5 Historical materialism in 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production'

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Introduction

'The general theory of historical materialism', wrote Eric Hobsbawm in his introduction to the first English translation of the 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production',

> requires only that there should be a succession of modes of production, though not necessarily any particular modes, and perhaps not in any particular predetermined order. Looking at the actual historical record, Marx thought that he could distinguish a certain number of socio-economic formations and a certain succession. But if he had been mistaken in his observations, or if these had been based on partial and therefore misleading information, the general theory of historical materialism would remain unaffected.
>
> (Hobsbawm 1964: 20)[1]

This seems, on the face of it, a very large claim. Can it really be sustainable to say that Marx could have been seriously mistaken in his historical observations and still be right in his general theory? At first glance, this claim suggests a rather casual approach to the relation between empirical specificity and theoretical generalization, or, perhaps, a reduction of historical materialism to an empty methodological abstraction, all form and no substance. Yet, on closer consideration, much can be learned by putting Marx to this test and asking how well his general theory stands up irrespective of historical error. So let us begin with an even larger claim: Marx was indeed seriously wrong in his historical observations, for reasons having less to do with his own shortcomings than with the existing state of historical scholarship at the time of his writing the *Grundrisse*; but the edifice he constructed on the foundation of this faulty knowledge reveals the power, not the weakness, of historical materialism as he conceived it, which pushed him beyond the limitations of existing scholarship.

Marx and pre-capitalist history: oriental and ancient

Marx in 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production' set out to examine the various ways in which a division of labour disrupted the primitive unity of the tribal community, not only the unity among its members but, more particularly, the unity of workers with the conditions of their labour and subsistence. Capitalism would be the final product of that disruption, the final 'release of the worker from the soil as his natural workshop' (Marx 1973: 471). But it was preceded by forms of property which had moved beyond primitive communalism, though the worker still related 'to the objective conditions of his labour as his property' and there remained a 'natural unity of labour with its material [*sachlich*] presuppositions'. In these pre-capitalist property forms – which included 'small, free landed property as well as … communal landownership resting on the oriental commune' – the worker had 'an objective existence independent of labour', relating to himself 'as proprietor, as master of the conditions of his reality' and to others either as co-proprietors of communal property or as independent proprietors like himself (Marx 1973: 471).

Marx distinguished essentially three pre-capitalist forms, the oriental or Asiatic, the ancient or classical (Greek and Roman), and the feudal form, derived, in specific conditions, from a 'Germanic' path out of primitive communalism. It is not always clear whether we should regard all or any of these as points in a process of historical succession or as alternative routes out of the most primitive communal property. Perhaps the most likely reading is that the 'Asiatic' form stands more or less by itself as the least dynamic route out of the primitive state, while the ancient alternative is more dynamic. The feudal form that follows it is, of course, the one that leads to capitalism. It may not even matter whether Marx had in mind a historical sequence, if his principal objective was to explain the specificity of capitalism (his discussion of pre-capitalist forms is, after all, part of a discussion of capital), in contrast to other ways in which humanity has related to the conditions of its labour and subsistence. Whatever his intentions, for the moment it suffices to say that his accounts of all three major forms were, in varying ways and degrees, misleading, when not downright wrong.

The oriental form has probably been the most controversial. This form, which according to Marx is the most long-lasting and resistant to development, retains a type of communal property embodied in a higher authority, typically a despotic state. This communal authority stands over and above smaller local communities, where manufacture and agriculture are united, and takes surplus labour in the form of tribute. Among the objections levelled at this model is that it collapses modern forms – particularly modern India – into ancient 'oriental despotisms'. Sometimes Marx is accused of Eurocentrism, especially because of his insistence on the stagnation of the 'oriental' form – although, since he includes in this category certain non-Asiatic societies, the objection may have less to do with a distinction between east and west than with his use of the term 'oriental' or 'Asiatic' to describe the stagnant type. Yet in some respects, his

account of the Asiatic mode has more to recommend it than do his descriptions of the other two major forms. There is ample historical and archaeological evidence of ancient states very much like Marx's oriental or 'Asiatic' form, even if they have not been exclusively or even predominantly in Asia. In fact, it is arguable that these states were more the rule than the exception in ancient civilizations – a point to which we shall return. What is most misleading about Marx's account has to do with how he situates it on his historical map and in particular, as we shall see, where he places it in relation to the ancient form.

The ancient form turns out to be the most problematic of all, and the misleading account of this type certainly has profound consequences for Marx's view of historical development. When the archaeological discoveries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, together with more recent scholarship on slavery and other aspects of ancient Greco-Roman history, revolutionized our understanding of classical antiquity, they threatened apparently important aspects of historical materialism, not just Marx's suggestions about the sequence of modes of production but, more fundamentally, theories about the origins and development of property, class and the state that we associate with Marx and Engels.[2]

In the ancient form, which appears to emerge directly out of primitive communalism, property is still communal, but the commune is now a civic community to which members belong as citizens, in a society already characterized by a division of labour between town and country. The ancient form is an urban civilization founded on agriculture and landed property. 'Membership in the commune remains the presupposition for the appropriation of land and soil, but, as a member of the commune, the individual is a private proprietor' (Marx 1973: 475). The natural presuppositions of labour belong to the proprietor, 'but this belonging [is] mediated by his being a member of the state'. The community of citizens stands over and against those outside it who cannot own property, most particularly slaves, who themselves constitute a major part of the city's communal property. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had elaborated on this division between the citizen community and the body of slaves, describing it as a class relation, with the state as an association of citizens against a producing class of slaves. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels spells out the sequence of development, which also seems to underlie Marx's analysis in 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production': the tribal or gentile order, still visible in the 'heroic' age of the Homeric epics, gives way to the state, as primitive communalism is disrupted by a division of labour and the emergence of classes.[3]

Archaeological discoveries, the decipherment of the ancient Mycenaean script, Linear B, and recent scholarship present a rather different picture. They reveal advanced civilizations in Bronze Age Greece, long before the age of Homer and very different from the 'heroic' society he depicts. Minoan and Mycenaean Greece apparently had states that much more closely resembled Marx's Asiatic form, if on a smaller scale than in the ancient empires of Asia: bureaucratic states in which the central monarchical power was the principal

appropriating force, extracting surpluses from surrounding villages of peasant producers, where the division between appropriators and producers was a direct relation between state and subjects, and where private property and class were undeveloped. Although Homeric heroes purport to represent these pre-classical Greek civilizations, it is now clear that the society described in the epics, to the extent that it existed at all, was something much closer to Homer's own day, long after the collapse of the Bronze Age states and with a very different type of state, the classical polis, already in prospect. The collapse of the old states remains a mystery, but it seems reasonable to believe that the aristocracy already visible in the Homeric epics does not represent the early dissolution of a primitive community, tribal disintegration and emerging class divisions, but rather a remnant of an earlier, more developed state with a much more structured hierarchy.

At the very least, then, we can draw certain conclusions which challenge the old Marxist picture: the 'purest, classic' form of class division did not 'spring directly and mainly out of class oppositions which develop in gentile society itself'. There are no known examples of an 'ancient' form, as a pristine transition from primitive communalism and an alternative to the 'Asiatic'. If anything, the 'Asiatic' form begins to look more like the 'purest, classic' pathway out of primitive communalism. If this is so, then we must adopt a very different view of the development of class and state. We have to consider the strong possibility that some form of state, as a direct appropriator of surplus labour, preceded private property and class, and that the development of landed aristocracies such as emerged in ancient Greece and Rome may presuppose the prior existence, and the destruction, of such hierarchical state structures.

It also needs to be said that the development of slavery on a significant scale in ancient Greece was a later development and that its growth was the product of an already existing class division within the civic community (see Wood 1988, Chapter II). Nor did slavery preclude the labour of citizens. The polis had developed to deal with internal divisions between landlords and peasants, and the majority of citizens would continue to labour for a livelihood throughout the democracy. The resolution or containment of the struggles between landlords and labouring classes was achieved by offering peasants and craftsmen a civic identity, strengthening the civic community against aristocratic power and privilege; and this gave an impetus to the enslavement of outsiders by giving citizens a certain protection from various forms of 'extra-economic' exploitation and juridical dependence. The juridical and political freedom of citizens, both appropriators and producers, was a condition of the autonomous development of property and class. It also constituted the dynamic and contradictory relation between state and private property which would be a constant theme in western history.

Does the ancient form fare better if we confine it to the Roman case? The problem here is that we are no more able to identify a pristinely primitive Rome than a 'pure and classic' early Greece. By the time the Romans become visible in the historical record, their society is already shaped by Etruscan and Greek

social and political forms. If the city is the hallmark of the ancient form, it is even more true that Rome owes its classic identity to the Etruscans and the Greeks. It may be possible to postulate some kind of early peasant society in Rome, but the aristocratic republic that followed the Roman kings and represents the essence of the Roman classical period presupposes class divisions between peasants and landlords, and those, in turn, may presuppose the hierarchy of the Etruscan state and even interaction with the Greeks. As for the division between citizens and slaves, here too the growth of slavery was preceded by the internal divisions between landlords and peasants, together with the civic identity of peasants which, though weaker than in Greek democracy, encouraged the aristocracy to seek alternative means of exploitation.

From feudalism to capitalism

The Germanic type is problematic for somewhat different reasons. Marx does not present it as a *system* in the same sense as the others. But this formation is in some ways more important to him, because without it there would be no feudalism and hence, presumably, no capitalism. The problems here begin with a historical record that is much more patchy than the Greco-Roman. For that matter, it is not at all clear who the 'Germanic' peoples were, since the category has, from the beginning, included a wide variety of social types and ethnic groups, sometimes including Slavs and Celts (if we can even assume that the latter categories themselves have a precise meaning). At the same time, the historical image of the ancient 'Germans' has been shaped from the start by Roman commentaries, with all their ideological baggage, especially in the works of Tacitus and Julius Caesar, to say nothing of Greek and Roman projections of their own tribal histories and mythologies. Not the least significant factor in this distorted picture is the Greco-Roman tendency to measure other societies by their own standard of 'civilized' life, centred on the political life of the city, the culture and politics of the polis or republic. Barbarians outside the polis were more like wild animals than civilized humans. At the same time, this picture could be stood on its head, to produce a romanticized image of German tribes as free and equal communities of hardy warriors, in contrast to the corrupt, degenerate and decadent Romans. It would be this image, filtered through a mythology of Germanic primitive communism and fierce devotion to freedom perpetuated by nineteenth century social scientists, that would inform the ideology of National Socialism and its propaganda of the German nation.[4]

Yet the archaeological record does little to support this imagery, in either its disdainful or romanticized expressions. For instance, even early records show considerable inequalities of wealth and the existence of an aristocracy among the 'Germans'. Marx's account is, to be sure, somewhat different from either of these mythical images, but it has its own problems. He certainly regards the Germanic relation to property as a form of primitive communalism (not communism), as was, for him, the ancient mode, in the sense that communal property of one type or another still exists. But the commune 'does not in fact exist as a

state or *political body*, as in classical antiquity' (Marx 1973: 483). Among the Germanic tribes, individual families and chiefs live separately and generally far apart, so the community exists only as a periodic gathering, a 'coming together', as he puts it, rather than a 'being together', although there is still some common property, in the form of land for hunting, grazing or timber. The Germanic community, then, consists of individual, more or less self-sufficient households, which come together when necessary, as in military ventures, but which are far more individualistic than the polis community. Even common property, such as pasturage, is utilized in individualistic ways, by individual household units; and there are, in Marx's view, already signs of class divisions within the community.

Marx probably exaggerates the individualism of the German tribes, since the archaeological record suggests a fairly consistent pattern of village settlement. But the real problems in his account have more to do with traditional conventions about barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire, which seem to suggest incursions by more or less pristinely 'Germanic' tribes, emerging more or less untouched from the forests of the north. Yet the interactions between the Romans and the 'Germans' go much further back than the late mass migrations commonly regarded as 'barbarian invasions'. There had, for instance, been long-standing relations of exchange, which served to aggravate social differentiation within the German tribes and to destabilize relations among Germanic communities themselves, provoking constant warfare and increasing militarization. By the time their incursions into Roman territory became a decisive factor in determining the fate of the Empire, the Germans whose practices and institutions are said to have created feudalism as they took over a disintegrating Roman Empire, were already deeply marked by their long interactions with Rome.

To the extent that Marx is concerned with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, what he says about the feudal form is obviously a matter of some consequence. It is true that he does not, in the *Grundrisse*, set out to explain the transition, although he does talk about the 'primitive accumulation' that preceded capitalism. His objective is rather to highlight the specificity of capitalism in contrast to earlier forms of property and labour. But if there is here *any* transition from one social form to another, it is the passage from feudalism to capitalism that matters most to him; and any weaknesses in his account of the feudal type, or the Germanic forms that led to it, are likely to have the most serious consequences for historical materialism.

Marx's account of feudalism in 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production' is perhaps most interesting for what is absent from it. Although there can be little doubt of his conviction that feudalism led to capitalism, he has very little to say about the internal dynamics of feudalism that produced this effect. As Hobsbawm has pointed out, there is very little here about feudal agriculture, nor do we find anything like the contradictions, emanating from class divisions, that fatally weakened the ancient type. For that matter, it is not entirely clear what it was in the logic of the Germanic type that conveyed itself to feudalism or helped to bring it into being. The argument seems to be something like this: while the

oriental form was a unity of town and country, and the ancient form an urban civilization founded on agriculture and landed property, the Germanic was more decidedly rural, based on the vast agricultural territories that emerged from the conquest of Rome. This type of development meant that the medieval city (however it came into being) developed autonomously, not as a unity of town and country, nor as an urban foundation rooted in agriculture, but as a distinctively free urban community permitting the autonomous development of craft production and trade:

> The history of classical antiquity is the history of cities, but of cities founded on landed property; Asiatic history is a kind of unity of town and countryside … the Middle Ages (Germanic period) beings with the land as the seat of history, whose further development then moves forward in the contradiction between town and country-side; the modern [age] is the urbanization of the countryside, not ruralization of the city as in antiquity.
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> (Marx 1973: 479)

It is possible to argue that the individualism imparted by the old Germanic culture plays an important part in Marx's account of the transition to capitalism, but more important still is his view of the relation between Germanic ruralism and medieval urbanism. Here are the basic assumptions underlying the view that capitalism grew not out of the social property relations of feudalism itself but rather, to use Marx's own words, in the 'interstices' of feudalism. The German form, in other words, was important in promoting the development of capitalism not so much because of its own internal dynamic but because it left available spaces within which 'bourgeois' culture and economic activity could freely develop.

It is here that the problems in Marx's account become most starkly visible, and it is striking that in *Capital* he begins to offer a rather different account. In 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production', he has not yet entirely broken with the most common question-begging accounts of how capitalism originated. Classical political economy and Enlightenment theories of progress had tended to assume the existence of 'commercial society' or capitalism in order to explain its coming into being: the urban economy of merchants and craftsmen contained the elements of 'commercial society', more or less by definition, and all that was required to bring about its full maturity was to release the commercial economy from bondage and sweep away the obstacles to its development. The remnants of this view are still visible in Marx's theory of 'interstices' and his account of the role played by Germanic forms in opening the road to capitalism. The origin of capitalism is here largely a matter of allowing its already existing elements to grow. When he developed his ideas in *Capital*, he was already hinting at a very different explanation, which did indeed begin to seek the source of the transition not in the 'interstices' of feudalism but rather in its own internal dynamics, in its own constitutive property relations, which gave rise to an authentic social transformation.

'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production' and historical materialism

Can we, then, find in 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production' anything that might have compelled him to look for an alternative, or anything that offered him a fruitful avenue to find it? It is clear, to begin with, that it does not offer a usable sequence of modes of production. But is it just a question of replacing one sequence with another, more informed by recent scholarship? Or should we reconsider the very premise that historical materialism needs such a sequence at all? Does the strength of historical materialism, as Marx himself conceived it, lie elsewhere?

The idea of a succession of modes of production does not, by itself, represent a radical break with the conventions of classical political economy. There, too, history is presented as a series of modes of subsistence, driven by the division of labour, each one more technologically advanced than the previous one and more capable of creating surpluses; and Marx's sequence still has much in common with it. Although his analysis of capitalism clearly recognizes its distinctive drive to constantly improve labour productivity, the whole historical process that culminates in capitalism may still be driven by some inevitable, transhistorical tendency to improve the forces of production through the division of labour and technological improvement. There is even a significant element of Smith's 'commercialization' model, or conceptions of progress as the liberation of the bourgeoisie, in Marx's explanation of how the Germanic form helped bring about the rise of capitalism by leaving room for an autonomous urban economy.

Yet Marx introduces a radical innovation into this historical sequence, which will in the end prove decisive: not only the emphasis on class divisions but, more particularly, the idea that historical progress has been a progressive 'separation of free labour from the objective conditions of its realization – from the means of labour and the material for labour' (Marx 1973: 471), which culminates in the complete separation of the wage labourer in capitalism. Before capitalism, workers related to the basic condition of labour – the land – as their property, whether the communal property of one or another form of primitive communalism or the free landed property of the independent small producing household. Capitalism completely disrupts the 'natural unity of labour with its material presuppositions', and the worker no longer has 'an objective existence independent of labour'. Marx cannot, then, be satisfied with the sequences of classical political economy – such as Adam Smith's progression from hunting, to pasturage, to farming to commercial society, propelled by the division of labour and ever-expanding exchange. Nor can he remain uncritically wedded to conceptions of progress as the forward march of the bourgeoisie. While there are certainly parallels between his sequence and those older conventions, the essential criteria of differentiation among the stages of progress are significantly different. His focus on property relations and the separation of labour from its material presuppositions invites us to look elsewhere for the driving force of history.

In 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production', the remnants of the older view are still visible. The little that Marx has to say on the transition from feudalism to capitalism here seems to fall back on those earlier conventions, without exerting the full power of his own distinctive insights. It is as if the state of contemporary knowledge holds him back from putting those insights to work on the transition to capitalism. So he relies, against the grain, on an albeit nuanced version of the old commercialization model, in which the emergence of capitalism requires no real explanation, because all it needed was the opening of space within which already existing capitalist elements were free to develop.

Yet against the background of his own deeper insights into the internal dynamics of specific social property relations, the weaknesses in his account of feudalism and the transition to capitalism become starkly apparent. Marx's ideas about the relation of labour to the conditions of its realization seem to propel him ever further away from the conventions of political economy and Enlightenment conceptions of progress. In *Capital* he moves further still beyond his original account, applying the general theory of social property relations outlined in the *Grundrisse*: 'The capitalist system,' he writes in volume I,

> pre-supposes the complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they can realise their labour. As soon as capitalist production is once on its own legs, it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a continually extending scale. The process, therefore, that clears the way for the capitalist system, can be none other than the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital, on the other, the immediate producers into wage-labourers. The so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.
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> (Marx 1996: 705)

It is striking that the process of capitalist development is here not based in the city but in the countryside. It occurred in its first and 'classic' form with the expropriation of direct producers in English agriculture, establishing a new system of relations between landlords, tenants and wage-labourers, in which landlords – unlike their counterparts elsewhere – increasingly derived their rents from the profits of capitalist tenants, while many small producers became propertyless wage-labourers. That social transformation – and not, as it was for classical political economy, the mere accumulation of wealth by means of commercial activity – was, for Marx, the *real* 'primitive accumulation'.

It would be left to later Marxist historians to develop these insights into a comprehensive explanation of the transition to capitalism. But the fundamental principles are already present, and these are the essential principles of historical materialism. What, then, does this tell us about the essence of historical materialism and its general theory of history? The first and most important point is that

it has nothing to do with a mechanical sequence of modes of production. Nor is it about some transhistorical drive which inevitably leads one social form to be succeeded by a more productive one.[5] By the time of 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production', Marx is less and less inclined to posit a transhistorical mechanism of historical change. He is increasingly insistent on the specificity of capitalism with its distinctive laws of motion and, in general, more concentrated on the specificities of every social form, each with its own distinctive relation of direct producers to the means of production and its own specific conditions of survival and self-reproduction. He is increasingly conscious of the ways in which the specific laws of capitalism, its historically specific drive to accumulate and increase productivity by technological means, have been mistakenly read back into history as general laws.

In 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production', it is becoming increasingly clear that, for Marx, each system of social property relations is driven by its own internal principles and not by some impersonal transhistorical law of technological improvement or commercial expansion. In the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, he distinguishes himself from economists who treat production as responding to 'eternal natural laws independent of history, at which opportunity *bourgeois* relations are then quietly smuggled in as the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded' (Marx 1973: 87). To be sure, he writes, 'there are characteristics which all stages of production have in common, and which are established as general ones by the mind; but the so-called *general preconditions* of all production are nothing more than these abstract moments with which no real historical stage of production can be grasped' (Marx 1973: 88). His objective in 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production' is to distinguish the various social property relations within which production has historically occurred and thereby to highlight the specificity of capitalism.

It is also clear that in each specific historical stage of production, direct producers and those who appropriate their surplus labour are operating within the existing property relations and trying to meet the existing conditions of self-reproduction, in order to sustain themselves. This, of course, does not preclude revolt, rebellion or revolution. But the fact remains that transitions from one mode to another are driven by the internal logic of the existing mode, in particular historical conditions; and movement beyond the existing conditions, whether gradual or sudden and violent, is driven not by some external historical necessity but by prevailing social property relations. In other words, the laws of motion of specific social forms – or, more precisely, their 'rules for reproduction', a formula better suited to a recognition of human agency – are at the same time the moving force of history in general.[6]

If anything, Marx in the maturity of his critique of political economy, from the *Grundrisse* onwards, becomes less rather than more a 'determinist', if by that is meant a thinker who treats human agents as passive receptacles of external structures or playthings of eternal laws of motion. It may seem counterintuitive to say this, since the most common tendency in dividing the 'early' from the 'late' Marx is to stress his early 'humanism' and his later, hard-nosed

economism. Yet it is in the earlier works that Marx finds himself forced to rely on transhistorical laws, such as technological determinism. In his mature work on political economy, notably the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, he much more consistently works out the implications of his materialism's first principle, a principle that remains constant from the earliest days to the end: that the bottom line for historical materialism is not some disembodied economic 'base' or 'structure' but 'practical activity'. The material base is itself constituted by human practice.

At the same time, the relevant practices entail relations – among human agents and between them and nature. These social relations, which will vary in different historical circumstances, constitute certain specific and irreducible conditions of self-reproduction; and human agency must operate within those specific conditions. Now, some might understand this to mean that, because there is always an infinite variety of such conditions, the best we can do is provide a detailed description of the requirements for reproduction at any given historical moment and in any given place, without generalizations about this or that 'mode of production', this or that set of social property relations. But historical materialism suggests that social property relations, as the irreducible conditions of survival and social reproduction, set the terms of survival and social reproduction in a more fundamental way, allowing us to construct certain generalizations about the rules for reproduction they impose, which operate wherever and whenever those property relations exist, whatever their specific political or cultural context.

In volume III of *Capital*, Marx tells us more about the nature of social property relations. He also explains how their general rules can operate in many empirically specific ways. He elaborates his definition of the essence of each social form, and it is more clear than ever precisely how the relation of labour to the means of its realization, as outlined in the *Grundrisse*, affects the whole social structure: 'the specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of direct producers … reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure' (Marx 1998: 777–8). In all pre-capitalist forms, where direct producers remained in possession of the means of labour, non-producing appropriators could appropriate their surplus labour only by exercising 'extra-economic' force, political, jurisdictional, military. These pre-capitalist forms, then, had rules for reproduction that directly implicated those extra-economic forms. Only in capitalism, where workers are completely separated from the means of production, is a purely 'economic' form of exploitation possible, based on the propertylessness of workers who must sell their labour-power for a wage, while capital is dependent on the market both to acquire labour power and to realize profits from it. This mode of exploitation, of course, carries with it specific rules for reproduction unlike those of any other form, which include the imperatives of competition, improving labour productivity and 'maximizing' strategies. In both capitalist and pre-capitalist cases, the essential rules for reproduction will always impose their specific requirements. At the same time, Marx goes on to say that 'this does not prevent the same economic basis …

from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances'. This has several implications: it means, first of all, that we cannot simply read off the empirical specificities of any given society from its economic 'base'; but it also means that the logic of the economic basis is discernible throughout those empirical manifestations.

One way of characterizing what Marx has done, already in the *Grundrisse*, is to say that he has replaced teleology with history – not history as mere contingency, nor history as a mechanical succession of predetermined stages or a sequence of static structures, but history as a process with its own causalities, constituted by human agency in a context of social relations and social practices which impose their own demands on those engaged in them.[7] It is more than a little ironic that the *Grundrisse*, where the *history* in historical materialism truly begins to come into its own, is often viewed as an exercise in teleology. In particular, the famous aphorism, 'human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape' (Marx 1973: 105) is cited in evidence. Yet it is precisely here that Marx detaches himself most completely from the teleologies of classical political economy. His objective is to emphasize the specificity of capitalism, instead of reading capitalist laws of motion into all history in general and treating 'commercial society' as its preordained destination. Indeed, it is the very specificity of capitalism that allows it to shed light on the earlier forms it replaced, not because it is their natural and inevitable outcome but because it represents their historical other. His purpose is to challenge 'those economists who smudge over all historical differences and see bourgeois relations in all forms of society' (Marx 1973: 105). By insisting on the specificity of capitalism, by refusing to read its principles of motion back into history, and by explaining how every mode of production is governed by its own specific rules for reproduction, Marx is offering precisely the antithesis of teleology.

What, then, of grand narratives in Marx's history? Is there anything left of the Enlightenment story of progress? Is the best we can say simply that, while capitalism generates a historically distinctive drive to improve the forces of production, there is, on balance and overall, a general, incremental tendency to technological improvement throughout history, if only because, once discovered, no advance ever completely disappears? Or can we still believe in a grand emancipatory project grounded in real historical conditions? It is certainly true that Marx's main preoccupation in the *Grundrisse* and later was the very specific operations of capitalism; and, given this preoccupation, we cannot be sure what he might have thought in his maturity about philosophical grand narratives, whether in their simplest Enlightenment form or in all their Hegelian complexity. But it would seem perverse to deny that the critical history embodied in his critique of political economy must have had substantial effects. He could surely not have remained wedded to a simple narrative of progress, in which some general laws of history work themselves out to reach an inevitable goal. But does this mean that he was obliged to give up the emancipatory vision of the Enlightenment?

Marx's critique of political economy liberated history and social theory from the dead hand of capitalist ideology, and it departed from Enlightenment conceptions of progress as a unilinear process governed by transhistorical principles of motion. In place of an abstractly universal history Marx proposed a critical analysis of historical processes which emphasized the specificity of every mode of production and of capitalism in particular. Yet this did not, as is sometimes suggested, weaken the promise of socialism or undermine its claims as the historic destination of class struggle and an emancipatory project with a universal reach. If we conceive of socialism not as the *telos* of a universal technological determinism but as a historical product of capitalism and the outcome of a struggle against capitalist exploitation, this does not oblige us to give up the universality of the socialist project. Capitalism confers its own kind of universality on the struggle against exploitation and oppression. This is so not only because, as Marx suggested, capitalism is the highest form of exploitation, the last stage in the separation of producers from the means of production beyond which lies the abolition of all classes, but also because it has for the first time created a truly universal history, embracing the whole world in its uniquely expansionary dynamic.

Marx's analysis, then, is both more historical and less deterministic than Enlightenment conceptions of progress, more attuned to historical specificity and, at the same time, more truly universalistic in its vision of human emancipation, more conscious of capitalism's systemic coercions and yet more open to the possibilities of human agency and struggle.

Notes

1 In Hobsbawn's translation, the title of this section of the *Grundrisse* is 'Precapitalistic Economic Formations'. The translation 'Forms which Precede Capitalist Production' comes from the Penguin edition being used throughout this volume.

2 For a discussion of these developments, with detailed references, see Wood (1988, especially Chapters II and III).

3 In what Engels calls its 'purest, most classical form', in Athens, 'the state derived directly and mainly from the class antagonisms that developed within gentile society'. In the heroic age depicted by the Homeric epics, the gentile order is, according to this argument, still strong but it is in the process of disintegration, and slavery emerges, first in the form of conquered prisoners and then the enslavement of fellow members of the tribe. The result, writes Engels, was the emergence of:

> a third power which, while ostensibly standing above the conflicting classes, suppressed their open conflict and permitted a class struggle at most in the economic field, in a so-called legal form. The gentile constitution had outlived itself. It was burst asunder by the division of labour and by its result, the division of society into classes. Its place was taken by the *state*.
>
> (Engels 1990: 268)

4 For a discussion of the distortions, ancient and modern, which have shaped this historiography, see Geary (1988: 39–43).

5 To say this is very different from saying that there is no general tendency for the forces of production to improve. That there is such a general tendency, in very broad terms, is almost incontrovertible (and almost vacuous), since technological advances can happen

in any form of society, and the effects are likely to be incremental, since once discovered they are unlikely to disappear altogether. The question here is whether there is any compulsion for any specific mode of production to be followed by a more productive one. Marx's aphoristic formula about the contradictions between forces and relations of production as the driving force of history (most notably in the 1859 *Preface* to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*) must be weighed against the whole of his life's work, especially his mature historical accounts, in which technological determinism is strikingly absent as a an explanatory principle. A more detailed discussion of this point can be found in Wood (1995: 129–40).

6 Robert Brenner lays out the concept of 'rules for reproduction' in Brenner (1986).

7 'Certain critical categories and concepts employed by historical materialism', as E.P. Thompson once wrote, 'can only be understood as historical categories: that is, as categories or concepts appropriate to the investigation of process … concepts appropriate to the handling of evidence not capable of static conceptual representation' (Thompson 1978: 237). It can be said that modes of production as Marx characterizes them in the *Grundrisse* belong to precisely such historical categories, not 'static conceptual representations' or abstract 'structures' but specific processes of social interaction, contradiction and change.

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