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## The Concept of Primacy in Historical Explanation

**Abstract:** G.A. Cohen interprets Marx as a technological materialist: the productive forces are "primary" in history. There are several mistakes here. First, for Marx technology is neither always nor predominantly the direct stimulus - either causal or functional - of the social relations of production. Second, it is not even the case that for Marx primacy in explanation is a matter of being a direct stimulus. It has to do rather with being a framework that underlies interconnections between direct stimuli and their results. It turns out that this framework cannot be technology but only the relations of production. Third, technological development is not an autonomous process but is for Marx one that is dependent on the cooperation of producers. This introduces the political element of the class struggle into technological development and refutes a technological reading of why a given class rules.

### 1. The Transition from Ideas to Society

The question of the origin of our ideas dominated philosophical thought from Descartes through Kant. The way one answered this question determined where on the spectrum from idealism to materialism one was to be placed. The range of options ran from the view that matter caused ideas to the view that ideas caused matter. The notion of causation involved was designed to accommodate a sharp separation of cause from effect. After all it had to bridge the dualism of mind and body, ideas and matter, or transcendental ego and empirical phenomena. In short, the question of the origin of our ideas was posed within an atomistic ontology that posited sharp separations rather than systematic integrations.

With Hegel the emphasis shifted away from the individual person and his or her connection with a source of his or her ideas. It shifted to society which as a complex whole unified the ideas of the person with their sources in an unproblematic way. Both ideas and matter and also mind and body are aspects of the larger whole that is a society and from its perspective there is no question of principle involved in asking whether ideas or mind are causally primary in respect to matter and body. The only question is that of the relative primacy of one over the other in particular circumstances in social evolution. Each time such a question comes up it is to be understood that it can be answered only against the background of the society as a whole that integrates both sides of the connection between ideas and matter. Moreover, the connection between them exists only as a connection for

such a society and not, as the atomist would have it, as a connection deriving from ideas and matter taken by themselves.

Marx's turning Hegel on his head in no way involved a regression to the earlier atomistic position and its preoccupation with the origin of ideas. Marx accepted the Hegelian relativization of inquiry into connections to society. Even his concern with the question of the connection between the economic and the legal, religious, and political is not to be understood in the way the question of the origin of ideas was understood in pre-Hegelian philosophy. This antediluvian reading of Marx does not, though, die easily; it has been given its most sophisticated and elaborate defense in G.A. Cohen's Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence. Cohen is concerned with which way the causal arrow runs in much the way the pre-Hegelians were. Are forces of production causes of relations of production or is it the other way around? Are relations of production causes of legal rights or are we to be idealist and hold that it is the other way around? More was at stake for Marx than these questions implied precisely because he accepted the Hegelian revolution in thinking. The arrow might run in different directions in different settings; the question was not this but an entirely new one.

The new question arose from making society the integrating system for all connections, no matter which way their arrows run. The nature of society itself, as the ever present whole in explanation and in fact, was the urgent question. To what are we referring connections when we relativize them to society? For both Hegel and Marx society is a manifold of aspects among which one is primary even though the rest are still necessary. What distinguishes the primary aspect from the others is not that they are in any straightforward sense reduced to it but that the primary aspect is the operative one when connections are relativized to the social system. There is one aspect that makes possible the existing connections between various social entities. Hegelians and Marxists need not be seen as differing over what the connections are or over which way the arrows run in connections; they do differ, though, over what the primary aspect of the social system is to which connections are referred. Marx held that the productive aspect of the whole is primary; Hegel held that the normative aspect of the whole is primary. "The conclusion we reach", said Marx, "is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well". (Grundrisse, 99) It predominates over itself in the sense that production is a framework for connections that themselves involve production. For Hegel, however, the essential is spirit and spirit is ethical life in its various historical forms. (Phenomenology, 262-65) The relation of the primary or essential to various connections is not itself of the same kind as occurs in those connections. It is like the relation of a fundamental theory to generalizations it explains.

## 2. The Functional Model of Primacy

Marx's prose bristles with explanatory phrases, but that does not make it easier to decide what he understands by historical explanation. He uses the phrases "predominate", "determine", "play the chief part", "the real basis", "explained from", "brings forth", "becomes incompatible with", "the action of the immanent laws of", "foundation of", "necessary", etc. One of the few places he ruminates explicitly on historical explanation is the Introduction to the Grundrisse; there if anywhere one might hope to get Marx's own idea of what he intended when he used phrases such as those just listed. Yet it is characteristic of those who want to see Marx as piling up evidence in favor of materialism in the sense it had in the debate over the origin of ideas in the 17th and 18th centuries to neglect whatever light can be shed on his view of explanation by the Introduction. The reason is simply that the Introduction carries on the Hegelian break with the atomistic view of connections that lies behind the old materialism.

Cohen's reading of Marx within the atomistic view of connections does though emphasize an important element in Marxist explanation. This is its functional character. One might ask whether his emphasis on the purposive rather than the mechanical nature of explanation in Marx eliminates the need Marx himself felt to provide a holist interpretation of his own explanations. To answer this question we must first look at the structure of functional explanations. Will they provide answers to problems concerning the atomistic view of connections that were raised by thinkers like Hume within the debate over the origin of ideas?

According to Cohen's view of Marx, productive forces enjoy explanatory primacy over productive relations. This is not, according to him, to be interpreted as meaning that productive forces are the agency for productive relations, for there are many times when the converse is equally true. To get the arrow pointing in only one direction, the explanatory relation must be seen to be a functional one: productive relations function to promote the growth of productive forces. Similarly, productive relations are not the agency for the social superstructure, but rather the superstructure functions to promote the productive relations.

Suppose we are explaining the productive relations of capitalism on the basis of the productive forces as they existed at the dawn of capitalism. The existence of capitalist productive relations must, on the model Cohen uses, emerge as the conclusion to a deduction from two premisses. One of those premisses asserts a causal connection of a general sort between capitalist relations of production and the growth of forces of production like those existing at the dawn of capitalism. This makes relations causally prior to forces; but within the functional model of explanation this of itself does not settle the matter of explanatory primacy. The second premiss asserts a lawlike, though a non-causal, connection between, on the one side, the causal connection just asserted

and, on the other side, the existence of the cause. In other words, if capitalist productive relations do bring about growth in those early productive forces then those capitalist productive relations do indeed exist. The plausibility of this connection rests on the assumption that the cause of a beneficial effect tends to exist. This second premiss brings the causal element and the functional element in the explanation together. Cohen calls premisses of this second type "consequence laws".

This is an elegant reconstruction of functional explanation that is particularly appealing in that it avoids the mistaken inference from the causal dominance of the productive relations to their explanatory primacy. Causal dominance is here only evidence that the primary factor is able to mobilize the conditions that promote it. One might, though, want to question whether productive forces have this kind of asymmetry in respect to productive relations: Is Marx a "technological" materialist? More important than that is the question as to whether this functional model has captured the idea of explanatory primacy itself.

Engels had wrestled with the problem of getting the arrow to point in only one direction - from the economic generally to the superstructure - and he failed to come up with a satisfactory solution. ('Letters on Historical Materialism, 1890-94', MER 760-68) Was he thinking too much in mechanical rather than in purposive terms? That was not the problem for we find that functional explanation too has a tendency to become symmetrical. Not only does base on occasion cause superstructure but also superstructure on occasion causes base; similarly, not only do forces on occasion functionally explain relations but also relations on occasion functionally explain forces. Cohen rightly emphasizes the functional importance of a new mode of production for productive forces whose growth has been fettered by an old mode of production. Marx also emphasizes the functional importance of new forces of production for a mode of production whose requirements cannot be realized by old forces of production. "At a given stage in its development, the narrow technical basis on which manufacture rested, came into conflict with requirements of production that were created by manufacture itself". (Capital I, Pt. IV, Ch. XIV, Sec. 5) That narrow technical basis dictated a division of labor that favored skilled workers over the unskilled. Long apprenticeships and discipline problems prevented capital from becoming the master of labor. It became the master of labor only with the introduction of machinery for then workers became an appendage to the production process rather than the will behind it. This is not an obscure example since it occupies Marx through two hundred pages of the central part of Volume I of Capital under the heading of the production of relative surplus value. In that discussion the transition from manufacture to industry is looked at from the point of view of promoting the capitalist drive for surplus value.

Engels got nowhere saying the economic was "ultimately decisive" or "in the last instance the decisive factor". And Cohen fails

to do a bit better by saying "that the productive forces on the whole dominate the production relations". (Cohen 1978, 165) In view of the possibility of reproducing examples like the one above of the transition from manufacture to industry there is no obvious statistical preponderance of cases in which productive relations function to develop productive forces over cases in which productive forces function to develop productive relations. Of course it is true that survival, for which the growth in productive forces is vital, cannot be ignored in social explanation. Philosophers like Cohen and anthropologists like Marvin Harris do us a service by insisting on the role of the survival drive. (Harris 1978) But Marx, unlike Cohen and Harris, insisted that the organic unity of a social formation made it impossible to pull out any aspect of that social formation - productive forces, productive relations, distribution, politics, culture, etc. - for the purpose of erecting it into the purpose or the agency for historical change. "Admittedly, however, in its one-sided form, production is itself determined by the other moments. ... Mutual interaction takes place between the different moments. That is the case with every organic whole". (Grundrisse, 99-100) Only on the atomistic view of connections is one tempted to suppose that the causal arrow can be restricted to pointing in only one direction. For on the holist view, isolating production for the sake of seeing it as either agency or purpose is understood from the start to be an abstraction from its role of interaction with the other moments of the social formation. The myth of the isolated causal factor is a product of neglecting this understanding. Once society exists, the importance of survival and the growth of productive forces remains great but it is not greater than the importance of social factors. Moreover, the importance survival and the growth of productive forces has comes to depend in large part on their contribution to a variety of social goals.

### 3. Social Laws and Social Systems

It is unavoidable that we should delve into ontology. Trying to avoid it on the sophisticated basis that ontology is unwarranted speculation becomes here a way of being uncritical about one's method. The difficulties in the Engelsian tradition of interpreting economic primacy, to which Cohen belongs, stem from certain ontological commitments, which should be criticized in light of those difficulties. Unless those commitments are brought out into the open and seen as the source of the difficulties, fruitless efforts to make refinements without fundamental changes will continue.

What was Marx's basic disagreement with the Political Economists on the nature of economic value? He agreed with them that labor time was the measure of value. But for him exchange value was a historical category; "the differentia specifica of the value-form" is the historical mode of production in which it is found. (Capital I, Pt. I, Ch. I, Sec. 4) To the bourgeois intellect, the fact that labor is represented

by the value of its product is not an indication that there is a certain state of society but rather an indication of a "Self-evident necessity imposed by nature". For John Locke "it is labor indeed that put the difference of value on everything". (Second Treatise, Ch. V, Sec. 40) But this was in a state of nature and not in a historically specific mode of production. And the importance of the category of exchange value is in its use in the Law of Value, which determines among other things the distribution of labor among industries and the allocation of surplus to investment. There is a natural basis for this law in different needs, but in historically different circumstances the form of the law changes. ('Letter to Kugelmann', July 11, 1969, SW, 524) The Law of Value is not then a connection that holds in a Lockean state of nature but it holds relative to a system of production. As Ronald Meek puts it, "To Marx, then, the task of showing how relations of production 'determine the [forms of] consumption, distribution, exchange' reduced itself, in its essentials, to the task of showing 'how the law of value operates' as commodity production develops". (Meek 1973, 154) The development from simple commodity production to capitalist commodity production is the one Marx follows in Capital I. The system relativity of categories and hence of laws expressing them is emphasized in the Introduction to the Grundrisse: "For example, the simplest economic category, say e.g. exchange value, presupposes population, moreover a population producing in specific relations; as well as a certain kind of family, or commune, or state, etc.". (Grundrisse, 101)

Cohen is not being disingenuous when he almost completely ignores the system relativity of Marxian laws and categories. He is being the loyal advocate of a timeless and atomist ontology which blinkers him to Marx's insistence on these points. Consider, for example, Cohen's handling of the consequence law involved in the reconstruction of a functional explanation. We want to explain the change from feudal to capitalist landed property in England over the period from the 14th to the 16th century. The explanation might be that the change promoted the development of the agricultural means of production. Behind this explanation would lie the causal connection from such a change to an actual increase of the agricultural means of production - more grazing land and hence more sheep. There would also be the consequence law that if a change to capitalist landed property were to promote agriculture then indeed a change from feudal to capitalist landed property would occur. This law is laid down as a timeless one yet it seems obvious that it is understood to be a law holding only relative to a system within which there is a "subordinate development of capital in its primitive (medieval) forms which has taken place in the cities, and at the same time by the effect of the flowering of manufacture and trade in other countries (thus the influence of Holland on England in the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century)". (Grundrisse, 277) The change to capitalist landed property is implied by the disposition it has to promote agriculture only in the framework of a total social system that though not itself capitalist has a

primitive form of capitalism within it. It is this framework that makes the abstract functionality of capitalist landed property the basis for more than a utopian wish. The if-then of the consequence law connects the change in relations of production in agriculture to the ability of such a change to promote productivity in agriculture not as two isolated entities but as entities within the social whole one of whose aspects is a subordinate capitalist development.

Why is this relativity of law to social wholes being emphasized? The reason is that through this relativity we have the key to the primacy of the economic that does not dissolve into a symmetrical relation in the way it did when we looked for the primary factor within causal or consequence laws. This takes us back to the difference between Hegel and Marx over the nature of the social whole. So far we have only made the point that connections are relative to social wholes, and on this there is no disagreement between Marxists and Hegelians. Connections that hold for one system will not hold for some other system, not just because the systems are distinct but because they have different natures and the nature of one of those systems provides a mechanism for supporting the connection whereas the nature of the other does not provide a mechanism for supporting the connection. For the Hegelian the spiritual nature of the system means that the mechanism for supporting connections will be a normative one, whereas for the Marxist the economic nature of the system means that the mechanism for supporting connections will be economic tendencies. The arrow will point in one way from the economic to connections to be supported. A different base, such as the normative, would not be justified on the ground that causal and consequence laws are found empirically to run in the opposite direction but on the ground that there is reason to adopt another theory in which the economic is no longer basic for such connections. Differences over primacy are important theoretical differences and not differences over what generalizations are reversible.

"Admittedly, however, in its one-sided form, production is itself determined by the other moments". By contrast, production not viewed one-sidedly as an agent or purpose but viewed as the nature of a system within which agents and purposes act is not determined by other moments - the market and distribution. For it is then primary in a way that does not admit anything else to be primary short of a change of theoretical perspective. Marx then came to understand that the primacy which he was attempting to attribute to the economic had little to do with whether the economic was predominate as an agent or a goal. It had to do with the role of the economic as the essence of temporary systems, it being understood that the essential was what made connections possible. The historical character of those connections reflected the historical character of those essences.

The Doctrine of Relations is a common feature of atomism. (Fisk 1973, Ch. VII) It asserts that in addition to individuals, which are the terms of relations, there are also bridge entities, which are the relations between the terms. These

bridge entities are distinct from the relata and it becomes a puzzle, for good Humean reasons, why given individuals should stand in certain relations rather than others. If productive relations are interpreted in the manner of the Doctrine of Relations, with forces of production and persons as their relata, then there is a severe limitation on what can be said about a social system. Such a system is at best a set of ordered  $n$ -tuples [ $R, x, y, \dots, f, g, \dots$ ] where  $R$  is some productive relation such as hires-to-work-on,  $x, y, \dots$  are people, and  $f, g, \dots$  are forces of production. (Cohen 1978, 35, 85) (Since the society will have other than an economic aspect,  $R$  could also be non-economic in character.) But there is a problem with this set-theoretical rendering of a social whole having to do with its ability to do the job social wholes do in backing up connections. A social whole makes a connection possible if it is of such a nature as to have tendencies providing a mechanism for the connection. A set of  $n$ -tuples does nothing of the kind; its existence implies nothing about the principles of development to which it is subject. (Fisk 1974) Yet this aggregating approach to a social whole is the only kind known to the atomist. For this reason Cohen, who approaches relations of production by this Doctrine, can see no purpose to be served by an appeal to social wholes of the kind that Marx continually makes.

Even the atomist must at some point stumble into the unwarrantedness of generalizations that are not relativized to systems. This unwarrantedness is particularly obvious in the case of consequence laws. Why should capitalism's potential to promote agriculture suffice for the realization of capitalism? Or, Cohen asks, why should a rain dance's potential to promote group identity among the Hopi suffice for its actualization? He is worried that something other than the rain dance might do just as well for the promotion of group identity. This is rather different from the worry expressed above about the transition to capitalism: the question there was not whether something else might promote agriculture just as well but rather whether there is the needed groundwork already laid for capitalism to make its actualization a real possibility. Nonetheless Cohen resolves his worry by the suggestion that "tradition" includes the rain dance ritual thereby giving it, as distinct from other rituals, the potential for promoting group identity. However it is seen to work, the appeal to Hopi culture as a whole has been made. Rather than being made central to the theory this appeal is viewed as one among several possible appeals that might be made to mend the fence in regard to the uniqueness of the functional instrument. (Cohen 1978, 275-77; see Fisk 1973, 69) And of course there is no hint that the resolution of the problem of primacy might lie in this direction.

#### 4. Technological Materialism

Since the functional arrow does not point in just one direction, the primacy of the forces of production cannot be based on



functional considerations. There are consequence laws whose antecedents involve production relations promoting productive forces and also consequence laws whose antecedents involve productive forces promoting production relations. Perhaps though a case can still be made for the primacy of productive forces. We have developed here a sense of primacy that is independent of the functional arrow. Are the productive forces the theoretical framework within which social functional relations become possible? The answer given here is that it is the production relations and not the productive forces that for Marxism are primary in this sense.

There is something appealing about a materialism that makes productive forces basic. On the one hand, the possibility is opened up of appealing to a universal rationality based on growth, not an epochal or group rationality. For, it seems easy enough to say that when faced with a choice between the growth and the stagnation of the productive forces any human agent would opt for growth. (Cohen 1978, 168-69) On the other hand, whereas growth in areas of culture is a problematic concept, growth of productive forces seems governed by a universal standard of growth, not one that changes with the productive relations. The standard can be growth of surplus labor time and shrinking of necessary labor time for the average worker. (Cohen 1978, 60-61) Armed with these universalist features, the particularist features of given epochs and groups can easily be explained. Isn't this what science is all about, explaining the particular by the universal? Well, of course, if we are talking about science in the atomist tradition. But Marx had an Hegelian scepticism about the universal unless it reflected the concrete social system. The rationality of growth can be appealed to only by those in a certain group in a given system whose material and political advantages can be advanced by growth. The standard of growth is itself relativized not just to the physical but also to the historical necessities that enter into the definition of necessary labor time. A transsocial universality is no longer available.

The historical nature of the categories of rationality and of growth leads to the historical nature of laws propounded in terms of the productive forces. This means that the laws will be relative to social wholes. The downfall of feudalism is explained by Marx by the fact that it promoted petty industry as opposed to the concentration of the means of production such as took place under manufacture. (Capital I, Pt. VIII, Ch. XXII) It limited the system of production, and when manufacture grew up within it it was fettered. The relevant consequence law is that if feudalism fetters manufacture then feudalism is annihilated, it being understood that manufacture would promote growth of productive forces. If the choice of growth were indeed a principle of universal rationality, then this law might be asserted without relativizing it to the social system. But those who had the most to lose by the downfall of feudalism were certainly and pardonably outside this rationality. The annihilation spoken of in the law is a possibility only if the law is relativized to a system with a subordinate capitalist aspect. This is the basis for the struggle

that can indeed annihilate feudalism. (Cohen 1978, 292) The emptiness of the law apart from the struggle of protocapitalists is an indication that its truth depends on relativizing it to a system within which there is such a struggle.

How, though, does the relativity of the standard of growth to historical needs weigh against technological materialism? It would be difficult to show that necessary labor time tends to decrease in a secular fashion. We do not have to create a myth about the leisure of members of prestate societies in order to recognize that the amount of labor required to satisfy needs in advanced industrial societies is considerable. Our transport needs alone are satisfied only with great expenditures of labor. Thus it would be hazardous to represent necessary labor time as decreasing in a stairstep fashion, with each step representing a slowdown in the decrease due to the fetters of existing productive relations. Rather, the situation can be better represented in the following manner. The historic mission of capitalism to develop the forces of production was a mission it had in relation to feudalism. It was capable of reducing necessary labor time in relation to the needs of feudal toilers. Yet capitalism would create a society in which the needs of toilers would be vastly different from those of feudalism. At different times, the needs of toilers within capitalism itself will be different. The potential of monopoly capitalism to develop the productive forces admits of ideological abuse precisely because it is presented as an absolute potential whereas it is a potential relative to the needs of workers within premonopoly capitalism. Such a presentation of the potential of monopoly capitalism conceals its equally great potential for making life more complex and hence increasing the labor needed to satisfy the requirements of the reproduction of labor. (Gendron 1977, Ch. 12) We cannot conjoin all such claims about successive epochs and periods into a representation by a staircase. There is no implication of secular decline.

The causal laws that play a role in functional explanation are then ones that hold within the framework of a given mode of production. When, on the one hand, we say that productive relations  $S_1$  would develop the productive forces  $F_0$ , it is to be understood that this is true in relation to a social system containing  $F_0$  and characterized by productive relations  $S_0$ . The link between the ability of  $S_1$  to develop the forces and  $S_0$  is that (a) in developing those forces  $S_1$  will reduce the necessary labor time based on the needs that must be satisfied to reproduce labor in the system characterized by  $S_0$  and (b) in having those needs this system reflects not its productive forces but the manner in which they are called into play by the productive relations  $S_0$ . When, on the other hand, we say that  $S_0$  is a barrier to the development of productive forces to a stage  $F_1$  to be reached with  $S_1$ , it is to be understood that this development is relative not to the needs workers will have when the stage  $F_1$  is actually reached but to the needs they already have under productive relations  $S_0$ .

We can then draw several conclusions in regard to technological materialism. There are numerous places where the productive forces play a vital role in historical explanation. It is important to be clear on what this role is. Among other things the development of the productive forces can be the function of a change in productive relations. At this level of causation and functionality, it is not possible to appeal to the role of the productive forces in order to justify the claim that they are primary. Productive relations and other social factors can play the same role in regard to causation and functionality. Moreover, it turns out that the very claims to which the technological materialist appeals in order to justify the primacy of productive forces in regard to causation or functionality are relative to the total system in its productive relations aspect. A consequence law explaining the origin of capitalist productive relations does not hold within a framework of rationality of the universal sort that opts for growth of the productive forces in whatever circumstances. It holds, however, relative to a feudal system within which subordinate capitalist relations are embedded. Only if there is such a subordinate system will there be the class forces needed to bring the change off. Even the causal law that capitalist productive relations promote growth of the productive forces does not hold within the framework of a standard of growth of a universal sort that connects all epochs and periods into a staircase pattern of the growth of productive forces. It holds, however, relative to the system of needs developed under feudal productive relations. Even these laws, on which the technological materialist wants to base so much, are seen to be valid only within the framework of productive relations. Productive forces fail once more to be primary: they are not the framework within which connections in general and laws in particular are possible.

##### 5. The Productive Forces in Political Perspective

There is a political factor that enters into the development of the productive forces. The development of the productive forces within a set of productive relations has limits set by the willingness of people to cooperate under those relations to develop the productive forces. It would be nice if we could say that their cooperation will be forthcoming when those relations have the potential for developing the forces. But the claim would be circular since that potential of the relations to develop the forces depends crucially on cooperation.

Let us assume that productive forces have been developed sufficiently under the existing productive relations to sustain a new social order. This possibility does not establish the actuality of a transformation to the new social order. There will be no transformation until the old order has exhausted its potential for developing the productive forces. What is crucial here is understanding what is involved in exhausting this potential. I want to contend that political factors enter in that are not derivable from the relations or forces of production themselves.

The development of productive forces in the '50s and '60s in the West might be used in retrospect to deny the readiness of European countries for a socialist transformation after World War II. The capitalist potential for developing productive forces was not exhausted. Suppose, however, the depression years between the wars had eventuated in socialist revolution. If for some reason this revolution had been delayed conditions would still have been ripe for it since the subsequent decades would have proven that the capitalist potential for developing the productive forces was indeed exhausted. But this juxtaposition is presented one-sidedly. (Mandel 1978, 217-20) One needs also to point out that the capitalist boom up to the mid-'60s was possible in view of the weakening of the working class toward the end of the war. And if, contrary to fact, the depression years had eventuated in a successful revolution, this would have been because the working class intensified its struggle rather than participated in the rejuvenation of capitalism.

The common objection to this is that if the working class failed to intensify its struggle in a revolutionary direction this is only because of the feast capitalism was preparing for it in the subsequent boom years of the 1950s and 1960s. If, however, the class did intensify its struggle in a revolutionary direction, then that was because capitalism was incapable of preparing such a feast and was hence exhausted. The objection goes through if the potential for a boom was determinate apart from the class struggle. But while still killing millions of its subjects in internecine war, capitalism was a long way from this potential. Capitalism's political ability to get the working class to cooperate in its rejuvenation was a condition for the boom. From the cooptation of the French resistance by De Gaulle to the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, capitalism was laying the basis for the boom. If it had these political victories and had then failed to develop the productive forces, a new period of intensified class struggle would have followed. But it is just mistaken to say it won the political victories it did win in the crucial years from 1944 to 1947 because it was still able to develop the productive forces between 1950 and 1970.

None of this squares with the application of the thesis of the primacy of productive forces to the class struggle. According to the thesis of the primacy of forces, "that class tends to prevail whose rule would best meet the demands of production". (Cohen 1978, 292) (It is still assumed that existing productive forces can sustain the new social order.) Yet what best meets the demands of production is objectively indeterminate so long as the outcome in the class struggle is undecided. Because of this indeterminacy, it becomes circular to attempt to explain the outcome of the class struggle by reference to what best meets the demands of production. There were numerous possible outcomes of that struggle. Hence one can't say the actual course was inevitable on the basis of the subsequent development of productive forces. If the capitalist reconstruction had been weaker as a result of an incomplete cooptation of the partisans in Italy, the resistance in France, and the British and

American labor movements, then no doubt the development of productive forces would have been less impressive. The possibility that the cooptation would be less than total haunted leading members of the capitalist establishment; they did not take the Stoic view that whatever they did their success would be determined by the ability of their class to develop the productive forces. They recognized that if the outcome was unstable politically - recurrent strike waves, civil wars, and ascendent working class parties - the measures necessary for a boom would be impossible and capitalism would have, at least for the time, lost its potential to develop the productive forces. "Economic development is thus not an automatic process. The issue is not restricted solely to the productive foundations of society. Upon these foundations there live and work human beings and the development occurs through these human beings. What, then, has taken place in the field of relations between human beings, or, more precisely, between classes?" (Trotsky 1921, 212)

The role of the political in determining whether productivity can be increased is neglected by the thesis of the primacy of productive forces. This neglect, nonetheless, has an important political implication. It leads to the view that political strategy can be plotted on the basis of knowledge about what class or what productive relations can develop the productive forces best. What I am claiming is that agnosticism is required here. Whether and to what degree a class can develop the productive forces is objectively indeterminate apart from some idea as to what the outcome of the class struggle will be at a given point in history. To think, though, that there can be knowledge is to adopt the atomist stance of supposing that the class struggle conforms to an independently determinate development of productive forces. Where there can be no knowledge yet people are sure there can be knowledge, mischief is bound to be done. It has two characteristic forms. Where it is believed that the ruling class has exhausted its potential to develop the productive forces, revolutionary adventures are encouraged even in the absence of clear indications of growing strength and organization of a revolutionary class. Where it is believed that the ruling class is on the verge of a renewed development of the productive forces, opportunistic alliances with the ruling class are encouraged for the reconstruction of the old productive relations even in the presence of clear indications of growing strength and organization of a revolutionary class. Adventurists accuse opportunists of overestimating the ability of the ruling class to develop the productive forces, and opportunists accuse adventurists of underestimating that ability. Neither can validate their accusation.

The inference should not be that politics is primary, for saying that politics is underdetermined by the productive forces is not to hold that politics is independent of the forces. The complex of factors that enabled the capitalist class in the western countries to defeat the working class contained numerous factors that were not themselves economic. Yet the explanatory power of this complex of factors depends

upon inserting it within the framework of capitalist society. Within that whole, the elements of capitalist productive relations made it possible for that complex of factors to bring about the defeat of the working class. Capitalist society and those elements are still to be regarded as primary.

In the framework model, the development of productive forces is not, like the evolution of the stars through their various stages, a process going on by itself which the class struggle comes along to serve. In the case of capitalism at least, the flip side of the immanent law of the whole, which is the accumulation of capital, is the law of competition between the individual capitalists, which is increasing productivity. (Capital I, Pt. VII, Ch. XIV, Sec. 3) Accumulation and productivity - the "limited purpose" and the "historic mission" of capitalism - are contradictory poles of its essence. They are contradictory in that each puts breaks on the other thereby generating a pattern of crisis: increasing productivity, under the labor theory of value, gets in the way of increasing capital, which is a form of value. Rejuvenating the accumulation process calls for slowing down the increase in productivity through periods of stagnation. (Cohen's shying away from a commitment to the labor theory of value (Cohen 1978, 196, n.2) makes him neglect economic crisis theory, surely an essential component of Marx's theory of history. (See Cohen 1979, and Holmstrom 1981)) In order to prevent this contradiction from having a disastrous effect on accumulation, a secular increase in the ratio of capitalist to worker shares in production and a secular inflationary trend that puts surplus profit into the hands of the most powerful capitalists have been necessary. (Fisk 1975, Sec. 3) This keeps the class struggle alive year in and year out under capitalism, and it explains the underlying relation of the class struggle to the productive forces under capitalism. Increasing productivity is not the answer the ruling class needs for quieting the working class, for along with that increase it must increase exploitation and inflation sufficiently to insure accumulation. The conflict that is the basis for reproducing class struggle is not one between productive relations and a separate process of the development of the productive forces; it is one between accumulation and competition, which are the two sides of the contradictory essence of capitalism.

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