

## KARL MARX'S CONTRIBUTION TO HISTORIOGRAPHY

The 19th century, that age of bourgeois civilisation, has several major intellectual achievements to its credit, but the academic discipline of history which grew up in that period, is not one of them. Indeed, in all except the techniques of research, it marked a distinct step back from the often ill-documented, speculative and excessively general essays in which those who witnessed the most profoundly revolutionary era—the age of the French and Industrial Revolutions—attempted to comprehend the transformation of human societies. Academic history, as inspired by the teaching and example of Leopold von Ranke and published in the specialist journals which developed in the latter part of the century, was correct in opposing generalisation insufficiently supported by fact, or backed by unreliable fact. On the other hand it concentrated all its efforts on the task of establishing “the facts” and thus contributed little to history except a set of empirical criteria for evaluating certain kinds of documentary evidence (e.g. manuscript records of events involving the conscious decisions of in-

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fluent individuals) and the ancillary techniques necessary for this purpose.

It rarely observed that these documents and procedures were applicable only to a limited range of historical phenomena, because it uncritically accepted certain phenomena as worthy of special study and others not. Thus it did not set out to concentrate on the "history of events"—indeed in some countries it had a distinct institutional bias—but its methodology lent itself most readily to chronological narrative. It did not by any means confine itself entirely to the history of war, politics and diplomacy (or, in the simplified but not untypical version taught by schoolmasters concerning kings, battles and treaties), but it undoubtedly tended to assume that this formed the central body of events which concerned the historian. This was history in the singular. Other subjects could, when treated with erudition and method, give rise to various histories, qualified by descriptive epithets (constitutional, economic, ecclesiastical, cultural, the history of art, science or philately, etc.). Their connection with the main body of history was obscure or neglected, except for a few vague speculations about the *Zeitgeist* from which professional historians preferred to abstain.

Philosophically and methodologically academic historians tended to demonstrate an equally striking innocence. It is true that the results of this innocence coincided with what in the natural sciences was a conscious, though controversial, methodology which we can loosely call positivism, but it is doubtful whether many academic historians (outside the Latin countries) knew that they were positivists. In most cases they were merely men who, just as they accepted a given subject-matter (e.g. politico-military-diplomatic history) and a given geographical area (e.g. western and middle Europe) as the most important, also accepted, among other *idées reçues*, those of popularised scientific thought, e.g. that hypotheses arise automatically from the study of "facts," that explanation consists of a collection of chains of cause and effect, the concepts of determinism, evolution, etc. They assumed that, just as scientific erudition could establish the definitive text and succession of the documents which they published in elaborate and invaluable series of volumes, so it would also establish the definitive truth of history. Lord Acton's *Cambridge Modern*

*History* was a late but typical example of such beliefs.

Even by the modest standards of the human and social sciences of the 19th century, history was therefore an extremely, one might almost say, a deliberately, backward discipline. Its contributions to the understanding of human society, past and present was negligible and accidental. Since the understanding of society requires an understanding of history, alternative and more fruitful ways of exploring the human past had, sooner or later, to be found. The subject of this paper is the contribution of Marxism to this search.

One hundred years after Ranke, Arnaldo Momigliano summed up the changes in historiography under four heads:<sup>1</sup>

1. Political and religious history had declined sharply, while “national histories look old-fashioned.” In return there had been a remarkable turn towards social-economic history.
2. It was no longer usual, or indeed easy, to use “ideas” as an explanation of history.
3. The prevalent explanations were now “in terms of social forces,” though this raised in a more acute form than in Ranke’s day the question of the relation between the explanation of historical events and explanation of individual actions.
4. It had now (1954) become difficult to speak of progress or even meaningful development of events in a certain direction.

The last of Momigliano’s observations—and we quote him as a reporter of the state of historiography rather than as an analyst—was probably more likely to be made in the 1950s than in earlier or later decades, but the other three observations plainly represent old-established and lasting trends in the anti-Rankean movement within history. From the middle of the 19th century, it was noted as long ago as 1910<sup>2</sup> the attempt had been systematically made to substitute a materialist for an idealist framework in it, thus lead-

<sup>1</sup> “One Hundred Years after Ranke,” in *Studies in Historiography*, London, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, XI edition, article “History.”

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ing to a decline in political, the rise of “economic or sociological” history: no doubt under the increasingly urgent stimulus of the “social problem” which “dominated” historiography in the second half of that century.<sup>3</sup> Plainly, it took rather longer to capture the fortresses of university faculties and schools of archives, than enthusiastic encyclopaedists supposed. By 1914 the attacking forces had occupied little more than the outlying posts of “economic history” and historically oriented sociology, and the defenders were not forced into full retreat—though they were by no means routed—until after the second world war.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the general character and success of the anti-Rankean movement is not in doubt.

The immediate question before us is, how far this new orientation has been due to Marxist influence. A second question is, in what way Marxist influence continues to contribute to it.

There can be no doubt that the influence of Marxism was from the start very considerable. Broadly speaking, the only other school or current of thought aiming at the reconstruction of history, which was influential in the 19th century, was positivism (whether spelled with a small or large initial letter). Positivism, a belated child of the 18th century Enlightenment, would have won our admiration in the 19th. Its major contribution to history was the introduction of concepts, methods and models from the natural sciences into social investigation and the application of such discoveries in the natural sciences as seemed suitable, to history. These were not negligible achievements, but they were limited ones, all the more so as the nearest thing to a model of historical change, a theory of evolution patterned on biology or geology, and drawing both encouragement and example after 1859 from Darwinism, is only a very crude and inadequate guide to history. Consequently the historians inspired by Comte or Spencer have been few, and, like Buckle or even the greater Taine or Lamprecht, their influence on historiography was limited and temporary. The weakness of positivism (or Positivism) was that, in spite of Comte's conviction that sociology was the highest of the

<sup>3</sup> *Enciclopedia Italiana*, article “Storiografia.”

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, for several years after 1950 they mounted a fairly successful counter-offensive, encouraged by the favourable climate of the cold war, but also perhaps by the inability of the innovators to consolidate their unexpectedly rapid advance.

sciences, it had little to say about the phenomena that characterise human society, as distinct from those which could be directly derived from the influence of non-social factors, or modelled on the natural sciences. What views it had about the human character of history were speculative, if not metaphysical.

The major impetus for the transformation of history therefore came from historically oriented social sciences (e.g. the German “historical school” in economics), but especially from Marx, whose influence was acknowledged to be such that he was often given credit for achievements which he did not himself claim to have originated. Historical materialism was habitually described—sometimes even by Marxists—as “economic determinism.” Quite apart from disclaiming this phrase, Marx would certainly also have denied that he was the first to stress the importance of the economic basis of historical development, or to write the history of humanity as that of a succession of socio-economic systems. He certainly disclaimed originality in introducing the concept of class and class struggle into history, but in vain. “*Marx ha introdotto nella storiografia il concetto di classe*” wrote the *Enciclopedia Italiana*.

It is not the purpose of this paper to trace the specific contribution of Marxist influence on the transformation of modern historiography. Evidently it differed from one country to another. Thus in France it was relatively small, at least until after World War II, because of the remarkably late and slow penetration of Marxist ideas in any field into the intellectual life of that century.<sup>5</sup> Though Marxist influences had by the 1920’s penetrated to some extent into the highly political field of the historiography of the French Revolution—but, as the work of Jaurès and Georges Lefebvre shows, in combination with ideas drawn from native traditions of thought—the major reorientation of French historians was led by the *Annales* school, which certainly did not require Marx to draw its attention to the economic and social dimensions of history. (However, the popular identification of an interest in such matters with Marxism is so strong, that the *Times Literary Supplement* has only recently<sup>6</sup> put even Fernand Braudel under

<sup>5</sup> Cf. George Lichtheim, *Marxism in Modern France*, 1966.

<sup>6</sup> 15 February 1968.

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Marx's influence). Conversely, there are countries in Asia or Latin America in which the transformation, if not the creation, of modern historiography can almost be identified with the penetration of Marxism. So long as it is accepted that, speaking globally, the influence was considerable, we need not pursue the subject further in the present context.

It has been raised, not so much in order to establish the fact that Marxist influence has played an important part in the modernisation of historiography, as in order to illustrate a major difficulty in establishing its precise contribution. For, as we have seen, the Marxist influence among historians has been identified with a few relatively simple, if powerful, ideas which have, in one way or another, been associated with Marx and the movements inspired by his thought, but which are not necessarily Marxist at all, or which, in the form that has been most influential, are not necessarily representative of the mature thought of Marx. We shall call this type of influence "vulgar-Marxist," and the major problem of analysis is to separate the vulgar-Marxist from the Marxist component in historical analysis.

To give some examples. It seems clear that "vulgar-Marxism" embraced in the main the following elements:

1. The "economic interpretation of history," i.e. the belief that "the economic factor is the fundamental factor on which the others are dependent" (to use R. Stammler's phrase); and more specifically, on which phenomena hitherto not regarded as having much connection with economic matters, depended. To this extent it overlapped with
2. The model of "basis and superstructure" (used most widely to explain the history of ideas). In spite of Marx and Engels' own warnings and the sophisticated observations of some early Marxists such as Labriola, this model was usually interpreted as a simple relation of dominance and dependence between the "economic base" and the "superstructure;" mediated at most by
3. "Class interest and the class struggle." One has the impression that a number of vulgar-Marxist

historians did not read much beyond the first page of the Communist Manifesto, and the phrase that “the (written) history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.”

4. “Historical laws and historical inevitability.” It was believed, correctly, that Marx insisted on a systematic and necessary development of human society in history, from which the contingent was largely excluded, at all events at the level of generalisation about long-term movements. Hence the constant preoccupation of early Marxist writers on history with such problems as the role of the individual or of accident in history. On the other hand this could be, and largely was, interpreted as a rigid and imposed regularity, e.g. in the succession of socio-economic formations, or even a mechanical determinism which sometimes came close to suggesting that there were no alternatives in history.
5. Specific subjects of historical investigation derived from Marx’s own interests, e.g. in the history of capitalist development and industrialisation, but also sometimes from more or less casual remarks.
6. Specific subjects of investigation derived not so much from Marx, as from the interest of the movements associated with his theory, e.g. in the agitations of the oppressed classes (peasants, workers), or in revolutions.
7. Various observations about the nature and limits of historiography, derived mainly from no. 2 and serving to explain the motives and methods of historians who claimed to be nothing but impartial searchers after truth, and prided themselves on establishing simply “*wie es eigentlich gewesen.*”

It will at once be obvious that this represented, at best, a selection from Marx’ views about history and at worst (as quite

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often with Kautsky) an assimilation of them to contemporary non-Marxist—e.g. evolutionist and positivistic—views. It will also be evident that some of it represented not Marx at all, but the sort of interests which would naturally be developed by any historian associated with popular, working-class and revolutionary movements, and which would have been developed even without the intervention of Marx, e.g. a preoccupation with earlier examples of social struggle and socialist ideology. Thus in the case of Kautsky's early monograph on Thomas More, there is nothing particularly Marxist about the choice of the subject, and its treatment is vulgar-Marxist.

Yet this selection of elements from, or associated with, Marxism, was not arbitrary. Items 1-4 and 7 in the brief survey of vulgar-Marxism made above, represented concentrated charges of intellectual explosive, designed to blow up crucial parts of the fortifications of traditional history, and as such they were immensely powerful. Perhaps more powerful than less simplified versions of historical materialism would have been, and certainly powerful enough in their capacity to let light into hitherto dark places, to keep historians satisfied for a considerable time. It is difficult to recapture the amazement felt by an intelligent and learned social scientist at the end of the 19th century, when encountering the following Marxist observations about the past: "That the very Reformation is ascribed to an economical cause, that the length of the Thirty Years' War was due to economic causes, the Crusades to feudal land-hunger, the evolution of the family to economic causes, and that Descartes' view of animals as machines can be brought into relation with the growth of the Manufacturing system."<sup>7</sup> Yet those of us who recall our first encounters with historical materialism may still bear witness to the immense liberating force of such simple discoveries. However, if it was thus natural, and perhaps necessary, for the initial impact of Marxism to take a simplified form, the actual selection of elements from Marx also represented a historical choice. Thus a few remarks by Marx in the *Capital* on the relation between Protestantism and capitalism, were immensely influential, presumably because the problem of the social basis of ideology in general, and of the

<sup>7</sup> J. Bonar, *Philosophy and Political Economy*, 1893, p. 367.



nature of religious orthodoxies in particular, were a subject of immediate and intense interest.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand some of the works in which Marx himself came closest to writing as a historian, e.g. the magnificent *Eighteenth Brumaire*, did not stimulate historians until very much later; presumably because the problems on which they throw most light, e.g. of class-consciousness and the peasantry, seemed of less immediate interest.

The bulk of what we regard as the Marxist influence on historiography has certainly been vulgar-Marxist in the sense described above. It consists of the general emphasis on the economic and social factors in history which have been dominant since the end of the Second World War in all but a minority of countries (e.g. until recently West Germany and the United States), and which continue to gain ground. We must repeat that this trend, though undoubtedly in the main the product of Marxist influence, has no special connection with Marx's thought. The major impact which Marx's own specific ideas have had in history and the social sciences in general, is almost certainly that of the theory of "basis and superstructure;" that is to say of his model of a society composed of different "levels" which interact. Marx's own hierarchy of levels or mode of their interaction (insofar as he has provided one)<sup>9</sup> need not be accepted for the general model to be valuable. It has, indeed, been very widely welcomed as a valuable contribution even by non-Marxists. Marx's specific model of historical development—including the rôle of class conflicts, the succession of socio-economic formations and the mechanism of transition from one to the other—have remained much more controversial, even in some instances among Marxists. It is right that it should be debated, and in particular that the usual criteria of historical verification should be applied to it. It is inevitable that some parts of it, which are based on insufficient or misleading evidence should be abandoned; for instance in the field of the study of oriental societies, where Marx combines profound insight with mistaken assumptions, e.g. about the internal stability of some

<sup>8</sup> These remarks were to give rise to one of the earliest penetrations of what is undoubtedly a Marxist influence into orthodox historiography, namely the famous theme on which Sombart, Weber, Troeltsch and others were to play variations. The debate is still far from exhausted.

<sup>9</sup> One must agree with L. Althusser that his discussion of the "superstructural" levels remained much sketchier and inconclusive than that of the "basis."

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such societies. Nevertheless it is the contention of this paper that the chief value of Marx for historians today lies in his statements about history, as distinct from his statements about society in general.

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The Marxist (and vulgar-Marxist) influence which has hitherto been most effective, is part of a general tendency to transform history into one of the social sciences; a tendency resisted by some with more or less sophistication, but which has unquestionably been the prevailing one in the 20th century. The major contribution of Marxism to this tendency in the past has been the critique of positivism, i.e. of the attempts to assimilate the study of the social sciences to that of the natural ones, or the human to the non-human. This implies the recognition of societies as systems of relations between human beings, of which the relations entered into for the purpose of production and reproduction are primary for Marx. It also implies the analysis of the structure and functioning of these systems as entities maintaining themselves, in their relations both with the outside environment — non-human and human — and in their internal relationships. Marxism is far from the only structural-functionalist theory of society, though it has good claims to be the first of them, but it differs from most others in two respects. First, it insists on a hierarchy of social phenomena (e.g. “basis” and “superstructure”), and second, on the existence within any society of internal tensions (“contradictions”) which counteract the tendency of the system to maintain itself as a going concern.<sup>10</sup>

The importance of these peculiarities of Marxism is in the field of history, for it is they which allow it to explain—unlike other structural-functional models of society—why and how societies change and transform themselves; in other words, the facts of social evolution.<sup>11</sup> The immense strength of Marx has always lain

<sup>10</sup> It need hardly be said that the “basis” consists not of technology or economics, but of “the totality of these relations of production,” i.e. social organisation in its broadest sense as applied to a given level of the material forces of production.

<sup>11</sup> Obviously the use of this term does not imply any similarity with the process of biological evolution.

in his insistence on both the existence of social structure and its historicity, or in other words its internal dynamic of change. Today, when the existence of social systems is generally accepted, but at the cost of their a-historical, if not anti-historical analysis, Marx's emphasis on history as a necessary dimension is perhaps more essential than ever.

This implies two specific critiques of theories prevalent in the social sciences today.

The first is the critique of the mechanism which dominates so much of the social sciences, especially in the United States, and draws its strength both from the remarkable fruitfulness of sophisticated mechanical models in the present phase of scientific advance, and the search for methods of achieving social change which do not imply social revolution. One may perhaps add that the wealth of money and of certain new technologies suitable for use in the social field, which are now available in the richest of the industrial countries, make this type of "social engineering" and the theories on which it is based, very attractive in such countries. Such theories are essentially exercises in "problem-solving." Theoretically, they are extremely primitive, probably cruder than most corresponding theories in the 19th centuries. Thus many social scientists, either consciously or *de facto*, reduce the process of history to a single change from "traditional" to "modern" or "industrial" society, the "modern" being defined in terms of the advanced industrial countries, or even of the mid-20th century United States, the "traditional" as that which lacks "modernity." Operationally this single large step can be sub-divided into smaller steps, such as those of Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth. These models eliminate most of history in order to concentrate on one small, though admittedly vital, span of it, and grossly oversimplify the mechanisms of historical change even with this small span of time. They affect historians chiefly because the size and prestige of the social sciences which develop such models, encourage historical researchers to embark on projects which are influenced by them. It is, or should be, quite evident that they can provide no adequate model of historical change, but their present popularity makes it important that Marxists should constantly remind us of this.

The second is the critique of structural-functional theories which, if vastly more sophisticated, are in some respects even

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more sterile inasmuch as they may deny historicity altogether, or transform it into something else. Such views are more influential even within the range of influence of Marxism, because they appear to provide a means of liberating it from the characteristic evolutionism of the 19th century, with which it was so often combined, though at the cost of also liberating it from the concept of "progress" which was also characteristic of 19th century thought, including Marx's. But why should we wish to do so?<sup>12</sup> Marx himself certainly would not have wished to do so: he offered to dedicate the *Capital* to Darwin, and would hardly have disagreed with Engels' famous phrase at his graveside, which praised him for discovering the law of evolution in human history, as Darwin had done in organic nature. (He would certainly not have wished to dissociate progress from evolution, and indeed specifically blamed Darwin for making it into its merely accidental by-product).<sup>13</sup>

The fundamental question in history is how humanity developed from the earliest tool-using primate to the present. This implies the discovery of a mechanism for both the differentiation of various human social groups, and the transformation of one kind of society into another, or the failure to do so. In certain respects, which Marxists and common sense regard as crucial, such as the control of man over nature, it certainly implies unidirectional change or progress, at least over a sufficiently long time-span. So long as we do not suppose that the mechanisms of such social development are the same as or similar to those of biological evolution, there seems to be no good reason for not using the term "evolution" for it.

The argument is, of course, more than terminological. It conceals two kinds of disagreements: about the value-judgment on different types of societies, or in other words, the possibility of ranking them in any kind of hierarchical order, and about the mechanisms of change. Structural-functionalisms have tended to shy away from ranking societies into "higher" and "lower," partly because of the welcome refusal of social anthropologists to accept

<sup>12</sup> There are historical reasons for this rebellion against the "evolutionary" aspect of Marxism, e.g. the rejection — for political reasons — of the Kautskyan orthodoxies, but we are not here concerned with these.

<sup>13</sup> "Marx to Engels," 7.8.1866, *Werke*, t. 31, p. 248.

the claim of the "civilised" to rule the "barbarian" because of their alleged superiority in social evolution, and partly because, by the formal criteria of function, there is indeed no such hierarchy. The Eskimo solve the problems of their existence as a social group<sup>14</sup> as successfully in their own way as the white inhabitants of Alaska; some would be tempted to say, more successfully. Under certain conditions and on certain assumptions, magical thinking may be as logical in its way as scientific thinking and as adequate for its purpose. And so on. These observations are valid, though they are not very useful insofar as the historian, or any other social scientist, wishes to explain the specific content of a system rather than its general structure.<sup>15</sup> But in any case they are irrelevant to the question of evolutionary change, if not indeed tautologous. Human societies must, if they are to persist, be capable of managing themselves successfully, and therefore all existing ones must be functionally adequate; if not, they would have become extinct, as the Shakers did for want of a system of sexual procreation or outside recruitment. To compare societies in respect of their system of internal relations between members is inevitably to compare like with like. It is when we compare them in respect of their capacity to control outside nature that the differences leap to the eye.

The second disagreement is more fundamental. Most versions of structural-functional analysis are synchronic, and the more elaborate and sophisticated they are, the more they are confined to social statics, into which, if the subject interests the thinker, some dynamising element has to be introduced.<sup>16</sup> Whether this can

<sup>14</sup> In the sense in which Lévi-Strauss speaks of kinship systems (or other social devices) as a "coordinated ensemble, the function of which is to insure the permanency of the social group" (Sol Tax ed., *Anthropology Today*, 1962, p. 343).

<sup>15</sup> "It remains true... even for a properly revitalized version of functional analysis, that its explanatory form is rather limited; in particular, it does not provide an explanation of why a particular item *i* rather than some functional equivalent of it, occurs in system *s*." Carl Hempel, in L. Gross ed., *Symposium on Social Theory*, 1959.

<sup>16</sup> As Lévi-Strauss puts it, writing of kinship models "If no external factor were affecting this mechanism, it would work indefinitely, and the social structure would remain static. This is not the case, however; hence the need to introduce into the theoretical model new elements to account for the diachronic changes of the structure." *Loc. cit.*, p. 343.

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be done satisfactorily is a matter of debate even among structuralists. That *the same analysis* cannot be used to explain both function and historic change, seems widely accepted. The point here is not that it is illegitimate to develop separate analysis models for the static and the dynamic, such as Marx's schemas of simple and extended reproduction, but that historical enquiry makes it desirable for these different models to be connected. The simplest course for the structuralist is to omit change, and leave history to someone else, or even, like some of the earlier British social anthropologists, virtually to deny its relevance. However, since it exists, structuralism must find ways of explaining it.

These ways must either, I suggest, bring it closer to Marxism, or lead to a denial of evolutionary change. Lévi-Strauss' approach (and that of Althusser) seem to me to do the latter. Here historical change becomes simply the permutation and combination of certain "elements" (analogous, to quote Lévi-Strauss, to genes in genetics), which, in the sufficiently long term, may be expected to combine in different patterns and, if sufficiently limited, to exhaust the possible combinations.<sup>17</sup> History is, as it were, the process of playing through all the variants in an end-game of chess. But in what order? The theory here provides us with no guide.

Yet this is precisely the specific problem of historical evolution. It is of course true that Marx envisaged such a combination and recombination of elements or "forms" as Althusser stresses, and in this as other respects was a structuralist *avant la lettre*; or more precisely, a thinker from whom a Lévi-Strauss (by his own admission) could, in part at least, borrow the term.<sup>18</sup> It is important to remind ourselves of an aspect of Marx's thought which earlier traditions of Marxism undoubtedly neglected, with a few exceptions (among which, curiously, must be numbered some of the developments of Soviet Marxism in the Stalin period, though these were not wholly aware of the implications of what they were doing). It is even more important to remind ourselves that the analysis of the elements and their possible combinations provides

<sup>17</sup> "Il est clair, toutefois, que c'est la nature de ce concept de 'combinaison' qui fonde l'affirmation... que le marxisme *n'est pas un historicisme*: puisque le concept marxiste de l'histoire repose sur le principe de la variation des formes de cette "combinaison." Cf. *Lire le Capital*, t. II, p. 153.

<sup>18</sup> R. Bastide ed., *Sens et usage du terme structure dans les sciences sociales et humaines*, 1962, p. 143.

(as in genetics) a salutary control on evolutionary theories, by establishing what is theoretically possible and impossible. It is also possible—though this question must remain open—that such an analysis could lend greater precision to the definition of the various social “levels” (basis and superstructure) and their relationships, as Althusser suggests.<sup>19</sup> What it does not do is to explain why twentieth century Britain is a very different place from neolithic Britain, or the succession of socio-economic formations, or the mechanism of the transitions from one to the other, or, for that matter, why Marx devoted so much of his life to answering such questions.

If such questions are to be answered both the peculiarities which distinguish Marxism from other structural-functional theories, are necessary: the model of *levels*, of which that of the social relations of production are primary, and the existence of internal contradictions within systems, of which class conflict is merely a special case.

The hierarchy of levels is necessary to explain why history has a *direction*. It is the growing emancipation of man from nature and his growing capacity to control it, which makes history as a whole (though not every area and period within it) “oriented and irreversible,” to quote Lévi-Strauss once again. A hierarchy of levels not arising on the base of the social relations of production would not necessarily have this characteristic. Moreover, since the process and progress of man’s control over nature involves changes not merely in the forces of production (e.g. new techniques) but in the social relations of production, it implies a certain order in the succession of socio-economic systems. (It does not imply the acceptance of the list of formations given in the *Preface* to the *Critique of Political Economy* as chronologically successive, which Marx probably did not believe them to be, and still less a theory of universal unilinear evolution. However, it does imply

<sup>19</sup> “On voit par là que certains rapports de production supposent comme condition de leur propre existence, l’existence d’une *superstructure* juridico-politique et idéologique, et pourquoi cette superstructure est nécessairement *spécifique*... On voit aussi que certains autres rapports de production n’appellent pas de superstructure politique, mais seulement une superstructure idéologique (les sociétés sans classes). On voit enfin que la nature des rapports de production considérés, non seulement appelle ou n’appelle pas telle ou telle forme de superstructure, mais fixe également le *degré d’efficacité* délégué à tel ou tel niveau de la totalité sociale.” *Loc. cit.*, p. 153.



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that certain social phenomena cannot be conceived as appearing in history earlier than others, e.g. economies possessing the town-country dichotomy before those which lack it). And for the same reason it implies that this succession of systems cannot be ordered simply in one dimension technological (lower technologies preceding higher) or economic (*Geldwirtschaft* succeeding *Naturalwirtschaft*) but must also be ordered in terms of their social systems.<sup>20</sup> For it is an essential characteristic of Marx' historical thought that it is neither "sociological" nor "economic" but both simultaneously. The social relations of production and reproduction (i.e. social organisation in its broadest sense) and the material forces of production, cannot be divorced.

Given this "orientation" of historical development, the internal contradictions of socio-economic systems provide the mechanism for change which becomes development. (Without it, it might be argued that they would produce merely cyclical fluctuation, an endless process of de-stabilising and re-stabilising; and, of course, such changes as might arise from the contacts and conflicts of different societies). The point about such internal contradictions is, that they cannot be defined simply as "dysfunctional" except on the assumption that stability and permanence are the norm, and change the exception; or even on the more naive assumption, frequent in the vulgar social sciences, that a specific system is the model to which all change aspires.<sup>21</sup> It is rather that, as is now recognised much more widely than before among social anthropologists, a structural model envisaging only the maintenance of a system is inadequate. It is the simultaneous existence of stabilising and disruptive elements which such a model must reflect. And it is this which the Marxist model—though not the vulgar-Marxist versions of it—has been based on.

Such a dual (dialectical) model is difficult to set up and use, for in practice the temptation is great to operate it, according to taste or occasion, either as a model of stable functionalism or as

<sup>20</sup> These may, of course, be described, if we find this useful, as different combinations of a given number of elements.

<sup>21</sup> One may add that it is doubtful whether they can be simply classified as "conflicts," though insofar as we concentrate our attention on social systems as systems of relation between people, they may normally be expected to take the form of conflict between individuals and groups or, more metaphorically, between value-systems, roles, etc.



one of revolutionary change; whereas the interesting thing about it is, that it is both. It is equally important that internal tensions may sometimes be reabsorbed into a self-stabilising model by feeding them back as functional stabilisers, and that sometimes they cannot. Class conflict can be regulated through a sort of safety-valve, as in so many riots of urban plebeians in pre-industrial cities, or institutionalised as “rituals of rebellion” (to use Max Gluckman’s illuminating phrase) or in other ways; but sometimes it cannot. The state will normally legitimise the social order by controlling class conflict within a stable framework of institutions and values, ostensibly standing above and outside them (the remote king as “fountain of justice”), and in doing so perpetuate a society which would otherwise be riven asunder by its internal tensions. This is indeed the classical Marxist theory of its origin and function, as expounded in *Origin of the Family*.<sup>22</sup> Yet there are situations when it loses this function and—even in the minds of its subject—this capacity to legitimate and appears merely as—to use the phrase of Thomas Morus—“a conspiracy of the rich for their own benefit,” if not indeed the direct cause of the miseries of the poor. This contradictory nature of the model can be obscured by pointing to the undoubted existence of *separate* phenomena within society representing regulated stability and subversion: social groups which can allegedly be integrated into feudal society, such as “merchant capital” and these which cannot, such as an “industrial bourgeoisie,” or social movements which are purely “reformist” and those which are consciously “revolutionary.” But though such separations exist, and where they do, indicate a certain stage in the development of the society’s internal contradictions (which are *not*, for Marx, exclusively those of class conflict,<sup>23</sup> it is equally significant that the same phenomena may, according to the situation, change their functions; movements for the restoration of the old regulated order of class society turning

<sup>22</sup> Whether the state is the only institution which as this function, has been a question that much preoccupied Marxists like Gramsci, but need not concern us here.

<sup>23</sup> G. Lichtheim (*Marxism*, 1961, p. 152) rightly points out that class antagonism plays only a subordinate part in Marx’s model of the break-up of ancient Roman society. The view that this must have been due to “slave revolts” has no basis in Marx.

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(as with some peasant movements) into social revolutions, consciously revolutionary parties being absorbed into the *status quo*.<sup>24</sup>

Difficult though it may be, social scientists of various kinds (including, we may note, animal ecologists, especially students of population dynamics and animal social behaviour) have begun to approach the construction of models of equilibria based on tension or conflict, and in doing so draw nearer to Marxism and further away from the older models of sociology which regarded the problem of order as logically prior to that of change and emphasised the integrative and normative elements in social life. At the same time it must be admitted that Marx's own model must be made more explicit than it is in his writings, that it may require elaboration and development, and that certain vestiges of the 19th century positivism, more evident in Engels' formulations than in Marx's own thought, must be cleared out of the way.

We are then still left with the *specific* historical problems of the nature and succession of socio-economic formations, and the mechanisms of their internal development, and interaction. These are fields in which discussion has been intensive since Marx,<sup>25</sup> not least in the past decades, and in some respects the advance upon Marx has been most striking.<sup>26</sup> Here also recent analysis has confirmed the brilliance and profundity of Marx's general approach and vision though it has also drawn attention to the gaps in his treatment, particularly of pre-capitalist periods. However, these themes can hardly be discussed even in the most cursory form except in terms of concrete historical knowledge; i.e. they cannot be discussed in the context of the present colloquium. Short of such a discussion I can only assert my conviction that Marx's approach is still the only one which enables us to explain the

<sup>24</sup> As Worsley, summarising work along these lines put it "change within a system must either cumulate towards structural change of the system, or be coped with by some sort of cathartic mechanism," "The Analysis of Rebellion and Revolution in Modern British Social Anthropology," *Science and Society*, XXV, 1, 1961, p. 37. Ritualisation in social relations makes sense as such a symbolic-acting out of tensions which might be otherwise intolerable.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the great quantity of research and discussion on oriental societies, deriving from a very small number of pages in Marx, of which some of the most important — those in the *Grundrisse* — were not available until 15 years ago.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. in the field of pre-history, the work of the late V. Gordon Childe, perhaps the most original historical mind in the English-speaking countries to apply Marxism to the past.

entire span of human history, and forms the most fruitful starting point for modern discussion.

None of this is particularly new, though some of the texts which contain the most mature reflexions of Marx on historical subjects, did not become available until the 1950's, notably the *Grundrisse* of 1857-8. Moreover, the diminishing returns on the application of vulgar-Marxist models, have in recent decades led to a substantial sophistication of Marxist historiography.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, one of the most characteristic features of contemporary western Marxist historiography is the critique of the simple, mechanical schemata of an economic-determinist type. However, whether or not Marxist historians have advanced substantially beyond Marx, their contribution today has a new importance, because of the changes which are at present taking place in the social sciences. Whereas the major function of historical materialism in the first half-century after Engels' death was to bring history closer to the social sciences, while avoiding the oversimplifications of positivism, it is today facing the rapid historicisation of the social sciences themselves. For want of any help from academic historiography, these have increasingly begun to improvise their own—applying their own characteristic procedures to the study of the past, with results which are often technically sophisticated, but, as has been pointed out, based on models of historic change in some respects even cruder than those of the 19th century.<sup>28</sup> Here the value of Marx's historical materialism is great, though it is natural that historically minded social scientists may find themselves less in need of Marx's insistence on the importance of economic and social elements in history than did the historians of the early 20th century; and conversely might find themselves more stimulated by aspects of Marx's theory which did not make a great impact on historians in the immediately post-Marxian generations.

Whether this explains the undoubted prominence of Marxian ideas in the discussion of certain fields of historically oriented

<sup>27</sup> Compare, for instance, the approaches of Dr. Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*, 1964, a valuable and illuminating pioneer work, and Prof. Eugène Genovese, to the problem of American slave societies and the abolition of slavery.

<sup>28</sup> This is particularly obvious in fields such as the theory of economic growth as applied to specific societies, and the theories of "modernisation" in political science and sociology.

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social science today, is another question.<sup>29</sup> The unusual prominence at present of Marxist historians, or of historians trained in the Marxist school, is certainly in large part due to the radicalisation of intellectuals and students in the past decade, the impact of the revolutions in the Third World, the break-up of Marxist orthodoxies inimical to original scientific work, and even to so simple a factor as the succession of generations. For the Marxists who reached the point of publishing widely-read books and occupying senior positions in academic life in the 1950's were often only the radicalised students of the 1930s or 1940s, reaching the normal peak of their careers. Nevertheless, as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of Marx's birth and the centenary of the *Capital*, we cannot but note—with satisfaction if we are Marxists—the coincidence of a significant influence of Marxism in the field of historiography, and a significant number of historians inspired by Marx or demonstrating, in their work, the effects of training in the Marxist schools.

<sup>29</sup> The discussion of the political impact of capitalist development on pre-industrial societies, and more generally, of the “prehistory” of modern social movements and revolutions, is a good example.