

THE OBJECT OF AFRICAN HISTORY:
A MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVE

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I.

The establishment of a journal specifically concerned with method in African history is to be welcomed. However, the early issues of *History in Africa* have demonstrated that the content of the term 'method' is itself at stake. The great majority of contributions to date have seized on a narrow and limiting conception of method as the development of *techniques of collecting and evaluating data*.¹ The necessity of such techniques is not in question, but they are subordinate to, and indeed partially determined by, a broader and more fundamental conception of method as the *principles of investigation and explanation in scientific practice*.² There are historians who do not regard the production of historical knowledge as a scientific enterprise, hence subject to certain theoretical demands, and they would not want to.³ Accordingly, they need not read on, but we are confident that there are others who are interested in method in the second sense and who may also have noticed its virtual absence in the pages of this journal.

On the other hand, it would be disingenuous to imply that a common interest in method in the broader and more fundamental sense is sufficient ground for agreement. Our argument in what follows derives from an understanding of historical materialism that has nothing in common with the stereotyped views held by it bourgeois critics. Our central concern is with method as the principles of constructing scientific explanations. But what is to be explained? We attempt to show that method necessarily starts with the correct posing of questions, as well as bearing on their investigation. Moreover, we regard investigation and explanation as pre-eminently *theoretical* activities pursued within distinctive theoretical frameworks which determine the content and uses of empirical knowledge.

The form of our presentation is extremely schematic, which is regrettable but unavoidable within the limits of a single essay. The theme itself is, in principle, an all-embracing one and, in addition, we feel unable to begin with any assumption that our conception of the issues is shared by those who may read this essay.

Therefore the presentation is compressed and the illustrations limited but the sequence of our argument is logical. First, it is necessary to give an exposition of historical materialism and materialist history and the relations between them. In the course of this exposition we present the concept of a 'problematic' which is employed to establish the radical incompatibility of the social knowledge produced by materialist theory and bourgeois theory. This is further developed in the next section in which we trace aspects of the ideological career of African history. Finally, we indicate briefly some of the developments and issues regarding the constitution of African history as a field of investigation within the materialist problematic.⁴

Historical Materialism and Materialist History

In *The German Ideology* (1846), a work in which the general conception of historical materialism began to take shape, Marx and Engels wrote that "the first historical act . . . is the production of material life [which is the] fundamental condition of all history which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life."⁵ The material production and reproduction of social existence is therefore the first and essential premise. However, the statement cited concerns *production in general*, an abstraction which is necessarily ahistorical -- the fundamental condition of *all* history. The materialism expressed in the concept of production in general is not yet *historical* materialism. The latter begins with "production at a definite stage of social development," and Marx continues:

It might seem, therefore, that in order to talk about production at all we must either pursue the process through its different phases, or declare beforehand that we are dealing with a specific historical epoch such as, e.g., modern bourgeois production, which is indeed our theme. However, all epochs of production have certain common traits, common characteristics. Production in general is an abstraction, but a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common elements and thus saves us repetition. Still, this *general* category, this common element sifted out by comparison, is itself segmented many times over and splits into different

determinations. Some determinations belong to all epochs, others only to a few. [Some] determinations will be shared by the most modern epoch and the most ancient. No production will be thinkable without them; however, even though the most developed languages have laws and characteristics in common with the least developed, nevertheless, just those things which determine their development, i.e. the elements which are not general and common, must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that in their unity -- which arises already from the identity of the subject, humanity, and of the object, nature -- their essential difference is not forgotten.⁶

In this important passage Marx indicated that the object of historical materialism cannot be production in general, but the specification of determinate modes of production. Three distinct types of abstraction can be derived from Marx's statement:

(i) categories pertaining to production in general and therefore common to all modes of production -- for example, the appropriation of nature through the application of human labor

(ii) categories common to several but not to all modes of production, appearing in several historical epochs, an example being commodity production

(iii) categories which define the unique characteristics of a given mode of production; examples would be feudal rent in the feudal mode, surplus-value and the expanded reproduction of productive capital in the capitalist mode.

The concept of mode of production is by no means a simple one, and the theory of any particular mode of production posits a complex structure. Without entering into the recent debates concerning the status of the concept and the methodology of constructing the theories of particular modes of production, several essential observations can be made.⁷ The first is that the concept of mode of production does not simply correspond to, nor can it be inductively derived from, the empirically observable and enormously diverse range of forms of production in history. On the contrary, modes of production can only be constituted by the application of a set of specific concepts: social relations of production, productive forces, political and ideological relations (which in class modes are relations of domination/subordination).

A tentative definition, sufficient for the present purposes, may be suggested as follows:

(i) Any mode of production is a determinate ensemble of distinct relations of production and a particular set of pro-

ductive forces, the social relations being the determinant element in this combination.

(ii) The categories of social relations (economic, political, ideological) and the relations between these categories cannot be theorized generally in the concept of mode of production itself, but vary according to each mode of production. Moreover, each category, while occupying a different place in the structure of different modes, cannot be reduced to a simple 'cause' or 'effect' but, as a distinct category, is one of the conditions of existence of the mode as a totality.

(iii) The determinations linking the categories of social relations with each other and with the productive forces, hence giving them their unity in the mode of production as a structured whole, are expressed dynamically through the concept of the laws of motion of the mode. Analysis of the latter entails the mechanisms of material and social reproduction of the mode of production, including the contradictions given effect in this process.

It may be useful to elaborate briefly some of the elements of this compound definition. On the first part, the emphasis that social relations have the determinant role in the combination relations of production/productive forces militates against the reductionist materialism which views history as a sequence of technological advances giving rise to corresponding forms of social relations. In *Capital* there is an important demonstration by Marx that it was the emergence of capitalist relations of production which produced the Industrial Revolution in England, and not the Industrial Revolution which produced capitalism. Industrialization (above all the production of machines by means of machines) crystalized and propelled further the social relations of production, not as an effect of advances in 'technology' but in terms of the development of the productive forces which cannot be divorced from the social forms in which they are embedded -- in this case a specific division of labor producing the socialized labor process and what Marx termed "the collective work."⁸

Regarding the second part of our definition, the structural relations suggested incorporate the principles of "determination in the last instance" by the material base, and the "relative autonomy" of levels of a mode of production. The theoretical work of Louis Althusser in recent years and the debates it has stimulated have contributed to a greater awareness of the problems posed by these formulations, in opposition to the tendencies of both vulgar and 'liberalizing' currents within Marxism.⁹ The former interprets the base/superstructure metaphor in a manner that renders politics and ideology as more or less epiphenomenal 'reflections' of the so-called 'economic base.' The latter reacts against economic determinism by advocating a pluralist or factoralist history; that is, one in

which 'factors' other than the economic are posed in an empiricist fashion, thereby abandoning the demands of a scientific (non-empiricist) methodology.¹⁰ As an illustration of these issues, it can be suggested that the fetishism of commodities, the mystification of bourgeois social relations rooted in the very structure of those relations, and the bourgeois state in its functions of concentrating and containing class contradictions, are conditions of existence of the capitalist mode of production which are as necessary as the appropriation of surplus-value in the process of production.¹¹

Finally, the laws of motion of given modes of production are an essential element in the conceptualization of historical specificity. Each mode of production has its own distinctive laws of functioning, which denies the metaphysical notion of 'general laws,' the foundation of philosophies of history. The production of historical knowledge cannot be accomplished within a philosophical framework which employs an aprioristic, deductive method.

The concept of mode of production is therefore a specific kind of abstraction, produced by the application of its constitutive concepts. It is not an abstraction in the empiricist sense of a generalization from observable data, but has a theoretical function and validity independent of any given set of concrete circumstances. The clearest example remains Marx's *Capital*, which provides a theory of the capitalist mode of production *per se*, not capitalist society in England, France, Germany, or the United States at a given time. Had Marx provided us merely with an abstraction selecting from and crystalizing the conditions of nineteenth-century British capitalism (corresponding to the ideal-typical 'historical individual' of Weber as exemplified in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), then the categories of *Capital* could not provide the basis of analysis of other capitalist social formations, and of subsequent stages in the global development of capital.

Certainly, *Capital* contains much data, both historical and contemporary, but Marx makes it clear that these provide illustrations of the theoretical propositions of the work, rationally derived from what was at that time the most developed capitalist formation. In the celebrated last part of *Capital*, (Volume I) on primitive accumulation, the essential *theoretical* point is how capital comes to organize production, a necessary condition of which is the separation of the direct producers from the means of production. Historically this was illustrated by certain forms of the expropriation of the peasantry and actions of the state in disciplining the emergent proletariat (examples again drawn mainly from Britain). There is no suggestion that these particular forms of primitive accumulation constitute a universally valid or necessary general theory of the transition

to capitalism, and Marx subsequently had to refute such an interpretation:

The chapter on primitive accumulation does not claim to do more than trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist economic system emerged from the womb of the feudal economic system . . . [My critic] insists on transforming my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an *historico-philosophical theory of the general path of development* prescribed by fate to all nations, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves . . .¹² (emphasis added)

The application of the preceding exposition to the concerns of historical methodology can now be elaborated. Production in general is a rational abstraction and the initial premise of materialism. However it is ahistorical in that it provides no concepts for producing historical knowledge, that is, establishing and explaining the characteristics of particular real objects, whether certain historical periods, the development of particular social formations, or particular sequences and constellations of events. The first step in constituting history as a field of investigation is through the application of the concept of mode of production to produce the theories of particular modes of production, the scientific project pioneered by Marx in *Capital*.

In our view, the construction of the theories of particular modes of production is a necessary condition for the production of historical knowledge, but is not to be confused with it. Modes of production have specific structures and modes of functioning (laws of motion) which are constituted at a theoretical level that we can term Historical Specificity I. However, in a strict sense, a mode of production does not in itself have a history, nor does it produce a history through a simple process of deduction from its appropriate level of abstraction to a set of discrete data. On the first point, for example, the feudal mode of production is not reducible, say, to the history of European feudalism. The theory of the feudal mode of production may provide the basis for the investigation of social formations as separated in time and space as twelfth-century England, seventeenth-century Poland and Japan, and nineteenth century Buganda and Rwanda. 'Feudalism' (that is, the feudal mode of production) thus has no history as such but can be employed to construct the histories of different social formations in determinate periods ('epochs' in Marx's usage, connoting the temporal dimension of the ascendance of a given mode of production).¹³

On the other hand, and this is our second point, we cannot produce historical knowledge of European (or any other) feudalism

by simply combining the categories of the mode of production with the facts 'belonging' to a given time and place. By this deductive method it is possible to classify a number of social formations as feudal, but this is essentially a typological procedure and not the same as producing their histories. Alternatively, the formations designated as 'feudal' could be distinguished according to various facts about them (ecological, demographic, techniques of production, forms of tribute, religious ideology, and so on), but this returns us to a procedure of empiricist description -- however systematic it may be -- of the various 'cases' within the category-type.

Given that modes of production do not have a history, the concrete conditions in which a given mode of production emerges, develops, undergoes crises and possibly dissolves in the course of its transition to another mode, can only be investigated through the social formations in which the mode of production is manifested. It is at this level, which we term Historical Specificity II, that historical knowledge is produced. The most important point here is that the production of knowledge at the level of Historical Specificity II, just as in the case of Historical Specificity I, involves the application of its own constitutive concepts. In other words, specific forms of theorization are appropriate to the investigation of concrete historical phenomena, in contrast to viewing such analysis as the effect of theory on data.

The constitutive concepts are of two kinds. Clearly, the categories pertaining to particular modes of production are employed; that is, specific relations of production, productive forces, political and ideological relations, which are now investigated through the concrete (and variant) *forms* in which they appear. This is expressed in the definition of the concept of social formation as it operates in the work of Althusser:

. . . the concrete complex whole comprising economic practice, political practice and ideological practice at a certain place and stage of development. Historical materialism is the science of social formations.¹⁴

The second category of concepts is operative only at the level of Historical Specificity II, examples of which are transition and conjuncture. The transition from one mode of production to another cannot be theorized at the same level of abstraction as the concept of mode of production itself. Transitions occur in determinate concrete conditions, and therefore take significant variant forms. We emphasize again that the variation of forms of transition cannot be established scientifically by appeal to the facts, but requires appropriate theoretical concepts. For example, variant forms of the transition to capitalism are the effect, in broad terms, of the character of existing pre-capitalist formations, the specific

class struggles and alliances through which the transition is charted, the forms of the bourgeois state arising from these struggles, the particular forms and rhythm of the emergence of capitalist relations of production, and so on. Only on this basis is it possible to construct a scientific history of the variant forms of the transition to capitalism in Britain, France, Germany, the United States, Japan, and Russia, to cite only the 'classic' examples.

The concept of conjuncture refers to sequences or constellations of events subject to a specific theoretical focus on the balance of class forces in a social formation at a given historical moment. At any one moment contradictions are manifested in a more or less concentrated form expressed in an uneven development of the political forms of class struggle.¹⁵ The concept is located properly within the Marxist theory of politics, and some notable conjunctural analyses have concerned instances of political crisis in which the stability of bourgeois regimes has been severely shaken, with the purpose of drawing out the lessons for the revolutionary movement -- for example, Marx's *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and Trotsky's *1905* (which is introduced by a brilliant historical sketch of the character of the Russian social formation). The works of Lenin and Mao Tse-tung also provide many rich examples of the method of conjunctural analysis.

We have outlined, in a compressed and schematic fashion, some of the issues involved in the production of historical knowledge as these issues are posed in historical materialism. Our principal argument is that the production of knowledge (in the sense of the means and results of explanation) is always and necessarily a theoretical task, in which concepts at different levels of abstraction -- to which particular functions correspond -- are established and applied in the investigation of different objects of knowledge, at the level of Historical Specificity I the theories of particular modes of production, at the level of Historical Specificity II the analysis of particular historical epochs, social formations, and conjunctures. The investigation of history cannot be accomplished by the deductive application of concepts established at the level of Historical Specificity I, which has the effect of viewing concrete historical phenomena as more or less 'pure'/'impure' expressions of the theoretical categories (that is, reducing the concept of mode of production to a Weberian ideal-type construction -- a 'model' to which reality 'approximates' in varying degrees). Rather, as Alain Badiou has written:

[It] is impossible to set a theoretical conception of history against real history defined by its very complexity -- its historical impurity . . . in Marxist theory the complexity is constructed

according to the concepts of theory . . . It is the proper task of a theory of history to give an account of the nature of real history.¹⁶

The ultimate objective of materialist analysis is always "the concrete analysis of a concrete situation" (Lenin), and the method by which this is achieved involves both movement from the concrete to the abstract and from the abstract to the concrete.¹⁷ The latter movement comprises a series of steps in which "concepts richer in the theoretical determinations" (in Poulantzas' instructive phrase) are successively introduced.¹⁸

In order to concentrate the arguments that have been advanced in a manner that further highlights issues of method, it is useful to consider the concept of 'problematic' (*problématique*). In its preliminary and most immediate meaning, problematic is synonymous with theoretical framework. All knowledge is produced within a problematic, whether this is explicitly acknowledged or not, and this applies equally to the crudest inductivism which claims to derive explanations from 'the facts' without the intervention of any conceptual apparatus. This statement is not particularly controversial and would find acceptance by many who are not Marxists. To leave the issue at this point, therefore, does not resolve very much and the concept of problematic must be pursued further.

What does a problematic consist of? Its components include both a set of concepts and a set of rules or procedures (methodology) which govern both the construction of concepts, (hence their content) and their employment in analysis. A problematic thus comprises the means of investigation necessary to producing knowledge. But it is more important to understand not merely what a problematic *is*, but how it functions in the active process of producing knowledge. This involves a number of systematic steps beginning with the posing of a question for analysis which indicates the object of the knowledge that is produced. This is of the greatest importance, because the questions which are posed are not *given* outside a problematic -- either by the facts themselves or by the personal inclinations of the researcher. Nor can a question which is posed within one problematic be taken over for investigation by another. The questions which indicate the object of knowledge are constituted within a problematic by its distinctive concepts and method. This is the sense in which Marx argued that "frequently the only possible answer is a critique of the question and the only solution is to negate the question."¹⁹ What distinguishes a scientific problematic, *inter alia*, is its procedures for 'problematizing' an issue, that is, posing it in a manner that is compatible with the production of its knowledge.

Several consequences follow from this formulation of a problematic. The first, and in a way the most strategic, is that

different problematics do not produce different knowledges of the same object -- in conventional terms, different 'interpretations' of the same issue. For example Marx and Weber do not provide different interpretations of the same process, the rise of capitalism (common as this mistake is in 'comparing' them). Their differences cannot be understood at the level of their conclusions, the results of their investigations, but must be pursued in how the questions they sought to answer were posed. In this case they were posed within different problematics, those of historical materialism and a subjectivist sociology which differ in their epistemology, their constitutive concepts, and their methods of investigation.²⁰

It can be inferred from what has been said that a scientific problematic entails a radically anti-empiricist methodology. The problematic of historical materialism does not reproduce the theory/facts distinction characteristic of bourgeois social science which suggests theory as responsible, hence subject to error, and facts as innocent in their passive and pre-existing 'givenness.' Materialist epistemology is premised on the objective nature of the material and real world, prior to and independent of its appropriation in thought. The real cannot be appropriated in thought without the mediation of categories. The cognitive appropriation of the real world in scientific knowledge necessarily employs a methodology distinct from that which operates to produce the practical knowledge derived from the daily experience of social life (knowledge that is practical in a social and ideological as well as a technical sense). In contrast to the perceptions of everyday life, the empirical data are no more innocent or 'given' to science than the concepts and methods of a problematic. 'Knowing' a fact is to name it, to classify it, to evaluate its significance within a particular conceptual framework. In a profound methodological sense, therefore, every problematic *produces* its own facts in the activity of appropriating the data of the real world through its concepts.²¹

Historians are prone to a particular mystification in that the generic object and the name of their discipline are the same, that is, history is the study of history. Herbert Lüthy has pointed out that this is analogous to Biology being termed 'Life' or Jurisprudence 'Justice'.²² This makes the pursuit of historical knowledge even more vulnerable to the empiricist effects of lacking an explicitly constituted object of knowledge -- 'History is the study of the past.' The notion of the past, contrasted with the present, clearly does not yield an object of knowledge in any scientific sense. 'The study of African history is the study of the African past.' All that happens here is that the vacuous, because residual, chronological dimension is combined with a geographical one which merely compartmentalizes what is, in principle, a limitless field of 'facts' of the African past. 'The study of Dahomey in the

eighteenth century is part of the study of African history.' This narrows the focus by further demarcating the chronological and spatial referents but in no way introduces any theoretical means of constituting an object of knowledge to be investigated.

In this sense, historians face a lamentable problem: their discipline has no object! As Althusser has remarked -- "this apparently full word [history] is a theoretically empty word in the immediacy of its obviousness."²³ Now, contrast history with the social sciences which have problematics that define their concepts and objects -- for example, in economics the neo-classical and neo-Ricardian; in sociology the functionalist and phenomenological; in political science the institutionalist and behavioral problematics. The resolution of this paradox is, of course, that historians do use concepts and methods which both define their specific objects of knowledge and govern the ways in which they investigate them. However, these concepts are not produced within the discipline of history, or more precisely do not emanate from the enterprise of historical research (as the study of the 'past'). The concepts, in the case of non-Marxist history, are constituted within bourgeois social theory (and its various branches and theoretical schools, some of which have been mentioned), and are thereby available to retrospective investigation ('history') as well as to contemporary investigation.

The effect of our argument is to displace questions of the 'what is history?' variety which exercise the self-conscious reflection by historians on the rationale and practice of their discipline. We have endeavored to shift the focus of inquiry to its proper location, namely, the production of social knowledge, whether concerning the past or the present. The production of knowledge involves both epistemology and methodology united in the concept of problematic. Since the time of Marx the field of social knowledge has been the site of a struggle between the problematics of historical materialism and those of bourgeois social theory and ideology (by no means a homogeneous category). This struggle has been waged within historical research and debate as well as in other areas, but its content is the confrontation between historical materialism and the range of bourgeois social theory, not Marxist 'economics' vs. bourgeois economics, Marxist 'sociology' vs. bourgeois sociology, Marxist 'history' vs. bourgeois history, and so on.

The history of historical materialism is itself the history of its confrontation with the concepts and methods of bourgeois social theory, a history Marxists cannot afford to ignore since it is inseparable from the struggles for revolutionary socialism which have occurred in the past and continue today. This history of struggle which can be traced through the various political and ideological tendencies and movements and the conjunctures in which they are submitted to the test of practice, is therefore also the history of the varying fortunes

of historical materialism. Contrary to the views of bourgeois critics, Marxists in no sense feel that they are in possession of a science which is unshakeable and complete, and which provides the key to open immediately all the doors of social knowledge. Rather, historical materialism -- by its very nature as a science concerned with social reality, which is subject to the fluctuations of the class struggle -- is self-critical, contingent, and open.²⁴

Its history begins with its foundation by Marx as the result of a long and arduous struggle with some of the dominant theories of his time, with which he himself had to break -- those of classical political economy, idealist dialectical philosophy, and petty-bourgeois socialism, represented in their most developed forms by Ricardo, Hegel, and Proudhon respectively. The continuing close study by Marxists of Marx's work and the character of its development does not replicate the exegetical concerns of the 'history of ideas', but expresses the necessity of penetrating the construction of Marx's problematic in order to *reproduce* it in the theoretical, ideological, and political circumstances of struggle of each generation.²⁵

Historical materialism at any given time is subject to the penetration of various elements of bourgeois social theory -- elements of idealism, positivism, empiricism, reductionism -- more or less disguised in the conceptual vocabulary of the materialist problematic but undermining its distinctive principles of determination and investigation. Several examples were mentioned earlier: the reduction of the movement of history to the development of the productive forces, the reduction of a mode of production or a social formation to an exclusive determination by its 'economic base.' Of particular relevance to our present concerns is a major tendency which has had the effect of stifling the development of materialist history. This is the conception of historical materialism as positing 'general laws' of history, which was evident in much of the theory of the Second International (Plekhanov, Kautsky, Hilferding), where it was associated with an 'inevitablist' view of the collapse of capitalism, producing particular effects in political practice. The conception of the 'general laws' of history was subsequently to govern much of the 'official' Marxism of the Soviet Union in the period of Stalin and after.²⁶

What are the effects of such a conception? The notion of 'general laws' militates against the production of historical knowledge in the sense we have tried to elucidate: the investigation of the specificity of particular epochs, social formations, and conjunctures. Investigation is pre-empted by established knowledge of the 'general laws' (the "historico-philosophic theory," in Marx's words), which can only yield a *verificationist* account of the concrete particularities of time

and place as exemplifying the operation of these 'laws.' This is quite explicit in the standard Eastern European work on African history by Endre Sík, who states that one of the purposes of studying African history is that "it brilliantly *substantiates* and most vividly *illustrates* a whole series of theses maintained by Marx, Lenin, and Stalin in the field of historical science."²⁷

On the contrary, the purpose of method in historical materialism is to establish and apply the principles through which a "concrete analysis of a concrete situation" is made possible, through which the specificity of the concrete is determined and not forever pre-determined by general laws of 'History.'²⁸ The development of materialist history has been hindered by such conceptions, which is recognized in the modesty of Marxist historians regarding their achievement. Pierre Vilar has observed that "the programme of a fully Marxist history remains not merely to be realized but even to be drafted."²⁹

It can be assumed, non-controversially, that Vilar's observation applies *a fortiori* to Africa. On the other hand, some of the elements of such a program have emerged in the past ten or twelve years through the work of a number of writers. Certain questions have been posed, sometimes in an initially crude manner but increasingly sharpened in the course of debate within the materialist problematic. These questions and investigations have begun to articulate as objects of knowledge the pre-capitalist modes of production and social formations of Africa, the specific forms and effects of their penetration by capital, and the emergence of particular class formations and forms of the state through the colonial period and that of independence. One can mention, the work of Meillassoux, Rey, Coquery-Vidrovitch, Terray, Arrighi, Van Onselen, Mamdani, Shivji, M. Hussein, and the rapidly developing corpus of Marxist analysis of South Africa by Trapido, Wolpe, Legassick, Morris, O'Meara, Davies, Kaplan, Bundy, and others.³⁰ Some of the concerns of this emerging body of theoretical/historical work can be indicated. First there are a number of issues debated concerning the constitution of the pre-capitalist modes of production, initiated by Meillassoux's pioneering work on *Anthropologie économique des Gouro de Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris, 1964). The content of the debate reflects different positions regarding the concept of mode of production, as well as the theorization of the modes of production specific to the investigation of African history. One major issue concerns the class nature of pre-capitalist formations, specifically the relations of production, appropriation and utilization of the social product which entails both the theoretical and historical investigation of such categories as exchange of different kinds; slavery, kinship, and ideology; and state formation.

The concept of "articulation of modes of production" has similarly posed a number of questions for research with respect to the specific processes of penetration of pre-capitalist formations by capital. The relations between capital and labor develop through a number of variant forms according to concrete conditions, and the concept of articulation poses questions of transition which focus on the degree of determination exercised by pre-capitalist modes and forms of production -- for example, the functions of social units such as peasant households, the "domestic community" (Meillassoux), and lineages in subsidizing the reproduction of labor-power, whether for direct exchange with capital through the wage-form (the case of labor migration) or mediated through petty commodity production. The work of Pierre-Philippe Rey on articulation has emphasized in particular the class alliances necessary to the tasks of the colonial (and subsequently independent) state in establishing and extending the conditions of operation of capital.³¹

Within the limits of the present paper, the discussion of the emerging materialist problematic in African history must remain brief but several of its ramifications can be spelled out. First, it is the case that our use of the concept of problematic does violate the integrity of African history as a field of academic specialization. The unity and coherence of a body of knowledge is the effect of its production within a problematic, not the record of its institutional growth and prestige. Most of the writers we have cited are not historians according to their professional labels, but in terms of their theoretical and methodological practice (the crucial determinants, as we have argued), Coquery-Vidrovitch and Van Onselen, say, who are historians have more in common with Arrighi (an economist), Meillassoux (an anthropologist), Mamdani (a political scientist) and Wolpe (a sociologist) than they do with their non-Marxist counterparts in history.

Moreover, a number of these writers have shown that the production of detailed historical studies is by no means the exclusive province of professional historians. This results in a definite problem for the latter, who, given their lack of a generic object or method of knowledge, are driven into the defensive posture of finding increasingly sophisticated and esoteric techniques of collecting data -- the pursuit and glorification of the "sources." The need for efficient and accurate techniques is evident, but they cannot replace the theoretical issues in the production of knowledge.

NOTES

1. We are saying this on the basis of the first two numbers of *History in Africa* that were available to us, as well as on the basis of the general trend in the discipline.
2. In the second issue of *History in Africa*, several of the contributors pay tribute to Jan Vansina's pioneering work *Oral Tradition* (London, 1965), and rightly so. This work still awaits a fully critical treatment, but we may point out that in a number of instances "historical methodology" is treated as a compendium of techniques, a tendency even more manifest in *Reconstructing African Culture History* ed. Creighton Gabel and Norman Bennett (Boston, 1967). In his opening article in the first issue of the journal, David Henige makes a strong plea for "comparative history" which presumably reflects an awareness of the need for some theoretical stiffening in the discipline. However, advocates of 'comparative history,' 'interdisciplinary history' and other fashionable phrases of the day should be beware of thinking that the problems of a scientific history are solved thereby.
3. For example, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l'Afrique noire* (Paris, 1972), p. 27.
4. This essay derives from and substantially develops several previous papers by the authors. Henry Bernstein, "Marxism and African History: Endre Sík and his Critics," *Kenya Historical Review* 5(1977), pp. 1-21; Jacques Depelchin, "Toward a Problematic History of Africa," *Tanzania Zamani* 18(1976), reprinted in *Journal of Southern African Affairs* 2(1977), pp. 5-10; idem, "African History and the Ideological Reproduction of Exploitative Relations of Production," *African Development* 2(1977). An earlier version of the paper was presented at a seminar of the History Department, University of Dar es Salaam. The authors have benefited from additional comments and criticisms by Gary Littlejohn, Daniel O'Meara, and Michaela von Freyhold.
5. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. Arthur (London, 1970), p. 48.
6. Marx, *Grundrisse*, ed. M. Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 85.
7. It is impossible to give anything like a complete bibliography of the course of this debate over the past decade, but see, *inter alia*, the publications of the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Marxistes: *Sur les sociétés précapitalistes. Textes choisis de Marx, Engels, Lénine* (Paris, 1973), for the long introductory essay by M. Godelier; *Sur le "mode de production asiatique"* (Paris, 1974, second edition); *Sur le féodalisme* (Paris, 1974);

- E. Balibar, "The Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism" in Louis Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London, 1970); B. Hindess and P.Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London, 1975), and the discussions by J. Taylor, *Critique of Anthropology* 4/5(1975) and 6(1976); by T. Asad and H. Wolpe in *Economy and Society* 5/4(1976), and J. Banaji, unpublished ms. (1976), as well as the subsequent auto-critique by Hindess and Hirst in their *Mode of Production and Social Formation* (London, 1977); J. Banaji, "Modes of Production in a Materialist Conception of History," *Capital and Class* 3(1977); M. Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics* (London, 1970); Emmanuel Terray, *Marxism and 'Primitive' Societies* (New York, 1972); P. Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism and Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1975), and the discussion by P.Q. Hirst in *Economy and Society* 4(1975); P.-P. Rey, *Les alliances de classes* (Paris, 1973); W. Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System* (London, 1976); A.M. Bailey and J.B. Llobera, "The Asiatic Mode of Production: an Annotated Bibliography," *Critique of Anthropology*, 2(1974) and 4/5(1975).
8. Marx, *Capital*, (2 vols.: New York, 1967), 1:chs. 14 and 15.
 9. In particular Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*; Althusser, *For Marx* (London, 1969); idem, *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London, 1976).
 10. E.G., I. Hrbek, "Towards a Periodisation of African History" in *Emerging Themes of African History*, ed. T. Ranger (Nairobi, 1968), and the further comments in Bernstein, "Marxism and African History," p. 16.
 11. On the fetishism of commodities, see *Capital*'1, Ch. 1, section 4, also I.I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (Detroit, 1972, first published in the Soviet Union in the 1920s), and N. Geras, "Marx and the Critique of Political Economy" in *Ideology in Social Science*, ed. R. Blackburn (London, 1972). On the theory of the bourgeois state see N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London, 1973), which contains an elaborate discussion of the relative autonomy of the political in the capitalist mode of production: for further discussion of this fundamental point (the conceptualization of different levels of social relations) and its application to pre-capitalist modes of production see a number of the references cited in note 7; also several of the contributors to *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*, ed. Maurice Bloch (London, 1975).
 12. Marx, Letter to the Editorial Board of the *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* (November, 1877) in Marx/Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1975), p. 293.

13. The capitalist mode of production is an exception to this statement, as to most general statements. This is because of its 'world-historical' nature (Marx), that is, its relentless drive to accumulate, which leads to its expanded reproduction on a world scale, thereby characterizing an entire epoch of world history. However, while it is possible to construct the framework of a history of capitalism in this sense, such a framework must include concepts which can produce a periodization of the global development of capital, and the specificity of particular capitalist formations (both advanced and backward) within each period.
14. Glossary in Althusser, *For Marx*.
15. Althusser elaborates a principle of analysis specific to the concept of conjuncture, namely that of 'overdetermination'; cf. his essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in *For Marx*.
16. Quoted in Terray, *Marxism and "Primitive" Societies*, p. 39.
17. See "The Method of Political Economy" in Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 100-08.
18. Poulantzas, *Political Power*, p. 16.
19. *Grundrisse*, p. 127.
20. For an excellent recent analysis of the Weberian problematic see P.Q. Hirst, *Social Evolution and Sociological Categories* (London, 1976), Chs. 3-6. Hirst characterizes Weber's problematic as a specific combination of the conception of the object of historical and social knowledge derived from the neo-Kantian *Geisteswissenschaften*, and a positivist conception of the nature and methods of empirical knowledge.
21. See B. Hindess, *The Use of Official Statistics in Sociology* (London, 1973). This is a short and extremely incisive work of far wider epistemological and methodological significance than its title suggests.
22. H. Lüthy, "What is the Point of History?" *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3/2(April, 1968), p. 3.
23. *Reading Capital*, p. 143.
24. Certainly the view of Marx and Lenin; see also Althusser, *Essays*, p. 193.
25. Important discussions in recent years of the formation of Marx's problematic with specific reference to the writing of *Capital* include Althusser et al, *Lire le Capital* (2d ed., Paris, 1968); R. Rosdolsky, *The Making of Marx's Capital* (London, 1977); E. Mandel, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* (London, 1971); M. Nicolaus in his introduction to the *Grundrisse*. The foremost examples of this process of reconstructing Marx's problematic in order to apply it in theoretical and political practice are to be found in the work of Lenin, who devoted a number of years to the exhaustive study of *Capital* and

- other major works. See L. Trotsky, *The Young Lenin* (Harmondsworth, 1974), which is a highly illuminating and beautifully written account. At the level of economic theory, for example, Lenin fought to re-establish Marx's concepts and method against the Narodniks (e.g. *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, Ch. 1), and later against Kautsky in the Second International debate on imperialism; in terms of political theory, see Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, the first part of which is devoted to drawing out the elements of a theory of the state from various works by Marx and Engels.
26. On the Marxism of the Second International see L. Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin* (London, 1972), and on the USSR the comments in Banaji, "Modes of production." This is not to say that all Soviet historiography is subject to these deformations; see, for example, the work of A.D. Lublinskaya, *French Absolutism: the Crucial Phase 1620-1629* (London, 1968), "The contemporary bourgeois conception of absolute monarchy," *Economy and Society*, 1(1972); "Popular Masses and the Social Relations of the Epoch of Absolutism: Methodology or Research," *Economy and Society*, 2(1973). The first article is introduced by an appreciation of Lublinskaya's work by G. Littlejohn.
 27. Sík, *The History of Black Africa* (Budapest, 1966), 1: p. 19, with emphasis added. For "theses" read "laws" -- the content of any term or word is given by the way it functions conceptually in a particular problematic. On the nature of Sík's "Marxist" history of Africa see further Bernstein, "Marxism and African History."
 28. "Althusser's chief achievement is to produce a version of the dialectic according to which history is determined, not pre-determined." A. Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism* (London, 1976), p. 71.
 29. P. Vilar, "Marxist History -- a History in the Making," *New Left Review*, 80(1973), p. 67.
 30. For the French literature see the annotated bibliography in Claude Meillassoux, *Femmes, greniers et capitaux* (Paris, 1975). Works by the other writers cited include the essays on Rhodesia by Arrighi in G. Arrighi and J.S. Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (New York, 1973); Van Onselen, *Chibaro*; M. Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (London, 1976); I.G. Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam, 1975); M. Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt, 1945-1970* (New York, 1973); S. Trapido, "South Africa in a Comparative Study of Industrialization," *Journal of Development Studies*, 7(1971), pp. 309-20; M. Legassick, "South Africa: Capital Accumulation and Violence," *Economy and Society*, 3(1974), and *Liberal Thought, Racial Discrimination and the Industrialization of South Africa* (forthcoming); M. Morris, "The

Development of Capitalism in South African Agriculture: Class Struggle in the Countryside," *Economy and Society*, 5(1975). We would also like to acknowledge the work of Jean Suret-Canale whose *Afrique Noire*, vol. 1, (3d ed., Paris, 1968) was for a long time the only serious study by a Marxist of pre-capitalist formations. While there has sometimes been a somewhat mechanical quality about the work of the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Marxistes -- for example Suret-Canale's pursuit of the so-called Asiatic mode of production in African history -- a number of original and creative studies have been produced, including Suret-Canale, "Essai sur la signification sociale et historique des hégémonies Peules (XIIème-XIXème siècles), *Les Cahiers du Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Marxistes* (special issue, Paris, 1964); also P. Boiteau, "Les droits sur la terre dans la société Malgache pré-coloniale," *La Pensée*, no. 117(1964), pp. 43-69, which anticipated a number of questions concerning the articulation of modes of production which are usually associated with the work of Pierre-Philippe Rey. For further literature on South Africa see the special issue of *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 7(1976).

31. Rey, *Colonialisme, néo-colonialisme et transition au capitalisme* (Paris, 1971); idem, *Les alliances de classes* (Paris, 1973); idem, ed., *Capitalisme négrier* (Paris, 1976).

This paper will be concluded
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