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„Productive Forces“ and „Relations of Production“ in Marx

"5. Dialectics of the concepts productive force (means of production) and relation of production, a dialectic whose limits are to be defined, and which does not do away with real differences."

(K. Marx, Grundrisse,
109/MEW 13, 640)

Abstract: This paper criticises the view that, according to Marx, "productive forces" determine "relations of production" and that the growth of the former basically determines the course of history. The particular version of this account discussed is that to be found in G.A. Cohen's Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence. The main part of this criticism involves a presentation of what, it is suggested, was in fact Marx's conception of "productive forces", "relations of production" and their relations, and an identification of class-struggle as the primary factor at least for the historically significant periods with which Marx was concerned.

1. Introduction

The concepts usually designated in English translations of Marx by the terms "productive forces" and "relations of production" (or "forces of production" and "productive relations"), and cognates, are among the most fundamental in his thought on society and history. At least two questions arise with regard to them. Firstly: Are they adequate to their subject-matter? And secondly (and more basically): What exactly do they refer to after all? It is the second question that I shall address in this paper.

Many different explications of Marx's concepts of "productive forces" and "relations of production" have been given, but about their relations to one another there have been, traditionally, two broad sorts of answers: that the first determines the second, or conversely.¹ At the present time the most notable recent exponent of the first view is probably G.A. Cohen in his recent and well-received Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence,² whilst the second is to be found - though less clearly expressed - in some of his critics.³ Critics of the first view tend to yield the explicit textual ground to defenders of the first,⁴ but argue that the second interpretation is faithful

to what is implicit in Marx's practice as economist and historian and hence that this is what Marx should have said.

In this paper I shall argue that neither of the above two alternatives adequately represents Marx's view on this question, and also that the correct account can be easily substantiated in Marx's texts. I shall take the first account - that productive forces determine relations of production - as my main target and the book by Cohen mentioned earlier as the main representative of this view just because his presentation is particularly clear and influential.

2. Marx's Presentation in the '1859 Preface'

It is both natural and, in view of the history of the discussion of the topic, virtually inevitable, that we begin by recalling some relevant sections of the well-known statement of the materialist conception of history which begins shortly after the opening of the preface to Marx's Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (henceforth the '1859 Preface'). He writes here (employing a more or less standard terminology in translation) the following:

"In the social production of their life people enter into specific (bestimmte) relations which are necessary and independent of their will, relations of production (Produktionsverhältnisse) which correspond to (entsprechen) a specific stage in the development of their material productive forces (Produktivkräfte). The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure (Struktur) of society, the real base (Basis) on which a legal and political superstructure arises and to which specific forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production (Produktionsweise) of material life conditions (bedingt) the process of social, political and mental life as a whole ... At a certain stage in their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the prevailing relations of production, or, what is only a legal expression for the same thing, with the property relations within which they have moved hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. ... A social formation never goes under before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new, superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured in the womb of the old society." (Marx/Engels, SW 1, 503 f./MEW 13, 8 f.)

The broadest distinction here is then between two sectors. On the one hand, there is what is called variously in the above passage (in order of occurrence in the text) "the economic structure of society", "the real base", "the mode of production of material life". (It is also referred to elsewhere at the same place, in a sentence I have not quoted, as "the economic foundation [Grundlage]".) On the other hand there is "a legal and political superstructure and ... specific forms of social consciousness". It is only the former that will concern me in this paper. As for the various ways of designating this - I shall not defend the assumption I have made, namely, that each is in fact simply an alternative designation of the same con-

cept - I shall prefer the first, as the second ("real base") brings in an allusion to "superstructure" which is irrelevant here, and the third ("mode of production") is very ambiguous in Marx's writings.⁵

About "the economic structure of society" the passage says, fairly unambiguously, at least the following:

- (1) it is identical with the set of "relations of production";
- (2) the latter are designated in legal terms as property-relations; and also
- (3) they "correspond" to "productive forces".

3. A 'Technological' Interpretation (G.A. Cohen)

G.A. Cohen in his book Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence has no quarrel with what I have just set out as points (1) - (3). Indeed (3) - or, more exactly, a certain interpretation of (3) - is at the heart of his view of Marx's theory of history. This interpretation is encapsulated in the first place in what he calls the 'Primacy Thesis' ('PT' in what follows):

The nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces.

(A productive force is, on Cohen's account, something that is used in production and can be owned. (Cohen 1978, 31 ff.) This criterion excludes "work relations" and includes labour power and means of production, that is, technology and raw materials.) This is supplemented by a distinct but related 'Development Thesis' (henceforth 'DT'):

The productive forces tend to develop throughout history.⁶

Given what is meant by "productive forces" here this effectively means that technology tends to develop throughout history.

Cohen's development of the argument regarding these theses proceeds in the following way. Firstly, he argues that what Marx says in the 1859 Preface - he cites passages included in those quoted towards the beginning of the preceding section above (Cohen 1978, 136 ff.) - shows that Marx was committed to PT. Secondly, he cites a wide variety of passages from Marx's writings as further evidence that Marx embraced PT (142 ff.). Let one of these stand for all, and in particular one from the first volume of Capital, a book published by Marx himself and unambiguously in the 'mature' canon:

"Technology reveals (enthüllt) the active relation of people to nature, the direct process of the production of their life, thereby also the process of production of the social relations of their life, and of the mental conceptions (geistigen Vorstellungen) that flow from these relations." (Capital I, 193 n/MEW 23, 393 n)

Thirdly - and we are here at the heart of the argument - he develops an independent case for both PT and DT. This case is set out over several pages (Cohen 1978, 151 ff.). The following summary will suffice for present purposes.

The argument is in two main parts. The first concerns the DT. It goes like this. (1) Men are rational (to some extent) insofar as, knowing how to satisfy compelling wants, they are disposed to seize and employ the means of satisfying these wants. (2) Historically humanity lives in a state of scarcity, where by "scarcity" is meant that "given men's wants and the character of external nature, they cannot satisfy their wants unless they spend the better part of their time and energy doing what they would rather not do, engaged in labour which is not experienced as an end in itself" (152). "Men possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation" (152). (1) and (3) are explicitly flagged as expressing "permanent facts of human nature" (150); (2) is presented as an empirical fact. Now, given (1) and (2), when by virtue of (3) "knowledge provides the opportunity of expanding productive power they will tend to take it, for not to do so would be irrational" (153). Cohen now brings forward the following further putatively factual premises. (4) The productive forces rarely move backwards. (5) Statements (1)-(3) have considerable explanatory weight. (6) The productive forces often move forwards. These premises underpin the DT.

So much for the DT. Now, as for the PT, this is deduced from the DT in conjunction with the further premise (7): "... a given level of productive power is compatible only with a certain type, or certain types, of economic structure" (158). So the productive forces are disposed to develop (DT), but, given the constraints expressed in (7),

"... with sufficient development of the forces the old relations are no longer compatible with them. Either they will have changed without lag along with productive development, or ... there will now be 'contradiction' between forces and relations. But if contradiction obtains, it will be resolved by alternation of the production relations. For otherwise they would impede further productive development, which is impossible to block indefinitely, according to [the DT]." (158)

Premise (7) is filled out with a functional theory of the nature of the primacy of the forces (160 ff.), summarized in the following sentence (emphasized in the original text): "The property of a set of productive forces which explains the nature of the economic structure embracing them is their disposition to develop within a structure of that nature." (161)

Finally, Cohen discusses the ways in which, though the productive forces are the basic determinants of the relations of production, the latter also condition the former (163 ff.). The discussion is summarized in the following passage:

"First, they promote the development of the forces, ... relations obtain when and because they promote development.
Second, they help to determine the particular path development takes, and this restricts the independent explanatory power of the forces, to the

extent that features of the path which explain features of production relations in turn reflect features of production relations not explained by the productive forces. Finally, the relations influence the rate of productivity development, and that too qualifies the primacy of the productive forces." (165)

Briefly, pulling all this together now, we can say that, according to Cohen's account, the productive forces are the fundamental determinants of the relations of production: in more or less stable situations they determine those relations by virtue of the fact that the relations that obtain are those that are functional for the maximum development of the productive forces at that stage (PT); change is basically brought about by development of the productive forces as a response of intelligent and rational human beings to a situation of pervasive scarcity (DT); and the character of the relations of production appropriate to the new stage of development of the productive forces is again a matter of the character of the latter (PT again).

4. Some Objections to the Preceding Interpretation

So much for Cohen's form of the 'technological' - or perhaps better, 'technologistic' - interpretation of productive forces/productive relations and their connections. I want to urge against it a few objections, with no pretension at exhaustiveness, the aim being mainly just to arouse some doubt about it and prepare the way for the next stage of the discussion. (I shall follow roughly the sequence of the presentation in the preceding section.)

(1) As regards the explicit textual evidence for the PT, this is not as convincing as Cohen makes out. For example, is even a passage like that about technology, cited in the last Section from the first volume of Capital, at all decisive? Technology might be said to "reveal" "the process of production of ... social relations", etc. because it is both the effect of the relations that determine it as well as what those relations are organised round, in something the way in which a neurotic symptom may "reveal" the process of production of an individual's personal-social relations without being "primary" for the individual. These considerations are not compelling, but merely serve to indicate that the texts which might appear decisive at first glance are not quite so probative at a second.

However, there are also texts in Marx - and not mere occasional ones either - which seem positively to contradict the PT. For example, take the following, also from Capital, where Marx writes that "the production of absolute and relative surplus-value determines ... the whole social and technical shaping (Gestaltung) of the capitalist process of production (Capital II, 461/MEW 24, 384). Now the production of surplus-value (indeed the applicability of the very concept of value) is a matter not of the productive forces but of specific relations of production⁷: the productive forces (in the relevant technical sense at least) are responsible for the generation of use-values, embodying or representing human labour, whilst it is

a specific set of relations of production that make this labour-process simultaneously a process of exploitation, a process of extraction of surplus-value (Capital I, ch. 7/MEW 23, ch. 5). So, in sum, the textual evidence for Cohen's claims is at least dubious.

(2) Turning from the texts to Marx's actual historical writing, it is quite clear that he did not think that changes in the character of relations of production are always explained by changes in the nature of the productive forces which are embedded in them. For example, the origins of slavery and serfdom, and to a large extent their maintenance, lay, according to Marx, in military force.⁸

(3) As regards the DT, Marx thought neither a) that the productive forces always show a tendency to develop, nor b) that when they do, it is a matter of inherent, autonomous tendencies. As regards a), over long periods of history the productive forces have shown no tendency to develop or have even regressed. Marx's favourite examples of this are from the history of Asia, and specifically India and China.⁹ Certainly, virtually uninterrupted development of the productive forces has characterized the capitalist world for the last few centuries; but this is hardly a basis for affirming an inevitable feature of world-history. Moreover - and here we touch on b) - Marx certainly did not consider that capitalist development has been a result of any inherent tendency of the productive forces to develop. Rather it has been a consequence of a whole complex of factors stemming specifically from capitalist relations of production, a complex the tap-root of which is the fundamental exigency of accumulation of surplus,¹⁰ just as the lack of development of the productive forces at other times was due to a different set of relations of production.¹¹

(4) Would Cohen say with regard to cases like those alluded to above under a) that the relations of production have been responsible for obstructing the development of the productive forces? But then it would seem that, on his showing, the relations of production have a very considerable degree of autonomy with regard to the level of development of the productive forces, and of society in general. Indeed there is a crucial lack of clarity in his remarks - cited in summary at the end of the previous section - on the influence of the relations of production on the forces of production. It is said that a certain set of relations of production obtain "when and because they promote development" of the productive forces, and also that the relations "help to determine the particular path development taken" and "influence the rate of productivity development". What does "promote" mean here? If it means that the relations are an at least strictly necessary condition for the development of the forces at all, then the sense of the PT becomes unclear. Does it mean then that the relations are responsible just for modifying the development of the forces which would have occurred anyway in one form or another? (Indeed this seems to be the sense of the second and third clauses in the summary of the ways in which the relations are said to influence the forces.) But then, amongst other things, Cohen

cannot appeal to the relations of production to explain the blocking of the development of the forces of production. Furthermore, his account cannot accommodate appeals to the specific characteristics of relations of production as basic determinants of the productive forces.¹²

(5) Finally and over-all the marriage between historical materialism and theses about human nature in general is not contracted with favourable auguries. After all, the former was born under the star of opposition to the latter.¹³ And this more or less exegetical point may be supplemented by the observation that explanations in terms of human nature tend to be both nugatory and obstructionist: the explanatory factor (human nature) tends to be defined in terms of what it is called upon to explain and also to act as a block on further attempts at explanation.

As I began by saying, the above has not been intended as an exhaustive criticism of Cohen's argument, but merely to introduce some doubts about it and to indicate some of the criteria of adequacy for the only effective critique, namely, an alternative account: clearly an account which is not subject to these queries will be, on those grounds anyway, a preferable one. I now turn to such an alternative account, after which we can come back briefly to Cohen's (Section 7).

5. An Alternative Account - I

I propose to offer an account of the notions of "productive forces" and "relations of production" which is both not subject to the preceding objections and is consistent with Marx's own texts - with both his explicit statements and his concrete analyses.

Before getting down to the detail of the construction of such an account let us verify that the passage from the 1859 Preface cited in Section 2 above and used as an anchor-point of interpretation by Cohen (and innumerable others) is no isolated one as regards content, nor one that was superseded. I shall do this by looking at another passage, written somewhat later, contained in the manuscripts later edited by Engels as the third volume of Capital.

"Then specific economic form in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines (bestimmt) the relation of domination and servitude (das Herrschafts- und Knechtschaftsverhältnis), as it grows directly out of production itself and in turn reacts back upon it as a determining factor. Upon this however is founded the entire mode of formation (die ganze Gestaltung) of the economic community (Gemeinwesen) which grows up out of the relations of production themselves and thereby at the same time its specific political form (Gestalt). It is always the direct relation of the owners (Eigentümer) of the conditions of production (Produktionsbedingungen) to the direct producers - a relation whose form naturally always corresponds to a definite stage of development of the methods (Art und Weise) of labour and hence its social productive power

(Produktivkraft) - in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden foundation (Grundlage) of the entire social structure (Konstruktion), and hence also that of the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence (Souveränitäts- und Abhängigkeitsverhältnisses), in short the always specific form of the state." (Capital III, 772/MEW 25, 799 f. Cf. Capital I, 325/MEW 23, 231)

The doctrine of this passage is fairly clearly the same, in essentials, as that contained in the passage from the 1859 Preface already cited. (1) What is basic is "the direct relation of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers": this is the "foundation of the entire social structure", determining the type of exploitation specific to a given society and the form of the state peculiar to it (that is, the political "superstructure"). This is the set of "relations of production" of the earlier passage. (2) This relation of "owners" (Eigentümer) is thus a type of property (Eigentum). (3) The relation in question which is basic and defines a given social formation has a form which "always corresponds to a definite stage of development of the methods of labour" and thus to their character as productive forces. These points (1)-(3) thus tally point by point with the three points extracted from the 1859 Preface passage earlier.

In constructing an alternative account of "productive forces" and "relations of production" we cannot do better than to begin with a consideration of a passage from Capital:

"Whatever the social forms of production, labourers and means of production always remain their factors (Faktoren). But both are such only potentially (der Möglichkeit nach) if they are in a state of separation from one another. For any production at all to take place they must be related to one another (müssen sie sich verbinden). The particular way in which this relation (Verbindung) is brought about is what distinguishes the various epochs in the structure of society (Gesellschaftsstruktur)." (Capital II, 120/MEW 24, 42)

Marx goes on to say that in the case which he is considering, namely, capitalism

"it is the separation of the free labourer from his means of production that is the given point of departure ... the two come to be united (vereint) in the hand of the capitalist - namely as his capital in its productive mode of existence."

Spelling out what is said here we have thus to begin with a distinction between, on the one hand,

- (1) the "factors" of all production, namely,
 - a) labourers, and
 - b) means of production,

and, on the other,

- (2) the manner in which these factors are brought together, related, so as to turn them from merely potential ways of producing into actual ones.

Now what is referred to in (2) both presupposes and entails a certain type of control over what is referred to in (1) and, specifically, in (1a). For certain types of societies anyway that (1a) and (1b) are in a state of separation from one another presupposes that they are differentially controlled by the agents of production, and also that both the fact that

they came together and how they do so are, at least in part, a result of the operation of the powers involved in that differential control. In the specific case in question, that of capitalism, the fact that free labourers are separated from the means of production is a consequence of the latter's being controlled by capitalists, and both that and how the two factors come together is a consequence of the fact that capitalists buy a) and put them to work in certain ways on b). In brief then, (2) presupposes certain relations between agents of production and the "factors" listed in (1) which may be called ownership or property relations. That is, what is in question here are obviously what is elsewhere in Marx called "relations of production".

So we can now distinguish between

- (1) the "factors" of production (labourers and means of production) and
- (2) relations of production as relations of control between agents of production on the one hand, and (1) on the other, which relations are at least partially responsible for
- (3) the precise way in which the "factors" of production are brought together, are turned from merely potential "forms of production" into
- (4) actual forms of production.

Before pursuing this set of distinctions as a whole, let us make (1) a little more precise. For this purpose we need only turn to another passage in Capital where we read that

"The simple elements (Momente) of the labour-process are purposeful activity or labour itself, its object (Gegenstand) and the means (Mittel) that it employs." (Capital I, 284/MEW 23, 193)

A little further on Marx speaks of

"all the necessary factors (Faktoren) of a labour-process, the objective (gegenständliche) factors or the means of production, and the personal factor or labour-power." (Capital I, 291/MEW 23, 199)

Thus the "elements" of the labour-process are, according to the first passage, 1) labour, 2) the object on which labour is exerted by means of 3) the means (instruments) of labour. In the second passage the "factors" of the labour-process are a) the "means of production", and b) "labour-power". It is clear that a) comprises 2) and 3). The two passages differ as to the third factor: in the first, labour, in the second labour-power. The distinction is, of course, a crucial one for Marx, and it is important to preserve it carefully. So if we are looking at the matter from the point of view of the "factors" with which we started, that is, from the point of view of merely potential factors of the form of production, we shall do best to stick to labour-power, keeping labour as a factor in the actual, functioning labour-process. Putting all this together then we can make (1) in our original list more precise by writing it as

- (1') the "factors" of production (labour-power and means of production, i.e. the objects on which labour-power works and the instruments by which it so works).

Let us now consider our original four-fold distinction again, in order, in particular, to arrive at a convenient and, if possible, illuminating nomenclature.

I propose to call (1'), by virtue of the fact that they are only the factors of actual, functioning labour-processes, only potential means of producing, "productive powers". (These are what Cohen calls "productive forces".) I shall call (2), the relations of control over the productive powers, "social relations of production", in distinction from (3), which I shall call "technical relations of production", these being the actual relations between the productive powers which transform them from mere powers into (4), which I shall call "productive forces".¹⁴

I shall not discuss the relations between these further right now except to clarify just one point. If we take the specific case of capitalism for the sake of concreteness, (1'), the productive powers, include, for example, metal-presses, electric screw-drivers, and so on, as well as labour-power, all but the last being - in general - the property of the capitalist, due to (2), the prevailing social relations of production (at least until he buys labour-power for a specified time). By virtue of this differential ownership the capitalist is responsible for overcoming the separation between the productive powers and bringing them together in, say, a car factory. Precisely how they are brought together in the specific types of technical relations of production (3), to form (4), productive forces proper, is a consequence partly of the social relations (e.g. the division of labour in its aspect as means of control over the labour-process (see Marglin 1976)) but partly also of the objective character of the means of production and the sort of commodity which is to be produced. (For example, the sequence of certain operations in the labour-process is dictated by the technical character of the latter - to give a trivial example, the engine cannot be fitted till the chassis is in place.) So productive powers are transformed into productive forces by virtue of relations induced between them - what I have called technical relations of production - which in turn depend upon social relations of production operating within the constraints imposed by natural necessities. Thus the social relations of production are not themselves a part or aspect of these productive forces though they are partly responsible for the character of specific productive forces.

Thus the relation between productive powers and productive forces is to some extent analogous to our ordinary distinction - when we are being very nice in usage - between "capacities" and "abilities"; for example, many people possess the capacity to speak Swahili but only a few of these have the ability to do so.¹⁵ Though I argue in an Appendix to this paper that the term in Marx's texts generally translated "productive force(s)" should, as a purely textual matter, be translated "productive power(s)", there is not much hope of changing the entrenched usage; however in the rest of the paper I shall, where necessary, make use of this revised terminology whilst following the usual practice where it makes no great difference.

The above account is fully consistent with the central passages from Marx cited so far, though I shall not pause here to review these in the light of what has just been argued. At this point I want only to look at a passage in the third volume of Capital that in fact occurs a little further on after the vitally important segment cited at the beginning of this Section. Marx writes here:

"... the social process of production in general ... is a process of production of the material conditions of existence of human life and also a process taking place under specific historico-economic relations of production, producing and reproducing these relations of production themselves, and thereby also the bearers (Träger) of this process. their material conditions of existence and their reciprocal relations (Verhältnisse), i.e. their specific economic form of society. For the totality of these relations (das Ganze dieser Beziehungen) in which the bearers of this production stand with respect to nature and to one another, in which they produce, this totality is precisely society considered from the standpoint of its economic structure." (Capital III, 798/MEW 25, 826 f.)

Marx once more says here that the economic structure of society consists of a set of relations of production, and that these relations of production consist, firstly, in the relations which the "bearers" of production have to nature, and, secondly, in the relations which they have to one another. Now the first sort of relation is clearly what I have called "technical relations of production". The second sort - the relation of agents of production to one another - can reasonably be taken to be nothing other than what is spoken of in the earlier passage cited at the beginning of this section as "the direct relation of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers". Since these relations of agents of production to one another are generated by the more primary relations of ownership/control over the productive powers - as is alluded to in the passage just quoted - this second sort of relation is a matter precisely of what I have called "social relations of production". So the above passage is of a piece with the others I have adduced, and has the additional theoretical advantage of making the matter of technical relations of production quite explicit.

6. An Alternative Account - II

I now address myself to questions alluded to by Cohen's PT and DT.

The PT is consistent with the alternative account as presented so far. For whilst productive powers (Cohen's productive forces) are combined into productive forces via social relations of production, it could be that the latter are themselves determined by the productive powers, as the PT asserts.

On this point there is little doubt that Marx considered that specific social relations of production have a specific range of productive powers as necessary conditions of existence: not any old productive powers can serve as the terms for being combined according to specific relations of production.¹⁶ It is

at least in this sense that social relations of production "correspond" - to use Marx's usual term - with productive powers.

But we cannot go further than this without entering upon matters relevant to the DT, according to which the productive forces (powers) develop as a result of the operations of (more or less) rational human beings in a situation of scarcity. Marx's view at this point has to be stated carefully. To begin with, there can be little doubt that, according to him (and at a first approximation) it is the social relations of production that determine the state of development of the productive powers. This state of development may be one of three sorts: regression with respect to an earlier stage, stagnation or progress. These possibilities have been canvassed earlier (Section 3, (3)). However, at least in the case of progress in the development of the productive powers, it may come about that the latter develop to the point at which the social relations of production of which those powers have been the terms hitherto are no longer adequate to the new powers, and different social relations of production are necessary if further progress is to be achieved or even if regression is not to occur. So it is clear that there is no simple answer to the question: "Which is primarily determining, productive powers or relations of production?" since changes in the former may turn out to be indispensable necessary conditions for changes in the latter.

I said above that the account just given was only a first approximation to Marx's full story. This qualification must now be removed. And this is easy to do if we remember that the social relations of production are in general a matter of differential relation of control over the productive powers: by virtue of certain agents owning some or all of them, others do not. Now this amounts to a characterization - for the historically significant cases at least - of class-relations: classes are basically defined for Marx in terms of differential relations of control over the productive powers. But since these relations of control are in general contested the notion of class brings with it the notion of class-struggle, and indeed classes are constituted as such in class-struggle. (Cf. Poulantzas 1973, 73 ff.) So what has been left out of the picture so far is precisely the fact(or) of class-struggle.¹⁷ In particular it must be remembered that the combination of the productive powers into productive forces by virtue of social relations of production is, when these are class-relations, seldom if ever the sort of more or less automatic process that the ways of talking so far may have suggested, but rather a matter which is fundamentally contested; and it must be remembered also that the generation of new social relations of production in the case where the old ones have forwarded the development of productive powers to a point incompatible with them is by no means an automatically occurring process, but once more a matter of struggle between classes. All this is indeed just to spell out what Marx says in a crucial part of the important statement cited at the beginning of Section 5 above, namely, that "it is always the direct relation of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers ... in which

we find the innermost secret, the hidden foundation of the entire social structure". And it is to recall the plangent opening of the first chapter of The Manifesto of the Communist Party: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (CW 6, 482/MEW 4, 462).

A brief survey of Marx's study of the history of West European capitalism, the only period of history which he treated in detail, will serve both as an illustration and a confirmation of the above account.

Marx periodizes the history of capitalism in different ways. But for the present purposes we can consider two broad and overlapping forms. In the first the distinction is between the period of "formal subsumption of labour under capital" on the one hand, and "real subsumption of labour under capital" on the other.¹⁸ The first embraces the period from the emergence of capitalism to the Industrial Revolution, or the period of what Marx calls "manufacture". As regards the emergence of capitalism. Marx shows how capitalist relations of production presupposed a growth of productive power in the countryside as well as in the city, a growth that could not be encompassed by pre-capitalist relations of production;¹⁹ insofar, there was a lack of "correspondence" between those powers and those relations. Thus a development of the productive forces was, in Marx's view, a clearly necessary condition for the emergence of capitalist relations of production. Marx also emphasizes (Capital I, 439/MEW 23, 341; cf. also Miller 1981, 102-5) that early capitalism has a technological base virtually indistinguishable from the economic structure it was replacing. This is in fact the clue to the meaning of "formal subsumption of labour under capital". Labourers are "subsumed" under capital insofar as they are legally separated from the means of production and hence have to sell their labour-power in order to live. But the subsumption is merely "formal" because whilst they are legally dispossessed they are not strictly technically dispossessed, since they still have a large degree of actual control over the labour-process by virtue of the fact that the instruments of production depend for their use on their skill and strength: they use the instruments of labour. Thus at this stage the capitalist relations of production have not acquired a technical basis appropriate to it, insofar as capital still does not have effective control over the labour-process and insofar as the accumulation of surplus has limits imposed on it both by the physical constitution of labourers and by the power they have to resist exploitation stemming from the technical relation which they have to the instruments they use. We can say then, in the language of the 1859 Preface, that forces of production (using the usual terminology) and relations of production fail to "correspond": the former, having provided the original technical basis for capitalist relations of production to get a foothold, are now inadequate to the latter.

The "real subsumption of labour under capital" begins with the Industrial Revolution and lies in the creation by capital of a technical base adequate to it (see esp. Tribe 1975). It consists essentially in the introduction of the machine proper in

place of the tool. Now the workers do not use tools: the machine uses them. The accumulation of surplus is now not restricted by the physical constitution of workers and they become dispossessed not merely legally but also technically.

Now Marx distinguishes, effectively, two sub-periods within this overall period of real subsumption of labour under capital. During the first (the exact dating is unimportant here) there was a "correspondence" between the forces and relations of production insofar as the latter actually fostered the development of the former; during the second the latter has formed an obstacle to the development of the former and hence there has been a lack of "correspondence" between the two, formally similar to that which obtained at the beginning of the epoch of capitalism but with the source of non-correspondence reversed, its being now the productive forces which are in advance of the relations of production.

Let us emphasise why capitalist social relations have encouraged the development of productive powers, and, particularly, technology. Capital gives two main answers to this. One is a matter of the struggle between capitals for a share of the surplus: better technology means (other things being equal) cheaper products and hence competitive advantage. (The full story is a bit more complicated than this. But what has been said just before is not false.) The other answer is that - again many other things being equal - the more advanced the technology the less control the worker has over the labor-process and the less the power of the working-class in its struggle with capital. So one of the crucial keys to the development of the productive forces under capitalism in the example studied above is the state of the class-struggle. And this is extensible backwards into the first period and forwards to the present. In oft-quoted words Marx wrote that "capital comes into the world dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (Capital I, 926/MEW 23, 788). And late-capitalist crises have their outcomes determined - hence, in particular, the possibilities of productive development determined - by, amongst other things, the outcome of the class-struggle (e.g. the capacity of the working-class to resist attacks on real wages)²⁰.

In brief then I am ascribing to Marx the view 1) that the social relations of production in general determine the productive forces to the extent that they determine - within certain independent technical constraints - the way in which the productive powers are combined; however, 2) a definite type of social relations of production has a definite range of types of productive powers as a necessary condition of existence; and 3) the social relations of production are brought into existence and sustained, to the extent that they are, in the cases with which Marx was centrally concerned, namely, class-societies, through class-struggle. So the correct answer to the question: Do productive forces determine the character of the relations of production or conversely? is: Neither, since the ultimate determinant of both (subject to the qualifications of scope already made) is the class-struggle, the nature and course of

which has, naturally, its own determinants (on the one hand, the state of development of the productive powers, on the other, the political and ideological situation)²¹

At the risk of excessive repetition it must once more be emphasised that this explanatory reference to class-struggle is obviously applicable only to class-societies. Marx has no special theory about the economies of pre-class societies, nor about the origin of class, and only fragmentary remarks about post-class societies. It would be wholly contrary to the spirit of Marx's historical materialism to posit universal mechanisms of particular historical developments, historically unspecific springs of all social change (as, for example, accounts in terms of "human nature" do).

7. Another Look at Cohen's Account

If we now look back for a moment at Cohen's account - a concrete example of a technologistic reading of Marx - it will be clear that the alternative developed above does not suffer from any of the defects of his. It is consistent with Marx's texts: with both his explicit statements and with his concrete analyses (cf. note 17 above). In particular it does not imply any necessary progress in the development of the productive powers/forces, the level of development at a time being a contingent result of many factors, even if the principal one is the nature of the social relations of production, the particular index of which in the most significant range of cases is the conjunctural state of the class-struggle. Not least the present interpretation has no need of recourse to theses about human nature.

In this last regard it is now easy to see the origin and function of such a human nature account. It is simply a metaphysical, speculative anthropology which fills the explanatory vacuum created by the absence of the factor of class-struggle in the account of Marx's theory of history. And it will indeed be found that every account which has this absence will also present some such surrogate. (Theory, like the nature of the Scholastics, has a horror vacui.) And the effect of such an ideological implant is precisely to create a road-block to further theoretical development.²² This is so whether or not the theory of human nature envisaged is of a materialist or idealist cast. (The factor of class and class-struggle opens up an indefinitely large range of questions. What program of inquiry does appeal to human nature suggest?)

It is not true of course that Cohen entirely ignores class and class-struggle in the context of Marx's theory of history. However, as others have pointed out,²³ he effectively reduces class-interests to individual interests and writes as if capacities to realize such interests arose by some sort of generatio aequivoca, the issue of capacities for action being replaced by that of rational objectives for action. For the rest:

"... why does the successful class succeed? Marx finds the answer in the character of the productive forces. ... The class which rules through a period, or emerges triumphant after epochal conflict, is the class best suited, most able and disposed, to preside over the development of the productive forces at the given time." (Cohen 1978, 149)

But as we have seen already (Section 4 (3)), what is said in the third sentence is simply not true either in fact or as a report on Marx's views. "Why does the successful class succeed?" Most generally it is because it has won a victory, or more usually a series of victories, lasting for a longer or shorter time as the case may be, over another class or other classes: the hegemony of a certain class is an index of a certain outcome of the class-struggle. This is, of course, a merely programmatic answer: there is no completely general explanation of why a certain class or group of classes triumphs. If there were historiography would be much simpler than it is - and also less useful. Cohen's picture is that of the struggle between classes being one for the privilege of being Chairman of the Society for the Development of the Productive Forces, the votes going to whichever class shows itself to be potentially or actually the best candidate (the development itself being in the long run inevitable anyway). What has been said so far in this paper is sufficient to show the untenability of this story.

8. Conclusion

In this paper I have sought in the first place to solve a theoretical problem, namely, that of explicating Marx's concepts of "productive forces (powers)" and "relations of production", and his views about their relations. I have not taken up two crucial related problems which indeed give extra-theoretical point to the one I have addressed.

The first of these concerns the practical political significance of each of the two views which I have rejected, namely, on the one hand, the doctrine of the primacy of the productive forces over relations of production, and, on the other the doctrine of the primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces. Each, if translated into practical political policies and strategies, is gravid with consequences. The first, especially as a political perspective, is essentially 'economism' and is associated with evolutionism, which down-plays or even elides the significance of the class-struggle.²⁴ The second, again especially as a political perspective, tends to be connected with voluntarisms of various kinds, with a careless use of the slogan "put politics in command". These allusions may serve at least to remind the reader of the political significance of the views in question.

The second question concerns the political roots of these doctrines: the problem of the structural characteristics of situations which give each doctrine its own anchorage. In a sense the second question concerns the basis of the doctrines in question whilst the first concerns their practical consequences. To solve either adequately is to provide the materials

of solving the other. But this is subject-matter for another inquiry.

Appendix

On Translating Marx's Term "Produktivkraft" into English

Marx's term "Produktivkraft" - more usually the plural, "Produktivkräfte" - is almost universally translated into English as "productive force/forces". (Where it is not it seems to be varied in a fairly random way, perhaps for stylistic reasons. Thus Martin Nicolaus generally renders it thus in his version of the Grundrisse (e.g. 540) but occasionally as "productive powers" (e.g. 325, 705).)

Now Therborn (1976, 355) has suggested that "Produktivkraft" occurs in the 1844 Manuscripts as a translation of Smith's and Ricardo's "productive power" (e.g. CW 3, 253, 262). But he does not remark that Marx was using French translations of these English authors at this stage, and so the point is not firmly based. (Marx's later usage, as seen from the text of the French translation of the first volume of Capital by J. Roy, which he supervised, is not consistent. For example, "Produktivkraft der Arbeit" is rendered at one place (Le Capital, 234) "force productive de son travail", and at another (564) "gesellschaftliche Produktivkräfte" appears as "puissances sociales du travail".)

But the point is a suggestive one and suggests that we look at it from a converse point of view, that we look at Marx's usage when he is writing in English. The fact we find that he invariably talks of "productive power", "power of social production", etc. when in German he would have used "Produktivkraft"/"Produktivkräfte" (see e.g. CW 11, 531; 12, 222; 13, 558; 14, 656; SW 2, 14, 32 etc.). There is a particularly striking passage in this regard in the Theories of Surplus-Value. Here Marx, writing, as he often does in his rough drafts, in a mixture of German and other languages, uses "Produktivkräfte" and "material powers of production" in clear apposition. (Theories III, 430/MEW 26.3, 422)

As further evidence for the above suggestion a couple of further points may be mentioned. Firstly, Marx sometimes uses "Produktionsfähigkeit" - "productive capacity" or "productive power" - in apposition with "Produktivkraft". (Theories II, 541/MEW 26.2, 542; and Capital III, 861/MEW 25, 891) Secondly, what Marx later called, in settled terminology, "Arbeitskraft" - standardly rendered "labour-power" - he often referred to in the Grundrisse as "Arbeitsfähigkeit" or "Arbeitsvermögen" - both indifferently translated "labour ability" or "labour capacity" (Grundrisse, 281, 282, 293/Grundrisse G, 192, 193, 201). A great deal more textual material could be added but it may be that sufficient has been said to make the point.

Notes

I am grateful to John Burnheim (University of Sydney) and Ross Poole (Macquarie University) for some comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

- 1 See e.g. Bukharin 1921, esp. 134 ff., for an example of the first and the critique by Lukács 1925 for an example for the second.
- 2 See the encomia in, for example, Levine and Wright 1980, 50, 51, 56; Miller 1981, esp. 91, 94, 98, 117. The 'Themes' (editorial foreword) in *New Left Review*, No. 123, 1980, and Anderson 1980, 40, 65, 72 f. Two other books containing a view of Marx substantially the same as Cohen's were published in the same year, namely those by McMurtry 1978 and by Shaw 1978.
- 3 For some remarks on the political significance of these theoretical positions see below Section 7.
- 4 See e.g. Levine and Wright 1980, 48, 50, 57, 59, 60, 68 (though the surrender of Marx's texts is occasionally accompanied by a hesitant "perhaps").
- 5 It is easy to document at least two senses:
 - (1) "mode of production" as what Marx calls elsewhere the "labour process", that is, the process of generation of use-values considered in its purely technical aspect (e.g. Capital I, 431/MEW 23, 333); and
 - (2) "mode of production" as what he sometimes calls the "production process", that is, roughly, the labour process in the context of the relations of production that embed it or perhaps even the structured totality of production in this sense with the appropriate modes of circulation, distribution and consumption (e.g. Capital I, 169/MEW 23, 90).
- 6 For both PT and DT, Cohen 1978, 134. - Miller 1981, 93 and n., referring to Plekhanov, calls him "Cohen's most distinguished intellectual forebear" and The Development of the Monist View of History "the most perspicuous and compelling exposition of technological determinism till Cohen's book". Now it is true that Plekhanov was in a sense a technological determinist - see e.g. Plekhanov 1895, 608 ff., 618, 625 f., 647 f., 653, 658. But, more precisely, he was a geographical determinist, holding that geography was a causal factor more important than even technology. See op.cit., 585 f., 657 ff.
- 7 See e.g. Marx's marginalia to Adolph Wagner's Textbook of Political Economy, in Texts on Method (MEW 19, 375).
- 8 Grundrisse, 490 f. (Grundrisse G, 390 f.) - referred to by Miller 1981, 101 who makes the point in the text to this note.
- 9 See the texts conveniently assembled in On Colonialism and Modernization. Cf. Anderson 1974b, 541: "The whole development of Sinic imperial civilization ... can be seen as the most grandiose demonstration and profound experience of the power, and impotence, of technique in history. For the great, unprecedented breakthroughs on Sung economy ... spent themselves in subsequent epochs ... In ... the Ming epoch ... the mechanisms of scientific and technological growth in the town ultimately appear to have stopped or gone into reverse."
- 10 Much of the textual material from Marx on this point is assembled in Miller 1981, 99-101. See also the papers by Brenner 1977 and by Wood

1981. Cf. also Levine and Wright 1980 on the parallel point for feudalism 62 f., and Anderson 1974a, 182 ff., on 'the feudal dynamic'.

- 11 Cf. on this with respect to classical slavery, Anderson 1974a, esp. 25 ff., 76 ff.
- 12 Related points are made by Levine and Wright 1980, 63 and Miller 1981, 96.
- 13 Marx says in Capital that it is necessary "to deal with human nature (Natur) in general, and then with human nature (Menschennatur) as historically modified in each epoch" (Capital I, 759 n./MEW 23, 637 n.). But this must surely be taken in connection with, for example, the more detailed developments in the Introduction to the Grundrisse (dialectics of production and consumption) in which Marx outlines how "production ... not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object" (Grundrisse, 92/MEW 13, 624). I would suggest that Marx's talk in Capital of human nature in general on the one hand, and in historical particularity on the other, may be more happily interpreted as a distinction between sets of basic dispositions on the one hand, and of historical realizations of those dispositions on the other, the former existing however only in the form of the latter, somewhat in the way in which determinables exist only in the form of their determinates. But this is here only a suggestion (which I intend to develop elsewhere).
- 14 It will be obvious to anyone familiar with Althusser and Balibar 1970 that my account is in the same general direction as theirs - cf. their distinction between appropriation of nature and appropriation of product. But I depart considerably when they say (op.cit., 235 - and cf. the Glossary, 317) that productive forces are a relation (of production). Now it is true that such forces are really not "things", as Balibar says. But this does not make them relations. According to the view I set out in the main text, productive forces are things-in-relation, and, when actually operative, are practices. Shaw 1978, 25 f. is right to object to the view of productive forces as relations, but his objections do not apply to my account.
- 15 I am indebted to Lloyd Reinhardt for this analogy.
- 16 I take it that this is the force of the endlessly cited passage from The Poverty of Philosophy: "The hand-mill gives you a society with feudal lords, the steam-mill, a society with industrial capitalists." (CW 6, 166/MEW 4, 130)
- 17 It is, on the face of it, odd that Marx does not so much as mention the term "class" in the 1859 Preface or in the Capital III passage. In the former the closest he gets to it is in writing that bourgeois (= capitalist) "relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the process of social production, antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but in that of an antagonism that grows out of individuals' conditions of social life" (SW 1, 504/MEW 13, 9), that is, not merely individual but structurally based antagonism. The reason for the absence of the notion of class here cannot be gone into now. Nevertheless it can hardly be denied that this absence makes the 1859 Preface in particular misleading. A reader could easily be forgiven for seeing Marx's view as the sort of automatic evolutionism that Cohen's account represents: "at a certain stage of development", productive forces come into contradiction with the productive relations "within which they have moved hitherto", etc. Of course, if the reader remembers that the "productive forces" include the direct producers, that "relations of

production" centrally involve always contested property relations, and so on, then no confusion need arise. But this is supposed to be an introductory statement ... - The absence of an explicit notion of class-struggle may be in turn an index of a lack of centrality in Marx's later writings of a crucial concept in the earlier presentations of historical materialism, namely, the concept of practice. We remember that the first of the 'Theses on Feuerbach' opened by saying that: "The chief defect of all previous materialism ... is that ... reality ... (is) conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation ... not as sensuous human activity, practice" and that the eighth asserted that: "All social life is essentially practical" (CW 5, 3, 5/MEW 3, 5, 7), that is, a matter of practices. This absolutely fundamental insight into the centrality of the notion of material practices for the theorization of social and historical matters later tends to be pushed somewhat into the background, and the idea of society as a matter of relations tends to be pushed more into the foreground. Thus in the Grundrisse we read (Grundrisse, 265/Grundrisse G, 176) that: "Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of connections (Beziehungen), the relations (Verhältnisse) within which these individuals stand."

Now it is true of course that bourgeois social theory typically rests on a taking of individuals as primary for theorization, relations being then superadded, and being regarded either as grounded in the individuals or as merely accidental with regard to them. But the fundamental theoretical framework of this conception is not abolished simply by taking the relations as fundamental and regarding the individuals as either in some sense expressions of, or constituted by the relations, or as (again in some way) mere accidental "supports" of the relations. To do this is simply to reverse the order of primacy of the elements of the same fundamental framework. It is equally a bourgeois social theory (e.g. a structuralism of some sort). The only way to get out of this problematic is to cease setting things up in terms of individuals and relations, and instead to make fundamental the idea of the transformation of a given subject-matter by certain material means by labour-power, that is, practice. A central intent of the relational idea, namely, the demotion of the individual as an explanatory factor is preserved in a practice-orientation: the somewhat ambiguous idea of the "bearer" or "support (Träger)" of relations replaced by the related idea of what may be called the "executor" of the practice, an executor who thus does not constitute the character of the practice (whose determining element is the means of transformation). Of course the notion of "relations of production" - to come back to our starting point - is still absolutely crucial, as practices of production are structured in terms of relations. But if "productive powers/forces" and "relations of production" are seen in a practice-perspective there is much less danger of evolutionisms of any sort (either mechanical materialist: technologisms for example, or idealist: history = the history of ideas of different sorts).

18 See especially the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', Capital I, esp. 1019 ff./Resultate, 95 ff.

19 See especially 'Results ...', Capital I, 106/Resultate, 88. And cf. Cohen 1978, 175 ff.

20 For contemporary class-struggle at the point of production see e.g. Edwards 1979.

21 Both Miller 1981, 106 ff. and Levine and Wright 1980, 50, 58 f., 63 ff., put considerations about class to the forefront in their critiques of Cohen's book. But Miller does not emphasize sufficiently the role of

class-struggle in the constitution and development of the productive powers/forces, tending to confine that struggle to the period of change from one mode of production to another; nor does he bring out the way in which a certain sort of development of the productive powers is a necessary condition for the institution of a certain sort of relations of production. Levine and Wright say that "contrary to what Cohen maintains, relations of production condition the development of productive forces" (63) - but a good deal hangs on what 'conditions' means here. They also say (67 f.) that "technological development is surely a critical factor for opening up new historical possibilities; and a specification of the level and type of technological development undoubtedly helps in defining the range of possible alternatives to the existing social order." In the end I do not get a clear picture of what their position is.

- 22 McMurtry 1978, whose book follows a line similar to Cohen's, says that "the forces of production are motivated and enabled by, respectively, the needs and capacities of human nature... They are ... for Marx, the objectifications of human nature" (54); the "essential spring" of the "dynamic nexus of capacities and needs" is "the capacity and the need for self-realization" (37). In fact: "The productive forces are the moving power and ultimate determiner of human history, inexorably generating a cumulative second creation, a new cosmic order. Technology is, in a word, the Marxian Providence." (71) Shaw 1978, just takes the development of productivity as a primitive: "The productive advance, this expansion of the productive forces independent of the social form of production, Marx seems to take as a given. For him this development is a natural occurrence, implied by the very nature of human productive activity. ... He neither queries why this is so nor seeks more primary factors to explain how it is possible that the productive forces may advance. ... Marx ... allow(s) human history to be integrated with natural history through this developing dialectic of man's material encounter with the world around him". (65) This is on a par with McMurtry's "explanation" in terms of human nature etc.
- 23 See Levine and Wright 1980, 57, 58 f. But they to some extent still share Cohen's standpoint for they say that "the transformation of interests into practices is the central problem for any adequate theory of history" (58). This puts the cart before the horse: "interests" arise from practices, and it is the generation of the first by the second what is the problem, insofar as the problematic is concerned with "interests" at all. (The critique of this notion does not belong here.)
- 24 Interesting materials towards a theory of economism are to be found in Bettelheim 1974, esp. 23 ff., 32 ff.

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