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Schools of Athens: Surplus Approach, Marxism and Institutions

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Abstract

Relying on the lessons of Marx, Polanyi, Sraffa and Garegnani, the paper moves from the material anchor that the classical surplus approach provides to economic and institutional analysis in anthropology, archaeological and economic history. In surplus theory institutions regulate the material basis of society and in particular the extraction and distribution of the social surplus. Marx's historical materialism is a natural source of inspiration for this view expunged, of course, of teleological and mechanical readings. The Marxian concept of modes of production has been however object of often over-complicated disputes among Marxists. These are not easily solved since historical results in anthropology, archaeological and economic history do not always deliver uncontroversial pictures of the working of ancient economies and of their transitional dynamics. Since Popper, historical materialism has also been object of methodological criticism. While the suggestions to complement macro analysis with consistent granular accounts of individual choices must be welcomed, methodological individualism is a dead end for social science. Individual and class choices must rather be dealt with through historical analysis. The surplus approach may provide support to both macro and micro analysis of behaviours and institutions. Interdisciplinarity is advocated in the paper.

Keywords: Surplus approach; Historical materialism; Anthropology; Archaeology; Agency

JEL Codes: A12; B51; B52; Z13

1. Introduction*

Previous papers by Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico (2021a, 2021b) and Cesaratto (2023c) examined some controversies on precapitalist economic formations in economic anthropology, archaeology and history in the light of the classical surplus approach recovered by Sraffa (1951) and Garegnani (1960, 1984). We suggested the inseparability of the analysis of socio-political institutions and production, distribution and conflict over the social surplus. Although the classical surplus approach should not be identified with Marxism — many of its supporters are not Marxists and more liberal ascendancies might be envisaged (cf. Roncaglia 1991) — historical materialism looks like a natural completion of surplus theory when applied to economic and institutional history. The central concept of historical materialism is that of mode of production. This subsumes an economic aspect, related to the material extraction and distribution of the social surplus; an institutional side concerning the political regulation of the economic relations; and an ideological side related to social consensus. There is little doubt that the relationship between economic interests and political-ideological forms has become common sense without calling oneself a Marxist.

It is generally acknowledged that in capitalism the economic-social relations are mostly regulated by market exchanges and competition, and are therefore amenable to mathematical-formal investigation, whereas in earlier economic formations production and distribution of the social surplus (if any) are more mediated by political or personal relations. Despite their different institutional regulations, one advantage of the surplus approach is that the same theory is applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to market economies and to non-market formations.¹ As the mature Marx ([1867] 1974, p. 226) stated:

Capital has not invented surplus labour [work provided beyond what is necessary for the reproduction of the livelihood of the working class]. Wherever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the labourer, free or not free, must add to the working time necessary for his own maintenance an extra working time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owners of the means of production, whether this proprietor be the Athenian [aristocrat], Etruscan theocrat, civis Romanus, Norman baron, American slave-owner, Wallachian boyard, modern landlord or capitalist.

Marginalist economists are instead at pain to apply their theory to ancient economies unless they could show some prevalence of market exchanges. By wrongly identifying

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¹ Blankenburg, Arena and Wilkinson (2012, p. 1272) observe, for instance, that in the opening chapters of Sraffa (1960) we find “different types of societies that are differentiated by their respective rules of income distribution”, and quote Garegnani’s remark “that ‘in the classical theories of distribution, the central problem is the determination of the circumstances which rule the size of the social surplus’ (Garegnani 1960, p. 3), *not price theory*” (italics in the original). The concept of social surplus is widely employed in archaeology and anthropology in a materialist but not necessarily Marxist perspective (see for instance Groot and Lentjes 2013). The most shining example in archaeology is still Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957), see e.g. Childe (1942). For a modern application Frangipane (2018).

economic analysis with marginalism, Karl Polanyi (1957) and Moses Finley (1973) sidelined the application of economic theory to non-market formations. Later, New Institutional Economics (NIE) has turned the tables explaining non-market economic institutions in ancient economies as the result of market failures (sort of). The difficulties that Douglass North, the major exponent of NIE in the field of economic history, has progressively met to explain institutions are discussed elsewhere (Cesaratto 2023d). In fact, North's contribution can be seen as a (failed) challenge to historical materialism regarded as a compact and consistent reading of economic, institutional and cultural history.

Unfortunately (or perhaps luckily), historical materialism is not in actual fact such a compact and complete theory. While this is a sign of openness and vitality — contrary to the popular opinion of Marxism as a closed doctrine — there is a Pandora's box of questions over the definition and laws of change of modes of production. The temptation is however to close the box immediately since, lamentably, the Marxist debate is not only vast, but often verbose and self-referential.

In a static sense there are a number of definitional issues left behind by Marx concerning a long list of terms including mode of production, social formation, structure, superstructure, forces of production, relation of production, forms of exploitation, let alone his very rough list of historical modes of production. Beyond semantic questions, common sense (or consensual) Marxism regards institutions as complementary to surplus extraction, namely *functional* to the regulation of social conflict and the preservation of the élites' power. This role of institutions has been challenged by mainstream NIE and by self-defined “analytical Marxism”, both pointing to the lack of “micro-foundation” of this functionalism.

In a dynamic sense, further and more challenging problems lie in the definition of the laws of change of the modes of production. Is it due to the evolution of the forces of production (aka production techniques), or to the breaking of some social equilibrium in the relations of production (aka class struggle); or instead to the occurrence of some exogenous event as the development of trade? At the bottom of the different positions one can trace a division, typical of the social sciences, between those who look at social processes primarily through the lens of theory and structure, and those who instead look at them through the eyes of human agency. As in Raphael's School of Athens, the former sort of Marxists (aka structuralists) point their finger upwards, the latter downwards. We shall however distinguish among the latter between those who look at human agency through the lenses of historical analysis (historicists for simplicity) and those who adopt methodological individualism (NIE and analytical Marxists). A study of income distribution and institutions in precapitalist “historical forms of social production” (as defined by Marx ([1867] 1974, p. 484) cannot avoid opening these boxes.²

By necessity and disciplinary competence, I limit myself to some controversies, particularly lively among historians and archaeologists, with the modest objective to single out

² Taccola (2020) provides a complete account of the lively debates among Italian Marxists on historicism over the last century.

some terms of the debate in current Marxism as a contribution to the application of the classical surplus approach, as an alternative to mainstream NIE, in the fields of economic anthropology, archaeology, history, and the theory of institutions.³

To oversimplify greatly, it is unfortunate that one Marxist side (the historicists) accuses the other (the structuralists) of ossifying historical materialism in predefined shelves or of indulging in economicism, while the latter accuses the former of reducing historical materialism to mere historical narrative. The interest in historical materialism lies precisely in the co-presence of theory and history, both finding their sustenance in the material modes in which humans reproduce their subsistence and distribute the eventual surplus, and in the evolution of these modes. More specifically, while defending the centrality of theory and materialism, I will argue that it is precisely in the historical study of human action, supported by a theoretical and materialist background, that sits the best answer to the methodological individualism re-proposed by marginalist NIE and analytical Marxists.

On the whole then, from my external point of view, such a sharp and sometimes acrimonious division of Marxism between theory and structure on the one hand, and historiography on the other, is just a waste of intellectual resources. Vices of sectarianism borrowed from adjacent political activities have perhaps conditioned Marxist cultural life. If this were the case, it is a damage to be avoided.

Section 1 gathers insights directly from Marx on how to approach precapitalist economies. Some of these suggestions have been picked up by leading Marxist historians. Section 2 evokes the controversies raised by the French philosopher Louis Althusser's "structuralist" attempt to systematise historical materialism. Rather than focusing directly on this author and his collaborators, whom I find excessively convoluted, it seems more interesting to us to revisit the discussion that has taken place on this subject between the Marxist historians Edward Thompson (defender of a historicist approach) and Perry Anderson (who has an intermediate position). Other critiques of structuralism will be considered, ranging from those of the Indian Marxist historian Jairus Banaji (2010) to the more recent ones of Knafo and Teschke (2020). In section 3 we go back to the classic Dobb-Sweezy controversy on the transition from feudalism to capitalism which found a new episode in the Brenner controversy of the late 1970s. Ever since Popper, criticism at Marxism for functionalism and lack of agency has also been levelled by marginalist economists who were joined in the 1980s and 1990s by 'analytical Marxism'. We deal with this in section 4, while some counter-objections are put forward in section 5 that try to go beyond Engels' wrestling with the subject. Section 6 deals with the question of free-riding and social classes. Some conclusions will follow.

³ Preliminary explorations of the controversies over the ancient economies and the modes of production are, respectively, Cesaratto (2023a) and Cesaratto (2023b).

2. Marx on the precapitalist economies

The influence of Marx on the combination of surplus approach and institutional analysis I proposed in previous work is apparent. Severely simplifying, historical materialism is indeed the result of German idealism with its focus on history and the evolution of human self-awareness, combined with the Classical economists materialism centred on the notion of social surplus – although the relative role of these two components in the formation of Marx's thinking are a matter of controversy. A study of the co-evolution of the materialist interpretation of history and distribution theory in Marx still seems to be lacking (nor will it be attempted here). Interestingly, Göran Therborn (1976, p. 371) notes that the “concept of surplus-value [...] first appears only in the *Grundrisse*” (in the late 1850s) arguing that this concept is “directly related to the development of the general concept of relations of production”.⁴

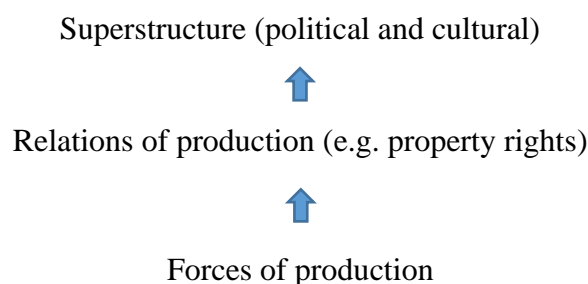
While the most mature Marx was mainly captured by problems of economic analysis, it is the later Engels who entered into the unsolved problems of historical materialism by seeking a synthesis of a long intellectual parabola, Marx's and his own (see also below section 5). In doing so, he attracted the praise of some (the historicists) and the strides of others (the structuralists). In the *Anti-Dühring*, for instance, Engels singled out the double nature, analytical and historical, of political economy, and the insights that come from comparing different historical-economic formations (Engels [1878] 1947, p. 90, p. 92):

Political economy is [...] essentially a *historical* science. It deals with material which is historical, that is, constantly changing; it must first investigate the special laws of each individual stage in the evolution of production and exchange, and only when it has completed this investigation will it be able to establish the few quite general laws which hold good for production and exchange in general. [...] In order to complete this critique of bourgeois economics, an acquaintance with the capitalist form of production, exchange and distribution did not suffice. The forms which had preceded it or those which still exist alongside it in less developed countries, had also, at least in their main features, to be examined and compared.

As well known, Marx left us with a well-articulated synthesis of historical materialism written in his most mature phase, the famous *Preface* (Marx [1859] 1977). This work proposed a bottom-up scheme in which it is the material basis of society — the “forces

⁴ Also Ernst Mendel ([1967] 1971) maintains that only in the late 1850s Marx distinguished between labour and labour-force arriving at a complete theory of exploitation (by buying the labour force at its *reproduction* value the capitalist purchases its *use* value). Mendel as many Marxists sees in the labour theory of value an element of continuity between an early humanist/anthropological Marx who focused on labour alienation, and a late Marx political economist: “In the *Manuscripts* of 1844, the secret of this dehumanised society is revealed. Society is inhuman because labour is alienated. All the more easily Marx could trace society and social man back to labour, as Hegel had already characterised labour as the essence of human praxis. Now, studying the classical economists, Marx discovered that they make labour the ultimate source of value. The synthesis took place fulminantly, the two notions were combined [...]” (ibid, p. 29). This fortunate astral coincidence is however misleading since Marx's theory of alienation and commodity fetishism can well resist the abandonment of the labour theory of value (cf. Garegnani 2018). Andrea Ginzburg (1985, p. 89) alludes at the late 1850s as the epoch in which Marx detached himself from the labour theory of value due to its analytical flaws.

of production” and the related “relations of production” (or “property relations”) into which individuals enter in the “social production of their existence” — that acts as the basis for “the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness”. The “material productive forces of society” may however “come into conflict with the existing relations of production” and this leads “sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure”. We may synthesise this bottom-up view as follows:



Strong is the temptation of a deterministic causation from the material/technical base of a society (the forces of production) to institutions, as Marx famously suggested twelve years earlier in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Marx [1847] 1955, p. 49): “In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist”.⁵

Indeed, in another famous paragraph from vol. III of *Capital* Marx advanced a more nuanced view in which *forms of exploitation* are the “innermost secret” of any society, nonetheless this “does not prevent the same economic basis [...] from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances” (Marx [1894] 1974, pp. 791-792).⁶ Similar production

⁵ This rigid view, perhaps typical of some doctrinal Marxism, has been more recently revived by an influential book by Gerald Cohen ([1978] 2000). Only interested to pure abstract reasoning (“generic abstractions” as opposed to Marx’s “determined abstractions”), Cohen’s main reference point seems indeed to be Marx’s *Preface*. Anderson (1980, pp. 40, 65) has words of appreciation for Cohen’s systematization of historical materialism that he sees in continuity with Althusser and Balibar (to which we shall allude below). Be that as it may, Cohen is considered the founder of “analytical Marxism”, a group of presumed Marxists that aimed at reformulating (while actually upsetting) Marx’s thought along “modern analytical lines”. Analytical Marxism discards the labour theory of value neglecting the defensive role it played in Marx in order to explain labour exploitation (Garegnani 2018), ignores Sraffa’s rescue of the surplus approach, and endorses marginalism and methodological individualism (see Tarrit 2006; and Veneziani 2012 for a useful albeit too sympathetic review). Deprived of the surplus approach, historical materialism is emasculated. Consistently, Cohen eventually abandoned historical materialism in favour of liberalism (Tarrit 2015).

⁶ Marx’s passages are worth quoting in their integrity: “The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the

techniques, Marx seems to suggest, may find a variety of applications in different geographical contexts being thus associated to “infinite variations” of organizations of labour, forms of exploitation, and related political institutions. Consistently to Marx’s method of the “determined abstractions”, this would imply an historical analysis of single societies (on Marx’s generic and determined or specific abstractions see Ginzburg 2016, Maffeo 2000, and Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 12). Marx’s example of what he is referring to will be given shortly with regard to the various forms of extraction of a precapitalist ground-rent from peasant communities.

Three other indications from the mature Marx are in my opinion particularly relevant. The first is Marx’s distinction between capitalism, where exploitation takes the form of *market relations* between the exploiter and the exploited, and the precapitalist modes of production where it takes the form of *personal dependence*. The second indication refers to precapitalist *ground-rent* as a general form of precapitalist exploitation. The third concerns the relation between the analysis of capitalism, where the economic relations have a high degree of definitiveness, and that of the precapitalist economies. Let me briefly consider them.

To begin with, referring to feudalism Marx ([1867] 1974), pp. 81-82) writes that here “we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence here characterises the social relations of production just as much as it does the other spheres of life organised on the basis of that production. [...] No matter, then, what we may think of the parts played by the different classes of people themselves in this society, the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour, appear at all events as their own mutual personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour”.

Marx’s distinction has especially been taken on by Perry Anderson (1974b, p. 403) who argued that “*All* modes of production in class societies prior to capitalism extract surplus labour from the immediate producers by means of extra-economic coercion. Capitalism is the first mode of production in history in which the means whereby the surplus is pumped out of the direct producer is ‘purely’ economic [...]”.⁷ The Marxist historian John Haldon (1993, p. 93) reproaches Anderson for having gone too far in differentiating

owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers — a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labour and thereby its social productivity — which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. This does not prevent the same economic basis — the same from the standpoint of its main conditions — due to innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural environment, racial relations, external historical influences, etc. from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances”. (Marx [1894] 1974, pp. 791-792). These propositions are expressed in the context of Marx’s discussion of precapitalist ground-rent, but they are quite general.

⁷ Marx’s distinction predates Polanyi’s own between embedded (personal) and disembedded (market) social relations. Unfortunately, Polanyi does not regard embedded relations amenable to economic analysis while considering disembedded relations adequately analysed by marginalism. Instead, Marx considers both as amenable to economic analysis through the surplus approach, although with “a grain of salt”, as recalled below. Polanyi’s poor understanding of Marx’s economic analysis is noted, among others, by Mathias Vernengo 2019. See also Cesaratto (2023c).

“pre-capitalist modes [...] not by their mode of surplus appropriation, but rather by the variations in the form of their superstructures”. Chris Wickham, a distinguished Marxist mediaevalist, argues along similar lines (1985, p. 169): ““This means that there can be as many modes of production as there are distinct legal-political constitutions and forms of extra-economic sanction which follow from them’. Anderson is here abandoning Marxism — indeed, abandoning systematic economic analysis (I’ll leave it to the reader to decide which is worse)” (internal quotation from Hirst (1975, p. 462)). This criticism seems to go too far since Anderson looks faithful to Marx when he refers to “extra-economic coercion” as the *institutional* modality ruling the extraction of surplus labour. On similar lines Garegnani argues that “labour exploitation” in precapitalist economies is legitimized by the given “social order”, while both the specific forms of exploitation (say surplus labour or surplus product) and the social order should be studied in the specific historical circumstances (Garegnani 2018, pp. 640–641).⁸

Marx’s second indication provided in vol. III of *Capital* (chapter XLVII) concerns the precapitalist ground-rent as the general *economic* modality of labour exploitation in pre-market economies, an intermediate form of exploitation between slavery (where labour is entirely subjugated) and wage-labour (where labour is formally albeit deceptively free). In serfdom exploitation takes the shape of in-kind or money rent on the landlord’s land leased to peasants or — in case peasants own some land — of corvees on the demesne, the landlord’s own land (“labour rent [is] the simplest and most primitive form of rent”, Marx ([1894] 1974, p. 792). Rent takes the form of taxation on household production where it is the State that politically subjugates producers.⁹

Well known Marxist historians have followed Marx’s second indication. John Haldon trails Marx defining “pre-capitalist rent as the general form in pre-capitalist class society through which surplus labour was ‘pumped out of the producers’” (Haldon 1993, p. 80). Tax and land-rent are forms of precapitalist rent they “are, in fact, expressions of the political-juridical forms that surplus appropriation takes, not distinctions between different modes” given that they share the same basic form of “surplus appropriation based upon the existence of a peasant producing class” (ibid, p. 77), made up of owners or ten-

⁸ Also in capitalism, Garegnani argues, profits are extracted within a given social order. However, exploitation is hidden by the apparent fairness of free market exchanges. Duty of critical political economy is then to dispel such appearances lest “a foundation other than the mere fact of the existing social order could be shown to exist if modern marginalist theories were correct and the rate of profit were ultimately the price of a ‘scarce’ factor of production” (Garegnani 2018, p. 641; cf. Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico (2021 a/b). Also the literature of the varieties of capitalism vindicates the idea that a same form of exploitation may be accompanied by different institutional frameworks (see e.g. Morlin, Passos and Pariboni 2022). These frameworks are not neutral with regard to the precise forms taken by exploitation (say the organization of labour) and patterns of technological change.

⁹ Cf. e.g. (Marx [1894] 1974, pp. 790-791): “Should the direct producers not be confronted by a private landowner, but rather, as in Asia, under direct subordination to a state which stands over them as their landlord and simultaneously as sovereign, then rent and taxes coincide, or rather, there exists no tax which differs from this form of ground-rent. Under such circumstances, there need exist no stronger political or economic pressure than that common to all subjection to that state. The state is then the supreme lord”.

ants of the land. Haldon subsumes under the label “tributary state” practically all the pre-capitalist economies, including feudalism. Wickham (1984, pp.9–10; 1985, p. 171; 2008, p. 5; 2021), closely follows Haldon, albeit opting for “feudalism” as the general label of the mode of production prevailing in pre-capitalism. Interestingly, he regarded rent as historically more accepted than taxation (Wickham 2021, footnote 10), possibly because rent was based on property rights seen as more “natural” and less arbitrary than the “political rights of command and dominance, in return [...] for protection and justice” on which taxation was justified (ibid, p. 12). On similar lines Eric Wolf distinguished between (i) a kin-ordered mode of production based on *personal*, kinship ties, one in which classes do not exist and conflicts are limited to individuals (Rosenswig 2012, p.10); (ii) a tributary mode based on *political* relations broadly including Marx’s centralised “Asiatic model of production” and decentralised “feudal mode” (Wolf [1982] 2010, p. 81); and (iii) capitalism. Anderson, Haldon, Wickham, and Wolf consistently emphasize the distinction between different precapitalist formations, in which the social order is based on personal, political, or military and not market relations. Different institutional setups rest, however, over a similar prevalent material basis, as Haldon, Wickham and Wolf clarify: the extraction of a surplus from the peasant community in the form of ground-rent and taxation. Rosenswig (2017, pp. 148–150; 2012, p. 9) calls Wolf-Trigger Hypothesis (after Bruce Trigger, a well-known Marxist archaeologist) the idea that, particularly in the tributary mode, the relations of productions are projected in a cosmic realm so to induce a consensual, moral obedience to social rules presented as a part of a larger sacred order.

Being based on the arbitrariness of personal and political relations, precapitalist ground-rent must be distinguished from capitalist ground-rent determined under competitive conditions. Only in a fully-fledged capitalism a normal (average for Marx) rate of profit is established: “For this reason there can be no talk of rent in the modern sense, a rent consisting of a surplus over the average profit” as in modern conditions (Marx [1894] 1974, p. 783).

In this regard the third indication we get from Marx concerns the relation between the economic analyses of capitalism and that of precapitalist formations. As Marx ([1857-8] 1973, p. 105) pointed out in another famous paragraph:

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up [...]. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. [...] The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc. But not at all in the manner of those economists who smudge over all historical differences and see bourgeois relations in all forms of society. One can understand tribute, tithe, etc., if one is acquainted with ground rent. But one must not identify them. [...] Although it is true, therefore, that the categories of bourgeois economics possess a truth for all other forms of society, this is to be taken only with a grain of salt. They can contain them in a developed, or stunted, or caricatured form etc., but always with an essential difference.

If I may put Marx's argument in this way, exploitation is differently hidden in capitalism and pre-capitalism. In the former it is masked behind free market relations, and one should appreciate the enormous effort Marx made to reveal its existence behind the veil of the free exchange. In the latter, exploitation was concealed by personal relations, and in this regard the critical work done on exploitation in capitalism can facilitate the unveiling of the economic relations behind personal relationships in former societies, as long as one has the care not to mechanically apply relations valid only in one case to the other (see also Engels ([1886] 1946). While the latter error, Marx says, is most commonly committed by bourgeois economists — nowadays by NIE economists that see Walras latent in any formation (Cesaratto 2023d) — we note that Polanyi and Finley made the symmetrical error of demoting the economic foundations of ancient societies (Cesaratto 2023c).

3. History versus structure in Historical Materialism

The most notorious attempt to systematise the concept of mode of production was made by Althusser (1969). According to Anderson, Althusser “invented” the “distinction between mode of production and social formation” which “had little or no currency within Marxism prior to Althusser” (Anderson 1980, p. 67). The concept of social formation was especially developed by Étienne Balibar (Althusser and Balibar 1970). According to Anderson, Balibar's work permitted to overcome some rigidities of Marx's *Preface* by including more than one mode of production (with one dominant) under the umbrella of social formation, and by rejecting some strict determinism in the relation “base-superstructure” (see also Burns 2022).¹⁰ Wickham (1984, p. 8) also found the Althusserian approach useful pointing out, interestingly, that in a social formation “the dominant mode of production is that which has the closest links with the state; if another mode is coming to be dominant [...] it will tend to undermine it, and the state form will tend eventually to change accordingly [...] as a result of class struggle”. Similarly, the late Oxford historian de Ste. Croix argued that a dominant mode of production coincides with the main source of surplus for the élite.¹¹

¹⁰ According to Anderson (1980, p. 67), the term “social formation” (*Gesellschaftsformation*) would be taken from Marx's *Grundrisse* ([1857-1858] 1973, p. 106) (where it is actually translated in “forms of societies”). In the same well-known passage Marx also talks of a dominant “kind of production”: “In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others”. Burns (2022, p. 38) takes some freedom in translating “kind of production” in “mode of production” thus giving a stronger sense to the passage.

¹¹ In spite of the composite structure of the working population, for de Ste. Croix the main source of surplus in the Greco-Roman civilisation was slavery (de Ste Croix 1981, p. 39): “*How then, if not by slave labour, was the agricultural work done for the propertied class? How, otherwise, did that class [...] derive its surplus?*” (ibid, p. 172, original emphasis; cf. Cesaratto 2023a).

In contrast, the British historian Edward Thompson wrote in 1978 a famous book very critical of Althusser and Balibar. Perry Anderson (1980) is a book-long counter-critical review.

Thompson (1978) accuses Althusser of neglecting the historical dimension of Marxism in favour of abstract theory neglecting, in doing so, both history *and* the role of human and class agency and “experience” as it unfolds in history.¹² For Thompson, moreover, the error is already in Marx. In fact Althusser’s and Balibar’s “structural Marxism” would be a further degeneration of Marx’s economicism as (supposedly) he developed from the 1850s, thus absolutizing “the errors of Marx in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, seeking ‘to thrust historical materialism back into the prison of Political Economy’, by making Marxism into a theory of modes of production”, as Anderson (1980, p. 60) sums up. For Thompson, the later Marx lost sight of the “programme of a materialist reconstruction of the full history of humanity, as a unitary social process” with “human experience” as its genetic transmission mechanism (ibid, p. 61). Recalling the two mentioned horns of Marx’s and Engels’s thought (the Hegelian and the Ricardian to simplify), Thompson emphasises the subordinate classes’ historical search for identity and self-consciousness of the earlier Marx, in contrast to Althusser’s open rejection of this perspective in favour of the more materialist mature Marx. Anderson counters Thomson with the methodological necessity of Marx to focus upon “the domain that the theory of historical materialism had indicated as determinant in the final resort — namely economic production — and to devote all his passion and industry to exploring and reconstructing that, in the *one* historical epoch of capitalism” (ibid, p. 62, original emphasis). It “was this progressive theoretical discovery — Anderson continues — which finally made possible the full-scale exploration of a new historical object in *Capital*: the capitalist mode of production. Marx’s essential movement after 1848, in other words, was not ‘away’ from history, but deeper into it” (ibid, p. 63). Moreover, far from being a concession to bourgeois political economy, the concept of mode of production was a way to escape its ahistorical perspective, a way of embarking in a “new kind of history” (ibid, p. 64) as in Marx’s sketch of pre-capitalist societies. However, Marx “never systematically articulated” the concept (ibid, p. 65), and this is what Althusser and Balibar set out to do. Geoffrey de Ste. Croix also firmly retorted to Thompson that the *existence* of social classes must be separated from their own political experience and class-consciousness. Exploitation, he argues, is “the very kernel of what I refer as ‘the class struggle’ although, he importantly remarks, “my ‘class struggle’ may have virtually no political aspect at all” (de Ste. Croix 1981, p. 36; Anderson 1980, p. 40 for a similar criticism).

A similar conflict between more structural and more historicist-oriented account of historical materialism have been recently reposed by Jairus Banaji.¹³ The Indian historian has questioned the standard identification of mode of production with a *specific* mean of

¹² In a notorious book, also Hindess e Hirst (1975) proposed an abstract systematization of Marx theory of modes of production overtly divorced from historical analysis.

¹³ The general lines of Haldon’s, Wickham’s and Banaji’s contributions are summed up by Tedesco (2022).

surplus extraction and the related institutional structure despite its origin in Marx. Respectively in the *Capital* and *Grundrisse*, the latter would have ‘ascribed two distinct meanings to *Produktionsweise* [mode of production]’, namely (Banaji 2010, p. 50):

According to one of these, it was indistinguishable from the ‘labour-process [*Arbeitsprozess*]’, or what Lenin would sometimes call the ‘technical process of production’.

While in other passages (ibid, p. 51):

Marx made more general statements about the various stages of social development, [where] *Produktionsweise* figured in a broader and more specifically historical meaning.

Banaji firmly rejects any mechanical identification of a mode of production with a specific *form of exploitation*, most typically slavery, serfdom, wage-labour (ibid, p. 5). He argues that in authors like Maurice Dobb or Anderson the forms of exploitation would constitute the independent variable of historical materialism leading to a form of vulgar Marxism (ibid, p. 53):

to this formal abstractionism, modes of production were deducible, by a relation of ‘virtual identity’, from the given forms of exploitation of labour. *These forms of exploitation, the so-called ‘relations of production’, were the independent variables of the materialist conception of history.* This conception, quite unexceptionable as it appears became one of the most widespread and persistent illusions of vulgar Marxism (my italics).

On the opposite, Banaji (ibid, p. 5, original italics) would maintain “that relations of production include vastly more than the labour-process and the forms in which it is organised and controlled (the *immediate* process of production, as Marx called it)” so that the “historical forms of exploitation of labour (slavery, serfdom, wage-labour is the usual trinity in most discussions; Marx tended to add ‘Asiatic production’) cannot be assimilated to the actual deployment of labour [...]”. He concludes that “the *deployment of labour is correlated with modes of production in complex ways*” (ibid, p. 5, italics in the original).¹⁴ The analytical alternative advanced by Banaji is not clear, however, boiling down to the “emphasis on Marx’s historical — rather than formal — conception of the mode of production”, as a follower has put it (Rioux 2013, p. 95).¹⁵

¹⁴ Banaji’s polemic against the idea of prevalent forms of exploitation as the ultimate fingerprint to historical formations extends to the identification of capitalism with “free labour” and of previous economic forms with “unfree labour”. Mainly addressed to fellow Marxists, this criticism is also directed at Marx himself who “tends to argue as if the use of free labour is a logical presupposition of capital, when it is clear that individual capitalists exploit labour in a multiplicity of forms, and this not just when capital exists as manufacture and domestic industry” (Banaji 2010, p. 128). Standard examples are slave exploitation in capitalism, or symmetrically forms of capitalism in the ancient economies. In fact, Marx acknowledged these copresences regarding, however, to wage labour as the specific character of capitalism. For Marx, of course, wage labour is only *formally* free in capitalism.

¹⁵ See the 2013 issue of *Historical materialism* dedicated to Banaji (2010) (Campling 2013). An eminent English historian testifies: “For this reader, it is always a struggle to read Banaji [2010], and to assess what one reads” (Bernstein 2013, p. 327). Severe on Banaji (2010) is also Tom Brass (2012).

This stance is not, in some respects, far from what Marx argued in the important passage quoted above that nothing would prevent “the same economic basis [...] from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances” (Marx [1894] 1974, p. 792). Following Marx, Haldon, Wickham, and Wolf refer to forms of ground-rent and taxation extracted from peasants (who can be serfs or relatively free) as general forms of surplus extraction consistent with a variety of specific forms of exploitation and institutional setups to be studied historically. Anderson shares a similar view. In this sense we find Banaji’s and his followers’ accusation of mechanicism to many Marxist authors (and partly to Marx himself) as largely overstated.

Although with different perspectives, a thread common to Banaji and Thompson is the assimilation of historical materialism to “historiography tout court — the practice of writing history”, as Anderson (1980, p. 84) pointed out in the case of Thompson. I believe in a balanced view between theoretical schematisation, which can force helpful distinctions between economic formations, and immersion in the complexity of history. Moreover, I shall below adumbrate a complementarity between the more objective core of historical materialism envisaged by the most structuralism-oriented scholars, and Thompson’s sensitivity to the historical reconstruction of the formation of class experiences and agency. In fact I shall regard this approach as a possible reply to the Popperian accusation to historical materialism of organicism, functionalism and neglect of human agency.¹⁶

4. Marx in transition

Two Marxist debates took place on the transition between modes of production, that between feudalism and capitalism, the celebrated Dobb-Sweezy controversy (Dobb, Sweezy et al. 1963) in the 1950s followed by the Brenner controversy in the 1970s (Brenner 1977, 1978).¹⁷ Object of the controversy was whether the transition was triggered by

¹⁶ Contrary to Edward Thompson or Banaji, Althusser dismissed the earlier Marx’s “humanism” in favour of the mature Marx, immersed in political economy. None the less, making the Marxist landscape possibly more confusing to the uninitiated observer, Trigger (1993) and Rosenswig and Cunningham (2017) regard Althusser’s structuralism as the inspiring source of the “neo-Marxism”, part of the so-called “post-processual” literature in archaeology of the 1970s and 1980s. This literature is said to react to the objectivism of prevailing “processual” (or new) archaeology that in the 1960s and 1970s relied on material circumstances (say climatic or geographical) to explain social evolution (Costello 2016a). Processual is seen close to classical Marxism archaeology *à la* Childe (Trigger 1993, p. 186; Rosenswig 2012, p. 34; Saitta 1995, p. 557). On the opposite neo-processualists would value more human (subjective) agency. As Earle and Preucel (1987, p. 507) sum up: neo-Marxism “differs from other Marxist approaches in its emphasis on ideology and structure rather than economy” referring to ideological rather than to economic elements to explain social conflict (see also Shanks 2007, and Costello 2016b). Trigger (1993, p. 175) endorses the accusation that neo-Marxists substitute “vulgar materialism” with a “vulgar idealism” inspired by Althusser’s “tendency to accord greater importance to the social relation of production than to the forces of production” (ibid).

¹⁷ The so called “other transition”, that between the ancient economies and feudalism has been studied by Anderson (1974a) and Wickham (1984, 2005).

endogenous or exogenous factors, respectively the Dobb's and the Paul Sweezy's sides. Endogenous factors refer to tensions in the prevailing relations of production, say between peasants and landlords, ending up, according to the different theories, in the constituency of a free labour force necessary to fully-fledged capitalism, or in the transformation of some peasants or landlords into agrarian capitalists. External triggers to capitalist development would mainly consist in development of trade. After the importance Adam Smith attached to the extent of markets for economic development, Brenner (1977) extends the label of neo-Smithian from Sweezy to Immanuel Wallerstein and André Gunder Frank which would posit *general* market mechanism of transition instead of social mechanisms. Endorsing this view, also Banaji focuses on "the concept of commercial capitalism as a key category for investigating the formation of the modern global economy" where this notion "is used to describe a profit-driven economic system whereby merchants employ their capital not only to circulate commodities but also to gain direct control over production and thus subordinate it to their interests" (Tedesco 2023, p. n/a). As a result, "Banaji's emphasis on merchant control over production is a frontal attack on the traditional Marxist dichotomy between the world of commerce (the 'sphere of circulation') and that of production — a dichotomy that led Marxist economists and historians such as Maurice Dobb to discount the very idea of commercial capitalism as a contradiction in terms" (ibid).

While assessing the historical intricacies of these debates does not fall within the scope of this paper, it may be pointed out that Marx himself leaned towards the first side while not denying the importance of the second. More specifically, he was critical of the Smithian thesis of a primitive capital accumulation as the premise to capitalist development. In this view primitive accumulation is not the result of the advent of a capitalistic mode of production, but merit of an early "frugal elite" (Marx [1867] 1974, p. 667). For Marx, instead, the dissolution of the feudal mode of production, and in particular the creation of a 'free' proletariat, no longer tied to the land, would be the precondition for capitalism, i.e. for the transformation of pre-existing wealth into capital (e.g. ibid, pp. 668-670). Moreover, Marx denied a full capitalist nature to merchant capital (cf. Cesaratto 2023b for a longer discussion).

In this regard, Wickham underlines Marx's irresoluteness between the primacy the *Preface* gave to the forces of production (production techniques) as the agent of change, and the emphasis in volume I of *Capital* on the relation of production (the class struggle) "in which transformations in the property rights and in the exploitation of peasants and artisans in fourteenth- to eighteenth-century England, their separation from the means of production, clearly predate changes in the labour process and in technical advance characteristic of the capitalist mode, and so were not caused by these changes" (Wickham 2008, p. 6; see also Stedman Jones 2007, p. 145). This is perhaps the main puzzle Marx left to us: from where does the change in modes of production originate, from tensions in

production relations or from a change in the forces of production?¹⁸ In another important paragraph in the *Grundrisse* Marx ([1857-1858] 1973 p. 96) adumbrates an inverse relation, so to speak, between institutional change and forces of production:

conquering people divides the land among the conquerors, thus imposes a certain distribution and form of property in land, and thus determines production. Or it enslaves the conquered and so makes slave labour the foundation of production. Or a people rise in revolution and smashes the great landed estates into small parcels, and hence, by this new distribution, gives production a new character. Or a system of laws assigns property in land to certain families in perpetuity, or distributes labour [as] a hereditary privilege and thus confines it within certain castes. In all these cases, and they are all historical, it seems that distribution is not structured and determined by production, but rather the opposite, production by distribution.

This view is consistent with Marx's "infinite" combinations of institutional and exploitation forms and also with the method of the "determined abstractions" that we noted in the former sections. The "conquest view" also anticipates that of the distinguished anthropologist Robert Carneiro (1988).

An argument in favour of the neo-Smithians has been put forward in an unpublished paper (Pinkusfeld, Crespo, Mazat 2022). On the one hand these authors endorse the Dobb-Brenner's stance that "the analysis of elements that are related directly to the process of production" are those "that determine the very nature of capitalism" (page numbers not available). However, they argue that "the extensive emphasis on the relations of production as if these could explain the whole movement of the economy, seems to us an unnecessary limited understanding of the concept of mode of production", too focused on the supply side, so to speak. The modern surplus approach would indeed be completed by the incorporation of the principle of "effective demand principle that along with the changes in productive processes and class relations/struggle explain the concrete historical trajectories of different countries".¹⁹

Of the opposite opinion is the recent paper by Knafo and Teschke (2020) which accuses Brenner of abandoning his initial historicism, while vehemently claiming Marxism as the study of human agency.²⁰ They reject historical explanations based on the functionalist (or structuralist) "logic of capital" with all privileges accorded to the production sphere, in favour of an agency-based "historicist tradition [...] more directly inspired by E.P.

¹⁸ In the first volume of *Capital*, the gathering of a large number of workers in manufacturing using technologies similar to that of handicrafts (only more expanded) and later adopting a more pronounced division of labour are placed by Marx at the beginning of capitalist development, while the invention of machinery took place only later (Marx [1867] 1974, e.g. pp. 339-347).

¹⁹ Source of inspiration of this classical-Keynesian view is Garegnani (1978-1979). Considerations on the demand side in ancient economies are not unknown in the literature, although sporadic, e.g. by the Cambridge historians Hopkins (1980) and Crawford ([1970] 1982) on the Roman economy, and Wickham 2007, p. 47 for the middle age (cf. section 5 of Cesaratto 2023a).

²⁰ See the symposium on this paper in *Historical Materialism* 29(3), 2021.

Thompson” (ibid, p. 31). We will return in the next section to the accusations of functionalism levelled at traditional Marxism, which are not entirely unjustified.²¹ It should, however, be emphasised here that in approaches such as that of Knafo and Teschke all traces of the theory of surplus seem irretrievably lost. Saitta (1994, p. 204) properly notes in this regard that from a “Marxist perspective [...] the most important problem with agency approaches in archaeology is their relative neglect of the surplus labour process in social life and the differential role of individuals and groups within it”.

To sum up, an echo of the debate between structuralists and historicists can also be heard regarding the transition controversies, with the former placing more emphasis on economic factors such as technical progress and the expansion of markets, and the latter on socio-historical factors. Relatedly, the question of the relationship between structure and agency in Marxism remains also open. Let us introduce it.

5. Agency and historical materialism

Since Karl Popper’s (1957) reproach of historicism and holistic (or organic) theories, Marxism has been criticised for not founding its assertions on individual choices and human agency (“methodological individualism is really about agency”, Ylikoski 2017, p. 16). The debate is wide and it found new fuel after Douglass North’s (1981) confrontation with Marx (Cesaratto 2023d), and John Elster’s (1985) inspiring texts of analytical Marxism — aka micro-founded Marxism — opposed to what analytical “Marxists” offensively named bull-shit Marxism. As previously seen, also the Marxist debate between structuralists and historicists deeply involved the role of human agency versus structure in history.²²

Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick (1988) did not find, for instance, major substantial differences between North’s NIE and Marx’s historical materialism but found many on the methodological side. More specifically, while NIE would micro-found social behaviours in individual choices, Marx’s and Marxism would suffer from *functionalism* for explaining macro-behaviours, including institutions or ideologies, as functional to the working of the whole.²³ In this sense functionalism is associated to holistic or organicist

²¹ As noted in footnote 16, also in archaeology new tendencies have developed from the 1980s criticising the presumed absence of agency in the (then) mainstream materialist “processual archaeology”.

²² I have furtherly developed the theme of agency versus structure in Cesaratto (2023e).

²³ A very apt example of functionalism, raised by Elster (1982), concerns Michal Kalecki’s idea of unemployment as a tool used by capitalists and governments to keep workers’ strength at bay (the criticism goes indirectly back to Marx’s industrial reserve army). “As any serious historian can imagine — Elster (ibid, pp. 461-462) argues — a mass of detailed evidence is required to make an intentional explanation credible — hence the strong temptation to take the functional short cut. [...] The mechanism need not be intentional design — but some mechanism must be provided if the explanation is to be taken seriously”. Whether the reaction of capitalists to worker empowerment in the wake of full employment takes the form of an “investment strike”, or whether it takes the form of fiscal and monetary policies designed to increase unemployment, I find it legitimate to demand that the mechanisms through which these decisions are taken be specified, without relying on the “logic of capital”.

theories (see also Lowenberg 1990). Since, after all, macro-outcomes are the result of granular micro-decisions and choices, what it is said to be missing here is a micro-foundation of macro-outcomes explaining the latter as the result of individual behaviour and choices: “since there are no intentional actors whose actions are instrumental in bringing about observed institutions, it is not clear how those institutions are actually created” (Lowenberg 1990, p. 631). In other words “the choice processes that actually serve to transform individual value-maximization into collective goods must be explained or modelled explicitly because these processes are by no means self-evident” (ibid, p. 632). The Popperian criticism of Marx has been renewed by the particularly bitter criticism moved in the 1980s by analytical Marxists according to whom a “particularly virulent form of functionalism is ‘objective teleology’, in which a purpose is postulated without a purposive actor. Elster draws a grammatical analogy to a ‘predicate without a subject’” (Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick 1988, p. 308; Lowenberg 1990, p. 631). Note that this criticism is not levelled at the static functionality of an existing institution (e.g. that institution A serves the interests of social groups B and C), but to the lack of “‘invisible hand’ explanations”, that is “casual-genetic stories about how individual actions unintentionally lead [...] to the emergence of some institutional structure”, while “functionalist explanations [...] focus not on the *process* through which the structure emerges but on the processes that *maintain* the structure once established” (Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick 1988, p. 312, italics in the original).

Postponing some criticism, these objections may be accepted as legitimate complaints that explanations of social institutions (or of collective action to change them) must be, at least in principle, validated by and consistent with the granular decisions of the agents involved (Ylikoski 2017, p. 12-13).²⁴ The risk is otherwise to support apodictic theses, based on the functionality of each societal aspect relatively to another in an organic vision that, however, “relate macrostates directly to macrostates without supplying a mechanism to show how the one brings about the other” (Lowenberg 1990, p. 631; Heijdra and Lowerberg 1991, p. 378). Such a holistic “grand theories” would possibly be little amenable to empirical scrutiny, again a well known Popperian criticism to Marxism.²⁵

²⁴ I do not regard the assumption of rational actors as an approximation of individuals striving “to make themselves as well off as possible” (Lowenberg 1990, p. 621) as a demarcation between marginalist supporters of NIE, analytical Marxists and Sraffian followers of the surplus approach. Unfortunately, a number of post Keynesian economists put more emphasis on the limits of rational choices, a dead end in my opinion (since these limits are widely acknowledged). On this post Keynesian stance see e.g. Lavoie (2022, pp. 85-100).

²⁵ A good summary of these critical arguments is by Dorman (1991, p. 365): “Greater explanatory power stems from the ability of methodological individualism to specify exactly how institutions are created or altered. If it is accepted that individuals act in their rational self-interest, and if it can be shown that such behavior in a given situation will give rise to particular institutions, then those institutions can be said to be explained. Functionalist arguments, by contrast, implicitly assume that individuals always act so as to bring about a collective end which is ‘functional’ - hardly a defensible proposition. The superior scientific status of methodological individualism results from its greater consonance with the Popperian falsifiability criterion, whose validity is attested by most economists [...]. The claim that rational individuals did or would establish certain institutions can be discontinued; presumably functionalist claims are not susceptible to such tests”.

The standard counter-objection is that, as it is often conceded, micro-decisions are not taken in a vacuum, but conditioned by the historical (material, ideological and cultural) circumstances, so a context should be at least taken at the same time into account.²⁶ In this regard Lowenberg (1990, p. 621) concedes that:

The method of neoclassical economics is, in fact, a variant of what Karl Popper calls “situation analysis”— individuals’ actions are dictated by the logic of a situation in which they find themselves, assuming that they will use only those actions that are most appropriate to their situation. [...] Langlois [...] points out that the advantage of situational analysis is that it renders unnecessary a detailed psychologistic study of the internal mechanisms of human decision making. A knowledge of the agent’s environment (including institutions) serves as a substitute for a detailed knowledge of his or her psychology.²⁷

But ‘situation analysis’ is an admission that in many cases individuals have a limited or false conscience of themselves (as the often-demonized Hegel would have said), that many free choices are just nominally so, and that, anyway, it is the context that explains the individual behaviour (isn’t Marketing a scientific discipline on how to invent needs and orient choices? And aren’t political choices conditioned by propaganda tickling the most brutal instincts?).²⁸

As to the origin of institutions, Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick (1988, pp. 298-299) specify, interestingly, that they “arise as a result of human action but not from human design”, a proposition they derive from the “British moral Philosophers of the eighteenth century (Hume, Tucker, Ferguson and Adam Smith)”. The proposition refers to the unintended consequences of the Smithian invisible hand in which the micro greedy production choices of individuals lead to some social benefits.²⁹

²⁶ Methodological individualism “presumes the ontological priority of the atomistic individual, who is a naturally occurring, discrete unit (the biological organism). [...] It further presumes that the source of the individual’s knowledge as well as its capacity to act rationally reside in the individual itself” (Patterson 2005, p. 374), the latter being an invertebrate, a-historical entity. As recalled above, also in marginal theory individuals decide on the basis of a known set of individual endowments of labour and capital, given their exogenous preferences, so one may only speak of conditioned choices. Indeed, to envisage a situation in which individuals *deliberately* choose what kind of society they would like to live in John Rawls uses a well-known thought experiment called the “original position” (in which, actually, the individual history, culture and, above all, personal interests are deleted).

²⁷ See also Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick 1988, pp. 297-298.

²⁸ Less controversial is the question of choices on the production side. Part of the capital theory controversy concerned, for instance, the choice of techniques based on cost-minimization firms’ behaviour, an assumption both “Cambridges” fully acknowledged. Nor Marx objected to the role of the invisible hand in guiding production choices, to the point of defining natural prices the “guiding star” of capitalists (Marx [1867] 1974, p. 163 (1)) — although he would object to the welfare outcomes of unleashed capitalism. It is also false that Marx did not recognise the progressive nature of capitalism: Schumpeter’s elegy of entrepreneurial capitalism clearly evokes Marx’s and Engels’s elegy of capitalism in *The Manifesto*. A number of other accusations to Marxism moved by analytical Marxists and reported by Heijdra et al. (1988, pp. 310) are also groundless, to be mild.

²⁹ Adam Smith (and later Marx) interposed many caveats on these social benefits. Smith is for instance crystal clear on the disadvantaged position workers (identified as a social group) have in the labour market vis-à-vis “masters” (the owners of capital, another social group). On the notion of labour alienation in Smith, prescient of that by Marx, see the classic paper by Nathan Rosenberg (1965). The often non-welfare

Heijdra et al (1988) and Lowenberg (1990) thus promote Smith's invisible hand, originally a label for the interplay of natural and market prices in guiding producers' decisions, from a simple organizing device of division of labour to a mechanism that generates institutions in which "a catallaxy of self-interested individuals, out of whose rational but selfish actions emerge rules or institutions that provide the foundations for a social spontaneous order" (Heijdra et al 1988, p. 312; Lowenberg 1990, p. 623, 635).

We are in a vicious circle, however, in which "unintended" individual choices explain institutions that in turn affect individual choices as in Popper's "situational analysis", so that we have explained nothing of the specific societal forms under examination. In spite of the relevance that NIE wants to assign to human agency, here history is a roulette-led process whose red thread we cannot catch. (The same accusation of "indeterminacy" is moved elsewhere to Douglass North theory of institutions and history, Krul 2016; Cesaratto 2023d).³⁰

Notably, the "British moral Philosophers" quoted approvingly by Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick (1988) regarded institutions as historically associated to the material stages humans went through in producing their subsistence and eventual surplus (Meek 1976). Referring again to this tradition, the above quoted statement that "institutions arise as a result of human action but not from human design" Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick 1988, pp. 298) evokes Marx's ([1852] 1937 chapter 1, pp. n/a) famous sentence that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past". What makes the difference between the two statements is Marx's reference, consistent with the tradition of "British Philosophers" alluded by Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick, to the material history of the human relations built around the production and distribution of the social surplus in different economic stages. This approach does not exclude some Darwinian selection process among competing socio-economic organizations and individual agency, quite the opposite. Indeed, it does not leave the invisible hand of history in a vacuum, but anchors it to a material basis amenable to scientific scrutiny.

maximising outcomes of the individual maximizing behaviour would be recognised by public choice theories (Lowenberg 1990, pp.623-627; Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick 1988, p. 306).

³⁰ Dealing with NIE and Douglass North, Matthijs Krul (2016, p. 18) observes that the "chain of argumentation in the most developed stage of the [NIE] runs from cognitive limitations, inherited as evolutionary baggage, to the formation of belief systems and ideologies and the need for social order, and these jointly give rise to respectively informal and formal institutions (laws and norms), which finally define the 'rules of the game' of self-interested pursuit of advantage in markets or substituting economic arrangements". However, he concludes, there is a "problem of indeterminacy in NIE theory" (ibid). More specifically, he argues that "if everything depends in an indeterminate way on institutions, then the institution concept does no explanatory work. That this may be a problem is already indicated by the vagueness of the popular phrase 'institutions matter', because it does not say how they matter or for what purpose" (ibid p. 21).

6. Engels' torments

Following in the footsteps of Marx, in very important passages of *Ludwig Feuerbach*, Friedrich Engels entered the patchwork of problems that suspend human history between agency and structure. Marx's friend has no doubt on the prominence of deeper objective forces over individual wills (Engels [1886] 1946, part IV):

In the history of society, on the contrary, the actors are all endowed with consciousness, are men acting with deliberation or passion, working towards definite goals; nothing happens without a conscious purpose, without an intended aim. But this distinction, important as it is for historical investigation, particularly of single epochs and events, cannot alter the fact that the course of history is governed by inner general laws. For here, also, on the whole, in spite of the consciously desired aims of all individuals, accident apparently reigns on the surface. [...] But where on the surface accident holds sway, there actually it is always governed by inner, hidden laws, and it is only a matter of discovering these laws. Men make their own history, whatever its outcome may be, in that each person follows his own consciously desired end, and it is precisely the resultant of these many wills operating in different directions, and of their manifold effects upon the outer world, that constitutes history. Thus it is also a question of what the many individuals desire. [...] The further question arises: What driving forces in turn stand behind these motives? What are the historical forces which transform themselves into these motives in the brains of the actors?

As in Greek mythology (in the *Iliad* or the Oedipus myth, for example), according to Engels the human destiny is wholly determined by superior forces, albeit through individual and collective torment.³¹ As Thompson (1978, p. 280) notes, Engels is thus far from solving the puzzle, but the questions he poses are nonetheless provoking — as when he asks himself: “What are the historical forces which transform themselves into these motives in the brains of the actors?” (see also Anderson 1980, p. 50). A question that could be thus rephrased: how to develop a vision in which agents are not just passive vehicles of higher forces and can instead be active vehicles of those forces? Should we

³¹ Engels' “parallelogram letter” is often also quoted in this context which just confirms Engels subordinate view of human agency: ” We make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions. [...] history is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills, of which each in turn has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life. Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant — the historical event. *This may again itself be viewed as the product of a power which works as a whole unconsciously and without volition.* For what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed. Thus history has proceeded hitherto in the manner of a natural process and is essentially subject to the same laws of motion. But from the fact that the wills of individuals — each of whom desires what he is impelled to by his physical constitution and external, in the last resort economic, circumstances (either his own personal circumstances or those of society in general) — do not attain what they want, but are merged into an aggregate mean, a common resultant, it must not be concluded that they are equal to zero. On the contrary, each contributes to the resultant and is to this extent included in it” (Engels [1890] 1972, emphasis added). To sum up, for Engels history is not a linear combination of agency-vectors, but the agency-vectors are generated in order to produce the predestined history-vector. In this way he fails to produce an internal dialectic between different structure and agency. Of course, this issue brings us back to the everlasting problem of determinism versus free will.

not, for example, think of the intimate forces of greed, power and wealth as the elements that transforms agency into structure (particularly into surplus extraction and related institutions) and structure into agency? ³²

An interesting “emendation” to Engels, as Anderson (1980, p. 50) calls it, has been advanced by Thompson (1978, p. 87), that is to subordinate “individual wills” to “class experience”. Through the latter, the economic forces would assert themselves in history confirming that, at the same time, “‘we make our history’ and ‘history makes itself’” (ibid).³³ Showing a sensitivity similar to that of Engels or Thompson, in the manuscripts Sraffa talks of “class mind”. In studying prices and distribution it “will be thought that the important part is the analytical and constructive”, he says; in this way, however, the “significance of the historical side will be missed. And yet, this is the truly important, that which gives us a real insight into the mystery of human mind and understanding, into the deep unknown relations of individuals between themselves and between the individual and society (the social, or rather the class mind)” (quoted by Le Donne 2022, p. 1120).³⁴

I share, on the one hand, many of Anderson's counter-objections to Thompson's critique of structuralism, reiterating the need to approach historical analysis through Marx's method of determinate abstractions, i.e. armed with a theory to be dialectically refined in historical analysis. On the other hand, I support the idea of the reconstruction of individual and collective subjectivities through historical analysis in an interdisciplinary perspective — which includes archaeology and anthropology as well as socio-biology. This is, in my view, the response that the classical-Marxist approach must provide to the criticisms of functionalism and neglect of agency.

On the opposite, starting from individual choices and motivations would be erroneous. If the challenge is of completing historical materialism with the historical reconstruction of individual or, better still, class choices, well I do not see much problem to welcome this invitation whenever it is useful.

There are perhaps other material dimensions at the bottom of the interest in power and wealth (and of agency “itself”). For instance, Wisman (2023) suggests the deeper (genetic) force of sexual competition: ‘Exploitation exists because the struggle over inequality has been the underlying force driving human history [...]. Humans are biologically driven to seek advantage in their quest for status which in turn enhances their potential for reproduction, for sending their unique genes into the future. As Charles Darwin made clear, sexual selection through reproductive competition underlies all competition in all species’ (ibid, p. 201). ‘Whereas natural selection occurs as a species undergoes mutations that better enable it to fit the opportunities and challenges of its environment’ — the author continues — ‘sexual selection occurs in response to how members of the species

³² These sort of aspirations remind of those who the founders of political realism, Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes, posed at the basis of their theories.

³³ Thompson's suggestion is not diminished by Anderson's complaint that, elsewhere, Thompson redefines classes so as to make them appear as a sum of individuals (Anderson 1980, pp. 50-51).

³⁴ These passages were written in 1927, while on the way to break with Marshall's heritage and proceed into the direction of the recovery of the classical surplus approach.

relate to each other. Sexual selection is a form of natural selection that works through mating success as opposed to physical survival.’ (ibid, pp. 202-203). Sexual selection, the author specifies, does not always coincide with the most advantageous natural fitness, so ‘Evolution will favor a balance or equilibrium that coevolves between the opposing forces’ (ibid, p. 203). An interesting case in point is that sexual fitness selection in favour of the most individualistic subjects could be to the disadvantage of the group as a whole. In this case a group-wide selection — selection between groups as opposed to selection within groups — would operate in favour of “ultrasocial” groups composed of more co-operative individuals (Wilson and Wilson 2008; Wilson and Gowdy 2015). The interest of Marx and Engels in Darwin is well known.³⁵

7. Classes and free-riding

According to the surplus approach individuals are admittedly part of social classes defined by their role in the production sphere.³⁶ Classes do not indeed exist in primitive sharing societies, where only social groups are present, defined by gender, age, prestige etc. Given the same material basis (in some general sense), class relations can take the infinite variable institutional forms alluded by Marx, distinguished in particular by the forms of property of the means of production (land and instruments).

This “class-approach” is often criticised because free riding would undermine class cohesion (Heijdra, Lowerberg and Mallick 1988, p. 310, North 1981, p. 45-54 and *passim*). This is a very weak criticism since: (i) social classes are defined by the objective position in the production sphere, independently of subjective awareness or choices, as argued by de Ste. Croix (1981); moreover, objective material circumstances limit social mobility (e.g. through slaves’ manumission, or education opportunities); (ii) participation in class activities and self-defence (instead of free riding) is often explicitly perceived as rational (i.e. advantageous); finally (iii) although free-riding (e.g. strikebreaking) may be occasionally rewarding, it may be chastised by classmates (cf. Taylor 1986, p. 7).

In addition, admittedly, ideologies tie individuals around common purposes (North 1981, p. 49; Lowenberg 1990, p. 627). In Marx, as North (1981, p. 51) acknowledges,

³⁵ In a letter dated 1875 Engels ([1875] 1936) put forward a less pessimist view of the human destiny compared to natural competition, pointing out that the “essential difference between human and animal society is that animals are at most *gatherers* whilst men are *producers*. This single but cardinal distinction alone makes it impossible simply to transfer the laws of animal societies to human societies”. As a result, at “a certain stage, therefore, human production reaches a level where not only essential necessities but also luxuries are produced, even if, for the time being, they are only produced for a minority. Hence the struggle for existence — if we allow this category as valid here for a moment — transforms itself into a struggle for enjoyments, a struggle no longer for the mere means of *existence* but for the means of *development*, *socially produced* means of development, and at this stage the categories of the animal kingdom are no longer applicable”. In this “cultural” transformation, sexuality might become less important in human choices.

³⁶ As noted in footnote 26, after all this is also true in neoclassical theory. This theory is however largely uninterested in explaining the origin of the distribution of initial endowments of material and immaterial resources.

class consciousness depends “upon one’s position in the productive process”. Similarly Lowenberg presumes common interests in the private sector: “to name but a few — [to] create benefits for organized industrial or labor interests” (Lowenberg 1990, p. 626); or in the state sector where “rent-seeking schools of public choice” and Marxists à la Nicos Poulantzas would share the idea of the control of the State resources as an arena of conflicting interests of labour and capital or other interest groups and lobbies (Lowenberg 1988, p. 635).³⁷ An idea of social conflict, therefore, also appears in the mainstream approach, albeit surreptitiously, in the form of coalitions of individuals aimed at exploiting positions of control that generate a rent. The yearning of history for the socialism of doctrinaire Marxism is replaced here by the finalism that sees in the free market the end of rent positions and conflict; the end of history in fact. Whereas, however, in the marginalist-NIE approach coalitions aimed at exploiting rent positions are an aberration in the face of history’s striving for a liberal, competitive society, exploitation is for the surplus approach a constant in every economic formation (including liberal, free market society), albeit in different institutional forms. This in a way vindicates Marx and Engels’ view of history as the history of class struggle (more accurately, of exploitation between classes). Needless to say that other dimensions must complete this view: gender and race are the most obvious.

Once the existence of an objective distributive conflict over the extraction and destination of the social surplus is acknowledged³⁸, and it is accepted that institutions (formal and informal) regulate this conflict by distributing political and legal power, we find it legitimate to complete the narrative with individual or class decision making, provided that choices are contextualised in the *historical stratification of former choices* crystallized in class relations, institutions, culture and ideologies. The historical context relativizes individual choices that can be reduced to zero (what choices can a slave ever make, but there is no need to resort to such an extreme example). Nor it is there a choice (or a market) for institutions, as NIE sometimes suppose as if “feudal lords and serfs initially made a calculation on whether to ‘choose’ serfdom over a labour market and feudalism over capitalism” (Ankarloo 2002, p. 20).

History is by definition a sequence, and we may ideally want to go back to the origin of the stratification of choices. It is not incidental that the exploration of the early human choices and ingenuity in the given material context is so important and gives rise to lively debates, the last over Graeber and Wingrow (2021). Earlier choices have indeed conditioning, often irreversible consequences over next generations. These effects are crystallized in production modes, class relations and correlated institutions, culture and ideologies that constitute the background of subsequent choices (a “second nature”), vindicating Marx’s sentence about the historical context of human agency. Biology suggests that while DNA is the architecture of human mind, practical human behaviour depends as well on culture (Viglietti 2018, p. 221). The careful observation of the historical stratification

³⁷ On the role of the State in the surplus approach following these lines see Cesaratto (2007).

³⁸ This requires of course that the marginalist view of distribution under competitive conditions as socially optimal is rejected because of its analytical flaws.

in institutions of generations of granular conditioned choices, taken in each epoch on the basis of the prevailing social and material circumstances, is the micro-foundation of the surplus approach.³⁹

8. Conclusions

This paper has argued that the classical surplus theory is naturally associated with institutional and historical analysis by regarding institutions as regulating the extraction and distribution of the social surplus and the related social conflict (Ogilvie 2007 for a similar view).

In this regard we presented a sample of the Marxist debates on historical materialism. These have been vast and divisive and, lamentably, often understandable only to the initiated. Simplifying, controversies have focused on the concept of modes of production and on their laws of change determining the transition from one mode to another.

Based on the teachings of Marx and the most clear-cut Marxist historians and archaeologists, the organisational forms of production and the eventual extraction of the surplus can be reduced to three: primitive, based on personal relations and with limited or no exploitation; ground-rent, based on semi-independent peasants exploitation through political relations; capitalistic, based on “free” labour exploitation. There is no discontinuity between one form and the other, but co-presence, with one form dominating. Slavery is also always present, a form of production never strictly dominant even in ancient economies (compared for instance to household production), but from which élites may have mainly derived their income in certain historical periods (Vlassopoulos 2015; Cesaratto 2023a). Given production techniques, forms of exploitation and associated institutions can have different manifestations (Marx's 'infinite variations') on the basis of other material, geographical and historical circumstances. The historical sedimentation in institutions and ideologies constitutes the context of individual choices that are conditioned and limited in material and mental terms by the given material and cultural circumstances. The objective relations of exploitation encourage to look at classes as the most immediate social context of behaviour.

Teleological aspects should be expunged from historical materialism (Runciman 2007, p.7).⁴⁰ Once this is done, historical materialism remains a reasonable, fact-based method

³⁹ Although we feel distant from “culturalism” (another current of “post-processual archaeology”), which tries “to capture ‘the native’s point of view’ as much as possible” (Viglietti 2018, pp. 226), we also appreciate “native conceptualization, experience, and cosmology” as an essential part of materialist interpretation of human motivations and conscience (albeit not taken at their face value).

⁴⁰ Eric Wolf ([1982] 2010, p. xxi) pointed out that in “Marx's case, especially, one should draw a line between the analyst and the prophet. Many of his analyses still speak to us, but his vision of how a new class ‘in itself’ might come to acquire a consciousness ‘for itself’ lacked sociological realism even in his own time”. Marx the prophet may be connected to what Wolf calls “Promethean Marxism” which “embodied the hope for human liberation from economic and political exploitation and celebrated the revolutionary will as opening the way to that desired future”. Above, I recalled De Ste. Croix (1981) on the irrelevance of self-consciousness to define social classes and exploitation.

in the study of history, centred on the study of the modes of extracting and distributing the social surplus and of the relative institutional regulation (Wickham 2007, p. 35; Hal-don 1993, p. 98; Liverani 2011, p. 17). As Rosenswig and Cunningham (2017, p. 12) put it: “mode(s) of production provide a framework to explore the organization of surplus production and appropriation and how this is employed to maintain the social and political status quo of existing kin and/ or class relations. As an inclusive framework, it is ideally suited for making cross-cultural and cross-temporal comparisons”.

What is, however, surprisingly deficient in the Marxist debate is a full valorisation of surplus theory as the material core of historical materialism.⁴¹ In a sense the latter is a consequence of surplus theory, and the study of historical social order (institutions) and surplus extraction are inseparable. In this regard, we suggest abandoning the two-levels distinction between structure and superstructure, since surplus extraction and the political institutions that rule this extraction are codetermined (Cesaratto 2023c). The study of Marx’s “innermost secret” is indistinguishable from the study of the institutions that regulate and justify it.

This does not concede anything to Polanyi’s and Finley’s view of economics as of minor importance in precapitalist economies. Quite the opposite, the concept of surplus is the economic core of institutional and historical analyses. While Marx was the first to introduce the distinction between market-based and personal/politically-based relation of production, he also remarked the necessity of studying the related inner or dominant forms of exploitation, in view of a variety of possible practical manifestations depending on a number of other circumstances. The extraction of ground-rent is an example of a dominant inner exploitation nexus associated to a variety of institutional forms. Marx’s method of the determined abstractions provide a firm basis to economic history research.

In a similar vein, archaeologist Dean Saitta (1994, p. 201) finds the missing aspect of neo-Marxist tendencies in the lack of a proper consideration of the “economic process of appropriating and distributing social surplus labor” by referring generically to “power” in social relations. As Rosenswig and Cunningham (2017, p. 2) commented: how “this surplus labor is organized and ‘spent’ provides the engine for social developments”. Taking this into account, cultural studies on the subjectivity of social classes and class-membership might reveal one way to meet the Popperian criticism of mechanical functionalism and lack of agency moved to organic approaches in social sciences, as future research might prove. In my external and possibly naive view, the historicist and structuralist souls of Marxism should be reconciled.

In this sense the surplus approach nails historical materialism on a solid base in so far as political and cultural institutions preside its production and distribution in each formation, although little of systematic we may still say (or will we ever be able to say) about

⁴¹ For instance, the archaeologist Giardina (2007, p. 16) confounds modern economics with marginalism arguing that “although Marxism finds useful application in economic and social history, it does not allow the historian to work within the logic of modern economic science”. Also Wickham (2007, p. 45) confounds “classical economics” with marginalism. Some Marxists like Robert Brenner were close to neoclassical-oriented “analytical Marxism” (see footnote 5 above and *passim*).

the interaction between the material and the institutional sides in determining historical change. Perhaps we should not draw a net bound between the material (production techniques) and the immaterial (institutions) sides of a social formation, looking at economic change as the result of their complicated co-evolution and interaction.

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