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## **Social Ontology and Social Theory: The Origins and Development of Mode of Production and Social Formation Theory 1925-1960**

**Abstract:** This paper argues that the social ontology that informs much of modern Marxian social theory became established principally in mid-century writings on mode of production and social formation theory. I employ Althusser's distinction between the Marxian complex and Hegelian expressive social totalities to critique this social ontology. This distinction is also used to highlight the analogical relationship between mode of production and social formation theory and Hegel's Philosophy of History. This paper argues that a social ontology based on the conception of society as an expressive totality emerged as a central tenet of Marxian theory in the 1920's, and then traces its influence of this ontology on the development of Marxism through the mode of production and social formation concepts. Particular attention is paid to the contributions made by Bukharin, Dobb, Childe, Cornforth, Lange and Kuusinnen. Mode of production and social formation theory has been influential in the Marxist practice of various social sciences, including economics, sociology, politics and development studies, and geography, as well as history and anthropology. Consequently decline of mode of production and social formation theory has had negative consequences for Marxian theory across the disciplines. This paper advances the proposition that mode of production and social formation theory is one possible interpretation of Marx, shaped by the political, cultural, and economic conditions of its production, and informed by a particular social ontology. It is one particular exegesis of Marxian social theory. The particular social ontology it employs engenders theoretical problems for Marxian theory—notably teleology and simple determinism—as well as political ones. The criticism presented in this paper is part of an effort to resolve these problems. Ontology is a fundamental part of any social theory, and this paper uses it to understand the history of Marxian theory and as a basis to revitalize it.

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*“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*)*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a critical history of the origins and development of a Marxist theoretical tradition that I refer to as mode of production and social formation (MoP-SF) theory. MoP-SF theory is presented by its creators and proponents as the authoritative interpretation of Marx’s theory of society, social change, and history. They present this theory as though it is contained more or less fully-formed in Marx’s texts and represents the essence of Marx’s writings on society and social development. The implication is that rather than actually producing something original, their work merely synthesizes, clarifies, or defends Marx’s theory. I disagree with this position. MoP-SF theory is a theoretical product of numerous Marxist writers who labored to create it over a period of years. These labors involved definite theoretical choices and resulted in identifiable theoretical innovations. In this paper I describe how MoP-SF theory developed gradually in the work of a number of different theorists beginning in the 1920’s and found its fullest development and clearest expression in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. The work of these theorists should be recognized, as should the choices they made and the innovations they introduced. Most modern writers treat MoP-SF theory as though it was already present in Marx’s and Engel’s shorthand uses of the terms ‘mode of production’, ‘social formation’, ‘base’, and ‘superstructure’. But it was not, and ignorance of the original development of this theory leads many to react as though Marxian social theory stands or falls with MoP-SF theory rather than seeing it for what it is: one possible interpretation of Marxian theory that has been produced by Marx’s later interpreters.

My purpose here is to identify the theoretical choices and innovations that this theory introduced into Marxism, and thereby to allow us to critically reevaluate them. I argue that the primary innovation of MoP-SF theory is a fundamental shift in Marxist social ontology from a complex totality to an expressive one. Section II of this paper discusses precisely what I mean by an expressive totality social ontology. Althusser was the first to criticize Marxist writers for adopting this position, which he considers to be Hegel's conception of society but not Marx's. My reading of MoP-SF theory is largely an interrogation of this theory using Althusser's original critique.

In section III I trace the origin of MoP-SF theory in a fragment of Marx's work and significant parts of Engels's, through to its formalization and eventual *de facto* codification as the official Marxian social theory in the writings of Bukharin, Stalin, Dobb, Childe, Cornforth, Lange, and Kuusinen. Engels did not create MoP-SF theory, but his work does provide elements of the theory and the license to take Marxism in this direction. Engels reprises the Hegelian social ontology and philosophy of history in his work, substituting the material for the ideal but leaving much else unchanged. In his inversion of Hegelian theory history is driven not by the contradictions between society and spirit, but rather by contradictions between the forces of production, the mode of appropriation, and the mode of exchange. Hegel argues that transitions from one society to the next occur because this is necessary for the development of the Spirit. Engels proposes that the transition from one type of society to another is a consequence of the development of the forces of production, which progress teleologically from less productive and interdependent (i.e. 'social') to more. Society, as nothing more than the expression of this essence, is transformed and also progresses through a sequence of

forms. Late in life Engels softened his position on the role of the economy in the development of society in the famous letters to Bloch in 1890 (Marx and Engels, 1968, pp. 692-693) and to Borgius in 1894 (Marx and Engels, 1968, pp 704-706). These letters are the touchstone for later writers who place limits to the deterministic role attributed to the economy in Marxist theory and advocate for what Althusser would call “relative autonomy” (1977, pp. 111, 240) of the non-economic aspects of society, but Engels’s earlier work provides ample basis for strictly determinist theories. Subsequent theorists can be distinguished by the degree to which they embrace Engels’s earlier or later stance. The primary difference between the writings of the era after Engels’s death in 1895 and the consolidation of the Soviet Union in the early 1920’s (referred to, somewhat inaccurately, below as “Second International Marxism”) and the later British and Soviet writers (also referred to as “Official Marxists”) is found in this distinction.

In the period between Engels’s death and the establishment of an Official Marxism—roughly the period of the Second International through to the consolidation of the third—Marxist social theorists grappled with the question of the relationship between the “base” and the “superstructure” that Marx referenced in his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1970), but they resisted the temptation to make one simply the expression of the other. Second International writers certainly embraced economic determinism, but, heading Engels’s late life qualifications to the positions he took in *Anti-Dühring* and *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, they largely refrained from presenting society as simply an expression of the underlying economic conditions. But the Russian revolution and the consolidation of the Soviet Union altered the intellectual landscape of Marxism. Their political accomplishments gave Bolshevik writers new

authority. Their theoretical positions had the aura of praxis. Soviet writers recaptured the sense of inevitability that Engels's social theory gave the transition to socialism, and indeed their own success, in part by resurrecting the Hegelian social ontology. This ontology also allowed them to propose that the modernization of production and industrialization, which the Bolshevik leadership unanimously agreed was its most pressing imperative at that time, would itself bring about the transition to socialism. Change the economic base and the rest of society will respond accordingly, or at least that is the argument that the expressive totality social ontology implies. But just how this change takes place requires a theory of society and social change, as well as a theory of history with which to find empirical support. MoP-SF theory provides that social theory and it does so without resorting to an express teleology.

The emergence and development of mode of production and social formation theory took place in two steps. The first was the return at least to a social ontology consistent with Engels's reprise of Hegel, if not back to Hegel himself. Like Hegel, the Official Marxists did not trouble themselves with determination 'in the last instance' by the social essence because society was (*pars totalis*) a mere expression of a social essence. The second step was the formalization of mode of production and social formation theory as the solution to the problems of the specific relationship between the social essence and its epiphenomenal expression. These two steps took place over a period of time, with Bukharin and Stalin largely carrying out the first one in the 1920's and 1930's, and a succession of other authors, including Dobb, Childe, Cornforth, Lange and Kuusinen carrying out the second one in the 1940's and 1950's.

During this time “mode of production” and “social formation” became the vital formal concepts in the Marxist theory of society, social change, and history in their writings. Earlier theorists, such as Bernstein, Kautsky and Plehkanov, conceived of society through the metaphor of a physical structure: society was said to exist as the combination of an economic ‘base’ and a political, cultural, and ideological ‘superstructure’. These writers use the terms “mode of production” and “social formation” either in the same relatively informal and descriptive way that Marx and Engels used them or they are absent altogether.<sup>1</sup> Readers familiar with the work of the later MoP-SF theorists cannot help but be struck by the distinct difference between these two different bodies of theory. Clearly MoP-SF theory was first stated formally by later theorists. While Second International theorists largely agreed that the base determined the superstructure ‘in the last instance’, they did not propose a general theory of the mechanisms through which this determination occurred, and they rejected the idea that the relationship between the two domains was unidirectional.

Over the 1925-1960 period Engels’s later repudiation of the strict determinist position was ignored in favor of his early unequivocal arguments, which became the basis to turn the mode of production and social formation concepts into a comprehensive social theory. Stalin’s *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1940) is often selected as the seminal statement of this trend, but the ideas that Stalin expounds in this text were by no means original to him. The principal philosophical positions of this literature were presented a decade and half earlier and much more comprehensively in Bukharin’s *Historical Materialism, A System of Sociology* (1925). Bukharin’s contributions to the Official Marxist canon were later suppressed, but his arguments remain relatively intact

(though unattributed) in any number of mid-century Marxist works. On many important issues there is little that differentiates Stalin's arguments from Bukharin's, except that Bukharin sought to theorize these issues while Stalin merely made declarations.

The works by Bukharin and Stalin established a philosophical shift within officially-sanctioned Marxism, especially with respect to the way in which society was understood to exist. Their work made the expressive totality the accepted model of society. Later theorists responded by providing a social theory, i.e. MoP-SF theory, that embodied this social ontology. Important works in the development of MoP-SF theory include Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946), Maurice Cornforth's *Historical Materialism* (1953), O.V. Kuusinen's *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* ([1959] 1963, esp. chs. 4 and 7), and Oskar Lange's *Political Economy* ([1959] 1963, esp. chapters two "Modes of Production and Social Formations", and three "Economic Laws").<sup>2</sup> These are the primary works in the development of this approach.

When fully developed in the Official theory 'mode of production' and 'social formation', concepts which were used unsystematically or as descriptive shorthand by Marx and Engels, become key explanatory concepts used to elaborate a theory of society, history and politics. Eventually it provided the general theory of social determination by the economy, or, more precisely, the forces of production, that earlier theories did not. It was these later theorists who proposed that the economic base should be understood as a composite mode of production consisting of the forces of production and the relations of production. The production technology uniquely determines what type of production relations (slave, feudal, capitalist, etc.) will exist. It is assumed that the production technology is not any given technique, but rather it is the system of production and this

system exists uniformly throughout a society (Bukharin, 1925, p. 135). Since everyone labors in the same system of technology then the same type of production relations must prevail throughout society. The superstructure is nothing more than the epiphenomenal expression of the mode of production. A social formation is defined as the mode of production-superstructure couple. Since the production technology uniquely determines the character of the mode of production, and the character of the mode of production determines all of the aspects of the superstructure, every social formation exists as a simple holistic expressive totality. The Official theory also accounts for change—typically a problem of structuralist discourses—by making it endemic to the structure. They argue that because production technology develops spontaneously and continually, change is the normal state for any social formation. The analogy with Hegel is straightforward. For Hegel history is the becoming of the Spirit through time in human society; for the Official theorists history is the necessary progression of society as a consequence of the ‘autodevelopment’ of the forces of production.

Dobb’s *Studies* (1946) provides an initial impetus for interpreting the term “mode of production” as the basis for a comprehensive Marxist social theory and Cornforth’s *Historical Materialism* (1953) is the earliest relatively complete and explicit statement of MoP-SF theory that I have been able to discover. Cornforth’s text is also interesting because it was published in the year of Stalin’s death, thus it predates the period of “de-Stalinization” and the early editions openly acknowledge his influence and celebrate his contributions to Marxist philosophy. Kuusinen’s and Lange’s texts were both originally published some six years later<sup>3</sup>, and by 1959 it was neither necessary nor entirely desirable to acknowledge Stalin’s influence on one’s work. Both of them do reference



Stalin, but less frequently and less authoritatively than does Cornforth. Kuusinen's and Lange's texts are consistent with Cornforth's basic arguments, but they develop mode of production and social formation theory in much greater detail and with much greater sophistication than does Cornforth. Their presentations are the standard that later Marxist theorists, whether they acknowledge it or not, either embrace and perpetuate or react against. It would, however, be inaccurate to say that these are the standard *references* in the Marxist literature. Given how infrequently these texts are referenced by later writers, it is doubtful that many are even aware of the provenance of MoP-SF theory as a distinct innovation in Marxian social theory.

A notable feature of the history of MoP-SF theory is that many of the theorists active in its development held leadership positions or were active party intellectuals in either the Soviet Union, i.e. Bukharin, Kuusinen, Stalin, and Lange, or the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), i.e. Dobb, Childe, and Cornforth. The close political association between the CPGB and the Soviet Union provided stimulus for intellectual exchange as well, and MoP-SF theory is one of the more obvious products of the Anglo-Soviet connection. Less than a decade after this approach emerged in the works of British Marxists it received the imprimatur of the highest Soviet political authority when Kuusinen (1963, part two, pp. 116-203) declared it to be “the essence of historical materialism” (p. 116).

Because MoP-SF theory was endorsed by the established political institutions of the mid-century communist movement it achieved the status of ‘official Marxism’ (see Wetter, 1966, pp. ix-xii). As the officially-accepted statement of theory it came to be regarded as authoritative, orthodox, and, indeed, definitive. Subsequently the origin of

this theory was no longer considered relevant. Once it was afforded the status of accepted truth (in the sense of being the ‘true’ interpretation of Marx) most of its proponents and critics alike no longer felt obligated to reference the literature or theorists that created it. Its history disappeared and it changed from one interpretation of Marxian social theory to its definition. Certainly there have been alternatives within Marxism, but none has had such a profound and lasting effect as this official position. Many activists, intellectuals, and political parties on the left and the right continue to associate Marxist theory with the basic propositions of this approach, and all others remain minority traditions. In 1990 Wolff assessed the influence of the official theory this way:

For many people then and to this day, that one theory *is* Marxism. In my experience, the vast majority of references to Marxism or Marxist theory (in the singular) in contemporary writings and discussions are actually references to this one “official” Marxist theory. Indeed, these references often betray a nearly total lack of interest in or ignorance of the multiple, different, and changing theories that have *always* comprised Marxism. For different reasons, both the enemies of Marxism and those Marxists devoted to the one official theory reinforced the reduction of the complex, changing theoretical tradition to only one of its contesting, competing theories. (Wolff, 1990, p. 333)

More than fifteen years later, and after the collapse of the institutions that expounded it, the preeminence of the official theory has dimmed but it remains influential. MoP-SF theory was the subject of close scrutiny by Balibar (1970) and Hindess and Hirst (1975), both of whom sought to reconceptualize the theory in order to address what they perceived as fundamental problems with it. These efforts ultimately failed (Hindess and Hirst, 1977), and rather than advancing the MoP-SF approach these efforts provided an impetus for new approaches in Marxian social theory. Despite this the basic propositions of MoP-SF theory continue to be defended and developed by leading Marxian theorists today (see for example Cohen, 1978 and 2000, and Laibman, 2005 and 2006).

At different times and in several areas of Marxian theory—history and economic development in particular—variants of MoP-SF theory came to form almost the entire corpus of accepted theory. Important debates or schools of thought received their impetus from these concepts. Notable among them are the “Articulation of Modes of Production” debate involving Laclau, Meillassoux, Banaji, and others (Laclau, 1971; Wolpe, 1980), the “Modes of Production School” of development economics (surveyed and critiqued by Chilcote and Johnson, 1983, and Ruccio and Simon, 1986), the controversy over the “Asiatic Mode of Production” (surveyed by O’Leary, 1989), and the “Indian Mode of Production Debate” (Patniak, 1996). Each of these issues or schools share the premise that mode of production is a primary theoretical concept in Marxian theory. This paper evaluates this basic premise. Since my purpose is to consider MoP-SF theory itself I do not devote attention to the literature that accepts and applies these concepts.

The history and criticism presented here is intended to help revitalize Marxian theoretical and political practice. In order for Marxian theory to once again be a vital part of new progressive political movements MoP-SF theory needs to be contextualized in order to dislocate the reflexive association between Marxism, this theory, and the politics it inspires. The image of society as an expressive totality remains widespread within Marxian theory even among theorists who do not employ MoP-SF theory or its concepts. This is the legacy of this theory and an objective of this paper is to demonstrate that this ontological argument is a theoretical choice made by previous Marxian theorists that can and should be reevaluated. MoP-SF theory is one interpretation of Marx, shaped by the political, cultural, economic, and natural conditions of its production. It is one particular

exegesis of Marxian theory. In order to make this clear this paper traces its genealogy and critiques the theoretical choices made in its development. This has never before been done and such a critical history is absolutely necessary at this particular juncture in the history of Marxian theory.

The alternative argument that overdetermination presents is society as complexly interrelated, mutually constituted, and aleatory. This is the difference between anti-essentialist and holistic rationality.

## **II. SOCIETY AS AN EXPRESSIVE TOTALITY**

To some readers it may seem artificial to try and address MoP-SF theory as a cohesive theoretical approach. Beginning with Marx and continuing to today the terms “mode of production” and “social formation” are used in a diversity of ways by Marxists. Marx never defined them and he used them relatively informally. There is no broad consensus among Marxists on their definition, and most modern theorists who use them begin by giving their own interpretation of what they mean. But there is a distinct body of theory that emerged in the mid-twentieth century that sought to imbue these concepts with very precise meanings and to locate them at the very center of Marxian theory. Numerous theorists contributed to the development of this theory. Their work involved certain choices and made identifiable innovations. It also pushed Marxian social theory in a particular direction, and continues to be influential, even if that influence is not always acknowledged. One of the primary channels through which this influence continues to be felt is through a distinct social ontology that is integral to this theory. This ontological position is not only integral to this theory, but in fact it guided the

development of MoP-SF theory, which is primarily a theoretical expression of this social ontology.

This social ontology derives from Hegel and is imputed to Marx. Althusser calls this Hegel's "spiritual" or expressive totality. His comments on this point are remarkably consistent and it is worth quoting them here at length,

. . . a system (of classical philosophy) was . . . conceived precisely in order to deal with the effectivity of a whole on its elements: the Leibnizian concept of *expression*. This is the model that dominates all Hegel's thought. But it presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole, . . . *it presupposed that the whole had a certain nature, precisely the nature of a 'spiritual' whole in which each element was expressive of the entire totality as a 'pars totalis'*. (Althusser, 1970, pp.186-87, italics original. See also pp. 17)

Hegelian society is not unified by a basic instance that exists outside it, it is neither unified nor determined by a basic instance that exists inside it, it is neither unified nor determined by any of its 'spheres', be it the political sphere, the philosophical sphere or the religious sphere. For Hegel, the principle unifying and determining the social totality is not such and such a 'sphere' of society but a principle which has no privileged place or body in society, for the simple reason that it resides in all places and all bodies. It is in every determination of society, in the economic, the political, the legal, etc., down to the most spiritual. . . . The totality of Hegelian society is such that its principle is simultaneously immanent to it and transcendent of it, but it never coincides in itself with any determinate reality of society itself. That is why the Hegelian totality may be said to be endowed with a unity of a 'spiritual' type in which each element is *pars totalis*, and in which the visible spheres are merely the alienated and restored unfolding of the said internal principle. (Althusser, 1977, p. 204, n. 43)

. . . the Hegelian whole is a 'spiritual whole' in the Leibnizian sense of a whole in which all the parts 'conspire' together, in which each part is a *pars totalis*, . . . (Althusser, 1970, p. 96)

For Hegel the conspiracy that all the parts participate in is the rational development of society towards a given end. In Hegel society has several distinct characteristics: complexity, holism, *telos*, and rationality. The whole is logically prior to the individual

elements, which can only exist as partial expressions of the underlying essence that unifies the whole. Society, itself a whole or totality, is composed of diverse elements, but this complexity is unified into a whole by reason, which is a necessary adjunct of the Idea that is immanent in all aspects of society, and is therefore both present in and transcendent of each individual element. The Idea is the omnipresent essence of this holistic totality but is not temporally contained within any one; it transcends the different social totalities that it is manifest in. A human society is a whole governed by this rational Idea, and its development through time (i.e. history) is a rational process (Hegel, 1956, pp. 9-10). The Idea unifies diverse elements, subordinates them to the logic of a whole, and provides rationality to the development of this social whole by acting as its *telos*. This allows Hegel to propose that the diverse elements of the social totality are subordinate to this social essence, and in so doing he unifies society and changes it from a complexity to a simplicity. This ontological argument allows Hegel to dispense with the epistemological problems that complexity poses, and to theorize society with the certainty that a holistic ontology provides.

The sum total of human consciousness and reason as it develops through history is “Spirit” (*Geist*), which is the guiding principle of the Idea. Hegel describes the relationship between the Idea and Spirit in this way:

For, like the soul-conductor Mercury, the Idea is in truth, the leader of peoples and of the World; and Spirit, the rational and necessitated will of that conductor, is and has been the director of the events of the World’s History.” (Hegel, 1956, p. 8)

Spirit develops through history because it never wastes the gains of previous epochs, which are preserved in subsequent ages (Rees, 1998, p. 42). In any given society the institutions, laws, morals, and beliefs embody a certain stage in the development of the

Spirit that Hegel called “the spirit of the age” (Rees, p. 43), and societies form a succession that represents the increasing perfection of the Spirit. “History in General is therefore the development of Spirit in *Time*, . . .” (1956, p. 72). A transition from one form of society to another results from a contradiction that emerges between the society and the development of the Spirit. The old order is overturned by reason once it has served its purpose, but the new society that emerges incorporates that which was advantageous about the old order and preserves it (Hegel, 1956, p. 78).

For Hegel creation has a purpose, and that purpose is its end or *telos*. Creation is the beginning of a journey with a destination. History is the record of progress towards this end. The future is the continuation of this progress to its completion. The development of an object is progress towards its end and therefore this progress is teleological. This teleology is what imposes rationality on social change. In order for the process to lead somewhere it cannot develop in a contingent or aleatory manner, it must proceed according to rules or laws such that its ending is secured. If this ending is not assured then it is a process without a destination and, therefore, without rationality. For something to begin it must have a purpose otherwise its existence is without reason. Weiss (1974) explains this aspect of Hegel’s thought exceptionally well, and it is worth quoting him here at length:

(For Hegel the) notion of a beginning itself entails some process of development that has begun, and some end or purpose in terms of which that beginning and its development come to have meaning. For Hegel, a genuine beginning has thus got to be an end in germ form, a purpose. It must involve the end in itself, though only implicitly or ‘ideally,’ together with the means of accomplishing it. Every cause, except the first and last, reveals itself as but an aspect of the cosmic *process* by which this first and last are united. The true beginning of things, their cause or origin, is the reason for their existence, but this is *par excellence* their end, that *for* which they come into being. What they ‘come from’ is therefore actually

where they are going, and what they 'are' is a more or less arbitrary measure of the distance they have traveled toward this end. Their beginning is their destination, and they are not pushed blindly and indiscriminately, but drawn teleologically. If nothing 'ends' or is realized, then nothing can truly be said either to begin or become, and thus everything disintegrates into what Hegel calls a 'bad infinity'. (p. 4)

Accordingly human society must also have an ultimate objective or it is a beginning with no end. In that case society would be a 'bad infinity' that cannot be said to be rational. Contradiction, the transformation of quantity into quality, and negation of the negation are aspects of the dialectic through which the meta-narrative of origin, alienation, and reunification is played out.

What is the objective or purpose of human society? For Hegel society and all things corporeal were created by the Absolute (i.e. god) from itself in order to come to know itself and achieve self-realization, Absolute Knowledge, through experience. Society and all of its aspects are little more than the epiphenomenal expression of this underlying essence, contained in Hegel's interrelated concepts of the Idea and Spirit, that gives it its *raison d'être*. History is the teleological development of society towards the final end, and specific societies are simply different way points of this journey. History for Hegel is a process that posits an original unity, the alienation of that unity, and a journey towards the ultimate transformed restoration of that unity. For this teleology to be realized society must be construed as a unified whole capable of systematic, cohesive, and purposeful development. The expressive or spiritual social totality is a consequence of this theistic and teleological theory of history.

Althusser challenges Marxian theorists not to uncritically or unconsciously import Hegel's theological social ontology. He argues instead that it is on just this issue that Marx transcended Hegel, and consequently he condemns the expressive totality as at best



a regression from Marxian theory to Hegelian (1977, pp. 202-204). This is the basis for his famous rejection of the idea that Marxism can be thought of as a simple inversion of the Hegelian dialectic that substitutes the material for the ideal but leaves the rest of its structure intact and his subsequent challenge to find Marx's own unique dialectic by reading it in Marx's *Capital* (Althusser, 1977, esp. pp. 89-127 and 161-217; 1970, esp. Part I). In other words, Althusser challenges us to question whether Marxism is simply a kind of post-Idealist social theory or if Marx genuinely revolutionizes Hegelian social theory. Clearly Marx was profoundly influenced by Hegel, and this influence sets him apart from most of western philosophy, whether rationalist or empiricist, but the question is to what degree did Marx remain within Hegelian thought and to what degree does he transcend it? Althusser never fully answered this question and never followed through on the answers implicitly or explicitly sketched in his work. I believe this is because Althusser was himself significantly influenced by MoP-SF theory. Instead of recognizing that this theory is itself profoundly representative of the problems that he warns must be carefully reckoned with, Althusser (as did Balibar) accepts this theory as an otherwise accurate interpretation of Marxian social theory that was undermined by a certain uncritical acceptance of aspects of Hegelian thought.

The approach to economy, society, and history originally sketched by Engels, and later developed as MoP-SF theory, reprises the Hegelian philosophy of history with some modifications but leaves its basic structure intact. The forces of production substitute for the Idea, qualitatively different modes of production replace the specific societies (e.g. Greek, Roman, etc.) that Hegel cites as moments in the development of the Idea, but

history remains a journey with an origin and purpose and society behaves teleologically in order to assure that this journey does in fact lead towards the given end.

Hegel's philosophy of history is based on a type of evolutionary theory, though for him this evolution is the journey of the Absolute and its path is preordained. His teleological evolution is similar to the crude theories of species evolution that see biological evolution as simply nature's progress towards man, whose existence is the ultimate end or *telos* of nature. First Engels and then later MoP-SF theorists expressed similar ideas when they argued for the evolution of human society from lower to higher stages of history as driven by the inexorable development of the forces of production moving from less productive and integrated (social) to more.<sup>4</sup> MoP-SF theory simply tries to provide a reasonably sophisticated theoretical exposition of this overarching narrative.

The features of MoP-SF theory are dictated by this analogical relationship with Hegel's philosophy of history. It substitutes so-called sociological 'laws' and claims to objective 'historical necessity' for Hegel's metaphysics. But while MoP-SF theorists loudly reject Hegel's teleology and metaphysics they introduce both of these things into Marxian theory *sub voce* by accepting the simple inversion of the Hegelian theory. But their simple inversion of Hegel puts the burden of theoretical consistency on Marxian economics. If the economy is asserted to be the essential determining aspect of society and must follow a particular path, then Marxian economics should substantiate this autonomy and self-movement. The interpretation of Marxism as a secular Hegelianism depends on Marxian economics providing support for this thesis. But MoP-SF theorists largely ignore Marx's *Capital*, or at best read it highly selectively and fail to

acknowledge the consistency of Marx's arguments there. If, on the other hand, one reads *Capital* as one synthetic work rather than selectively an entirely different picture emerges. Instead of a passive social structure rigidly determined by the development of the forces of production, *Capital* presents an image of society as a complex, contradictory, and aleatory class structure constituted by multiple different class positions and different social sites. The forces of production are embedded in this social complex and their development cannot be thought of as autonomous from it.

### **III. THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF MODE OF PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL FORMATION THEORY**

#### ***Marx's Preface***

Advocates of MoP-SF theory cite a small selection of Marx and Engels's work as its basis. The primary sources are the well-known paragraph from Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (PAGE #,1970), and Engels's *Anti-Dühring* (1987a), with particular emphasis on those sections of it that were excerpted and published separately as *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Engels, 1975). This selection of texts largely ignores Marx's mature works, *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, and *Theories of Surplus Value*, which begs the question of how the most dominant and influential trend in twentieth century Marxism came to be founded on writings other than Marx's most advanced theoretical output. This is a question for the history of Marxism that I cannot answer here.

The determinist tendency in Marxism bases itself on Marx's Preface in particular. It treats the Preface as a kind of Rosetta Stone of Marxism that unlocks meanings in the rest of Marx's oeuvre that are otherwise undecipherable. But Marx's Preface is open to

different interpretations, and numerous authors from a range of different theoretical positions have challenged the reading of the Preface that sees it as an argument for simple determinism and teleology. Raymond Williams (1977, pp. 75-82), for example, considers the relation of the Preface to base-superstructure theory, and provides a sophisticated and convincing critique of the simple determinist reading. Williams questions the determinist reading because it interprets the Preface strictly in isolation from Marx's other varied and nuanced uses of the terms 'base' and 'superstructure'. He also questions the tendency to use the Preface as a way of separating economic from non-economic processes in social analysis, and contrasts this with Marx's efforts to show not only the indissoluble connections but the mutual constitution of these processes. Guest (1939, pp. 52-54), a distinctly orthodox Marxist, cites Engels's well-known letter to Bloch in his rejection of a simplistic and reductionist reading of Marxism that might be inspired by the Preface. Less orthodox writers such as Hindess and Hirst (1975, pp. 16-17) similarly reject such a reading of the Preface, but for entirely different reasons.

### ***Engels's Reprise of Hegel's Philosophy of History***

The *Anti-Dühring* was published during Marx's lifetime, and Marx contributed a portion of the chapter on the history of Political Economy about the Physiocrats ("From Kritische Geschichte") that Engels was unable to write, which allowed Engels to claim Marx's endorsement for the entire text. In it Engels discusses dialectics at length, and after Marx's death it came to be the main point of reference for 'the philosophy of Marx and Engels'.<sup>5</sup> In the *Anti-Dühring* Engels attributes to Marxism a comprehensive system of materialist metaphysics, consisting of a cosmology, a philosophy of nature, a theory of

society, a theory of history, and an epistemology, all of which are derived from a common set of first principles and mutually support one another.

For Engels society is simply the human manifestation of the general laws of the universe and nature, and hence his social ontology derives directly from his general ontology. “Nature is the test of dialectics” says Engels (1975, p. 67), so the *Anti-Dühring* proceeds from general natural and physical concepts—time, space, cosmogony, physics, chemistry, and the organic world—to human issues such as morality and law. Sections on political economy and socialism follow the opening section on philosophy, and complete the derivation of human phenomena and, *a fortiori*, socialism from the general laws of the universe. Given this derivation of the social from the natural or cosmological, it is not difficult to see how social phenomena, and economic phenomena in particular, would come to be regarded by some Marxists as behaving with the same regularity as a natural system governed by inexorable and trans-historic laws. Engels’s influential text helped to establish economic determinism as the leitmotif of Marxism, and his fusing of arguments about the similitude between the natural and the social with economic determinism helps to explain why Gramsci would later characterize economism as,

. . . the iron conviction that there exists objective laws of historical development similar in kind to natural laws, together with a belief in a predetermined teleology like that of religion. (1971, p. 168)

The distinction between the universal theory of nature and the social theory would be formalized later as the distinction between ‘dialectical materialism’ and ‘historical materialism’, the latter representing a specific social form of the former.<sup>6</sup>

*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* extracts Engels’s basic arguments in the *Anti-Dühring* from the polemics, thereby refining the format and streamlining their

presentation. Instead of a systematic refutation of Eugen Dühring, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* provides a derivation of scientific socialism from three precursors: the utopian socialism of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen; the “new German philosophy” of Kant, Fichte, and, especially, Hegel; and the materialism of Bacon, Darwin, and Marx. In this text Engels echoes Marx’s Preface and proposes that the “economic structure of society” is the “basis” upon which arises a “superstructure” of legal, political, religious, etc. institutions and ideas (1975, p. 71). He also locates the economic base as the source of change and transformation for all aspects of society. Socialism is proposed to be the ultimate end of human progress, at which time “the struggle for individual existence comes to an end” and man “passes from animal conditions to really human ones” (1975, p. 98).

Part II of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* presents Engels’s discussion of the new German philosophy. Its greatest merit, he argues, is the “resumption of dialectics as the highest form of thinking”, and its greatest defect that it was stuck in metaphysical reasoning. It is also here that Engels describes the Marxian dialectic is a relatively straightforward inversion of the Hegelian dialectic, with material conditions simply replacing Spirit and the Idea. According to Engels Hegel’s dialectic rightly emphasized interconnection, process, and change. Every existent exists in its interconnections and concatenations, in flux and in motion, as an endless maze of connections and interactions, in which everything moves, changes, comes into being and passes away. The basic problem he identifies with Hegel’s dialectic is its idealism. Hegel’s theory was Idealist, according to Engels, because to him thoughts were not the abstract images of actual things and processes, but rather things and their development were realized images of the

Idea (p. 69). This idealist defect results in a vision of history that is an inverted image of the true course of history. Replacing idealism with modern materialism, he argues, allows us to see history as the process of development of humanity as a consequence of the development of the material conditions. This new theory is a vision of history in terms of economic relations (i.e. class struggles), and the economic structure of society,

. . . always forms the real basis, from which, in the last analysis, the whole superstructure of legal and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical, and other ideas of a given historical period is to be explained” (pp. 71-72).

Engels’s simple inversion of the Hegelian dialectic preserves almost all of the basic elements Hegel’s social theory, i.e. complexity, holism, *telos*, and rationality. Of particular importance for my current purpose is that Engels retains Hegel’s essentialist holism (the expressive totality) and teleology. Engels criticizes Hegel for inverting the objects of essence-expression (the material and its expression in thought) but he accepts Hegel’s essence-expression mechanism as sound. Hegel placed the Idea and Spirit at the center of a theory of history, as its essential motive force and guiding principle; Engels simply substitutes material conditions but retains the precept that society is a whole that is rationally ordered by an essential aspect that drives its development and leads it to ever-increasing states of perfection. In Hegel the Idea unifies the diverse elements of society and subordinates each aspect to a rationality that exists at the level of the whole; for Engels the economy serves as the essential unifying and ordering feature of society.

The problem with these arguments is not whether it is the Idea or the economy that is the essence of society and history, but rather whether or not society should be construed as a whole with an essential characteristic, structuring rationality, and developmental logic. In order for complexly interdependent phenomena to have a

pervasive rationality they must be viewed as simply elements of a totality that provides that rationality. No matter how complexly interrelated the subordinate phenomena may be, if the whole obeys a particular logic or rationality then the subordinate phenomena that constitute it must also. The behavior of the parts ultimately reveals or expresses the governance of the social essence. Hegel's position is unambiguous:

The only thought which Philosophy brings with it to the contemplation of History, is the simple conception of *Reason*; that Reason is the Sovereign of the World; that the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process. (1956, p. 9)

While it is exclusively its own basis of existence, and absolute final aim, it is also the energizing power realizing this aim; developing it not only in the phenomena of the Natural, but also of the Spiritual Universe—the History of the World. That this “Idea” or “Reason” is the *True*, the *Eternal*, the absolutely *powerful* essence; that it reveals itself in the World, and that in that World nothing else is revealed but this and its honor and glory—is the thesis which, as we have said, has been proved in Philosophy, and is here regarded as demonstrated. (1956, pp. 9-10)

Engels recognizes Hegel's linkage of the complex interconnection of phenomena with the necessity for an “inner logic” that guides the development of the process of history (1975, p. 68), and he preserves both of these aspects of the Hegelian dialectic in his own. His innovation is simply to substitute one “inner logic” or essence for another—materialism for idealism—and he declares the transformation of the Hegelian dialectic complete. In short, the Marxian dialectic is presented by Engels as though it already existed in a fully-formed state in Hegel and simply needed to be rescued from his idealism—inverted from idealism to materialism—in order to be put to work in the service of the worker's movement. It is this interpretation of dialectics that Althusser (1977) famously rejected in his essay “Contradiction and Overdetermination”. While Althusser never successfully developed the alternative that he proposed there—overdetermination—later authors have



succeeded in making it the basis of a distinctly Marxian dialectic and ontology (see Resnick and Wolff, 1987 and 1994).

Part III of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* uses the interpretation of dialectics developed in part II as the basis for theory of society and social change that many Marxists, MoP-SF theorists in particular, have sought to prove and expand upon ever since. In this text Engels presents his basic outline of the materialist conception of history, largely in the form of an argument for the objective necessity for a transition from capitalism to socialism. He argues that since the production and exchange of goods are the basis of every social order, the ultimate cause of all social changes is change in the “modes of production and exchange” (1975, p. 74). He goes on to argue more precisely that it is in fact the development of the forces of production makes change in the relations of production an objective necessity. From this one can deduce that it is the development of the forces alone that drives changes in the relations of production and through them the rest of the social whole.

The primary contradiction that emerges in society is the incompatibility between the development of the forces of production and the relations of production—what Engels calls here the “mode of appropriation”—in a market-based economy or “mode of exchange”. To reach these conclusions Engels preserves all of the essence-expression ontology and teleology of Hegel’s philosophy of history. Where previously Engels argued for “material conditions” as the true basis of social life, here he narrows the focus to only the fundamental contradiction between “social production” and “capitalist appropriation” (Engels, 1975, p. 79). Every other aspect of society is said to respond to the rational development of the demiurge of production. In Hegel’s theory the transition

from one society occurs when the Spirit can no longer progress in the society in which it exists (1956, pp. 74-79). The old society decays and is destroyed, but a new National Spirit is formed from the remnants of the old and allows a new society to continue the development of the Spirit. Engels's theory of transition is analogous to Hegel's but with one basic difference: for Engels it is the development of the forces of production that precipitates the transition from one social form to another. The new, higher form of society is that which is necessary to reconcile the contradictions between the forces of production, the mode of appropriation, and the mode of exchange in order to facilitate the further development of the forces of production. As it is for Hegel so it is for Engels, though for one it is a journey of the Idea and Spirit and for the other it is the secular journey of mankind through different socio-economic forms.

What is curious about his argumentation is that Engels makes almost no use of Marx's work in *Capital*—Marx's economics—to support his arguments. The *Anti-Dühring* devotes one of its three sections to a discussion of Marx's economics<sup>7</sup>, and at the conclusion of section two of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* Engels states that Marx's discovery of surplus value is the key to unlocking the secret of capitalist production (1975, p. 73) but he never discusses this further in the text. Engels's argument for the necessary succession of capitalism by socialism makes no reference to the complex analysis that Marx presents in *Capital* and its associated texts. It seems that when he condensed his arguments in the later text he concluded that a discussion of Marx's economics was irrelevant for his argument. This begs the question of whether this can be considered an authoritative basis for a Marxian theory of society and social change. My answer is that we should look to Marx's texts and not to a later popularization.

## *Second International Marxism*

Prior to the publication of Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938 in Russian, first English translation 1940), which initiated the defining period of Official Marxism (roughly from 1938 until the early 1960's), Marxists used the terms 'mode of production' and 'social formation' unsystematically and expressed a diversity of ontological positions, even in the texts being issued by communist party publishing houses. For example, David Guest published *A Textbook of Dialectical Materialism* (1939) one year prior to the English translation of Stalin's book. Guest's text is notable for its orthodox approach, but also for its criticism of the "mechanistic" view of society that might be drawn from an excessively economistic reading of Marx's "Preface" to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. He states,

Superbly clear though the (Preface) formulation of the materialist conception of history must seem, and richly though it is supplemented in many writings of Marx and Engels, there is no other side of Marxism that has been more often and more willfully misunderstood. . . . The "mode of production" is the ultimate decisive factor influencing the form of society, the conflicts within society, and the types of ideas that become dominant. In this sense the mode of production is often referred to as the "basis," while the social relations and consciousness are called the "superstructure of society". But it would be wrong to understand this use of the terms *mechanically* in the sense that everything in the "superstructure" is rigidly determined by the "basis." Marx and Engels often protested against this over-simplification (in fact, falsification) of their theories. (Guest, 1939, pp. 56-57)

In support of this position Guest then cites the passage from Engels's famous 1890 letter to Bloch (Marx and Engels, 1968, pp. 692-693) rejecting simple determination of the society by the economic base—the same passage that Althusser would later rely so heavily on in his essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (1977, pp. 111-13).

Guest's position on this matter is not unique to him. His views represent what was more or less a consensus from the period of the Second International until

Bukharin's initial dissent in 1925. Bernstein (1961, pp. 10-11) expressed this position in 1899 in his *Evolutionary Socialism* by denying that the superstructure can ever be thought of as a simple expression of the economic base and citing Engels's letters to Bloch and Borgius as support. In his *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* Plekhanov (1969) also relies on these late-career arguments by Engels to reject the idea of the superstructure as a simple expression of the base even more forcefully than Bernstein, and attacks Bernstein for ever proposing that Marx's Preface might imply otherwise (pp. 66-68). Plekhanov does argue for a stagist view of social development and history, and bases these arguments on his reading of Marx's Preface (see esp. p. 162-63), but he also argues against an interpretation of Marxism as simple economism, especially in terms of a simple, unidirectional determination of the superstructure by the base.

. . . though a given state of the productive forces is the *cause* of the given production relations, and in particular of the property relations, the latter (once they have arisen *as a consequence of the aforementioned cause*) begin themselves to influence that cause. Thus there arises an *interaction* between the productive forces and the social economy. (p. 64, italics original)

Plekhanov's text is an interesting example of the state of Marxist theory of society during the period of the Second International. He bases his arguments almost exclusively on the paragraph from the Preface, as well as on Engels's *Anti-Dühring, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, Dialectics of Nature* (1987b), and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1968), while making only a few incidental references to *Capital* or any of Marx's other mature works. He uses the terms "mode of production" and "social formation", but does so in the same relatively informal and descriptive way that Marx and Engels do. The sociological question that engages him, as well as other Second International Marxists, is the relationship between the "base" and the

“superstructure” that Marx mentions in the Preface and Engels later emphasizes. His thinking on this question provides an example of what emerges when one tries to maintain determination by the forces of production alone but without the expressive totality social ontology. For him the productive forces remain the base upon which society rests, and they “condition” economic relations, but the “socio-political system” is not a simple expression of this base.

Kautsky provides another example of thinking during this period. In 1927 he continued to use the concepts of base and superstructure, but he rejected the idea that they could be understood as a simple unity or that there was a clearly deterministic relationship between them, though he, like Plekhanov, clung to determination by the economy ‘in the last instance’.

It also cannot be said that base and superstructure always stand in a relation of cause and effect to one another. They influence each other in constant interaction. Certain legal, political, and religious views are conditioned by certain economic circumstances, but the reverse is equally true. Legal and political conditions also affect economic life to determine it. And the same is true even of religion . . . (1988, p. 229).

A history of ideas of an era, written from the standpoint of the materialist conception of history, must not confine itself to relating these ideas to the given economic conditions. The attempt to explain completely the entire spiritual and intellectual content of an era by its economy will never succeed. In another way, Engels already stressed repeatedly that the economic conditions are the decisive factor in the world history only in the *last analysis*. [*Kaustsky quotes from Engels’ letters on historical materialism to J. Bloch of September 21-22, 1890, and to W. Borgius on January 25, 1894 . . .*] (1988, p. 233, bracketed text inserted by Kautsky’s editor).

Kautsky notes that many different kinds of “social labor”, which for him means the relations between direct producers and owners of the enterprise, are compatible with one type of technology (p. 192)<sup>8</sup>, and states:

Which kind of social labor appears at any given time depends, to be sure, on technology, but by no means on it alone. That is an extremely important viewpoint for research into social evolution. (1988, p. 193).

But the publication of Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* in 1938 marked the beginning of a new era in Marxist theories of society. By the time that Cornforth—who succeeded Guest as a lecturer for the British Communist Party after his death in Spanish Civil War, and primary exponent of Official Marxism in the U.K.—published his *Historical Materialism* in 1953 any hesitation to argue in terms of a unified, mechanistic, and teleological social whole had been abandoned in officially sanctioned literature. During the period of dominance of the Official theory, deviation from Hegelian holistic essentialism and simple technological determinism would only be found outside of the literature that received the imprimatur of the Communist International. Important Marxist writers of this period—Lukacs, Korsch, Sartre, Adorno, Althusser, Marcuse, Della Volpe, Colletti, etc.—all dissented, in one way or another, from the Official theory, but they had to proceed either from outside of their national parties, or in coded opposition to them (Anderson, 1984, p.18). It is also during this period that the concepts of mode of production and social formation—the basic theoretical concepts of the Official approach—were developed and established as *the* Marxist theory of society and history.

Engels's early holistic and teleological arguments formed both the basis and the boundaries for the Official theory of society. The innovation of the Official theory was to formulate 'laws of motion' that were evolutionary rather than simply teleological or metaphysical. But they replaced the simple teleology of Hegel with an evolutionary one. The forces develop in only one direction: from less productive and integrated to more.

Consequently social development—the expression of this change—is likewise teleological.

### *An Official Ontology*

The publication of Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* confirmed the Hegelian holism and evolutionary teleology distinctive of the Official theory as the definitive statement of Marxist theory from within the international communist movement. Stalin's text relies heavily on Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, following it in form and content, further simplifying Engels's arguments, and adding only material specific to the Russian situation. Kuusinen (1963) presents a discussion of dialectics far greater than Stalin's, including arguments from Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, *Dialectics of Nature* (Engels, 1987b), and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Engels, 1968), and synthesizes these with selections from Lenin.<sup>9</sup> It is, however, Lenin's polemical writing in *Materialism and Emperio-Criticism* (1960a) that is emphasized here, not the sophisticated and contemplative writings of the *Philosophical Notebooks* (1960b). These sources represent Engels's and Lenin's engagement with Hegel, and despite the subtleties that they contain (esp. Lenin's *Notebooks*), the dialectics that emerges in Kuusinen's text showcases the essentialist and teleological elements of Hegel and is blind to the issues of complexity and conjuncture.

Consider, for example, Kuusinen's discussion of negation in dialectics:

Dialectical “negation” presupposes not only the destruction of the old, but also the preservation of the viable elements of formers stages of development; it presupposes a certain connection between the outgoing old and the new that is coming to replace it. When the socialist social system is built upon the ruins of capitalist society, the “negation” of capitalism does not imply complete destruction of everything created by mankind under capitalism. The productive forces and the valuable achievements of science and culture are preserved and continue to

develop. . . . Since only what has become obsolete is “negated” in the process of development, while all that is sound and viable is preserved, development is a progressive movement, an ascent from lower stages to higher stages, from the simple to the complex. In other words, development is *progress*. (1963, pp. 84-85)

Clearly this is an interpretation of dialectics premised on the familiar arguments from Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, and is intended to enlist Hegel’s teleological theory of historical development in the cause of socialist transformation. As with Engels the analogy is a simple one: in Official Marxism the forces of production substitute for Hegel’s Idea or Spirit, but otherwise the image of society and social change remains fundamentally unaltered.

Despite all of the work that had been done in Marxian theory in the intervening years by Marx, Lenin, the Marxists of the Second International, and even Engels’s late life modifications to his earlier positions, the Official ontology (general and social) and social theory is a return at least to Engels’s reprise of Hegel and, in important ways, a return to Hegel himself. Engels qualified his holistic approach by proposing that the social essence (the forces of production) exerted its control over the social whole only ‘in the last instance’. The Marxists of the Second International added the additional qualification of arguing for the mutual interaction between the base and the superstructure, which makes it difficult to argue that they embraced the notion of an expressive totality at all. The Official Marxists express neither of these qualifications, and can thereby be said to regress all the way back to Hegel’s simple, unmediated determination of the whole by its essence.



## *The Formal Development of Mode of Production and Social Formation Theory*

### **The 1940's**

Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946) is the earliest effort that I have found that seeks to explicitly formalize the concept of a "mode of production" as the basis for a theory of society. Childe (1946, pp. 250-251) was also working along these lines contemporaneously with Dobb, though for him it is technology that is the deterministic element, not the relations that Dobb emphasizes. Dobb never provides a fully-developed mode of production theory in the way that later Official theorists would, but he does begin the re-conceptualization of the term "mode of production" from a descriptive one to a formal theoretical concept. The novelty of Dobb's arguments is demonstrated in his subsequent exchange with Sweezy. They disagree and wrestle with what it means to refer to a "system of production" and how this idea is or is not similar to a "mode of production" in Marxist theory (Hilton, 1976, esp. pp. 33-34 and 57-58). Sweezy's *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, which was published only four years prior to Dobb's *Studies*, scarcely even uses the term "mode of production" and certainly does not make it a central concept for Marxian theory. For two eminent Marxist scholars to differ so dramatically over such a basic concept clearly illustrates that Dobb was introducing something novel into Marxian theory.

Dobb introduces the concept of a mode of production as a way of defining capitalism. Capitalism, according to Dobb, is a mode of production and a mode of production is a "system" (p. 7). It is also only one of several different types of economic systems that have existed in history. What is significant in studying these modes or systems, according to Dobb, is to identify when one has "grown to proportions which enable it to place its imprint upon the whole of society and exert a major influence in

moulding the trend of development” (p. 11). For Dobb the economy is the basis that influences the whole of society and its development, and each “epoch” should be understood as defined by a single dominant economic system:

What is implied in a conception of Capitalism such as we have adopted is that, save for comparatively brief intervals of transition, each historical period is moulded under the preponderating influence of a single, more or less homogeneous, economic form, and is to be characterized according to the nature of this predominant type of socio-economic relationship. (p. 11)

Arguing that society is determined or “moulded” by a single uniform economic system allows him to theorize society as a “socio-economic system” (pp. 12-13). For Dobb, like Hegel and Engels, society is a system with a basis or center that subjects it to laws of regulation. He transforms the notion of a “mode of production” from a system of production involving the relationship “between men which resulted from their connections with the process of production” (p. 7) into a theory of society (pp. 12-13). For Dobb society is a mode of production or system that is unified by one type of economic relation. He does not use the term “social formation” and so for him the “mode of production” encompasses the society as a whole. Like the Second International Marxists Dobb locates the economy as the basis of society. But unlike them he tentatively adopts the expressive totality social ontology that they repudiated.

Dobb avoids the base-superstructure image and substitutes the notion of society as a mode of production that is an expressive totality. Instead of questioning the relationship between the economic base and the non-economic superstructure he presents society as one coherent whole whose features are determined by the economic relations. Changes in economic relations transform the entire society and these transformations mark the passage from one stage of historical development—for the society as a whole—

to another. His analysis of western European feudalism and the transition to capitalism gives a concrete example of his method. He attributes the dissolution of the feudal mode of production to conflict between producers and appropriators. The inability of feudal laborers, working inefficiently with a low level of technique, to meet increased demands for revenue from feudal lords leads to struggle over feudal rents (p. 42). The increased demands from the feudal ruling class had a variety of origins. Dobb mentions a trend towards sub-infeudation in order to increase military strength, the natural growth of noble families and increases in the number of their retainers, the effects of wars (esp. the Crusades) and brigandage, and the advance of the age of chivalry, with its attendant feasts and displays of consumption that required emulation (“the cult of *magnificentia*”) (pp. 44-45). The increased demands became unendurable for the producers. The resulting conflict transforms the relations of production and thereby the entire feudal society *qua* socio-economic system or mode of production.

Something that sets Dobb apart from his contemporary Childe and from later Official Marxists is that within the economy itself his focus on the relations between producers and recipients of surplus, and he expressly denies that the relations of production are reflexively related to the available productive forces.

The development of Capitalism through the main phases into which its history falls has been associated essentially with technical change affecting the character of production; . . . But it would be a mistake to suppose that (the relations of production) were a passive reflection of technical processes and to ignore the extent to which changes in them exercised a reciprocal influence, upon the shape of development. They are the shell within which technical growth itself proceeds. (pp. 22-23, see also his response to Sweezy in Hilton, 1976, p. 58)

For Dobb it is the economic aspects of society that are the essence that society as a whole expresses, but he places the relations at the center of the economy not the forces.

Different aspects of the economy may reciprocally affect one another, but political and cultural phenomena are determined by the economy as social essence and have no reciprocal effects upon it. Society for Dobb is a totality that behaves as a system with a logic or rationality that expresses the essential force of the economy, but within the economy it is the relations rather than the forces that determine this logic or rationality.

Dobb's work contributed to the direction of future research in the Marxian theory of society and his work provided a substantial contribution to the Official research program. He never carried this analysis much further than he does in *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, and the subsequent "Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism" debate (Hilton, 1976) emphasized empirical questions rather than theoretical ones. So Dobb's *Theories of Capitalist Development* is an important step in the development of mode of production and social formation theory, but it only begins the theoretical development of these concepts, and the debate that it inspired did not significantly advance this development.

### **The 1950's**

The first appearances of fully-developed MoP-SF theory in English begin in the early-1950's, with Maurice Cornforth's work (1953) being the earliest example. Lange's and Kuusinen's works in the late 1950's are relatively complete and comprehensive statements of this theory, and are its clearest and most comprehensive presentations. Later theorists, such as Cohen (1978, 2000), who seek to restore MoP-SF theory to prominence after the criticism it received in the 1970's, are promoting interpretations of Marxism first formally stated by these writers.

The original contribution of the Official literature of the 1950's is a relatively complex social theory with descriptive and explanatory power that fleshes-out the holistic social ontology and teleology into a comprehensive theory of society. It accomplishes this by proposing Marxism as first and foremost a theory of history. It is, perhaps, too strong to say that the Official theorists themselves originated the interpretation of Marxism that would later be referred to as the 'science of development of social formations', there certainly were antecedents, but it is in the Official literature that this problematic became the theoretical core of Marxism, reached an advanced stage of formal development, and received the imprimatur of a Marxist establishment.

Society is the object of analysis in fully-developed Official Marxist theory, and society exists as a "social formation" (Lange, 1963, p. 26), or "socio-economic formation" (Kuusinen, 1963, p. 125), which is composed of a mode of production (economic base) and a superstructure. All societies are constituted in this way and have these features, and all societies are understood in terms of this unified base-superstructure couple. The mode of production has two aspects (i) the forces of production (tools, machinery, technology, and technique), and (ii) the relations of production (limited to the relations between owners of forces of production and the direct laborers). Within the mode of production itself it is the forces of production that determine the character of the production relations. The relations of production arise in conformity with the development of the productive forces, and for each stage of development of the forces of production there is one unique corresponding type of relation of production (Stalin, 1940, p. 32; Cornforth, 1953, p. 69; Kuusinen, 1963, pp. 120; Lange, 1963, pp. 22-23). Five "main" types of production relations have arisen in the course of human development:

primitive communal, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist. Other types of production relations have occurred, most notably “petty commodity production”, but these have been secondary or transitional forms unable to constitute the basis for a distinct social formation. All other aspects of society are distinguished from the mode of production and form a separate “superstructure”.<sup>10</sup> The mode of production or economic base determines the superstructure, and consequently as the mode of production changes the superstructure responds accordingly.

The forces of production determine society through their effects on the relations of production, and while the relations themselves interact with the various aspects of the superstructure, the supremacy of the forces of production over all aspects of the social totality is undiminished. Their development may be inhibited or facilitated by the society in which they exist, but they remain the demiurge of society and are otherwise unaltered by the society in which they are both pervasive and transcendent. Bukharin, for example, states this point clearly,

. . . the social and political superstructure is a complicated thing, consisting of different elements, which are interrelated. On the whole, this structure is determined by the class outline of society, a structure which in turn depends on the productive forces, *i.e.*, on the social technology. Certain of these elements are directly dependent on technology; others depend on the class character of society (its economy), as well as on the technology of the superstructure itself. All the elements of the superstructure are therefore directly or indirectly based on the stage that has been reached by the social productive forces. (1925, p. 155)

This thesis is irrefutable; it follows that our analysis must begin with the productive forces, that the countless mutual dependences between the various parts of society do not eliminate the *basic, ultimate* dependence of the productive forces; that the diversity of the causes operating in society does not contradict the existence of *a single unified causal relation in social evolution*. (1925, p. 229, italics original)

Stalin (pp. 29-34), Cornforth (pp. 55-68), Lange (pp. 21-23), and Kuusinen (pp. 121-125) also make this same point.

The social formation exists in a state of change, and this change is propelled by the self-development of the forces of production. The process of change in the social formation is best described by using what Lange (1963), with his characteristic clarity, calls the three “basic laws of sociology”:

- First Law: The law of the necessary conformity between production relations and the character of the productive forces (p. 23).
- Second Law: The law of the necessary conformity between superstructure and the economic base (p. 30).
- Third Law: The law of the progressive development of the productive forces (p. 36).

According to the first law of sociology the relations of production must conform to the forces of production. Therefore as the forces of production progressively develop (third law), the relations of production are transformed so as to conform with the developing forces, thereby completing the transformation of the entire mode of production. The second law of sociology requires that the superstructure conform to the mode of production, and hence the change in the economic base brought about by the development of the forces of production also transforms the entire superstructure. Thus the entire social formation responds, either directly or indirectly, to the progressively developing forces of production. But the development of the relations of production lag behind the forces of production, which continuously develop more or less independently of what may occur in other realms of society. In this way the progressive development of the productive forces comes into contradiction with the social relations, which,

because they which do not develop as rapidly as the forces, are the conservative element in society. The resolution of this contradiction comes through the revolutionary transformation of the relations of production, which ultimately transforms the entire superstructure accordingly.

Individual phenomena become elements in the simple unity that is the Official social formation, and as such they lose their independent status and become manifestations of the essence that defines this whole. No aspect of the social totality exists independently of its relation to the productive forces.

We can compare this with Althusser's statements about the Hegelian totality,

The *Hegelian totality* is the alienated development of a simple unity, of a simple principle, itself a moment in the development of the Idea: so, strictly speaking, it is the phenomenon, the self-manifestation of this simple principle which persists in all its manifestations, and therefore even in the alienation which prepares its restoration. . . . every concrete difference featured in the Hegelian totality, including the 'spheres' visible in this totality (civil society, the State, religion, philosophy, etc.), all these differences are negated as soon as they are affirmed: for they are no more than 'moments' of the simple internal principle of the totality, . . . (1977, p. 203).

In the same way that the Idea or Spirit serves as both the unifying basic instance of society in Hegelian theory and the cause of its development, the forces of production are the principle unifying and determining the social totality in Official theory. Very little else is changed. The forces of production fulfill the role of the Hegelian social essence by being both pervasive in their effects and transcendent of any particular social whole; they determine every aspect of the social formation but are not in turn determined by any aspect of that society; and their progress continues from one society to the next, each society is simply a vehicle for their progressive development.



The simple mechanistic development of the Official Marxist social formation is another index of a Hegelian totality underlying the Official theory. It is typical of the writers in the Official tendency to formally eschew “mechanistic” causality in favor of dialectic causality (Cornforth, 1971, chapters three and four; Kuusinen, 1963, pp. 26-29), but when they attempt to apply their dialectic method to society the result is as rigidly deterministic as the mechanistic position that they disavow. The problem resides in their inability to conceptualize society as anything other than a unified, self-contained, self-developing totality. Official theorists are unable to conceive of society as having both distinct, relatively independent elements *and* a constitutive outside. Because the social formation is a unified Hegelian whole, its development proceeds not through the aleatory unfolding of a dialectical process involving all of its various aspects, and the relations between this social formation and others, but rather through the teleological evolution of the social essence of which the social formation is simply a manifestation. Individual social formations form totalities that are as self-contained as the universe or cosmos.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION: THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF MODE OF PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL FORMATION THEORY IN RETROSPECT**

Neither Marx nor Engels explicitly formalized the terms “mode of production” or “social formation” as theoretical concepts in their theory. In their writings these terms remain descriptive shorthand expressions that represent something far less comprehensive than what later theorists would make out of them. Mode of production and social formation theory is a product of later writers and should be interpreted as such.

The concepts of mode of production and social formation as formal theoretical statements of Marxian social theory emerged out of the earlier base-superstructure

approach and superseded it. Mode of production theorists resurrected the Hegelian holistic ontology that Engel's advocated in several of his works as a way of enabling his strongly economic determinist and teleological arguments. This social ontology, coupled with an assumed "law of the progressive development of the productive forces", reassuringly implies a teleological development path without overtly embracing teleology. Late in life Engels equivocated and reduced the deterministic role of the economy to "the last instance", and this calls into question the holistic-essentialist image of society that his earlier arguments were based on. But this is either overlooked or afforded minimal importance by mode of production and social formation theorists, whose work re-established simple economic determinism and Hegelian ontology as the basic principles of Marxian social theory. MoP-SF theory provides a reasonably cogent and relatively comprehensive social theory out of Marx's unsystematic uses of the terms "mode of production" and "social formation". Earlier theorists wrestled with the question of the relationship between the base and the superstructure; MoP-SF theory provides a mechanism through which the base expresses itself in the superstructure, it explains how this leads to progressive social change, and it explains how this has given rise to progressive "epochs" in social development.

It is the synthesis of the base-superstructure metaphor with an unreconstructed Hegelian ontology that gives rise to this theory. This synthesis is evident in Bukharin's *Historical Materialism*, but Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* gave this interpretation of society the force of official dogma. Dobb, Childe, Cornforth, Lange, Kuusinen, and others completed the theoretical development. The Marxists of the Second International widely embraced economic determinism and the base-superstructure

distinction, but generally balked at combining them with the ontological holism of Hegel and Engels that made the superstructure a simple expression of the base.

It should, however, be noted here that the concept of a mode of production is a superfluous complication for the Official theory because the forces of production alone determine which type of production relations will exist, and thereby determine the character of the entire social formation. The relations of production may facilitate or hinder the self-development of the forces of production, but any contradiction between them must ultimately be resolved by the adjustment of the relations to the forces, with the adjustment of the superstructure in turn. Hence the forces of production are the ultimate or essential cause of all social change and the relations of production have as little a causal role as any aspect of the superstructure. The mode of production is a minor complication from the simple unity and mono-causal determination of the social formation in the Official theory. The forces are both immanent in and transcendent of any social formation. Identifying a separate 'mode of production' within the social formation serves two purposes: (1) it allows for a periodization of history according to the five main types of production relations as periods manifesting distinct 'modes of production', and (2) it makes the official theory appear consistent with Marx's work by incorporating his frequent but unsystematic uses of this term as the ostensible basis of their theory.

How then did Marxist theory do a virtual *volte-face* on the issue of ontology, and, beginning with Bukharin's work in the early 1920's move to embrace the image of society as a simple expressive totality, unified and determined by the forces of production? This again is an issue for the history of Marxian theory that I cannot fully

answer here, but it is difficult not to recognize the profound influence of writers who held leadership positions in the Soviet Union on the development of this position. One can speculate that the particular conditions of the Soviet Union at that time led these thinkers to believe that the development of the forces of production was critically important for the social and economic development of that society, and were thus inclined to place the forces of production as the prime mover in their theory of society and social development.

Mode of production and social formation theory became *the* Marxist theory of society in the Official literature, and thereby became the basic accepted statement of historical materialism. Later scholars seem to have accepted mode of production and social formation theory as the definitive exegesis of Marx's social theory by being content to accept that it existed fully-formed in the writings of Marx and Engels. The position most often taken by later theorists is that what was needed was to prove the validity of this theory through empirical application. They concerned themselves with the question of whether such-and-such mode of production existed in the past, and, if so, what characteristics did it have? These are the types of questions that occupied scholars working with mode of production and social formation theory in the latter part of the twentieth century. Little attention seems to have been paid to the question of where this theory originated from because it was assumed to be already present in Marx's writings.

This paper proposes, however, that this conclusion is not supportable. Mode of production and social formation theory is the work of later theorists, who made specific decisions of interpretation and introduced distinct innovations that had consequences for the development of Marxian theory. It represents not an 'old-fashioned Marxism', but

rather a regression to Hegelian spirituality and teleology. The basic problem I find with MoP-SF theory is its essentialism, determinism, and teleology. These characteristics are a consequence of its genealogical relationship with Hegel's philosophy of history via Engels's simple inversion of Hegelian theory. My reading of the MoP-SF literature only reinforces the conclusion that these later writers erred by interpreting Marxism as a secular version of Hegel's philosophy of history, and that this interpretation is only possible by relying on selection from Engels's work that he himself would later warn us about, at best a few select references to Marx's writings, and what is clearly a pre-Marxian social ontology. I further propose that this is no longer supportable within Marxian theory, and that new Marxist approaches to social theory need to be embraced. MoP-SF theory, in all of its different iterations, either ignores or is inconsistent with what I take to be Marx's original and lasting contributions: society as a complexly overdetermined totality and class theory (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, introduce this alternative interpretation of Marxian theory).

Both my critique of MoP-SF theory and the alternative approach I advocate owe much to Althusser. I am aware that both he and many of the theorists influenced by him sought to rescue some version of MoP-SF theory from the expressive totality ontology and the manifold problems associated with it rather than reject it. But these efforts failed because MoP-SF theory is not corrupted by the ontology it embodies it. Advances in Marxian social theory will be built by looking to Marx for inspiration, not by resurrecting his predecessors, no matter how inviting that might be.

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<sup>1</sup> August Thalheimer is an exception among early twentieth century writers in that he actually sought to define the term “mode of production”. Writing in 1927 in his *Introduction to Dialectical Materialism* (1936) he defined the mode of production in this way,

We now want to determine more exactly the nature of this foundation, this manner and mode in which men earn their living, or, as Marx called it, the Mode of Production. What is the mode of production? By mode of production dialectical materialism understands the reciprocal relations into which men enter with each other when they produce or work; or, to put it very tersely, the reciprocal relations of men through their work. In the last analysis it is a question of how men are grouped in regard to the means of production. In other words: to whom do the means of production belong, and how are they utilized?

The difference between this definition and those offered by British and Soviet writers of the 1950’s, who devote multiple chapters and entire sections of books to this issue, is tremendous. Clearly significant theoretical innovation occurred in the intervening period.

<sup>2</sup> There are other texts that are similar to these (Glezerman, 1960, for example), but are less prominent in the literature and less influential. For some later statements of this same basic approach see Yurkovets (1984), chapters 7 and 8 or Sheptulin (1978), chapters 10 and 11.

<sup>3</sup> While there is no date of publication given for the first edition of Lange’s *Political Economy*, the “Forward to the First Polish Edition” is dated (1959). Wetter (1966, p. ix) states that Kuusinen’s *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* was also first published in that year and describes the book in this way:

... *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* was the work not only of professional philosophers and students, but also of party officials and publicists, under the direction of O.V. Kuusinen. Its 735 pages provide an exposition of the entire Soviet ideology.

<sup>4</sup> Mayr (1992) refers to evolutionary theories of this type as “transformational evolution”, which he summarizes in this way:

Almost invariably, transformation theories assume a progression from “lower to higher” and reflect a belief in cosmic teleology resulting in an inevitable steady movement toward an ultimate goal, an ultimate perfection.

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between Marx’s and Engels’s ideas has been considered extensively by others. Short surveys are provided in Sheehan (1993, pp. 53-64) and Rees (1994). These

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surveys should be considered guides to the literature and not authoritative interpretations of it.

<sup>6</sup> Both of these terms post-date Marx. Plekhanov is often given the honor of being the first to use the term “dialectical materialism” in 1891 (Edgley, 1983, p. 120); Engels himself seems to have coined the term “historical materialism” in his introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1975, p. 15).

<sup>7</sup> There is a notable asymmetry between the *Anti-Dühring* and *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* that hinges on exactly this point. Both of these texts are presented in three sections. In the *Anti-Dühring* these three sections are “Philosophy”, “Political Economy”, and “Socialism”, and the subject matter of these sections is basically dialectics, Marx’s economics, and the transition to socialism, respectively. His presentation forms a syllogism. In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* the three sections are untitled but consist of a critique of utopian socialism, dialectics, and the transition to socialism.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth reproducing Kautsky’s quote here in its entirety because, while he does not use the concept of surplus in his analysis, he problematizes the questions of appropriation and power in a way that has an affinity with current understandings of class:

Often the most diverse kinds of social labor are compatible with one and the same technology. Let us consider a modern factory. It can be run in a capitalistic manner . . . The products are sent to market. The proceeds from them belong to the capitalist. But the same factory can also be run cooperatively by a producers’ cooperative association made up of workers who own it in common . . . A producers’ cooperative association, too, produces for the market. Finally, the factory can also be owned by the consumers of its products—a consumers’ cooperative association, a local community, or a state. It produces not for the market but for the needs of the social entity that owns and regulates its operation. In the last case, the organization of this the organization of this factory can, furthermore, take different forms. The workers employed in it can constitute a self-administering producers’ cooperative association, that leases the factory from the given social owner . . . [They] can, however, also be engaged as wage laborers under the management appointed by their representatives in conjunction with representatives of the consumers . . . (1988, p. 192)

<sup>9</sup> Kuusinen’s text represents the apex of the Official philosophy. It draws from the texts that were politically acceptable during this period, which by this time were only Marx, Engels and Lenin. But Marx is cited infrequently by Kuusinen and clearly no attempt is made to derive a Marxian philosophy from Marx’s work. The primary sources for his Marxist philosophy are Engels and Lenin. Stalin is neither cited nor discussed, but the influence of his philosophical statements is unmistakable. There is little or no influence of non-Soviet writers, and no original contributions by Soviet writers except in their ability to divine the philosophical arguments distinctive of the Official Marxist position from the original sources. An objective of this text appears to be to read Lenin’s texts in

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such a way as to make him consistent with Engels's interpretation of the Marxian dialectic.

<sup>10</sup> There is some disagreement among Official theorists on this point. Lange (1963, p. 26), following Stalin (1972), limits the superstructure to "only those conscious social relations (except conscious production relations, for these are part of the base) and those social ideas and socio-psychological attitudes which are necessary for the existence of a given mode of production, which make possible the continuation of the existing production relations and which, in particular, consolidate the established system of ownership of the means of production".



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