For Natasha

DEREK SAYER

The Violence of Abstraction

The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism

Basil Blackwell

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. . . as if the task were the dialectic balancing of concepts, and not the grasping of real relations!

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Preface

It has become fashionable in some circles to decry 'Marxology'. In one way this is odd. We do not speak in the same tones of 'Kantology', or 'Weberology', though studies of Kant and Weber abound. Interpretive commentary on the work of major thinkers is a common and legitimate scholarly enterprise, and not always a merely scholastic one. In the social sciences, at least, explicit reflection on established paradigms is a normal, and perfectly proper, way in which problems are clarified and disciplines advance, particularly in times of theoretical crisis. Because the pioneering work of a Durkheim or a Keynes does constitute a paradigm, in Kuhn's sense – a framework within which substantive researches continually go on – the form which theoretical debate takes is often that of a questioning return to, and reinterpretation of, the writings of an acknowledged past master. The context of such discussion is often a growing awareness of empirical anomalies which the relevant paradigms have difficulties encompassing. Every generation reappropriates its intellectual heritage in accord with its needs and priorities. In this sense, I see nothing wrong with 'Marxology', and this book is unashamedly a Marxological work. I focus on Marx's own texts, but I do so in the light of current preoccupations, and in order ultimately to help further knowledge of the world we live in. I do not presume that this knowledge can be directly derived from Marx's writings themselves – he after all died more than a century ago – but critical reflection upon their theoretical foundations may aid his successors in their endeavours to produce it.

But there is, none the less, a particular problem with writing about Marx. This problem is a moral as much as an intellectual one. No

other modern social thinker has influenced social and political movements as much as he. Some one-third of the world's population now live under governments which claim Marx's imprimatur for their policies and indeed legitimate their very existence in terms of his supposed theory of history. Marxist parties, of varying size and strength, claim to speak for 'the people' everywhere they are permitted. This is not the case with a Kant or a Weber, and greatly raises the stakes of intellectual debate. Questions of what Marx meant by this or that have an inescapably political as well as a scholarly context, and may sometimes have very practical implications. In many cases the claim that Marx held such and such a view is itself – absurd as this may be – considered sufficient to confer authority upon that view. Nobody, so far as I know, has yet been incarcerated or killed for their heretical interpretation of Kant or Weber (or, come to that, for their orthodox one). 'Marxology' is therefore rarely a merely academic pursuit. However disinterested one's scholarly motives, conclusions often become part of other people's politics. The study of Marx can be a coded form of social criticism (in East and West alike), it can be snivelling apologetics, but it can hardly be politically innocent.

It is, of course, this political context of Marx scholarship – the association of Marxist theory with what is claimed to be socialist practice – which gives the charge of 'mere Marxology' its rhetorical force. The accusation of 'scholasticism', 'academic' Marxism, is a convenient moral bludgeon with which to beat 'bourgeois' intellectuals into shamefaced conformity, or marginalize the political pertinence of their researches. Meghnad Desai, in a recent deplorable review of Teodor Shanin's *Late Marx and the Russian Road* – a book which painstakingly demonstrates Marx's deviation from Marxist orthodoxy across a wide range of politically sensitive issues, and traces the organized 'forgetting' of this within the communist movement – avails himself of this device in order not to discuss the challenge to received views which the book poses. Peter Binns does much the same in his grotesque dismissal, in *Socialist Review*, of Kolakowski's magisterial (if eminently disputable) three-volume history of Marxism as 'chit-chat from the common rooms'.[1] It is very often just those – they frequently turn out to inhabit universities – who believe themselves to possess, in their own pet version of Marx, the truth incarnate, the revealed secret of history, who are the first to denounce serious Marx scholarship as 'Marxology'. In this environment I believe the study of what Marx actually said not merely to be an academically defensible but a politically virtuous enterprise. If intellectuals are to be of any service to humanity, they must first of all serve the truth. The political context of Marxist debate, in short, makes it more, rather than less important to respect the constraints of academic scholarship when trying to expound his ideas.

That is not to say I believe a 'definitive', or a disinterested, interpretation of Marx's thought to be either possible or desirable, and this is not my aim in this book. Marx wrote an enormous amount, over a period of many years. His legacy is very varied. Texts like *Capital* I, finished for the press, and revised through several editions, form the smaller part of the corpus that has come down to us. Unpublished drafts like *The German Ideology*, the *Grundrisse*, or the remaining volumes of *Capital* – all now treated as major works – are part of our inheritance in ways they were often not for earlier generations. Apart from his 'economics', Marx penned political tracts like the *Manifesto*, an inordinate amount of penny-a-line journalism (sometimes on subjects he knew little about), and even poetry. He left a voluminous private correspondence. There are obvious problems as to what weight to give to these different kinds of text, dating from different periods of his life. Not all that Marx wrote was clear, unambiguous or even consistent. It would be exceedingly surprising if it were.

But beyond this, why should we in any case seek to be definitive? It seems to me perfectly reasonable (as well as being unavoidable) to read Marx in different ways at different times and for different purposes. It is a testimony to his greatness that we can do so, notwithstanding all attempts to freeze his ideas into formulaic and dogmatic moulds. Marx's thought lives in so far as it is interpreted anew by others, in the light of their changing needs. It is no more eternal than the nineteenth century that produced it. Definitiveness, then, is so far as I am concerned a chimerical grail. Indeed I believe its assertion to be profoundly authoritarian and coercive, indicative of an approach to theory which is the opposite of emancipatory.

This is not, however, to argue for an interpretive free-for-all. As Max Weber once remarked, Marx is not a taxicab one can drive where one will. It is, I think, often possible to demonstrate that Marx did *not* adhere to positions commonly ascribed to him. Much of the argument of this book is of this sort. There is, for me, both a

scholarly and a political point in engaging in such debate, scholastic and 'Marxological' as it might frequently appear. Precisely because Marx's name is so often invoked to authorize and legitimate contemporary doctrines and practices, to know what he did and did not say, and what can and cannot fairly be said in his name, becomes important.

This is, then, why I have written this book: not in order to establish some new, impeccably accredited orthodoxy, but rather to challenge the authority claims of the old. I hope thereby to suggest the possibility of reading Marx differently, of seeing him as pioneering an approach to the understanding of society and history which offers more empirical purchase than that normally identified with his name. I would like to make it clear, finally, that I do not consider such modes of argument to be in any way capable, in and of themselves, of establishing the validity of historical materialism, whether in my heretical variant, or any other. *Capital* is not the Holy Bible, and provenance no criterion of truth. That Marx said something does not make it right, and he was frequently, and demonstrably, wrong. Textual commentary is the necessary currency of a study such as this. But the test of an adequate analytic framework is its capacity to make sense of the world, not its conformity with Marx's or anybody else's texts. The point is a banal one, but in this context probably needs to be made.

This book, then, is mainly a study of Marx's ideas, a work of 'Marxology'. It presents an argument about the analytic foundations of historical materialism, as exemplified in Marx's own analytic practice. Its specific concern is with the major general concepts of his sociology, and the way he uses them in substantive inquiry. The argument is organized around the key categories in which he frames what for many is the classic summary of the historical materialist perspective, the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy:* the concepts of *forces of production, relations of production, economic structure* and *superstructure.* I argue that these fundamental concepts of Marx's have been comprehensively misunderstood – indeed fetishized, in his own sense of that key motif in his thought – within mainstream Marxism, and that the 'theory of history' which historical materialism is normally taken as offering rests on these fetishized foundations.

Misunderstandings among Marxists of what these concepts denote, and how they may legitimately be used, testify to a failure to comprehend their anchorage in Marx's distinctive methodology: the analytic practice I characterized in my earlier book *Marx's Method* as *critique.* These misunderstandings, I believe, have done enormous violence to what is most innovative and emancipatory in Marx's social thought. Rather more importantly, they eventuate in a form of historical materialism which does equal violence to real history – both that history people have made in the past, and that they might seek to make in the present. Marx's own practice offers an alternative, and an analytically superior, version of historical materialism, which I try to outline and defend.

To develop this argument I need economically to exemplify the readings of Marx I reject. Throughout this book I take G. A. Cohen's influential work *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defence* (1978) as the best modern exposition of the standard interpretation of Marx's fundamental concepts, which has not been superseded in the decade since it appeared. Cohen's book is immensely valuable for its philosophical clarity of definition and coherence of argument. He outlines 'traditional historical materialism' more clearly, and defends it more ably, than anyone else known to me. This book is not, however, primarily concerned with Cohen, despite his frequent appearance in its pages. There is much in his work, and the debates it has inspired, which I do not address. I nowhere, for instance, discuss his debates with Elster, or Elster's own ambitious reconstruction of Marxism by way of 'game theory'. Nor do I consider Cohen's own shifts of position since 1978. I discuss his original book only as an exemplar. Cohen's understanding of Marx's fundamental concepts – my sole concern in this book – is shared wholly or in part by many Marxists, across a variety of perspectives, who do not otherwise subscribe to his 'technological' variant of historical materialism. This book, then, is both much less, and at the same time somewhat more, than a critique of Cohen's Marxism as such.

The argument is organized as follows. Chapter 1 is a kind of prologue, in which I briefly outline the conventional interpretation of Marx's concepts and claims in the 1859 Preface, and, by way of a preliminary skirmish, discuss Engels's qualifications of these claims in a well-known series of late letters. The next three chapters form the heart of the book. In these, I respectively discuss Marx's own usage of the concepts of productive forces, relations of production/

economic structure, and superstructure, in his substantive work. I argue in each case that Marx's use of these concepts differed radically from that normally ascribed to him. I also suggest that his analysis of capitalism provides more than adequate grounds for seeing orthodox conceptions of productive forces, economic structure and superstructure as fetishized. These are, to use Marx's own vocabulary, 'idealizations' or 'abstractions' which falsely generalize from the misleading phenomenal forms our social relations take under capitalism. Chapter 5 is a brief interlude, devoted wholly to Cohen's characterization of Marxism as a species of functionalism, which I dispute. The most technical chapter in the book, it can safely be omitted by those whose interest lies in Marx rather than Cohen. Chapter 6 ties the overall argument of the book together, by way of a consideration of the relation between history and theory in Marx's work, and its implications for the formation and use of analytic categories in substantive inquiry.

I do not pretend originality for everything argued here. Various intellectual influences on my argument will be apparent, of which some deserve particular acknowledgement. I would single out for special mention the work of Bertell Ollman, whose *Alienation* remains for me the classic study of Marx's novelty; the historical writings – which are profoundly theoretical in their import – of Edward Thompson, Christopher Hill and other Marxist historians; and the pathbreaking Marxist anthropology of Maurice Godelier. Many of the ideas developed here originated in collaborative work with Philip Corrigan, not only in our recent study of English state formation, *The Great Arch,* but in our previous books with Harvie Ramsay on socialist construction in post-revolutionary societies. Patrick Murray's helpful criticisms of *Marx's Method,* in his review essay in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences,* jolted me into rethinking the importance of Marx's Hegelian background, something I undoubtedly neglected in the earlier book.

Ted Benton, Philip Corrigan, Greg McLennan and Gavin Williams read the first draft of this book in full, and made extensive, sometimes highly critical, but invariably useful comments. I have tried to respond to their anxieties, even if on some issues I have remained obstinate. Their generosity has at least, I hope, made some points in my argument rather less murky than they were in their first formulation. David Frisby indulged a good deal of thinking aloud on my

part, and added some ideas of his own. Sean Magee was as ever all that one could want in an editor, and Blackwell a positive pleasure to work with. Much of the book was written during a period of two terms' study leave from the University of Glasgow; it would have taken a lot longer otherwise. To all, my thanks.

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1

Prologue: Marx's 'guiding thread'

I

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 of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.

Preface, *The Critique of Political Economy* (1859a)

These few lines are amongst the most familiar, but also the most debated, in all Marx. Introduced by a thumbnail sketch of his intellectual development up to the mid-1840s, they summarize, in his own words, 'the general result at which I arrived and which, once won, served as a guiding thread for my studies'.

The passage comes from the 1859 Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy,* the first part of Marx's 'economics' to be published. This project, which was to eventuate in the four volumes of *Capital,* the summit of his life's work, had already occupied Marx for

some 15 years. Under the circumstances it is impossible to believe that he did not weigh his words carefully. He himself indicates that he wrote the 1859 Preface to replace an earlier draft introduction, that of 1857 to the *Grundrisse*. To be sure, the book had to pass the Prussian censor, and it has been suggested that the language of its Preface – the first, and perhaps the only thing the censor would be likely to read – is appropriately coded (Prinz, 1969). The word 'class', for instance, a concept normally (and rightly) thought central to Marx's view of history, is conspicuous by its absence. But whilst due allowance might be made for such linguistic caution, there remains no convincing reason not to regard the 1859 Preface as Marxists traditionally have: as providing a definitive summary, indeed the nearest Marx ever came in print to the definitive summary, of the core of the materialist conception of history.

If so, certain conclusions as to what that conception is, would seem inexorably to follow. Their most lucid and influential recent elaboration can be found in G. A. Cohen's book *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defence* (1978). Cohen describes his Marxism as 'an old-fashioned historical materialism ... a traditional conception, in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth' (ibid.: x). The 1859 Preface, which Cohen reproduces at length as the frontispiece to his book, is the 'most pregnant statement' of this version of historical materialism – one which would not have been unfamiliar to Plekhanov or Kautsky. Though occasionally unorthodox in his treatment of some aspects of Marx's concepts, Cohen undoubtedly does articulate the essentials of the 'traditional conception'. He does so, moreover, with a clarity and rigour not always associated with that tradition, which is why I take his formulations as exemplary here. Cohen interprets the claims of the 1859 Preface as follows.

The text presents, to begin with, a general theory of history. Fundamental to this theory, the bedrock, as it were, on which the 'economic foundation' of society is built, are material productive forces. By these, Cohen understands the things people use in order to produce. Productive forces consist of two sorts of things: means of production – raw materials, instruments of production, auxiliary materials, premises, spaces, (some) scientific knowledge; and labour power – human beings' physical and mental capacity to work, together

with their accumulated skills. Cohen postulates, and attributes to Marx, an inherent tendency for these forces to develop throughout history (the 'development thesis'), and argues that in Marx's theory productive forces have explanatory primacy in that it is their level of development which explains the production relations of a society and from time to time obliges them to change (the 'primacy thesis'). Development of productive forces is thus, for Cohen, the fundamental dynamic or motor of history, and Marx's theory of history is ultimately a technological one (ibid.: 29). Importantly, Cohen insists that productive forces are material, as distinct from social entities. He sees this material/social distinction as a systematic and fundamental one in Marx's work, whose existence must be acknowledged if the primacy thesis is to be rendered coherent.

Production relations, for Cohen, are relations of ownership between people and productive forces, thus defined. By ownership Cohen does not mean a legal relationship. This would create problems of circularity, since the 'base', comprising production relations, would then apparently presuppose its 'superstructure', in which legal relations are held to belong. Ownership, as Cohen uses the term, is a relationship of effective control: an ability really to command the force owned. This power may or may not be superstructurally expressed in the form of legal relations. The totality of production relations, thus construed, makes up the 'economic structure of society', its 'base' or 'infrastructure' in standard Marxist parlance. This is society's 'foundation', that which in *Capital*'s words provides 'the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure' (1865a: 791). In accord with the primacy thesis, bases 'correspond' to requisite levels of development of material productive forces.

In most forms of society production relations will be class relations, and class, conversely, is for Cohen entirely defined as a property relation. 'A person's class is established by nothing but his objective place in the network of ownership relations ... His consciousness, culture, and politics do not enter the *definition* of his class position' (1978: 73). Cohen argues that these exclusions are necessary to protect the substantive character of Marx's claim that the latter are largely determined by the former. This position receives some support from (amongst others) Perry Anderson in his critique (1980) of E. P. Thompson, the most prominent recent advocate of a 'cultural' rather than a 'structural' (the terms are inadequate) concept of class.

Two further consequences of Cohen's definition of the 'economic base', where he differs somewhat from more traditional (and usually less scrupulously formulated) Marxist accounts, should be noted. First, for Cohen productive forces are not themselves part of the 'economic structure of society'. If they were, he argues, we could not make sense of Marx's claim that productive forces and production relations come into conflict, which would seem to suppose that they are separate entities. The primacy thesis demands their clear demarcation. Second, only relations of ownership in his sense can be *bona fide* production relations. This means other forms of social relationship which are evidently connected with or have a bearing on material production fall outside the category. These include both relations within the immediate production process itself, like forms of division of labour 'in the workshop', which Cohen calls 'material relations' between producers; and relations which lie apparently outwith, but nevertheless facilitate, production, like particular forms of law, state or family. Though Cohen does not deny the productive salience of such relations, he does not count them as relations *of* production. The economic base is made up of, and only of, property relations as he defines them.

This base is the 'real foundation' on which legal and political 'superstructures' in turn arise and to which 'definite forms of social consciousness' correspond. Cohen is similarly punctilious in his definition of the superstructure. He is also, on this occasion, rather less than orthodox. Marxists who adhere to a base/superstructure perspective have usually implicitly taken the superstructure to include all else in society – though there have always been some grey areas, prominent amongst them language. For Cohen, however, the superstructure specifically comprises 'non-economic *institutions*', above all the institutions of law and state. This implies that phenomena may exist in social life which are neither basic nor superstructural, an important limitation on the explanatory pretentions of historical materialism. Additionally, for Cohen, the 1859 Preface's 'forms of social consciousness' are not part of the superstructure, where for most Marxists they quintessentially belong. Not much hangs on this, however – at least in Cohen's view – since Marx says very similar things about both: namely, that they are 'strongly conditioned' by the economic base.

As productive forces develop, production relations are forced to change; the 'entire immense superstructure' sooner or later alters accordingly. Marxists have traditionally interpreted such propositions causally (although, in most cases, with a determined effort not to do so mechanistically). Cohen makes a persuasive philosophical case for the view that if Marxism is to be rendered coherent, 'correspondence' – of production relations to productive forces, and superstructure to base – must be interpreted in functional terms. Functional explanation is thus in his view indissociable from historical materialism. He also maintains, with some justice, that Marxists for the most part do treat these relationships functionally, loth as they might be to admit it. So for him Marxism holds that 'economic structures are as they are because, being so, they enable human productive power to expand', and 'superstructures are as they are because, being so, they consolidate economic structures' (1978: xi). There, in a nutshell, we have Karl Marx's theory of history. It is an economic, indeed in the final analysis a largely technological determinism, albeit of a functional rather than a conventionally causal sort. *The Poverty of Philosophy*'s infamous dictum, 'The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist' (1847a: 109) should not be considered the embarrassment twentieth-century Marxist intellectuals have so often found it. On the contrary, it expresses the very core of Marx's thought.

II

Cohen's reading is cogent, and his book undeniably persuasive. In many ways he cuts through a century of evasion and double-think, and forces us to think seriously, clearly and honestly about what are the central and distinctive claims of historical materialism. In so doing, he powerfully restores and lends new philosophical credibility to a certain traditional Marxist 'orthodoxy'. The Marxists of the Second International, for long the whipping boys of 'western Marxism', stand posthumously vindicated. But there is still room, perhaps, for doubt.

Let us begin, not with Marx himself, but with a famous series of letters written by another stalwart of the Second International, Marx's lifelong friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels, in the 1890s. By then Marx was dead (he died in 1883), but his ideas, often

in bastardized forms, were beginning to animate Social Democratic parties throughout Europe. In these letters Engels – who was habitually, it might be remembered, more of a popularizer than Marx[1] – showed himself appalled at the crudity with which some of the younger 'Marxists' of the time were treating Marx's work, and sought to soften the hard economic determinism drawn by them from such texts as the 1859 Preface. Marx's references to contemporary 'Marxists' in the early 1880s had been no more flattering, as Engels elsewhere recalls.[2] Cohen's own formulation of the 'primacy thesis' and 'correspondence' of superstructure to base is, as I have noted, functional rather than straightforwardly causally determinist, and these letters of Engels's in no way in and of themselves simply 'refute' him. They do, however, suggest an altogether different attitude or approach to Marx's 'guiding thread', and it is for that reason that I rehearse them here.

Engels's best known 'revisionist' formulations are contained in his letter to Joseph Bloch of 21 September 1890. Here he qualifies the apparent determinism of Marx's 1859 Preface thus:

> According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Therefore if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he is transforming that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various components of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, such as: constitutions drawn up by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflections of all these actual struggles in the minds of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their *form* in particular. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless number of accidents . . . the economic movement is finally bound to assert itself. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history one chose would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree. (1890b: 75–6)

Engels goes on to say that we make our own history, but under definite conditions, amongst which 'the economic ones are ultimately decisive'. He also offers an image of history as the product of 'innumerable cross-cutting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces', the unplanned resultant of the play of myriad individual wills and actions. If these latter are impelled by 'external, in the final analysis, economic circumstances' they cannot on that account be disregarded; for 'each contributes to the resultant and is to this extent included in it' (ibid.: 77).

Other letters say similar things. The letter to Schmidt of 5 August 1890, describes people's 'material mode of existence' as 'the *primum agens*', but immediately adds that 'this does not preclude the ideological spheres from reacting upon it in their turn, though with secondary effect' (1890a: 71–2). Writing again to Schmidt, two months later, Engels speaks of 'the inherent relative independence' of the state, and conceives its relation with the economy as 'the interaction of two unequal forces' (in which 'the retroaction of the state power on economic development can do great damage to the economic development'). Law, likewise, 'must not only correspond to the general economic condition and be its expression, but must also be an *internally coherent* expression' (1890c: 84). Hence 'it rarely happens that a code of law is the blunt, unmitigated, unadulterated expression of the dominance of a class – this in itself would offend the "conception of right"'. In sum, 'ideological outlook influences in its turn the economic basis and may, within certain limits, modify it' (ibid.: 85).

Speaking of literature and philosophy, Engels – in yet another avatar of the 'relative autonomy' argument – describes the 'ultimate supremacy of economic development' as in this case operating only 'within the terms laid down by the particular sphere itself' (ibid.: 86). His letter to Mehring of 14 July 1893, offers still another formulation, which is in some ways at odds with the 'inherent relative independence' model: it is ridiculous, he says here, to assume that 'because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres we also deny them any *effect on history*' (1893: 92). Similar arguments are advanced in the letter to Borgius (previously published as to Starkenburg) of 25 January 1894. In this case it is 'economic necessity' which is finally seen as having to assert itself. And Engels introduces one more analogy from the mathematical realm:

> The further the particular sphere which we are investigating is removed from the economic sphere and approaches that of pure abstract ideology, the more shall we find it exhibiting accidents in its development, the more will its

curve run zigzag. But if you plot the average axis of the curve, you will find that this axis will run more and more parallel to the axis of economic development the longer the period considered and the wider the field dealt with. (1894a: 103)

Engels cautions, however, 'Please do not weigh each word in the above too carefully . . . I have not the time to work out what I am writing to you so exactly as I should be obliged to for publication' (ibid.: 104). This letter is also of interest in the present context for including within 'the economic conditions which we regard as the determining basis of the history of society' both geographical circumstances and race, which Engels describes as 'itself an economic factor' (ibid.: 101). Unlike Cohen, he also includes there 'the *entire technique* of production and transport' (ibid.: 100).

Whatever the difficulties with, or the undoubted possible inconsistencies between, these various formulations, the broad outline of what Engels is wanting to say in these letters – his 'testament', as some have described it – is crystal clear. And it seems to me, at any rate, to contradict the spirit of Cohen's 'traditional historical materialism'. Not the least interesting feature of these letters, sharply contrasting with Cohen's analytic nicety, is the capaciousness of Engels's notions of 'economic sphere' and 'superstructure'. The *primum agens*, for instance, is variously described as economic situation, movement, circumstances, conditions, development and necessity, while the superstructure (Engels's 'ideological spheres') extends well beyond Cohen's institutions of state and law.

It may of course be argued that notwithstanding this terminological latitude – a lapse of rigour, perhaps, understandable in private correspondence – Engels's formulations can be reconciled philosophically with Cohen's version of Marx. Cohen might argue that Engels's remarks (in so far, no doubt, as they are meaningful at all) bear at best on how the primacy of the economic is conceived as operating, without weakening either the claim of primacy or its functional interpretation one iota. Additionally, Cohen's own functional account of primacy itself entails the feedback of relations on forces and superstructures on bases, since the character of the former term is in each case explained by its functionality for the latter. 'Construing [Marx's] explanations as functional makes for compatibility between the causal power of the explained phenomena and their

secondary status in the order of explanation' (Cohen, 1978: 278). Interestingly, however, apart from one passing reference to Engels's 'unexplained "determination in the last resort"' (ibid.: 280) Cohen entirely ignores these letters.

I think the omission unfortunate. Though Marx and Engels were not identical twins (Carver, 1986), Engels's testimony ought surely to count for something in the interpretation of the central tenets of Marx's thought. Certainly, nothing Engels says in these late letters in any way denies the centrality to historical materialism of 'the production and reproduction of real life'. Nor will anything said in this book. But Engels's caveats should affect how we understand that claim; and he is adamant that this should not be done in what he sees as a simplistic, reductionist manner. Claims for primacy (whether of forces or relations) have at the least to be nuanced. To do otherwise, for Engels, is to travesty his and Marx's life work. That Engels returned to the issue on so many occasions is perhaps indicative of how comprehensive, and damaging, he considered the travesty to be.

III

With some exceptions, subsequent Marxists have for the most part accepted the ultimate economic determination/relative superstructural autonomy framework established by Engels, and happily pursued empirical work within this framework without troubling over much about its theoretical credentials. It is, after all, an undogmatic, sensibly flexible basis for a materialist sociology, which is sufficiently open to allow room for the real complexity of history – a not unreasonable 'guiding thread'. But from the 1960s onwards there have been various attempts to develop what Althusser once somewhat patronizingly called Engels's 'genial theoretical intuitions' (1969: 128) in conceptually more 'rigorous' ways. Althusser himself has advanced an elaborate model of 'structural causality', in which society is conceived as being made up of a 'structure in dominance' comprising several distinct 'levels' or 'instances' – economy, polity, ideology and so forth – any one of which may play the 'dominant role' in a given 'conjuncture', but whose overall interrelation is governed by economic factors. Poulantzas in his earlier writings offered a similar schema. Godelier, by contrast, hypothesizes a functional hierarchy in

which relations of production dominate social structures under all conditions, but which social relations actually constitute production relations in a given context may vary enormously. Frequently, these will not be manifestly 'economic' relations at all. He counts kinship relations as relations of production in many primitive societies, as does Meillassoux age and gender relations. Rodney Hilton has recently argued a similar case for juridical relations in feudal Europe. Hindess and Hirst, at one stage in their odyssey of critique and autocritique, tried to conceptualize superstructures as essential, but non-economic conditions of existence of economic bases. I could continue.[3]

For Cohen, these are in the end little more than obfuscations and evasions. On one level, I am inclined to agree, at least so far as the theoretical contortions of Althusser and his followers are concerned. Such conceptual acrobatics recall the equants and epicycles of Ptolemaic astronomy in the face of the Copernican challenge, attempts frantically to buttress an outmoded theory in the face of anomalous phenomena. But though I wish to argue against going down this road of ever more elaborate theoretical schemata, I think that the problems to which it is a response – in many cases, those of applying traditional Marxist categories like Cohen's to the analysis of non-capitalist societies[4] – are real enough, and much that is illuminating has been unearthed in the attempt. In particular, Marxist historians' and anthropologists' realization of the need to extend the category of relations of production beyond its traditional 'economic' boundaries is a big step forward. I shall return to this in later chapters. But for the moment, I want to draw a rather different set of emphases from Engels's 'testament'. These points tell equally against 'traditional historical materialism' and Althusserian-style revisionism.

What is overlooked in most recent commentary, and entirely ignored in modern attempts theoretically to systematize Engels's 'intuitions', is the way his letters repeatedly, and emphatically, underline the limitations of *any* general theory or model when it comes to analysing particular historical events, processes or societies. In the letter to Bloch, for instance, Engels concedes that he and Marx must take the blame for having laid 'more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We have to emphasize the main principle over and against our adversaries, who denied it'. Such polemical one-sidedness was pardonable, given a historiographic context dominated by philo-

sophical idealism. Engels then goes on to argue: 'but when it came to presenting an era of history, i.e., to making a practical application, it was a different matter and there no error could be permitted' (1890b: 78). This echoes his complaint to Conrad Schmidt of 5 August of the same year: 'our conception of history is above all a guide to study' – recall here Marx's description of his 1859 summary as a 'guiding thread' – 'not a lever for construction after the manner of the Hegelians. All history must be studied afresh . . . But instead of this too many of the younger Germans simply make use of the phrase historical materialism (and *everything* can be turned into a phrase) only in order to get their own relatively scanty historical knowledge . . . constructed into a neat system as quickly as possible.' He adds, sourly: 'It often seems as if these gentlemen think anything is good enough for the workers' (1890a: 73–4). The 'phrase' accusation (also used in the letter to Bloch, above, p. 6) has a long pedigree in Marxist invective. The same jibe figured frequently in Marx's attacks on the Young Hegelians' 'theoretical bubble-blowing' (1846a: 53), their penchant for 'speculative construction' (1844a: 57 ff.), in the 1840s.[5] The echo of those early critiques is instructive.

These quotations amount to a general warning against a certain pre-emptive use of theory, and a plea for empirical, and in particular for historical, study. This is a more general theme in Marx's work, and not just an afterthought on the part of the ageing Engels. Unfashionable as such 'empiricism' may be in some philosophical quarters, Marxism's founders' protestations of it are too numerous, and too consistent, to be credibly dismissed as mere 'rhetoric' (Callinicos, 1985).[6] In *The German Ideology* – their first, joint 'manifesto' of the materialist conception of history – Marx and Engels argue, in pretty uncompromising terms, the primacy of people's 'materialistic connection' in historical development, just as the 1859 Preface does. Nevertheless they go on to warn that:

> definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into . . . definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. (1846a: 36)

Had Marxists taken this seriously, they could never have consistently

advanced the kind of universal theory of this 'connection' of the sort developed either by Cohen from the 1859 Preface or by Althusser and others from Engels's 'testament'.

This 'empiricism', incidentally, is not, as some have alleged, merely an aberration of the 1840s, a 'positivist' over-reaction to the excesses of idealism. Marx echoes the point, for instance, over 30 years later, when repudiating Mikhailovsky's 'metamorphosis' of the 'historical sketch' of the rise of capitalism in Britain given at the end of *Capital* I into 'an historico-philosophical theory of the general path of development prescribed by fate to all nations'. One must, Marx says here, study 'forms of evolution separately', something which cannot be done 'by using as one's master-key a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical' (1877: 293–4). This passage, like many another in Marx, is much cited (including by Cohen, 1978: x), but without due consideration for how it affects the interpretation of his methodological fundamentals.

Shanin (1984) and his collaborators have recently shown how Marx's 'late writings', particularly on Russia, in fact admirably exemplify his willingness to modify and even abandon the supposed general theory of history conventionally ascribed to him, in the light of fresh empirical evidence. If Engels (1894b: 17) is to be believed it was the continuing search for such evidence which delayed completion of volume 3 of *Capital.* Russian history was to play the same role there as English history had in volume 1. Given the picture of historical development normally drawn from the 1859 Preface, and outlined in Cohen's reading above, it is very much to the point that Marx – having learned Russian at the age of 42, and studied Russian social conditions from a mass of primary sources – envisaged Russia avoiding a 'capitalist stage' of historical development, notwithstanding its generally low level of development of productive forces. The basis for an alternative 'form of evolution' in Russia, in his view, lay in the specific social relations (and associated forms of experience and consciousness) materialized in its surviving peasant commune, the *obshchina* or *mir,* providing the forces currently undermining these – state and capital – could be neutralized (Marx, 1877; 1881a, b; Shanin, 1984). It was the writings of 'the great Russian scholar and critic' (1873: 15) Chernyshevsky which had first alerted him to this possibility. Marx's historical and anthropological reading over the last decade of his life was wide-ranging and voracious.[7] One of his last manuscripts, published in Russian translation in the 1930s but virtually unknown among western Marxists to this day, was a chronology of world history from the fall of the Roman Empire to the seventeenth century, which runs to over 1500 pages in print (1882a). I do not want to pull yet another 'unknown Marx' out of the archivist's hat, but the painstakingly empirical tenor of such an enterprise is worth remarking, perhaps, in the context of this argument.

All this suggests that general formulations of the kind found in the 1859 Preface should be treated as exactly what Marx said they were – precisely a 'guiding thread', an orientation to empirical and historical research, not a theoretical substitute for it. It can be questioned, in other words, whether they were ever intended to amount to a theory of history, in any rigorous sense of the word, at all. To take them as such – as do both Cohen and the Althusserians – is to misconstrue them. Obviously Marx has a certain vision of the overall trajectory of human historical development, which leads him to focus on material production as his analytic starting-point, but this is not quite the same thing as a systematic theory. It provides, rather, the guiding framework within which he works empirically. We should attend instead to Engels's repeated urgings, in his late letters, that those in search of the fundamentals of historical materialism should look not just at Marx's general resumés – like the Preface – but rather at his concrete analyses, his historiographic practice. Three times Engels refers his correspondents to the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as an epitome of historical materialist analysis. He also recommends that critics should look at '*Kapital,* the section on the working day, for instance, where legislation, which is surely a political act, has such a drastic effect. Or the section on the history of the bourgeoisie' (1890c: 87). The clear message is that the meaning of Marx's general, summary pronouncements is best sought, not in texts like the 1859 Preface taken in isolation, but in the wider context of the substantive analyses such summaries can inevitably do no more than gloss. Marx's concepts are best explicated on the basis of their actual use.

Now Engels has been criticized, in recent Marxist literature, for both the variety and the imprecision of the metaphors he employs in these late letters to conceptualize the 'ultimate' primacy of the material dimension of social life. Cohen's one dismissive reference to the letter to Bloch is of this ilk. Such criticisms are undoubtedly (if

obviously) valid, if these letters are read as advancing a putative theoretical model of social structure or historical process. Engels's formulations, without closer specification of his key terms ('ultimate' determination, 'relative' autonomy) are so vague as to be vacuous (Sayer, 1975). Devotees of Sir Karl Popper's doctrine of the necessary falsifiability of scientific propositions would have a field day with so accommodating a 'theory': what historical event could possibly count as an instance neither of 'ultimate economic determination' nor of 'relative superstructural autonomy'? But to argue thus may be seriously to miss the point.

For if Engels's intention was not to provide such a model at all, but rather to argue precisely against the translation of Marx's 'guiding thread' into one, the objection evaporates. His apparent lack of conceptual 'rigour', far from being a weakness, is of a piece with the character of the message he is trying to convey. So is Marx's own use of a base/superstructure metaphor – an analogy, rather than a precise concept – in the 1859 Preface and elsewhere, a use which, as we shall see, is also far from consistent between texts. Such shifting, and theoretically treacherous, recourse to metaphor and analogy may be a linguistic signal of exactly the inappropriateness of attempting a closed and 'rigorous' formulation of theory at this level of generality in the first place. Marx after all himself remarks at the start of the 1859 Preface that 'the reader who really wishes to follow me will have to decide to advance from the particular to the general', and in that spirit offers no more in that text, in his own estimate, than 'a few brief remarks regarding the course of my study of political economy' (1859a).

But as Edward Thompson has observed, 'the graveyard of philosophy is cluttered with grand systems which mistook analogies for concepts' (1978a: 296). 'Traditional historical materialism', I shall argue, is just such a grand system, built on just such mistakes.

2

Productive forces

I

One feature of Marx's 1859 Preface has been remarked upon rather less often than it perhaps ought to be. The key concepts he employs there – forces and relations of production, economic structure and superstructure – are, for the most part, either left altogether undefined in the text itself, or else defined circularly, in terms of one another. No definition whatsoever is offered of material productive forces, that concept which for Cohen has explanatory primacy in Marx's theory of history. Nor are we told what relations of production are, beyond Marx's remark that property relations are 'but a legal expression for the same thing'; itself a highly confusing formulation (and one that has spawned its own extensive literature) because of the many possible interpretations of 'expression'. We glean only that 'in the social production of their existence', people inevitably enter into such relations, which are 'independent of their will'.

The 'economic structure of society' – the 'base', the 'real foundation' – is defined circularly, as the sum total of production relations, which takes us no further. The Preface also invokes the 'mode of production of material life', which Marx tells us 'conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life'. But the text neither defines a mode of production, nor clarifies the relation of this concept to those of forces, relations or economic structure. Conventionally a mode of production is taken to comprise a particular – in modern Marxist jargon, an 'articulated' – combination of forces and relations,[1] but Marx does not say so here. Cohen, among others, construes it otherwise, correctly noting a variety of uses of the term in Marx's work (1978: 79–84).

Marx qualifies the 'superstructure' in the Preface as 'legal and political'. He also refers, independently, to 'definite forms of social consciousness'. He fails to make clear whether the latter are part of the superstructure, though his language in this instance suggests otherwise. This is what has led Cohen to argue they are not. Elsewhere, however, Marx – like Engels in the letters discussed above – frequently describes the entire superstructure as 'ideal' or 'ideological', and explicitly includes forms of consciousness within it. Indeed, as we shall see in chapter 4, in some passages where the term superstructure is used we would be justified in concluding that its primary, if not exclusive, reference is to consciousness. The sentence later in the Preface itself, which distinguishes 'the material transformation of the economic conditions of production' from 'the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out' might be taken to support this latter interpretation. On the other hand, the reference in the preceding paragraph to 'legal relations as well as forms of state' having their roots in 'the material conditions of life' might incline us to the more restrictive institutional definition favoured by Cohen.

But again, Marx's apparent curtailment of the scope of the category at this point in the Preface may have a simple explanation. He is here recapitulating a stage in his own intellectual biography, the critique of Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie* which he undertook in 1843. Hegel's central concerns in that work were with law and state, and Marx embarked upon his critique to clarify his own views on the state following his personal encounters with Prussian officialdom as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*.[2] The Hegelian background, however, muddies the waters still further with Marx's introduction of the term 'civil society' as a synonym for the totality of 'the material conditions of life', whose 'anatomy . . . has to be sought in political economy'. Is 'civil society' as used here merely another expression for 'economic structure', or an intermediary level between base and superstructure? At all events, there is considerable room for uncertainty over what exactly, for the 1859 Preface, the 'superstructure' comprises – or excludes.

This problem of the meaning of the key terms in this 'most pregnant' summary of historical materialism is not, I believe, generally raised in commentary for a very simple reason. We all think we *know* what Marx means when he uses these concepts. But it should be clear by now that it is not the text itself which gives us warrant for this presumption.[3] Nor is our interpretive confidence as a rule founded on any sort of scholarly examination of how Marx uses such concepts elsewhere, the study of the 'theory' in its concrete applications of the sort recommended by Engels. It is in fact simply the authority of the long tradition of 'orthodox Marxism' which has accustomed us to understand these concepts, without demur, in particular ways. With minor caveats, these are the ways advocated by Cohen and outlined above.

But much hangs on this apparently semantic question. Lucio Colletti, for instance, in his justly famous essay on the Marxism of the Second International – a Marxism not unlike Cohen's – has argued that the orthodoxy of Kautsky and Plekhanov and the revisionism of Bernstein equally vulgarized Marx's understanding of production itself. Engels's 'testament', in his view, unwittingly succoured this vulgarization. For although Engels argued against outright economic determinism, the way in which he did so – conceding the 'inherent relative independence', and therewith the separability, of superstructures from their economic bases – inadvertently reinforced an economistic, technologistic conception of the latter. Hiving off superstructures drained production itself of its social and cultural dimensions, for Colletti Marx's crucial insight. In Colletti's own words:

> what Bernstein shared with Plekhanov, and what Engels's 'self-criticism' could not correct but only confirm, was the profound adulteration of the concept of the 'economy', or, better still, of 'social relations of production', precisely the core and foundation of Marx's entire work. The so-called 'economic sphere' – which in Marx had embraced both the production of *things* and the production (objectification) of *ideas*; production and intersubjective communication; material production and the production of social relations (for Marx, the relation between man and nature was also a relationship between man and man and vice versa) – was now seen as *one isolated factor*, separated from the other 'moments' and thereby emptied of any effective *socio-historical* content, representing, on the contrary, an antecedent sphere, prior to any human mediation. *Social* production is thus transformed into 'production *techniques*'; the object of political economy becomes the object of technology. Since this 'technique', which is 'material production' in the strict sense of the term, is separated from that other simultaneous production achieved by men, the production of their *relations* (without which, for Marx, the former would not exist), the *materialist* conception of history tends to become a *technological* conception of history. (1972: 65)

This may not be entirely fair to Engels, for other readings of his late letters can be defended. One may, for instance, argue that they are as conducive to an interpretation of superstructures as ideological forms of expression of class and other 'basic' relations, as they are to a view of superstructures as substantially separate 'spheres'. But Colletti's charge certainly holds for much subsequent Marxism. His argument, moreover, applies to Marxist practice as well as theory, for such analytic paradigms have been a far from negligible ingredient in the shaping of ruling communist party policies for economic development and social transformation in the USSR and elsewhere, with momentous consequences for socialist politics.[4]

It is this line of criticism I shall pursue here, though I shall take it further, perhaps, than Colletti himself might wish. I shall try to show, from Marx's substantive analyses as distinct from his general summaries, that conventional Marxist wisdom on the interpretation of his fundamental concepts is, quite simply, wrong. Marx had a very different understanding of what (and how much) was entailed in 'the production and reproduction of real life' than most of his disciples, and used all of these concepts – forces, relations, and so on – very differently from the ways ascribed to him by tradition and systematized and defended by Cohen. Additionally, and perhaps more radically, I shall suggest that 'traditional historical materialism' actually fetishizes Marx's concepts, in his own sense of that term. I shall begin, in this chapter, by looking at Marx's concept of productive forces – or, to be more accurate, and not altogether pedantic, the social forces of production.

II

Before examining this and other key concepts of the Preface individually, however, a further preliminary observation is called for. This concerns what we may expect in Marx by way of conceptual definition as such. The Preface is not alone among Marx's writings in its failure to provide clear definition of its terms. Marx was not a devotee of that tradition of twentieth-century analytic philosophy whose 'standards of clarity and rigour' Cohen seeks to bring to bear on historical materialism (1978: ix), and it is idle to ransack his work in search of neat and unambiguous definitions of his general concepts. Notoriously, for example, he never defined class, that central concept of his sociology. Such apparent laxity infuriates those of a philosophical cast of mind, and Cohen's entire book can be seen as an attempt to remedy this supposed deficiency. But Marx's way of using language in this instance – as with Engels's penchant for elusive metaphor – may be indicative of something more substantial in his thought. Modern analytic philosophy, by the same token, might not turn out to be the most fortunate choice of framework in which to try and express his ideas.

Bertell Ollman (1976) has persuasively argued that Marx's conceptual slipperiness – 'words like bats', as Pareto complained, appearing now like birds, now like mice – is evidence not of any lack of rigour on his part, but of his commitment to a specifically, and distinctively, dialectical ontology. Marx did not conceive social reality[5] atomistically, as made up of clearly bounded, separate, interacting entities: the kind of analytic particulars which can be grasped in clear, consistent and exclusive definitions. He saw the world, rather, as a complex network of internal relations, within which any single element is what it is only by virtue of its relationship to others. In this Marx stood squarely in the philosophical tradition of Spinoza, Leibniz and of course Hegel, of which 'mighty thinker' he explicitly avowed himself 'a pupil' (after having written *Capital*) (1873: 19–20).[6] To take the most obvious example, neither wage-labour nor capital, for instance, can for Marx be defined 'in themselves', as autonomous particulars, conceivable independently of one another. Nor can they properly be understood as externally 'interacting' on one another. Each is what it is only by virtue of its relation to the other, and must be conceptualized accordingly. The concept of capital implicitly contains that of wage-labour, and vice versa.

What Marx held to be thus implicit in a single concept may be very extensive indeed. In the *Grundrisse*, for example, he remarks that 'the simple concept of capital has to contain its civilizing tendencies etc. *in themselves*; they must not, as in the economics books until now, appear merely as external consequences. Likewise the contradictions which are later released, demonstrated as already latent within it' (1858a: 414). Hence – amongst other things – 'the tendency to create the *world market* is directly given in the concept of capital itself' (ibid.: 408). In the same way he observes that 'the germs of crises, or at least their possibility' are already implicit in the concept of money

as medium of exchange (1858a: 198), and indeed in the elementary concept of the commodity itself (ibid.: 147 ff.; cf. 1867a: 114).

'The simplest economic category', like exchange-value, 'presupposes [*unterstellt*: Ollman (1976: 12) translates this as 'implies'] population, moreover a population producing in specific relations; as well as a certain kind of family, or commune, or state, etc. It can never exist other than as an abstract, one-sided relation within an already given, concrete, living whole' (1857: 101). In the same text, elaborating on the proposition that 'every form of production creates its own legal relations, forms of government, etc.' – a proposition most Marxists would understand as a causal claim about the relation between essentially distinct entities – Marx berates economists for treating this relation as an external, contingent one. 'In bringing things which are *organically* connected into an accidental relation, into a merely reflective connection', he says, 'they display their crudity and lack of conceptual understanding' (ibid.: 88, emphasis added). Such examples could be multiplied.[7]

Within an internal relations perspective drawing boundaries to concepts – particularly to general concepts – is evidently going to be a problem. The problem is compounded when, as was also the case for Marx, the relations at issue are viewed as being in the process of constant formation and transformation. But if Ollman is right about Marx's ontology this difficulty is unavoidable. It is not resolvable by definitional fiat, because it arises out of the very nature of the reality Marx's concepts seek to define. Words must be 'like bats' if they are to be able to grasp this complexity. From the standpoint of this philosophy, one which differs in fundamentals from the whole analytic tradition, to use concepts otherwise would be singularly unrigorous, since it would entail systematically distorting reality. Indeed, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 4, Marx in fact regarded concepts and categories as a facet of social reality itself, and hence saw definitions as necessarily real rather than nominal. Engels, again, argued just this. In his Preface to *Capital* III he pointed out that we should not expect to find:

> fixed, cut-to-measure, once and for all applicable definitions in Marx's works. It is self-evident that where things and their interrelations are conceived, not as fixed, but as changing, their mental images, the ideas, are likewise subject to change and transformation, and they are not encapsulated in rigid definitions, but are developed in their historical or logical process of formation. (1894b: 13–14)

It is false, Engels says, to assume that Marx 'wishes to define where he only investigates'.

An important corollary of Ollman's argument – but a thesis which can also be independently defended on other grounds[8] – is that Marx's general, transhistorical categories (like those of the 1859 Preface) acquire substantive definition from, and only from, the particular historical contexts to which they are applied. They are not applicable without change across space and time, because their content changes with the reality they seek to comprehend. This means that they cannot be substantively defined transhistorically; as general categories, they are necessarily empirically open-ended. We cannot offer a universally applicable definition, of an empirical sort, of what for instance productive forces or production relations are. Conversely, in so far as Marx's concepts are substantive categories – the concepts of concrete empirical phenomena – they are necessarily historical categories: a feudal force, a capitalist relation, and so on. Their content is historically specific, and their validity historically circumscribed.

Marx himself argues this when discussing ways of defining property, a key concept in his writings, in a passage to which I shall return:

> In each historical epoch, property has developed differently and under a set of entirely different social relations. Thus to define bourgeois property is nothing else than to give an exposition of all the social relations of bourgeois production. To try and give a definition of property as of an independent relation, a category apart, an abstract and eternal idea, can be nothing but an illusion of metaphysics or jurisprudence. (1847a: 154)

Both the relational (and therefore extended) and the historical character of what Marx saw as involved in 'definition' are well brought out here. E. P. Thompson argues similarly, regarding that central concept Marx so conspicuously 'failed' anywhere in his writings to define, class. He could not have done so, if a definition of the analytic philosophy sort is required – exclusive, unambiguous, closed and universal. For, quite simply, 'class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition' (1968: 11). To

define a class – or any other social phenomenon – is, in the final analysis, to write its history.

Neither a philosophical defence of an ontology of internal relations, nor a systematic textual justification of its ascription to Marx, will be attempted here. I cannot, in any case, better Ollman on this. I rest my case rather on the degree to which interpreting Marx in this way allows us to make better sense of how he actually used his fundamental concepts – the central concern of this book – than the standard alternatives. But the major point I want particularly to emphasize at this stage in the argument is this. If Marx indeed did adhere to an internal relations perspective, we must approach the general concepts of the 1859 Preface very differently from 'traditional historical materialism'.

In particular, we can no longer assume that terms like forces and relations of production, or base and superstructure, refer unambiguously or consistently to different, and mutually exclusive, bits of empirical reality as they would in an atomistic ontology. They unproblematically do so for Cohen (as they do equally for many 'relative autonomy' models). Thus he avers that 'productive forces strongly determine the character of the economic structure, while forming no part of it', and in turn 'the economic structure is separate from (and explanatory of) the superstructure' (1978: 31, 218), all these entities being defined in empirical terms. Such separations are of course logically required if the Preface's claims of 'determination' are to be coherently rendered either in straightforwardly causal or in functional terms. Determining and determined phenomena must be logically independent of one another, contingently rather than essentially related.

But on the view argued here, the empirical referents of Marx's concepts may neither be mutually exclusive, nor consistent across space and time. An empirical particular – a form of division of labour, for example – might figure as a production relation under one description and a productive force under another. The same division of labour might be a productive force in one historical context and a relational fetter on such forces in another. The 'detail' division of labour discussed by Marx in chapter 14 of *Capital* I is exactly like this; the foundation of the productivity of early capitalist manufacture, it fetters the subsequent development of machine industry. In the same way notions of personal liberty would normally, for

Marxists, belong without question in the 'ideological superstructure' of society; but we shall encounter an instance later on in which Marx treated them none the less as a productive force. For him even theory may under certain circumstances become a 'material force' (1843d: 142). This conceptual fluidity reflects both the relational and the historical character of social reality itself. The point is an important one. For if the key general concepts of historical materialism are necessarily empirically open-ended and multi-referential, they cannot then officiate as the building-blocks of an overarching 'theory of history' in the traditional way.

III

If, for Marx, substantive categories are necessarily historically delimited, it should not surprise us to find that the few observations he allows himself to make on 'production in general' are relatively trivial. He considered, indeed, that all that could reasonably be asserted at this level of ahistorical generality were 'flat tautologies' (1857: 86). 'Production in general' is a rational abstraction, since there are generic features common to all productive activities and epochs. But it is an abstraction none the less. In Marx's own words 'the so-called *general preconditions* of all production are nothing more than . . . abstract moments with which no real historical stage of production can be grasped' (ibid.: 99).

Thus he admits, for example, the obvious truth that all production involves some sort of labour process in which people transform raw materials into products, using their labour-power, with the aid of instruments of production of one sort or another. This is 'an everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence' (1867a: 184), which must go on 'in all social formations and under every possible mode of production' (1865a: 820). Even here, however, Marx is careful to say that to conceptualize the labour process thus is to view it abstractly and ahistorically, 'independently of the particular form it assumes under given social conditions' (1867a: 177), and thus unempirically. And he only deals with it, in *Capital*, in such abstraction at all in order to bring out, by means of contrast, the *differentia specifica* of its distinctively capitalist form, in which he is interested.

In the same way, in a well-known letter to Kugelmann of 11 July

1868, Marx dismissively observes that 'every child knows' that social labour must be distributed in definite proportions between different branches of production whatever the society. Obviously some proportionality of inputs and outputs must be secured if production is to go on, irrespective of its mode. Such 'natural laws' cannot be done away with. But what can change is 'the *form* in which these laws operate' (1868). Such social forms, for Marx, are the proper subject-matter of economic science. The 'material side, which the most diverse epochs of production may have in common' is something 'whose examination . . . lies beyond political economy' (1858a: 881). He frequently criticizes political economists for their 'crude materialism' (1858a: 687; cf. 1865a: 323) in failing to differentiate these levels of analysis, leading to the conflation of historical and transhistorical. As we shall see below, this is fundamental to his critique of fetishism.

Analysis of what pertains to production in general, then, is for Marx economically antediluvian, an enterprise yielding 'commonplaces' which at best 'had a historical value in the first beginnings of the science, when the social forms of bourgeois production had still laboriously to be peeled out of the material, and, at great effort, to be established as independent objects of study' (1858a: 881). One consistent theme in Marx's comments on production in general nevertheless does deserve emphasis here. Though similarly tautological and self-evident to Marx himself, it above all else distinguishes his approach from that of most mainstream economics. This is his insistence on the irreducibly social nature of production – the point brought out by Colletti above.

In *The German Ideology* Marx stresses that 'the production of life . . . appears as a *double* relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship' (1846a: 41, emphasis added). *Wage Labour and Capital* elaborates on this:

> In production, men enter into relation not only with nature. They produce only by cooperating in a certain way and mutually exchanging their activities. In order to produce, they enter into definite connections and relations with one another, and only within these social connections and relations does their relation with nature, does production, take place. (1847b: 211)

The same point is basic to Marx's polemic in the General Introduction to the *Grundrisse* against the 'unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades', the isolated hunters and fishermen who provide the analytic starting-point for the classical economists' systems. 'Production by an isolated individual outside society . . . is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other' (1857: 84). Other texts, early and late, concur (including in the linguistic analogy).[9] This sociological emphasis is encapsulated in the nearest Marx comes to a general definition of production as such, again from the General Introduction: 'All production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual *within and through a definite form of society*' (ibid.: 87, emphasis added). Conversely, as argued in the *Grundrisse*, 'when we consider . . . society in the long view and as a whole, then the final result of the process of social production always appears as the society itself, i.e. the human being itself in its social relations' (1858a: 712). To produce material goods in a particular way is *ipso facto* to participate in the (equally particular) social relations involved in doing so.

Marx's claim here, it should be stressed, is not that social relations are caused by material production but that it irreducibly involves them. They are part and parcel of it. It accordingly cannot be conceptualized, in any empirically adequate manner, independently of them. In particular, production cannot be conceived as a purely 'material' sphere, if material is taken to exclude social. I shall argue in chapter 3 that this vitiates Cohen's attempted distinction between 'material' and 'social' relations of production as substantially distinct kinds of relation. In Ollman's terminology, the connection between people's productive relations with nature, or labour process, and their productive relations between themselves, or social relations of production, is internal and necessary, not external and contingent. In any given empirical context (a particular, historical form of) the one entails (a particular, historical form of) the other.[10] These are but different 'sides' of one and the same set of relations, not substantially separable relations at all.

IV

I shall now try to show, with reference to productive forces, that this holds equally for any individual components of production. They cannot be conceived as exclusively material either. As production is

in general for Marx a double relationship, so productive forces – consistently enough – are also in his usage 'double', simultaneously natural (material) and social. By this I mean two things. First, both material and social phenomena – in so far as we may coherently distinguish them thus at all when dealing with human productive activities – may become productive forces. Marx talks routinely of 'every . . . natural or social power of labour' (1858a: 358). Whether or not they do, as in general with Marx and argued above, depends on historical context. Second, and rather more subtly, the material/social distinction is highly problematic here, and real forces of production for Marx habitually partake of both sets of attributes.

Material things (land, tools, raw materials, fuel, machines and so forth) only become productive forces in so far as they take on social characteristics. A production line, for instance, is indeed (among other things) a set of material objects, and the natural properties of those objects obviously make up an important part of the explanation of its contribution to the productivity of human labour. But a production line is equally a manifestation or embodiment of both ideas and social relations, and it is only through these that it becomes a production line as distinct from a heap of useless metal. The ideas and social relations, therefore, are quite as intrinsic to the possibility of a production line being a productive force as its more evidently material features. A machine would not be a productive force in a society which lacked the technical knowledge or social organization to utilize its material capacities; at best it might be a potential productive force.

Conversely, social phenomena – forms of co-operation and division of labour, scientific knowledge, the Protestant 'work ethic', and much else – are not productive forces either, except in so far as they are materialized in actual production processes. In this sense 'all productive force resolves itself' into 'a given relation to nature' (1858a: 540). They, too, will only be potential productive forces outwith this context, and accordingly 'fettered' if the requisite conditions for their productive utilization are absent. One frequent argument for socialism, for instance, is that it would unlock the knowledge and enthusiasm of direct producers in a way capitalism, by virtue of its social relations, does not. In short, neither material objects, nor social phenomena, are inherently or universally productive forces by virtue of their 'innate' properties alone; they become so only by dint of the relations – both between people themselves, and between people and nature – in which they stand. Things, then – contrary to Cohen, and much mainstream Marxism[11] – are not, in or of themselves, productive forces. The concept is inherently a relational, and therefore an historical and contextual, one.

Indeed, an alternative translation of Marx's *Produktivkräfte* – that of productive *powers* – is rather more revealing of the sense he gave the term. 'Productive powers' was in fact the original concept in classical political economy which Marx rendered in German as *Produktivkräfte*. Whereas a 'force' can be conceived as a thing, an independent entity, standing alone, a power is always an attribute *of* something. For Marx, the power in question is specifically that of social labour. 'The' productive forces – a reifying formulation – are precisely the powers to transform nature (and with it human nature) of social labour. Productive forces are thus an attribute of human beings in association, their collective capacities, not a set of things as such at all. Cohen himself notes that 'neither an instrument of production nor a quantity of raw material in strict speech *is* a productive force' (1978: 37); I believe there is more than a slippage of language involved here. As a well-known passage in the *Grundrisse* hyperbolically puts it:

> Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand.* (1858a: 706)

The productive power of social labour may indeed, in the course of human development, increasingly become embodied in things – like machines – and undeniably it is through such embodiment that it is most enhanced. This is what is so revolutionary about modern industry; for Marx it represented a qualitative break, a veritable quantum leap in the unfolding of human productive potential comparable only perhaps with the neolithic revolution. Human beings are, distinctively, creatures who purposefully objectify their collective capacities in the material world they create through transforming nature, and this is fundamental to Marx's sociology. In his earlier writings it is this which defines human 'species-being', while in

Capital it remains the purposive character of human labour which 'stamps it as exclusively human' and 'distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees' (1867a: 178). Under certain circumsances the productive powers of human labour may then come to appear simply as the intrinsic property of the material things in which these powers are objectified, independently of the social relations through which they alone acquire this property. But such an appearance is, for Marx, exactly that: a fetishistic illusion, and one he was much concerned to confute, as we shall see.

I shall first try to substantiate my interpretation of productive forces from Marx's texts. Having done that, I shall show that Marx himself explicitly criticized what has become the standard conception – the reduction of productive forces to the things used in production – as exactly such a fetish, an ideological confusion rooted in the alienated forms of appearance of human capacities and social relations under capitalism.

V

The passage already quoted from *The German Ideology*, which describes production as a 'double relationship', is an appropriate place to begin. For it reads, at more length, like this:

> the production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation . . . appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. *It follows from this that* a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a 'productive force'. (1846a: 41, emphasis added)

Note should be taken of the words I have italicized: it is interesting to see what Marx himself considered to follow for the concept of productive forces from his understanding of production as a 'double relationship'. Cohen does not discuss the closing sentence to this passage: oddly, since Marx here explicitly includes social relations among productive forces, something Cohen is at pains to deny. Were this the only occasion where Marx did so, it could perhaps be

dismissed as an aberration, notwithstanding its evident connection with the logic of his overall argument. But it is not.

Marx speaks, for instance, in the same text – when discussing communism – of 'communal economy' as 'in itself . . . a new productive force'. Though he makes clear that communism supposes an appropriately developed technology, it remains the 'communal economy', and not the technology in and of itself, that is the productive force at issue (1846a: 40n). He also counterposes 'industrial productive forces' and 'productive forces . . . based on association and the community' (ibid.: 91). Lest such sentiments be thought a peculiarity of Marx's early works alone, the *Grundrisse*, also, describes 'the community itself . . . as the first great force of production' (1858a: 495).

In the same work, Marx argues that 'the capability to consume' is 'the development of an individual potential, a force of production. The saving of labour-time [is] equal to an increase in free time, i.e., time for the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labour as itself the greatest productive power' (1858a: 711). Discussing Robinson Crusoe, he conceives such castaways – bereft, presumably, of advanced technology – as persons 'in whom the social forces are already dynamically present' none the less (1857: 74, 84–5). Money, as well as being 'an intrinsic relation of production', is 'itself an instrument of production' and 'a driving wheel for the development of all forces of production, material and mental' (1858a: 215, 216, 223; cf. 225). 'Trade' is numbered as a productive force alongside industry and science (ibid.: 277). So is 'increase in population', because it 'makes possible a greater combination and division of labour' (ibid.: 399). Most importantly, perhaps, it is '*the human being himself*' who is '*the main force of production*' (ibid.: 422).[12] *Capital*, similarly – though not explicitly using the term 'productive force' – describes state activity during the early development of capitalism as 'itself an economic power' (1867a: 751). Not all of these can plausibly be dismissed as merely metaphorical extensions of the concept.

Returning to the early works, a draft article of 1845 brings out the thoroughly contextual, historical character of Marx's concept with macabre irony:

> Under the present system, if a crooked spine, twisted limbs, a one-sided development and strengthening of certain muscles, etc., makes you more

capable of working (more productive), then your crooked spine, your twisted limbs, your one-sided muscular movement are a productive force. If your intellectual vacuity is more productive than your abundant intellectual activity, then your intellectual vacuity is a productive force, etc. etc. If the monotony of an occupation makes you better suited for that occupation, then monotony is a productive force. (1845a: 285)

F. W. Taylor, the pioneer of 'scientific management', would readily have concurred. For optimal operation of his system he sought workers 'of smaller calibre and attainments', 'of the type of the ox' (quoted in Braverman, 1974: 118, 108). Adam Smith thought the modern division of labour made the worker 'as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become'; a destiny he saw – in this case I presume with unintended irony – as inevitable, for 'the labouring poor, that is, the great mass of the people', 'in every improved and civilizing society' (*Wealth of Nations,* quoted in Marx, 1867a: 362).

But rather than multiply isolated quotations (which would not however be difficult in this instance) I think the argument best advanced by looking in detail at how Marx comprehends productive forces in the context of one substantial piece of historical analysis. The example I shall give is his study of the emergence of specifically capitalist productive forces. It is drawn, therefore, from the very centre of his intellectual and political concerns – the analysis of the capitalist mode of production. This example will also allow us some insight into how, in one empirical instance – but again, an absolutely central one in his work – Marx saw technological development and social change intersecting in the genesis of a new mode of production, thus clarifying the claims of the 1859 Preface on this point. The texts on which I mainly draw are the first volume of *Capital,* and its draft so-called 'sixth chapter' (1866). This latter is a long manuscript entitled 'Results of the immediate process of production' which was written some time between 1863 and 1866, and published only in 1933 (and first translated into English in 1976). 'Results . . .' clarifies some of *Capital*'s arguments in important ways. Marx originally intended it to follow the chapter on Wakefield with which *Capital* I as we know it closes.

In these writings, Marx distinguishes what he calls manufacture and machine industry as successive historical stages (though stages 'no more separated from each other by hard and fast lines of demarcation, than are geological epochs' (1867a: 371)) in the development of a specifically capitalist production process. These stages rest upon different historical forms of the labour/capital relation, which Marx refers to as formal and real subordination, subjection or subsumption of labour to capital respectively. To these two forms of the capital/labour relation, and stages in the development of a capitalist production process, correspond two different modes of exploitation of labour. These are absolute and relative surplus-value. Marx details these in parts 3 and 4 of *Capital* I. Absolute surplus-value is obtained by extending the working-day, relative surplus-value by diminishing, through increases in productivity, the portion of it devoted to reproducing the labourer's wage-costs.

Formal subordination of labour to capital – the social basis of capitalist manufacture – involves, for Marx, simply a change in social relations. Workers previously in possession of their means of production, whether as peasants or artisan craftsmen, become wage-labourers, dependent for their livelihood upon the sale of their labour-power to capitalist employers. Real subordination, by contrast, comes into being only when 'a technologically and otherwise *specific mode of production – capitalist production* – . . . transforms the nature *of the labour process and its actual conditions*' (1866: 1034–5). Labour is said to be really subjected to capital when the production process itself, and above all the instruments of labour, have become transformed in such a way that they can only be operated co-operatively, by '*labour-power socially combined*' (ibid.: 1040), or what *Capital* terms 'the collective labourer'. At this stage of capitalist development – unlike in manufacture, where the power of capital remains a merely social requisite of production – 'the sway of capital develops into a requisite for carrying on the labour process itself, into a real requisite of production' (1867a: 330). The difference Marx is pointing to is that between, say, hand-loom weavers working under the putting-out system, where the actual mode of work is no different from that they would have pursued had they remained independent craftsmen, and power-loom weavers working in large factories.

Real subordination occurs with the development of machine industry. Thereafter, it is not merely their dispossession, but the concrete forms of the actual labour-process itself – large-scale, co-ordinated, mechanized productive processes – that prevent the labourers from working individually for themselves. The very tech-

nology of production is socialized. In its capitalist form, however, modern industry is a palpable, material embodiment of the social power of capital and the expropriation of labour. This, for Marx, in contrast to merely formal subordination, represents 'the development of a *specifically capitalist mode of production*' (1866: 1021), 'a *specifically capitalist form of production* . . . at the technological level too' (ibid.: 1024), '*capitalist production proper*' (ibid.: 1027).

Crucially for my argument, Marx is adamant that the merely formal subordination of labour does not entail any immediate changes in the labour process, though it may (it also may not) lead to their adoption. Nor, equally importantly, does it in any way presuppose the prior development of a specifically capitalist technology, or indeed any technical advancements whatsoever on previous modes of production. Formal subordination of labour to capital, according to 'Results . . .':

> does not in itself imply a fundamental modification in the real nature of the labour process, the actual process of production. On the contrary, the fact is that capital subsumes the labour process as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over an *existing labour process,* developed by different and more archaic modes of production . . . For example, handicraft, a mode of agriculture corresponding to a small, independent peasant economy. If changes occur in these traditional established *labour processes* after their takeover by capital, these are nothing but the gradual *consequences* of that subsumption. The work may become more intensive, its duration may be extended, it may become more continuous or orderly under the eye of the interested capitalist, but in themselves these changes do not affect the character of the actual labour process, the actual mode of working. (1866: 1021, final emphasis added)

> There is no change as yet in the mode of production itself. *Technologically speaking,* the *labour process* goes on as before, with the proviso that it is now *subordinated* to capital. (ibid.: 1026)

In *Capital,* Marx extends these points. He distinguishes, within the manufacturing epoch, two successive regimes which precede the development of machine industry and capitalist production proper. These are 'simple co-operation' and 'detail division of labour'. In the first, workers are brought together, either physically under one roof or organizationally under the aegis of a single capitalist; in the second – as in Adam Smith's famous discussion of pin manufacture – existing crafts are broken down into detailed operations devolving on different individuals. In neither case, Marx makes clear, is the technological

basis of the production process altered, though its social relations are already undeniably capitalist (1867a: ch. 24). Indeed eventually this 'narrow technical basis' becomes a 'fetter . . . on the dominion of capital' (ibid.: 368).

Whereas, for Marx, the real subordination of labour to capital always supposes its formal subsumption – the wage relation being fundamental to all forms of capitalist enterprise[13] – 'the converse does not necessarily obtain' (1866: 1019). We may, in other words, find formal subordination in the absence of, or side by side with, the specifically capitalist mode of production based on real subordination. The latter arises out of the former only 'if the historical circumstances are otherwise favourable, as they were for instance in the sixteenth century' (ibid.: 1022). There is no automaticity about the progression. But on one point the 'sixth chapter' is insistent:

> absolute surplus-value always precedes relative. To these two forms of surplus-value there correspond two separate forms of the subsumption of labour under capital, or two distinct forms of capitalist production. And here too the one form always precedes the other. (ibid.: 1025)

Capital is equally emphatic. 'A greater number of labourers working together . . . under the mastership of one capitalist, constitutes, both historically and logically, the starting-point of capitalist production' (1867a: 322).

Now, it is true that in this account capitalist production proper is only achieved with the real subordination of labour to capital. Only then does capitalism become 'a mode of production *sui generis*' (1866: 1035). It is true, also, that Marx at one point asserts that it is only at the latter stage that 'the corresponding *relations of production* between the various agents of production and above all between the capitalist and the wage-labourer, come into being for the first time' (ibid.: 1024). This is, on the face of it, somewhat mystifying – indeed contradictory – in the context of the overall analysis, for Marx is clear throughout that formal subordination is a capitalist relation, or 'form of capitalist production' (ibid.: 1025). The only sense I can make of this apparent inconsistency is to interpret Marx as saying that only with real subordination do capitalist relations achieve what he later calls their 'adequate form' (ibid.: 1035) – only then, in the words of the *Grundrisse,* do they gain 'totality and extent' (1858a: 277; cf. 297), becoming obligatory and general, because materialized in the very

forms of the labour process itself. This indeed does presuppose an industrial technology.

But what is beyond any doubt, throughout the analysis, is that technological change as such is not the *primum agens* in the rise of capitalism, or even in the development of the production process most appropriate to it, machine industry. It may be capitalism's most productively revolutionary consequence, but that is a different issue. It is in fact competition between capitals – explained by the division of labour between them, a social relation – which compels technical innovation, and the labour/capital relation that makes its general adoption possible on the basis of co-operative labour. Social relations, not productive forces as conventionally construed, thus have explanatory primacy. '*Capital* is productive, i.e. an essential relation for the development of the social productive forces' – these being 'the productive powers of labour, which [it] incessantly whips onward with its unlimited mania for wealth' (1858a: 325, emphasis added). The 'sixth chapter' is clear that formal subsumption of labour – a change in social relations alone – is not merely historically antecedent to, but forms 'the premiss and precondition of its *real* subsumption' (1866: 1026). *Capital*, again, reiterates the point. It is the production of relative surplus-value – on the basis of real subordination – which 'revolutionizes out and out the technical processes of labour'; but this 'presupposes a specific mode, the capitalist mode of production, a mode which, along with its methods, means and conditions, arises and develops itself spontaneously on the foundation offered by the formal subjection of labour to capital' (1867a: 510).

How, then, are we to reconcile this historical analysis with the picture usually drawn from the 1859 Preface, in which the development of productive forces – understood technologically, as the things used in production (including labour-power) – is the ultimate motor force of historical change, impelling transition from one mode to another? At first sight, Marx's analysis – an analysis, it should again be recalled, of the rise of that mode of production whose 'laws of motion' preoccupied him above all others – flatly contradicts this picture. Here, changes in production relations bring about developments in technology, not the other way about. A perusal of part 8 of *Capital* I, incidentally, would complicate the issue still further, since it would additionally reveal the key part played in Marx's account by those historically 'favourable circumstances' of the sixteenth century

to which he refers in the 'sixth chapter'. It is difficult to see how for instance Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries is readily susceptible to technological explanation, no matter how 'ultimate'.

Marx's account is in fact (logically) compatible with Cohen's functionalist reading of the 'primacy thesis', to which I shall return. It evidently cannot, however, be reconciled with standard causal versions of that claim. In the face of this Anderson (1974a: 204 ff.), Bettelheim (1976: 86 ff.), Balibar (in Althusser, 1970: 233 ff.) and others have sought to reverse the traditional paradigm, arguing instead for the dominance of relations over forces. Whilst I sympathize with what they are attempting, I believe the problem to be illusory. I also think this solution misleading, for several reasons. First, it bends the stick too far; as I shall show, there is a sense in which Marx's analysis here is compatible with the 'primacy thesis', though that sense is not Cohen's. But simply to reverse the line of causality between forces and relations obscures the important extent to which, for Marx, the growth of human productive power does remain the fundamental dynamic of historical progress. Second – although the authors I have cited are not in fact themselves generally guilty of this – a mere reversal of terms may have the consequence of preserving a conception of productive forces as things which was not Marx's own, and which is, as I shall argue below, specifically fetishistic. Finally, this way out of the dilemma entails dismissing the claims of the 1859 Preface as anomalous, which is to say the least implausible.

In fact, Marx's analysis of the rise of capitalist productive forces contradicts the claims of the 1859 Preface only so long as productive forces are understood in the traditional, restrictive manner. So soon as the forms of co-operation and division of labour entailed in the formal subsumption of labour to capital (or, indeed, the competitive relations between individual capitals) are themselves acknowledged to be productive forces in this historical context, the apparent inconsistency disappears. The rise of capitalism is indeed understood in terms of new productive forces conflicting with old production relations, exactly as the Preface requires. Only in this case – in the first instance, at any rate – the new forces at issue are embodied in new forms of social relationship rather than new technologies. Such an interpretation is of course consistent with the passages cited above from *The German Ideology* and elsewhere, which indicate that for

Marx social relations could indeed be productive forces. But we do not need to go so far for authorization of this heresy. The texts on which I have been drawing – *Capital* and 'Results of the immediate process of production' – themselves say as much.

Although, for Marx, formal subsumption of labour to capital entails no technological change in the labour process, it does lead to a considerable enhancement in the productive power of human labour. He repeatedly, even tediously, stresses this. For the *Grundrisse,* 'the greater the extent to which production still rests on mere manual labour . . . the more does the increase of the *productive force* consist in [producers'] collaboration *on a mass scale*' (1858a: 529). In the 'sixth chapter', Marx lists several ways in which this happens.

Formal subsumption 'increases the continuity and intensity of labour; it is more favourable to the development of *versatility among the workers,* and hence to increasing diversity in modes of working and ways of earning a living' (1866: 1026–7). In contrast to slave or servile labour, 'this labour becomes more productive . . . The consciousness (or better, the *idea*) of free self-determination, of liberty, makes a much better worker of the one than of the other, as does the related feeling (sense) of *responsibility*' (ibid.: 1031, Marx's parentheses). 'Social forms of consciousness' – 'superstructural' phenomena *par excellence* for most Marxists – would seem here to be part of capitalism's productive forces, and unproblematically so for Marx. A similar case could be made for Max Weber's 'Protestant ethic', an 'orientation to conduct' of whose benefits to capitalist enterprise neither Marx himself, nor Marxist historians like Hill or Thompson, have been entirely unaware.[14] This position is perfectly coherent within the multi-referential and non-exclusive interpretation of Marx's general concepts argued earlier, but not otherwise. The same goes for the passage on state activity as 'itself an economic power' quoted above. Elsewhere Marx similarly describes French state formation as 'a powerful coefficient of social production' (1871: 75). My own previous work (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985) suggests he was not exaggerating.

Perhaps most importantly of all, for Marx, formal subsumption permits – 'even on the basis of the old, traditional mode of labour' – large increases in the scale of production, and 'this enlargement of scale constitutes the real foundation on which the specifically capitalist mode of production can arise' (1866: 1022). Once again *Capital* generalizes the point:

> the sum total of the mechanical forces exerted by isolated workmen differs from the social force that is developed, when many hands take part simultaneously in one and the same undivided operation . . . In such cases the effect of the combined labour could not be produced at all by isolated individual labour, or it could only be produced by a great expenditure of time, or on a very dwarfed scale. Not only have we here an increase in the productive power of the individual, by means of co-operation, but the creation of a new power, namely, the collective power of masses. (1867a: 326)

Marx goes on to remark that 'mere social contact begets in most industries an emulation and a stimulation of the animal spirits that heighten the efficiency of each individual workman'. His general conclusion – something of a syntactic battering-ram, but worth giving in full – is this:

> Whether the combined working-day, in a given case, acquires this increased productive power, because it heightens the mechanical force of labour, or extends its sphere of action over a greater space, or contracts the field of production relatively to the scale of production, or at the critical moment sets large masses of labour to work, or excites emulation between individuals and raises their animal spirits, or impresses on the similar operations carried on by a number of men the stamp of continuity and many-sidedness, or performs simultaneously different operations, or economises the means of production by use in common, or lends to individual labour the character of average social labour – whichever of these be the cause of the increase, the special productive power of the combined working day is, under all circumstances, the social productive power of labour, or the productive power of social labour. *This power is due to co-operation itself.* When the labourer co-operates systematically with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species. (ibid.: 329, emphasis added)

Only the most determined casuist, I would suggest, could deny that for *Capital,* as much as for *The German Ideology,* people's 'mode of co-operation is itself a "productive force"' – and a pretty powerful one at that. The forces/relations distinction as conventionally drawn must accordingly collapse. These are not mutually exclusive concepts, denoting substantially distinct entities.

Cohen himself does discuss these analyses, though not at any great length. He deals with the apparent contradiction between Marx's assertion here of the historical and logical precedence of formal over real subordination, and the 'primacy thesis', via his interpretation of

the latter as a functional rather than straightforwardly causal argument. In brief:

> the primacy thesis does not say that forces *characteristic* of capitalism preceded its arrival. It rather requires that nascent forces could not be used or developed within pre-capitalist relations, and that a capitalist structure was necessary for productive progress. (1978: 179)

'Forces [even as yet non-existent forces] select structures according to their capacity to promote development' (ibid.: 162; my interjection, based on Cohen's arguments in ibid.: 177). Cohen is right that if Marx is interpreted thus, the contradiction disappears. His reading is internally coherent, whatever other objections might be raised against it. In chapter 5 I shall argue against both functional explanation as Cohen conceives it, and its ascription by him to Marx.

The second problem I have raised is that of social relations themselves being putative productive forces. I hope I have shown that the view that they may be is more than warranted by Marx's texts. Cohen, to my mind, simply evades this issue when commenting on these analyses. He draws a distinction, within the category of production relations, between 'social relations' and what he calls 'material relations between producers' or 'work relations'. The former alone enter into the 'economic structure'. I shall discuss this distinction further in my next chapter. The relevant point here is that Cohen classifies the forms of co-operation and division of labour I argue were for Marx (also) productive forces, as 'material relations'. He then concedes that '*something* in this conceptual area is a productive force, but not the work relations themselves' (ibid.: 113). In his view, the relevant productive force is 'knowledge of ways of organising labour', not that organization as such (ibid.). This seems to me a wholly artificial, if characteristically ingenious, piece of special pleading: knowledge, like machines, is a productive force only in so far as it is productively applied.

It is also, it should be said, an extremely cavalier reading of the texts I have cited. Marx makes it abundantly clear that the relevant power is that of – in his own words – 'co-operation itself', not the knowledge of or blueprint for co-operation, and he does so repeatedly. The only justification for denying Marx's contention is consistency within Cohen's own theory, and whatever the merits of the

latter, this is not a good reason for attributing to Marx a view he demonstrably did not hold, or denying to him the view he equally demonstrably did. Particularly if, as is the general argument of this book, an alternative and equally coherent account of historical materialism, which is consistent with Marx's own conceptual usage, is eminently possible.

VI

Following a characteristically capacious account of what, in capitalism, 'the *social* productive forces of labour, or the productive forces of directly social, *socialized* (i.e. collective) labour' actually comprise, the 'sixth chapter' goes on to observe that:

> This entire development of the productive forces of *socialized labour* . . . takes the form of the *productive power of capital.* It does not appear as the productive power of labour, or even of that part of it which is identical with capital. And least of all does it appear as the productive power either of the individual worker or of the workers joined together in the process of production. The mystification implicit in the relations of capital as a whole is greatly intensified here, far beyond the point it had reached or could have reached in the merely formal subsumption of labour under capital. (1866: 1024)

This brings me to the second major argument I want to develop on Marx's understanding of productive forces. This is that to conceive them otherwise than as powers of social labour – and specifically, to identify them with the 'things used in production', means of production and labour-power – is, so far as Marx is concerned, to 'mystify' them. It is in fact a paradigm instance of what he diagnosed as 'the fetishism peculiar to the capitalist mode of production', from which, in his view, most economics suffered (ibid.: 1046). Since the concept of fetishism will be a central one in the overall argument of this book, it is worth spending some time establishing what exactly Marx meant by it.[15]

We saw earlier that he systematically distinguished a 'material side' and a 'formal side' to production. The material side is that which all human productive activities have in common, or that which pertains to production in general in abstraction from its particular social

modalities. For instance all production involves a labour process, and all products have a use-value (understood as a capacity to meet some human need). But to conceive production simply thus, from its 'material side' alone, is, Marx argues, to grasp it abstractly. For – Robinson Crusoe notwithstanding – production only takes place empirically within definite social relations, and it is these which imprint on its elements, in any given case, their particular social or economic forms. It is these forms which are Marx's prime concern, defining 'real historical stages' of production.

In capitalism, for instance, the labour process is also a process of production of surplus-value, and the product, in addition to having use-value, assumes the specific 'value-form' of the commodity. The latter term in each pair is a distinctively social characteristic, and the specific object of Marx's analysis. Thus, clarifying the methodological starting-point of *Capital* in his 1880 Notes on Adolf Wagner, he makes it clear that, 'I do not start from "concepts" . . . What I start from is the simplest social form in which the labour product is represented in contemporary society, and this is "*the commodity*"' (1880a: 50; cf. 1858a: 881).

Fetishism confuses, or indeed inverts, these two sets of attributes, material and formal or natural and social. Properties which things acquire entirely as a consequence of their standing in a specific set of social relations are mistakenly seen as inhering in, and explained by, the material qualities of those objects themselves. In Marx's own words, fetishism 'consists in regarding *economic* categories, such as being a *commodity* or *productive* labour, as qualities inherent in the material incarnations of these formal determinations or categories' (1866: 1046). To fetishize economic phenomena is to 'metamorphose the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of production into a natural character stemming from the material nature of those things' (1878: 229).

So commodity fetishism, to take Marx's best-known example, consists in seeing the value of commodities as something intrinsic to them as things, and therefore explicable by their material features, their scarcity, durability, utility or whatever. But these material features, for Marx, pertain only to the use-values of commodities, something the goods in question would continue to have even if they did not assume the commodity-form, and – as for instance when immediately consumed by their producers – accordingly had no value

as such. The commodity 'as an exchange-value differs from itself as a natural, material thing' (1858a: 188). Exchange-value is 'a cipher for a relation of production' (ibid.: 141). It is a material mode of expression of a social relation, the respective amounts of labour necessary under given conditions to the production of different commodities, and it is the social relations specific to commodity production which wholly explain why the labour-product should assume this specific (and somewhat mystifying) value-form: 'No scientist has yet discovered what natural properties make definite proportions of snuff tobacco and paintings "equivalents" for one another' (1863c: 130). Rather:

> Where labour is communal, the relations of men in their social production do not manifest themselves as 'values' of 'things'. Exchange of products as commodities is a method of exchanging labour, [it demonstrates] the dependence of the labour of each upon the labour of the others [and corresponds to] a certain mode of social labour or social production. (ibid.: 129, interpolations from editorial collation of Marx's ms.)

In money, the universal symbol of value, the fetish reaches its apotheosis: 'a social relation, a definite relation between individuals, appears as a metal, a stone, as a purely physical, external thing' (ibid.: 239). This kind of transubstantiation is, for Marx, wholly analogous with what goes on in 'the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world', and explains his use of the term fetishism (which he took originally from Feuerbach's critique of religion): 'In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands' (1867a: 72).

This first fetishistic confusion, of material and social, entails a second. To comprehend social properties of objects as deriving from their material attributes is at the same time implicitly to universalize them, to deny their specific historical character. Thus value, in this example, becomes a property products possess transhistorically, irrespective of their particular modes of production. It is no longer, as for Marx, 'a historic relation' (1858a: 252), a property things acquire only within a definite historical mode of production – commodity production, which rests on particular relations between people, a specific form of social division of labour, not found in all forms of

human society. Capitalist conditions are thereby covertly taken as premisses of any and all human sociation. The connection between this critique of fetishism, and the argument developed earlier in this chapter concerning the necessarily historical character of Marx's substantive categories will, I hope, be evident. For him, 'it is precisely these *forms* that are alone of importance when the question is the specific character of a mode of social production' (1863a: 296, emphasis added).

Importantly, for Marx fetishism is not simply an intellectual *faux pas*, a category error. Consistently with his general denial of the independence of ideas from people's 'materialistic connection', of consciousness from experience – which I shall discuss further in chapter 4 – he seeks to root fetishism in the forms in which, under capitalism, individuals actually experience their social relations (Sayer, 1983, ch. 1; Godelier, 1964; Mepham, 1972). To use the hackneyed but none the less useful analogy, the mechanism of fetishism is akin to that of a mirage rather than an hallucination. It is not that people mistake what they see, what they see misleads them, for thoroughly objective reasons to do with how it presents itself to their consciousness. Marx makes this point against the Ricardian socialist, Thomas Hodgskin:

> Hodgskin says that the effects of a certain social form of labour are ascribed to objects, to the products of labour; the relationship itself is imagined to exist in *material* form . . . Hodgskin regards this as a pure subjective illusion which conceals the deceit and the interests of the exploiting classes. He does not see that the way of looking at things arises out of the relationship itself; the latter is not an expression of the former, but vice versa. (1863c: 295–6)

A corollary of this is that fetishism is not equally characteristic of all social formations (any more than, for Marx, ideology was an invariant feature of social life[16]), and its explanation must accordingly be empirically specific. He argues, for instance, that exploitation was much more transparent in feudal societies, because it was not concealed by the material forms of the labour process itself as in capitalism. Work for oneself and work for one's lord were palpably separate in a way they are not within the wage-relation, where all of one's labour-time appears to be paid for.[17] Empirically this is perhaps debatable, since feudal relations involved norms of reciprocity; crudely, protection, both earthly and divine, in exchange for services. But Marx's intent is clear.

For Marx, fetishism reaches its zenith in capitalism, and this is explained by the singularity of the social relations on which that mode of production rests. Fundamental to capitalism is a spontaneous social division of labour between private producers, which is not subject to any conscious overall social regulation. This 'same division of labour that turns [people] into private producers', he argues, 'also frees the social process of production . . . from all dependence on the wills of those producers.' Hence, 'their relations to each other . . . assume a material character independent of their control and conscious individual action.' What ensues is 'a whole network of social relations spontaneous in their growth and entirely beyond the control of the actors' (1867a: 108, 92–3, 112). This is epitomized in Adam Smith's 'hidden hand' of the market, governing the movements and prices of commodities apparently by laws entirely of its own. Indeed under capitalist conditions this appearance of autonomy on the part of 'market forces' is real, for it is only in the form of relative prices of goods that the social relations between independent producers are actually expressed, and only through the price-mechanism that equilibriation of inputs and outputs of labour between different branches of production is regulated.

The *Grundrisse* summarizes this key dimension of the sociology of capitalism:

> As much, then, as the whole of this movement appears as a social process, and as much as the individual moments of this movement arise from the conscious will and particular purposes of individuals, so much does the totality of the process appear as an objective interrelation, which arises spontaneously from nature; arising, it is true, from the mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another, but neither located in their consciousness, nor subsumed under them as a whole. Their own collisions with one another produce an *alien* social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them. Circulation, because a totality of the social process, is also the first form in which the social relation appears as something independent of the individuals, but not only as, say, in a coin or in exchange value, but extending to the whole of the social movement itself. The social relation of individuals to one another as a power over the individuals which has become autonomous, whether conceived as a natural force, as chance or in whatever other form, is a necessary result of the fact that the point of departure is not the free social individual. (1858a: 196–7)

The Hegelian language of this passage prompts one final observation. In this respect, at least, Marx's analysis of the 'bewitching'

phenomenology of capitalism was remarkably consistent over time. In the early writings he was more inclined to use the concept of alienation than that of fetishism, though the former figures in his later works to a far greater extent than some commentators have acknowledged (and the latter, which comes from Feuerbach, is by no means entirely absent from the 'young Marx'). But the heart of the analysis – that, within capitalism, people's social relations take on the 'alien' form of objects, and are accordingly fetishized in their consciousness – remains the same. So does the explanation of this fetishism as being consequent upon a particular social form of division of labour. This was, in short, an enduring and central theme of Marx's historical sociology.

VII

Many commentators have recognized the importance of the concept of fetishism in Marx's writings. Indeed Cohen himself offers an account of fetishism which is in many ways outstanding.[18] The relevance of Marx's critique of fetishism to what we understand by productive forces, however, has received much less attention. Fortunately, Marx himself provides explicit criticism of fetishized views of productive forces – their identification with the material objects in which they are embodied – and he does so throughout his work. In *The German Ideology*, for instance, he argues that under capitalist conditions:

> The social power, i.e., the multiplied productive force, which arises through the co-operation of different individuals as it is determined by the division of labour, appears to these individuals . . . not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them, of the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they cannot thus control, which on the contrary passes through a peculiar series of phases and stages independent of their will, nay even being the prime governor of these. (1846a: 46)

It is not without irony that although Cohen quotes this passage, it could have been written as an exact critique of his own formulation of Marx's so-called 'development thesis'. Both the independence of 'material' productive forces from social relations, their character as 'things', and their supposedly inherent tendency to develop, such

development being the 'prime governor' of history, emerge as precisely forms of appearance, arising out of specifically capitalist production relations.

We might note in passing the (important) converse that for Marx neither such development, nor its apparent spontaneity, were in fact universal. Closely following Hegel, he characterized the 'Asiatic' mode of production, for instance, in terms of its 'millenial stagnation'. 'Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history' (1853b: 217); life there is 'undignified, stagnant and vegetative' (1853a: 132). 'English interference' alone produced 'the only *social* revolution ever heard of in Asia' (ibid.: 131). This stasis is explained by the peculiar social relations of the 'self-sufficing communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form' (1867a: 358), which provide the economic foundation of 'Oriental despotism'.[19] Again, the empirical validity of this picture of Asiatic society – a picture whose roots in European (and Eurocentric) thought have been admirably traced by Krader (1975) – is more than dubious. But the illustration none the less suffices to clarify Marx's position.

Another passage from *The German Ideology* is equally clear on the fetishism entailed in identifying productive forces with their material embodiments, and says more about the specific social relations – the form of division of labour characteristic of generalized commodity production, one very different from that which prevails in Marx's portrayal of Indian communities (see 1867a: 257–9) – which grounds this reification. In capitalism, Marx writes:

> the productive forces appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals; the reason for this is that the individuals, whose forces they are, exist split up and in opposition to one another, whilst, on the other hand, these forces are only real forces in the intercourse and association of these individuals. Thus . . . we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, *taken on a material form* and are for the individuals no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property. (1846a: 83–4, emphasis added)

Marx goes on to argue that 'the history of the evolving forces' is in reality 'therefore, the history of the development of the forces of the individuals themselves' (ibid.: 90). The *Grundrisse* similarly describes 'forces of production and social relations' as 'but two different sides of the development of the social individual' (1858a: 706).

I do not believe we can plausibly interpret 'forces of individuals' in such passages as these to refer simply to the things individuals own – means of production and labour-power – as Cohen's reading would oblige us to. Marx is not speaking here of an external relation of ownership, by people of things (or their own and other people's labouring capacities). On the contrary, when he says a force of production is a force of individuals he clearly intends that 'force' be understood as a power, an attribute, a characteristic, of those individuals in association – of social individuals – albeit a power which may frequently be materialized in things. The relation is internal.

Marx argues similarly in his later writings. The *Grundrisse* is insistent that labour is 'the productive force which maintains and multiplies capital, and which thereby becomes the productive force ... of capital, a force belonging to capital itself' (1858a: 274). Importantly, Marx makes clear that by 'labour' here he does not mean labour-power, the commodity which the worker sells the capitalist; the productive force is 'labour as value-positing *activity*, as productive labour' (ibid., emphasis added). This distinction between labour-power and labour is not a casual one; it is fundamental to Marx's analysis of capitalism as a whole, and basic, amongst other things, to his mature theory of surplus-value. Cohen, acknowledging the distinction, perversely insists (1978: 43–4) that it is labour-power and not labouring activity which is the productive force. One can see why. Labour-power can be conceived as a 'thing used in production', as Cohen's theory requires, in a way that labour-as-activity on his own admission cannot. Marx's insistence on the contrary, on the other hand, serves only to underline the gulf between his concept and Cohen's.

Later in the same work Marx argues that 'all the progress of civilization, or in other words every increase in the *powers of social production* [*gesellschaftliche Produktivkräfte*], if you like, in the *productive powers of labour itself* ... increases only the productive power of capital ... The productivity of labour becomes the productive force of capital' (ibid.: 308; cf. 715). In an interesting and subtle elaboration of the argument, Marx goes on to say that those who see here a simple 'displacement' of the productive power of labour to capital, or argue that only labour – as distinct from capital – is productive, only partially escape from the fetish. For they forget that 'capital' precisely *is* a social relation, the essence of which is that it

subsumes labour and entails 'the necessary positing of its own powers as *alien* to the worker'. Such theorists – Marx has in mind Ricardo – 'do not conceive capital in its *specific character as form*, as a *relation of production* reflected into itself, but think only about its material substance, raw material, etc. But these material elements do not make capital into capital' (ibid.: 308–9). Capital is indeed a productive force, in fine, but it is so by virtue not simply of its 'material substance', but equally through its particular subsumption or inclusion within itself of labouring activity. It is a productive force, in other words, precisely in its character as a production relation.

One final quotation will suffice to round off the argument. It is taken from *Theories of Surplus Value*, a text intended by Marx as the fourth volume of *Capital*, which dates from the early 1860s. The parallels between fetishism of productive forces and commodity fetishism are here made absolutely explicit:

> Since living labour – through the exchange between capital and labourer – is incorporated in capital, and appears as an activity belonging to capital from the moment that the labour-process begins, all the productive powers of social labour appear as the productive powers of capital, just as the general social form of labour appears in money as the property of a thing. Thus the productive power of social labour and its special forms now appear as productive powers and forms of capital, of *materialized* labour, of the material conditions of labour – which, having assumed this independent form, are personified by the capitalist in relation to living labour. Here we have once more the perversion of the relationship, which we have already, in dealing with money, called *fetishism*. (1863a: 389)

Marx could scarcely be plainer. The 'traditional' conception of productive forces defended by Cohen, I submit, splendidly exemplifies this 'perversion of the relationship'. It illustrates both features of fetishism discussed above: materialization of the social, and consequent universalization of the historical. This conception certainly takes productive forces to be not 'the productive powers of social labour', but 'productive powers ... of the *material conditions of labour*'. Cohen defines productive forces in terms of the latter, as labouring capacity and means of production, and moreover takes pains to insist that these are material as distinct, quite specifically, from social forces. He then generalizes this concept of productive forces to all modes of production. A misleading and specifically capitalist appearance – for Marx – thereby gets transmuted into a

general theoretical postulate, in ways exactly parallel to those Marx himself criticized in his economic predecessors.

The consequences are serious. Not only does this mystify the productive forces of capitalism itself, at least as Marx conceived them, in ways evidently conducive to capitalist apologetics. Once capital is perceived as a thing, whose contribution to social productivity is independent of that of labour, profit can be understood as its equally independent and thoroughly deserved reward (see Sayer, 1983: ch. 3). The fetishizing of Marx's concept also denies us access to what actually were the productive forces of previous epochs, if by that we understand those things (and ideas, and relations) which actually did enhance the productivity of labour, and thereby give humanity a history which is, despite everything, meaningfully a progress. Marx numbers here such phenomena as 'the power of Asiatic and Egyptian kings, Etruscan theocrats, &c.' in relation to 'the colossal effects of simple co-operation' evident in such 'gigantic structures' as the pyramids (1867a: 333–4; see also the long quote there from Richard Jones).

But, as a famous passage in *Capital* remarks – *à propos* commodity fetishism, but the point applies equally to other fetishes as well:

> Man's reflections on the forms of social life, and consequently, also, his scientific analysis of those forms, take a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development. He begins, *post festum*, with the results of the process of development ready to hand before him. The characters that stamp products as commodities . . . have already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life, before man seeks to decipher, not their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but their meaning . . . The categories of bourgeois economy consist of such like forms. They are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production. The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, as soon as we come to other forms of production. (1867a: 75–6)

It seems that 'traditional historical materialism' has yet to learn this lesson, and is no more immune than bourgeois economics to the fetishistic seduction of 'natural, self-understood forms of social life' (1867a: 75), in which, for Marx, our 'social forms of consciousness' are embedded. One might say of the traditional conception of productive forces, as Marx himself said of political economists' notions

of value, that 'these formulae . . . bear it stamped upon them in unmistakable letters that they belong to a state of society, in which the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him' (1867a: 81). One might also take seriously, sixth and lastly perhaps, his cautionary invocation of Shakespeare's Dogberry, for whom 'To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by nature' (*Much Ado About Nothing*, III. iii, as quoted in Marx, ibid.).

3

Relations of production

I

If productive forces are not the things they are so often taken to be, then definitions of production relations, and hence Marx's 'economic structure of society', in terms of ownership of these forces are clearly in some jeopardy. But there is far more to be said about the concepts of production relations and economic structure than this. We may begin with a common criticism of historical materialism, to which I briefly alluded in chapter 1. In the 1859 Preface, as we know, Marx says that property relations are 'but a legal expression for' relations of production, and his writings frequently assimilate the two terms. H. B. Acton, amongst others, has argued that this renders Marxism incoherent. It amounts, he says, to defining production relations – the alleged 'economic base' of society – by legal forms which belong in the very 'superstructure' which that base, within historical materialist theory, is supposed to determine. The theory is thus viciously circular. Acton goes on to argue, more generally, that 'the "material or economic basis of society" is not . . . something that can be clearly *conceived,* still less *observed,* apart from the legal, moral and political relationships of men' (quoted Cohen, 1978: 235).

This charge is obviously a serious one for any Marxism which wishes to retain a standard base/superstructure model, and it has not gone unchallenged. Cohen, in particular, has replied at length. On the face of it, he has little trouble in disposing of Acton's argument. He simply develops a general '*rechtsfrei*' definition of 'ownership' in terms of real powers over, as distinct from legal rights in, the objects owned – productive forces, as he conceives them. Other Marxists,

like Balibar (in Althusser, 1970: 226 ff.), take a similar tack. Within such views, Marx's 'production relations' are ownership relations[1] in some distinctively non-juridical sense. Legally formalized property relations can then coherently be conceived as both distinct from and expressive of production relations thus defined, exactly as the 1859 Preface seems to require. This resolves Acton's problem of the independent conceivability of economic structure and superstructure. Cohen further argues, not unreasonably, that the fact that economic variables may not be empirically observable independently of the non-economic variables they are held to determine does not of itself invalidate the claim of determination. Such situations, he maintains, are commonplace in any developed science.

Cohen's solution is a nice, and characteristically elegant, piece of philosophical reasoning. But whether it satisfactorily resolves the substantial problem which lies at the heart of Acton's comments is another issue. Consider, by way of example, the following satirical observation of E. P. Thompson's on the supposed 'relative autonomy' of law. His ire is directed at Althusser's 'structural Marxism' rather than Cohen's, but the point is pertinent none the less:

> I have, as it happens, been interested in this myself, in my historical practice: not, of course, in any grand way – for the whole of history, nor for the capitalist mode of production everywhere, but in a very petty conjuncture: in an island on the edge of the Atlantic, very well supplied with lawyers, at a moment in the eighteenth century. So my evidence is highly marginal, as well as being seriously contaminated by empirical content. But what I discovered there would make *La Structure à Dominante* boggle. For I found that law did not keep politely to a 'level' but was at *every* bloody level; it was imbricated within the mode of production and production relations themselves (as property-rights, definitions of agrarian practice) and it was simultaneously present in the philosophy of Locke; it intruded brusquely within alien categories, re-appearing bewigged and gowned in the guise of ideology; it danced a cotillion with religion, moralising over the theatre at Tyburn; it was an arm of politics and politics was one of its arms; it was an academic discipline, subjected to the rigours of its own autonomous logic; it contributed to the definition of the self-identity both of rulers and ruled; above all, it afforded an arena for class struggle, within which alternative notions of law were fought out. (1978a: 288).

'*La Structure à Dominante*' is Althusser's 'structural causality' model, referred to above (p. 9). He, like Cohen – and many other Marxists – supposes the separability of the 'economic' from other levels of social

structure. It is this separation Thompson rejects, going on to ridicule the very notion of '"levels" motoring around history at different speeds and on different schedules' as 'an academic fiction' (ibid.: 289). I could have cited other Marxist historians like Christopher Hill on Coke's *Institutes*, or Rodney Hilton on jurisdiction in feudal Europe,[2] to similar effect.

Cohen's rebuttal of Acton is, significantly, carried out entirely within theory, at the level of a general, transhistorical concept of property. It is undoubtedly successful, as a piece of philosophical argument. To develop a *rechtsfrei* definition of property raises no particular difficulties of a theoretical sort. But what the passage from Thompson scathingly brings out is that so soon as we try to apply such a definition, and specify, historically, what real power over objects – property, as Cohen conceives it – empirically consists in, then those things excluded from its general *rechtsfrei* definition tend ineluctably to creep back in.

For we rapidly discover that 'power over objects' (including, here, people's labouring capacities) only exists, empirically, in forms which include things which according to the standard dogma ought to belong in the supposed 'superstructure'. In eighteenth-century England, for instance, we may not be able to say, in any empirically meaningful way, what 'property' or production relations were, without talking about game laws, the 'bloody code', Parliamentary Acts of enclosure, strict settlement and entail, magistrates' regulation of hours of work and rates of pay, Combination Acts, the theatrical rituals of the assizes, or laws prohibiting the shearing of sheep within five miles of the coast. Historical inquiry shows what Adam Smith called 'the orderly oppression of the law' (quoted D. Winch, 1978: 88–9) to be an integral part of – internal to, constitutive of – the complex web of social relationships we summate as 'property' in this particular time and place, not a 'relatively autonomous instance' at all.

In the real world, then, 'power' over objects turns out to be neither the abstraction, nor the simple relationship, of Cohen's impeccably *rechtsfrei* definition. It exists only in a multiplicity of often *rechtsvoll* empirical forms, to whose analysis, if Thompson is correct, a categorial framework built on prior and exclusive definitions of supposed social 'levels' is remarkably ill-suited. In certain cases, like England in the eighteenth century, law will emerge as inextricably 'imbricated within' – indeed constitutive of – any property relations we might want to consider relations of production, 'part of the same nexus of relationship' (Thompson, 1965: 84). So too might other supposedly superstructural 'instances', like moral codes, political institutions, or 'forms of social consciousness' (all of which are fairly evidently entailed in Smith's 'orderly oppression'). In which case, to seek to expunge these from the concept of property or production relations *a priori*, for the sake of theoretical coherence or elegance, would seem to be a gross artificiality which does considerable violence to the very facts Marx's concepts are meant to help us understand: a species of what he himself castigated as 'violent abstraction' (see Sayer, 1983: 121–2).

II

Cohen, however, tells us that he does 'not need to be advised that history is "always richer in content, more varied, more many-sided, more lively and 'subtle'" than any theory will represent it as being' (1978: ix, quoting Lenin). Balibar's concern is likewise with outlining only what he calls the 'pertinent differences' on whose basis the abstract concepts of modes of production can be theoretically developed (in Althusser, 1970: 209 ff.). Either would therefore presumably dismiss the foregoing line of argument as beside the point: a reminder, perhaps, of the real complexity of history, but not something which should be allowed to affect the basic formulation of Marx's theoretical concepts as such. To forestall this objection, a short philosophical aside is in order. For I do not cite Thompson here simply to counterpose the real complexity of history against the arrant simplicities of theory, worthwhile and necessary as that enterprise sometimes is.

I want rather to make a theoretical point concerning the character of general concepts like property and their relation to empirical particulars of the sort invoked by Thompson. This follows on the argument I developed in section II of the last chapter, and relates to the difference between Marx's transhistorical and historical categories. Only if this difference is ignored, I shall argue, can Thompson's – or indeed Acton's – arguments be dismissed as a merely 'empiricist' quibble which is irrelevant to considerations of high theory, and the relation between abstract theory and concrete fact be construed in the

way it is by Cohen or Balibar. The empiricism, in fact, is if anything theirs, and resides in the tacit assumption – one shared by positivist philosophies of science generally – that fact and theory are wholly separate domains of discourse.[3]

In *The Holy Family* there is a celebrated discussion of some of the more absurd practices of idealist philosophy. One of these is the fallacy of reification, or misplaced concreteness: mistaking abstract concepts for real entities. Marx[4] dubs this 'the mystery of speculative construction'. By way of illustration, he satirizes philosophers – his specific target here being the Young Hegelians – as taking the general concept 'fruit' to refer to some real essence of fruitiness which is distinct from the empirical forms in which fruit alone exists – apples, pears, and so on (1844b: 57 ff.). Wittgenstein was later similarly to chide those who imagined that beauty was a real essence inhering in and defining all beautiful objects. Nobody, we might think, would be so silly.

But like fruit, or beauty, 'property' too – at least as Marx conceived it – does not exist except in particular, empirical forms. As with production, it has no existence as a generality. We might indeed be able to abstract from these particulars conceptually, in order to construct a general notion of property. But such an abstraction – *rechtsfrei* or otherwise – does not refer to some real essence of property independent of its empirical forms, any more than the generic 'fruit' refers to anything other than real apples and pears. In more technical terms, generic concepts refer to what defines classes of phenomena, not, or at any rate not directly, to any empirical particulars – real objects – as such at all. And as Wittgenstein, again, argues, what makes phenomena members of the same class may be something as loose as 'family resemblances' rather than an unvarying list of empirical characteristics which they all necessarily have in common.

Now such class concepts, precisely because they are generic categories, are not, in themselves, complete descriptions of any of the individual phenomena which can be subsumed under them. Indeed – and crucially – they do not even adequately comprehend the essential features of those phenomena, if by that we mean those features which make such phenomena what they individually are, and are thus essential to their definition. They only designate those aspects of a given set of phenomena which make them members of the relevant class, the resemblances by virtue of which they can be conceived as

members of the same family. What defines phenomena in their individual particularity – in other words, in their real existence – is precisely those features they do not share with other members of the class to which they belong, and are therefore not contained in their class concept. We have not, for instance, adequately defined a lemon, in any empirical sense, when we say it is a fruit. Part of any adequate empirical description of a lemon would include, for example, its colour. But yellowness is not a characteristic of fruits as such or in general, and cannot be derived from the general concept of fruitiness. Yellowness is, however, essential to what makes a lemon a lemon, and is thus part of its concept.

Similar arguments apply to property. Certainly we may choose to define the class 'property', in general and abstractly, in ways which exclude 'superstructural' terms. There may even be a point in doing so, in so far as such a definition enables us to classify certain legal and non-legal forms of relationship as kindred phenomena, which we certainly could not do if we included legal criteria in property's general concept. Thus far we may go along with Cohen against Acton. To do so is also consistent with Marx, who undoubtedly did take pains to insist that relations which were substantially property relations could exist without being legally expressed as such, as in passages like this:

> With [Wagner] there is, first, the law, and then commerce; in reality it's the other way round: at first there is *commerce*, and then a *legal order* develops out of it. In the analysis of the circulation of commodities [in *Capital*] I have demonstrated that in a developed trade the exchangers tacitly recognise each other as equal persons and owners of the goods to be exchanged respectively by them; they *do* this while they offer the goods to one another and agree to trade with one another. This *practical* relation, arising through and in exchange itself, only later attains a *legal form* in contracts etc.; but this form produces neither its content, the exchange, nor the relationship, existing in it, of persons to one another, but vice versa. (1880a: 210)

If our generic concept of property includes legal terms, the 'practical relation' Marx recognizes here as a property relation could not be acknowledged as such, which would be plainly contrary to his intent.

But we should not then confuse such a general definition of property with its substantial reality, or take our generic concept adequately or immediately to designate real empirical objects. Nor, in

particular, can we infer that what our concept excludes as a general characteristic of the class 'property' can *a fortiori* be excluded from the concepts of the individual members of that class, property's particular forms – the only forms in which it empirically exists. To do so would be exactly like denying that yellowness is an essential characteristic of lemons, because it is not a feature of the generality 'fruit' – an evident *non sequitur*.

What my quote from Edward Thompson suggested, on empirical grounds, was that precisely as we move from the general concept of the class 'property' to the concepts of its members – as soon as, in other words, we try to specify empirically those historical forms of property which are Marx's particular concern – we cannot any longer always exclude 'superstructural' terms. Like the yellowness of the lemon, they might be essential, and hence defining features of the property relations empirically at issue. At first sight, this appeared simply as an ill-bred 'empiricist' counter to Cohen's or Balibar's attempts rigorously to demarcate economic and legal at the level of a general theory. But it is in fact testimony to a lapse in their own logic. Even had Thompson not been burying his head in the archives, we would have had no licence to exclude law – or anything else – *a priori* from counting, should the evidence warrant it, as internal to a given property form.

For recognition of the internality of 'superstructural' relations to a given empirical form of property in no way conflicts with adherence to a *rechtsfrei* definition of the concept of property in general. No general concept of property can or ever could be exhaustive of the empirical characteristics which define property's particular forms. It is impossible, in logic, to infer the concepts of members of a class, their *differentia specifica*, from the concept of the class itself. But for exactly the same reason, *rechtsvoll* specifications of these forms cannot be ruled out by virtue of the general *rechtsfrei* definition alone either. Cohen can only evade this conclusion by implicitly reifying his general concept of property – taking it as immediately specifying an empirical particular. He treats *rechtsfrei* property as if it were an entity in itself, a substance really distinct from the legal and other forms in which property empirically exists, rather than – like 'fruit' – a mere class concept, specifying some characteristics (or family resemblances) real empirical forms of property have. A predicate, to use Marx's own vocabulary, is thus surreptitiously transformed into an independent subject.[5]

If we refuse the reification, however, and properly distinguish the general concept of property – however defined – from the concepts of its particular forms, Acton's contention may still make eminent sense, when applied to the latter. Cohen's refutation of Acton rests on his tacit, and wholly illicit, conflation of these distinct levels of conceptualization: transhistorical and historical, to employ my earlier terminology. But one cannot argue thus from the general to the particular. Certainly we may, if we choose, define property in general in *rechtsfrei* terms. There are some obvious advantages to doing so. But in any given empirical instance 'the economic structure of society' may still turn out to be neither conceivable, nor observable, 'apart from the legal, moral and political relationships of men'. The burden of this chapter is to show that Marx never for a moment thought otherwise, and his concepts of production relations and economic structure must be comprehended accordingly.

Similar arguments, we might note, apply to another of Cohen's attempted restrictions on the category of production relations, his exclusion from Marx's 'economic structure' of so-called 'work relations' – relations of production which Cohen terms 'material' as distinct from 'social' relations between producers. 'Work relations' include the forms of co-operation in the labour process, and division of labour 'in the workshop',[6] discussed (also) as productive forces in the last chapter. By a specifically social relation between producers, Cohen means one which 'entails an ascription to persons – specified or unspecified – of rights or powers *vis-à-vis* other men' (1978: 94). This is another way of delineating his ownership relations. Not all relations between people in production are of this kind, and only those which are, in his view, enter Marx's 'economic structure'.

The foundation of this distinction between social and material relations of production is Cohen's perfectly correct observation that Marx himself systematically distinguishes between material and social properties of the phenomena he analyses. We saw this, and its relevance to Marx's theory of fetishism, in the last chapter. But Cohen commits a similar reification here as he does with property. For the point is that in Marx, the relevant distinction lies between material and social attributes – properties, qualities, characteristics,

features – of productive phenomena, not between different kinds of phenomena in production as such. These too are in other words class concepts. Use as raw materials or instruments in the labour process, for instance, is a material characteristic which defines the class means of production, while embodying value and commanding surplus-value are social characteristics which define the class capital. But the empirical form, constant capital, exists only as a phenomenon which conjoins both these sets of attributes. Accordingly, as argued above for class or attribute concepts generally, no purely 'material' description (or, come to that, no purely social description) can be a complete empirical account of any real entity in this realm of analysis. We have not sufficiently described constant capital when we enumerate its material characteristics *qua* means of production. This is to refer only 'to the simple matter of capital, without regard to the formal character without which it is not capital' (1858a: 267). Remember the lemon again. Conversely, means of production only ever exist in some social form or another, just as there is no fruit that is not an apple, a pear, and so on.

Cohen is aware of this; it is basic to his own account of fetishism. What he apparently fails to realize, however, is that this totally invalidates his attempted work relations/social relations contrast. If 'material' and 'social' in Marx refer to attributes of phenomena, not phenomena as such, we cannot use his distinction to differentiate two different kinds of production relation, material and social. Nor, therefore, can we on these grounds expunge 'work relations' from the 'economic structure of society'. These supposedly separate 'material relations' are but social relations of production regarded – abstractly – from their 'material side'. Marx's distinction lies between the material and social dimensions of one and the same set of activities – activities, we might recall, which he explicitly conceives from the start as 'double', simultaneously material and social – not between substantial kinds of relations as such.[7]

III

Having, I hope, cleared some ground, let us now turn more directly to Marx. I have already quoted *The Poverty of Philosophy* on the impossibility of defining property as 'an independent relation, a

category apart, an abstract and eternal idea' (above, p. 21). 'Moralizing Criticism and Critical Morality', a text dating from the same year, agrees: '*private property*, for instance, is not a simple relation or even an abstract concept, but consists in the totality of the *bourgeois* relations of production' (1847c: 337). In both cases Marx defines property in terms of production relations, rather than the other way about. The production relations in question are always historically specific – the relations of a given mode of production – and property therefore emphatically a historical category. Marx's approach here contrasts sharply with Cohen's or Balibar's, both of whom, as we have seen, seek to ground the concept of production relations on a transhistorical, albeit *rechtsfrei*, concept of property.

Indeed property, as Marx uses the term in these texts, far from being susceptible to independent definition, is in fact synonymous with the 'economic structure of society' as delineated in the 1859 Preface. 'Moralising criticism' says that property consists of 'the totality of . . . relations of production', which is exactly the Preface's description of the 'economic structure'. We might, for a change, take quite literally the Preface's claim that property and production relations are but different expressions for 'the same thing'. As usual, however, Marx offers no general definition, of a substantive kind, of what these production relations, whether construed as 'property' or 'economic structure', actually are. But given the apparent synonymity of the referents of these terms, exploration of what he had to say, in various historical contexts, about particular forms of property might take us some way forward in the search for what he understood by an 'economic structure'.

We may begin with some critical remarks on Hegel in *Capital* III. Hegel, according to Marx, seeks to explain private property in land from the (transhistorical) premise that 'man as an individual must endow his will with reality as the soul of external nature, and must therefore take possession of this nature and make it his private property'. For Marx this will to possession is 'comical':

> Free private ownership of land, a very recent product, is according to Hegel, not a definite social relation, but a relation of man as an individual to 'Nature', an absolute right of man to appropriate all things . . . [Hegel] makes the blunder at the outset of regarding as absolute a very definite legal view of landed property – belonging to bourgeois society. (1865a: 615–16n)

Basic to Marx's argument here is the idea that property is a social relation, not – or at least not primarily, but only consequentially – a relation of individuals to things. He says the same thing in *Grundrisse*, drawing a linguistic parallel we have encountered previously in his discussion of production. 'Language as the product of an individual is an impossibility. But the same holds for property' (1858a: 490). Possession, Hegel's starting-point, is indeed 'the subject's simplest juridical relation', but 'there is no possession preceding the family or master–servant relations'; 'the concrete substratum [like family or master–servant relations] of which possession is a relation is always presupposed' (1857: 102, my interpolation). The appearance of property as an unmediated relation of possession between individual owners and the things they own is an illusion arising out of the phenomenal form property takes within specifically capitalist relations. It is an historical product.

In previous forms of society, neither individuals as owners, nor their property, had their modern exclusivity or simplicity. Property did not even appear as a simple relation of person and thing. Who owned what, or even what it meant to be an owner, were by no means clear-cut; the very terms at issue are anachronistic. This is well brought out in the historian Marc Bloch's discussion of the inapplicability of modern concepts of property to medieval Europe. There, he points out:

> the word ownership, as applied to landed property, would have been almost meaningless . . . The tenant who – from father to son, as a rule, ploughs the land and gathers in the crop; his immediate lord, to whom he pays dues, and who, in certain circumstances, can resume possession of the land; the lord of the lord, and so on, right up the feudal scale – how many persons are there who can say, each with as much justification as the other, 'That is my field!'. Even this is an understatement. For the ramifications extended horizontally as well as vertically and account should be taken of the village community, which normally recovered the use of the whole of its agricultural land as soon as it was cleared of crops; of the tenant's family, without whose consent the property could not be alienated; and of the families of the successive lords. (1967: 115–16)

Marx himself argues that landed property receives 'its purely economic form' – i.e. its modern capitalist form, of a relationship of exclusive, individual possession, wrongly theorized as 'an eternal idea' by Hegel – only 'by discarding all its former political and social embellishments and associations' (1865a: 618), to become divorced from 'relations of dominion and servitude' (ibid.: 617). Only then can property appear as a simple relation of possession between individuals and objects. As any reader of *Capital* I (or anyone with any familiarity with modern history) will know, the making of this 'purely economic form' of property was a protracted, bitter, and often bloody struggle – one Marx first encountered, incidentally, as early as 1842, with the transformation, in the Rhineland, of erstwhile common rights to gather wood into a crime (1842; cf. 1859a). We will see later that the independent 'natural individual' who appears to Hegel as the self-evident possessing subject is equally a modern phenomenon.

One might perhaps maintain that the complexity to which Bloch points can be analytically encompassed within some notion of degrees of control of persons over things. Cohen's argument moves in this direction, when he seeks to define the serf as a part-owner of both means of production and labour-power (1978: 65). It is questionable whether such a merely quantitative index of control is sufficiently subtle to allow us to differentiate the qualitative variety of forms which anything we might want to call property has taken historically. But this is, I would suggest, in any case to miss the main thrust of Marx's argument. For what he does is precisely to shift the focus of the concept of property away from relations between people and things – from ostensibly simple possession – to the social relations between people which make such appearances possible in the first place. In the process – just as with the fetishized conceptions of productive forces considered in the last chapter – Marx criticizes everyday ideas of property, of the sort systematized by Hegel, as an ideological expression of specifically capitalist conditions, whose extension elsewhere is profoundly anachronistic.

These points are reinforced when we turn to Marx's (extensive) discussions of property in his early writings. Thus in the Paris Manuscripts of 1844 he writes, for instance, that:

> *Private property* is . . . the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labour,* of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself . . . True, it is as a result of the *movement of private property* that we have obtained the concept of *alienated labour* (*of alienated life*) in political economy. But analysis of this concept shows that though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labour, it is rather its consequence . . . Later this relationship becomes reciprocal . . . estranged labour is the direct cause of private property. (1844a: 279–80)

Marx goes on to say that 'the character of *private property* is expressed by labour, capital, and the relations between these two' (ibid.: 289; cf. 1845a: 278). This strikingly anticipates later and more famous formulations, like *Capital*'s observation that 'capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons established by the instrumentality of things' (1867a: 776). The overall argument of the 1844 Manuscripts on private property is succinctly captured in two sentences: '*material*, immediately *perceptible* private property is the material perceptible expression of *estranged human life*' (1844a: 297). Conversely, 'only when *labour* is grasped as the essence of private property, can the economic process as such be analysed in its real concreteness' (ibid.: 317).

In *The German Ideology* Marx concretizes this analysis somewhat but without losing its essentials. He argues there that 'different forms [of society] are just so many forms of the organisation of labour, and hence of property' (1846a: 78). Specifically, '*division of labour* and private property are . . . *identical expressions*: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity' (ibid.: 44). For,

> the various stages of development in the division of labour are just so many different forms of ownership, i.e., the existing stage of the division of labour determines also the relations of individuals to one another with reference to the material, instrument and product of labour. (ibid.: 33)

Marx elaborates:

> with the division of labour . . . is given simultaneously the *distribution*, and indeed the *unequal* distribution, both quantitative and qualitative, of labour and its products, hence property; the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family, where wives and children are the slaves of the husband. This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first property, but even at this early stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others. (ibid.)

The equation of property with 'power of disposing of the labour-power of others' is one Marx employs repeatedly in texts of this period. That power, in more developed modes of production like capitalism, is certainly materialized in (and effected in part through)

ownership of physical means of production. But it is worth underlining the fact that this is not the case with the family, whose relations Marx none the less claims here to be property relations. Power over people's labour-power derives in this instance from direct, personal, patriarchal relations between individuals themselves. Modern Marxist anthropologists, not to mention feminist writers, concur with this insight.[8]

IV

I want now to consider exactly what relations between people would, for Marx, qualify as property or production relations. I shall show, from his own texts, that he indeed did (where historically relevant) include within this category relations which are, for traditional historical materialism, eminently 'superstructural'. The 'economic structure of society' was therefore for him a very different – and a very much broader – totality of social relations than is normally recognized. The examples I shall consider are drawn from *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, both undeniably 'mature' works. They are therefore not open to the sort of objections Althusserians might raise to my use of the 1844 Manuscripts and *The German Ideology* immediately above. They are, however, perfectly consistent with these early texts. Since both my examples concern the 'economic structure' in non-capitalist societies, they also have the additional merit of suggesting, if only by way of contrast, the rootedness of conventional, narrow definitions of the 'economic sphere' in specifically capitalist forms of appearance.

The section of the *Grundrisse* entitled 'Forms which precede capitalist production' is a long, and largely self-contained disquisition on various historical forms of communal property and production, their gradual disintegration, and the eventual 'freeing' of the elements of capitalist production. Such communal forms were to remain an abiding interest for Marx, increasingly so in his later years. A large part of his copious, and still largely unpublished, notes and manuscripts of the 1870s and 1880s are given over to this theme (1879a, b; Shanin, 1984). In *Grundrisse*, he distinguishes three main communal types: primitive, ancient and Germanic. All have variants. I am not concerned here with the historical or anthropological accuracy of Marx's characterization of these forms of society, which by modern

standards undoubtedly leaves a lot to be desired (Godelier, 1973: part II, discusses this), nor with how his views on the character and development of communal property might have altered in later writings. I invoke these analyses simply to illustrate how he used his concepts.

Marx's 'first form of landed property' (1858a: 472–4), the primitive commune, is characteristic of initially pastoral, nomadic societies. Here individuals relate to land as '*property of the community*, of the community producing and reproducing itself in living labour'. They are proprietors of the land in so far as, and only in so far as, they are members of the community. Indeed, Marx says, strictly speaking individuals as such are here merely possessors of the soil, for land is the property of the community as a whole (ibid.: 476). Marx is clear that the 'initial, naturally arisen spontaneous community' – which is the 'family, and the family extended as a clan' – 'appears as first presupposition' for this form of property:

> the *clan community*, the natural community, appears not as a *result* of, but as a *presupposition for the communal appropriation* (temporary) *and utilization of the land*. When they finally do settle down, the extent to which this original community is modified will depend upon various external, climactic, geographic, physical etc. conditions as well as on their particular natural predisposition – their clan character. This naturally arisen clan community, or, if one will, pastoral society, is the first presupposition – the communality of blood, language, customs – for the *appropriation of the objective conditions* of their life, and of their life's reproducing and objectifying activity (activity as herdsmen, hunters, tillers, etc.) . . . The *real appropriation* through the labour process happens under these *presuppositions*, which are not themselves the *product* of labour, but appear as its natural or *divine* presuppositions. (ibid.: 472)

Here, then, particular social relations – specifically, familial relations, extended into the 'clan community' – are presupposed to appropriation through the labour process, and integral to these relations are 'communality of blood, language, customs'. These latter are of course 'superstructural' phenomena *par excellence* for most adherents to base/superstructure models, and things which belong neither in the 'economic structure' nor the superstructure (and thus lie outside the scope of historical materialist theory altogether) for Cohen.

The so-called 'Asiatic form' of property (ibid.: 472–4) is a variant

of this primitive form, though, Marx says, it at first sight appears not to be because of the individual's apparent propertylessness. Here:

> the *comprehensive unity* standing above all these little communities appears as the higher *proprietor* or as the *sole proprietor*; the real communities hence [exist] only as *hereditary* possessors. Because the *unity* is the real proprietor and the real presupposition of communal property, it follows that this unity can appear as a *particular* entity above the many real particular communities. (ibid.: 473)

Marx's language here is dense. But he appears to be saying that in the Asiatic form, the 'unity' formed in the co-operation of several communities becomes a 'presupposition of communal property', in exactly the same way as within any single community the existence of the commune itself is such a presupposition. He instances water control as an important form of inter-commune co-operation. Clearly where artificial irrigation is a condition of production, and it requires inter-communal co-operation, such co-operation also becomes a condition of production, and hence of property. Karl Wittfogel (1957) was to develop this line of argument (and apply it to the modern USSR), though in ways uncongenial to most Marxists; modern 'bureaucratic collectivist' theorists reason similarly, drawing on Marx's analyses of the Asiatic mode of production, *vis-à-vis* the 'socialist' state in modern planned economies (Melotti, 1977).

In such cases, this trans-communal 'unity' may be personified in the form of a 'despot'; property 'appears mediated for [the individual] through a cession [*sic*] by the total unity – a unity realized in the form of the despot, the father of many communities – to the individual, through the mediation of the particular commune' (1858a: 473). Such a personification of social relationships is analogous to fetishism in the capitalist mode of production (though Marx himself does not draw the explicit parallel here). Surplus then goes to the personification of this 'unity' – oriental potentate, clan patriarch, state, or whatever. Marx sees varieties of this 'Asiatic' form of society as being very widespread, embracing Mexico, Peru and early Celts, as well as India. He also suggests that among Slavs this may have been the origin of villeinage. What is of interest for the present argument, however, is that once again relations internal to a given mode of production and property form embrace evidently 'superstructural'

phenomena: quasi-political relations (of a tributary sort) and, in so far as a specific mystification of the 'unity' is involved, ideology too. Marx writes, for instance, of 'common labour for the exaltation of the unity, partly of the real despot, partly of the imagined clan-being, the god' (ibid.).

Marx's second form of landed property, the ancient (ibid.: 474–6) 'also assumes the *community* as its first presupposition' (ibid.: 474). The ancient Greek or Roman community, however, differs from the primitive or Asiatic archetype in several respects. Its basis is urban rather than rural: 'the cultivated field here appears as a *territorium* belonging to the town'. We also see here the beginnings of private property: 'communal property – as state property, *ager publicus* – [is] here separate from private property. The property of the individual is here not, unlike in the first case, itself directly communal property'. The great problem, in ancient society, is no longer the conquest of nature, but maintenance of the *territorium* against other communes:

> War is therefore the great comprehensive task, the great communal labour which is required either to occupy the objective conditions of being there alive, or to protect and perpetuate the occupation. Hence the commune consisting of families initially organised in a warlike way – as a system of war and army, and this is one of the conditions of its being there as proprietor. (ibid.: 474)

The ancient commune, then, unlike the primitive, consists of individual private peasant proprietors. But at the same time, the condition of their property remains their communal organisation, particularly for war. In this connection Marx offers some interesting parentheses on antiquity's view of agriculture as the sole '*proper occupation* of a free man, the soldier's school', and the consequent exclusion of craftsmen from citizenship (ibid.: 477).

Importantly, however, the emergence here of private property does not obviate the communal character of the ancient form as a whole. Rather, 'membership in the commune remains the presupposition for the appropriation of land and soil, but, as a member of the commune, the individual is a private proprietor'; 'the commune ... is the presupposition of *property* in land and soil' still, 'belonging [is] mediated by [the individual's] being a member of the state, by the being of the state' (ibid.). The individual is in other words only a private proprietor in so far as he remains a member of the commune.

The German Ideology similarly observes that in antiquity, 'the citizens hold power over their labouring slaves only in their community, and on this account alone ... are bound to the form of communal ownership' (1846a: 33). Certainly, 'the survival of the commune is the reproduction of all its members as self-sustaining peasants'. But equally, their 'surplus time belongs precisely to the commune, the work of war etc.'. For:

> The property in one's own labour is mediated by property in the condition of labour – the hide of land, guaranteed in its turn by the existence of the commune, and that in turn by surplus labour in the form of military service etc. by the commune members. It is not co-operation in wealth-producing labour [unlike in the primitive form] by means of which the commune member reproduces himself, but rather co-operation in labour for the communal interests (imaginary and real), for the upholding of the association outwardly and inwardly. Property is *quiritorium* [i.e. the property of the Romans or *quirites*], of the Roman variety; the private proprietor of land as such only as a Roman, but as a Roman he is a private proprietor of land. (1858a: 476, my interpolations)

Property here is therefore integrally bound up with citizenship; it is only as a *civis* that an individual can be a proprietor. In this instance, then, it is membership specifically of a *polis* – and participation in its military and other obligations – which Marx sees as presupposed to property and the material labour-processes in which it is realized. That *polis* is understood, moreover, as a variant of the clan system which also underpinned Marx's first communal form, the primitive. The ancient *polis* remains, in essence, an association of families grounded in the needs of war, even if the later Roman *gens* are not strict blood-kin.[9] Marx approvingly quotes Niebuhr to the effect that 'there was in the world of antiquity no more general institution than that of kin groups' (ibid.: 478).

Finally to Marx's third form of communal property, the 'Germanic'. He sees this form as typical of the medieval period in Europe. It is in many ways a transitional form, representing a further development towards modern private property. Settlement here is sparse, and society predominantly rural rather than urban. The commune now exists only as a periodic gathering together of its members 'to pledge each other's allegiance in war, religion, adjudication etc.' (ibid.: 484). It thus 'appears as a *coming-together*, not as a *being-together*; as a unification of independent subjects, landed proprietors, and not as a

unity. The commune does not therefore in fact exist as a *state* or *political body*, as in classical antiquity' (ibid.: 483). Marx still, however, considers that the 'unity-*in-itself*' of commune members is none the less 'posited in their ancestry, language, common past and history, etc.' (ibid.); and he continues to insist that the commune 'is presupposed in-itself prior to the individual proprietors as a communality of language, blood, etc.', even if it only becomes 'a *real assembly* for communal purposes' (ibid.: 484–5).

There remains undivided communal land – for grazing, hunting and so on – but this does not take the separate form of state property, the *ager publicus*, as in antiquity. Rather, it is 'really the common property of the individual proprietors, not of the union of these proprietors endowed with an existence separate from themselves' (ibid.: 485). 'Individual property does not appear mediated by the commune; rather, the existence of the commune and of communal property appears as mediated by, i.e. as a relation of, the independent subjects to one another' (ibid.: 484). This characterizes the Germanic form more generally: 'the commune exists only in the interrelations between these individual landed proprietors as such' (ibid.).

Following these sketches, Marx draws some general conclusions. 'In all these forms', he writes, the '*relation* to land and soil, to the earth, as the property of the labouring individual . . . is instantly mediated by the naturally arisen, spontaneous, more or less historically developed and modified presence of the individual as *member of a commune* – his naturally arisen presence as member of a tribe etc.' (ibid.: 485). Hence:

> If the objective conditions of his labour are presupposed as belonging to him, then he himself is subjectively presupposed as member of a commune, through which his relation to land and soil is mediated. (ibid.: 486)

Marx goes on explicitly to discuss what 'property' means in this context. He argues that, '*property* . . . originally means no more than a human being's relation to his natural conditions of production as belonging to him, as his'. He then elaborates on the character of these 'natural conditions' (making it clear, once again, that 'natural' and 'social' were not for him by any means exclusive categories):

> The forms of these *natural conditions of production* are double: (1) his existence as a member of a community; hence the existence of this community, which in its original form is a *clan* system, a more or less modified *clan* system; (2) the relation to *land and soil* mediated by the community. (ibid.: 491–2).

Hence, 'a natural condition of production for the living individual is his belonging to a *naturally arisen, spontaneous society*, clan etc. This is e.g. already a condition for his language, etc. His own productive existence is possible only on this condition' (ibid.). This of course powerfully echoes Marx's characterizations of production as always a 'double relationship' in the supposedly immature *German Ideology*. Marx concludes – and it is the only logical conclusion – that in these forms of society, '*Property, therefore, means belonging to a clan*' (ibid., emphasis added).

Now I argued earlier that for Marx, property and production relations were substantially synonymous concepts. He says much the same here, for instance in this passage, three pages later:

> The original unity between a particular form of community (clan) and the corresponding property in nature . . . which appears in one respect as the particular form of property – has its living reality in a specific *mode of production* itself, a mode which appears both as a relation between the individuals, and as their specific active relation to inorganic nature, a specific mode of working (which is always family labour, often communal labour) . . . This relation as proprietor – not as a result but as a presupposition of labour, i.e. of production – presupposes the individual defined as a member of a clan or community (ibid.: 495)

If property means 'belonging to a clan', we must conclude that production relations, in all these forms of society, include all those relations by virtue of which individuals are clan or commune members. Not only do these include kinship relations. They embrace 'communality of blood, language, customs', and in the Germanic case a common historical experience or tradition. They extend to the entire *polis* of antiquity, membership of which made the *civis* into a *Romanus*. They encompass, in the Asiatic case, ideology. There is simply no way, for any of these pre-capitalist socio-economic formations, that we can even begin to exclude 'superstructural' terms from the very definition of 'economic structures'. To do so would make nonsense of Marx's entire analysis. It would also render the societies at issue incomprehensible.

It will do no harm in passing here to move beyond Marx, to look,

for a minute, at modern historical materialist anthropology. Meillassoux (1972; cf. his 1975) argues that 'agricultural self-sustaining communities . . . rely less on the control of the *means of material production* than on the *means of human reproduction*: subsistence and women. Their end is reproduction of life as a precondition to production'. He uses this to explain why social power in the cases he examines tends to be distributed on the basis of age and gender, rather than property as traditionally conceived. Godelier goes still further, arguing of such societies that '*here relations of kinship serve as relations of production*, and this *from within*' (1978). Elsewhere he develops a similar case for the *polis* of ancient Athens (1984). On this basis he rejects any general distinction between basis and superstructure as '"levels" of social reality, as distinctions within social reality which are in some sense substantive . . . institutional divides in its substance' (1978). He maintains, as I do, that it is specifically capitalism which 'for the first time separated economics, politics, religion, kinship, art, etc., as so many distinct institutions'. This is of course why restrictive conceptions of production relations, and the hard and fast base/superstructure distinctions they sustain, do have some phenomenal purchase in bourgeois society (and cease to as soon as we move beyond its historical boundaries). Such work is immensely valuable precisely because it is not founded in merely theoretical argument, and recognizes criteria of adequacy other than coherence alone. If Marxist anthropologists have been forced (as was Marx himself, a century earlier) to take a broad view of what comprises an 'economic structure', it is because the facts have resisted characterization otherwise.

V

To return to the *Grundrisse*. A little later, Marx significantly extends the argument I have traced thus far, telling us that 'slavery and serfdom are . . . only further developments of the form of property resting on the clan system' (1858a: 493). The analysis of property developed here, then, would seem to apply to all the non-capitalist 'epochs in the economic formation of society' – Asiatic, ancient, feudal – delineated in the 1859 Preface: a very wide historical compass indeed. With that in mind, we may turn to the second substantive analysis of property/production relations in Marx I wish

to discuss, that of feudalism. His fullest treatment of the topic is in *Capital* III, where he raises it in the context of an inquiry into the origins of capitalist ground-rent.

As with the section of the *Grundrisse* we have just been examining, Marx's underlying concern in this text is with what distinguishes capitalist forms of landed property, so he focuses on feudal forms mainly for their contrasts with capitalism rather than for their own sake. The major contrast he draws is this. Unlike in capitalism, where labourers are separated from the means of production, in feudal society 'the direct producer . . . is to be found . . . in possession of his own means of production, the necessary material labour conditions required for the realisation of his labour and the production of his means of subsistence' (1865a: 790). This difference has an important implication for the mechanism of exploitation – the transfer of surplus labour or its products to the ruling class – in the two societies. We should remember, in discussing this, that this mechanism is absolutely crucial to Marx in characterizing a mode of production:

> The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers . . . which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure. (ibid.: 791)[10]

In capitalism, 'economic' pressure[11] alone suffices to ensure that the worker produces surplus for the capitalist. Given the labourer's lack of means of production, the only conditions under which he can produce his subsistence at all – selling his labour-power for a wage – are ones which entail the performance of unpaid surplus-labour. But in feudalism, things are different. From a purely 'economic' viewpoint the peasant can produce his subsistence, on the land, and with the animals, tools, and so on, which he possesses, without having in the very process to produce surplus for his lord. Since feudal lords none the less manifestly do extract surplus-labour, and feudal society would not be what it was if they did not, Marx is led to draw the following conclusion:

> Under such conditions the surplus-labour for the nominal owner of the land can only be extorted from them by other than economic pressure, whatever the form may be . . . Thus, conditions of personal dependence are requisite, a lack of personal freedom, no matter to what extent, and being tied to the soil as its accessory, bondage in the true sense of the word. (ibid.: 791)

It is a conclusion which he generalizes. 'In *all* forms in which the direct producer remains the "possessor" of the means of production', he argues, 'the property relationship must simultaneously appear as a direct relationship of lordship and servitude' (ibid.: 790, emphasis added). *Herrschaft,* we must conclude, is here the 'specific economic form' in which surplus is pumped, and hence constitutes 'the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure'. Other texts make this explicit. For *Capital* I, 'personal dependence here characterises the social relations of production just as much as it does the other spheres of life organised on the basis of that production . . . personal dependence forms the groundwork of society' (1867a: 77). We could hardly ask for a clearer statement of the internality of *Herrschaftsverhältnisse* to society's 'economic structure'. For the *Grundrisse,* likewise, 'the *master–servant relation* is an essential element of appropriation' (1858a: 500). For *Theories of Surplus Value,* the latter's 'basis is the forcible domination of one section of society over another' (1863c: 400). In feudal society, relations of personal dependence – relations, moreover, not founded upon 'effective control' of the means of production, which Marx assumes the direct producer to enjoy – are essential relations of production, and hence, consistently with the stipulations of the 1859 Preface, form the 'groundwork of society'.

To reduce *Herrschaft,* as Cohen does, simply to part-ownership of labour-power is in my view a travesty of what Marx is getting at in these analyses: the essence of the relationship, he makes clear, is 'appropriation of an alien *will*' (ibid.: 500–1, emphasis added), personal subjection, unfreedom. It also begs the (empirical) question of how – in other words, through what set of relations – such alien control over labour-power is actually established. At one point in the *Grundrisse* Marx goes so far as to assert that feudal landed proprietorship developed 'out of purely military relations of subordination' (1858a: 165); given the amount of land administered by the medieval church, one might also want to give due weight to the power of the word. It is ironic, considering the labours of Cohen and others to

produce a *rechtsfrei* definition of property, that in European feudal society by the high middle ages *Herrschaft* was in fact largely organised through jurisdiction. In Perry Anderson's words, 'justice was the ordinary name of power' (1974a: 153). This has led Rodney Hilton recently to count jurisdiction explicitly as a key social relation of feudal production (1985); unsurprisingly, perhaps, since his own earlier writings estimate that by the twelfth century, more than half of all feudal ruling class income took the form of profits of jurisdiction or taxes, rather than ground-rent as such (1976).

Anderson himself argues similarly, and like Marx generalizes the point beyond feudalism alone:

> *All* modes of production in class societies prior to capitalism extract surplus labour from the immediate producers by means of extra-economic coercion. Capitalism is the first mode of production in history in which the means whereby the surplus is pumped out of the direct producers is 'purely' economic in form . . . All other previous modes of exploitation operate through *extra-economic* sanctions – kin, customary, religious, legal or political. It is therefore impossible to read them off from economic relations as such. The 'superstructures' of kinship, religion, law or the state necessarily enter into the constitutive structure of the mode of production in pre-capitalist social formations. They intervene *directly* in the 'internal' nexus of surplus-extraction, where in capitalist social formations, the first in history to separate the economy as a formally self-contained order, they provide by contrast its 'external' preconditions. In consequence, pre-capitalist modes of production cannot be defined *except* via their political, legal, and ideological superstructures, since these are what determine the type of extra-economic coercion that specifies them. (1974b: 403–4)

I would want to express the point more forcefully, and say that what Anderson is getting at renders the very terms in which he (like Marx himself) formulates his argument – 'economic' versus 'non-economic' – anachronistic. 'Superstructures' cannot reasonably be said to 'intervene' in a structure of which they are 'constitutive'. A far better way of putting it would be to say that in these societies, a distinction between 'economic relations as such' and 'superstructures' – at least as conventionally drawn – simply does not obtain. Indeed if we persist in using these concepts in the usual way, Anderson's observation comes very close to denying the applicability of Marx's claims for the primacy of the 'mode of production of material life' outside capitalism. 'Superstructures', Anderson appears to be saying, determine the core social relations of these modes, their specific modes of

exploitation, upon which, for Marx, 'is founded the entire formation of the economic community'. Anderson's frequent recourse to quotation marks is perhaps indicative of some unease; I doubt he intends thus to curtail the scope of historical materialism. None the less he goes on to make a very important point.

Since, he says, feudal societies are defined by their 'non-economic' mechanisms of surplus-extraction, to specify them in *rechtsfrei* terms, abstracting from 'superstructures', leaves us with no basis for differentiating between them. This has a paradoxical historiographic consequence. 'If, in effect, the feudal mode of production can be defined independently of the variant juridical and political superstructures which accompany it, such that its presence can be registered throughout the globe wherever primitive and tribal social formations were superseded, the problem arises: how is the unique dynamism of the European theatre of international feudalism to be explained?' (ibid.: 402). A 'colour-blind materialism' (ibid.) eventuates in historical idealism, for the differentiating factors can then, logically, only be sought outside the sphere of 'material life'.

Cohen does discuss Marx's analyses of feudalism; he could hardly fail to, given their evident awkwardness for 'traditional historical materialism'. What he says is to my mind implicitly subversive of his overall conception of production relations. He cannot but recognize that for Marx 'the production relations of slavery or serfdom include the authority of the superior over the producer's labour-power, and he exploits it by exercising that authority' (1978: 83). Violence and ideology are thus admitted to be internal to feudal exploitation, or constitutive of the specifically feudal property form. On the face of it, this must collapse the base/superstructure distinction as Cohen conceives it, to yield a broader conception of economic structure. Cohen tries to evade the difficulty – in so far as he recognizes it at all – by arguing that the serf is not in fact the owner, but merely the possessor, of his plot, so that 'the rights he enjoys over it are tied to the performance of his duties' (ibid.: 84). To the extent that we can speak of 'ownership' without anachronism in this context, this is undoubtedly true, but it hardly helps Cohen. He remains hoist by his own petard. For Marx's point, well taken by Anderson, is that 'economically' the serf precisely is in a position to produce his own subsistence, and any *rechtsfrei* definition of ownership would have to acknowledge this fact. The only thing which curtails his 'effective

control' of either means of production or his labour-power is the eminently *rechtsvoll* relationship of *Herrschaft*. It is only through the latter – Marx's 'non-economic' coercion – that we can in fact meaningfully characterize the lord's 'ownership', as distinct from the peasant's material possession, at all. As with Marx's three forms of communal property, the 'political and legal superstructure' turns out once more to be internal to the 'economic structure of society', a defining element of 'property' in the feudal context.

VI

In the early sections of this chapter I sought to establish, on both empirical and theoretical grounds, that we had no good reason for excluding any kind of social relation from being a possible relation of production, or for arbitrarily assigning some social relations to the 'base' and others to the 'superstructure' of society, *a priori*. These questions could only be resolved for particular historical forms of society, on empirical criteria. I have now shown that in analysing concrete historical formations Marx himself was no respecter of neat base/superstructure models. Indeed, I have suggested that the apparent separability of the 'economic sphere' from Acton's 'legal, political and moral relationships of men' is a phenomenon of capitalism alone, and orthodox conceptions of production relations are therefore methodologically akin, in their immediate generalization of capitalist appearances, to the fetishized views of productive forces discussed in chapter 2 – a theme I shall take further below.

The clear implication of this argument is that, for Marx, production relations are, very simply, any and all social relations which are demonstrably entailed in a given mode of production, or 'way in which [people] produce their means of subsistence' (1846a: 31). To put it the other way around, the production relations of a given mode are all those relations between people, in whose absence they would not be producing in that particular way. Such production relations and the 'economic structure' they define, may include Cohen's 'material relations', 'superstructural' relations, or relations he deems beyond the purview of historical materialism entirely, like familial forms. Examples of all of these being treated as internal to an 'economic structure' can be found in Marx's work. What is, or is not,

a production relation in any given instance can only be determined *a posteriori*, on the facts of the case. We have no good theoretical grounds for defining the category more restrictively, and Marx's own practice suggests he did not intend that we should. Since property is for him merely another appellation for production relations, the same holds for what comprises 'ownership'.

Greg McLennan (1981: 17 ff.), criticizing an earlier (and less elaborated) formulation of this argument, has expressed the worry that so open a definitional criterion of production relations might be satisfied by random empirical evidence. His concern is that everything will be collapsed into a vague concept of 'social relations', and historical materialism lose its distinctiveness. I do not see the danger. If it is claimed that social relation *x* is essential to, and therefore a production relation of, mode of production *y*, the case needs to be empirically argued, and counter-claims can be empirically evaluated. Certainly there may be disputes, but I fail to see why their resolution should be considered 'arbitrary'. Arbitrariness is only a risk so long as such claims are *not* subjected to any process of empirical adjudication. What I think worries McLennan (and other critics[12]) is my refusal of a determinate concept of production relations at the level of general theory, which is where Marxists habitually seek it; my point, however, is that in Marx's analytic framework conceptual determinateness can only be provided *a posteriori*, for specific historical formations. That is not to say, however, that it cannot be provided at all.[13]

Two final quotations might appropriately be cited by way of conclusion to this long argument. When, in *The German Ideology*, Marx describes production as a 'double relationship', both material and social, he adds: 'by social we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner, and to what end' (1846a: 41). We might take this openness, for once, at face value. Similarly with this remark, against Proudhon, in the *Grundrisse*: 'human life has from time immemorial rested on production, and, in one way or another, on *social* production, whose relations we call, precisely, economic relations' (1858a: 489). What Marx is doing here is so devastatingly simple, and at the same time so genuinely revolutionary, that generations of commentators have somehow managed to overlook it.

He is not, as with 'traditional historical materialism', reducing social relations to economic relations as conventionally conceived, or explaining the former in terms of the latter. He is precisely redefining 'economic' relations – and thus the 'economic sphere', or 'economic structure', or 'economic base' of society – as comprising the totality of social relations, whatever these may be, which make particular forms of production, and thus of property, possible. These social relations are simultaneously forms of material relation of human beings to nature. This totality is Marx's 'groundwork of society', and its extensiveness indicates why he could plausibly treat material production as being synonymous with production of 'the society itself, i.e. the human being itself in its social relations' (1858a: 712), or assert that 'the relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society' (1847b: 212). Such propositions are grossly reductionist on any other interpretation. As he wrote in 1846, introducing the notion of a 'mode of production', this mode 'must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of . . . individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part' (1846a: 32). What we have here is less an economic (and still less a 'technological') theory of history or society, in any standard sense of the word 'economic', than an agenda for an historical sociology of economic forms and phenomena.

VII

The final issue I wish briefly to air in this chapter – and I do not pretend to do any more – concerns what I take to be a serious lacuna in Marx's work, and the historical materialist tradition generally. This is the question of human reproduction, and its connection with 'material production' as Marx conceived it. The context in which I raise this (and what has made it visible as a theoretical problem) is, of course, the renaissance of feminist scholarship in recent years, which questions the paradigms of all classical sociologies, including Marxism. I have argued that Marx's conception of the 'material groundwork' (1867a: 80) of society was far broader than that normally ascribed to him. The question I want to raise here is: was that conception sufficiently broad – or could it be made sufficiently broad – to accommodate (without subordinating) the undoubted sociological insights of feminist analysis? I shall suggest that it was not, but

could be made so; and that Marx's own writings provide some grounds for undertaking the task with his posthumous blessing. Thus to revise historical materialism, however, would leave few familiar Marxist theoretical landmarks intact.

Conventionally, by production Marxists understand production of material goods, and modes of production are defined and differentiated according to how this is effected. Marx speaks of a mode of production as a way in which people produce their means of subsistence (1846a: 31). It is true, and important, that he recognized such production as simultaneously being the production of social relations. But the relations he had in mind were specifically those entailed in the production of goods, such as the kinship relations of the primitive commune, the ancient *polis*, feudal *Herrschaft*, or the labour/capital class relation. It is production of goods, therefore, which demarcates the field, and whose social forms constitute the specific object, of historical materialist inquiry. But in certain of Marx's writings, notably *The German Ideology*, the notion of 'production and reproduction of real life' has a significantly wider compass than this.

Near the beginning of that text Marx and Engels list a number of 'material' factors in human life routinely overlooked by idealist historiography, which they say are 'premises' of their own viewpoint. The first and second of these are the need to produce (goods) to live, and the development of new human needs and capacities in the process. They continue: 'the third circumstance which, from the very outset, enters into historical development, is that men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their own kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, *the family*' (1846a: 40). These three 'aspects of social activity', they go on to make clear:

> are not of course to be taken as three different stages, but just as three aspects or, to make it clear to the Germans, three 'moments', which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and which still assert themselves in history today. (ibid.: 41)

The next sentence – the one I have severally quoted on production as a 'double relationship' – includes within the 'production of life' both production 'of one's own [life] in labour' and production 'of fresh life in procreation'. Production of goods and production of people are thus given equal status here, conjointly defining 'the production of life' and equally integral to people's 'materialistic connection' (ibid.), Marx's declared analytic starting-point. A page or two later, in a passage I have already quoted more fully (above, p. 62), Marx refers to 'the nucleus, the first form' of both property and division of labour as being 'the family, where wife and children are slaves of the husband' (ibid.: 44), while later in the same manuscript he writes of 'marriage, property, the family' as 'the practical basis on which the bourgeoisie has erected its domination' (ibid.: 195).

It must be said, however, that Marx did not take these fragmentary observations much further in his subsequent work. Engels did, in his *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1891), but in ways that are problematic.[14] Marx recognizes the importance of familial and clan relations to pre-capitalist property forms, as we have seen, in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere – but only in so far as these are relations of production of material goods. The probable reason for this failure to return to family forms in later writings – also stated in *The German Ideology* – is that Marx considered the family to be 'a subordinate relationship' in more developed forms of society (1846a: 40). Thus *The Communist Manifesto* roundly declares that capitalism has 'put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations . . . and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash-payment"' (1848a: 486–7). This sweeping, and undoubtedly inaccurate, judgement reads somewhat ironically in the light of recent work on the multiple ways in which capitalist production continues to be organized through patriarchal forms of relationship both within and outwith the 'workplace' (narrowly considered) and the labour-market.[15] It explains, however, why Marx should have given his third material 'circumstance' so little explanatory weight in later writings by comparison with the modes of production of goods.

None the less, it is clear that in principle Marx did consider production of human beings – and thus, presumably, the relations through which such production is organized – to be as essential to 'production of life' as is the production of goods. It would have been surprising (and inconsistent) had he not, since he recognized human labour as common to all labour processes, and repeatedly stressed, moreover, that individuals were always social – and therefore specifically and differentially socialized – human beings. His exclusion of 'the relation between man and woman, parents and children, *the*

family', therefore, from the ways in which modes (and thus forces and relations) of production are conceptualized, can be defended if, and only if, his claim that this is a 'subordinate relationship' stands. He must show that such relations are wholly a corollary or a consequence of ways in which people produce their means of subsistence. Now this is a substantive judgement, open to empirical inquiry. If it turns out to be wrong, then – on Marx's own, self-declared premisses – the notion of 'production of life', and the concepts employed to analyse it, must perforce be extended to encompass modes, forces and relations of human reproduction as well as of 'material production' more narrowly considered.

The historical record, I suggest, powerfully argues for just such a revision. The relations, generally of a patriarchal sort, within which social individuals are produced cannot wholly be reduced to aspects or epiphenomena of modes of production as historical materialism has traditionally conceived them. Indeed if anything patriarchal relations have independently informed and influenced the ways the production of goods has been socially organised, to a massive (and still largely unrecognized) extent. Relations between capital and labour, for instance, were frequently structured through patriarchal, master–servant norms, well into the nineteenth century (and understanding this might make the 'transition' to capitalism that much easier to grasp: not as a total rupture, but as a subtler gradation of forms). Outside capitalism's metropolitan heartlands, they often still are. Developed capitalism rests on a separation of household and enterprise, Max Weber tells us (1978: 375ff.); how can we begin to comprehend that separation empirically without reference to divisions of labour of an eminently patriarchal kind? English law and polity in the nineteenth century – that heyday of supposedly individualist Victorian capitalism – were permeated through and through with the social power of the 'household head', the *paterfamilias*, who alone, as Diana Barker (1978) reminds us, could actually be a 'freely contracting individual'. That patriarchal household had been an organizing matrix of productive activities, political authority, taxation and administration, law and franchise, and religious worship, as well as 'domestic ideology', in England, since time out of mind.[16] Indeed its unspoken assumption underpins even Marx's own determination of the value of labour-power in *Capital* I (1867a: 172). Here, a man of his own very patriarchal times, Marx did not seek to unravel 'natural, self-understood forms of social life'. He took their naturalness[17] very much for granted. Such is the enduring power of patriarchy.

In fact, these forms of patriarchy *would* emerge as essential relations of the relevant stages of capitalist production on the criterion advocated above, since they are clearly social relations in whose absence production of goods would not have taken the empirical forms it did. This is undoubtedly an advance on 'traditional historical materialism'. But that is not the point, or at least not the whole point. To acknowledge the patriarchal dimension of a given set of production relations, conceived as those relations necessary to a mode of production of material goods, is not to explain patriarchy itself. I reject the view – advocated by some Marxist-feminists – that patriarchal relations can be explained with reference to their economic functionality, on both theoretical and empirical grounds. The burden of modern feminist argument is rather to suggest an independent (if very material) basis for age and gender relations which is the particular concern of feminist theory. Now the specific terrain of that theory is precisely 'the relation of man and woman, parents and children, *the family*', or in other words the mode of production (conception, birth, nurturing, socialization) of human beings – exactly the dimension missing, because considered a 'subordinate relationship', from Marx's analysis of 'production of life' after 1846. Explicitly to revise Marx's concept of production to include – as he first intended – production of human individuals within familial and other relations, and what might follow from that for human society as a whole, might allow the possibility of reconciling Marxist and feminist perspectives without subordinating the specific concerns of the latter. Retention of Marx's own conception of 'mode of production' as the starting-point for sociological analysis, notwithstanding its capacity to recognize the economic import of relations of human reproduction, does not.

Had Marx developed his broader *German Ideology* view of 'the production of life', the conceptual apparatus of historical materialism might have looked very different. Mode, forces and relations of production would be very much wider notions even than those I have advocated here – if indeed those concepts, or only those concepts, remained the fundamental categories of historical materialism at all. Class relations would remain a central dimension, but would not necessarily be seen as the central – let alone the exclusive – dimension of social structure. Age and gender relations would be as integral an

analytic concern. One way forward, again mooted in *The German Ideology*, might be to approach all these social relationships as forms of division of social labour – labour, however, extending well beyond just those activities which produce material goods. And to think the unthinkable, we might not even be differentiating social formations, or periodizing history, in the traditional Marxist ways at all. What feudalism and capitalism have in common, for instance – a certain patriarchal infrastructure – might become as significant as what distinguishes them, forms of the sexual division of labour (both within and outwith 'production' narrowly considered) being a common presupposition of either set of class relations. These are my views, not Marx's. To attempt to develop historical materialism along these lines, however, seems to me not inconsistent with the intellectual and emancipatory spirit of Marx's own enterprise. He was, after all, engaged in a 'critique of the economic categories' (1858b), and there is no good reason to see that critique as terminating in the nineteenth century, or bound forever in its 'natural, self-understood forms of social life'.

4

Ideal superstructures

I

If the argument of the last chapter stands, standard readings of Marx's base/superstructure metaphor must evidently fall. 'Base' and 'superstructure' cannot be consistently delineated across modes of production as exclusive, substantively defined 'levels' of the social formation. This in turn undermines the possibility of erecting any general theory of the base/superstructure relation, of a causal or functional sort, since to do so presupposes the substantial character of the distinction. This, we should note, applies as much to 'relative autonomy' models as straightforward economic determinisms. The question then arises: what did Marx intend to convey by his use of base/superstructure imagery? For it is undeniably common in his work, if not the *leitmotif* it is so often taken to be.

Cohen's account may again serve as a convenient, if indirect starting-point. Unlike most Marxists, Cohen seeks to exclude Marx's 'forms of social consciousness' from the superstructure, and reserve the concept for 'non-economic institutions'. Leaving aside the obvious question of how we might begin sensibly to describe human institutions without reference to the ideas they embody, it is difficult to reconcile this exclusion with Marx's own use of the term 'superstructure'. At a pinch it fits the 1859 Preface, but it demonstrably conflicts with many other texts. We have already seen Engels, in his late letters, referring to the whole superstructure as 'ideal' or 'idealistic' – adjectives which make little sense except as applied to forms of consciousness. This was also Marx's usage, on at least as many occasions as not.

The German Ideology, for instance, speaks of 'the state and the rest of the idealistic superstructure' (1846a: 49), and 'family and political relations, together with their entire ideological superstructure' (ibid.: 417) – an interesting formulation, since here it seems to be family and political relations, the latter eminently superstructural (and the former ignored) in standard accounts, which serve as base to a superstructure which is entirely ideological. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx writes similarly that 'upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of different and distinctly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations' (1852: 128). With this last quote – incidentally, but a point I shall return to in my final chapter – we are in a different language game to that in which the base/superstructure issue is generally posed. Instead of the silent dance of structural 'correspondences', we glimpse the creative, and conscious, activity of real individuals.

At the very least then, 'social forms of consciousness' were certainly part of what Marx understood by the 'superstructure'. Cohen thinks it a relatively trivial matter whether or not we classify them as such. I do not. For I believe that Marx's references to the superstructure as 'ideal' or 'idealistic' hold the key to his entire base/superstructure metaphor. The 'superstructure', in brief, is simply the 'ideal' form in which the totality of 'material' relations which make up the 'base' itself are manifested to consciousness, not a substantially separable order of reality at all. Arguing this will take some time. Let me begin with an apparent digression.

II

Marx, of course, held a materialist view of consciousness. For him, 'life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life' (1846a: 38). In the words of the 1859 Preface, 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (1859a).[1] The problem, however, is what exactly Marx meant by such claims. A common interpretation, epitomized in the works of Plekhanov or the younger Lenin, is to read Marx as inverting the primacy of the 'ideal' – consciousness, thought, ideas – over the 'material' world (allegedly)

asserted in German idealist, and particularly Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy. Where Hegel held that the ideal determined the material, Marx argued the contrary. In a famous formulation, he found the Hegelian dialectic 'standing on its head', and turned it 'right side up again' (1873: 20). Marx was thus like his materialist philosophical precursors in that, in Lenin's words, he 'takes matter as primary and regards consciousness, thought, sensations, as secondary' (1908: 46). His specific novelty, and debt to Hegel, consists in conceiving of matter itself 'dialectically'.

In my view,[2] Marx's critique of idealism involves something quite different from, and very much more radical than, this straightforward inversion of idealism's supposed order of priorities, and the inversion metaphor is in important ways misleading. What Marx does, in criticizing Hegel and his 'left' followers – Stirner, Bauer, and the rest – is first and foremost to deny the very existence of the 'ideal' as a separable entity. The 'cunning of reason', the 'spirit of the age', Hegel's *Weltgeist*, the Young Hegelians' 'self-consciousness', and so on, cannot for Marx be the subjects of history for the simple reason that they do not exist. They are reifications: philosophers' fictions, abstractions made flesh, speculative constructions, just like in the 'fruit' example we considered in the last chapter. Marx's central criticism of idealist history is that it is 'an imagined activity of imagined subjects' (1846a: 38).

He ridicules what is involved in thus being 'German, profound and speculative' (ibid.: 542) on numerous occasions. The most famous of these is probably *The Holy Family's* discussion of 'the mystery of speculative construction', on which I drew in the last chapter. Here is another such recipe:

> The whole trick of proving the hegemony of the spirit in history . . . is . . . confined to the following three efforts.
> No. 1. One must separate the ideas of those ruling for empirical reasons, under empirical conditions and as empirical individuals, from these actual rulers, and thus recognise the rule of ideas and illusions in history.
> No. 2. One must bring an order into this rule of ideas, prove a mystical connection among the successive ruling ideas, which is managed by regarding them as 'acts of self-determination on the part of the concept' . . .
> No. 3. To remove the mystical appearance of this 'self-determining concept', it is changed into a person – 'Self-consciousness' – or, to appear thoroughly materialistic . . . into the 'thinkers', the 'philosophers', the ideologists, who are once again understood as the manufacturers of history. (1846a: 64)

With such 'conjuring tricks' (ibid.: 131), consciousness ceases to be an attribute of real individuals, and is instead transformed into an independently-acting historical subject in its own right, the 'spirit of the age', or whatever. The concept of an attribute is mistakenly concretized as an entity. In Marx's words, 'first of all, an abstraction is made from a fact; then it is declared that the fact is based upon the abstraction' (ibid.: 542).

Marx's denial of the determining role of the ideal in history, then, is based on a prior denial of the very existence of the ideal as a separable entity. Consciousness is precisely not a thing in itself, and the fundamental error of the idealists is to treat it as such, to attribute to 'conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness . . . *an independent existence*' (ibid.: 30, emphasis added). Where for idealism 'the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual', Marx's starting-point is 'the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as *their* consciousness' (ibid.: 38). Consciousness is 'my relationship to my surroundings' (ibid.: 42), it 'can never be anything else than conscious existence' (ibid.: 37). These passages all come from *The German Ideology*. But nearly 30 years later, in that same text in which Marx speaks of setting the Hegelian dialectic 'right side up again', his criticism is exactly the same – that the ideal subject of Hegel's historiography is a purely fictitious one:

> To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of 'the Idea', he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external phenomenal form of 'the Idea'. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. (1873: 19)

Idealism's historical subjects are constituted by first abstracting, then reifying what is in fact merely a predicate – consciousness – of real subjects. But Marx's critique is less an inversion of the subject/predicate relation than an insistence that such predicates cannot, in the nature of things, be subjects at all. The only subjects of history, he insists, are 'real, living individuals' themselves.

The quotations I have given so far argue the fictitious status of the ideal, which is my main concern in this chapter given that Marx and Engels repeatedly qualified 'superstructures' thus. But it is equally important to realize that the other term in the equation – the 'material' – is also and *ipso facto* transformed. If consciousness ceases to be regarded as 'a living individual', but instead is recognized as an attribute or predicate of 'real living individuals' themselves, then the material existence of these individuals can no longer be conceptualized in ways which exclude their consciousness. The material premiss from which historical materialism starts is not, abstractly, 'matter', as opposed to 'spirit' (or Lenin's 'consciousness, thought, sensations'). It is 'real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live' (1846a: 31) – real individuals who are amongst other things conscious, and act on the basis of their conceptions. We have seen that such purposeful action is what for Marx defines labour as a distinctively human activity, and differentiates it from superficially analogous phenomena, like the 'labours' of bees and beavers, elsewhere in the natural world (above, p. 28).

This is, of course, the burden of Marx's famous *Theses on Feuerbach*. The fault in Feuerbach's materialism (which among other things renders it ahistorical) is that 'the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* . . . but not as *sensuous human activity, practice,* not subjectively'. This '*active* side was developed abstractly by idealism' (1845b). Stirner's understanding of 'matter' is similarly dismissed as an 'abstraction, an idea' (1846a: 109), empiricism branded as 'still abstract' because it treats history as a collection of 'dead facts' (ibid.: 38), and 'so-called *objective* historiography' denounced as 'reactionary' because it apprehends 'the historical conditions independent of activity' (ibid.: 52). A quarter of a century later, Marx was to reiterate this dismissive characterization of 'objective historiography' in connection with a reissue of his *Eighteenth Brumaire,* a text concerned centrally with the puzzle of how an individual, Louis Bonaparte, could come to play the central historical role he did (1869: 144).

Marx is precisely unlike his materialist precursors in his inclusion, within what he understood as the realm of material life, of those attributes of human beings – the 'active side' – which were previously separated off under the illusory guise of the ideal. Indeed, what he retained from the idealist tradition, whilst resituating it in terms of the natural history of humanity rather than the biography of spirit, was a conception of the internality of the relation between what Spinoza called thought and extension. The reason inversion is so

inadequate a metaphor for this critique should by now be evident. The metaphor suggests a simple reversal of terms – 'material' and 'ideal' – which leaves their referents intact. But what Marx actually does is to challenge these terms themselves. He denies the validity of the distinction of material and ideal, as previously drawn – including by materialists – in the first place, and it is the presumed separability of the two which forms the specific target of his attack. Material and ideal can be separated, for the social world, only at the cost of the 'abstraction' or reification of both.

Note the exact words in which, for instance, he criticizes Proudhon in another text of 1846:

> Because M. Proudhon places eternal ideas, the categories of pure reason, on the one side and human beings and their practical life, which according to him is the application of these categories, on the other, one finds with him from the beginning a *dualism* between life and ideas, between soul and body, a dualism which recurs in many forms. You can see how this antagonism is nothing but the incapacity of M. Proudhon to understand the profane origin and the profane history of the categories which he deifies. (1846b: 192)

It is Proudhon's very dualism, the 'antagonism' of life and ideas, that Marx rejects. Certainly this has the corollary that history is to be explained from 'living individuals', and not their consciousness or its products considered in artificial abstraction or isolation. But this is a corollary, and it is the main argument from which it follows that is of most relevance here. For that argument implies, amongst other things, that the sense of 'determination' in such propositions as 'social being determines consciousness' cannot be the standard causal one, in which the related terms are seen as being merely externally or contingently connected.

III

Now it is notable (and usually goes totally unremarked in commentary) that the structure of Marx's argument against the historical primacy of (ostensibly) other elements of what is normally taken to be the superstructure – in particular, law and state – is identical with that of his critique of idealism. His denial of superstructural primacy, just as with that of the primacy of 'the ideal' more generally, rests on a prior denial of superstructural *independence* – 'relative' or otherwise. Thus *The German Ideology* uncompromisingly avers that:

> Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness . . . no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. (1846a: 38)

Marx extends the argument quite explicitly to the institutions of politics and law. 'It must not be forgotten that law has just as little an independent history as religion' (ibid.: 80). The idea that politics is 'an independent sphere of activity, which develops in its own way' is one 'shared [by] all ideologists' (ibid.: 528). 'There is no history of politics, law, science, etc., of art, religion, etc.' (ibid.: 671). I shall exemplify this argument in detail with regard to state and law below. But first, let us consider further what kind of argument it is.

If, with Cohen and 'traditional historical materialism', and with 'relative autonomy' theorists, we see the 'economic structure of society' as exclusive of morality, law, religion, science, art, politics, and the rest, then we have to conclude from these curt propositions that Marx was indeed an economic determinist, and a pretty vulgar one at that. This is implausible, given the oft-remarked undeterministic character of any of his substantive historical analyses, like *The Eighteenth Brumaire* or part 8 of *Capital* I. What Marx actually says in these passages, however, is rather different. His concern is to deny that law, religion, politics and so on have a history in themselves, which is independent of that of production and its social relations. He does not say these are epiphenomenal, secondary, subordinate, or otherwise marginal factors in history as such. The two claims are very different.

Marx's point – in fact a mirror-image of Acton's criticism of his supposed position – is that law, state, and so on have no existence independent of people's 'materialistic connection' (ibid.: 41). This is why, like the subjects of idealistic philosophy generally, they cannot in themselves be seen as the motive forces of history. Like 'consciousness', they have no existence 'in themselves'; to treat them as independent entities is to reify them. But this does not, in logic or in Marx's texts, entail a denial or downgrading of their historical import

as such. Indeed, if they are inseparable from people's 'material production and material intercourse', and the latter is held to be 'basic' to society and history, such a conclusion would be somewhat self-contradictory.

In this connection, it is worth pausing over a much discussed footnote to *Capital* I. Marx is defending his formulations in the 1859 Preface, against the charge that 'all this is very true for our own times, in which material interests predominate, but not for the Middle Ages, in which Catholicism, nor for Athens and Rome, where politics, reigned supreme'. He goes on:

> this much, however, is clear, that the Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood which explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played the chief part. (1867a: 82n)

Certainly there is room for argument as to exactly how 'the mode in which they gained a livelihood' explains why religion and politics respectively 'played the chief part' in the life of these societies. Althusser for instance invokes this passage in defence of his 'structural causality'. My point, however, is that nothing Marx says here denies that politics in antiquity, and Catholicism in the Middle Ages, actually did 'reign supreme'.

Marx's argument, then, is about how law, the state, religion and so forth should be conceived. It is not, or at least not primarily, about their causal status – determinate or determined – in history. That they are denied causal primacy is a consequence of Marx's prior denial of their very separability. If they cannot in themselves determine or explain historical development, this is because they have no separable existence in themselves. But this does not mean that when properly conceived – not 'in themselves', but as 'organic related' (1857: 88) to people's productive activities – they lack causal efficacy. Engels makes this very clear in one of the letters I cited in chapter 1. He says it is 'ridiculous' to assume that 'because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them any *effect on history*' (1893: 92, Engels's emphasis).

The structural similarity between Marx's critique of idealism and his analysis of 'ideological spheres' is striking. I believe this to be more than a mere coincidence. Marx attacks the independence of

'superstructures' in the same terms as he does idealism's fictitious historical subjects, because he believes 'superstructures' actually to be idealizations comparable to the philosophers' 'speculative constructions'. They are constituted in the same way as Hegel's *Geist* or Stirner's 'self-consciousness'. Law, state, religion, and so on can be conceived as independent, self-acting spheres, only by virtue of a reification of exactly the sort idealism engages in with regard to consciousness. In reality, they do not exist outwith people's 'materialistic connection'. For Marx, 'superstructures' are not, as they immediately appear to be, levels of reality which are substantially separate from the 'base'. They are, rather, ideological forms of appearance – *Erscheinungsformen,* to use his own concept – of the totality of social relations which make up that base itself, and their ideologicality consists precisely in their appearance of real independence. The proper interpretive context for Marx's metaphor of basis and superstructure, then, is that of his critique of ideology. Superstructures, contrary to Cohen, are the 'social forms of consciousness' in which the 'essential relations' of society are immediately grasped, and their analysis is coterminous with Marx's critique of immediate appearances.

Alasdair MacIntyre argued similarly (and correctly drew attention to the relevance here of Marx's Hegelian background) long ago:

> As Marx depicts it the relation between basis and superstructure is not only not mechanical, it is not even causal. What may be misleading is Marx's Hegelian vocabulary. Marx certainly talks of the basis 'determining' the superstructure, and of a 'correspondence' between them. But the reader of Hegel's *Logic* will realise that what Marx envisages is something to be understood in terms of the way the nature of the concept of a given class, for example, may determine the concept of membership of that class . . . The economic basis of a society is not its tools, but the people co-operating using those particular tools in the manner necessary to their use and the superstructure consists in the social consciousness moulded by and the shape of this co-operation . . . Creating the basis, you create the superstructure. These are not two activities but one. (quoted in Thompson, 1973: 189n)

If this reading is correct, to construe the base/superstructure metaphor as a model of the relation between substantially discrete levels, practices or 'instances' within the social formation, and conceptualize that relation in causal (or functional) terms, is to replicate exactly the ideological illusion of superstructural separability Marx is above all

concerned to confute. Such constructions spectacularly miss the central point of his argument. The base/superstructure metaphor applies to the relation between social being and social consciousness, it is not a putative model of societal 'levels' at all. We might recall, here, the several occasions in Engels's late letters – and comparable passages can also be cited from Marx[3] – on which he relates base and superstructure as, respectively, content and form.

For Marx the analytic reification of superstructures – like the fetishes considered in chapter 1 – bespeaks a real social process of estrangement. Given his views on consciousness, it would be surprising if this were not the case. Marx sees '*ideas, categories*' as being but 'the abstract ideal expression of social relations' (1846b: 189). Accordingly, where, as in capitalism, social relations take on the mystifying form of 'the violence of things' (1846a: 95), their 'abstract ideal expression' is likely to be a reified one. *The German Ideology* explicitly develops this argument:

> Within the division of labour relationships are bound to acquire independent existence in relation to individuals. All relations can be expressed in language only in the form of concepts. That these general ideas and concepts are looked upon as mysterious forces is the necessary result of the fact that the real relations, of which they are the expression, have acquired independent existence. (1846a: 406)

The *Grundrisse* advances a similar thesis. Contrasting the (relatively transparent) personal dependency-relations of precapitalist societies – kinship and *Herrschaft* – with the 'objective dependency-relations' of the capitalist market, Marx argues that:

> These *objective* dependency-relations, also appear, in antithesis to those of personal dependency (the objective dependency-relation is nothing more than social relations which have become independent and now enter into opposition to the seemingly independent individuals; i.e. the reciprocal relations of production separated from and autonomous of individuals) in such a way that individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended on one another. The abstraction, or idea, however, is nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master. Relations can be expressed, however, only in ideas, and thus philosophers have determined the reign of ideas to be the peculiarity of the new age. (1858a: 163–4)

It was at such 'abstractions', rather than the relations of which they were the expression, that the Young Hegelians characteristically

tilted. The objective of Marx's critique was to refocus attention on the relations themselves, to locate the secret of the 'holy family' in the 'earthly family' (1845b).

In Marx's later writings, a distinction between the substance of 'essential relations' and the variously misleading 'phenomenal forms' in which they present themselves to consciousness is a systematic, organising principle of his critique of capitalism.[4] He held that 'science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided' (1865a: 817), and that in general 'it is only the direct *form of manifestation* of relations that is reflected in [people's] brains and not their *inner connection*' (1867b). In capitalism, though not in all societies, these two diverge. Patrick Murray, criticizing my *Marx's Method,* has suggested that Marx leans heavily here on Hegel's distinctive logic of essence, 'which can be typified in the phrase "the essence must appear as something other than itself (namely, the phenomena)"' (1983: 496). Under certain conditions, essential relations necessarily appear to their subjects in misleading forms (and Marx's critique of appearances shows why this should be the case, in terms of the character of the underlying relations themselves). In Murray's words, 'Marx works with a non-traditional model which conceives of the discrepancies between essence and appearance to be a necessary consequence of the very nature of the essence' (ibid.). I have exemplified this above for commodity and capital fetishism. This Hegelian logic of essence is, for Marx, *accurately* expressive of a specifically alienated social reality: the 'enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world' of capitalism with its 'personification of things and conversion of production relations into entities' (1865a: 830). Only such a logic can penetrate 'this religion of everyday life' (ibid.) – again we see Marx's persistent analogy between religious and other fetishes. In this sense Lenin was quite right when he famously observed that *Capital* could not be fully understood without reference to Hegel's *Logic* (1916: 180).

It is exactly such *Erscheinungsformen* which comprise Marx's 'superstructure'. It is the discrepancy between essential relations and the misleading forms in which they are experientially manifested[5] which makes sense – I am tempted to say, which alone can make sense – of his repeated characterizations of superstructures as 'ideal' or 'ideological'. This argument has an unsurprising corollary, for those who have followed my reconstruction of historical materialism thus far. That the base/superstructure metaphor has been understood

in the way it conventionally has is itself readily explicable in terms of Marx's own 'logic of essence'. It is an ideological consequence of the fact that within capitalism, social relations of production do manifest themselves phenomenally in the form of obstensibly independent economic and non-economic 'spheres'. Here, as elsewhere, 'traditional historical materialism' uncritically takes appearance for reality. It grounds its analytic categories on the 'natural, self-understood forms of social life' of the bourgeois world, whose characteristics it then proceeds unhistorically to generalize to all social formations. It is the depth, the tenacity, the sheer massive obviousness of these capitalist *Erscheinungsformen* that makes what Marx was saying so eternally difficult to grasp.

IV

I shall shortly exemplify this argument with regard to Marx's analyses of state and law. But first, a clarification. I have tentatively suggested the identification of superstructures and *Erscheinungsformen* elsewhere (Corrigan and Sayer, 1978; Sayer 1983: 80–1), but in ways which are likely to be misleading.[6] The same goes, more generally, for my account of ideology in *Marx's Method.* My concern there, as here, was to deny the independence both of consciousness from experience and of politics, law, and so on, from what Marx understood by 'economic structure'. My language, however, tended to suggest that the relations at issue could be adequately comprehended in terms of structural 'correspondences'. This was unintentional. But I would now be more cautious.

In talking of the economic structure of society, we should never forget – and Marx rarely did – that we are talking of relations between living, acting, thinking, and above all historical individuals; real men and women. Far from dichotomizing society and the individual, structure and action, Marx is insistent throughout his work that 'above all we must avoid postulating "society" . . . as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual. The individual *is the social being*' (1844a: 299); 'my own existence *is* social activity' (ibid.: 298). Society has no existence independently of individuals: 'its only subjects are the individuals, but individuals in mutual relationships, which they produce and reproduce anew' (1858a: 712; cf. Frisby and Sayer, 1986: 91–6). These relations, moreover, are always in the process of formation and transformation: Marx's continual revolutionizing, in practical activity, of circumstances and selves. 'Structure' thus resolves into activities.

'Ideological superstructures' – understood as the forms in which these relations are experientially apprehended – likewise do not mechanically 'arise', except in analytic shorthand. Indeed I would now argue that the blanket term 'ideology' is inadequate, except for the most abstract analytic purposes, to elucidate the multiple and complex ways in which social being is articulated in the social consciousness of individuals. It is too blunt an instrument to embrace (for instance) languages, symbols, moralities, artefacts, myths, faiths, traditions, customs; all of these, moreover, more or less institutionalized in churches, legal systems, political rituals, and so on. The concept of ideology has suffered the fate of many in Marx. Where for him its primary use was adjectival and descriptive of qualities – illusoriness, class bias, etc. – which some particular historical forms of consciousness had, it has become reified as itself descriptive of a supposed real entity, a noun which sails through history innocent of any reference to real individuals and the lives they lead. And as Marx remarks against Stirner, concepts, 'if they are divorced from the empirical reality underlying them, can be turned inside out like a glove' (1846a: 362).

It is people – not individuals in the abstract, but definite, socially and historically located individuals – who have ideas, build (and modify) institutions, shape their world. The process through which being is 'expressed' in consciousness is an active one. An appropriate image of this is the picture of a sculptor: creating something genuinely novel, but always out of materials – physical and cultural – which constrain (and in that sense, 'determine')[7] what can be made of them. Marx thought the ultimate basis of people's consciousness lay in their experience, which is why it makes sense to seek to ground an explanation of its ideologicality (where such a claim is made) in *Erscheinungsformen.* But we have hardly begun to explain, with this presumption, the actual empirical forms – think of millenarianism, rough music, carnival, or *grands peurs* – which social consciousness assumes in actual history. It is a starting-point, no more. Least of all can we simply 'read off' forms of consciousness from the bare concept of a 'mode of production' or its abstractly specified 'essential relations'.

In the final analysis the relation between social being and social consciousness can only be elucidated historically, over time, through empirical investigation of – in Marx's words – exactly how 'people make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are confronted' (1852: 103).

Amongst these 'given and inherited circumstances', I would add, the cultural legacy of the past must be reckoned a powerful material constituent of the present, framing present experience, informing 'phenomenal forms'. Societies exist in time, and cannot be made sense of otherwise. *Erscheinungsformen* equally have an historical dimension, even if it is never independent of people's 'materialistic connection'. Forms of consciousness cannot adequately be analysed statically or synchronically. We cannot begin to understand, for instance, the phenomenal forms of the 'modern' English state without invoking the traditions symbolized and materialized in Magna Carta, Parliament and the common law, without remembering that England is an old Protestant country, or even – some would argue – without comprehending the long reach of the cultural and institutional heritage of Anglo-Saxon England (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985). It is not irrelevant to the aetiology of social forms of consciousness in England that, for instance, county boundaries were with few exceptions continuous from before the Norman Conquest to 1974. Counties are not just names on maps, they are real repositories of historical experience. Such 'traditions' – themselves contested (think of the centuries-long 'myth' of the Norman yoke (Hill, 1954) or the differential meanings of 'English liberties' (Thompson, 1968: ch. 1) – are formative of individuals' social identities, of, precisely, their 'social forms of consciousness' and self-consciousness.

The 'arising' of 'superstructures', in short, cannot be directly comprehended through some structural (or functional) logic. It needs rather to be painstakingly and empirically traced through time, as without doubt constrained, but also without doubt active, social formation – to give that usually static term a more historical nuance than it is usually granted. Theory alone, no matter how elegantly formulated, provides no short-cuts here to knowledge. This caution should be borne in mind in all that follows. It is essentially that I drew from Engels's 'testament' in chapter 1. Base and superstructure are in the end *metaphors*, and what Marx had to say about them in the

1859 Preface was never intended to be any more than a 'guiding thread'.

V

It is time to substantiate these arguments. I shall take Marx's analysis of those two closely linked institutional realms which for Cohen are superstructures *par excellence*, state and law. We may begin once more in the 1840s. E. P. Thompson (1978a: 247 ff.) has argued that Marx's texts of this period are significantly wider in the scope of their historical sociology than his later, supposedly more 'mature' writings, and that his critical focus on political economy in the 1850s and 1860s brought losses as well as gains. Certainly this case can be persuasively made for Marx's 1840s analysis of state and law. Marx himself acknowledged in the 1860s that 'the relations of the different state forms to the different economic structures of society' was something he did not deal with adequately in *Capital*, and others might find it difficult to do on the basis provided there.[8]

Early in 1845, Marx signed a contract with the Darmstadt publisher Leske for a work whose proposed title – an instructive one – was 'The Critique of Politics and Political Economy'. He never delivered. But his plans for his 'economics' included a 'book' on the state at least until 1862 (see Sayer, 1985). Had such a book materialized, it might have amplified on a pregnant remark of 1843:

> The *establishment of the political state* and the dissolution of civil society into independent *individuals* – whose relations with one another depend on *law*, just as relations of men in the system of guilds and estates depended on *privilege* – is accomplished by *one and the same act.* (1843c: 167)

Marx says much the same in another manuscript of the same year, using slightly different terms:

> The political constitution as such is brought into being only where the private spheres have won an independent existence. Where trade and landed property are not yet free and have not yet become independent, the political constitution too does not yet exist . . . The abstraction of the *state as such* belongs only to modern times, because the abstraction of private life belongs only to modern times. The abstraction of the *political state* is a modern product. (1843b: 32)

The 'political state', 'the state as such', is, then, for Marx an historical phenomenon, coterminous with the establishment of a 'civil society' of 'independent individuals' whose mutual relations depend on law. In view of my arguments in the earlier sections of this chapter we should not let pass unremarked Marx's description here of both the state and private life as 'abstractions'.

In many of his earliest writings, as here, Marx employed the concept of civil society to refer to what he was in *The German Ideology* to call 'forms of intercourse' (*Verkehrsform*) and later clarify as relations of production (*Produktionsverhältnisse*). He took the concept from Hegel, who in turn had it from eighteenth-century French philosophers via Adam Smith (see Frisby and Sayer, 1986: ch. 1). Thereafter, interestingly, the term civil society does not disappear entirely from Marx's lexicon. He uses it in his autobiographical sketch in the 1859 Preface, to refer to 'the totality of' the 'material conditions of life' (whose 'anatomy',[9] he says there, is to be sought in political economy) (1859a). More significantly, perhaps, the concept of civil society surfaces again in *The Civil War in France,* in connection once more with the analysis of the modern state (1871: 149 and *passim*). I have suggested elsewhere (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985) that this is part of a wider set of neglected continuities between Marx's 1840s and post-1870 writings, which reinforces Thompson's point about the relative narrowing of focus in the texts of the intervening years, and suggests that any simple dismissal of the 1840s analyses of the state as 'immature' is ill-considered. The later Marx continued to see civil society and 'the political state' as coeval phenomena.

Although Marx notes in *The German Ideology* that the concept of civil society is conventionally extended to embrace 'the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the state and the rest of the idealistic superstructure', he makes it clear that civil society is in fact an historical category in both its origins and its specific reference. 'The term "civil society"', he says, 'emerged in the eighteenth century, when property relations had already extricated themselves from the ancient and medieval community. Civil society as such develops only with the bourgeoisie' (1846a: 48–9). The German term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* indeed translates both as civil and as *bourgeois* society. The 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse* extends this argument, and takes further the theme of 'the dissolution of civil society into *independent individuals*'.

Here Marx contends that the 'isolated individuals' who form the theoretical starting-point both of classical political economy, and of Rousseau's *contrat social,* 'which brings naturally independent, autonomous subjects into relation and connection by contract', are in fact projections back into an imaginary past of individuals as they appear within modern 'civil society, in preparation since the sixteenth century and making giant strides towards maturity in the eighteenth' (1857: 83). The error here, for Marx, is exactly the same as Hegel's on landed property, discussed in the last chapter – the treatment of concepts 'not as historical but rather as eternal categories' (1865a: 615). Indeed, it is but the other side of the same coin, for the process whereby 'property' is 'freed' from its former 'political and social embellishments and associations', to achieve its 'purely economic form', is the same process wherein individuals appear progressively detached from the communities through whose membership they previously became proprietors or possessors of land: family, clan, *Herrschaftsverhältnisse.* They appear in *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* for the first time as, precisely, mere individuals, in 'dot-like isolation'. But 'human beings become individuals only through the process of history. He appears originally as a *species-being, clan being, herd animal*' (1858a: 496). It is, specifically, the social relations of capitalism – and in particular its social division of labour – which constitute individuals as apparently autonomous, freely contracting subjects: owners either of means of production or labour-power.

But for Marx – as later for Emile Durkheim (1984) – this appearance of individual autonomy, of lack of dependence on social relations, is ultimately illusory. The more the division of labour which individualizes people expands, the more socially interdependent individuals actually become. Given capitalism's inherent dynamism, ultimately such interdependence becomes global, through the world market. Overt relations of personal dependency give way to general '*objective* dependency-relations' (1858a: 163–4, quoted more fully above, p. 92):

> the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also that of precisely the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a *zoon politikon,* not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. (1857: 84)

This objective interdependence may not be apparent, because of the alienated forms – the fetishized appearance as relations between

things (commodities), rather than people – it assumes under capitalism. But it is real. Accordingly, Smith's, Ricardo's or Rousseau's 'Natural Individual' is 'an ideal' (ibid.: 83) – note again the use of this significant term. Marx had criticized Feuerbach in the same terms ten years earlier: 'the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs in reality to a particular form of society' (1846a: 57; cf. 1843d: 175).[10]

In his essay of 1843 on 'The Jewish Question', Marx elaborates on his proposition that 'egoistic man', 'the member of civil society' – the 'abstract individual' whom we have been discussing – is 'the basis, the precondition of the *political* state' (1843c: 166). He develops his argument via a series of historical contrasts with feudal society. It is best to follow the text closely, for Marx's language is not always easy:

> *Feudalism* . . . was *directly political*, that is to say, the elements of civil life, for example, property, or the family, or the mode of labour, were raised to the level of political life in the form of seigniority, estates, and corporations. In this form they determined the relation of the individual to *the state as a whole*, i.e., his *political* relation, that is, his relation of separation and exclusion from the other components of society . . . Thus, the vital functions and conditions of civil society remained . . . political, although political in the feudal sense, that is to say, they secluded the individual from the state as a whole and they converted the *particular* relation of his corporation to the state as a whole into his general relation to the life of the nation, just as they converted his particular civil activity and situation into his general activity and situation. As a result of this organisation, the unity of the state, and also the consciousness, will and activity of this unity, the general power of the state, are likewise bound to appear as the *particular* affair of a ruler isolated from the people, and of his servants. (1843c: 165–6).

What Marx is saying, in more modern vocabularies, is something like this. In feudalism, 'civil' and 'political', 'public' and 'private', coincided; indeed these very terms are anachronistic as applied to the medieval world, for such distinctions are precisely a product of bourgeois historical development. Individuals' 'civil' statuses were at the same time 'political', and it would be meaningless to try to differentiate between 'public' and 'private' at the level of institutions. Thus, for instance, feudal lords were not merely 'property' owners – and we have already seen the inappropriateness of that description of them, if property is taken in its modern sense – but suzerains who enjoyed jurisdiction over their serfs and tenants. Feudal estates had distinct and differential privileges in law; in medieval England, for

example, villeins had no access to the royal courts in matters affecting relations with their lord, while the nobility were exempt from corporal punishment. Most medieval parliaments were organized by estates. The king, conversely, was ideally expected to 'live off his own', and farmed taxes. This is the kind of thing Marx had in mind in his earlier quoted remark about 'privilege' being the basis of medieval society.

In this social context, a 'political sphere', a 'state' in the modern sense of the word, cannot meaningfully be separated off from 'civil society'. Nor can it be construed as the realm of the 'public' interest as distinct from 'private life'. Feudalism recognizes no such distinctions. Politics 'in the feudal sense' is rather the 'private' affair of the ruler and his servants, 'the political nation', to use a term drawn from English historiography. Though Marx does not say so here, the same is true of the *polis* of antiquity. For Aristotle only the free can be citizens, and 'a citizen in the fullest sense is one who has a share in honours' associated with holding office in the *polis* (1984: 184). St Paul too, of course, escaped a whipping on the grounds that he was a *civis Romanus* (Acts of the Apostles, 22–6).

Bürgerliche Gesellschaft fractures this identity of civil and political, public and private, in ways which profoundly alter the very meanings of the concepts of polity and society, making their modern distinction conceivable. In ancient and medieval political thought society was rarely, if ever, theorized independently of the *polis*: it was conceptualised as a community of citizens (*civitas*) with a public-political form (*res publica*) (see Frisby and Sayer, 1986: ch. 1). Marx continues:

> The political revolution which overthrew this sovereign state of affairs and raised state affairs to become affairs of the people, which constituted the political state as a matter of *general* concern, that is, as a real state, necessarily smashed all estates, corporations, guilds, and privileges since they were all manifestations of the separation of the individual from the community. The political revolution thereby *abolished* the *political character of civil society*. It broke up civil society into its simple component parts: on the one hand, the *individuals*; on the other hand, the *material* and *spiritual* elements constituting the content of the life and social position of these individuals. It set free the political spirit, which had been, as it were, split up, partitioned, dispersed in the various blind alleys of feudal society. It gathered the dispersed parts of the political spirit, freed it from its intermixture with civil life, and established it as the sphere of the community, the general concern of the nation, IDEALLY independent of those *particular* elements of civil

life. A person's *distinct* activity and distinct situation in life were reduced to a merely individual significance. They no longer constituted the general relation of the individual to the state as a whole. Public affairs as such, on the other hand, became the general affair of each individual, and the political function became the individual's general function.

But the completion of THE IDEALISM OF THE STATE was at the same time the completion of the materialism of civil society. Throwing off the political yoke meant at the same time throwing off the bonds which restrained the egoistic spirit of civil society. Political emancipation was at the same time the emancipation of civil society from politics, from having even the semblance of a universal content. (1843c: 165–6; Marx's italics, my capitals)

In the bourgeois world, 'civil society' ceases to be directly 'political'. Or, to use a formulation I would prefer since it is less anachronistic than Marx's own, civil society as such is actually constituted, and becomes a possible object of theorization, for the first time, as a society of (formally) free, equal, independent human *individuals.*[11] Unlike in feudalism, individuals' differential material positions do not – in appearance at any rate – any longer coincide with differential 'political' powers, statuses or rights. They can be conceived of as a 'private' matter, irrelevant to one's 'public' existence as a citizen. At the same time, and correspondingly, an identifiable 'public' sphere – the state – is also demarcated for the first time, as (ideally) the domain of 'the general interest', in which all equally partake as citizens. In sum then, for Marx:

political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of civil society, to an *egotistic, independent* individual, and, on the other hand, to a *citizen,* a juridical person. (1843c: 168)

As later for Durkheim, Elias or Foucault, state formation and individualization are complementary processes, entailing one another: the abstraction of the state and the abstraction of the individual originate in 'one and the same act'.

Now this is evidently an ideal-typical account, which at the least savagely truncates the protracted, uneven and complex process of bourgeois state formation. It is also in some respects undoubtedly misleading, if taken as a straightforward statement of historical fact. Real feudal societies often differed considerably from Marx's archetype. In England, for example, state formation (and with it such

notions as equality – of free men – before a law which overrode seigneurial prerogatives) was well advanced long before anything that can reasonably be called a bourgeois economy had developed. Marx equally overstates the degree to which abstract equality of individuals was (or is) the basis of bourgeois political life. Property qualifications remained the explicit, hierarchized criterion for successive nineteenth-century English franchise extensions, for instance, while adult women did not gain the vote on the same terms as men until 1929, or equal rights to own property or make contracts until later still. The Equal Rights Amendment outlawing discrimination on grounds of sex has yet to pass the US Congress. For long the 'individuals' of whom Marx speaks – to take up again my arguments about patriarchy in the last section of Chapter 3 – were specifically household heads, the household being a crystallization of age, gender and property relations. But regarded as an analysis of the distinctive ideological forms – the legal and political superstructures, as I am using the term – of bourgeois society, Marx's observations remain, to my mind at least, extremely insightful.

For he goes on to develop a critique of this 'political emancipation', which denies its substance. The burden of Marx's argument is that the political state, far from transcending the material inequalities of civil society, in fact reproduces and reinforces them: 'far from abolishing these *real* distinctions, the state only exists on the presupposition of their existence' (1843c: 153). To anticipate later formulations, the state is a form of class rule. Specifically it is the form in which the modern bourgeoisie publicly organizes its social power. Now in my last long quote from 'The Jewish Question' I capitalized two of Marx's phrases: he speaks of the political state as being '*ideally*' independent of the 'particular elements of civil life', and of 'the completion of the *idealism* of the state'. Another passage in the same text elaborates on this theme of the state's ideality, drawing an instructive analogy with religion (to which, of course, Marx also persistently compared fetishism in the 'economic sphere'):

Where the political state has attained its true development, man – not only in thought, in consciousness, but in *reality,* in *life* – leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the *political community,* in which he considers himself a *communal being,* and life in *civil society,* in which he acts as a *private individual,* regards other men as a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. The relation of the

political state to civil society is just as spiritual as the relation of heaven to earth. The political state stands in the same opposition to civil society, and it prevails over the latter in exactly the same way as religion prevails over the narrowness of the secular world, i.e., by likewise having always to acknowledge it, to restore it, and allow itself to be dominated by it. In his *most immediate* reality, in civil society, man is a secular being. Here, where he regards himself as a real individual, and is so regarded by others, he is a *fictitious* phenomenon. In the state, on the other hand, where man is regarded as a species-being, he is the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty, is deprived of his real individual life and endowed with an unreal universality. (ibid.: 154)

We should take the religious analogy seriously, because for Marx religion is the paradigm of alienated consciousness, its fetishes the exemplars for fetishes elsewhere. He once famously remarked (in a text contemporary with 'The Jewish Question') that 'criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism' (1843d: 175). What he is saying here, I think, amounts to much more than that the state's pretentions to be above classes are to be disbelieved.

Marx's claim is that the institution of the 'political' state as such is an illusory, ideal community – an ideological fiction – built upon the construction of an equally fictitious social identity for the individual, that of the citizen. Individuals are *citoyens* only as 'abstract' individuals – individuals, in other words, divorced from the material circumstances and social relations which concretely make them what they are. The 'ideal' state is predicated on the ideological denial of real individuality. Real differences between people are submerged in the ascription of 'unreal universality'. In capitalism, the individual and the community are therefore simultaneously idealized: the bourgeois citizen is 'an *imaginary* member of an *illusory* sovereignty'. We cannot begin to understand Marx's thinking on the state, to my mind, unless we take these words in their literal sense. The state is an ideological representation of bourgeois society, an *Erscheinungsform*. In Philip Abrams's provocative adaptation of Durkheim, it is capitalism's 'distinctive collective misrepresentation' (1977: 15). And individuals as identified and represented (in all senses) within the community of state are not individuals as they really are.

VI

For 'The Jewish Question', then, the political state as such is without doubt an ideological form, an ideal superstructure on real relations in the sense argued above. But beyond its references to 'egoistic individuals', this text offers no material analysis of the social relations which underpin this form. Later writings, however, do – but without sacrificing any of the essential insights of 'The Jewish Question'. *The German Ideology* roots the 'illusory community' of the state (and law) in the particular class relations of bourgeois society, which it in turn sees as based in the division of labour (1846a: 65, 83):

> the division of labour implies the contradiction between the interests of the separate individual . . . and the communal interests of all individuals . . . And out of this very contradiction between the interests of the individual and that of the community the latter takes an independent form as the *State*, divorced from the real interests of individual and community, and at the same time as an illusory communal life, always based, however, on the real ties . . . and especially . . . on the classes, already determined by the division of labour. (1846a: 44–5)

Specifically, Marx relates the fact that bourgeois power takes the characteristic forms of domination through a political state and the rule of law to the circumstance that the bourgeoisie is the first social group in history truly to rule 'as a class'.

At first sight, this notion is odd, for did not previous forms of society also have ruling classes: feudal lords, ancient slaveholders, oriental potentates, and so on? Clearly they did, and Marx obviously does not mean to deny that pre-capitalist ruling strata lived off surplus labour. The contrast he has in mind is a narrower one, between social *forms* of rule; in particular, between rule as a class and rule as an estate (*Stand*). In this sense, class too is a historical category.[12] Rule as an estate, as we saw in chapter 3, is based in personal relations of domination and servitude, as also is slavery. Personalized domination is in fact for Marx the norm in all pre-capitalist societies. The bourgeoisie, by contrast, rules impersonally – and is the first class in history to do so – in the context of the formal equality of all individuals. The form in which bourgeois social power is embodied is the 'purely economic' (and specifically alienated) one

of its property, in the modern meaning of the word. Control over people (and their labour) is mediated through control over things. The ultimate expression of this impersonal social power is in money – 'the consumate fetish'. In bourgeois society, according to the *Grundrisse*:

> The reciprocal and all-sided dependence of individuals who are indifferent to one another forms their social connection. This social bond is expressed in *exchange value* . . . the power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of *exchange values*, of *money*. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket. (1858a: 156–7)

It is the materialization – the alienation – of the 'social bond' in the thing-like forms of commodities, money and capital, which permits people to exercise power over one another indirectly and impersonally, as abstract individuals, rather than directly and personally as master and slave or lord and serf. In *Capital* Marx observes that it was on precisely these grounds – 'social power becomes the private power of private persons' – that the ancients denounced money as 'subversive of the economic and moral order of things' (1867a: 132), an order seen by for instance Aristotle as one of natural and personalized hierarchy.

The German Ideology relates the existence of both state and law to this 'impersonal', and alienated, form of class domination through 'property' alone:

> pure private property . . . has cast off all semblance of a communal institution and has shut off the state from any influence on the development of property. To this modern private property corresponds the modern state . . . By the mere fact that it is a *class* and no longer an *estate*, the bourgeoisie is forced to organise itself no longer locally, but nationally, and to give a general form to its mean average interest. Through the emancipation of private property from the community, the state has become a separate entity, beside and outside civil society; but it is nothing more than the form of organisation which the bourgeoisie *necessarily* adopt, both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests. (1846a: 79, emphasis added)

Marx says exactly the same of law: 'in the law the bourgeoisie must give themselves a general expression precisely because they rule as a class' (ibid.: 671).

The clue to the necessity of bourgeois rule taking the form of an ideally independent state enforcing the rule of law lies, for Marx, in the atomized, fissiparous character – precisely the individualized nature – of the bourgeois class itself. This in turn follows from the specific form of social division of labour between independent commodity-producers in which capitalist production is based. The individuals of the bourgeoisie, Marx considers, 'form a class only in so far as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors' (ibid.: 69). Their common class interest can be secured only by maintaining conditions – above all the defence of individual property-rights – in which they can continue to act freely as individuals, each pursuing his own private interests, in apparent isolation from one another. This entails both the safeguarding of bourgeois right against the political and moral economies of other classes (whether aristocratic or proletarian) and the maintenance of equal right among bourgeois individuals themselves. The 'rule of law' is the paradigm form of such regulation:

> the fact that they [the bourgeois class] enforce their own will in the form of law, and at the same time make it independent of the personal arbitrariness of each individual among them, does not depend upon their idealistic will. Their personal rule must at the same time assume the form of average rule. Their personal power is based on conditions of life which as they develop are common to many individuals, and the continuance of which they, as ruling individuals, have to maintain against others, and, at the same time, to maintain that they hold good for everybody. The expression of this will, which is determined by their common interests, is law. It is precisely because individuals who are independent of one another assert themselves and their own will, and because on this basis their attitude to one another is bound to be egotistical, that self-denial is made necessary in law and right, self-denial in the exceptional case, and self-assertion of their interests in the average case. (ibid.: 329)

Marx's discussion of the English Factory Acts in *Capital* I (1867a: ch. 15) admirably illustrates this thesis. Certainly he stresses the degree to which parliamentary limitation of hours of labour represented a victory for 'the political economy of the working class' (1864a: 845–6); law is a theatre of class struggle as much as a form of class rule. But he is equally sensitive to 'the cry of the capitalists for equality in the conditions of competition' (1867a: 490). *The German Ideology*

argues, comparably, that the 'representative system' of modern parliamentary democracy is 'a very specific product of modern bourgeois society which is as inseparable from the latter as is the isolated individual of modern times' (1846a: 217–18).

Marx's later writings extend the argument to the actual forms of law themselves, and anchor these more directly in the phenomenal forms of commodity circulation. Pashukanis (1978; cf. Corrigan and Sayer, 1981) has developed this theme in Marx with considerable brilliance (if also, at times, undue abstractness). 'Capital-logic' theorists (who can sometimes be subjected to the same criticism) have argued similarly regarding the characteristic political forms of bourgeois democracy (Holloway and Picciotto, 1978). So I shall be brief. For the *Grundrisse,* the juridical subject – the free, autonomous, sovereign individual – is implicit in the relation of commodity exchangers: in the very act of exchange 'they are *stipulated* for each other as, and *prove* themselves to be, equals, [and] there enters, in addition to the quality of equality, that of *freedom*':

> although individual A feels a need for the commodity of individual B, he does not appropriate it by force, nor vice versa, but they recognise one another reciprocally as proprietors, as persons whose will penetrates their commodities. Accordingly, the juridical moment of the Person enters here, as well as that of freedom, in so far as it is contained in the former. No one seized hold of another's property by force. Each divests himself of his property voluntarily. (1858a: 243; cf. 1867a: 84)

Marx goes on to argue that 'the exchange of exchange-values is the productive, real basis of all *equality* and *freedom*', and 'as pure ideas they are merely the idealized expressions of this basis; as developed in juridical, political, social relations they are merely this basis to a higher power' (1858a: 245). Equality and freedom presuppose relations of production lacking in the medieval and ancient world, which rested on 'direct forced labour' (ibid.; cf. 464–5). *Capital* argues similarly that 'the notion of human equality' can only 'acquire the fixity of a popular prejudice' when 'the dominant relation between man and man is that of owners of commodities' (1867a: 60). In this sense the market is 'a very Eden of the innate rights of man', where 'alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham' (ibid.: 176).

The 'attributes of the juridical person', then, are 'precisely [those] of the individual engaged in exchange' (1858a: 246). However, Marx

argues – and here we return to the 'ideality' of superstructures – that the sphere of exchange is merely 'the surface process' of bourgeois society, 'beneath which, however, in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which this apparent individual equality and liberty disappear' (ibid.). He of course has in mind the eminently unequal 'exchange' of labour-power for wages, out of which arises an unrequited surplus-value. Polemicizing against French socialists, who see this as a 'perversion' of the original equality of the exchange relationship, Marx argues that capital is 'inherent in' exchange-value, and wage-labour in commodity-producing labour. The possibility of the 'perversion' is in other words given in the original relationship itself. Failing to see this is a 'utopian inability to grasp the necessary difference between the real and the ideal form of bourgeois society', the latter being 'only the inverted projection [*Lichtbild*] of this reality' (ibid.: 249). Such are 'superstructures'.

VII

Let me now try to pull together the strands of this argument. Nothing I have said, or quoted from Marx, is in any way intended to deny the reality of organs, institutions or agencies of government or law as such. That would be absurd. It is the reality of their apparent separation from capitalism's 'economic structure' – its essential relations – which is at issue.

Marx's analysis of legal and political 'superstructures', I believe, hinges upon two key points, both of which are very subversive of 'traditional historical materialism'. First, he seeks to establish that the regulative agencies of state and law are substantially internal to capitalism's 'base' itself. That is to say, they are but forms of the social relations within and between classes – division of labour and labour/capital relation – upon which the possibility of capitalist economy is predicated. Their appearances of independence notwithstanding, state and law are in reality 'the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests, and in which the whole civil society of an epoch is epitomised' (1846a: 79–80). Marx insists, moreover, that state and law are *necessary* forms of bourgeois rule: 'the individuals who rule in these conditions – leaving aside the fact that their power *must* assume the form of the state – *have to* give

their will – a universal expression as the will of the state, as law' (ibid.: 329, emphasis added). State and law are thus essential relations of capitalist production, in the sense elaborated in my last chapter: it could not proceed in their absence. We should pay close attention to Marx's language when he says that civil society 'must assert itself in its foreign relations as nationality, and inwardly must organise itself as State', and speaks of civil society 'in its action as State' (ibid.: 50, 48). This does not sound like an external relation.

This argument implies, among other things, that the class relations of capitalism cannot adequately be delineated just at the 'economic' level, as Cohen's supposedly *rechtsfrei* ownership relations. State and law are intrinsic to the totality of social relations which actually make up the seemingly 'impersonal' power of bourgeois property, which maintain a social order in which domination can appear to take purely 'economic' forms. They are constitutive of bourgeois class rule; it could not exist otherwise. The bourgeoisie, in Max Weber's useful phrase, is the 'national citizen class' (1966: 249); Marx himself observes of the notion of citizenship 'it should read: domination of the bourgeoisie' (1846a: 215). Anderson, too, must be qualified here. I quoted him above on the novelty of 'the economy' being a 'formally self-contained order' in capitalism, for which 'superstructures' of state and law are '"external" preconditions' (p. 73). This is fine, and grasps an important contrast between capitalism and previous forms of society, providing we remember that although the novelty is real enough, the externality of these 'spheres' *is* merely apparent. This brings me to Marx's second point.

For he is equally clear that in capitalism, these essential relations manifest themselves in *Erscheinungsformen* which conceal their true substance. The appearance of the 'economic sphere' as an external, objective realm is one side of that world of illusion, whose fetishes we have sufficiently explored in previous chapters. As E. P. Thompson has observed, 'the very category of economics – the notion that it is possible to isolate economic from non-economic social relations, that all human obligations can be dissolved except the cash-nexus – was the product of a particular phase of capitalist evolution' (1965: 82–3). The appearance of the political state, the 'illusory community', peopled by abstract individuals, equal citizens of the polity and subjects of the law, is the other side of the same phenomenon. The link between the two is the real subject of the commodity exchange –

the bourgeois. When Marx speaks of state and law as 'superstructures', it is to this bewitched world of appearances that I believe he is referring. Far from inscribing in his own theory, via a metaphor of 'levels', the reifications of capitalist society, the base/superstructure metaphor is intended to show them to be just that. The real state is an essential dimension of capitalism's class relations, 'the combination of one class over against another' (1846a: 93). Its ideal appearance is of an 'illusory community [which] took on an independent existence' (ibid.). It is the latter Marx calls a 'superstructure', in order precisely to show up its illusoriness, its 'ideal' character, and deny its substantial independence.

Regrettably Marx never did write that 'Critique of Politics and Political Economy'. But his later writings are thoroughly consonant with the critique he developed in the 1840s, arguing both the internality of the real state to capitalism's class relations and the insubstantiality of its 'ideal' independence. *Capital* for instance asserts that the use of state power is 'an essential element of the so-called primitive accumulation' (1867a: 737), whose methods 'all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organised force of society' (ibid.: 751). For *Grundrisse*, likewise, speaking of England, '*governments*, e.g. of Henry VII, VIII, etc. appear as conditions of the historic dissolution process [of feudal relations] and as makers for the conditions of existence of capital' (1858a: 507). Part 8 of *Capital* I details some of what Marx has in mind.[13] Both *The Civil War in France*, and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, texts of the 1870s, continue to anchor the 'political state' – 'the state in so far as it forms a special organism separated from society through the division of labour' (1875: 356), 'a *State* separate of and independent from society' (1871: 151) – in the specifically capitalist division of labour.

Marx also continues emphatically to deny the substantial reality of this separability. For *The Civil War*, the Second Empire whilst 'at first view, apparently the usurpatory dictatorship of the governmental body over society itself, rising alike above and humbling all classes', is in fact 'the only possible stateform in which the appropriating class can continue to sway it over the producing class' (ibid.: 196), 'the last degraded and the only possible form of that class ruling' (ibid.: 198).[14] The very separation of 'civil society' and 'political state' is an ideological superstructure on capitalism's component relations, an ideological form in which they are masked,

which simultaneously idealizes individual and community. Two passages, one from 1843, the other from 1871, bring out well the underlying continuities – and the animating emancipatory vision – in Marx's thinking here:

> Only when man has recognized and organized his '*forces propres*' as *social* forces, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished. (1843c: 168)

> [The Paris Commune] was . . . a revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or Imperialist form of state power. It was a revolution against the *State* itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life. (1871: 150)

Cohen at one point in his book remarks that 'even the mature idea of the political superstructure has some analogy with the doctrine of commodity fetishism' (1978: 128). Too true. But why, then, perpetuate the fetish within the analytic categories of historical materialism itself?

5

Interlude: the giraffes among the acacias

What follows is a brief, but I hope a useful, digression from my main argument. It is entirely concerned with a series of issues arising out of G. A. Cohen's formulation of 'traditional historical materialism'.[1] This chapter, which is the most philosophically technical in this book, may be skipped by those persuaded of my arguments thus far and disinclined to pursue Cohen further, since the aspect of his work I want to take up here – his functionalism – rests on premisses I have already rejected. If my view of Marx's basic concepts is accepted, there is evidently no possibility of developing a general functional model (any more than there is of elaborating a general causal model) of the forces/relations or base/superstructure relationship, as Cohen attempts. The issue of functional explanation in Marxism is worth discussing independently none the less, for two main reasons.

First, Cohen is undoubtedly correct that many forms of Marxism are tacitly functionalist. These include certain internal relations perspectives, and I wish clearly to distinguish my own position from these.[2] Functionalist formulations are also endemic in some variants of Marxist-feminism. Second, and more importantly, Cohen maintains that Marx's claims in the 1859 Preface can only be rendered coherent if they are interpreted functionally. Only thus, he contends, can we reconcile Marx's recognition that specific superstructures are conditions of existence for economic structures, and economic structures for development of the productive forces, with his assertion of the respective explanatory primacy of the latter term in each pair. Marxism in Cohen's view entails an inescapable commitment to functionalism.

I believe Cohen to be right on this issue if – but only if – his

definitions of the entities in question are accepted. Non-functionalist causal interpretations of the forces/relations and base/superstructure 'correspondences' run into unavoidable problems of circularity, of the sort raised by Acton. To this extent Cohen renders Marxist debate a significant service in showing that an orthodox conception of Marx's basic concepts does entail a functional reading of his explanatory propositions – a conclusion many Marxists have been reluctant to accept, even whilst wishing to maintain their conceptual orthodoxy. Interestingly, it was a recognition that only a covert teleology could reconcile a conception of superstructures as conditions of existence of economic structures with the assertion of economic determination 'in the last instance' which led Hindess and Hirst[3] eventually to argue the 'necessary non-correspondence' of these supposed levels of the social formation.

For me, on the other hand, Cohen's demonstration of the unavoidability of functionalism within 'traditional historical materialism' provides an additional, and compelling, reason for doing what I have argued for throughout this book, and rethinking these basic concepts themselves. For I shall argue that Cohen does not succeed in defending functional explanation. The alternatives are therefore to follow Hindess and Hirst out of the historical materialist framework entirely, in the direction of a systematic pluralism, or to seek to reconstitute that framework on foundations very different from those of 'tradition'. If we are to reject a functionalist version of Marx, in short, we must also abandon the familiar interpretation of his fundamental concepts.

I

Functional explanation, for Cohen, is 'a distinctive explanatory procedure, in which reference to the effects of a phenomenon contributes to explaining it' (1978: 250). It is a causal explanation, but a '*special* type of causal explanation . . . deriving its peculiarity from generalizations of distinctive logical form' (ibid.). Cohen calls the logically distinctive generalizations on which functional explanations are based 'consequence laws'. He sets out the form of these laws as follows:

> IF it is the case that if an event of type E were to occur at t1, then it would bring about an event of type F at t2, THEN an event of type E occurs at t3. (ibid.: 260)

In practice consequence-explanations are invariably also functional explanations – that is, the explanandum-event E is functional for something or other. Importantly, however, Cohen insists that this functionality is not a necessary feature of the structure of functional explanations, which is simply that of consequence-explanations in general. It is at least logically possible to imagine a consequence-explanation in which the explanandum-event would be dysfunctional. We may therefore abstract from the functionality of the explanandum in characterizing functional explanations, and describe them sufficiently by reference to their logical form – that of the consequence-explanation – alone. I assume Cohen insists on this in order to avoid standard objections to teleology.

Though consequence-explanations are causal, they are not, for Cohen, 'mirror-images of ordinary causal explanations' (ibid.: 261). The logical form of the consequence-laws on which consequence-explanations rest differs from that of ordinary causal laws. He asserts, none the less, that 'a consequence-statement explains when it relates to a *consequence-law* in whatever way an explanatory precedence-statement relates to a pertinent law' (ibid.: 259). This means that, *mutatis mutandis*, a functional explanation can be cast in the familiar deductive-nomological (hereafter D–N) form, as set out classically by Hempel. In Cohen's words:

> An elementary consequence-explanation, D–N construed, would contain as first premiss a consequence law and as second a statement asserting an instantiation of its major antecedent. The schema, where what is to be explained is the occurrence of an event of a certain type, would be as follows:
>
> L IF it is the case that if an event of type E were to occur at t1 then it would bring about an event of type F at t2,
> THEN an event of type E occurs at t3.
> C Were an event of type E to occur at t′, it would bring about an event of type F at t″
>
> ---
>
> E An event of type E occurs at t‴ (ibid.: 272)

In an article of 1983 Cohen offers a less technical account of functional explanation than in his book, which I have followed so far. If *e* is a cause and *f* its effect, the explanation is neither that *e* occurred because *f* occurred, nor that *e* occurred because it caused *f*. Either of these has the unacceptable consequence of requiring an effect temporally to precede its cause. The form of functional explanation

Cohen favours 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*' (1983b: 115). In functional explanation, 'it is the fact that *were an event of a certain type to occur, it would have a certain effect,* which explains the occurrence of an event of the stated type' (1978: 261). Cohen calls this fact – that described by the words he italicizes – a 'dispositional fact'. Thus in Cohen's Marxism the emergence of production relations of a given type is functionally explained by the dispositional fact that were such relations to emerge, they would promote development of the productive forces. Similarly with superstructures *vis-à-vis* bases.

Cohen emphasizes, additionally – and very importantly for my argument – that such explanations may be 'confirmed in the absence of a theory as to *how* the dispositional property figures in the explanation of what it explains . . . we may have good reason for thinking a functional explanation is true even when we are at a loss to conjecture by what means or mechanism the functional fact achieves its explanatory role' (ibid.: 266). As his later article puts it: 'to say that A explains B is not necessarily to indicate *how* A explains B . . . In a widely favoured idiom, [we] may not know the *mechanism* linking cause and effect, or, as I prefer to say, [we] may be unable to *elaborate* the explanation' (1983b: 118–19).

Thus specification of causal mechanisms is not for Cohen necessary to explanation. To use his own terms, explanations answer 'why-questions' and we may be able to say why an event occurs without knowing how it occurs. In a functional explanation, the answer to the question why an event occurs is necessarily and sufficiently furnished by citation of the relevant consequence-law and antecedent (dispositional) conditions, exactly as within the conventional D–N schema to say why an event occurs is simply to invoke a covering causal law whose antecedent conditions are satisfied. Identification of causal mechanisms – saying how the explanandum-event is actually brought about – pertains to what Cohen calls the 'elaboration' of explanations. Such elaboration – the provision of a theory of causal mechanisms – may be desirable. But it is not in any way mandatory. Functional explanations as such are sufficiently characterised by their formulability in terms of Cohen's modified D–N schema alone, and hence remain valid as explanations even in the complete absence of theoretical elaboration. This is, of course, the standard position adopted by positivists (and denied by realists) with regard to ordinary causal explanations.

II

Discussion may best be advanced from here by considering one of Cohen's examples of functional explanation in more detail. I shall treat it as a paradigm. It is this:

> A population of giraffes with a mean neck length of six feet lives in an environment of acacia trees, on whose leaves they feed. The height of the trees makes it true that, if they now had longer necks, their survival prospects would be better. They subsequently come to have longer necks. So far all we have is evidence of a consequence generalization. But if Darwin's theory of evolution is true, then the fact that were they to have had longer necks, they would have fared better, contributes to explaining the elongation. The environment selects in favour of variants with longer necks precisely because it is an environment in which longer necks improve life chances. On no construal can that dispositional fact be reduced to an unexplanatory precursor of the acquisition of the feature. Its explanatory relevance to the elongation of the neck is entailed by the Darwinian theory. (ibid.: 269)

Cohen then confronts an imaginary sceptic, who argues that the dispositional property (that the environment is of a kind in which longer necks would improve life chances) merely correlates with what really explains the elongation. This is 'the presence of the trees, a quite undispositional circumstance' (ibid.: 270). Cohen replies as follows:

> We can agree that it is the trees which, aided by the chance genetic variation, cause the neck of the species to grow. But what is it about the trees which makes them have that effect? Answer: where trees are of the given height giraffes with longer necks would prosper better. The dispositional fact is an essential element in the explanatory story. (ibid.)

Consistently with his disjunction between explanation and its 'elaboration', Cohen claims, additionally, that in this example the dispositional fact is essential to the explanation of the lengthening of giraffes' necks irrespective of whether we favour Darwinian or Lamarckian accounts of how the elongation occurs – the latter,

Cohen might have added, being a functionalist theory in the conventional teleological sense, and the former not. In Cohen's view, what we have in the Darwin/Lamarck dispute are 'rival theories of why a consequence-explanation holds, not rival alternatives to consequence-explanation' (ibid.: 271). We see here the import of Cohen's denial that the functionality of explananda is necessary to structural characterization of functional explanation, and the way this connects with his explanation/elaboration distinction. In so far as the functionality of an explanandum enters into a putative causal account, as it does for Lamarck, it does so at the elaborative level. It is not necessary to the formulation of the consequence-laws upon which functional explanation as such rests.

Now, I believe that in this example Cohen mis-states Darwin, and when Darwin's theory is properly expressed, dispositional properties are not essential to explanation. There is a construal within which such 'dispositional facts' are non-explanatory precursors of the elongation at issue: and that construal is standard Darwinian theory, at least as I understand it. Let me elaborate. In confronting his imaginary opponent, Cohen attributes to him the view that it is the presence of the trees which explains the elongation of the giraffes' necks, and this is not a dispositional circumstance. Cohen easily rebuts this. But a Darwinian would not, in fact, be likely to advance this argument. He would be more likely to argue in two stages, which Cohen conflates.

First, he would say that the initial appearance of long-necked giraffes is not explained by anything in the environment, 'dispositional' or otherwise, but by genetic mutation. Such mutations are random, and (*pace* Lamarckian theories) altogether unconnected with environmental circumstance. It is this mutation which is the cause of long-necked variants initially emerging. And the presence or absence of acacias – importantly – makes it neither more nor less likely that this original adaptive mutation will occur, precisely because mutation is random. Indeed it is perfectly conceivable that the mutation of the neck might not have occurred. Some species, after all, do actually die out. Consider dinosaurs. We cannot then speak here of the operation of a consequence-*law* (if *e* would cause *f*, then *e*). The presence of acacias cannot therefore be said to 'dispose' the genes to mutate in an appropriately adaptive way. To suppose otherwise is to fall into the fallacy of reasoning *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

Second, our Darwinian would say that the survival of the long-necked variant – a different issue – is undoubtedly then explained, *ceteris paribus*, by the presence of the trees whose leaves they are better equipped to eat than their short-necked competitors. But dispositional propositions are in no way 'an essential part of the explanatory story' at this level of the explanation either. It is rather the case that given the fact of the mutation, the presence of the trees then does sufficiently explain the enhanced survival chances of the long-necked giraffes. That the mutated giraffes can eat acacia leaves, and thus have a competitive advantage in the struggle for survival, in other words remains a totally contingent consequence of their having fortuitously acquired long necks for reasons that are entirely unconnected with the environment or its supposedly 'dispositional' properties. This can be expressed in standard D–N form, without any recourse to 'consequence-laws':

L1 Individuals well adapted to their environment will have competitive advantages over those less well adapted.
L2 Such advantages, over time, ensure the 'survival of the fittest' and thus the generalization through a species of the relevant adaptive features.
C1 Some giraffes have long necks as a result of fortuitous genetic mutation.
C2 Giraffes live among tall acacia trees.

E Long-necked giraffes have a competitive advantage over short-necked in their natural habitat, and the long-necked variant will therefore prevail.

Certainly the character of the environment is an important part of the explanation of the generalization of long necks among the giraffe population, but not in the way Cohen supposes. Giraffes have long necks not because of the dispositional properties of the environment, but because of the complex interaction through time of genetic variation and environmental circumstance – these two factors, on Darwin's theory (though not Lamarck's) being contingently connected.

An adequate causal account of the acquisition of long necks by the giraffe species would thus have to combine a series of propositions concerning the population dynamics of giraffes, genetic variation in the giraffe population, and features of the environment, including the height of acacias. But none of these propositions would have to be 'dispositional' for the 'explanatory story' to make sense, as Cohen alleges. It is not the 'dispositional fact' that were giraffes to have long

necks, they would fare better among the acacias, which in any sense explains why the feature was acquired by some giraffes in the first place, and the explanation of why this variant then prevails supposes this initial acquisition of the feature. Given the mutation, moreover, presence of trees then does sufficiently explain the survival of long-necked giraffes *ceteris paribus*.

On the contrary, what is being offered in Darwinian theory is an historical and relational – a material – explanation of what functionalism apparently explains, namely the evident adaptation of giraffes to life among the acacias. It was of course exactly for this reason that Marx hailed the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* for dealing 'the death-blow to teleology in the natural sciences' whilst setting forth its 'rational meaning in an empirical way' (1861). Darwin, Marx is saying, provided a material explanation of (and thereby makes rational) what superficially appears to be a teleological process. Cohen can construe the 'dispositional fact' that environments with tall trees favour long-necked mammals as in itself explanatory only by short-circuiting this complex, material account of how long necks were both initially acquired and subsequently generalized through the species.

III

This line of criticism of functional explanation is hardly new, but Cohen does not confront it. What I am saying, in effect, is that explanations in terms of Cohen's 'dispositional properties' can be entirely rewritten in straightforward causal terms without any loss in content, but with a considerable gain in accuracy. Cohen's 'dispositional properties' are contingent factors (like presence of acacias) which may feature as relevant antecedents in a perfectly conventional causal explanation (as of the long-necked giraffes' survival) if certain other equally contingent events (like mutation) occur, but they do not thereby explain why those other events occur in the first place. They merely appear to do so, as long as we remain in ignorance of the real causal mechanisms at work.

Somewhat paradoxically, the possibility of thus rewriting functional explanations as orthodoxly causal explanations is a consequence of Cohen's own insistence on eliminating the functionality of explananda from his characterisation of 'consequence-explanation'. I could not have argued this case for all varieties of functional explanation. For Cohen, dispositional facts explain in exactly the same way that causal antecedents do. But this is not the case, for instance, in avowedly teleological explanations in which ends are explanatory without being temporal antecedents. Such explanations self-evidently cannot be assimilated to orthodox (Humean) causal paradigms in the way Cohen attempts for his 'consequence-explanations'. Were the functionality of the explanandum-event a necessary feature of functional explanation, the latter indeed would be a distinctive form of explanation – if an obviously dubious one, except when applied to entities capable of acting to achieve goals, like people or gods – and the translation of functional into causal propositions would be impossible without loss of the specifically teleological element in their content. For Cohen, though, causes lie in antecedent dispositional facts, not the functionality of explananda as such, and it is these supposed dispositional facts I argue can be causally rewritten.

Now, it will be recalled that Cohen carefully distinguishes explanation and elaboration. The possibility of translating functional into causal propositions, however, depends precisely upon knowledge of what Cohen sees as extraneous to explanation *strictu sensu*, namely the causative mechanisms he relegates to the category of 'elaboration' of explanations. In his Darwinian example, it is only knowledge of random genetic variation – which actually causes long-necked giraffes to emerge – which allows us to rewrite what appears to be an explanation in terms of the dispositional properties of an environment, as an explanation in terms of material causes operating within that environment. In the absence of knowledge of the real causal mechanism at work, it is indeed only the 'dispositional fact' that acacias favour species with long necks – precisely Darwin's explanandum – which appears capable of explaining the presence of giraffes.

It is worth spelling it out that, contrary to Cohen, this knowledge of causative mechanisms is not something through which we merely 'elaborate' explanation, supplying the 'how' to buttress the 'why' we already know. It tells us rather than the functional answer to the question why – despite its initial plausibility – is *wrong*. Giraffes do not, except perhaps in a shorthand pardonable in biologists but inexcusable in philosophers, have long necks because their environment is such that if they did they would thrive in it. They have long

necks by the luck of the genetic draw, operating within given environmental conditions, certainly, but not in any way which is *functionally* explained by those conditions. Indeed, knowledge of mechanisms shows that there are in fact no consequence-laws involved; as argued above, it in no way follows from the presence of acacias that the adaptive mutation actually will occur. If Darwinian theory is correct, we cannot say, for this area, if *e* would cause *f*, *e* will occur. We can reach this last conclusion however – in defiance of manifest correlations of species and environments – only because we know the adaptive mechanism in fact to be random. The causal 'elaboration', in short, actually vitiates the supposed functional 'explanation'; it shows the 'dispositional' features of the environment not to be the explanatory factor, appearances notwithstanding.

By the same token, we should not suppose production relations and superstructures take the forms they do because they respectively 'serve' productive forces and economic structures – even if they manifestly do – without a far more convincing defence of functional explanation than Cohen supplies. It may on the contrary be the case that, say, a 'superstructural' feature arising out of eminently non-economic causes is quite contingently able to facilitate certain 'economic' developments, as the mutation does the survival of giraffes on the plains of Africa. In such cases the feature should properly belong, in the first instance, in the causal explanans of why a given economic structure is able to emerge, and not, by functional sleight of hand, be numbered among its explananda. Once the mode of production is on its feet, the environment it constitutes for the superstructural feature at issue might in turn help explain the latter's persistence, as the continued presence of acacias does the survival of long-necked giraffes. But if it did, it would do so materially, not functionally.

Examples of this might include, in the case of capitalism, Weber's Protestant ethic or the English common law. Few sociologists would deny the pertinence of either for capitalist development, but only a historical ignoramus would ascribe them capitalist origins. Many would accept that whatever their origins, the survival of both was considerably facilitated by the success of the capitalist economic structure they (arguably) helped give rise to. Christopher Hill argues this brilliantly for both Protestantism and the common law as summated in Coke's *Institutes*.[4] The seductiveness – a fatal one – of Cohen's functionalist model is that (like much bad Marxism) it

apparently allows us to have our cake and eat it. Technological and economic determinisms can be maintained in a 'dispositional' form in which straightforward empirical challenges cannot be used to refute them. I would argue, however, that to hold, as Cohen must, that such 'superstructural' factors as Protestantism and law are 'selected for' by bases (or bases by productive forces) at best obscures explanation of their real material causes, while to excavate the latter – schisms in the Church, the strength of the Norman and Angevin monarchies, and suchlike eminently undispositional factors – is likely to reveal the alleged 'selection' to be as contingent, and 'dispositional' explanation as spurious, as in Cohen's mistreatment of Darwin. To sever 'explanation' and 'elaboration', in short, is to evade explanation, in any material sense, entirely. In the case of Marxism it is to substitute theory for history. Functional explanations can masquerade as explanatory only so long as material causes remain unexplicated.

This brings me to the major point I want to make here. What is most striking in Cohen's formulation of functional explanation, and has not generally been raised in debates around his book, is that he sees it as a variant of causal explanation – albeit of a distinctive kind – as the latter is understood within the mainstream positivist tradition. His use of Hempel's D–N schema is indicative. Within this tradition – which derives ultimately from Hume – a cause is understood in terms simply of constant conjunction (if *p*, then *q*) of terms between which no necessary connection obtains. To give a causal explanation of something is accordingly merely to show that it instantiates a covering law, the latter being a universal conditional relating empirical particulars. Cohen formulates the relation between his consequence-laws and consequence-statements in exactly the same way. His expunging of considerations of mechanism from explanation proper, and attempt to characterize the latter in terms of its logical form alone, is likewise wholly of a piece with the positivist project.

But Cohen ignores here the entire (and currently very influential) realist tradition in the philosophy of science, which has many adherents within or sympathetic to Marxism. Indeed there is now a large literature which seeks to annex Marx to the realist cause.[5] Now for realism, expressibility in D–N form is certainly not sufficient, and for some realists like Bhaskar is not even always necessary, to qualify a series of propositions as an explanation. Another way of putting this is to say that what is entailed in giving an adequate explanation

cannot be sufficiently described by giving an account of its logical form alone. The covering law model, accordingly, does not adequately characterize what scientists (or ordinary language) actually mean when they speak of a cause.

Keat and Urry (1975: 11–12) use a famous illustrative example. The onset of measles is invariably preceded by the presence of small white marks in the lining of the cheeks, known as koplik spots. The latter have both of the necessary characteristics of a Humean cause (temporal precedence, and invariant succession), and could therefore serve as a major premise to D–N explanation of the form 'if koplik spots, then measles'. And if D–N formulability suffices to characterize what is required for an explanation, then we have no good reason not to explain measles as the outcome of koplik spots. Yet we would not ordinarily want to say that the spots cause the measles. The cause, rather, is invasion of bodily cells by a virus of the family *paramixo viridae,* of which koplik spots are an early manifestation. Certainly we may predict the imminent onset of measles from the presence of koplik spots, but the spots do not in any meaningful sense explain the disease.

Ascription of causes – explanation – for realist critics of positivism, necessarily entails giving an account of the actual mechanisms through which a given effect is seen as being really produced, in this case the activities of the virus. It is only in virtue of such an account that we can differentiate real causes from merely incidental correlations, or stop a potentially infinite causal regress of empirical antecedents. This in turn requires what Bhaskar calls 'ontological depth' – the invocation of real, and sometimes invisible entities distinct from the phenomena observed, whose characteristics, properties and powers are capable of explaining those phenomena in this materially causal sense. Such are viruses with measles, and genes with giraffes' necks. This conception of causal explanation clearly deviates considerably from Hempel's authoritative characterization of the positivist model, which Cohen straightforwardly accepts, for it centrally involves going beyond mere empirical regularities. Indeed for realism such regularities – like the manifest adaptedness of species to their environments – are characteristically part of science's explananda. An instance in Marx would be the correlation between fertility of land and differential rent, which he does not accept as in itself explanatory (see Sayer 1983: 49–52).

This means that giving a causal explanation *necessarily* involves 'elaborating' a theory of causal mechanisms. It is only such a theory which makes a series of propositions into an explanation. We cannot answer a why question except by saying how. We cannot give a properly causal explanation without elaboration, for it is precisely in the supposed 'elaboration' – the development of a theory of mechanisms – that explanation, as distinct from unexplanatory (or insufficiently explanatory) correlations of the koplik spots/measles (or acacias/long necks) variety, finally consists. In my final chapter I shall argue that in Marx, the analogous mechanisms lie ultimately in the actions of real individuals, and that causal explanation of social phenomena must acordingly be historical. We do not explain such things as Protestantism or law by their functionality but their genealogy.

To defend realism, whether as a philosophy of science or in relation to Marx's method, is beyond the remit of this book. I have made some gestures in this direction elsewhere (1983). But it is not irrelevant to my overall argument to suggest that what finally vitiates Cohen's account of functional explanation is exactly what realists argue undermines positivism, the lack of any material conception of cause. For Cohen's characterization of functional explanation is, as he goes to some lengths to show, a variant of Hempel's D–N model. Had Cohen operated with a material understanding of cause, he would never have made the mistake he did with the giraffes – excluding what actually makes their necks grow from the category of explanation proper, whilst ascribing a contingent empirical correlate (the 'dispositional properties' of the environment) an illusory causal role. Nor would he have had the gall – or should I say the historical ignorance, comprehensible only in an analytic philosopher? – to suggest that, in effect, in the social world we have explained a phenomenon by demonstrating its functionality for another, whilst establishing how it was brought about (or is materially sustained) is a mere optional extra, irrelevant to the truth or falsity of our supposed explanations. To call such a procedure either historical or materialist is a travesty of either adjective, and about as far away from Marx as we could conceivably get.

6

The historicity of concepts

I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

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

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

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

Having written on this at book length elsewhere (1983), I do not intend to elaborate too far on (or defend) what I see as involved in this form of analysis. But briefly, I see Marx's critique, analogously to Kant's, as entailing an excavation of the conditions of 'possibility or impossibility' and therewith the 'origins, extents and limits' (Kant, 1969: 3) of its object. Marx's object – his severally declared starting-point[2] – is not production in general, but the specific social forms in which, in any given instance, productive phenomena manifest themselves to our experience. Given his materialist assumption of 'correspondence' between phenomenal forms and categories of thought, such an analysis of the conditions of 'possibility or impossibility' of the forms themselves is simultaneously an exposure of the 'origins, extents and limits' of the theoretical categories in which they are conventionally apprehended. Not only propositions, therefore, but the very terms in which they are framed – categories and concepts – for Marx have a truth-value. Definition can accordingly never be a merely nominal operation. A difficult notion for analytic philosophy to accept, this idea would not be at all odd to a Hegelian.

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

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

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

> One thing . . . is clear. Nature does not produce on the one side owners of money or commodities, and on the other men possessing nothing but their own labour-power. This relation has no natural basis, neither is its social basis one that is common to all historical periods. It is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older forms of social production. (1867a: 169)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But:

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

I would argue that the same applies to state, law and all the other social forms historical materialism analyses. All that is apparently solid melts, if not into air. And only in that melting – that deconstruction of sedimented social forms into historical process, the actions of real living individuals – does the possibility of people getting 'exchange, production, the mode of their mutual relation under their control again' (1846a: 48), human emancipation as Marx conceived it, begin to look graspable.

III

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

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

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

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

The main point I wish to stress here is that what was argued above for Marx's 'economic' categories – 'labour', value, capital, and so on – applies with equal force to his 'sociological' concepts. I have provided ample evidence throughout this book to show that Marx himself was well aware that 'simple' sociological abstractions – individual, class, economy, polity, state – were no more devoid of historical anchorage and reference than a concept like 'labour'. In 'the specific character of their abstraction' these too are historical categories. In one sense, just as with 'labour', the very abstractness of these concepts indeed does enable them to illuminate antecedent forms of society. We may, for instance, use the concept of class as developed for capitalism to illuminate what is involved in serfdom. Like the wage-relation, the latter is a relation in which direct producers are exploited, contrary to its appearances as a relation of reciprocal patriarchal obligation founded in natural or God-given hierarchy. But this is not to identify the two, or to say that a feudal estate is a class in the same sense as the modern bourgeoisie (Godelier, 1984).

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

bloodily violent in its practical implications.

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

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

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

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

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

V

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

the level of some general theory of history nor by virtue of philosophical virtuosity, but for substantive societies, and on the basis of empirical investigation. I would argue that historical materialism can be determinate *a posteriori* to the precise extent that it eschews the temptation spuriously to foreclose empirical and historical questions by *a priori* speculative construction.

Marxists may feel that this cuts them adrift. A characterization of historical materialism in terms of an object-domain ('production and reproduction of real life') and a method of analysis (empirical history informed by critique) leaves few of the old comforting landmarks intact. The proof of the pudding is left entirely to its eating, and there is little left for the philosophers to do. But I see nothing as being lost, and much to be gained, by this strategy. We cannot after all establish any logical necessity for the primacy of production in the explanation of social life. It must remain hypothetical. Material production – including, I would suggest, production of human beings – is a reasonable starting-point for a sociology, and one which has in the past led to substantive studies which have mightily increased our knowledge of society and history, including those of Marx himself. But we can no more conclude from the undeniable fact that there can be no social life without production, the consequence that the mode of production therefore determines any other area of social life, than we could conclude from the equally true (and equally banal) proposition that there can be no social life without language, the corollary that social structures are determined by the laws of grammar.

No worthwhile piece of historical materialist sociology, or anthropology, or history would in my view resist methodological characterization in the terms offered here. Indeed, the best and most innovative Marxist work has as often as not been accomplished only by abandoning (or at best paying only lip-service to) the sacred cows of 'tradition'. Consider Thompson's explicit rejection of the base/superstructure distinction, and ask whether *The Making of the English Working Class* could have been written otherwise, or think about how far Godelier would have got in his anthropological studies had he not been prepared to jettison the standard conception of an 'economic structure'. On my interpretation of the fundamentals of historical materialism, we can without contradiction respect Thompson's observations on the pervasiveness of law in eighteenth-century English society, indeed – and the point should really not have to be argued among

historical materialists – we can see this for what it actually is, an important gain in our knowledge of the 'material groundwork' of that phase of English capitalist development, rather than a theoretical embarrassment, an unwelcome anomaly, or (worse) a deviation from the Biblical texts of the Master. To adopt the kind of conceptual hygiene advocated by Cohen, on the other hand, would I fear land us up with no worthwhile Marxist work of any substantive kind at all. For to put it bluntly, the world is not as his theory requires it to be. Thankfully perhaps. As Marc Bloch once remarked, it is no bad thing the facts are there to remind us that society is not a geometric figure.

Theory should be abandoned if it gets in the way of knowledge. In the case of historical materialism, I believe, we are better off without the familiar landmarks, for all too often they turn out to be mere Potemkin villages: impressive façades which block the view. 'Traditional historical materialism' all too often theoretically pre-empts what can only be historical questions and should never have been treated as anything else. Marx himself, I believe, would have had little truck with such 'theoretical bubble-blowing' (1846a: 53) – though that is neither the only, nor the best, reason to leave it behind. But a last reminder of irascible Old Nick's impatience with the poverty of philosophy will not, perhaps, go amiss:

> When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence. At the best its place can be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men. Viewed apart from real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. On the contrary, our difficulties begin only when we set about the observation and the arrangement – the real depiction – of our historical material, whether of a past epoch or the present. (1846a: 38–9)

Notes

Preface

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

Chapter 1 Prologue: Marx's 'guiding thread'

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

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

Chapter 2 Productive forces

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

4 I have argued this at length in my work with Philip Corrigan and Harvie Ramsay.

5 I make the qualification 'social' because I believe the internal relations perspective more defensible for the social world than the natural, on grounds elaborated as much by Wittgenstein or, seminally, by Winch (1958), as by Marx. I do not think historical materialism needs to be grounded in a philosophy of nature, though it may well be compatible with one. Marx and Engels themselves, however, fairly evidently did subscribe to a dialectical view of reality *per se*. Engels developed this most explicitly, in *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*, but Marx explicitly endorsed the former and was well aware of Engels's work for the latter.

6 Patrick Murray (1983) has drawn attention to my neglect of the Hegelian legacy in *Marx's Method*. I think he is right. In that book I was more concerned with Marx's epistemology than his ontology, and was – to say the least – somewhat evasive about what the latter was. I now believe the critical epistemology I ascribed to Marx there is comprehensible only in the context of the kind of ontology proposed by Ollman. We cannot make sense either of Marx's treatment of categories as 'expressing' relations, or of the discrepancy between those relations and their 'forms of appearance', otherwise. Somewhat belatedly, I am persuaded of the truth of Lenin's maxim that 'it is completely impossible to understand Marx's *Capital* . . . without having thoroughly studied . . . Hegel's *Logic*'. One implication of this, of course, is that analytic philosophy is perhaps the worst of all philosophical frameworks in which to try and force Marx's thought. Two features of the analytic school are particularly problematic in trying to make sense of Marx: first, its hard and fast analytic/synthetic distinction (Quine, 1953), which renders any notion of internal relations in the world as distinct from among propositions simply meaningless; and second, its persistent phenomenalism (which leads to a conception of definition which Kolakowski (1972) summates as the 'rule of nominalism'), which rules out appearance/essence distinctions. Cohen (1978: ch. 1) gives Hegel his due for having supplied the paradigm for Marx's 'image of history', but shows no awareness of how the Hegelian legacy might have influenced Marx's conceptual usage at any deeper level.

7 See chapter 4 below, where I argue that both the 'abstract individual' of civil society and the 'political state' are in the same sense implicit in the 'economic' relations of commodity production.

8 On grounds of the logical, as distinct from ontological, presuppositions of Marx's method; though as I have said in note 6 to this chapter, I now see the former as requiring the latter. See my 1983, ch. 5, Afterword, and *passim*.

9 Marx's frequent references to language, in elucidating his idea of production and society, suggest another intriguing set of possible parallels. Wittgenstein's later work – which was highly critical of the logical atomism, and correspondence theory of meaning, in his earlier *Tractatus* – roots concepts in 'forms of life'. That same work is also highly critical of

reification of generic abstractions in ways which are strikingly close to Marx's criticisms of 'speculative construction' (below, ch. 3, section II). The best-known sociological elaboration of this Wittgensteinian position on language is to be found in the work of Peter Winch, who argues that 'the relation between ideas and context is an *internal* one', and the 'very categories of meaning, etc., are *logically* dependent for their sense on social interaction between men' (1958: 107, 44). Durkheim's later writings argued something very similar in their thesis of the social origin of the logical categories: a position strikingly anticipated by Marx – with due homage to Hegel – in his letter to Engels of 25 February 1868, where he wrote *à propos* the concepts *Allgemeine* and *Besondre* (universal and particular) that 'the logical categories are . . . damn well arising out of "our intercourse"'. These parallels are not fanciful or over-extended. Certainly Marx differed from Winch or Durkheim in insisting on the material rootedness in humanity's relation with nature of 'forms of life', and with this their specific historicity, but his appreciation of the relationship between ideas and social relations as internal is as fundamental to his sociology as it is to the more familiar idealist variants of the same thesis. Again we need to take cognisance of Marx's Hegelian background. See further ch. 4, section II, below; Frisby and Sayer (1986).

10 I should clarify this. It is, I think, conceivable that say, a particular material labour-process – for instance, modern factory production – is compatible with a range of possible social relations, in at least some respects. Modern industry is materially organized in not dissimilar ways in the present-day USA and USSR. To this degree we may analytically distinguish the material labour-process from the wider social integument. But *in any given empirical instance* these two will be internally related, in the sense in which I am using the term here: the one will exist only in and through the other, as aspects of the same totality. The necessity at issue is substantial (material production can only take place in definite social relations), not logical. The problem with much Marxism is its persistent reification of such analytic distinctions; a reification which *must* be undertaken if the entities in question are to be related causally and externally.

11 There are exceptions here. Balibar (in Althusser, 1970) is amongst the more significant, correctly arguing the relational features of Marx's concept.

12 Cohen's dismissal of this as rhetorical (1978: 44–5) is based on highly selective quotation from Marx.

13 See, *inter alia*, Marx (1867a: 430; 1863c: 490–1; 1865a: 879–80; 1878: 119–20). Compare Weber (1966: 207–9).

14 Weber (1966: final chapter; 1974); Hill (1961; and more generally his 1958 and 1974 collections); Thompson (1967).

15 I gave a more detailed account of Marx's critiques of the fetishism of commodities and capital in my 1983: chs 2 and 3, respectively.

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

Chapter 3 Relations of production

1 In his 1970 Cohen differentiated two sorts of production relation, work relations (the 'material relations between producers' of his 1978) and ownership relations. His 1978 denies that the former are social relations of production *strictu sensu* (p. 35, note).
2 Hill (1965); Hilton (1985); Thompson (1977); Hay (1977); Corrigan and Sayer (1985).
3 See *inter alia* Benton (1977); Bhaskar (1975; 1979); Keat and Urry (1975); Hanson (1969); Kuhn (1969).
4 The relevant chapter in the joint work *The Holy Family* was written by Marx, not Engels.
5 For further exemplification of Marx's critique of such transformations, see especially the opening 20 pages or so of his 1843b; also the last section of his 1844a.
6 Marx carefully distinguishes (within commodity production) division of labour 'in the workshop' and 'in society', in his 1867a: ch. 14.
7 Balibar's distinction between the 'property connection' and 'material appropriation connection' between producers and their means of production (in Althusser, 1970) is open to similar sorts of objection.
8 See the works of Godelier and Meillassoux cited in my bibliography.
9 As Marx notes. Of course, kinship relations are *always* social – ascriptive – rather than merely biological relations of 'blood', no matter how 'primitive' the society. Marx tends often in this text to treat them as quasi-natural. I suggest below, this chapter, final section, that Marx's sociology of family forms is both underdeveloped and, in key respects, wrong.
10 Cited out of context – as it frequently is – this passage is tailor-made to suit readings of Marx like Cohen's. We should therefore particularly note the context in which it occurs – that of the analysis of feudalism I discuss below.
11 Marx's point should not be taken to obscure the degree to which the existence of such 'purely economic' relationships in capitalism rests on much that is 'non-economic' in this present sense. I discuss this further in chapter 4 below, with reference to Marx's own analyses of state and law. In Corrigan and Sayer (1985) I argue the case substantively for the key role of state formation and moral regulation in the history of English capitalism.
12 See reviews of *Marx's Method* by Arthur (*Sociology*, 14, 1980), and McLelland (*New Society*, 12 July 1979).
13 See my 1983, ch. 5, for elaboration of Marx's procedures of concept formation.
14 Because his analytic starting-point is in mode of production as traditionally conceived.
15 See *inter alia* the essays in Amsden (1980); Newton (1983); Burman (1979); Barker and Allen (1976); Kuhn and Wolpe (1978); Barker and Allen (1976); as well as Barrett (1980); Barrett and McIntosh (1981); Brenner and Ramas (1984); Humphries (1977); Brueghel (1979); Davidoff (1973); Lewenhak (1978); Pinchbeck (1981); Smith (1983); Anthias (1980); and for an earlier period Middleton (1979; 1981).
16 See Corrigan and Sayer (1985) for elaboration, and references there.
17 See this chapter, note 9, above.

Chapter 4 Ideal superstructures

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

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

Chapter 5 Interlude: the giraffes among the acacias

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

Chapter 6 The historicity of concepts

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

Bibliography

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

Works by Marx

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