

# TOWARD THE PRODUCTION OF A MATERIALIST EPISTEMOLOGY

A review of Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1975.

Utafiti, Dar es Salaam,  
vol.2 no.2, 1977

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Look at Marx. He wrote ten books as well as the monument that is Capital without ever writing a Dialectics. He talked of writing it, but never started. He never found the time. Which means that he never took the time, for at that period the Theory of his own theoretical practice was not essential to the development of his theory, that is, to the fruitfulness of his own practice.

However, Marx's Dialectics would have been very relevant to us today, since it would have been the Theory of Marx's theoretical practice, that is, exactly a determinant theoretical form of the solution (that exists in the practical state) to the problem we are dealing with: the problem of the specificity of the Marxist dialectic. This practical solution, this dialectic, exists in Marx's theoretical practice, and we can see it in action there. The method Marx used in his theoretical practice, in his scientific work on the 'given' that he transformed into knowledge, this method is precisely the Marxist dialectic; and it is precisely this dialectic which contains inside it in a practical state the solution to the problem of the relations between Marx and Hegel, of the reality of that famous 'inversion' which is Marx's gesture to us, in the Afterword to the second edition of Capital, warning us that he has settled his relations with the Hegelian dialectic. That is why today we so miss the Dialectics which Marx did not need and which he refused us, even though we know perfectly well that we have it, and where it is: in Marx's theoretical works, in Capital, etc. -- yes, and of course this is the main thing, we can find it there, but not in a theoretical state (with one remarkable exception which I shall discuss later). (Althusser's emphasis)

From: L. Althusser, For Marx, Vintage Books,  
N.Y. 1970, p. 174.

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\* The title of this essay was inspired by Manuel Castells' and Emilio de Ipola's essay "Epistemological practice and the social sciences" in Economy and Society, vol.5,2, pp. 11-144.

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When initially asked to review the above book, I had suggested the title: "Is History incompatible with Marxist Theory?" From a Marxist point of view, the posing of such a question is symptomatic of an un-Marxist problematic.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless it did reveal one of my first reactions to the reading of some of the conclusions of a book in which one reads that "Marxism, as a theoretical and a political practice, gains nothing from its association with historical writing and historical research". (p. 312)

This sentence does not say that Marxism cannot produce history and the whole book is precisely demonstrating how to produce a history through Marxist theory. According to the authors "all Marxist theory, however abstract it may be, however general its field of application, exists to make possible the analysis of the current situation". (p. 312) I shall return later to the implications of this view of the relationship between history and Marxist theory. At this point it can be said that the authors' position follows Marx's own methodological recommendations which is to say that history, as an empirical form of investigation, or as a philosophy, or as a chronological sequence, or as any of meanings usually assigned to it as a "discipline" cannot constitute the starting point for studying a particular social formation. Therefore when bourgeois historians, for example, look at Marx as a historian they are in error because Marx did not write Capital, or any of his other works as a historian, but as a theoretician who was struggling to produce a scientific theory of bourgeois society. The production of a Marxist theory of bourgeois society took a long time because it required more than a simple rejection of Hegelian idealism or a radicalisation of it. As Marx himself once stated: "the early rejection of Hegelian idealism was conducted in a Hegelian fashion, and from within the field of concepts forged by Hegelian philosophy."<sup>2</sup> The rejection of Hegelian dialectics required -- according to Althusser -- more than a simple "inversion" (i.e. putting dialectics on their feet). It required the development, the construction of a theory that owed nothing (once completed) to Hegelian philosophy or the Hegelian method. Long before Althusser, Lenin -- in "What the Friends of the Peoples are" -- made the same point.<sup>3</sup> In his very valuable essay "Preface to Capital", Althusser argues that Capital is a work of scientific discovery: "the discovery of the system of concepts (and therefore of the scientific theory) which opens up to scientific knowledge what can be called the Continent of History".<sup>4</sup>

Again, here it is important to point out that Marx did not set out to discover "that continent" as a historian. What is crucial is the theoretical apparatus he forged in order to understand the modern bourgeois society and the economic basis on which it operated: the capitalist mode of production.<sup>5</sup>

The efforts that Hindess and Hirst (from now on HH) go into in order to make a distinction between the practice of history and the practice of Marxist theory is comparable to Lenin's and Althusser's arguments about the difference existing between Hegelian dialectics and Marxist dialectics. Obviously the distinction between Marxist practice and historical practice can be generalised to other academic fields. In the quotation above, history can be replaced by anthropology, sociology, political science, philosophy or economics. One of the practical implications of this position is the necessity to struggle against the academic division of labour that has come to characterise the modern bourgeois universities. It is necessary because academic division of labour raised serious obstacles in the production and reproduction of a Marxist theory. The obstacles can take various forms: academicism, careerism, elitism, individualism, etc.<sup>6</sup> All of which are in contradiction to Marxist practice.

The contradictory practices of Marxism and an "academic discipline" can only lead to academic Marxism. An example of this can be seen in the way in which one academic Marxist has married Marxism to anthropology. In the Rise of Anthropological Theory Marvin Harris claimed Marx as an anthropologist because of the interest expressed by Marx and Engels in the work of Morgan. Harris would have one believe that Marx is of interest to anthropologists in so far as he was interested in ethnographical empirical data. As to one of the most important concepts of Marxist theory, the concept of the mode of production, Harris writes:

Here we may venture to express our disinterest in the attempt to find out precisely what Marx and Engels intended by the phrase "mode of production"<sup>7</sup>

The marriage of Marxism and economics has produced a more complicated situation first of all because of the very object of Capital, and second because of the apparent closeness between Ricardo and Marx. On this question I can only refer to an essay by Suzanne de Brunhoff where she demonstrates, contrary to what economists like P. Sraffa are trying to do, that there is an "irreducible difference

between Ricardo and Marx."<sup>8</sup> The difference is so fundamental that it is necessary to distinguish between a non-Ricardian (as exemplified by Sraffa) and an a-Ricardian (Marx) position. Marx was through and through an a-Ricardian because his point of departure was entirely different from that of Ricardo. Marx began by rejecting what constituted the object of study of Ricardo, which is why he called his major work a Critique of Political Economy. As pointed out by de Brunhoff, Marx was not interested in constructing "pure economic theory" (de Brunhoff's emphasis):

In Marx's theoretical enterprise the economy is not given but it is constituted by the concepts of historical materialism, concepts which specify definite social relations as necessary to and constitutive of the economic "phenomena" of the capitalist system.<sup>9</sup>

It cannot therefore be argued that Marx picked up where Ricardo stopped as is so often taught in certain courses on the history of economic thought. Ricardo's conception of value and its relation to labour is totally different from that formulated by Marx. The concepts of capital as the product of social relation and not as a sum of values is again also alien to Ricardo. It is for this reason that it can be said that Marx did not simply "complete" Ricardo. Marx started entirely anew: he displaced the problem of Ricardian economic theory.<sup>10</sup>

In her article, de Brunhoff acknowledges that her anti-Hegelian treatment of Marx is derived from Althusser's demonstration that Hegelianism is entirely foreign to Capital.<sup>11</sup> The reason for all this long preamble is to point out the similarity between the theoretical premises of Lenin, Althusser, de Brunhoff and the authors of Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production, with regard to the question of how to read Marx. In spite of their sharp disagreements (with Althusser and Balibar principally) HH are motivated in their work by similar objectives, that is to produce an ever more rigorous exposition of Marxist theory:

Although HH's book is on the pre-capitalist modes, it is Capital which is the point of departure (p. 1). This procedure may appear to be a contradiction in logic. And yet, in doing this HH, even if they don't say it, were following almost word for word Marx's methodological statements about the production of history:

It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which

seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to historical development. The point is not the historic position of the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Even less is it their sequence in the idea (Proudhon) (a muddied notion of historic movement). Rather their order within modern bourgeois society.<sup>12</sup>

That Hindess and Hirst and Althusser (especially in For Marx) are operating within the same problematic ought to be clear. Similarly it ought to be evident that they share the same concern regarding the necessity to construct a Marxist theory rooted in a (still to be constructed) materialist epistemology.<sup>13</sup> The sharing of these objectives does not mean, however, that it will result in similarities of views on all the elements and concepts of such a materialist epistemology. It is important to point out this common point of departure between HH and Althusser because reading the book, one may get a different impression because of the fundamental disagreement they have over the relationship between a mode of production and history, and more specifically over what is history. It may also be of interest to point out that HH concentrated their attacks on Reading Capital (Althusser and Balibar) and that they have practically nothing to say about For Marx.

Specifically, HH accuse Althusser and Balibar of reintroducing Hegel into Marxism through a theorization of history based on essentialist notions (such as structure) and sequential or structural causation. The problem that Althusser and Balibar ran into is connected to their inability to construct a theory of modes of production without resorting to the notion of a philosophy of history. It is because of this reintroduction of history (empirical and teleological by definition) that HH can write that "Althusser fails to break with the notion of history at the very moment of splitting from it." (p. 318). It is difficult to disagree with HH critique of Reading Capital, and it is possible to state this precisely on the basis of reading For Marx which can be seen as an attempt at setting the basis for the construction of a materialist epistemology. A very schematic summary of what Althusser attempted in For Marx might be a useful way of explaining what must be understood by the creation of a materialist epistemology.

For Marx can be seen as an attempt to theorize what Marx wrote in Capital, i.e. to explain and demonstrate that, when Marx produced the concept of the mode of production, he was not engaged in a piece-meal effort, but rather that the construction of the mode of production was determined by a definite problematic. We know that problematic by name: historical materialism, but we do not know what the constitutive elements of that theory are and how they were

constructed. It is at this level that Althusser's greatest contribution to Marxist theory must be located: rigorous effort to analyze the process which Marx went through in order to construct a theory which operated within its proper field, within boundaries set up by itself, and, most importantly, with concepts adapted and only applicable (intelligible) to that theory. Althusser analyzed this process of construction through Marx's works, and it is from this analysis that he derived the following categorizations: early works, works of the break, mature works.<sup>14</sup> In the early works, Marx broke with Hegel, but the break was -- so to speak -- only incremental, i.e. although Marx attacked Hegel, he did it within a Hegelian problematic, utilizing the same notions and concepts. In the works of maturity -- climaxed by Capital -- Marx has not only broken away from Hegel, but he has also produced his own problematic, one which is entirely different, one which cannot even be related to Hegel. It is because of this epistemological break<sup>15</sup> with previous philosophers and economists that one must absolutely reject the notion so often advanced by experts of "intellectual history" that Marx simply put Hegel's dialectics on its feet so that in order to understand Marx's dialectics one has to go back to Hegel. Such an evolutionary understanding of Marx's contribution is totally rejected by Althusser.<sup>16</sup>

This concept of epistemological break between Marx and his predecessors is an important one not only because of the light it sheds on Marxism, but also because -- through its occurrence -- it locates and identifies, conceptually the obstacles that constantly undermine the production and reproduction of a materialist epistemology. Furthermore, it is not because Marx managed to bring about and consummate an epistemological break that this rupture is a permanent gain: it has to be reproduced. During his time, Marx had to break away from Hegel, humanism and idealism; nowadays, humanism and idealism still have to be contended with, along with various forms of empiricism (which are often poorly disguised ideological discourses, e.g. positivism, functionalism, structuralism).<sup>17</sup> Marx's theory being revolutionary, the only way to maintain, to reproduce that revolutionary character is to constantly reproduce the epistemological break. Marxist theory as a revolutionary theory and revolutionary political practice is being threatened constantly from outside its problematic as well as from within. The outside threats are usually well known, especially if they come from rabid anti-Marxists or "enlightened" liberals who are "sympathetic" to Marxism. It is when an anti-Marxist position is articulated by a Marxist that it becomes harder to detect the attack. Therefore,

the object of the construction of a materialist epistemology must aim primarily at preventing Marxism from slipping back into those philosophies or pseudo-theories which it sought to combat. It seems to me that the authors of Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production intended to live up to this objective.

One sees this immediately in the introduction where they want to establish for the reader the boundaries of their discourse and therefore the boundaries that should be used for doing a critique of it:

This book is a work of Marxist scientific theory. It must be judged in terms of that theory, in terms of the field of concepts and forms of proof specific to its problematic... Our constructions and our arguments are theoretical and they can only be evaluated in theoretical terms (my emphasis) -- in terms, that is to say, of their rigour and theoretical coherence. They cannot be refuted by any empiricist recourse to the supposed "facts" of history. (p.3)

This introduction is also the occasion for explaining why the construction of theory has nothing to do with the collection and arrangement of data so dear to the vulgarized view of science. They are totally opposed to the conception of science which is defined as beginning "with the careful observation and collection of facts: it ends with their correlation". (p. 2) They cannot accept this because facts are not concrete objects which exist autonomously. "They are always the product of definite practices, theoretical or ideological, conducted under definite real conditions". (p. 2) Similarly empiricism must be opposed because "what empiricism represents as given is always the product of a definite theoretical or ideological practice". (p. 4) For HH a fact does not have a passive existence. A fact is not comparable to some sort of raw material which is lying on the ground ready to be used. "Facts are never given (HH emphasis), they are always produced. The facts of the sciences are products of scientific practices". (pp. 2-3)

The logic behind all this is based on the necessity of being able to prove the existence or non-existence of a particular mode of production on the basis of the concepts which make the theoretical construction of a mode of production possible. They do not see why, for example, the validity of the conception of the Asiatic mode of production tends to be

discussed in terms of the "facts" of Indian or Chinese history. And from their standpoint, John Taylor's critical review of their work would probably be considered as irrelevant and missing the point of what the object of their book is.<sup>18</sup> J. Taylor's criticisms of HH and their conception of the Asiatic mode of production is precisely derived from an empiricist position by trying to prove that HH reject the concept of the Asiatic mode of production because they have looked at the wrong evidence.<sup>19</sup> HH argument is not articulated around the evidence, but around two basic theoretical points: (1) Marx's own formulation of that mode of production and process of appropriation (tax/rent couple) on which it is based; (2) a Marxist reading a critique of Marx. The reading that HH make here of Marx goes back again to the concept of the epistemological break. HH, argues that the concept of the Asiatic mode of production is the result of Hegelian residues in his theoretical work which is why they can state without any apparent hesitation that Marx undoubtedly remained under the influence of Hegelian ideology particularly in respect of the East and Asiatic society (p. 203) It is possible to uncover these Hegelian residues precisely because "the effect of Marx's theoretical work was to produce a decisive critique of Hegel and of all teleology, and a non-Hegelian and anti-teleological theory of history. It is this theoretical work which makes possible the scientific criticism, by means of Marxist concepts (my emphasis), of the ideological elements in the given texts of Marx". (pp. 203-4)

## HISTORY, MARXIST THEORY AND CURRENT SITUATION

In their conclusion, HH push the practice of epistemological breaking to a point which will appear to many as untenable. Unless one accepts the proposition above concerning the necessity to reproduce Marx's epistemological break, it will be difficult to follow HH in their discussion on the relationship between history, Marxist theory and the current situation. Because of their extremely unorthodox positions, it is necessary to begin with rather extensive quotations so as to leave no room for misunderstandings. They begin their conclusion by stating that their anti-historical stand will surprise in a work which seems historical:

We have no doubt that this book will appear to many people, historians and others, to be a contradictory enterprise. How can a book about pre-capitalist modes of production be



abstract and anti-historical? Surely, the sole value of the concepts of the pre-capitalist modes of production is to serve as tools or research devices for the investigation of concrete historical societies? What purpose do these concepts have if they are not used as guides to historical research?" (p. 308)

They reply themselves to this anticipated reaction:

Our answer to these questions is simple. They are based on a misrecognition, not only of the nature of our book, but of the nature of Marxist theory: a misrecognition which engenders a cosy conflation between Marxist theoretical work and the historian's practice, a misrecognition which reduces Marxist theory to historical method and to a philosophy of history. Marxism is not a science of history and Marxist theoretical work has no necessary connection with the practice of the historian. (p. 308) (my emphasis)

This anti-historicist/anti-historical position is elaborated in the conclusion under four different sub-headings: "concepts and history", "the object of history", "Althusser's proposal for a 'science of history'", "concepts and the concrete". While the above introductory exchange is controversial enough and likely to irritate many Marxists, it is when the authors discuss the object of history that they make their most controversial statement, and possibly the one which will induce many Marxists to dismiss the book as a futile and academic exercise. Again rather than paraphrasing their words, it is better to quote in extenso:

It is the notion of a Marxist history, of a Marxism confined within the conditions of the historian's practice, which is the contradictory enterprise. Marxism as a theoretical and a political practice, gains nothing from its association with historical writing and historical research. The study of history is not only scientifically but also politically valueless. (pp. 311-2)

How can anyone produce a theory without studying history? In order to understand this, one has to examine what HH mean by history

(and the historian's practice) and what they mean by Marxism (and the Marxist practice). Clearly, they are striving to re-establish the primary of theoretical work in Marxism. Toward what objective?

All Marxist theory, however abstract it may be, however general its field of application, exists to make possible the analysis of the current situation. (p. 312)

The concept of the current situation introduced here actually appeared earlier in the book (Chapter VI: The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism, pp. 260-307). The concept derived its theoretical status from Lenin's formulations and applications.<sup>20</sup> But why HH decided to ignore what Mao Tse-Tung had written on the practice of assessing the current situation is astonishing.

The suppression of Mao's contribution to Marxist theory is in sharp contrast to the place that Althusser gave him in For Marx. Are HH hinting that between Lenin and themselves nothing happened to Marxist theory. From 1927 to 1949 (especially) Mao gave numerous examples of how to assess the current situation not only with regard to China, but also with regard to the international communist movement.<sup>21</sup> Throughout their entire text, Hindess and Hirst ignore Mao Tse-Tung's work. This silence is tantamount to a theoretical statement, and yet, this silence should have been explained. As it stands readers may legitimately wonder whether HH consider Mao's contributions as irrelevant to Marxist theory. To this I shall return later.

HH insist, correctly, that the current situation is not and cannot be defined as something which is given by history. Here again, I am sure they will antagonize historians who will argue that it is impossible not to view the situation as, in some ways, a product of a historical process. Not so say HH: "A historical analysis of the "current situation" is impossible" (p. 312). Because of the implicit definition contained in history, i. e. constituted as an object of knowledge of the past, history is bound to deform the meaning or the manner of grasping and confronting the current situation. Because history tends to rationalize the past, it is likely to rationalize the current situation to digest it and make it part of the body of knowledge of the past. It is this process of rationalization that HH perceive as the element which makes the practice of history irreconcilable with Marxist practice. Their opposition to the reduction of the current situation to history is predicated on the assumption that it will automatically lead to a teleological history, and, of course, they are against teleological history because:

in teleological conceptions of history  
historical time is a continuum, its successive  
moments necessarily linked by the development  
of an essence. (p. 312)

Although HH derive their conception of the current situation from Lenin, it is also visible in Marx where his confrontation with the current situation (Hegelian philosophy) led him to a scornful rejection of the then current practices of philosophers who were merely philosophizing about the world when the objective was to transform it.<sup>22</sup> Transformation then must be dialectically linked to the assessment of the current situation. This assessment cannot be conditioned, determined or defined by its genealogy or its preceding history because:

History renders unrecognizable that which is the primary object of Marxist theoretical and political practice. It dislocates that necessary connection between theoretical analysis and politics which is the very core of Marxism. It reduces theory to the role of a rationalisation of the real and the politics based on such rationalization to an abstract shadow politics of gesture. (p. 313)

This means that history, by its very nature, cannot enter the territory of the current situation, even if there are elements in the current situation which are clearly determined by history (such as the necessity not to repeat previous errors). It cannot because politics -- revolutionary politics -- by their very nature require anticipation. Why the current situation cannot be defined by history is not entirely resolved in this dense section on the "object of history", but in the fourth one "concepts and the concrete" and especially in the last two pages of the book:

The current situation exists for Marxist theory only so far as it is given a definite form by Marxist political practice, and in so far as definite problems are designated as objects of analysis or criticism within that practice. These problems are problems of political practice and are specified in political terms. What (HH emphasis) the current situation is cannot be specified in the same way that the object of an empiricist knowledge is specified. (p. 322)

By way of example the authors go on to consider the current situations which Lenin confronted and how they determined the kind of work he produced. With regard to The Development of Capitalism in Russia, they contend that the work is not a history of the Russian economy nor is it " a state description of the given conditions of late 19th century Russia". (p. 322) While correctly pointing out that the work was produced in order to combat Narodism, the authors are not as convincing in explaining why the theoretical point had to be illustrated by a historical analysis:

'Empirical' material -- in fact, statistics and information, collected according to definite problems, by definite techniques, and within definite political and social purposes, Lenin had no illusions or fetishes about their purity -- functions in this book as the object of criticism or as a source of illustration of a theoretical point. (p. 323)

For all the logical rigour of the book, readers are bound to ask some questions that HH have not anticipated and/or answered (or provided the elements of an answer). For example: doesn't the nature of the current situation change with the emergence of a revolutionary situation (HH's transitional conjuncture, Mao's antagonistic contradiction).

On this question of the revolutionary character of Marxism, Althusser in (For Marx) is much more correct than HH. This is ironical in view of the sharp criticisms addressed to Althusser and Balibar in Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production. Althusser's statements and analysis of the current situation as it was confronted by Lenin are closer to Marxism precisely because they reaffirm most emphatically its revolutionary nature. Furthermore, for Althusser, Lenin, in 1917, was not acting on just any kind of current situation:

Lenin analysed what constituted the characteristics of its structure: the essential (articulations, the inter-connexions, the strategic nodes on which the possibility and the fate of any revolutionary practice depended; the disposition and relations typical of the contradictions in a determinate country (semi-feudal and semi-colonialist, and

yet imperialist) in the period in which the principal contradiction (my emphasis) was approaching explosion.<sup>23</sup>

The underlined words in the above quotation have no place -- as concepts -- in HH vocabulary. Does this omission reflect a judgement on Mao's "On Contradiction". If so, it might be difficult not to go along with those who have rejected the book as futile, arrogant and academic. HH and some concepts: productive forces, relations of production, transition.

In this section I would like to turn my attention to the interpretation that HH give to some specific concepts; in particular, forces of production and their relation to relations of production, transitional stages.

In defining the general concept of a mode of production HH run counter to some very widely held interpretations of Marxism. Some may see this as a rejection of Marxist theory altogether. According to HH, a mode of production is defined as:

an articulated combination of relations and forces of production structured by the dominance of the relations of production. The relations of production define a specific mode of appropriation of surplus-labour and the specific form of social distribution of the means of production corresponding to that mode of appropriation of surplus-labour. (pp. 9-10)

The assertion of the dominance of relations of production over forces of production is in direct opposition to what one reads in the Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.<sup>24</sup> It may be noted that it is also from the Preface that terms such as base and superstructure have found their theoretical justification. HH consider this mechanical causation that has linked the base and the ideology to be an erroneous and unwarranted reading of Marx:

This passage says nothing about the origin or cause of the superstructural forms of the corresponding ideologies. (pp. 16-17) (HH emphasis)

What the passage suggests is that the "economic structure is the foundation on which the superstructure rests and which therefore defines certain limits to what can be erected upon it". (p. 16)

HH are saying here in a unilineal fashion something which was dialectically articulated by Mao in his essay "Never Forget the Class Struggle!"

While we recognize that in the general development of history the material determines the mental and social consciousness, we also -- and indeed must -- recognize the reaction of mental on material things, of social consciousness on social being and of the superstructure on the economic base.<sup>25</sup>

As to the distinction between productive forces and relations of production and the combination of the latter, it is based on two arguments. First of all on the necessity to emphasize the role of the class struggle in history, and secondly, on the conceptualisation of forces of production. HH's understanding of productive forces is definitely not of the kind which reduces forces of production to the elements of which they are constituted: man, machines, nature: "In this sense it is not the craftsman's tool or the industrial machine as such that define the productive forces, but the specific form of their articulation into a concrete labour process". (p. 11) This particular interpretation of productive forces is important in view of the distortions that have been given by many Marxist writers, but also by the practices of all the revisionist communist parties whose leadership looked at productive forces and relations of production as two separate entities. Thus a simplistic and distorted reading of Marx was a contributing factor to the suppression of class struggles in Russia -- in the name of transition to socialism. This transition was assumed to be possible only after the productive forces had been developed.<sup>26</sup>

The notion that the motor of history is constituted by the contradictions between the level of the productive forces and the relations of production is based on a Marxist theory which empties it of its very substance: the class struggle. As history has shown, the privilegisation of productive forces over relations of production went hand in hand with the proclamation of the non-existence of class struggle. Out of this practice grew an oppressive, repressive, reactionary and revisionist bureaucracy.<sup>27</sup>

Although the Chinese revolution was the most important rebuttal of the validity of this conception, the last 25 years in China have shown also that -- even there -- there is still a struggle going on between those who believe in the primacy of the

productive forces and those who hold the line that progress (toward Communism) will be achieved only through the continuation of the class struggle -- with the workers and peasants, in command. At the risk of sounding banal, one must reiterate that there is a dialectical connexion between productive forces and the relations of production, in the sense that the elements which enter in the labour process -- machine, tools, nature, labour -- are themselves the result of relations of production. A machine is not just an element of the productive forces it is also a materalised form of relations of production. Conversely, there can be relations of production only if they result in productive forces.<sup>28</sup> The interconnexion between productive forces and relations of production has important consequences with regard to the so-called question of choice of strategies for countries "moving" towards socialism. It means that the question of choice of industrialisation strategy cannot be reduced to a choice of techniques or to vague pronouncements about the necessity "to make machines serve the people" (even the capitalists would want to do that). However, lest this relation between productive forces and relations of production be misunderstood it must be stressed that there is a definite distinction between the two concepts.

I have said that one finds in the Chinese Revolution and especially in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution the answer to the confusion over the role and primacy of the productive forces and relations of production. Clearly such practice has not yet been translated into an adequate theoretical formulation. For example, the slogan "make revolution and promote production" lends itself to ambiguous interpretations, i.e. one which sees the slogan as encouraging revolution at one time and production at another. Obviously such a dualist interpretation is untenable. The only possible Marxist interpretation must be to make revolution and promote revolution in production.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, it is because of a mechanical understanding of the relationship between productive forces and relations of production that Althusser and Balibar (and Bettelheim in part) have run into trouble in their conceptualisation of the transitional period. As HH clearly point out one cannot reduce the period of transition to moments of "non-correspondence" between relations of production and productive forces. Others have advanced the notion of transition as being one which is characterised by the productive forces "being ahead" of the relations of production or vice-versa, which is but another way of describing a period of non-correspondence.

The chapter on transition in Pre-capitalist Modes of Production hinges on the reaffirmation of the centrality of the class struggle in Marxist theory (see especially p. 285)

The first famous words of the Communist Manifesto are effectively used to demonstrate that the transition from one mode of production to another is not the result of contradictions which, so to speak, grow on their own, but rather that it is created or brought about by "a specific form of the conditions of class struggle in a social formation dominated by a determinate mode of production". (p. 285) However, is it theoretically acceptable to reduce the construction of the concept of transition (as HH do) to a discussion of transition from one type of class society (Feudalism) to another type of class society (Capitalism)? The question is of crucial importance to any study of African formations because in many cases the process of transition is one which goes (sometimes) from primitive (class-less) societies to capitalism.

It is also this chapter which is the occasion for HH's sharpest attacks on Althusser and Balibar's conception of history which according to the authors is teleological. What is teleology?

All conceptions in which a structure is defined in the future anterior, by the future results of present phenomena, involve a collapse into idealist and teleological theories of history.  
(p. 271)

HH are entirely justified in their attacks, and I suspect that the authors of Reading Capital would agree.<sup>30</sup> Why? In the first place, all four authors are in agreement about the necessity for a non-Hegelian reading of Marx. Secondly, HH demonstrate convincingly how Althusser and Balibar reintroduce Hegel by substituting the essence "which is called structure" (p. 8) Dynamic structuralism, so central to Althusser's and Balibar's theory of a mode of production, cannot be accepted as a concept in Marxist theory because it reintroduces idealism and subjectivism, and as Althusser himself once wrote, "It is always a gain to lose an inadequate concept if the concept gained in exchange is more adequate to real practice."<sup>31</sup> In exchange, HH offer the transitional conjuncture and the class struggle:

Transitional conjuncture refers to a condition of the social formation such that the transformation of the dominant mode of production is



a possible outcome of the class struggle. It is distinguished from non-transitional conjunctures not by the fact (HH emphasis) of class struggle (which is necessarily present in all class societies) but by the specific conditions of that struggle which determine what is and what is not a possible outcome. These conditions ensure that transition is a possible outcome; they do not make it necessary. (p. 278)

I am afraid HH are ratiocinating. What distinguishes the fact from the specific conditions of the class struggle? Transitional conjuncture (associated with class struggle) does not resolve the problem of conceptualising periods of transition. Again, had the authors of Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production deigned to consult "On Contradiction" they would have learned that the concept of contradiction is not only necessary to explain periods of transition from one mode of production to another, but also "the passage from ignorance to knowledge".<sup>32</sup>

#### HH AND AFRICAN PRE-CAPITALIST FORMATIONS

As such HH have not much to say about pre-capitalist African formations except through a critique of the work of Claude Meillassoux, Emmanuel Terray, Pierre-Philippe Rey and Georges Dupre.<sup>33</sup>

While the criticisms they have against these writers are well taken, they are unable to offer valid alternatives.

The anti-empiricist position of HH should be welcome in a field of research which seems to have been characterised at one point by a concern to find new modes of production. Every time different/empirical conditions obtained, a new mode was discovered. As HH put it:

There is a tendency of collapse into an empiricism in which modes of production are multiplied according to empirically given conditions. (p. 62)

HH attribute this particular tendency of collapse to an understanding of the concept of mode of production which sometimes reduces the latter to a labour process or "principal" (pastoralism, hunting, agriculture) activity.<sup>34</sup> HH critique of Meillassoux's technicist understanding of the mode of production

is a fundamental one, and Meillassoux himself is aware of it as can be seen from his latest book Femmes Greniers et Capitaux (Paris, Maspero, 1975). But even in his latest efforts, Meillassoux was unable to move out of an empiricist definition of a mode of production. We are treated to yet another -- domestic -- mode of production.<sup>35</sup>

All in all, the chapter where the African pre-capitalist formations are discussed (Primitive Communism) along with the chapter on the Ancient mode of production are the least satisfactory parts of the book. Their most effective point is the one they make against the practice of anthropology (pp. 69-73). The practice of anthropology cannot but undermine the practice of Marxist theory. The core of the argument is very much similar to the one made on the relationship between history and Marxist theory.

Anthropological practice does not simply refer to the ideological uses that have been made of anthropology to serve colonial rule. What has been missing in the works of Marxist anthropologists is an epistemological critique of the object of anthropology, of its language, of the terminology it uses (e.g. kinship). It ought to be evident that the pseudo-scientific language of anthropology has, in part determined -- and consequently distorted -- the effort of Marxist writers trained in the discipline. The double allegiance of Marxism and anthropology can only be detrimental to Marxism. With regard to this, it is interesting to note how Pierre-Philippe Rey arrives at the conceptualisation of the lineage mode of production while at the same time questioning the categories of analysis that have been imposed by a language and problematic (anthropological) which has nothing in common with Marxism. In the section which concludes the presentation of his problematic in the book on the Congo, Pierre Philippe Rey expressed his doubts about the mixing of anthropology and Marxism in the following words:

I have the impression more and more that the particular importance given to real kin relations in the "primitive" societies by anthropologists is a mystification.<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, Rey does not follow up on this assessment, but contrary to the impression given by HH Rey is aware -- even if he does not act on it -- of the contradictory object of anthropology and Marxism. One finds a similar awareness (as pointed out by

HH -- p. 75, footnote 28) in Terray's work. It is because of his suspicions about the ideological determination of anthropological enquiry that Terray went back to Morgan (in Marxism and 'Primitive' societies). For all his weaknesses Morgan's efforts had had the merit in Terray's words of aiming "to construct a theory (Terray's emphasis) of that history, i.e. a system of concepts to make it possible to think it out scientifically."<sup>37</sup> What has to be noted is that while Morgan used terms like kinship and its various derivatives (lineage, clan, tribe), he did not elevate them to the level of concepts. In order to explain the social relations in the primitive communities, Morgan produced the concept of the gentile constitution. To be sure, HH are very critical of Morgan's understanding of the concept itself, but still he had the merit to see that relations in society cannot be explained by what is visible.

### CONCLUSION: MARXIST PRACTICE AND MARXIST EPISTEMOLOGY

At the risk of making abusive use of quotations I believe it worthwhile quoting Althusser on the relationship between theory and practice:

So to pose and resolve our theoretical problem ultimately means to express theoretically the 'solution' existing in the practical state, that Marxist practice has found for real difficulty which it encountered in its development, whose existence it has noted, and, according to its own submission, settled.

So we are merely concerned with filling in a 'gap' between theory and practice on a particular point. We are not setting Marxism any imaginary or subjective problem, asking it to 'resolve' the 'problems' of 'hyperempiricism', nor even what Marx called the difficulties a philosopher has in his personal relations with a concept. No. The problem posed exists (and has existed) in the form of a difficulty signalled by Marxist practice. Its solution exists in Marxist practice. So we have only to express it theoretically. But this simple theoretical expression of a solution that exists in the practical state cannot be taken for granted: it

requires a real theoretical labour, not only to work out the specific concept or knowledge of this practical resolution -- but also for the real destruction of the ideological confusions, illusions or inaccuracies that may exist, by a radical critique (a critique which takes them by the root). So this simple theoretical 'expression' implies both the production of a knowledge and the critique of an illusion, in one movement, (For Marx, pp. 165-6) (Althusser's emphasis)

If theory cannot be divorced from practice, then one must ask oneself whether the efforts to construct a materialist epistemology, the style and language in which it is made does not divert Marxist practice from its objective, i.e. to serve the revolutionary classes (peasant and workers) in their struggles to overthrow their capitalist exploiters. What is at issue is not whether or not one needs a materialist epistemology, i.e. a language and a system of basic scientific concepts.<sup>38</sup> Such a work is badly needed, but there are signs, and Pre-capitalist Modes of Production is a case in point, that the construction of such a materialist epistemology is being carried out in the vacuum which is so characteristic of the rarefied atmosphere of bourgeois universities. The result cannot but be debilitating for Marxism. HH have exposed clearly the contradictory nature of practicing both Marxism and history (or anthropology), but a more fundamental critique should be addressed to the very academic environment within which anthropology, history and Marxism are coexisting and then turned into tests for assessing intellectual prowess. This cannot but result in the diffusing of the class struggle. By encouraging intellectualism the bourgeois universities have promoted an intellectual interest in Marxism, and in the process Marxism is losing its revolutionary theoretical foundations. I am sure HH are aware of this, but the text of Pre-capitalist mode of Production does not show that they have acted on this awareness. In a recent article Castells and de Ipola have articulated the dangers of mixing Academia and Marxism:

For example, to posit the possibility of 'producing' a historical materialism (in the form of concrete situations) in conditions of production which are essentially determined by their involvement with the ideological

apparatuses of the bourgeoisie (e.g. the University), is to fall back into scientism. In other words, it is to regress to the abstract relation of the intellectual to a scientific object defined in rigorous formal terms and with a faithfulness to certain texts. We should remember, in particular, that historical materialism has been able to make no important discoveries without a direct link with the political conjuncture of the class struggle.<sup>39</sup> (first emphasis mine; second emphasis Castells and Ipola's)

I have emphasized that portion of the quote which, I think is precisely applicable to HH's production of Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production. HH have overly sacrificed to rigour.<sup>40</sup> Rigour can be one of the reasons behind the non-appearance of Mao Tse-tung anywhere in their work in spite of the fact that his writings and his practice have greatly contributed to the construction of a materialist epistemology. HH silent disregard for such pieces as "On Practice", "On Contradiction" can only be interpreted as a form of intellectual arrogance and reactionary political practice. The rigour of HH is characterised by a unileal progression and it is probably for the reason that they are unable to deal with the theoretical works of a revolutionary thinker whose writings are permeated with dialectical rigour. There is no place in HH mode of analysis for the kind of analysis that Mao makes of the Chinese formation especially when he analyzes it as a semi-feudal, semi-colonial formation under the sway of several imperialist powers. Such an analysis has important theoretical implications on the question of conceptualising the process of transition from one mode of production to another, even if HH have asserted otherwise.

Mao himself had something to say about the kind of theoretical practice in which HH engage in Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production. Reading the following words from "On Practice" one cannot help but think of HH:

We are opposed to die-hards in the revolutionary ranks whose thinking fails to advance with changing objective circumstances and has manifested itself historically as Right opportunism. These people fail to see that the struggle of opposites

has already pushed the objective process forward while their knowledge has stopped at the old stage. This is characteristic of all die-hards. Their thinking is divorced from social practice, and they cannot march ahead to guide the chariot of society; they simply trail behind, grumbling that it goes too fast and trying to drag it back or turn it in the opposite direction. (Selected Writings, Vol. 1, pp. 306-7)

This being said, it cannot be denied that some of the questions raised by HH in *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* are crucial to Marxist theory. The recognition of this importance is directly linked to a certain understanding (on my part) of the historical development of class struggle in the last hundred years or so. Specific references were made to class struggles in Russia and China. In the last paragraph of their book HH reiterate why theory is important to Marxist politics. Although they state that theory cannot be divorced from practice ("This relation between theory and political practice is the essence of Marxism") (p.323) it is clear that their unorthodox positions are likely to lead many Marxist readers to question and reject their practice.

To understand Marxism is not just to be able to repeat certain quotations. I have shown in the course of the review how certain quotations can be understood differently. It is this practice of explaining Marxism through quotations which is probably responsible for what an external examiner here at the University has referred to as sloganeering.

This review is likely to lead into a discussion of what makes an individual a Marxist. For example, in the current struggle in China, who are the Marxists? The Huaists or "the gang of four?" Furthermore, in a non-revolutionary situation, which criteria are we to use in order to determine what is a contribution to Marxist theory? These questions are not idle ones as one can see from the manner in which one reviewer of Issa Shivji's Class Struggles in Tanzania has rejected it as a non-Marxist work.<sup>41</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND FOOTNOTES

This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented for discussion at a Department of History Seminar on November 25, 1976. If

it has any merits it owes them to numerous discussions and critiques made before and during the presentation. In particular I would like to thank H. Bernstein for sharing his greater knowledge and familiarity of the authors of Capital and Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production. This, however, does not mean that he agrees entirely with the paper. I also want to thank the students of History 201 History 301, the History M.A. Programme and Abdul Sheriff for having forced me to take a more critical attitude toward the book under review.

- 1 A Marxist is not "anybody who claims to be one. The authors under review can be said to be Marxists. A purist interpretation would probably deny them that status.
- 2 In the Afterword to the Second German Edition of Capital Marx wrote "My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite". Further wrote "The mystifying side of Hegelian dialectic I criticized nearly thirty years ago, at the time when it was still in fashion.. I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even here and there, in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him". In Capital Vol. 1, International Publishers, New York, fifth printing, 1973, pp. 19-20.
- 3 In Collected Works, F.L.P.H. Vol. I Moscow, 1963, especially pp. 163 to 174.
- 4 L. Althusser, "Preface to Capital Volume One" in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971, p. 72.
- 5 Note how Lenin in "What the Friends of the People are" criticized Mr. Mikhailovsky who had written among other things; "He (Marx) brought to light theoreticians of economic science long forgotten or unknown to anybody today, and did not overlook the most minute details in factory inspectors' reports or experts' evidence before various special commissions; in a word, he examined this enormous mass of factual material, partly in order to provide arguments for his economic theories and partly to illustrate them..." Then follows Lenin's comment: "The whole tirade is highly characteristic and helps us to understand how little the public understand Capital and Marx. Overwhelmed by the tremendously convincing way he states his case, they bow and scrape before Marx, laud him, and at the

same time lose sight of the basic content of his doctrine and quite calmly continue to sing the old songs of "subjective sociology"...."It would appear that Marx contributed nothing essentially new or noteworthy to the methods of constructing these theories, that he left the bounds of economic science where the earlier economists had them, without extending them, without contributing a "completely new" conception of the science itself". (Collected Works, Vol. 1, pp. 134-5).

- 6 L. Althusser explains why a double allegiance (Marxist anthropologist, Marxist historian, Marxist sociologist) is difficult to maintain. Himself a philosopher by training he found that "it is not easy to become a Marxist-Leninist philosopher. Like every 'intellectual', a philosophy teacher is a petty bourgeois. When he opens his mouth, it is petty-bourgeois ideology that speaks: its resources and ruses are infinite". ...."Proletarians have a 'class instinct' which helps them on the way to proletarian 'class positions'. Intellectuals, on the contrary, have a petty-bourgeois class instinct' which fiercely resists this transition". In L. Althusser, "Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon" in Lenin and Philosophy, pp. 12-3.
- 7 M. Harris, The Rise of Anthropological Theory, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1968, p. 233; see also pp. 228-9.
- 8 Suzanne de Brunhoff, "Marx as an a-Ricardian: Exchange value and money at the beginning of Capital", in Economy and Society, Vol. II, 4, p. 421.
- 9 Ibid., p. 423.
- 10 Ibid. p. 424.
- 11 Ibid., p. 422 and her note on p. 429 where she points out her disagreement with Althusser's treatment of Section I of Book I as Hegelian.
- 12 K. Marx, Grundrisse, Penguin Books, 1973, pp. 107-8.
- 13 M. Castells and E. de Ipola define epistemology as "The exercising of vigilance in the (conceptual and methodological) operations of scientific activity. The aim of this vigilance being to render ineffective the epistemological obstacles which hinder the production of knowledge". For this definition they acknowledge Althusser. Further down, epistemological obstacle is defined as "an extra-scientific element or process which, by intervention in a scientific practice, slows down, prevents, or perverts



- the production of knowledge". (C. and I. emphasis) "Epistemological practice and the social sciences", in Economy and Society, Vol. 5, 2 (May 1976), pp. 113, 118, 142, - note 2. This rather oddly formulated definition will become clearer later. It is difficult to say one way or the other whether HH would agree with this definition.
- 14 Althusser's classification is more complex than this. His breakdown is as follows: 1840-44 the Early works, 1845: the works of the Break, 1845-57: transitional works, 1857-83: mature works. See For Marx, pp. 21-39.
- 15 For M. Castells and E. de Ipola, epistemological break is defined as the "specific effect of the irruption (C, and I. emphasis) into the ideological formation of a process of production of scientific knowledge". op. cit., p. 115.
- 16 Ironically, he does say that "if we want a historical predecessor to Marx (in this respect) we must appeal to Spinoza rather than Hegel "(For Marx, p. 78) Hence HH attack Hegel against Althusser for flirting with Spinozist conceptions of history. See pp. 272-3.
- 17 A point explicitly made by M. Castells and Ipola: "The Chief epistemological obstacle in the Social sciences today is empiricism (C. and I. emphasis), op. cit., p. 120. This position is shared by HH whose rejection of history is -- among other reasons -- on the grounds that it is by nature -- it must be -- empiricist.
- 18 J. Taylor, "Review Article: Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production" (part I), Critique of Anthropology, 4 and 5, Autumn 1975, pp. 127-155.
- 19 J. Taylor, Ibid., especially p. 134.
- 20 See especially V. I. Lenin's various interventions at the Seventh (April) All-Russia Conference of the R.S.D.L.P. (B), April 24-29 (May 7-12), 1917, in Selected Works, Vol. 2, International Publishers, N.Y., 1967, pp-59-115.
- 21 As can be gathered from a cursory look at the tables of contents of Mao Tse-Tung's Selected Works.
- 22 The exact quote being "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it". From "Theses on Feuerbach" in K. Marx and F. Engels, Selected Works in 2 volumes, Vol. 2, F.L.P.H., Moscow, 1951, p. 367. (Marx's emphasis)
- 23 For Marx, pp. 178-9.

- 24 The part of the preface that HH deal with reads: In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness... At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure".
- 25 Liberation Army Daily, May 4, 1966 as quoted from K.H. Fan(ed.), The Chinese Cultural Revolution: Selected Documents, Grove Press, N.Y., 1968, pp. 118-9.
- 26 See Ch. Bettelheim, Les Luttes de Classes en URSS, première période 1917-1923, Maspéro/Seuil, 1974, especially pp. 30-43. The English translation has been published by Monthly Review Press (September 1976).
- 27 Ibid., pp. 7-46.
- 28 For an excellent discussion on this see A.D. Magaline, Lutte de classes et dévalorisation du capital, Paris, Maspéro, 1975. The Work's sub-title: contribution à la critique du révisionisme. See especially pp. 43-65.
- 29 A.D. Magaline, Ibid., pp. 39-41.
- 30 At least two co-authors have offered self-criticisms L. Althusser in Reponse à John Lewis and Jacques Ranciere in "How to use Lire le Capital" in Economy and Society, Vol. 5, 3 (August 1976), pp. 377-383. See also L. Althusser, Eléments d'autocritique, Paris, Hachette, 1974, and E. Balibar, "Self-criticism -- an Answer to Questions from Theoretical Practice, Theoretical Practice, Nos. 7-8, January 1973.
- 31 L. Althusser, For Marx, p. 217, footnote.
- 32 Mao Tse-tung, "On Contradiction", in Selected Works, I, pp.335.
- 33 The French Marxist tradition in African studies is much richer than might be suggested by the mentioning of the above four names.

- See C. Meillassoux's annotated bibliography at the end of his book Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux, Paris, Maspero, 1975.
- 34 It is easy to criticise, but much more difficult to provide a better alternative as can be seen by my own attempt (and failure) to move out of a technicist definition of a mode of production; see "A Contribution to the study of pre-capitalist Modes of Production: Uvira Zone (Eastern Zaire) c. 1800-1937". in African Economic History Review, Vol. II, I, Spring 1975, pp. 1-6.
- 35 C. Meillassoux, Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux, pp. 7-135.
- 36 P - Ph. Rey, Colonialisme, Néo-colonialisme et Transition au Capitalisme, Paris, Maspero, 1971, p. 207. Similar doubts have been expressed by Rodney Needham from whom C. Meillassoux quoted approvingly (Femmes..., p. 37): "The word 'kinship' (...) does not denote a discriminable class of phenomena or a distinct type of theory. (...) it has an immense variety of uses. (...) In other words, the term 'kinship' is (...) an 'odd-job' word and we only get in trouble when we assume that it must have some specific function. (...) The word has in fact no analytical value (...) There is no such thing as kinship theory". As quoted from R. Needham, Rethinking Kinship and Marriage, A.S.A. Monograph, n° II, Tavistock, London, 1971.
- 37 E. Terray, Marxism and 'Primitive' Societies, Monthly Review Press, 1972, p. 24.
- 38 See L. Althusser, "Preface to Capital Volume One!" In Lenin and Philosophy, p. 75.
- 39 In their footnote to this M. Castells and Ipola draw attention to Mao's "On Practice". They continue by pointing out that "the opposite contention, according to which ideological apparatuses would entirely determine the content of the knowledge thus produced, is leftist and mechanist, in that it leads one to ignore certain of the effects produced by the class struggle on the apparatuses of the dominant class"., op. cit., p. 141.
- 40 H. Bernstein drew my attention to this aspect of HH mode of expression.
- 41 D. Wadada Nabudere, "Imperialism, State, Class and Race: A Critique of Shivji's Class Struggles in Tanzania, Maji-Maji, No.27, August 1976, pp. 1-22.