

ECONOMY, CULTURE AND CONCEPT

Three Approaches to Marxist History

by

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

PART I: Maurice Dobb and Marxist History

PART II: Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese and Socialist-Humanist History

PART III: Rationalism: Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## INTRODUCTION.

In this paper we wish to raise in a limited way some problems involved in the relation between history and theory. We consider three marxist 'tendencies' principally because it is above all in the marxist tradition that such questions are raised, and because they are hotly contested within marxism itself. If our focus is relatively narrow, the repercussions of the discussion are, hopefully, of quite general significance. This is because issues, posed within marxism, confront historians and social theorists alike: for example, the question of a 'science' of history or of a 'humanist' alternative; the problem of the 'subject' or motor of history; the nature of historical causality; and the relation between 'concreteness' and abstraction. This is so even - perhaps especially - when historians or others choose to ignore or dispute the relevance of such issues. The refusal to see the problem of 'theory' and 'research' is itself one position with respect to the problem, but one whose strength lies only in its silence. It should be possible to substantiate the need for a theoretical history by taking examples across the whole range of historiography. But it is even more interesting to consider whether the internal claims of marxist historiographies/<sup>and the consequent</sup> challenge of marxism to other problematics, could amount to the theory (or science) of history.

Maurice Dobb, in many ways the father of British marxist theoretical history, begins each chapter of his seminal Studies in the Development of Capitalism with a discussion of alternative theoretical concepts and strategies. Engaging successfully with many rival 'bourgeois' definitions, it might nevertheless be asked in advance whether Dobb himself ultimately succeeds in demarcating his own perspective from a Weberian type of analysis (that of theoretical 'models'). Dobb's work has received many important extensions - especially on questions of class struggle and politics in feudalism - from Hill and Hilton, and aspects of the work of these writers are also briefly considered in Section one.

Indirectly, Dobb and his 'school' raise some basic questions about the nature of marxist theory. Dobb himself can be seen as giving relatively little attention to politics and ideology or culture as aspects or levels of the social totality. Now, while this, in our view, is not necessarily a 'fault' in Dobb, and while Hilton and Hill undoubtedly

provide a corrective, the question of an 'economistically' one-sided history (often misleadingly described as 'economic determinism') is a real one which marxists must face up to. One alternative is to assert a militantly humanist marxist perspective, where human agency and consciousness are shifted from the periphery to the centre of the historical stage. This tendency is considered here through an account of the work of the 'theoretical twins' Eugene Genovese and Edward Thompson. The metaphor of dramatic presentation is not wholly out of place: for both these writers are concerned more to let the people speak for themselves than to 'impose' a theoretical scheme which may scar the authenticity of their story. We will contend that the political merits of such a position do not outweigh some important theoretical lapses.

The idea that theoretical coherence is indispensable to history has been raised sharply by a number of marxist theorists stemming from and including the work of Louis Althusser. The nature of the althusserian intervention has been clarified and criticised by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst in works - especially Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production - which have influenced some of our own views (if often only to clarify our critical perspective). However, if the epistemological 'rationalism' of the althusserian positions (particularly with regard to the analysis of historical transitions) is fraught with problems, then difficulties of a similarly rationalist kind confront the neo-Althusserian views of these critics themselves. Principally this involves the status of 'concrete historical reality' when it is asserted that the object of historical theory is wholly constructed within discourse.

## PART I: LAWRENCE DOBB AND MARXIST HISTORY

Dobb's Studies in the Development of Capitalism (1946) represents a decisive moment in the formation of British marxist historiography. One of the most distinctive features in this early formation, supported in the work of Hill and Hilton, was the reconceptualization of the problem of the transition from one mode of production to another - thought specifically in terms of the formation of capitalism - which is crucial, indeed central, to marxism. (This concern is closely paralleled in a contemporary and resonant theoretical project: Hindess and Hirst begin their book Pre Capitalist Modes of Production by stating: "Its object is to investigate the various pre-capitalist modes of production briefly indicated in the works of Marx and Engels and to examine the conditions of the transition from one mode of production to another". 1975 p 1). If it is difficult to appreciate the originality of these historians today, it may only be due to the fact that the legacy of their work settled in the 1950s into something of a marxist orthodoxy. But nonetheless it is curious that this tradition, which was quite consciously premised on the elaboration of new theoretical positions, should today be criticized for its empiricism. Anderson, for example, claims that "It has been a general phenomena of the last decades that marxist historians, the authors of a now impressive corpus of research, have not always been directly concerned with the theoretical implications of their work" (1974b p 7). One of the aims of this section of the paper is to assess the accuracy of reducing this particular body of historical work to a notion of "research" alone.

An important precursor to Dobb's Studies in the Development of Capitalism, and perhaps the earliest work in this tradition, was Hill's The English Revolution 1640 (1940) which still claims a significant readership today as the most accessible introduction to the Puritan Revolution. It is largely the thesis itself - arguing that there had been a revolution in the C17 comparable to the French Revolution - that is notable, firmly opposing the naturalized evolutionism characteristic of the dominant Whig school of history, which was further challenged by Hill's explicit taking of (political) sides, undercutting embedded beliefs in the objectivity and neutrality of scholarship. Yet at the same time it is perhaps a classic of economism and essentialism, in which history becomes the product of one single (economic) contradiction. As such the book has marked theoretical



limitations today, although Hill's premise at least was conceptual, in that he set out to investigate the historical specificity of a national bourgeois revolution, and this involved thinking a (simple) totality. The theoretical influence here seems quite clearly to be that of The Communist Manifesto. The problems of this approach, as well as its insights, defined much of Hill's subsequent work, and in some respects, the same concerns were taken up by Dobb in Studies, although he had been working on the book for many years before its eventual publication in the 1940s.

The starting point for Dobb is one which recently has once again received a great deal of attention: that is of Marx vs Weber, or more accurately, the problem of demarcating marxist from weberian and sociological types of analysis. Thus the first chapter of Studies in the Development of Capitalism is constituted by the rejection of various concepts which were current in historical and sociological explanations of the formation and nature of capitalism. The process here is both a critique conducted at a high level of abstraction attempting to make explicit theoretical discrepancies, and one which precisely distinguishes Dobb's conceptual framework from the dominant positions, structured by the assumption that the critique itself must lie in the explanations of the concrete, in the 'Studies' themselves. Nonetheless it is quite clear that the methodological structure of the book is one which proceeds from the abstract to the concrete, which from the outset dislodges the pertinence of any simple charge of empiricism.

The first theoretical position which Dobb explicitly rejects is the set of idealist tendencies represented in the work of Sombart and Weber which held that the advent of capitalism can be understood primarily in terms of the realization of some embryonic spirit of capitalism. And secondly he rejects the reductionism of the position which equates capitalism with market or commodity relations alone, implying an unproblematic binary analysis composed of the twin concepts natural economy/market economy. Dobb correctly emphasizes the place and articulation of commodity relations (specifically, the role of labour power itself as a commodity) within the specificity of the new economic relations of capitalism. Complementing Hill's work on the politics of the C17, he recognizes the historical break inaugurated by the dominance of capital as a relation of production,

opposing at a fundamental theoretical level the evolutionist conclusions of the historians - Pirenne amongst them - who explain the formation of capitalism in terms of the 'rise' of the market, or commodity, relations. (Here Dobb's argument duplicates Lenin's criticisms of the Narodniks, whose analysis, thought in terms of natural peasant economy and 'community' or Gemeinschaft, is a theoretical variant of the money economy positions. See Lenin 1972). Dobb argues that:

The view that development is characterized by periodic revolutions stands therefore, in contrast to those views of economic development, moulded exclusively in terms of continuous quantitative variation, which see change as a simple function of some increasing factor, whether it be population or productivity or markets or division of labour or the stock of capital. A leading defect of the latter is their tendency to ignore, or at any rate belittle, those crucial new properties which at certain stages may emerge and radically transform the outcome ... and the bias they are apt to give the mind towards interpreting new situations in categories of thought which were products of past situations and towards super-historical 'universal' truths, fashioned out of what are deemed to be immutable traits of human nature or certain invariable sorts of economic or social 'necessity'. (p 12).

The direction of these preliminary propositions holds Dobb to a very precise trajectory: on the one hand, it is clearly at odds with any idealist notion of human intentionality or agency, encapsulated foremost in the theories of Sombart and Weber; and on the other hand, it is equally clear in rejecting its reverse position, that is, any variant of functionalism, such as a recourse to some metaphysical economic necessity.

At this stage in his argument, it can be noted that his epistemological criteria for opposing the dominant theoretical positions are always constituted with reference to the concrete, to history as such. The basis for this is Dobb's belief that the theoretical constructs of figures like Sombart or Pirenne can only result in the collapsing and blunting of historical specificity, thus concluding that his own way of proceeding is more worthwhile in terms of the adequacy of the final explanation. Thus a theory of capitalism can tell us more about C19 England, for example, than the descriptive notions of market, or industrial, society. He builds into this a second strand of argument:

The justification of any definition must ultimately rest on its successful employment in illuminating the actual process of historical development: on the extent to which

it gives shape to our picture of the process corresponding to the contours which the historical landscape proves to have. (p 8).

The looseness of the metaphor in this sentence points to a persistent ambiguity in the epistemological basis of his work: on the one hand the 'definition' (e.g. of capitalism) "illuminates" a historical process, a process which appears to have a pre-conceptual existence, as an unproblematic and uncontested entity which comes into being only through the diligence of historical research; and on the other hand, Dobb insists throughout the book that the concepts employed must "shape" our understanding of this process, (thereby making a significant theoretical advance upon the earlier work of Hill). It is apparent that Dobb is attempting to hold together two moments in the practice of a historian: the moment of 'logic' (or abstraction) and the moment of 'research'. But it is equally apparent that this unity remains one which is merely formal, one which in its effects has the tendency to dis sever the process of historical knowledge into two quite distinct procedures. Nonetheless it is crucial to emphasize that Dobb's sense of the determinacy of theory in forming historical explanation ensures that his critique of sociological concepts becomes a defining feature of his Studies.

Dobb was one of the few marxists of the period to return to Capital with a specific theoretical purpose - to elaborate the concept of mode of production. This to a very large extent marked a break with the dominant readings of Capital as a paradigmatic economic history book, a reading determined by the influence of an eminent line of classical economic historians. Certainly there are a number of passages where Marx refers to specific historical conjunctures, passages which Dobb uses quite extensively. But at the same time Dobb draws the crucial distinction between logical operations, taking place wholly within knowledge, and the actual process of history itself: as for example in his distinction between thinking the abstract 'definition' of an economic system and the complex forms of any determinate social formation (p 11). Thus for Dobb a necessary level of abstraction - unlike those historians representing most sharply the culturalist positions, which are discussed in the next part of the paper - remains a fundamental step in his methodology; he explicitly claims that "the work of abstraction" must be "competently handled" (p 255), although for Dobb this can only remain a preliminary (and thus in itself incomplete) stage of theoretical work. As quite a direct result of his reading of Capital he attempted to do a number

of things: to hold in mind and clarify the concept of the capitalist mode of production; to think through and elaborate from this paradigm the concept of the feudal mode of production; and most important of all, at a lower level of abstraction, to think the historical conditions for the transition from feudalism, ie. the formation and development of capitalism. This resembles quite closely a programmatic statement by Althusser that "the theory of the transition from one mode of production to another ... is the same thing as the theory of the process of constitution of a determinate mode of production, since every mode of production is constituted solely out of the existing forms of an earlier mode of production" (Althusser and Balibar 1970 p197). In this particular respect, the readings of Marx by Dobb and Althusser - both formally constituted on the basis of their anti-empiricism - at the same time hold no warrant for the rejection of historical practice in the name of rationalism.

#### Mode of Production

The key concept which structures Studies in the Development of Capitalism is the concept mode of production. Dobb's emphasis is always on the (economic) relations of production, on the various forms of appropriating surplus labour from the direct producers. He quotes (p36) the important passage from Volume III of Capital:

The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself, and, in turn reacts upon it as a determining element ... (Marx 1972 p791).

There are two important points in this re-statement of marxist 'orthodoxy'. The first has reference to the positions which defined the terrain of historiography in the 1940s. To a very great extent it was the influence of Dobb himself which shifted this whole terrain from one which focused on the increasing role of trade, the widening influence of towns, the growth of market relations in general - analyses framed by the parameters of distribution and exchange - to one which was defined by an appreciation of the theoretical importance of the determinacy of production. This is not to suggest that Dobb discounted the contributions of the non-marxist historians, to which he returned again and again; rather he rethought and relocated these (conceptual) insights into a problematic which was radically distinct from the original. The second point refers to the culturalist positions which were formed partly as a result of the reception (and critique) of Dobb's work. By following through the logic of this emphasis on



the relations of production, Dobb refused to countenance any non-economic criteria for a theoretical definition of any determinate mode of production. Concerning the feudal mode of production he argues that:

The emphasis of this definition will not lie in the juridical relation between vassal and sovereign, nor in the relation between production and the destination of the product, but in the relation between the direct producer (whether he be artisan in some workshop or peasant cultivator on the land) and his immediate superior or overlord and in the socio-economic content of the obligation which connects them. (p35).

It is this premise - production as the determining social relation - which is the touchstone of Dobb's marxism, sharply demarcating his historical practice from any which gives the dominant theoretical place to the juridical or superstructural, a characteristic, he writes elsewhere, of bourgeois historians.

The centrality given to the concept of economic production had one crucial consequence for the development of British marxist historiography. Much of the work of the 1960s - the immense influence of culturalism - reacted against this early orthodoxy, against its emphasis on economics as well as its 'economism', and tried to outrun what was perceived as its residual positivism, and its tendency to abstraction. The theoretical nature of this response is discussed later - although note can be made here of Thompson's characterization of the tradition he opposed, suggesting polemically that its thesis could be summarized as "Steam power + factories = working class". But what is submerged in culturalist appraisals is that the 'economism' of Dobb at least was one formed explicitly in an engagement with the dominant idealist and weberian theoretical positions, often themselves 'culturalist'. It was precisely a re-assertion of marxism that drove Dobb not simply to economics or the 'problem of production', but to the marxist problematic of mode of production.

The specific form or forms of the articulation of the relations and forces of production, which lies at the heart of theorizing concepts of modes of production, remains underargued in the Studies. But it is quite clear that Dobb considers any form of technicism - in which history is reduced to the outcome in changes of the instruments of labour alone, as in the formula "steam power + factories"

- to be foreign to marxism.

By mode of production Marx did not refer merely to the state of technique - to what he termed the state of productive forces - but to the way in which the means of production were owned and to the social relations which resulted from their connections with the process of production. (p7).

It is strange perhaps how often this argument has had to be made from within and for marxism; but it is equally strange how Dobb's work has sometimes been read as economicist because of his supposed theoretical adherence to a force of production or technicist problematic. He frequently argues against this, specifically proposing that the historically decisive moment in the formation of capitalism was the penetration and domination of the production relations by capital, and, closely following the Marx of Capital, claims that this transformation was not dependent on any substantial or qualitative change in the forces of production:

The subordination of production to capital, and the appearance of this class relationship between capitalist and the producer is, therefore, to be regarded as the crucial watershed between the old mode of production and the new, even if the technical changes that we associate with the industrial revolution were needed both to complete the transition and to afford scope for the full maturing of the capitalist mode of production and of the great increase in the productive power of human labour associated with it. (p 143).

Moreover he emphasizes that this must necessarily be understood in terms of the articulation of the economic with the political "reaching its apex in the Cromwellian revolution" (pp 18-19). In fact Dobb's thesis prefigures one of Anderson's major arguments concerning the structure of the feudal crisis, from which Anderson concludes that "the relations of production generally change prior to the forces of production in an epoch of transition and not vice versa" (Anderson 1974a p 204). Given the previous explanation by Dobb and Marx's comments in Capital it is hard to understand why Hobsbawm (and Miliband elsewhere) should refer to this as one of Anderson's "more brilliant observations" (Hobsbawm 1976 p 8).

This does not imply, however, that Dobb's theoretical system denies an effectivity to the forces of production, an effectivity which may be decisive in theorizing certain determinate conjunctures, even in an epoch 'of transition'. Thus for Dobb the priority of the relations or forces of production, in terms of explaining historical causation, is a matter of contingency, and not of any formal pre-given necessity. This is precisely what he intends to prove in his



chapter on 'The Industrial Revolution'. He begins by referring to Arnold Toynbee's "four great inventions" (p261): but just as he takes the site of the problem of 'the rise of market relations' seriously, so too he appreciates the logic and limitations of the 'four great inventions' approach. In effect he rejects the essentialism common to both these positions, and rethinks the problems signalled by both by re-articulating and relocating them in a distinct conceptual structure. Further, by stressing that "industrial inventions are social products" (p268) and that for the historian of capitalism the crucial factor is the moment when changes in the instruments of labour become socially significant (rather than when they make their first appearance), he implies that a simple technicism merely reverses the idealism of a position which attributes determinacy to the agency of the far-sighted industrial pioneer or inventor. But despite this, Dobb poses the problem no more precisely than in a notion of the generalized "reciprocity" of the relations and forces (p25): thus for the industrial revolution, he argues only for "the close connection between technical change and the structure of industry and of economic and social relations, and in the extent and significance of the effects of the new inventions upon the latter" (pp 260-1); or again, in demarcating his own position from one in which the transition to machinofacture is reduced to "a purely technical revolution" he mentions "the special significance of that transformation in the structure of industry and in the social relations of production which was the consequence of technical change at a certain crucial level" (p 267). Any conclusions less ambiguous than these, for Dobb, would have to rest on more detailed historical research.

### Social Formation

There is a marked difference between the ways in which Dobb and Hill (in The English Revolution) conceptualize the social totality, although both are variants of the familiar base and superstructure formulation. The base, or the economic, in Dobb's work is always constituted as a complex formation, which can never be reduced simply to any single and universal contradiction (e.g. between the relations and forces of production) except at a most general level of either hypothesis or conclusion. Note is taken of dominant and subordinate forms of production, necessary uneven development, the articulation of different modes of production in a social formation, the structured totality of production, exchange and distribution,

and, 'most of all, tendencies and counter-acting tendencies of development. "An economic revolution", he writes, "results from a whole set of historical forces in a certain combination: it is not a simple product of one of them alone" ( p 277 ). For Hill on the other hand, the monocausal economic contradiction is directly reflected in the superstructure, reducing complexly-articulated totalities to totalities expressive of their (economic) essence. Because of the complexity of the economic in the Studies, its determination can never be theorized in anything like such a direct way. But Dobb's lack of attention to the political and particularly the ideological, structured in his methodological hierarchy economic-political-ideological, consistently undercuts many of his most important insights. And in passing, we should acknowledge that the reason this registers so deeply today must primarily be due to the legacy of culturalism. Inattention to the superstructural in itself need not be the result of a theoretical economism, although the assumptions of many of the culturalist positions might imply this. But it is the case with Dobb that, despite formal recognition of the non-economic, the superstructural is nowhere adequately theorized in his work. For example, he claims that one of the most decisive conditions for the formation of capitalism in England was the political revolution of the C17: but how this was so, and why it took the historically specific form it did - in other words an explanation of determinacy - is ignored. Thus even by employing his own criterion of the adequacy of the explanation of the concrete, Dobb ultimately produces 'Studies' which are quite severely reduced in their scope. And this is a form of economism against which later culturalist tendencies were correct to engage and to oppose: as this reaction crystallized, however, many of Dobb's positive theoretical contributions were ditched in the process.

But any serious criticism which consigns Dobb to a position within economism has immediately to be qualified: there is no warrant for accepting the rationalist corollary that the only answer can be the quick and painless liquidation of his entire problematic. There is of course much to be valued in his marxism. As we have suggested, it was a marxism formed in critical engagement with other positions; and as we shall see the process of the production of his marxism was at the same time the process of the reproduction of certain weberian tendencies - it is the double nature of this process which

marks the crucial epistemological ambiguity in his work - but nonetheless, these were reproduced within an original and distinctive problematic. There is perhaps here an analogy with the argument which claims that Gramsci's marxism defines the 'limit case' of historicism, for the 'structuralism' of Althusser and Poulantzas, a historicism with which they have to come to terms in constituting their own anti-historicist marxism; similarly it could be argued that Dobb's particular position is one which provides a limit case of economism. For a start, his marxism is structured on the concept of the relations of production, which at once distinguishes Dobb from any technicist variant of economism. We have noted also the necessary complexity of the base which is the site of a series of articulated contradictions, which in their combination are determinant. Further Dobb also uses the descriptive (and ambiguous) notion of "the social", which he often places in the context of 'the political and the social', pointing towards a largely unmapped location; however it does suggest, in context, not only the effectivity of the superstructural, but also implies a sense of culture and ideology as something more than mental reflections of the economic base. That this is ultimately class reductionist is uncontentious; that it is economistic in the sense of reducing the political and ideological to simple products of economic class 'interests' is much less clear. (For an explicit rejection of economic determinism, in general, see his essay 'Historical Materialism and the Role of the Economic Factor' 1956). One element which supports this argument is that Dobb himself - as we have repeated throughout this part of the paper - was acutely aware of the problem of essentialism: at every stage of his argument, he is careful to demarcate his own analysis from those which rely on an understanding of 'the motor of history' as some central and unproblematic essence, be it the market (Firenne), or the spirit of capitalism (Weber in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism), or the forces of production (Toynbee). It is these 'discrepancies' in Dobb's peculiarly complex economism which are as serious for marxism today as the neglect of the superstructural was for the culturalists who followed him.

#### Transition

The nature of Dobb's contribution to marxist historiography can only be adequately assessed by examining quite closely the 'Studies' themselves: the critical edge of his marxism was explicitly constituted as much in the explanations of the concrete, as in the preliminary

process of demarcating his particular conceptual field. This is not to imply that his aim was to write a narrative of the development of capitalism - predicated on some given and unproblematic chronology - thought within the terms of a simple empiricism. The book itself is formally structured so that the major levels of abstraction are held together in tension. Thus, as we have noted, the first chapter is wholly analytical, taken up with the rejection of various concepts of capitalism, and this is the closest Dobb comes to discussing the capitalist mode of production 'in general'. But it is also the case that the beginning of each chapter focuses on more specific abstract problems, and these sections correspond to a second level of abstraction, formed primarily by the elaboration of sets of subordinate concepts. One very clear example of this is Dobb's re-working of the thesis on "the two ways" in which capital came historically to penetrate production, which for Marx (1972 p 53-) had a function which was quite marginal. Certainly Marx carefully explained the analytical conditions for thinking the abstract process of the transformation of money into productive capital (Capital Volume I, Part II); but this procedure is distinct from the one which produces the analytical conditions for thinking the historical process as it occurred in determinate social formations. It is at this lower level of abstraction - concerned in this case precisely with the problem of transition- that Dobb formulates the theoretical focus of each of his 'Studies'. Thus in his chapter on industrial capital, he begins by examining the theoretical problem of the nature of merchant capital, its relation to the feudal mode of production, and the possible routes and obstacles which allow its transformation into productive capital (pp 120-9). Having set up this theoretical framework, he then shifts to a lower level of abstraction again, to explain the historical transition itself; he writes: "The first stage of this transition - the turning of sections of merchant capital towards an increasingly intimate control over production - seems to have been occurring on an extensive scale in the textile, leather and smaller metal trades in the sixteenth century ... " (p 129). Moving through various stages of abstraction, in a way typical of Marx himself, Dobb finally comes to explain historical change itself.

His account of the formation of capitalism is one particular study which clearly broke with the dominant readings, and it was precisely in the nature of their dominance that their theoretical basis had



been largely unquestioned. The classic interpretations were defined by the assumptions of the money economy theorists: feudalism (often conceptualized as a political system crystallized around serfdom) is dissolved directly by the assault of an incipient and 'vigorous' capitalism (in the guise of trade, understood as the great agent of dissolution), a framework which can only place the vanguard social grouping as urban money capitalists. This reading is posited on a pure evolutionism by which history is reduced to a simple unilinear development, determined by human intentionality, the 'needs' of the economy, or whatever. And if this is a caricature it can be recalled that even the marxism of Hill in The English Revolution (consciously constructed by its opposition to political evolutionism) provided an explanation which was quite apparently the consequence of this theoretical evolutionism. Dobb's account is quite different. Here the feudal crisis of the C14 and C15 is understood as the direct result of an intensification of class struggle between the direct producers and the feudal lords, which, constituted by the dominant relation of production, overdetermines secondary struggles. But the routes out of this 'transitional conjuncture' were shaped by the variant forms of class struggle, including non-economic struggle: he draws the distinction between the different "political and social" factors "which played a large part here in determining the course of events", especially in determining the restabilization of feudal relations of production in Eastern Europe and their destruction in parts of Western Europe (p50). The result in England at least was the partial breaking of feudal relations, and the formation of pockets of petty commodity production in town and country. This was a form of production which was necessarily subordinate, existing in the feudal mode, but at the same time disintegrating it (p121). Thus the argument illustrates that the dissolution of the feudal mode of production was well advanced before the formation of the capitalist mode of production; and also, in a further rejection of the evolutionist position, Dobb explains how the capitalist mode of production was formed not out of the feudal mode of production, but from petty commodity production. (Marx refers to "The original historic forms in which capital appears at first sporadically or locally, alongside the old modes of production, while exploding them little by little everywhere ... " 1975 p510).

Dobb has then to prove how it was that capital as a relation of production was formed within petty commodity production. This he

done by means of a double analytical process. The first side of this conceptualizes the forms of stock-piling or accumulating money capital, which takes place either in the form of trade 'external' to a particular social formation (historically, for example, the income from Mediterranean trade for London merchants), or more crucially, the appearance of domestic merchant capital itself, arising from the systematic practice of buying cheap and selling dear through control of the market, a practice instituted and protected by the political power blocs of the monopolies. The second side of this process refers to the growing internal differentiation of the small commodity producers, which both depended on the effects of accumulated money wealth, and was also the pre-condition for the dispossession of the direct producers from their means of production. In this stage of his argument, Dobb introduces the 'two ways' thesis: this proposes that way 1, "the really revolutionary" path to the formation of capitalism, occurred when sections of the direct producers themselves, already undergoing the process of social differentiation, began to employ other workers and to organize their own control of the means of production. As against the control of the market by merchant capital, this involved a direct control of both the means of production and labour, as commodities, by capital. The second route, according to Dobb, was the more gradual encroachment of control by some merchant capitalists (sometimes through various ways of organizing the putting out system) which in the long term came to transform some subordinate fractions of merchant capital into productive capital. The conclusion of this analysis, however, is that merchant capital was structured by its place in the economic totality in such a way that it tended to be a reactionary force; its monopoly position threatened by the new sections of productive capital which had emerged, through struggle, from small commodity production; and that it was merchant capital which effectively fettered the emergent productive capital from an autonomous role in the economy. Thus the central feature of the C17 Revolution was the political struggle between these two sections of capital, and not the antagonism between 'the wealthy' and the dispossessed. The decisive political condition for the victory of productive capital, from the very start of the C17, was the destruction of the monopolies, interlocked with and dependent on the absolutist state. Thus the analysis based on the evolution of a money economy, by the very nature of its theoretical standpoint unable to distinguish capital as money and capital as a relation of production, is forced to



teleologically read back a progressive role to urban merchant capital, to the 'monied' classes. (See Marx 1976: "The economists have made the blunder of confusing these elementary forms of capital - money and commodities - with capital as such" p975). This was precisely one of the conclusions to Hill's The English Revolution, which he himself criticized in a later Preface (1955), referring specifically to the non-evolutionist restructuring of the whole problem by Dobb.

The passing criticisms of this reconceptualization of the formation of capitalism by Hindess and Hirst are perplexingly imprecise. By consigning Dobb's work to an unproblematic economism and empiricism, it is of no surprise that they should regard it as being outside of a strictly marxist terrain. But it is within their protocol to appropriate and re-theorize specific insights of non-marxist theorists, most notably in their treatment of the slave mode of production. Thus the lack of attention they give to Dobb is also curious, especially given the common concern with the problem of transition. Indeed, there are a number of conclusions which overlap quite closely, for example: the similar approach to thinking the analytical conditions of the feudal mode of production, without politicizing the productive relation, or relying on a theoretical humanism which constitutes these conditions in terms of personal inter-subjectivity (Dobb pp33-7; Hindess and Hirst 1975 Ch. 5); the key place Dobb gives to the forms of class struggle in determining the outcome of the feudal crisis (Dobb above; Hindess and Hirst: "The object of the theory of transition is the transitional conjuncture and its transformation" p 288); or the common emphasis they give to the necessary displacement and extension of commodity production in the formation of capitalism (Dobb above; Hindess and Hirst p298). These examples could be multiplied, but don't touch the heart of the issue, as Hindess and Hirst would claim that their own conclusions have a different status to Dobb's, due to their different theoretical objects. Alternatively they might argue that these apparent agreements are actually based on ambiguities in their own position which they would now reject. (Hindess and Hirst, 1977).

What then are the disagreements? There are a couple of minor criticisms they make: that Dobb regards trade as being "in some sense" external to feudalism (p 263). Here they misread the historical point that some wealth was appropriated (through trade, plunder, etc) from outside the parameters of the feudal production

of the English social formation. (See Marx 1976 p918). It would make nonsense of Dobb's opposition to the money economy theorists to suppose that he regarded trade as a feature 'external' to the feudal mode of production. Nor is it the case that he relies on defining the capitalist mode of production at the level of the individual unit of production (Hindess and Hirst 1975 p270). As we argued earlier Dobb appreciates the theoretical importance of understanding determinate modes of production as dominant and subordinate formations, unevenly articulated, and this is exactly the way that he conceptualizes the development of capitalism: at a different level of abstraction, he used the instances of individual units as illustrations, which are not explanatory in themselves. The major criticism of Dobb however appears in their critique of Balibar, and it is this rather oblique approach which to some extent dislocates their treatment of him. Briefly, the Hindess and Hirst argument against Balibar is based on the rejection of the concept of a transitional mode of production, because i) the concept mode of production - specifying the reproduction of the relations of that mode - necessarily precludes the notion of a mode of production which reproduces the relations of a different mode of production; and ii) Balibar's dichotomy, founded on the correspondence and non-correspondence of the relations and forces of production (where non-correspondence marks a transitional mode of production) is formalist and idealist. They do not suggest that Dobb formally proposes any adherence to the notion of a transitional mode of production (note his rejection of this analytical strategem, pp 19-21); But Hindess and Hirst do claim that the characteristics that Balibar assigns to a transitional mode of production, Dobb assigns to all modes of production, so that any mode of production "is time-bound in its very concept" (p 266). Thus, they continue, Dobb's historicism (in the company not only of Balibar, but also of Hegel) leads him to the conclusion that the supersession of all modes of production is specified by their concepts, the "necessary" decline of "all" modes of production (p265, our emphasis). The evidence which Hindess and Hirst cite for this is the passage in which Dobb writes:

It was the inefficiency of feudalism as a system of production coupled with the growing needs of the ruling class for revenue, that was primarily responsible for its declines; since this need for additional revenue promoted an increase in the pressure on the producer to a point where this pressure became literally unendurable. (Dobb p 42).

They comment on this: "Here the very development of feudalism and the consequent intensification of its basic contradiction is thought to be responsible for its supersession" (p 265). This is correct; (although note the difference between Dobb's "primarily responsible" and Hindess and Hirst's lack of qualification). But this is not the same thing as stating that the decline of feudalism is given in its concept; Dobb's statement is a generalised historical conclusion, thought from within the theoretical terrain given by the concept of the feudal mode of production, referring to the dislocation of feudal social formations, and is constructed theoretically from concepts of historical tendencies, which are given by the concept of mode of production. (See for example Marx's argument for the "Historical tendency" of capitalist accumulation, thought within terms of contradiction, class struggle, and counter-acting tendencies, Marx 1976 p 929). "Necessity" is nowhere specified in Dobb's theory; nor is there any indication why we should accept the shift which Hindess and Hirst make in extending Dobb's conclusion on the feudal mode of production to "all" modes of production. (Is it conceivable that Dobb would have included the advanced communist mode of production as one which must necessarily come to its end?). The structural analogy between Dobb's problematic (one of the laws of motion of a mode of production) and Balibar's (transitional mode of production) cannot hold; in their determination to be done with both at one blow, they fail to do justice to Dobb.

### Epistemology

We have shown how Dobb works at a number of different levels of abstraction, that he believed both in the necessity of quite a complex abstract procedure, and that even the most abstract moment should be thought with reference to the concrete. In this respect alone, his contribution to British historiography is significant. But formulated in this very general way, as many problems, as answers are encountered. What, for example, is the nature of this 'logical' stage in the practice of the historian? How can it be itself theorized, how can its internal adequacy be assessed, and why should one position be superior to another? What relation does this have to the 'research' of the historian? How is it possible for this level of conceptual abstraction to be 'tested' by the concrete?

Dobb, by thinking the 'facts' of history as already constituted,

is forced into an empiricist position, even though he may never quite comfortably inhabit it. He often implies that it is possible to "describe" the historical process, which the theorist can then re-work according to the varying protocols prescribed by the different theoretical positions:

Since classification must necessarily precede and form the groundwork for analysis, it follows that as soon as one passes from description to analysis, the definitions one has adopted must have a crucial influence on the result (p 35).

But despite his adherence to thinking the importance of abstraction, it is an adherence already thought from within an empiricist standpoint. The consequence of this, as we suggested earlier, is the disavowance of the 'logical' and the 'historical', or abstraction and research. Thus for Dobb, the "economist" (or theorist)

... is in the dark partly, no doubt, because the questions that he needs to ask have too seldom been formulated sufficiently fully or correctly for the economic historian to have sorted the material that is relevant to their answer (p 256),

which institutionalizes the split, in much the same way as the debates which were common some years back, confining historians to the 'facts' and sociologists to the 'models'. This theorization of the relation between the theoretical and the concrete, despite the insistence on the importance of this for marxism, can only reach an impasse, descriptively focused on the necessary 'inter-relation' between the two.

The argument can be taken a step further. Dobb formally recognized the need to be able to understand the nature of abstraction itself, and (again descriptively) he points towards the direction of locating one particular concept in a whole conceptual field defined in terms of other concepts: "... it is not simply a matter of verifying particular assumptions, but of examining the relationships with a complex set of assumptions", and then continues by adding the further point which we might expect, "and between this set as a whole and changing actuality" (pp vii-viii). But it is precisely in his attempt to think these two moments together, that Dobb gives only a provisional status to theory, provisional in the sense of being tested (and 'completed') by the 'facts'. This position depends on an understanding of the concrete as an unproblematic entity, appropriated in knowledge empirically, independent from any conceptual conditions. The effect of this is that the nature of abstraction itself ultimately cannot be thought other than in terms

of the concrete-as-facts. Hayek's proposition, that theory "can never be verified or falsified by reference to facts", Dobb thinks is a "rather startling claim" ( p 27 ). (And thirty years later, it seems as if he was equally taken by "surprise" encountering the similar claim by Hindess and Hirst that "facts are never given; they are always produced". (Dobb 1976).). The paradox is that Dobb's epistemological position is very close to Weber's, despite the force of Dobb's critique in many other respects. Hirst argues that "there are no criteria of proof, conceptual, empirical or otherwise for general concepts in Weber's epistemology. Concepts and categories are selected and rejected by the ambiguous test of their 'usefulness' for reaching and illuminating the significance of the concrete" (Hirst 1975a pp 56-7). Recall the passage by Dobb quoted at the beginning of this section of the paper: "The justification of any definition must ultimately rest on its successful employment in illuminating the actual process of historical development ... ". It is the limitations of this approach which determine some of the underargued passages in his 'Studies': just as this position reaches an impasse in thinking the relation between the conceptual and the concrete, so too the same tendency occurs in elaborating the conceptual field itself.

The tension produced in Dobb's attempt to think the theoretical and empirical moments as structurally related - which is the one side of his argument - is not always expressed consistently throughout the book. The chapter on the formation of productive capital, for example, where he relies quite directly on the prior theorization by Marx, is one of the most complex. But at its weakest, this tension collapses into what is perhaps the logical consequence of the ambiguity of his epistemology: the methodology in which all abstraction is reduced to a 'model', which approximates as best as possible to the complexity of the concrete. This is true both of particular studies (see the chapter on monopoly capitalism, where Dobb outlines a model, and then claims that there are a number of features "which do not fit this simplified model" p 334) or of his general methodology, where the criterion of internal theoretical adequacy rests on whether

a given structure of assumptions and definitions affords an abstract model which is sufficiently representative of actuality to be serviceable" (p vii)



41.  
(And again it is possible to note the appearance of this position throughout his work: in a very interesting essay he wrote late in life he argues:

As is well known, the shape assumed by a theoretical model is itself a selection of the facts and the events to be studied; hence however impeccable or elegant its logic, it can represent a biased selection which may distort our vision of the real world, instead of illuminating it.  
( 1957 p 132).

But whatever the consistency in Dobb's theoretical position, the position as a whole is ultimately framed first by the identification of the two separate procedures, the logical and the historical, and secondly by the attempts to retheorize the integration of these moments, which, we have argued, - once the prior assumption has been made - can only produce a solution with a reduced theoretical potential. There are indications that he was never completely satisfied with this logical/historical approach, not least in the ambiguity of the various formulations by which he tries to re-think the structured relation of the two. Whatever the limitations, it is, however, this consistent adherence, almost alone in the historiography of the time, to the elaboration and rethinking of the conceptual terrain which is most striking today. But his legacy is ultimately contradictory: his re-assertion of the theoretical centrality of the concept mode of production, in itself almost a re-statement of marxism, slides into economism; and his belief that "the work of abstraction must competently be handled" was framed from the outset by empiricist presuppositions. To focus on these tendencies is important precisely because of the value of Dobb's marxism for contemporary historiography, which lies primarily in his defining most sharply the site of the problem of the logical and historical categories.

### The Transition Debates

The response to Dobb's Studies from the academic history establishment was minimal, but its impact on marxists was formidable. Isolated at home - Thompson has recently emphasized that "intellectual McCarthyism was not confined to the United States" - the major appreciations and challenges to Dobb came from American, European and Japanese marxists, notably in the pages of 'Science and Society' in the early 1950s (collected and reprinted as The Transition From Feudalism to Capitalism, edited by Hilton 1975). These lengthy debates focused on the transition itself, taking up most frequently that part of Dobb's work which aimed to elaborate the sets of subordinate concepts.



which referred specifically to the transition, those which we suggested functioned as an intermediate level of abstraction. Very little attention appears to have been given to Dobb's project as a whole, or to its theoretical and epistemological assumptions: indeed one of the points which emerges quite clearly from the debates is that Dobb's tendency to separate out the two moments in the practice of the historian forms an unquestioned assumption for both his critics and his admirers. Further, while Dobb struggled against the effects of this position, the participants in the debates seem to have accepted from the start the 'logic and research' approach as a formal solution to the problems of historiography. Indeed it even came to define and frame the theoretical issues of subsequent historiography, which is expressed sharply by the conceptual form of Anderson's appraisal which was quoted at the start of this section. Possibly the one exception to this is the contribution from the Japanese historian, Takahashi, who was acutely sensitive to the general theoretical project on which Dobb had embarked. He begins his article by outlining the value of this project:

Maurice Dobb's Studies ... raises many important problems of method. It presents a concrete case of a problem in which we cannot but be deeply interested - the problem of how a new and higher stage of the science of economic history can take up into its own system and make use of the positive results of preceding economic and social historians,

and, he continues, "to establish more accurate historical laws" (Transition p 69). The place he gives to a relatively high level of abstraction - he explicitly emphasized "the logical content of 'the passage from feudalism to capitalism'" (p 87) and the preconditions for this knowledge (p72) - are reminiscent of Dobb at his most complex.

The protagonist who came to define the concerns of the debates was Paul Sweezy: he marshalls the most developed non-marxist accounts of the transition (based most of all on Pirenne) to challenge Dobb's account. But the weakness of his procedure - which can be crudely characterized as appropriating the insights of the non-marxist historians without adequately re-theorizing them from within a distinct problematic - primarily serves to illuminate the undoubted strengths of Dobb's methodology by comparison. For what Sweezy in effect does is to shift the whole discussion back onto the 'weberian' terrain, which Dobb had originally set out to demolish.

In the course of Sweezy's argument a number of familiar themes re-appear. He proposes the adoption of the term 'system of production' alongside the concept mode of production, but gives it no analytic coherence, nor explains its relation to the latter concept. He re-asserts the importance of the 'destination' of the product (for use or for exchange) as the key criterion for defining a mode or system of production, rather than the relations in which production takes place. This forces Sweezy into pursuing a variant of the money economy theories:

It seems to me that the important conflict in this connection is not between 'money economy' and 'natural economy' but between production for the market or production for use. We ought to try to uncover the process by which trade engendered a system of production for the market, and then to trace the impact of this system on the pre-existent feudal system of production for use (Transition p 41).

This, despite the formal denial, is merely another way of stating the same problematic. By eclectically pulling together part of Dobb's thesis (the place of petty commodity production as a subordinate form alongside the feudal mode of production) and part of Pirenne's (the rise of urban trade sectors) his problem becomes one which is peculiarly his own: to examine "some of the currents of influence running from the exchange economy to the use economy" (p42). The four determinants of this influence which Sweezy proposes illustrate how close he comes to the money economy standpoint; he notes i) the role of the inefficiency of production on the manorial estate ii) "the very existence of exchange value as a massive economic fact tends to transform the attitude of the producers" iii) the development of the "tastes" of the feudal ruling class iv) the rise of towns (pp 42-3). In re-stating this basic Pirenne analysis, Sweezy has to explain the nature of the historical formations from the C14 (when these features first appear) to the C15, without resorting to the strict natural economy/market economy formula. In his failure to locate the market and commodity relations within the structure of the economy as a whole, he concludes that these formations were neither feudal nor capitalist, but teleologically designates them as forms of "pre-capitalist commodity production" (p49), which theoretically parallels Balibar's attempts to think a transitional mode of production.

In a second contribution Sweezy saw little need to correct any aspect of his argument, although he added two minor points which

are of some significance for his argument as a whole. The first was his insistence (against Dobb) on discussing only the feudalism of Western Europe "because what ultimately happened in Western Europe was manifestly very different from what happened in other parts of the world where the feudal mode of production has prevailed" (p 103) strengthening his earlier teleological tendency. Secondly he concludes that theoretically "no internal prime mover" is contained within the feudal system, and thus "the driving force is to be sought outside the system" (p 106), that is, from the accumulation of merchant capital from the Mediterranean, and the effects of this on the feudal mode of production.

Dobb's contributions to the debates (including one as late as 1962) do little more than refine aspects of his original thesis, which he seems to propose each time with growing confidence. He again argues the decisive theoretical point about the determinacy of the relations of production (in the 1950 and 1962 articles,) quoting that same key passage from Capital III which structured the first chapter of the Studies, rejecting especially the tendency to give analytical priority to exchange relations; he gives further and more nuanced emphasis to the variants of the extraction of the surplus product within feudalism (p 160); he restates the primacy of the struggle between the direct producers and the feudal lords, in relation to which other struggles are secondary (p 59 and p 166); he is much less inclined to understand the inefficiency of the feudal mode of production (p 59); and he regards as "an impossible procedure" the notion of a transitional mode of production, which in this case leaves "two centuries suspended uncomfortably in the firmament between heaven and earth" (p 62). This is only a skeletal summary of the main points which Dobb re-argues. What is of importance is that at least until 1962, he did not believe any major re-working of his original positions was necessary, that there had been no counter-propositions which he believed had damaged the argument of his Studies. So how do we assess the nature of Sweezy's challenge? Nowhere did Sweezy engage critically with the conceptual structure of Dobb's work. What he did do was to propose the elements of an alternative theory of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. These elements were produced from within a perspective which was more or less coherent, i.e. there is a certain coherence in the 'trade and towns' thesis within a money economy problematic, and a certain

internal incoherence in the notion of a transitional mode of production, where the arguments of Dobb and Hindess and Hirst seem to be correct. On the other hand Dobb's account was composed theoretically around the concepts of the determinacy of the relations of production, class struggle and contradiction. That the one position may be closer to marxism doesn't necessarily make it better than the other. But the point is that, at a number of levels of abstraction, Dobb in the *Studies* had rigorously challenged the assumptions of the theories and explanations to which Sweezy and Pirenne adhered, and had produced a conceptual alternative that was critical of those theories, which itself was internally coherent. And it is the case that neither Sweezy nor anyone else in the debates either defended the Pirenne position or elaborated an alternative account which took note of Dobb's reformulations.

One of the persistent themes of the debate is expressed by the claim that Dobb had produced an imaginative hypothesis, but that it was now necessary for the historians to confirm this hypothesis by unearthing the relevant empirical material. Of course there is some substance to this: Dobb's *Studies* were in no sense definitive, and could further be extended in scope and elaborated as a result of further historical work. But the assumption behind many of these assertions is one which almost classically expresses the 'logic and research' approach: that Dobb's hypothesis will fall if the empirical material is found not to 'fit'. Lefebvre writes;

Dobb and Sweezy have performed the service of formulating the problems. Now it is up to the historians to answer them! (Transition p 127);

Sweezy himself calls for more "factual research" (p 107); and Procacci suggests that

The only way of emerging from this impasse is to give the contenders equal weapons, that is, to encourage research in keeping with this plausible explanatory hypothesis (p 133).

Hilton, in his 1976 Introduction, fully endorses this suggestion of Procacci (p 11); indeed it is from him that we take one of the terms which describes this tendency, when he writes that historical work is "an effort of research and not only of logic" <sup>(p 12)</sup> As a crystallization of Dobb's legacy, this is correct in so far as it goes, marking out the site of the whole problem of the place and levels of abstraction in historical work. It is interesting that at the same time, but from a different context, a rather different



assessment is made on the historiography of the formation of capitalism:" ... the time is now ripe for erecting some sort of building from the enormous mass of facts accumulated by the German historical school ... " (Vilar 1956 p 34). But both these claims appear to construct the relation between the 'concepts' and the 'concrete' as an unspecified reflexive unity, which offers very little guidance precisely how the elaboration of concepts structures the practice of writing history.

So far as we are concerned here, there is one final point to be made. The way that this paper has been composed may seem to suggest that we believe there to be a rigid division between the problematics of 'economism' (Dobb) and of 'culturalism' (Thompson and Genovese). This is not the case. Apart from a certain common theoretical basis, it can also be noted that some of the most interesting developments in recent historiography have been the products of the overlap of these tendencies. Hill, clearly, is one example. Or the case of Hilton is also important: starting from the conceptual framework produced by Dobb, his later work (1969, 1973) has not only refined our theoretical understanding of the determination of the central forms of class struggle by the feudal relations of production, but has illustrated how the precise mechanisms which precipitated particular struggles were overdetermined by the determinate cultural and ideological formations, adding a crucial dimension to the Studies. And in a very early essay, conceived as a contribution to Dobb's project, he emphasized the necessity of grasping the whole social totality, the non-correspondences between the economic, and the political and the ideological, and the effectivity of the superstructural (Transition pp 153-7). Or Takahashi, the contributor most intransigently committed to conducting the complex work of abstraction in elaborating the concepts of determinate modes of production, criticized Dobb for ignoring Weber's insights into the cultural and ideological conditions for the transition (Transition p 89). But there is one footnote to these debates with which we can conclude: one of the important issues of the debates was how the bourgeois revolutions can be conceptually located in the general theoretical conditions for thinking the formation of capitalism, which was the object of Hill's original study in 1940. In the mid 1960s there occurred the well known debate between Thompson and Anderson, which largely revolved around the contentious issue of the nature of the

English bourgeois revolution and the subsequent development of capitalism. The contribution of Dobbs' work to this later discussion was, potentially, immense but it had already been swept into oblivion by the whole culturalist tide. That, however, tells us more about "culturalism" than about Dobb's achievements.



PART II: Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese and Socialist-Humanist History.

From Maurice Dobb and those influenced by him we turn to Edward Thompson and to Eugene Genovese, Marxist historian of the slave South. This succession - from Dobb to Thompson - is both an 'historical' and a 'logical' one. A history of Marxist historiography might well be written around the movement that is composed in the shift from Studies in the Development of Capitalism to The Making of the English Working Class (though it might also be composed, still more strikingly, around the earliest and the latest work of one historian - Christopher Hill). We may regard the period from the early 1960s as, indeed, a second stage in the development of this tradition, breaking sharply from some earlier Dobbian emphases. Logically, or in terms of theoretical position, the break is from Dobb's theoretically-aware and complex economism to Thompson's militant a-theoreticism and 'culturalism'. This shift was also registered in a different appropriation of Marx himself in which class (understood in a particular way) became the master category, displacing almost completely the previous concern with modes of production (feudalism, capitalism and various ways of producing within them) and with economic transitions. Politically the move was understood as part of a battle against a Stalinist politics and the moral insensitivity of orthodox communism. Stalinist practices of control and coercion were juxtaposed against the ideal of a humanist socialism.

These associated changes are evident in much of the history written in early 1960s and later. But they were, of course, part of a more general set of shifts within European and American Marxism ('Western Marxism' in Perry Anderson's phrase) whose history is only just beginning to be written (Anderson, 1976). So 'culturalism' was not limited to history. In the re-discovery of 'class' within English empirical sociology from the later 1950s' class relations took characteristically qualitative and 'cultural' forms. The uncompleted history of Raymond Williams' literary criticism is part of the same movement and so, for that matter, was both Sartre's fusion of existentialism and Marxism and the answer of 'scientific' Marxism to both this and economism in the work of Louis Althusser. Nor was this movement - the general concern with the cultural - or experiential - or ideological - by any means limited to Marxism

or to sociologies employing the category of class. The American reaction against the classic sociologies - the forming of what has been called 'the two sociologies' is a parallel case of the rejection of 'structures' in favour of 'experience' (Dawe, 1970). Culturalist historiography is by no means as thorough-going a rejection of 'structure' as say, radical ethnomethodology, but there are clearly some broad similarities.

Many of the tendencies which we later specify and describe as 'culturalist' are present (often with others) in the later work of Christopher Hill, (e.g. Hill, 1973) in Perry Anderson's attempts at a theoretical and politically useful history, (Anderson, 1965 and 1974) and in the work of very many younger historians who have been influenced by culturalist classics. There is, then, a certain arbitrariness in the choice of Thompson and Genovese, to stand in, as it were, for a much more internally various movement. Yet their work constitutes, together or apart, a peculiarly tough-minded and consistent project, hugely influential on both sides of the Atlantic and in parts of Europe and fully 'culturalist' in its pre-suppositions. They may be taken together because of the parallels in their major works and, perhaps, at certain particular points, what seems to be a real mutual influence. Thus, Roll Jordan Roll (surely to date Genovese's masterpiece, 1974) is a kind of Making of the black nation, very clearly influenced by Thompson's early work, with the same epic scope, the same emotional commitment to its main object - the culture of the slaves, and, as we shall see, the same theoretical and epistemological position. On the other hand, Edward Thompson's later work - his sustained critique of received notions of eighteenth-century society and politics and his exploration of the relations of 'symbolic violence' - seems to owe something to Genovese's early discovery and use of Gramscian concepts in understanding the relations of masters to slaves. 'Hegemony', in the shape of the slaveholder's 'paternalism', is the main organising idea of Roll Jordan Roll, but is important in Genovese's history as early as The Political Economy of Slavery (1961). The same conception, also in the form of a (gentry) paternalism is present in Thompson's work from 'The Moral Economy of the Eighteenth-Century Crowd' (1971) onwards. Clinching such influences, however, is not an important part of our argument; we suggest them merely to re-inforce our conviction of the real affinities between these two major historians

- who also, undoubtedly disagree on many things. It seems legitimate both to treat their work as symptomatic of a distinctive solution to 'logic and history', and to deal with them, only half in jest, as 'theoretical twins'.

### Socialist-Humanism and the Rationalist Critique

The most powerful criticisms of the Thompson-Genovese positions derive from a structuralist marxism. It is through the theoretical categories of Louis Althusser (and their extension by neo- and post-Althusserians) that we are best able to place these histories within the range of contemporary marxisms and to assess them critically. To put it in another way, Althusser's work provides a privileged vantage-point from which to survey our object. This opposition, though not the force of the critique that follows, is undoubtedly recognised by Edward Thompson himself. His published rebukes of Althusser and Althusserianism have, so far, fallen short of a real engagement, yet hardly a piece passes without a pot shot or two at the target of 'some structuralist philosophers'. (e.g. Thompson, 1975, pp 258 - 269) This circumstance - the power of the Althusserian critique of 'culturalism' - has particular historical causes to do, in fact with the initial formation of these two tendencies on either side of the English Channel: the fact that 'culturalism' derives from a single opposition - culturalism versus various kinds of economism; while 'structuralism' derives in a double movement, hostile to both economism and 'humanism'. It is important to insist that this circumstance does not carry with it, as a matter of 'logic', a consequence that might seem to follow: that structuralist marxism is in every way superior as a marxist practice to culturalist historiography. These two related points cannot be developed in this paper - though they are of prime significance for another associated project, the development of an adequate marxist account of culture and ideology. At this point we can only note that the relation between 'culturalism' and 'structuralism' is altogether more complicated than one in which culturalism is simply superseded, or 'culture' succumbs to 'ideology'.

At first sight the two tendencies seem so dissimilar as to be simply not comparable. On the one side we have histories of particular social and cultural formations or movements; on the other works of 'philosophy' and 'critique' working at an altogether

higher level of abstraction. Evidently Reading Capital and The Making of the English Working are very different kinds of books. If, however, culturalist practice is raised to a more abstract level, if what is mainly implicit is made explicit, it is clear that the historians are organised around quite definite theoretical and epistemological pre-suppositions. They have, in Althusser's term, their own 'problematic'. And, as we shall argue this problematic is very much in opposition to the structuralist protocols, so that on some essential matters, it is indeed necessary to argue through the oppositions or to decide in favour of one or the other. This, however, is not the end of the story, for it is also possible to argue that the two positions share some very specific deficiencies, notably a reduced view of economic relations - a consequence of some common elements of origin in opposition to economism. Moreover, though, as we shall see, the Althusserian critique of the tendencies represented by culturalism is very powerful, this critical power is not always matched by equivalent success in supplying adequate theoretical and especially epistemological alternatives. This is especially the case if we judge 'adequacy' both as consistency and rigour and as explanatory power in the analysis of particular situations. It is part of the argument of the third part of this paper that there are some ultimate incompatibilities to a fully rationalist epistemology and the development of a properly conceptual history. In this sense Thompson's scattered criticisms of the Althusserian demon are not, despite all the misrecognitions, so wide of the mark. They mistake structuralism for the old (mutual) enemy of economism; they simplify the very contradictory epistemology in order to damn it; they fail to recognise the point of the basic criticisms of empiricist 'proofs'. Yet Thompson is absolutely right to point to the epistemological questions - the distancing of 'theory' from the analysis of particular situations - as the major difficulty of the Althusserians. (Thompson, 1976, esp. pp. 16-20).

Despite the mutual relevance and the creative potential of these tensions, there has been no really sustained two-sided encounter between the British marxist historians and marxist-structuralist philosophy. This circumstance is itself testimony to the gulf that has opened, subsequently to the transition debates, between 'theory' and 'history'. Some British marxists, Gareth Stedman Jones, Perry Anderson and, more fleetingly, Eric Hobsbawm, have espoused

Althusserian notions or, at least reviewed them favourably. (Hobsbawm, 1973, pp142-52; Stedman Jones, 1971 p16. Anderson, 1974), but neither Hobsbawm nor the two editors of the New Left Review are at all typical of the historical tradition, or even of the dominant marxist tendencies within it. The nearest thing to a direct encounter, Thompson versus Althusser apart, has been the critique of Genovese in the work of the English post-Althusserians Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst (1975, esp. pp 148 .) Unfortunately, to our knowledge, Genovese has not replied, so that the encounter remains somewhat one-sided. He has, however, polemicised against American critics who have made somewhat similar points (Genovese, 1977).

Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production itself will be discussed in its own right in part III of this paper. But one of its themes is a sustained attack on History as a marxist intellectual practice and on the accounts offered by historians of particular modes of production and particular transitions. The critical designations are drawn from Althusser's original armoury - especially the trio: 'humanism', 'historicism' and 'empiricism'. They are applied with great 'rigour'. The implicit assumption (different from That which informs our critique) is that once a work is shown to be organised through a problematic which is humanist, historicist etc, the whole edifice falls. Among the historians discussed, Genovese figures prominently as a worthy antagonist. His early work - The Political Economy of Slavery - is the main target of the chapter on the slave mode of production. It is twice referred to as 'a serious attempt', a positive accolade, in this book, for an historian. In what follows we summarise the critique with necessary brevity, then assess its force for culturalism as a whole.

The main target of the chapter on slavery is 'humanist assumptions'; no subject is more prone to 'humanist mythologising' than slavery itself. Typically humanism argues that slavery is characterised by the denial to the slave of his human essence. He is treated instead as a species of property. The slave's forms of protest or culture on the other hand can be understood as an assertion of humanity. Genovese work is shown to be organised around such humanist presuppositions. In general his portrayal of the Old South conforms to 'an idealist-historicist variant of Marxism



strongly influenced by Gramsci'. (p148). The nub of the demonstration is to show that Genovese understands southern slavery as simply a relation between two classes - slaves and slave-owner - a relation between groups of persons, of a primarily political-cultural kind, a relation of domination and subordination. This portrayal is 'historicist' because it collapses what in Althusserian protocols are held to be separate 'instances' of a social formation - the instances or 'levels' or relatively autonomous practices of the economic, the ideological and the political. Qualitatively different processes with their own specificity are simplified down to an 'essential' (or unitary) relationship between groups of people. The account is 'humanist' both because of this stress on the pre-constituted and unproblematic human being and because of the centrality of the notion of human essence which slavery is held to deny. The account also lacks a concept of a mode of production in the sense employed by Althusser (and by Marx). Hegel's master/slave relationship, much cited by Genovese, stands in for a properly worked up concept of slavery as a mode of production involving relations between people and things, not merely between people. Genovese is also, according to the neo-Althusserian diagnosis, guilty of a more Weberian failing - a speculative empiricism. He builds his conception of capitalism, for instance, by generalisations based on observation - societies that are held to be capitalist look like this, have this or that feature. The final proof of all this is Genovese's portrayal of the American Civil War as 'a conflict between social systems mediated and realised in the mind of a class subject' - the slave-owning "aristocracy" in the South. (p 172 ).

In both its mode of argument and its conclusions this critique is highly contentious. The whole manner and substance of the book make it peculiarly indigestible to historical appetites and historians have very generally sidled round it or consumed it in most unproductive ways. Thus the force of the critique (which ought at least to be considered by any open and undogmatic historical practice) has been ignored. In what follows we want to suggest that 'philosophical' criticism of culturalist

historiography, not dissimilar to those marshalled by Hindess and Hirst and with a common origin in the work of Althusser, do indeed

go the heart of the culturalist position and have to be properly considered. In making this case, however, it is important first to present the culturalist problematic as clearly and as strongly as possible.

### Re-presenting Culturalism

We may start with a quotation from the opening pages of Roll Jordan Roll:

But, knowing that the ambiguity of the Black experience as a national question lends the evidence to different readings, I have chosen to stay close to my primary responsibility: to tell the story of slave life as carefully and accurately as possible. Many years of studying the astonishing effort of black people to live decently as human beings even in slavery has convinced me that no theoretical advance suggested in their experience could ever deserve as much attention as that demanded by their demonstration of the beauty and power of the human spirit under conditions of extreme oppression ( p xvi ).

And pair it with a very similar and very well-known one from the preface of the Making:

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condemnation of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we do not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience.. (1963 edn. pp 12-13).

Such statements in prefaces are something read as mere gestures on the way to the real business of history. These two historians, certainly, as part of their continuing practice, hold out fraternal hands to the oppressed people of the past. Yet this runs much deeper than a mobilising political stance; it is indicative of a whole theoretical, epistemological and political position which deeply influences the whole style of history and which is indeed actively advocated.

The first imperative is to comprehend and respect the authenticity or 'validity' or 'rationality' of the experiences and cultures that are addressed. Alongside Genovese's (rather artless) 'tell the

story of slave life' we might set Thompson's stress on 'listening' (and compare it with the audacious interventionism of the Althusserian 'reading' ):

But the fact is, again, the material took command of me, far more than I ever expected. If you want a generalization I would have to say that the historian has got to be listening all the time. He should not set up a book or a research project with a totally clear sense of exactly what he is going to be able to do. The material itself had got to speak through him. And I think this happens.  
(1975. p15).

This fundamental attitude has a number of consequences of a theoretical and epistemological kind. It leads, in the first place, to a principled distrust of theory and of the more abstract modes of discourse. Greg McLennan has caught the inter-relation of this with the stress on 'experience' excellently:

Thompson's humility with respect to the human agency he observes in the history of 'subordinate' classes is counterbalanced by the moral outrage directed against those (especially marxists) who 'seek' to replace individuality and agency by the reification of concepts: a reductionist scholasticism which cannot but lead to political sectarianism. For Thompson, history requires the closest attention to the feelings and motives of those who, due to bias or philistinism, have been lost to our own modern experience. Historical study therefore necessitates a certain suspension of presuppositions, an empathetic ability to 'listen' to people whose essential rationality in terms of their everyday experience relative to the conditions of their own society is often cynically dubbed by the right as the spontaneity of the mob, or by the left as 'ideology' something pre-given by a social structure.  
(McLennan, 1976, p5).

So there is a preference, in practice, for examining an object 'in its own terms, and within its own set of relations', hence a preference (common to historians in general) for the close study of specific cases. Not that analysis stops here; in Thompson's work cases are used as crystallised forms of more general features of a social formation. His work is full of the identification and examination of such symbolic moments - Whigs and Hunters being the best example of this method. But the use of externally-derived concepts, of generalisations based on other instances, let alone deductive systems derived from other theoretical propositions may, and perhaps must, lead to the forcing of real historical materials into some distorting mould of the theorist's own pre-occupations.

This procedure is 'irrational' because it imposes no check on speculation. (Thompson 1965; Thompson, 1976).

It is doubtful whether within this conception, 'theory' or 'abstraction' can have any place at all. True, both historians write, on occasion, of 'theory', as a legitimate pursuit. This occurs, especially in Thompson's case, much more often in the course of general or political writing than in the histories. Thompson's history in particular is much less scrupulous in the acknowledgement of theoretical debts than in the range, and explicitness of the citation of 'sources' in the more usual historians sense. This 'theoretical' discussion is, however, of a particular kind. To simplify a complex argument, 'theory' is understood either as a kind of critical long-duration history (as in Edward Thompson's criticisms of Perry Anderson's provocations), or as a kind of political prognostication and diagnosis, or as the critique (including empirical criticism) of other historians, economists or sociologists. As Thompson himself puts it, citing Feuerbach, Anti-Duhring and the Marx-Engels correspondence, 'I think of theory as critique, theory as polemic'. (1976. p21). There is one more sense, however, in which theory is understood: as something very similar to Weber's 'ideal-type', or the social-scientist's 'hypothesis' or, more common-sensically, as a kind of informed guess. Thompson's word is 'model'. (1965, pp349-50). As such, theory is a moment in the historian's method - the moment of forming questions rather than testing them, a moment always provisional in status, always subject to the ultimate control of 'grand facts'. We shall return later to these conceptions, but one has only to note the distance between the level of abstraction in most (but not all) of the three volumes of Capital and the specificity of most 'history' to want to question the hostility to abstraction as such.

We may say, then, that there is a necessarily anti-theoretical tendency in culturalism, a tendency to prefer 'experience' to 'theory'. A further symptom of this preference is a sometimes quite astonishing suppression of borrowings of a theoretical kind even where it is clear, from the whole cast of the work, that they exist. Thus Genovese's debt to Freud, somewhat less evident, it must be said, than his longstanding and admirably explicit use of Gramsci, is quite casually divulged in a recent casual piece. (1977. p108 and footnote 9)

Thompson's debt to Gramsci, a striking feature of much of his recent work, has never, outside a mention in 'the Peculiarities of the English' been properly acknowledged at all. Its importance for the formation of Thompson's own work can be gauged, however, by comparing the emphasis of the Making or of other early work like 'Homage to Tom MacGuire' (1960) with the later work on the eighteenth century. Despite the epic sweep of the Making it remains the history of a single class, both breaking from and staying within a tradition of labour or working-class history. Thompson's later work involves a much more sophisticated attempt to grasp social-cultural totalities and deals, more centrally than before, with relations between classes. The main concept employed to think these relations is a particular appropriation of Gramsci's 'hegemony'. This debt is clearest in the shorter essays on the eighteenth century, especially the important, but enormously compressed essay 'Patrician Society; Plebeian Culture' (1974). But in the curiously half-conscious nature of these borrowings (which the avowed method actually forbids) culturalism has much in common with those kinds of history which are attacked as empiricist, with the apparently pre-suppositionless (but actually ideological) economic history, for instance, which is a principle target of The Making.

There is one further corollary to judging historical objects in their own terms according to the centrality of what Thompson calls 'the inwardness of experience.'. The Making is overwhelmingly a book about how people see and understand their social world and how, in their consciousness, they respond. This emphasis was inscribed in culturalism from the beginning, in the initial reaction to a Stalinist politics and a theoretical economism. All of Thompson's work, indeed, has, he stresses, been informed by the pre-occupation with 'values', with supplying what is seen as this absence in Marx and as a peculiarly deforming aspect of orthodox communism.

This over-riding pre-occupation has necessary consequences for how other aspects of the social formation are viewed. This is all the more the case since culturalist histories (The Making or Roll Jordan Roll) are not what we might call 'regional' histories; they do not present themselves as 'cultural histories' or histories of the culture of particular classes. Though they cannot be histories of everything that occurred within a particular society (and are, in



that sense 'abstractions', willy-nilly), they are informed by a sense of the totality, do have the ambition of grasping it, and are critical of the kinds of history that 'fragment'. Such histories necessarily involve some conception, explicit or implied, of what a social formation is, how it may be thought.

The commonest general formulations are, as might be expected, in the form of critiques, rather than the general specifications of the Althusserian type. Thus Thompson rejects altogether the base-superstructure metaphor and prefers to speak of 'economics' and 'values' as 'two sides of a coin', or in 'a dialectic of interaction'. Culture may be understood as 'the ways in which the human being is imbricated in particular, determined productive relations' (1976 p23). Certain value systems are 'consonant with certain modes of production and certain modes of production and productive relations .. are inconceivable without consonant value-systems'. We shall return to these formulations later, but it is important to stress that, on the whole, it is not the relation mode of production to culture which concerns culturalist historiography, but the relation culture to class. It is indeed the culturalist stress on class that constitutes its claim to be a Marxism. It is this above all that Thompson<sup>and</sup> Genovese take from Marx - the emphasis on class, class-as-relation and classes in struggle. As we shall see, however, class is given a very particular 'culturalist' inflection, reduced in some important ways, from the full richness of Marx's categories.

We might end this section, then by summarising the main features of what have been calling 'culturalism'. Again McLennan's description of a 'cultural' Marxism sums up the matter very appositely:

The reaction against this kind of determinist or 'vulgar' Marxism often takes the form of an assertion of the equality of social conditions and ideas. Each is 'as real' as the other. Human agency (dependent upon ideas) is a precondition of revolutionary change, not its mechanical result. Societies are dialectical totalities in which there is not a pre-given dominance of economy over ideas and agency, but, rather, an essential complementarity. The sense which people make of their 'objective' situation is part of, and not reducible to, that situation. There is no abstract imposition or distortion of ideas. To reject such a schematism is to acknowledge the real constituents of socio-cultural formations; it is the task of historians to reveal and

investigate such processes.  
(McLennan, 1976, p2).

But what are the main problems of this view of the historian's object and practice?

It is important to say, at the outset, that none of the problems which culturalism poses and fails to solve are easy to resolve. In some cases it is possible to suggest better solutions, but this is by no means true in every case, especially on the very vexed epistemological questions. The 'critique' that follows is, despite occasional appearances to the contrary, written in the knowledge that it is easier to object than to propose, and still more difficult to construct histories that are adequate in every sense.

#### Abstraction

Let us start with epistemological questions. As we have seen culturalism robs itself of 'theory' in the interests of authenticity. This is because theory is identified as a priori mental schematism and 'history' as a quite direct (if only we listen) mediation of the real. There are two sets of problems with this. First, it is by no means clear that relatively abstract statements about, shall we say, modes of production in general, are of a wholly different status (in relation to 'the real') than, shall we say, an account of the Peterloo massacre. Both are statements (thoughts) about the real world. It is possible that they ought to be understood as mutually necessary and complimentary kinds of statements or thoughts, distinguished mainly by their relative degrees of abstraction. Both are representations of the real; in the one case relatively simple, formal and general, in the other extremely complex, concrete, dense and specific. The second set of problems concerns Thompson's own epistemology - the epistemology of 'models' and 'grand facts'. While this certainly describes the sense of the relative subjectivity of the question and the very real (material) existence of the 'source' of 'text' which every historian experiences in research, the operation it describes - the friction of theory on fact - is not a coherent or possible relation.

The best way to develop the first of these points is to recall some of the key features of Marx's method in Capital. These hinge around the notion of abstraction which, it will be recalled, Marx himself

describes as a hall-mark of what is scientific in his method in the preface to vol 1. (Capital I, 1976, p90) Now, according to the Althusserian reading of Capital, it is a work of theory. It is not the history of a particular social formation, nor even, despite its reliance on English illustrations, a history of English capital. It is concerned rather to develop the categories that may be used in such a concrete analysis. This is true as far as it goes. It is true that Capital is not a history book. But it would be still more accurate to say that there are different discourses present in Capital, distinguished mainly by their degrees of abstractness.

It is best to take an example. One aspect of Capital that has recently received much attention from Marxist feminists and others interested in education, the family and their articulation through the state, is the theory of 'reproduction'. Reproduction might be described as the process by which, mostly in production itself, the conditions of further production (of a capitalist kind) are secured. Now there are several different kinds of discussion of this theme in Capital. In one kind of discussion (e.g. the chapter on 'Simple Reproduction' in vol I), Marx's strips the process down to some bare essentials; he presents a very formal, simplified, abstract version. He does this by pre-supposing a range of conditions with which, at least for the moment, he is not prepared to deal. Sometimes such conditions are merely omitted, though we know that Marx is aware of them from later and more complex treatments of the same theme. Sometimes such conditions are mentioned, but are pre-supposed in the sense that their precise state is fixed - assumed to be 'constant' in the language of social science. Thus, in the chapter on Simple Reproduction, Marx assumes a certain level of skill in the work force (very low) and nil accumulation. It is also assumed that reproduction occurs fairly unproblematically, through production and circulation itself and 'the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation'. Throughout Capital, however, this very abstract version is progressively rendered more concrete through the specification of more and more sets of relevant relations. Accumulation and its reproductive mechanisms are supplied; the inherent contradictions of the process are elaborated; the necessity, in general, of conscious political intervention through the State becomes apparent. Yet even here, Capital remains a work of theory, some way from the specific complexities of 'reproduction' in

nineteenth-century Britain. Yet this too is implicitly recognised in Marx's procedures. For Capital (especially vol I) does contain what Marx calls on occasion his 'historical sketches' and these are more recognisable as 'history'. For here Marx puts his own tools to work usually on the materials supplied by contemporary economic analysis and observation - typically the Blue Books - in order to conduct a critique of contemporary bourgeois analyses. He is attempting to demonstrate the power of his own conceptions, their critical edge, their adequacy to the objects described within a different frame of reference. But there is something else going on in these sections. Often Marx transgressed the self-imposed limits of Capital itself, the most important abstraction of that work - the abstraction of economic social relations from the total matrix of relations. In his historical sketches (as also in earlier works like the Eighteenth Brumaire) Marx supplies something of other instances. In the case of reproduction, for example, he shows, especially in the analysis of the Factory Acts and their effects, how ideological and political relations are necessarily involved - and in what precise forms - in a particular history of reproduction. (See Capital I chapters 10 and 15). All this means that if we are, for example, concerned to understand 'Marx on reproduction' we must attend quite as much to these sketches as to the simplest schemes. It is often necessary to draw out from Marx's discussions of the particular some more general considerations for our understanding of the process: i.e. to abstract out further relations which are only dealt with in Capital in a 'practical state'. The main conclusion from this theoretical work on Capital so far as reproduction is concerned is that it must never be seen as an automatic process, but is constantly contradictory or problematic, requiring continuous, external management.

This very cursory 'reading' requires much elaboration and development. But if it is anything like accurate, it may suggest a range of ways in which Marx's legacy can be (and has been) mis-appropriated. The fundamental mechanism here, is the failure to recognise the range and levels of discourse in Capital and, often, to mistake the properties and pertinances of one level for those of another. The actual structure of the text aids selective appropriations. Thus 'philosophers' appropriate the grander concepts - mode of production, relations and forces of production especially - and ignore the specific

tendencies, laws and forms that constitute the capitalist mode of production as a process. Historians relate to the 'histories' (e.g. the chapters on 'the so-called primitive accumulation'), but may overlook the fact that these are constructed with a prior series of abstractions on which the coherence of the account depends. In the same way, a pathological divorce develops between those who analyse particular situations (historians, journalists or politicians) and those concerned to develop 'theory'. 'Culturalism' as an epistemological position represents one side of this particular divorce in a particularly extreme manner. Despite the emphasis on critique, it represents a form of intellectual work that, rather systematically, distances itself from what is most distinctive in the method of the mature Marx.

What, then, of the friction of 'models' on 'facts'? This has been dealt with more elegantly than is possible here in Greg McLennan's paper and the problem will be specified here very briefly. Like all 'empiricist' formulations, this conception assumes that somehow thought (a hypothesis or some provisional conception of the real) can be brought into a direct relationship with the real in the form of 'facts' about the past. The problem is that this operation is simply not possible. In order for such a comparison to take place, these objects must be of like kind. But in order for this to be the case, 'facts' must already have been transformed into 'categories', into the same medium, as it were, as the 'theory' (These are in fact, typically categories at a lower level of generality than those that compose the theory). Some process of representation of the real is, therefore, necessarily involved as part of the process of testing. But this is the problem with which we started. How do we grasp the historically concrete? The empiricist solution, then, while it certainly indicates a process with a definite knowledge effect, constitutes a circular or tautologous argument or 'proof'. In the case of a culturalist historical practice, the 'facts' are commonly those about conceptions of the world; what are in fact interrogated here are people's conceptions of their lives. But since culturalism makes 'subjective experience' the final court of appeal in matters of human science - it is against this that theories must be tested - yet supplies us with no protocols of what we do when faced with radically different experiences or meanings, it dooms us, if



consistently followed, to a relativism. If not consistently followed, we may suspect hidden and therefore arbitrary sets of criteria are in play, typically linked to an ascription of moral or cognitive superiority to the culture of populace or working class over that of the bourgeoisie.

### Reductions

Let us now turn to the question of reductions. This involves a critique of the conception of the social totality which informs culturalist practice. There are in fact two associated reductions. The first of these is a reduction of class and of social formations to relations between groups of people (the characteristic termed by Althusserians 'theoretical humanism'); the second is the characteristic reduction of 'culturalism' - a reduced conception of the economic.

In both Edward Thompson and in Genovese, the very proper moral and political commitment to a 'truly human society' (a necessary constituent of communist morality and purposes) becomes transformed into a theory of how things actually are or were. What is properly an objective is made into a tool of analysis. Thus from sympathising with the oppressed peoples of the past, both historians slip into understanding the past (or whole social formations) in terms of relations of a more or less exploitative kind, between groups of people. Classes are constituted as such groups of people in a relation with each other and with people of another class. Both historians have a superb sense of the relational character of class which already raises the analysis beyond the level of social-democratic conceptions (as static structure or 'stratification'); but they have no conception at all that these relations are over or in some thing. Here, for instance, is Genovese on slaves and slave-holders:

As in a lasting though not necessarily happy marriage, two discrete individuals shared, for better or worse, one life ... masters and slaves shaped each other and cannot be described or analysed in isolation. (xvii)

Or

Slavery bound two peoples together in bitter antagonism while creating an organic relationship so complex and ambivalent that neither could express the simplest human feeling without reference to the other ...

and compare the following passage from the Making:

More than this the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead ... The finest meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context .... We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers. And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. (p9)

Phrases like 'slavery bound' promise to explore the nature of the tie. Thompson's later reference, in the same preface, to 'the productive relations into which men are born' similarly heralds a rather different mode of analysis. In both historians there are echoes of a more authentic Marxism. But in practice such ties and necessities are not elaborated in these histories. In Roll Jordan Roll we return no further back than 'slavery as a system of class rule', 'class power in a racial form', or 'the master-slave relationship'. In a symposium in Radical History Review on Genovese's history Eric Perkins made the following point about Genovese's work: 'He fails to utilise the familiar, though misunderstood Marxist conception of "social relations of production"'. (RHR, 1976, p42). Despite Genovese's pungent reply, this criticism is substantially correct. As we shall see in more detail in a moment, these conceptions are also absent, in any elaborated way, from the Making too. As both the earlier quotations suggest, then, class is seen very much as a collective inter-subjective relationship; metaphors of 'personal relations' are those most often used to encapsulate it. In such a conception what is specific to class relations in Marx - their rootedness in economic relations - is not grasped; in this respect the Hindess and Hirst criticisms of The Political Economy of Slavery are deadly accurate. What applies to slaves and slave-holders applies also to patricians and plebians. The privileged status of Althusser's analysis in relation to the conceptions informing these histories can be seen on the following quotation from Essays in Self-Criticism:

Marx shows that what in the last instance determines a social formation and allows us to grasp it, is not any chimerical human essence or human nature, nor man, nor even 'men', but a relation, the production relation...

And, in opposition to all humanist idealism, Marx shows that this relation is not a relation between men, a relation between persons, nor an inter-subjective or psychological or anthropological relation, but a double relation between these groups of men and things, the means of production...(pp201-22).

This takes us to the characteristically 'culturalist' reduction. This might also be described as a reduction 'upwards', a reduction to the political and the cultural. While in theory, culturalism attempts to establish 'economics' and 'values' on an equal footing and in a dialectical relationship, the histories that are written are firmly 'super-structural'. Their characteristic objects are culture and politics. They focus on what we might term 'relations of authority'. It is relations of authority indeed, or what Bourdieu terms 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1976) that forms the very nature of relations of class in both Thompson's portrayal of the eighteenth-century system and Genovese's of the slave South. It is not, precisely, that the 'economic' does not appear in their work. In Genovese has a 'political economy', but the object of this study - a kind of polemical economic history - is mainly the nature of the economic crisis of slavery or of its origins and limits. In the Making, and in Thompson's later work (see especially, Thompson 1967) the economic is also, in a sense, present. But it is present all the time mainly through the category of 'experience'; economic relations exist in the feelings and imputed meanings of members of the class. The economic as a set of objectively present relations - only appears in an attenuated form, through the cultural, through the 'inwardness of experience'. We shall see in a moment how this works in a particular chapter of the Making.

One last index of 'culturalism' is the reception of Gramsci and especially of Gramsci's notion of hegemony by these English and American historians who have been attracted to his formulations. (This criticism applies to Anderson 1964, to Gray, 1976 and to Tholfsen 1976 as well as to Thompson and Genovese). Very briefly, we may say that whereas Gramsci's conception <sup>concerns the relation</sup> of base to superstructure (or in Gramsci's terminology, of structure to superstructure), it is appropriated by Genovese and by Thompson as a concept to do with culture and politics alone. It is easy to see how this occurs. Gramsci's conception of the social formation, despite the historicism of his conception of philosophy, is a uniquely structuralist one.

He had a very strong sense both of the significance of the distinction between economic and other relations, and of the 'normality' of enormous disjunctions - non-correspondencies between them. This unevenness between levels, which ought nonetheless to be distinguished, was matched by a very 'hard' way of using the term 'super-structure'. Superstructures were not merely composed of ideas or relations between people with certain conceptions in their minds. They were subject to political and institutional organisation. In both these ways, then, his conception of a social formation was an attempt to comprehend complexity. Such a conception cannot be described as 'historicist'. But Thompson and Genovese do collapse structure and superstructure. In theory they refuse the distinction; in practice structure virtually disappears. It follows that they are bound also to reduce the full complexity of Gramsci's conception. If Gramsci is not a historicist; Thompson and Genovese are.

#### Determination

All this has important implications for the problem of determination. Some notion of determination (which is not the same as determinism) seems essential to any explanatory account of the social world whatever, certainly for an adequate history. There are limits to how far determinations can be discussed at a relatively high level of abstraction. Yet some general formulations are more coherent than others and give more exact or comprehensible protocols for work of a more specific kind. All the general formulations of a recognisably culturalist kind - 'dialectical interaction', 'consonance', 'two sides of the same coin' - seems to produce irresolvable dilemmas. If one wants to retain some notion of determination, and some sense of the specific effect of culture? and political processes, notions like 'consonance' are not very helpful. They permit indeed very little 'play' between 'social being' and 'consciousness' in the typical culturalist formulation. 'Dialectical interactions' is an attempt to avoid this dilemma, but carries no coherent or usable conception of determination. Nor is there any point where it is really shown to be operative in culturalist histories where the actual explanatory dynamic is the (undifferentiated) relation of men-in-class and in struggle. But there is here a very similar problem. Culturalist explanations are a kind of amalgam of two of Marx's dicta in truncated form - 'Men make history' and 'All history is

the history of class struggle'. But which classes make history? Which groups of men and when and how? Slaves? or slave-holders? Plebians or patricians? Workers or capitalists? It is symptomatic of the problem that whereas one of Genovese's books is titled The World the Slave-Holders Made, another, Roll Jordan Roll, is sub-titled 'the World the Slaves made'. What is missing of course are the determinant conditions on which Marx was equally emphatic and which set limits to what it is possible for any group of men or women to do, which constitute them indeed as social beings. Bearing in mind the subtlety and coherence of Althusser's general protocols on determination, one is tempted to suggest that Thompson and Genovese declare themselves Althusserians forthwith!

### 'Exploitation'

We may sum up much that has been said so far, by seeing how the general features of 'culturalism' are worked through in a particular, classic location of the paradigm. Chapter 6 of the Making of the English Working Class is an appropriate choice since it is here, according to its author, that the more 'structural' arguments of the book are to be found. (Thompson, 1976, p22). It is also the chapter that comes nearest to using Marx's own categories of economic analysis.

The chapter certainly contains most of the characteristic features of Thompson's theory and method. It is a 'theoretical' chapter in the rather idiosyncratic sense of the word discussed above. It is 'theory' as polemic. In particular it conducts an argument against the two characteristic targets of the Making: a crude economism ('steam power plus the cotton mill equals the new working class') which is in fact a vulgar Marxism; and an 'empiricist' economic history which at best radically de-contextualised the questions of 'standards of living' and, at worst, confuses history with Cold War ideology. A principled theoretical position is argued against both these positions. Political and cultural traditions and events have their own effectivity in the creation of classes. Industrial revolution, on its own, is no adequate explanation of class formation. There was no spontaneous generation of a proletariat; rather the class made itself from the pre-existing cultural materials and under the force of both economic revolution and political counter-revolution. Against the



economic historians a not dissimilar case is argued. Whatever the movements of the economic series, subjectively, 'exploitation' intensified and suffering increased. To argue thus is no imposition on 'the facts'. The sources show how people felt - a journeyman cotton spinner, indeed, testifies to how he feels for three and a half pages. Similarly, though the empiricists might argue, along with Francis Place, that conditions of existence were too varied to warrant the ascription of a single class-ness, cultural and experiential materials show a clear sense of shared interests, grievances and antagonisms.

Nevertheless, when every caution has been made, the outstanding fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of 'the working class'. This is revealed, first, in the growth of class-consciousness: the consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of other classes. And, second, in the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organisation. By 1832 there were strongly based and self-conscious working-class institutions - trade unions, friendly societies, educational and religious movements, political organisations, periodicals - working-class intellectual traditions, working-class community patterns, and a working class structure of feeling (P.194).

On both its fronts of engagement the chapter remains an extremely effective critique. It marshalls, in the kind of summary paragraph quoted above, a dense knowledge of popular movements and a fully 'cultural' reading of contemporary sources. These are compressed into lightning histories - 'grand facts' - and sent off to refute economistic and other theses. Those (un-named) who argue that the factory created the working class are shown the anticipatory work - in culture and organisation - of domestic workers, artisans and weavers, and are reminded of the importance of the mutations of earlier popular notions like 'the free-born English-man'. The 'new orthodoxy' (Sir John Clapham and some less respected economic historians) are faced with a quick sketch map of 'the political context' and the evidence of felt grievances. By this complicated mixture of critique and compressed empirical reference, a whole historiographical re-evaluation is suggested. The ideologues of Capitalism and the Historians are extremely clearly identified, growth and 'modernisation' theories are given their first hard pull through the hedge, 'the Hammonds', pioneering social historians, are very properly seen as precursors of many more modern emphasis, and are rehabilitated. The mixture is a powerful one and one

one remembers, once again, the impact of this work on a whole generation of young historians and less specialised readers.

Yet, in retrospect, it is easier to see that these victories were bought at a price. In the most 'economic' or, if one will, most 'structural' chapter in the Making, the attack on various species of economism seems to involve vacating the ground of the analysis of economic relations altogether. Economic processes are mainly represented in the chapter symbolically. It begins with perceptions of the factory - with 'observers' - and ends on the following well-known note:

By 1840 most people were "better off" than their forerunners had been fifty years before, but they had suffered and continued to suffer this slight improvement as a catastrophic experience. (p.212)

There is a tendency to identify the industrial revolution four court with the factory and, in the absence of any serious reading of Marx on precisely this transition, to fall back on the categories of a non-Marxist economics: 'process of industrialisation'; 'problems of economic growth'. Time and again, on the verge of structural moment, the argument returns to a cultural mode.

There are, however, several passages in the chapter where the fundamental theoretical limitation of 'culturalism' is almost broken through. In some of Thompson's other work, there are similar moments though we would argue that the break-through to the analysis of economic social relations - in their particular historical forms - must be a peculiarly difficult one for this historian to make without some major and conscious shift in his basic problematic. The context is the discussion of 'exploitation'. (See mainly pp.194-99 & 203-6) and it is these passages, perhaps, that warrant the term structural. On a closer look, however, it is clear that although the 'culturalist' reduction is partially broached here, the tendency to a theoretical humanism makes it extremely difficult to employ economic categories in any very exact way. They acquire instead an almost metaphorical character. This is especially the case with 'exploitation'.

Consider closely the shifts that occur in the following paragraph which is, perhaps, the most explicitly 'theoretical' section in

in the chapter, and the nearest approach in the whole of this work to exploitation conceived as an economic relation of production:

The exploitative relationship is more than the sum of grievances and mutual antagonisms. It is a relationship which can be seen to take distinct forms in different historical contexts, forms which are related to corresponding forms of ownership and State power. The classic exploitative relationship of the Industrial Revolution is depersonalised, in the sense that no lingering obligations of mutuality - of paternalism or deference or of the interests of "the Trade" - are admitted. There is no whisper of the "just" price, or of a wage justified in relation to social or moral sanctions, as opposed to the operation of free market forces. Antagonism is accepted as intrinsic to the relations of production. Managerial or supervisory functions demand the repression of all attributes except those which further the expropriation of the maximum surplus value from labour. This is the political economy which Marx anatomised in Das Kapital. The worker has become an "instrument", or an entry among other items of cost.

In fact, no complex industrial enterprise could be conducted according to such a philosophy... (pp.203-4)

This is a puzzling paragraph. What is being addressed here? Relations of production in something like the 'classic' Dobbian or Marxian sense? The references here and elsewhere to Marx and the (fleeting) use of concepts like surplus value suggest this is the case. But if we read the passage carefully it is clear that it slips in and out (and mostly out) of some structural conception of relations of production and in and out (and mostly in) of some cultural or idealist notion of capitalist 'philosophy' or 'spirit'. In terms of Dobb's critical categories, it hovers between a proper mode-of-production analysis in which relations of production (which objectively exist independent of perceptions) constitute the relations of classes at an economic level and a more Sombartian or Weberian account. (Dobb, 1945 pp4-5)

The paragraph begins with the (un-culturalist) insight that exploitation is more than felt grievances. It is a historical form of (economic?) relations. These relation(s) of production are related to juridical and political forms. So far we might regard the analysis as 'structural': it shapes up as an analysis of a mode of production. But then it breaks back into culturalist definitions. It is the subjective, felt features of the relationship that are really important - its

cultural-psychological aspects: depersonalisation, the decline of mutuality, the destruction of custom, the forms of legitimation. Thompson is back - too soon - to his famous 'ab sence', 'values, culture, law, and that area where what is normally called moral choice evinces itself' (1976, p23). There is then, apparently, a brief return to the structural level: 'functions demand the repression' etc, but we soon discover that what is being discussed here are not the structures of capitalist economic relations as such, but 'political economy' (i.e. representations of these relations) and a 'philosophy' which cannot, in practice, be altogether enforced.

One more example must suffice. Earlier in the same chapter, it is argued that exploitation became both more 'intensive' and more 'transparent'. (P.198). The term 'economic exploitation' is used, promising precision. There follows a typical compressed account of agrarian and industrial change: enclosure, the loss of common rights, the replacement of the small master or small producer by the large employer, the employment of women and children, the introduction of factory organisation and the new labour disciplines 'all contributed to the transparency of the process of exploitation'. (p.198). Of course each of these points is elaborated in detail in the chapters that follow on field labourers, artisans and weavers. What is never elaborated, however, is the notion of exploitation and its 'intensification'. One way in which the changes described might have been thought, for instance, is in terms of the rising rate of exploitation, but this economic and partly quantitative ground is largely left to the economic historians, and, towards the end of chapter, Thompson appears to accept their findings based largely on wages and consumption. (p.212). It is precisely at this point of his critique, however, that he really needs to employ Marx's economic categories to identify changes at the level of productive relations, and to question, more radically, a view of economic amelioration based on wages, prices and the sphere of exchange.

Of course there is nothing unproblematic about an analysis on these lines, though Marx himself supplied us with many of the materials and a whole set of further concepts - absolute and relative surplus value and the transition from manufacture to machinofacture for

instance - that help to make sense of this period. But this is alien to the whole direction of Thompson's analysis; instead we return, post haste, to the cultural level. 'Exploitation' is reduced, in the end, to a simple 'humanist' conception:

We can now see something of the truly catastrophic nature of the Industrial Revolution; as well as some of the reasons why the English working class took form in these years. The people were subjected simultaneously to an intensification of two intolerable forms of relationships: those of economic exploitation and of political oppression. Relations between employer and labourer were becoming both harsher and less personal; and while it is true that this increased the potential freedom of the worker ... this 'freedom' meant that he felt his unfreedom more ... (pp.198-99).

'Intolerable', 'harsher', 'less personal', 'felt' all signal the re-entry into the world of cultural evaluations, the inability, indeed, to escape it. These examples do seem to show some of the ultimate limitations of the culturalist paradigm and of socialist-humanist history as a historiographical form. Definite and precise categories, necessary for a really systematic analysis, acquire a literary or metaphorical character - they become, as it were, experiential categories themselves. In this way histories like the Making are very far removed from Marx's own conception of historical materialism as 'science'.

#### Conclusions

We might end by stating what we have and have not set out to do in this part of the paper. We have not been concerned to review the whole oeuvre of two major historians - both of whom are productive to a quite intimidating degree. We have been concerned, instead, to take some of their work as examples of a particular approach to history and to theory. We are not concerned to write critical reviews but to examine, critically, a particular position. Our criticisms of 'culturalism' may not apply equally to every text. We have not, for example, discussed any of Genovese's work apart from Roll Jordan Roll and The Political Economy of Slavery; we have not discussed Thompson's most recent major text, Whigs and Hunters which seems in some ways to break from his earlier paradigm (though it is more about modes of predation than of production).



We have drawn heavily on critical categories developed by Louis Althusser, but our own position is not that of a generalised assault on culturalist practices from 'structuralist' perspectives. We distance ourselves from this position in two ways. First, as we show in the third part of this paper, there are definite problems with tendencies derivable from Reading Capital and with attempts to extend a part of the logic of that work. Secondly, we would insist that there are elements within culturalism that ought to be preserved. As a moment in the development of Marxism, socialist-humanist history has an important place. Works like the Making stand as a permanent reminder that any account of the world that does not come to terms with intentionality, 'subjective experience' or 'the inwardness' of culture risks reversion to mechanical notions of society or to fundamentally conspiratorial ideas of 'control'. Neglect of the content of conceptions and 'values' and of the nature of their 'hold' or 'appeal' in particular moments for particular classes and groups similarly returns us to the crudest models of ideological processes - models which fall back on unilateral manipulations or transmissions and which are astonishingly persistent, not least within Marxism. In this sense Thompson's 'experience', or concepts that indicate, less ambiguously, a similar space, are absolutely indispensable. If 'culturalist' history is inadequate, without a history of intentionality we can have no adequate explanatory history at all. If this is 'humanism', it is humanism in a quite specific sense. An insistence on the importance of what Marx called, generally, 'consciousness' (and regarded as an attribute of men through all history) cannot be dismissed as a mere romanticism, or as the intrusion of 'moral' considerations into theoretical and scientific matters. Rather it is a kind of provisional description of an object which science itself must grasp.

Yet we hope to have shown that the costs of an overbearing stress on 'experience' are too high. We are robbed, in the first place, of a powerful tool of analysis. Culturalism, preferring 'authenticity' to 'theory', renders its own theoretical project guilty, surreptitious and only partly explicit. It places a kind of embargo on abstraction, though a certain amount of smuggling of the most refined of goods must still go on. By 'abstraction' here

is meant something different from 'theory' in orthodox sociology, or the 'hypothesis' or testable propositions of the Popperians, or the 'models' or 'ideal types' of a Weberian methodology. Genuine abstractions are simplified formal representations of really-existing relations, as true as far as they go, true at that level of abstraction. Now, to reject the moment of abstraction, even as part of a method, is a hopelessly contradictory procedure if conducted from within the Marxist tradition. Abstraction is central to the method of Capital and is also much referred to in the Marx-Engels correspondence (e.g. Marx & Engels 1975 pp. 29-39, and 98-99). It is the inclusion of the higher levels of abstraction in Capital (that which refers to the capitalist mode of production as such) that makes it more than a history book. We would argue that all works of history are going to have to look more like that, moving systematically through different levels of abstraction describing and examining particular histories and situations but 'doing theory' all the time.

It is not only in its method that culturalism departs from Marxism. It also suppresses Marx's major substantive achievements - the analysis of the forms, tendencies and laws of the capitalist mode of production. Since Marx's anatomy of economic social relations is based on the English case, the neglect in the Making of the English Working Class is all the more astonishing. Culturalist pre-suppositions, so we have argued, make this inevitable. The consequences are very serious. It is not enough to say that culturalism supplies an absence in Marxism or, reversing the relation, that we must add to insights about culture, Marx's insights about 'economics'. Nor is it adequate to defend neglect of economic relations by reference to the work of other sympathetic historians. (c.f. Thompson, 1976, p.25). Absences of this kind must actually lead to re-definitions - the whole field of concepts is effected. So, for example, the reduction of 'class' to 'class consciousness' or to how men and women feel about social relationships is a serious impoverishment of Marxist categories and must have definite theoretical and practical effects. It produces serious difficulties, for instance, when it is necessary to analyse moments in the history of classes when cultural and political fragmentations do actually prove, in political outcomes, to be more powerful than any sense of class unity. Do classes then

not exist? One might consider the question for the 1850s and 1860s in Britain and for the period of the 'disappearance' of class in the post-World War II period, especially the 1950s.

Faced with periods like these (much of the eighteenth is indeed another), the characteristic culturalist move is to show that real cultural differences persist - there is no actual 'embourgeoisement'. This strategem may often suffice but has its own dangers and limitations - the danger for instance of searching the record for only the most dramatic or conflictual of class relations; the limitation of having to hang class designations (patricians? plebians?) on some pretty imprecise and idiosyncratic criteria of attitude or collective organisation.

A much more powerful strategem is to show how, even in moments of consensual hegemony, or the political defeat or prostration of subordinate classes, class remains integral to the very organisation, reproduction and movement of the social formation in question.

This requires not only a great deal of careful research but also some conception of class or classes which does not rest on cultural or experiential criteria alone and retains a quite 'orthodox' stress on economic positions and relations. With such a conception it is possible to 'think' the disjunctions and autonomies of economic and ideological relations. It is possible, theoretically, to show how men and women may be constituted as class subjects within economic relations and yet be moved by forms of ideology and politics which address them in other terms - as 'citizens' or as 'the people' or as members of the imperial race, or as 'the respectable' as against the rest. (These formulations owe much to Laclau, 1977).

In both these respects, then, in terms of theory and epistemology, we hope to have shown that culturalism is inadequate. In its over-reaction to economistic and mechanical Marxisms, it actually suppresses some earlier strengths of the tradition, strengths best seen in Dobbs, Studies and in the transition debates. It is all the more important, standing as it were in a third phase of the development of a Marxist historiography,

older Dobbian practice.

The problem is a much broader one than faithfulness to Marx's original insights. As we have seen, culturalism belongs to that range of 'sociologies' - using the term in its widest sense - that seek to grasp phenomena in their own terms, in their forms of appearance in the world. Culturalism does not altogether refuse questions of 'structure' or 'process' - it is significant that Thompson wishes to appropriate the word to his own usages (e.g. 1976, p18.) Class, however experientially rendered, supplies a kind of structure, yet it is a structure that sits on the surface of things, is there to be seen by anyone who looks (or listens). The problem, in general, with such sociologies, is that they abandon the ground of 'determinations' or of explanations of why things (or relations) appear as they do. So it is, when we finish reading the Making of the English Working Class. We can picture all this movement and strife and human energy. We identify, are moved and comprehend it all imaginatively. We may (through some 1960s resonances) be politically excited and animated. Yet we still want (and need) to know how these things came to be.

### PART III. RATIONALISM: HINDESS AND HIRST.

#### Foundations

We have been trying to suggest that a nuanced employment of the categories 'economism' and 'culturalism' is of considerable critical value in the assessment of marxist historiographies. The responsibility for the uses and abuses of theoretical 'pairs' like economism/humanism (culturalism) must lie in the wide impact which the work of Louis Althusser has had on marxism in general, and in the renewed attention to the 'science of history' in particular. It would be beyond the scope of this short paper to give an adequate assessment of Althusser's contribution to historical materialism: this would involve a great deal of general argument and close textual detail with regard to the relation between history and philosophy, marxism and science, and so forth. It is also a particularly difficult task in view of the fact that Althusser's alleged 'theoreticism' reveals a surprisingly nuanced and ambiguous attitudes towards the 'concrete', towards 'history'. Surprising, this, because it is a widely held and not wholly justified position that Althusserian approaches necessarily rule out due respect for the primacy of reality over thought. However, if Althusser himself is not fully open to such charges, the work of Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst (especially Pre-capitalist Modes of Production) might be seen as a critique of Althusser's limitations and ambiguities having the crucial consequences, for the purposes of this paper, of problematising the notion of the concrete, and of rejecting the very possibility of a (marxist) science of history. We therefore discuss it as an example of a 'rationalist' position which attempts to surmount difficulties common to the previous perspectives we have indicated.

Some characterisation of the project of Althusser and Balibar's Reading Capital is necessary in order to place Hindess and Hirst's denial of history as a legitimate object of marxism. In Reading Capital, Althusser argued that the character of Marx's epistemology definitively separated marxism as a scientific enterprise from all forms of empiricism, economism, and humanism. These doctrines represent a range of positions from the absolute primacy of the technical productive forces to the replacement



of economic classes at the heart of marxism's conception of history by the concept of 'man'. Althusser tried to show that although superficially contradictory to one another, the positions within this range shared 'essentialist' notions of a self-moving 'subject' of history, having privileged causal status with respect to its forms of appearance in society and history. In short, economism and humanism were shown to be more or less sophisticated philosophies of history which can only hinder marxism's scientific project. However, the notion of historical science, for Althusser, is not one which emphasises, for example, verification procedures - an alternative widely adopted by historians and rationalised by academic empiricist philosophy in opposition to 'speculative history'. On the contrary; the empiricist idea of the primacy of the perceptual 'given' is as philosophical and speculative as those philosophical dogmas it aspires to contradict. Althusser thus plausibly asserts that empiricism as well as idealist essentialism shares a common epistemology such that the relation between thought and reality, or concepts and the concrete is i) treated as a philosophical 'problem', and ii) is resolved by a short-cut reduction of one term of the couplet to its essence as represented by the other term.

From even this abstract summary, it should be clear that Althusser's notion of a 'science of history' is, in intention at least, thoroughly theoretical: it must be produced by the systematic correlation of marxist concepts in a way which transcends the reductionisms of the observational given and of speculative philosophies of history, be the latter dependent on economism or cultural humanism. Althusser's alternative, schematically, is a conception of the social formation governed by a complex or structural causality. He insists that structural and interdependent social relations and levels could be exhaustively analysed in a marxist fashion without recourse to a monocausal reductionism or to a philosophical subject, pattern, or goal of 'History'. At the same time, Althusser stressed the 'openness' of the scientific procedure which establishes and deploys these categories, as against the artificial and ideological closures to what are in any case 'false' problems erected by typically philosophical conceptions of causality, social formations, and history. This concern to emphasise ideology-free marxist

science and its thoroughly theoretical character we may, for convenience, term marxist rationalism, and it is rationalism which makes possible the view that economism and culturalism as histories are no more than equally limited and internally related projects which must be subject<sup>ed</sup> to a radical critique.

While having noted our view that Althusser's own arguments are not wholly susceptible of a simple and schematic summary, Balibar's contribution to Reading Capital was in general terms an application of Althusser's protocols in a reconstruction of the 'basic concepts' of historical materialism. And Balibar's theory can be seen to fit the rationalist schema in such a way as to give rise to intractable problems for Althusserianism. On the basis that 'history must constitute its object before it can receive it', Balibar argued that 'mode of production' was the central concept of marxist analysis, and the crux of Marx's latent theory of historical periodisation. As we have seen, such a notion is by no means original: it was, for example, constitutive of Dobb's work. However, two further features mark off the Balibarian conception from other interpretations of Marx. First, following (and perhaps over-extending) Althusser, mode of production is conceived as a structured whole comprising economic, ideological, and (in class societies) political 'levels'. Now while the economy is determinant in the last instance, the mode of causality involved is neither mechanical nor expressive, but structural. The determinant economic structure is said to be present only in and as its effects - that is, the other levels. Second, the basic elements of the economic level are invariant (the labourer, the means of production, and the non-labourer, linked by variant relations of property ownership and a connection of 'real appropriation'. It would be superfluous to go further into details here. What is important is that while Balibar is aware that there can be no theory of possible modes a priori, there are nevertheless certain invariant features of all modes of production which Balibar considers to be of importance. The theoretical status of these invariant elements, it would seem, can in no sense be reduced to the 'obvious' fact (indeed, tautology), that human agents must produce in any labour process.

The effect of Balibar's analysis is that history must be conceived

as a series of discontinuous modes of production, each structured around a determinant instance which has<sup>a</sup>/formally unchanging basis.

### Precapitalist Modes of Production

Let us now turn to Hindess and Hirst. These authors accept Althusser's rejection of economism and humanism, but detect contradictions in his project which show that the Althusserian critique is actually not radical enough. They themselves propose to show the impossibility of Balibar's position by combining an even greater drive to theoretical purity (which involves the rejection of all history), with the claim to reinstate the 'material causality' of the class struggle as a central category. Hindess and Hirst criticise Althusser and Balibar as follows.

- a) The notion of structural causality, they argue, while formulated against essentialism, is itself essentialist. This is because, by definition, a structure which is nothing outside its effects implies a self-sustaining or 'eternal' social totality. History thus becomes a succession of 'eternities' - a notion which escapes self-contradiction only at the cost of regarding each mode as a variant of a trans-historical combination of 'basic' elements.
- b) The theory cannot, therefore, account for historical change or class struggle. Balibar, it should be said, is aware of this problem, and attempts to overcome it by theory of social reproduction which would involve the possibility of a transformation of the structure themselves. However, such an attempt must fail, since he initially defines the problem of reproduction in terms of structural causality. Hindess and Hirst thus point to the fact that Balibar has to conceive transition between modes of production as itself a mode, or else introduce factors (such as the forces of production) which teleologically detach themselves from the structural mesh to produce a new mode. The ploy thus both muffles the 'basic' concept and undermines the general validity of structural causality - a supposed validity upon which the entire theory was predicated.
- c) Hindess and Hirst argue that such confusions have their roots, ironically, in the fact that Althusser and Balibar themselves retain the empiricist 'problem of knowledge'. This is because they continue to recognise the philosophical primacy of an object outside theory which the thought-object somehow appropriates in the 'knowledge-mechanism'. The critics term this epistemology a

rationalist one. In this more specific sense, rationalism means that the order and causality of concepts are taken to be the order and causality of the material world. In short, Hindess and Hirst accuse Althusser and Balibar of producing yet another philosophy of history, however sophisticated and however marxist.

Hindess and Hirst reject the idea of a general theory of modes of production. They propose to clarify the object of marxist theory by doing away altogether with the pre-critical concept of history, which they see as inevitably tied to bogus philosophical difficulties. Clearly, they would respect no distinction between 'history' and 'logic' or theory. Marxist theory, for Hindess and Hirst, serves to formulate general concepts of modes of production, which specify the conditions which must be fulfilled by specific concepts of modes of production (feudal, ancient, slave, etc.) This theoretical task contributes to the elaboration of what they see as the primary object of marxist theory - the 'current situation'. The current situation itself is the product of theoretical and political practice. They argue that their position will clarify errors and ambiguities in marxist theory, by denying the dualism upon which philosophy of history is based. In so doing, the temptation to introduce philosophical substantialism - that is, the substitution of the development of concepts for the real historical process - can be avoided. Hindess and Hirst assert that, by definition, history is all that is past. Now, all that is past exists only through its representations. The claim for a 'marxist history' would necessarily involve regarding marxism as merely another set of ideological representation: of a reference external to, but commonly designated by, different theories, namely the mythical object, 'the past'. Marxism cannot therefore have the past as its object, and cannot be a science of history, for no such thing is possible.

The legitimate scope of the concepts of modes of production is, they contend, central to the real object of marxist theory, the current situation - not least due to the theoretical and political tangles left to marxism by Althusser. The architecture of their proposal can be summarised as follows. A mode of production is an articulated combination of a set of productive forces and definite relations of production, with priority given to the latter. Against

technicising, it is argued that nothing in the concept of improved technique, for example, can specify definite forms of social relations. Concepts of particular modes of production, in turn, specify 'variants' and 'elements' of themselves. These concepts together indicate concrete social formations when an economic mode of production (in a variant form) exists together with its ideological and political conditions of existence, or in the case of communist modes, with only ideological conditions. A mode thus requires such conditions, and is in that sense dependent upon them, but the forms they take, and whether or not they can ensure the continuance of the mode, are things which cannot be known in theory or in advance. Such a degree of conceptual specification would involve the kind of rationalism of which Balibar is guilty. The state of conditions of existence is determined by the material causality of the class struggle, and this is the only form of causality which Hindess and Hirst endorse. The class struggle can also therefore create the conditions under which transition from one mode to another is made possible, but it is quite impossible to establish any necessary succession from one mode of production to another: marxism is not a teleological theory, not an evolutionism. The bulk of Pre-capitalist Modes of Production is devoted to an extensive application of these theoretical propositions: in turn, the primitive communist, the ancient, the slave, and the feudal modes are interrogated, and the transition from feudalism to capitalism is problematized.

#### Assessment and Critique

In sum, we can say that Pre-capitalist Modes of Production attempts three things:

- i) To return to their proper levels of specificity both conceptual necessity (the logical relations between theoretical propositions) and the 'materiality' of the class struggle.
- ii) To avoid both rationalism and all forms of teleology.
- iii) To produce a 'concrete' object while escaping the allegedly false concreteness of the empiricist object 'history'.

Before taking up critical assessment, it should be said that the proposal is an exciting and novel one. There can be no doubt that the rationalism of Reading Capital, and especially Balibar, is open to such criticism. The impressive negative-critical



manner of Hindess and Hirst should not be undervalued in that respect. Whatever the consequences, at least the intention to rid marxism of a substantialist philosophy from those areas in which it does not belong is an important aspect of critique. The emphasis on conceptual clarity is a refreshing presence: too often the theoretical ideas crucial to marxism stagnate into dogma. No good history can be produced unless the organising conceptual framework aspires to self-consciousness and rigour. Hindess and Hirst ambitiously but rightly point out the need to sharpen up such basic concepts which are, frankly, weaker than they should be: mode of production, social formation, class structure, superstructures. Further, the proposition that 'mode of production' necessarily has an economic definition is a useful counter to the difficulties engendered by Balibar and Poulantzas and others, that is, that it should be seen as a multi-levelled structure. That kind<sup>of</sup> position, one which effectively conflates mode of production and social formation, can only breed confusion, as can be seen in Poulantzas' later work on the identification of classes. However, the important concept of conditions of existence in Hindess and Hirst, in conjunction with 'material causality' (both actually adapted from Althusser), ensures that the schema is anything but economistic: on the contrary, it militates against a general determinism, but without necessarily ditching a principle of determinacy.

These positions produce useful theoretical clarifications of specific modes of production (as Dobb himself pointed out in a review). The Asiatic mode, for example, is shown to be extremely dubious theoretical proposition, and certain elements of and problems with the feudal mode are given important treatment. Generally, Hindess and Hirst are quick to take up their positions at the slightest sign of either economism or the illegitimate extension of superstructural factors (especially legal relations) into the economic definitions itself. In view of these positive, and undoubtedly challenging features, it is unfortunate - and disappointing - that the book has been largely ignored by historians.

However, it is a frequent feature of attempts to replace philosophical encroachments into 'science' by yet another philosophical variant. If such a case can be made against Althusser, then it also reveals

the contradictions which render Pre-capitalist Modes of Production an unacceptable position. Whatever critical value the operation has had, it is incapable of providing a body of knowledge; a theoretical shell has been constructed which can have no substantive centre.

Asad and Wolpe (1976) have convincingly argued that the general definition of a mode of production given in the introduction shifts in different chapters to accomodate what can only be thought of as the historical realities of societies which produce under the mode concerned. Clearly, if this is the case then the central and first proposition - that the concept of 'mode of production' lays down the necessary conditions for specific modes - is fundamentally undermined. For example, the general concept states that modes are defined by the form of the appropriation of surplus product, yet the chapter on the slave mode of production defines that mode by the fact that it is the entire product of labour which is appropriated. Asad and Wolpe thoroughly trace these discrepancies through several definitions, and leave little room for confidence in the verbal formulations, though it could be said that on some other important counts (such as the claim that not only do Hindess and Hirst overwork the term 'empiricism', they don't actually understand it precisely) the case against is overpitched.

There are other sets of discrepancies: for example, the absurd inclusion of a chapter on the ancient mode. By defining the mode as 'appropriation by right of citizenship', the authors break their own strictures against superstructural definitions of the economy (elsewhere ably used by Hirst in a review of Perry Anderson's culturalism). Similarly, there are a number of crucial ambiguities on the nature of kinship as ideology in the discussion of the primitive communist mode. The fact that, at least in the case of the ancient mode, Hindess and Hirst admit their transgression yet allow it to remain, is astonishing.

Such discrepancies and counter-examples weigh against the idea that a purely conceptual procedure can deliver the promised goods of specific analysis. Take, for instance, the notion of conditions of existence. While, it seems, variants of a mode of production

are specified by the concept of the mode, conditions of existence cannot be. It follows that conditions are a consequence of class struggle but variants are not. This gives rise to large problems; for how do we explain the effects of class struggle on, say, the changes from one kind of rent to another in the feudal mode? If we were to believe the historians (according to one caricature), it would seem that the very conditions and variants - and indeed modes themselves - are the effects of particularised historical events, initiatives, and struggles. And Marx himself, in the chapter of Capital on the genesis of ground rent, carefully - and somewhat inconclusively - considered the problem of 'elements' and 'conditions' in his discussion of the changes from one form of feudal rent to others (including transitional forms). This raises difficulties for Hindess and Hirst. What exactly are elements, variants, and conditions that they should be of such different species? Can there be a conceptual limit to the scope of class struggle? What is the nature of the 'materiality' of class struggle?

In fact, these questions, and many like them, cannot be satisfactorily answered by the authors. This is due to a persistent rationalism of a Balibar kind. A social formation is conceived as a mode of production together with its conditions of existence, and a conjuncture is a specific state of those conditions. That is to say, the existence of a concept has pertinent effects on what exists and in what relations of determination. Such rationalism - as in Balibar's case - is a product of both the drive to conceptual self-sufficiency and the recognition of the material reality of struggle. But it is therefore also a contradictory product. Despite the anti-history, Hindess and Hirst engage in debates about real historical questions (with Genovese on the American Civil War, and with Balibar on the reality of transitions.). The recognition of reality is expressed in the 'materialist' terminology - material causality, class struggle - while its suppression is guaranteed by either the lack of a content for these concepts (material causality), or the transposition of content from the status of contingency to that of strained conceptual necessity (for example, conditions of existence and variants)

There is, consequently, a failure to engage squarely with important

argument. The authors characterise history as whatever is past, thus reducing what Marx would surely have seen as only the point of departure for a multi-determined analysis to a 'forced abstraction' (see 1857 Introduction). This condemns together, and in advance, theories which might be in all other respects incommensurable. It presupposes that all other questions of theoretical history (periodisation, theoretical scope and coherence) are automatically subordinate to that simple bi-polar distinction. It is a purely verbal manoeuvre which thus relies on an imprecise level of generality, and on the theoretical value of a couplet (past/present) which will not bear elaboration and which assumes, paradoxically, empiricist means of identifying cases. The further claim that marxist history, being just another set of representations, is ideological, is equally banal. For, providing the simplest empiricism is avoided, it is clear that not only history appears through its representations (eyes, documents, theory??), but so does political practice, current situations, and theories of modes production. Holding an anti-empiricist position in Pre-capitalist Modes of Production, but, unlike their later work, retaining a science/ideology distinction, the notion of representation is arbitrary and unclear. For Hindess and Hirst the object of marxist theory is the current situation, yet they have (as Asad and Wolpe suggest) made the concrete elaboration of such a situation by the theoretical concepts impossible. The supremacy of the concepts ultimately rests on their withdrawal from the terms of possible explanatory power.

Pre-capitalist Modes of Production is a text ridden with unevenness in quality and rigour, and is structured by contradictions. The contradictions of Balibar's rationalism are reproduced and formalised. The argument against rationalism in the text takes the form of a denial of the epistemological dualism which tempts the transposition of the conceptual order on to the world of material causality. Yet the very denial reveals a belief in the non-reducibility of the concrete to concepts. Seeking to avoid both empiricism and rationalism, Hindess and Hirst reproduce the logical form of knowledge as appropriation, but can say nothing about it. This fact should not however, at least in this text, imply an agnosticism or neutrality, for the contradictions of the position stem from the attempt to push rationalism as a theoretical

tendency within marxism to higher levels of conceptual self-sufficiency.

In conclusion, we should note that some of these critical points have been acknowledged in subsequent books and papers by Hindess and Hirst - in particular the 'auto-critique', Mode of Production and Social Formation. They now see the fault of such texts as Reading Capital and Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production as the pernicious effects of any epistemology in the social sciences, and they offer a critique of epistemology as such. The latter is, they argue, a dogmatic form of thought which must always uncritically presuppose its own validity. Rival theories are condemned simply in view of their form, and wherever they doubt the 'privileged' concepts and objects of the epistemology in question. Kantianism, empiricism, Althusserian rationalism, and any epistemology at all share this structure, Hindess and Hirst thus advocate a 'bracketing out' of all such philosophical questions, especially that of 'scientificity'. We also find, as a consequence of the excision, a replacement of the primacy of the abstract 'mode of production' by the more flexible and concrete 'social formation'. However, the authors insist on the concepts lack of a 'real' reference outside the field of 'discursive practice'. The only criteria by which to judge the usefulness of a theory or concept is in terms of politico-theoretical 'problematization' or in those of internal coherence. Briefly, it may be said that 'knowledge' as something implying a non-conceptual reference and a degree of 'objective' validity is now a quite unacceptable notion for Hindess and Hirst.

Whatever the merits of the new position, it seems to leave the 'rationalist' alternative to economism and culturalism as represented by Pre-capitalist Modes of Production with no defenders. It has been part of the purposes of this paper to argue that none of the three positions discussed actually do exist as coherent wholes in their pure form. Beyond that, much theoretical work has to be done in order that positions having coherence but which are also useful for concrete research can be developed. To be adequate, such theories will have to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of the three perspectives we have outlined, yet must avoid both eclecticism and the claim to



eternal validity. This will involve theoretical choice and argument. We would assert - it cannot be substantiated here - that the marxist theory of history can be developed in such a way as to produce a body of theoretical propositions and a means of informed concrete research and analysis without having to resort to justification of a purely epistemological kind. The poles of empiricist myopia and (to use Hindess and Hirst's terms) the rationalist 'quagmire' do not preempt and dictate to the whole field of theoretical argument. Insofar as this is a tenet of the latest stance of Hindess and Hirst, there is something to be said for it. However, this should not be taken as a denial of the epistemological consequences of supporting one set of basic concepts and arguments as against others. It is Hindess and Hirst's mistake to think that to deny the primacy of epistemological questions in historical theory implies their necessary and radical elimination, but a stance of total anti-epistemology can be no less dogmatic and arbitrary than full-blown rationalism or empiricism. Their latest texts, it seems to us, deny epistemology as a form of argumentation in precisely the way in which epistemology is said to operate. For all the sophisticated self-criticism, Hindess and Hirst remain unaware of - or simply repress - the philosophical nature of their rejection of philosophy, the essentialist manner in which they condemn all essentialisms. With due recognition of philosophy's necessarily limited role, the inescapable epistemological consequences of theoretical debate can sometimes be put to some use in the reformulation and extension of the concepts of historical materialism.

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This paper was completed before the simultaneous appearance of a number of significant contributions to the debates on the formation of capitalism. See especially Jairus Banaji 'Modes of Production in a Materialist Conception of History' Capital and Class No 3 (Autumn 1977); Robert Duflossis 'From Domesday to World System': A Critical Review of the Literature on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism' Radical History Review Vol 4 No 1 (Winter 1977); Robert Brenner 'The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism' New Left Review No 104 (July-August 1977); Scott Cook 'Beyond the 'Formen': Towards a Revised Marxist Theory of Precapitalist Formations and the Transitions to Capitalism' Journal of Peasant Studies Vol 4 No 4 (July 1977). It is not the case however that these arguments provide any major re-evaluation of our particular concern in the first part of this paper: Dobb's contribution to marxist historiography.