Marxist Theory and Systems of Total Reproduction

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The argument developed here represents one of the main avenues along which we were moved from the analysis of societies as totalities, as systems, as the seat of adequate self-explanation to a global systemic framework. We have discussed the ethnographic question at length in other contexts (Ekholm and Friedman 1981), arguing for the inadequacy of the local ethnographic field as the empirical basis for its own comprehension. This is not an argument against long-term intensive fieldwork as some have now begun to suggest, but for its extension to wider fields adequate to the investigation of processes which constitute social realities. This implies in the most trivial way a multi-sited approach, not as an adaptation to a new globalized world, but as a necessity that is always present in historical global systems. The ethnographic argument, thus, requires a theoretical argument that was provided in this early article, reproduced in part below.

In the following we argue against the restriction of theory, in the form of Marxist theory, to the society as totality. We argue also that this reductionism is the result of the political and ideological vectors in the constitution of historical materialism, vectors that were equally as evident in the constitution of functionalism, structural functionalism, and neo-evolutionism. As Marxism claims to be a dynamic model it is the best case of our argument for the global systemic approach, and it is for this reason that it makes sense to return to an argument that we made in the 1970s, which was at the time largely rejected. This is also a way of distinguishing our approach from the current approach to globalization. The latter is strongly evolutionary and sees the global as the continuation of the local or even its replacement. The global systemic perspective is based on a structural argument, in which the local is and has been reproducitively dependent on larger global processes, not something which happened
yesterday but which characterizes much of world history (Ekholm 1975, 1976, 1981). We do not, of course, deny that there are and have been locally reproducing populations organized into single polities, but we emphasize that the way their organization is constituted is a product of interrelations of a systematic or structural nature even where these are on a relatively small scale. Global systemic refers to two distinct aspects of the local-global nexus. First it argues that local social organization is historically constituted within larger social fields. These fields may imply social isolation and political autonomy, but they are relational all the same. The populations encountered by anthropologists and represented as leftovers from the Stone Age, or isolated communities, are on closer examination the products of regional or global historical processes. Self-reproducing subsistence economies are not a stage or a fixed type, but a historical variable practice, a suggestion that is increasingly borne out by archaeological research. Second, the stronger sense of global systemic refers to ongoing processes that link the reproduction of local organization to larger reproductive processes so that the reproduction of the local is directly dependent upon the larger process. This is no way implies that the actor is eliminated, nor his or her cultural specificity. It merely signals, as an empirical question, the degree to which both intentionality and cultural specificity, from forms of sociality to political strategies, are constituted within and dependent upon larger structural contexts. The most concise expression of this free will/determinism relation is that “Men have free will, but the will is not free.” For if the will were free, there would be nothing for which to account.

**THE REDUCTION OF REPRODUCTION TO PRODUCTION**

There have been many Marxisms during the past century, and there is no point in recounting the complex history of these divergent conflictual strands. There is one particular and popular form that Marxism took quite early which is referred to as historical materialism. The latter also took on numerous expressions, but the way it influenced anthropology is primarily in that form that emerged in the Second International. Historical materialism consists of a hypothesis of the primacy of material conditions in the generation of social life. The latter can be reduced to the immediate process of labor, that is, the technological organization of production, which has led to what has been called mechanical materialism. Marx, however, stressed that it was the social form of the appropriation of nature that was the key to understanding and that technology in itself was a false abstraction. In his major works, such as *Capital*, the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, and even his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the theoretical object is always the social
system of reproduction and the way its particular structure distributes both power and wealth in society. There is some crucial ambivalence in his work. He claims on the one hand that consumption is not generally an immediate effect of production but that distribution acts as an intervening structure in determining the way in which wealth is allocated and is not a mere derivative of production (Marx 1971a:199). But when he analyzes the forms of capitalist reproduction, the argument seems more determinist. There is, of course, a reason for this. In the capitalist form, the social categories of production are also categories of the distribution of wealth. Here Marx distinguishes between two notions of distribution, one superficial, the actual distribution of the social product, and the other fundamental, “the distribution of the members of the society among the various types of production (the subsuming of individuals under definite relations of production)” (Marx 1971a:201).

The argument here is that the determination of relations of circulation and consumption by relations of production is dependent on the specific social form of capitalist reproduction. The categories of capital and labor and the various forms of surplus value (interest, profit, etc.) are both social forms of control over the production process and forms of income. A wage as a cost of production and a form of income provides the framework in which costs of production are metamorphosed into a portion of the value of the total product. The same logic applies to industrial and financial capitalists and landlords. In other “modes of production” the relations of distribution do not logically follow from the direct production process, so any deterministic claims would have to be based on extralogical criteria. Furthermore, the determination of distribution by production that is specific to capitalism is not the determination of social form by production. On the contrary, it is only within the social form of capitalist reproduction that distribution follows from production, and this is only because the two moments of the larger process are structured by the same social categories.

This kind of determination has little to do with the popular forms of historical materialism. The latter nonlogical notion of determination is based on the generalization of what was discussed as a logical form in capitalism to an absurd notion that forms of distribution are determined by forms of production in all societies. The specificity of capitalism, the penetration of capitalist relations into the production process, became an ideological model for all societies. And for this to work, the entire notion of logical determination had to be replaced by either functionalism or causality. The point is as fundamental as the confusion is simple. The logical notion of determination is not an explanatory concept. It is not a question of accounting for the existence of a given social form but simply of delineating the determinate relations in an already-given structure.
There is no question that Marx often confused the two notions of determination, but the dominance of the latter notion, mechanical determination, is primarily developed in the work of Engels and in the successors of the Second International. The notion of technological determinism or of determinism in general by the structure of production is the principal form of reductionism that has become predominant in Marxist theory.

THE POLITICAL FORMATION OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM: THE “SOCIETY” AS UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The second aspect of historical materialism, one that characterizes much of nineteenth-century economic thinking as well, is the choice of the state and by abstraction the society as the unit of analysis. As the emergent political space of the West was a field of competing nation-states, in which the primary unit of identification and socialization became the state itself, it is not unreasonable that it became the locus of thinking about the social and even the cultural. It dominated economic thinking from Ricardo on, and in the Second International it gave rise to notions of autonomous national development and even of alternative culturally based roads to socialism. In spite of the existence of a world order, the latter was filtered through the identity structures of the state. Both evolutionary and culturalist thought were products of this political organization of social space. Anthropology was very much a product of this period of development in which the society at most became the ultimate unit of analysis for structural functionalists, functionalists, evolutionists, and ecologists, in which larger systems were usually reduced to external factors since the society or polity contained within it the totality of the conditions necessary for its understanding.

Marx was himself very much influenced by this process of conceptual localization, what can be called the nationalization of social reproduction. Following classical economists such as Ricardo, he tended to see capitalist reproduction as a national cycle however contradictory, in a way that presaged the work of Keynes. And while Marx was himself quite ambiguous about this, as historical materialism became wedded to one state, the Soviet Union, it became a powerful ideology. “Marx showed in Volume II that capitalist production can easily be conceived without external markets, with growing accumulation of wealth” (Lenin).

Of course there were other interpretations. Luxemburg, far superior as a theorist to Lenin, argued that Marx’s schemes of reproduction were logically impossible to maintain without a larger economic field of markets and resources (continuous “primitive” accumulation). This implied for her the logical
necessity of an international political economy that Lenin opposed vehemently. This accounts as well for the latter’s understanding of imperialism as the highest and latest stage of capitalism rather than one of its fundamental properties.

The results of the reductionism in Marxist thinking are the single society as the unit of analysis within which everything relevant occurs and within which social structure and representations are determined by one or another model based on the immediate production process. This amounts to the reification of society as a natural scientific object and the reduction of reproduction to production.

**BACK TO REPRODUCTION**

The notion of mode of production became very popular in France in the 1960s and was taken up by anthropology in France and then in many other countries in the following decades. While there are various approaches to this concept, the great majority tends to conflate technological processes with social processes, reducing the latter to the former by way of a vague notion of causality. Among the spectacular attempts to systematize the concept of mode of production is the extensive work of Althusser, Balibar, and others. They were quite aware of the logical issues involved in Marx’s analysis, and in order to maintain the model of determination they simply divided the explanatory mechanism into a formal versus a real relation of appropriation. In capitalism the two coincide so that the economy could be said to be truly dominant, organizing directly the process of exploitation. In precapitalism the two do not coincide, and here enters the notorious notion of determination in the last instance. Since in the feudal mode of production the actual organization of production is such that the immediate producers control their own means of production, another mechanism is required to exploit them, a political structure. But this structure is said to be determined in the last instance by the economic structure, that is, by the very nonseparation of the producers from their means of production. The political structure here substitutes for the direct economic exploitation that is by definition possible in capitalism. The argument is a kind of tautology since economic dominance is maintained by extension or by displacement onto the political instance. This rather far-fetched attempt to maintain the notion of determination is intellectually interesting if somewhat absurd. The more usual model, much less intellectually challenging, is simply that a given technological level or organization determines a specific form of society. This is the model commonly found in various forms of anthropological materialisms. At its most sophisticated, as in Steward’s work on band society and in some of
Meillassoux’s attempts to deduce structures of power from technological forms of production, it is still flawed by reductionist arguments. That a given technology, for example, determines that populations must be small and mobile and maintain networks of relations of access to resources in a wide region, is not sufficient to generate a social organization of bands. In its most vulgar form it reverts to a simpler functionalism, that irrigation works require centralized states, that ecosystem stability requires ritual feasting, all arguments that have the form that if $X$ does $Y$ in population $Z$ and the latter survives, then $X$ is a necessary mechanism of survival. This is the link between historical materialism and cultural materialism.

*Forces of production* is another term disfigured by the reduction of capitalist logic to a universalist model. Such forces become neutral and autonomous elements, the combination of means of production, raw materials, and a specific organization of labor, without social properties but instead generative of the latter. The so-called correspondence of relations of production to forces of production is easily translated into a relation of causality or functional necessity. From a reproductive perspective, forces of production are always dependent functions, permeated by social choices and structured relations within which they take form. And then there is also the important fact that these “forces” are very often not simply there, not simply local, but the product of larger regional cycles of reproduction. While local conditions of production do indeed provide constraints, they do no more than this. The material properties of technological and ecological processes are effective only within the larger social processes in which they are organized. Mesopotamia, famous for its hydraulic theories of state formation, could only construct irrigation systems with clay tools and raise sheep for wool in the nearby highlands. But the signs of its greatness are associated with a trade dependent technological base, tin, copper, gold, wood, obsidian, stone, and slaves. The latter can only be included in the *material base* of Mesopotamia as a global systemic phenomenon. In a more general sense the accumulation of civilization can be understood only as a larger scale systemic phenomenon connecting a great many areas in a single reproductive totality within which the circulation of objects and people plays a critical role.

Reproduction is a concept proper to the level of the forces of production. If the latter cannot be defined without specifying its conditions of continued existence, a local production process cannot be a base unless it is truly self-reproductive. In this light, forces of production cannot realistically be equated with immediate processes of production. The latter are embedded within larger social structures of reproduction; structures that not only organize the larger flow of necessary elements in production but also subsume the latter within culturally specific projects. This is of course true even where production is truly localized.
Relations of production have in much Marxist literature been reduced to those relations directly involved in the immediate production process itself. In the case of capitalism this may have appeared easy since there was the wage relation itself, a relation between capital and labor in which the categories of production were directly expressive of capitalist exploitation, the wage defined as a necessary cost of production for a capitalist enterprise just as are costs of raw materials, costs of maintenance, of machinery, and so on. This cost is, of course, a cost of reproduction, that is, of the maintenance in the long run of the productive apparatus and of labor itself. And this cost from the capitalist point of view could be subtracted from the total revenue resulting from the sale of commodities, leaving profit, interest, and rent. The latter are included in surplus value for Marx, those social costs related to the use of capital and profit itself, for the reproduction of the capitalist and the accumulation of capital itself in the form of new investment or expanded reproduction. As indicated earlier, it is the very fact that the immediate production process is subsumed within capitalist categories that enables one to equate relations of production with direct exploitation of labor. But the determination of the level and even the forms of exploitation cannot be separated from the larger process of capitalist reproduction. The realization of production on the market is, of course, the absolutely necessary goal of production, and this in its turn is merely a subset of a higher goal, the accumulation of capital in general, which includes all the methods by which money can be turned into more money and which includes financial accumulation and even speculation as its driving forces. These latter forms cannot be deduced from the social relations in immediate production but are its prerequisite and in historical terms its origins. It is capitalist accumulation that penetrates and reorganizes production, and it is the integration of the latter within larger cycles of capitalist accumulation that becomes the major contradiction of industrial capitalism, the contradiction between fictitious capital accumulation and real production, the subject of the third volume of Capital and much of the Theories of Surplus Value, books that are mostly forgotten today, but also rarely used systematically by Marxists who were themselves victims of a materialist determinism of a certain theory of value (Ricardian in origin) that would deduce the value of capital from the immediate process of production, that is, “real” costs. It is interesting that it is precisely in volume III of Capital that the issue of reproduction becomes absolutely crucial for understanding the illusive issue of the “falling rate of profit.” The Ricardian and Keynesian reformulations of this problem in Marxist economics eventually led to the abandonment of the concept that makes no sense without the notion of fictitious capital, capital that simply grows by itself without reference to the productive process. The materialist reduction of relations of production to immediate production divides the space of analysis into forces + relations of
production on the one hand and circulation and almost everything else on the other. The distortion is all the clearer when the concept is applied outside of capitalism, that is, where production exploitation and circulation are organized by different logics. In both Marxist and other economic historical discussion, feudalism is usually defined in terms of a basic feudal rent and a division between a class of landlords organized into a hierarchy of partial rights over a class of serfs. The relations of production are defined as a form of direct appropriation of agricultural surplus. But this appropriation indicates nothing about the realization of this surplus, although it is sometimes implied that the feudal demesne is a total economy. In fact, the latter situation occurs only in marginal areas and in periods of economic depression or “dark ages.” The more usual situation is one in which the estates are linked to larger regional markets, which are in their turn linked to dominant mercantile economic centers in the Middle East to which they supplied raw materials, slaves, and certain rare goods. The aristocracy in return got luxury goods from the larger system. The lack of logic linking these different spheres suggests that the relations of exploitation were no more than that and that they had no internal dynamic of accumulation. The fact that in relation to the commercial towns feudal lords applied the same relation, that is, feudal rent, indicates that the exploitation relation is not one that can be in any way deduced from production itself. The historical variation between the different kinds of rent also indicates the lack of material determination in the feudal world. Rent in kind, money, or labor service varied according to the variation in peasant autonomy and the strength of market demand. This implies that any understanding of the feudal economy must be sought in the larger dynamic of a global system, one in which Europe was largely peripheralized as a raw material and slave producer in a larger Middle-Eastern dominated commercial system. It is for this reason that the famous transition from feudalism to capitalism is such a misnomer. The latter did not grow out of the former. Rather its forms, already present in the larger system, became gradually dominant in the form of a shift of power from a declining Middle East to the particular points in the Mediterranean and Flanders. And this shift of power was very much related to the decentralization of capital accumulation in the Middle East, a decentralization toward Europe which simultaneously weakened the former while strengthening the latter (Abu-Lughod 1989). The attempt to argue a genetic relation between feudalism and capitalism is simply illogical and dependent on a reductionism that flies in the face of the facts of history (Anderson 1974:150). It also creates a false notion of dynamics as if forms of exploitation were accumulative in themselves, something that in logical terms is true only for capitalist exploitation.
The notion of mode of production is an inadequate framework for explanation. Social reproductive totalities are the necessary starting point for an adequate analysis even of those phenomena classified as modes of production. It is in the social processes of reproduction that we can locate the fundamental strategies that organize lower-order processes. It is here that we can grasp that which drives a system and where we can discover whether there is such a system. Social reproduction refers to the sum of processes that organize and move populations through historical time, that link individual and social actors in larger chains of activities that maintain and transform their conditions of existence. And while Marx, as we noted above, was partially trapped in the national reductionism of his day, he is also splendidly clear about the larger systemic connections that are the basis of historical transformation.

Direct slavery is just as much a pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits etc. Without slavery you have no cotton: without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large scale industry. (Marx 1963:111)

The conversion of money capital into slave labor does not negate the capitalist mode of production. On the contrary, it demonstrates that the properties of capitalist reproduction are not simply expressions of a particular set of relations of exploitation. This is true even of capitalist reality, in which there exists a logic linking production and reproduction. To simplify things one can simply note that a capitalist would be out of his mind if he did not see the advantage of making his money grow in multiple says. Wage labor is, in an important sense, a great burden on capital, and ultimately this is true of all labor and all costs of production. The true spirit of capital is, in this logic, the conversion of money into more money, the goose that lays golden eggs.

A mode of production as relations of exploitation-appropriation + forces of production can never be a system. It has no temporal properties and has therefore no explanatory value. It is entirely static and merely descriptive. The combination forces of production + relations of exploitation-appropriation + relations of realization do form a system, but one whose social properties determine the system’s nature and one which might include any number of forms of exploitation and forces of production. We have argued that the concept of mode of production is itself the product of a severe reductionism within historical materialism, one that consists in a generalization of capitalist logic to a kind of universalist causality that transforms that logical relation itself.
into a mechanical determinism, one that is further transfigured by the identity space of the nation-state into a local determinism in which the single society is the ultimate field of explanation.

It is interesting that while Marx did recognize the importance of the larger processes of social reproduction, he did not make it the focus of his analysis. This, we argue, is partly the product of the strongly localizing identity space within which he worked, but it is also because the larger world had not yet emerged clearly as a conscious, practical political issue. Larger systems have become a theoretical issue today because they have intruded upon our conscious everyday existences. This is very much the result of the geographical shift of accumulation, the breakdown of former colonial and postcolonial hierarchical orders and the partial construction of new hierarchies, and it may account for an earlier bout of global thinking that occurred at the end of the past century and that found its way into Marxism as well.

The concept of reproduction opens the door to two crucial areas of rethinking. First, the hypothesis that social reproductive processes are at the core of any adequate account of the social world implies that socially specific, that is, culturally specific, properties or structures of such processes must become the centerpiece of our attempts to understand the world. It is here that we discover the intentionality of systemic processes, the unity in the diverse social projects that pervade any social world. But it is also here that we discover the materiality of the social and of the contradictory nature of social reproduction, by discovering the fundamental structural incompatibilities in such processes. The concept of reproduction also implies the necessity of considering processes that encompass particular social worlds and link them to one another in ways that generate new forms and dissolve others (Friedman 1976, 1979). These processes are emphatically not to be understood as independent of the social worlds that they encompass. On the contrary, the reproductive process is constituted by the articulation of these worlds. This is a structural argument for a global systemic anthropology. The reasoned rejection of the notion of mode of production and all its components leads to the critical necessity of considering the social and therefore culture nature of reproductive process as well as the necessity of considering the larger processes within which the social, including its boundedness, is constituted.

NOTES

1. This is not a logic that determines the actual quantitative relations of distribution, but it does determine their limits of variation and as such implies the potential contradictions that arise within the dynamics of expansion and contraction. Marx’s
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most important and ignored work concerns precisely the fictitious component in the accumulation process and its determinant effects on capitalist dynamics.

2. Anderson is concerned with the role of commerce in the dissolution of the feudal mode of production, but the question is misconstrued. To say that it is the peculiarity of feudalism that it permitted the emergence of autonomous mercantile enterprise is to confuse possibility with explanation. Feudal relations emerged within an already existing mercantile economic world and are not its cause.

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