no longer pass through the same stages as the pioneers.[57]

Advanced torch-carriers are likely, in time, to yield pride of place to once backward societies, and those societies do not have to repeat all the stages which the societies they begin by emulating went through. The torch shifts to a new carrier partly because the once advanced country or region tends to lock itself into the once progressive economic structure, which has lost its leadership value. The United States cannot readily remake its relations of production in the image of those under which Japan is currently helping to carry the torch. Being a pioneer can bring (eventual) disadvantages, and late starters have a head start when a new start is needed.[58]

[56] I emphasize that the new torch-carrier is influenced by its predecessor to forestall a possible accusation of Hegelianism, of the sort which William Shaw rightly or wrongly directs against the similar theory expounded by Kai Nielsen: see Shaw, 'Historical Materialism and the Development Thesis', 207, which comments on the Nielson article cited in n. 53 above. (For an intriguing glimmering of the torch-relay theory in Marx, but in a form which indeed invites the Hegelianism charge, see his 'Draft of an article on Friedrich List', 281.)

[57] Ernest Gellner, 'A Russian Marxist Philosophy of History', 64. This superb article is a critical study of Yu. I. Semenov, 'The Theory of Socio-Economic Formations and World History', which is in the same volume, and Gellner attributes the torch-relay model to him. (Semenov and Gellner are principally concerned with the succession of types of relations of production, but I am applying the torch-relay model to stages of development of the productive forces.)

[58] This theme is brilliantly discussed by Jon Elster in 'Historical Materialism and Economic Backwardness', 39–41. The Elster article offers a superb typology of the historical possibilities under contemplation here.

Gellner offers a lucid formulation of the strategy which I have adopted in the present section, which is to argue for a tendency to progress not on the basis of a statement about what must always happen but on the weaker basis of a claim about what will (surely) sometimes happen:

> The conditions of upward development are . . . complex, and require . . . propitious circumstances . . . *The theory would only require that this combination of circumstances is sufficiently probable to ensure that it should occur sooner or later*. Once it occurred, the processes of torch-of-leadership assumption and of diffusion . . . would ensure the perpetuation of the new stage. It would constitute no objection to such a theory that the initial endogenous transformation would only occur in a minority of . . . societies.[59]

The shift to a global understanding of the Development Thesis generates fresh theoretical problems, which I shall not try to deal with here. One of them is the potent role which it assigns to war, as a diffuser of innovation and as a torch-shifter: it is not clear that assigning such a role to war is consistent with the emphases of historical materialism.[60] Another problem is the impact of the global view on the relationship between forces and relations of production. One could not now require that relations always correspond to the forces they envelop. Capitalist relations could appear in a technically backward region because it is the periphery of a more advanced centre. Whether there would remain a general tendency for relations to correspond to forces—whether, that is, the Primacy Thesis would still hold—is a moot point, and at least one commentator is confident that a globally interpreted 'Development Thesis no longer performs the function of supporting the Primacy Thesis'.[61] I have not thought enough about that problem to have a definite opinion about whether or not he is right.

[59] Gellner, 'A Russian Marxist Philosophy of History', 71 (my emphases). By omitting some of his words I have put Gellner's point in a more general form.

[60] See the discussion of conquest at *The German Ideology*, 84–5, which *might* be regarded as an obstacle to global construal of the Development Thesis.

[61] Shaw, 'Historical Materialism and the Development Thesis', 207.