

CHAPTER FIVE

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND STRUCTURISM

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Historical materialism is one of the oldest and most important attempts or series of attempts to provide a general explanatory theory and/or methodology for the domain of structural history. As I argued in Chapter Two when outlining the history of structural history writing, Marx and Engels were well ahead of their time, and of many of their subsequent interpreters and defenders, in developing a methodological approach to structural history that contains versions of realism and structurism. For nearly a century most Marxists were unable to grasp the centrality and importance of these features of their work.

I THE PROBLEM OF THE ESSENCE OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND ITS VALIDITY

The edifice of Marxian historical materialism as a coherent approach is now beginning to crumble from within in a way never seen before because of the number and sophistication of proposed reconstructions and transformations being made by *sympathetic*, often erstwhile Marxist, critics. But, of course, attempts to reconstruct historical materialism (hereafter HM) in order either to save it or transform it have been made ever since it has existed. Even Marx and Engels' theory was an elaboration, synthesis, and reconstruction of earlier, half-formed versions of the theory that were first developed in Britain and France in the second half of the 18th century and in France and Germany in the early 19th century. And Marx and Engels were aware that they were not the only historical materialists of their time, acknowledging the work of, for example, L.H. Morgan, Maxim Kovalevski, and Joseph Dietzgen. Soon after the work of Marx and Engels partial reconstructions and amendments were made by Eduard Bernstein, Georgi Plekhanov, and V.I. Lenin; and Max Weber's work can be seen as an attempt to build on, criticise, and go beyond Marx's materialism. In recent times many writers have made more or less sweeping attempts to amend Marxism or make its foundations compatible with some other philosophical system in order to save it or the other system. These reconstructors of the foundations of HM can be seen as either rescuers or transformers.

The rescuers, such as Louis Althusser, G.A. Cohen, Jorge Larrain, and Derek Sayer, wish to save what they believe is the essence of Marx's HM from distortions or obscuring and irrelevant glosses. Although often describing their work as reconstructions they are really not so much reconstructors as rescuers, trying to provide a better interpretation of the theory from within what each of them takes to be its original assumptions. Unfortunately, each provides a different construction and Marx's texts are ambiguous so any claim to be offering the definitive Marxist construction is difficult if not impossible to evaluate. The transformers, on the other hand, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jurgen Habermas, Raymond Williams, Jon Elster, and Anthony Giddens, wish to change HM into something else, usually through marriage, so that what is good in it can perhaps be united with some other theory.

What separates these two approaches is largely a matter of degree -- the first sees HM as essentially valid and powerful, the second as at best only partially valid and containing fundamental weaknesses. Both are of course opposed to historical idealism, but whether the transformers actually remain as materialists is debateable and depends very much on the meaning of "material", as we shall see. The simplistic idealist/materialist dichotomy is one of the things that all these critics (rightly) wish to transcend. Another thing that unites these critics and many of those who have written explicitly about HM in general ever since the 1890s¹ is the assumption that HM is synonymous with Marxism. This is a serious error that blinds them to important variations in the theory that need incorporating into any general understanding and critique. It also prevents some of them from seeing that an attack on HM is not necessarily an attack on Marxism. It is at least possible, despite some statements by Marx and Engels that their theory was materialist, that they in fact may *not* have developed such a theory at all! It is possible to interpret Marx's theory of history in a non-materialist way, as some Marxists have in fact recently done. So, I emphasise that this chapter is not mainly about Marxism because I do not wish to enter the debate about its character.

This prompts the questions of what is the essence of HM that apparently needs rescuing, restating, updating, or transforming; and what are its strengths and weaknesses?

¹ Such as Georgi Plekhanov, Antonio Labriola, V.I. Lenin, Benedetto Croce, Nikolai Bukharin, Karl Korsch, Karl Federn, Jean-Paul Sartre, and right up to Raymond Williams, Lucio Colletti, Maurice Godelier, Perry Anderson, Goran Therborn, and Jorge Larrain. (See the Bibliography for references.) In the 19th century there was a greater awareness by Marxists of the lineage of HM. This is shown in, for example, the work of Labriola, Plekhanov, and E.R.A. Seligman, *The Economic Interpretation of History* (1907).

There is little agreement among writers on answers to these questions and a good deal of dispute has occurred. This chapter is partly a comparative consideration of the ideas of several recent reconstructors, some of whom wish to rescue HM in various ways and some of whom wish to transform it and go beyond it in different ways. After discussing their ideas I shall turn to the question of the validity of HM and try briefly to develop and defend structurism as a *post-materialist* approach to developing structural historical explanations.

Toward a Defence of Structurism as Post-materialism

This defence of structurism *vis-à-vis* historical materialism centres on:

- 1) *Affirmation of five components* that have been common to some (especially Marxist) historical materialists:
 - (a) the centrality of human practice for structuring the material, cultural, and social worlds;
 - (b) the social-relational theory of society, material production, and culture;
 - (c) the abstract model of the social totality as having several "levels" or "spheres" of activity and structure;
 - (d) the abstract model of persons as having several "levels" of interests; and
 - (e) the notion of the historicity of all social forms.

- 2) *The necessity of three main additions* to these existing components:
 - (a) a theory of action as motivated primarily by a combination of personal intentions, psychological dispositions and socially and culturally conditioned understandings and interests, rather than mainly by material interests;
 - (b) a central rather than lagging role for meaning, culture, and ideology in the social totality; and
 - (c) an epistemology based on philosophical realism, supervenience theory, and a provisional/convergence notion of truth.

- 3) *The denial of any general primacy to the material aspects of society*, no matter how "material" is construed.

I do not, however, wish to replace materialism with some version of idealism or culturalism. Rather, what has been fundamentally wrong with HM is the *dogmatic* materialist part. There seems to be no sustainable reason for retaining it. Materialism is not generally necessary for the explanation of action, socio-economic structure, culture, or ideology, nor for the explanation of social structural change, although it may be valuable

for such explanations under certain limited circumstances. But we must not replace it with another dogma, hence the importance of the point about a provisional/convergence notion of truth which I will elaborate later. The value of materialism as a theoretical explanation of any particular process or phenomenon is empirically contingent.

Before launching into the discussion it is important to pause a moment to consider one possible objection to any denial of the primacy of the material. This is the idea that because there is only a material reality in the universe -- the doctrine of substance monism -- all causation being material. I agree with this general ontology but it is important to add that it does not rule out *property pluralism* -- that there are emergent properties which are not reducible to their physical base level. Neither are they some other form of substance. It is the *emergent* properties of society -- such as social rules and relations, cultures, ideologies, and so on -- that are in need of explanation and which have a contentious relationship with the physical aspects of society. In any case, historical materialism is not the same as philosophical materialism although it is related to it. So the issue here is not whether social and cultural properties are material. They are in the sense articulated by Donald Davidson, Mario Bunge, and Jaegwon Kim, among others, to the effect that they have a *supervenient* relationship with the physical world, as I argued in the previous chapter.² The issue is: what is the relationship between the physical, social, cultural, and ideological *properties* within the material societal totality?

II *PRIMA FACIE* VARIETIES OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

By way of introduction to this argument I want first briefly to illustrate (without justifying) the contention that HM as a theory of history was not invented by and is not confined to the writings of Marx and his followers. If we are to extract the essence of the doctrine we must first know something about the history and variability of historical materialist theories.³ I emphasise that I am not talking about materialism in general or

² See D. Davidson, 'Mental Events' in *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980), especially p. 214; M. Bunge, *The Mind-Body Problem* (1980), especially pp. 21-25; and J. Kim, 'Causality, Identity, and Supervenience' (1979).

³ Historical Materialism lacks a thorough history, something I will attempt partially to alleviate in a forthcoming book on *Varieties of Historical Materialism*. Meanwhile, there are a few partial histories of some HM doctrines, such as: E.R.A. Seligman, *The Economic Interpretation of History* [originally 1902] (1967); R. Meek *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (1976); G. Therborn, *Science, Class, and Society: On the Formation of Sociology and Historical Materialism* (1976); N. Levine, 'The German Historical School and the Origins of Historical Materialism' (1987).

about methodology but only of those *theories* that pertain to social history and social structure. I think it is possible to identify at least ten different *prima facie* versions of the theory that have been presented over the past 250 years. Not many of them were called "historical materialism" and in the next section I shall discuss the labelling of them as such.

1. The original rudimentary form of HM was developed in the second half of the 18th century by the *Scottish Historical School* centred on Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and John Millar. They argued that socio-economic, political, and legal history had evolved through a series of stages with the dynamic element provided by the mode of material subsistence or what we would now call the economy. The other "levels" of the social totality were dependent in some sense upon the economy.
2. From the 1840s *German Historical Economics* was developed by a group of writers, such as Roscher, Knies, Bucher, Schmoller, and Sombart, who reacted against the abstraction of English Classical and Austrian Marginalist Economics. They defended a form of economic holism and evolutionism in which economic progression through stages played the leading historical role.
3. *Classical Marxism*, as developed by Marx and Engels, was of course the first fully-fledged HM theory, in which the influences of the Scottish School and Classical Economics were strong. (They also developed the first methodology of HM.)
4. As an outgrowth from Classical Marxism there was *Dialectical Materialism* -- or what can be called Marxism-Leninism -- as propounded mainly by Lenin, Luxemburg, Bukharin, and Stalin. This is a much more mechanical version of HM than that of Marx in that it proposed a simpler, more deterministic relationship between the economy and other aspects of the social totality.
5. *English Positivist History*, notably that of H.T. Buckle and Herbert Spencer in the 1860s and 70s, espoused a basic materialist cause of history while marrying that idea with a positivist conception of universal historical laws.
6. *Materialist Anthropology*, as developed from the 1870s mainly by some American, British, and Russian anthropologists such as Morgan, Maine, and Kovalevski. These writers influenced the late anthropological writing of Marx and Engels without there being a reciprocal relationship. They had an economic interpretation of the evolution of pre-literate cultures.
7. Some of *Max Weber's* work can be seen as HM, which is perhaps surprising for some people, given the subsequent interpretations of his work. In some of his writings on historical sociology, especially on the Ancient world, he developed a theory of history that gave primacy to economic interests and economically defined social classes.

8. While history did not play a central role in Classical Economics, from the 1880s and 90s there was begun to be developed, especially in Britain and America, the modern form of economic history, which in the 20th century has been directly influenced by neo-classical economics. This *Neo-Classical Economic History*, while not being a school, nevertheless rests upon certain shared assumptions about the primacy of economic interests and institutions for motivating economic and social behaviour. This has been made very explicit in more recent times by the cliometricians and other economic reductionists.
9. Meanwhile, in France a version of HM was developed by some of the *Annales School* people, such as Bloch and Braudel, who saw a central role for ecological and economic influences on social change.
10. Finally, there is recent *Ecological Anthropology and History*, developed partly under the influence of Marxism by people such as Marshall Sahlins, Marvin Harris, W.G. Hoskins, W.H. McNeill, and A.W. Crosby, who argue for the centrality of ecological and biological influences on social and cultural history. Ecologism from these kinds of sources and from the *Annales School* is now also having an influence on neo-Marxist theories.

III DEFINING HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Given all these supposed versions of HM theory, can we in fact find something that is common to them that we can call its essence or core? It is possible to try to answer this question in either an analytic or a synthetic sense. Analytically, one could construct a definition that would depend upon the meaning of the terms "historical" and "materialist" and then compare the uses of the term to see if in fact various doctrines measured up. That is, one could establish *a priori* what a minimal and a maximal historical materialism would have to be committed to. Synthetically, one could inductively generate a concept by generalising from the various doctrines that claim or seem to offer a version of the doctrine. As far as I know that has not been done thoroughly although there have been partial attempts, such as by Seligman.

However, the major difficulty with both these approaches is that the meanings of terms change over the centuries according to the theoretical backgrounds of the users. So, any overly rigorous *a priori* construction made now is bound to miss some of the particular complexities of earlier theories, and an inductive generalisation would have to remain on a fairly vague level in order to incorporate all the varying uses of the concepts over the centuries. I shall try to employ a combination of the two approaches such that definitions of terms can progressively be modified according to historical usage.

Therefore I start with a broad *minimal definition of historical materialism* as being
a theory of history (not a methodology) that explains the long-run evolution of social, political, and ideological structures in general by reference to the causal influence over time of the material aspects of the social totality.

Note that this definition does not say anything explicitly about how the social totality is structured, or about particular social structures, or what the material aspects are, or how they causally influence social evolution, or the motivation of human actions. However, there is the strong implication that society is at least analytically divisible into material and non-material aspects, so there is an implied theory of structure. There is also the assumption that human societies are a real entity or series of entities that have a history.

A *moderate definition of historical materialism* would go a little further and specify to some extent the social structure and the material aspect, that is, it would become more than just a theory of history but also a methodology containing general concepts of society and an implied epistemology as well. An example is the definition given by Frederick Engels in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* in 1892 which said HM is

"that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of the classes against one another".⁴

A *maximal definition of historical materialism* would include strong statements about causation, social structure, the material and the mental, action, and consciousness.

Thus one possible maximal definition could be that it is

a theory of society, socio-political action, and social history that models society as a "layered" structure in which the material-economic "layer" causally determines the other "layers", including consciousness, politics, and ideology, both synchronically and diachronically. This causal connection therefore produces a history of both social structures and forms of socio-political action, which pass through a definite progressive series of stages. All societies and social events are its product and therefore explicable by it.

Different versions could replace the economic definition of the material with a technological, geographical, or some other definition, and the directly causal connection with a so-called "functional" connection.

⁴ Marx, Engels, *Selected Works (Three volumes)* (1970), Vol.3, p. 103.

Employing the minimal definition, I think we can say that all ten versions outlined in the previous section would be covered by it. This is because they can all be seen as offering a theory of history as depending in some sense or other on the material aspect of the social totality. But they defined "material" in different ways and even those who had an economic conception of the material conceived of the economy in different ways. Few of them, and none before Marx, had a worked-out methodology of HM. That is, they did not have *explicit* and *general* concepts about social reality, practice, structure, causation, and history, nor about how to study them. But this does not mean they are not historical materialists. It is possible both to try to explain particular social events and processes in a materialist way without being aware of general implications for all social explanation, and to try to explain structural history in a materialist way without adopting some sort of dialectical conception of the social totality *à la* Marxism.

A maximal definition, however, would probably not fit many of these versions. Whether it does or not depends to some extent on the particular interpretation that is made of each of them. Marxism, for example, has been variously interpreted in technological determinist, culturalist, and phenomenological forms. Some neo-classical economic historiography can also be seen as containing a very different maximal version of HM theory, resting on an individualist rather than structuralist social ontology and methodology.

IV A BRIEF CRITIQUE OF SOME RECENT RECONSTRUCTIONS

Having discussed various aspects of the question of the essence or core of HM I can now begin to discuss the more important question of the strengths and weaknesses of HM. Here I come back to the six key concepts I mentioned in the first section. I want to employ them, and others, to consider very briefly some of the recent attempts at reconstruction to see what they consider to be the strengths of HM and how they attempt to overcome what they consider to be weaknesses.

The Constructions of Coher, Miller, Larrain, and Sayer

First, there have been recently many different constructions of HM which purport to offer improved and defensible versions of Marxism, most notably those of G.A. Cohen, Richard Miller, Jorge Larrain, and Derek Sayer. The first thing to note about them is their undefended conflation of Marxism and HM. None of them discusses whether HM could take a form quite different from Marxism. Each of them sees Marxism primarily as

containing an analytical methodology and macro theory or theories of history which are empirically testable. Their careful *analytical* construction of the Marxian concepts and theories contrasts with earlier approaches by people more influenced by the Hegelian, phenomenological, and structuralist traditions, who all read Marxism in terms of its supposed holistic nature as an *a priori philosophy* of praxis, experience, and history which had to be accepted in total. This meant in practice that Marxism was a discrete language and could not be criticised from a supposedly "bourgeois" standpoint of analytical concepts and orthodox logic.

In *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (1978) Cohen made a careful exegesis of Marx's texts but claimed to find only one theory of history in them -- the technological determinist thesis. According to this, Marx explained the history of social relations and politics by reference to their functional relationship with the technological mode of production. The forces of production, in this reading, have a long-term autonomous tendency to develop. The role of social relations and politics is, *inter alia*, to facilitate this development in the long run -- that is, they function to further or occasionally to fetter the development of the forces.

Cohen's reading takes us back some of the way to earlier readings of Marx, notably that of Plekhanov, but he was the first to bring to the forefront the latent functionalism that undoubtedly exists in Marx. However, it is certainly not the case that this is the only theory of history in Marx's ambiguous texts and strongly debatable that it is the best, as Cohen claims. The constructions by Miller, Larrain, and Sayer offer alternative, more nuanced, and better textually supported readings.

Richard Miller's book *Analyzing Marx: Morality, Power, and History* (1984) is one of the most persuasive ever written on Marx. In contrast with Cohen, who is concerned to extract and develop a single, internally coherent thesis about history, Miller has paid full attention to the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions in Marx's texts. Out of all that he extracts various possibilities and shows why some readings are more textually supported and plausible than others. He constructs a version of the narrow economic determinist theory of history and then proceeds to show why it is not supported in Marx's writings. In opposition to it he defends what he calls a "mode of production interpretation", or what I would call "relational materialism", in which

basic, internal economic change arises (whenever it does, in fact, take place) on account of a self-transforming tendency of the mode of production as a whole, that is, the relations of production, the forms of cooperation and the technology through which material goods are produced. Because of

the nature of the mode, processes that initially maintain its characteristic relations of production eventually produce their downfall. This change need not overcome any barriers to material production. It may do so. Change may be based on developments in the forms of cooperation or in technology, giving access to enhanced productive power to an initially subordinate group, and motivating their resistance to the old relations of production because the latter come to inhibit the further development of that new productive power. But, in this broad mode of production theory, change may also be wholly internal to the relations of production. The patterns of control in the old relations of production may make it inevitable that an initially nondominant group will acquire the power and the desire to overthrow the old relations. (pp.172-3)

As Miller rightly says and shows, this theory fits Marx's practice as a historian, which cannot be said for technological and economic determinism. What is less certain is his claim that this is a defensible theory of history, irrespective of Marxism. I shall discuss relational materialism in more detail in a moment. There is no doubt that it is the most plausible version of HM but it is still a *materialist* theory.

Like Miller, Jorge Larrain has also provided a careful and textually rich interpretation of Marx in *A Reconstruction of Historical Materialism* (1986). He attacks economic determinist, Hegelian, existentialist, and structuralist readings and argues for the central importance of human practical subjectivity within a structural context. Rather than Marx's 1859 'Preface' being the canonical text he takes the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as central, in which Marx said that it is men (we should read, "people") who make history but always under conditions not of their own choosing. Larrain rightly says that

it does not make sense ... to concede 'primacy' to a social result, be it productive forces or relations of production. Primacy can only be attached to human beings' practical production and transformation of their material life. Of course, this practice necessarily involves both relations of production and productive forces as *results* and *preconditions* of material reproduction. But change cannot be fully explained as a structural effect of these social results. Change is only conditioned by them but not fully preordained. It is human beings with their practical activity that bring about change within a set of limited options. It is true that human beings do not choose freely their productive forces and relations of production -- they are handed down to them by the preceding generation -- but this does not make them absolutely powerless to change them nor does it preclude various possibilities in attempting to change them.

The tensions in Marx and Engels' conception of social change must therefore be resolved in favour of practical political activity and class struggle. (p. 116)

With this conclusion Larrain is close to abandoning HM altogether, something that is reminiscent of the work of many supposedly Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill, Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Barrington Moore, who have not allowed general base/superstructure and economic determinist formulas to dictate their explanations of actual processes. In fact, we can think of their work as examples of post-materialism, as I shall argue in a moment.

Similarly, Derek Sayer argues in his also textually rich and persuasive book -- *The Violence of Abstraction* (1987) -- that social historians such as Hill and Thompson, who employ HM in a fluid and dynamic fashion, are closest to Marx's "guiding thread". His non-rigorous, non-abstract, metaphorical, reading of Marxism owes much to the defences by Engels after Marx's death and to Thompson's use of it to explain history. He believes that Marx's "shifting, and theoretically treacherous, recourse to metaphor and analogy may be a linguistic signal of exactly the inappropriateness of attempting a closed and 'rigorous' formulation of theory at this level of generality". (p. 14) In particular, he sees as a mistake the attempt by "traditional historical materialists" (including Cohen) to separate material production and social relations. He has much textual support to show that Marx's claim was not

that social relations are caused by material production but that it irreducibly involves them. They are part and parcel of it. It accordingly cannot be conceptualised, in any empirically adequate manner, independently of them. In particular, production cannot be conceived as a purely "material" sphere, if material is taken to exclude social. ... this vitiates Cohen's attempted distinction between "material" and "social" relations of production as substantially distinct kinds of relation. (p. 25)

One of the main things that follows from this is a different interpretation of the base/superstructure and economic determinism concepts than that propounded by the traditionalists. Sayer rightly argues that to see ideological spheres as somehow independent is a fetishised reification. For Marx, on the contrary, "superstructures" are not levels of reality separate from the "base" but forms of appearance. Therefore,

to construe the base/superstructure metaphor as a model of the relation between substantially discrete levels, practices or "instances" within the social formation, and conceptualise that relation in causal (or functional) terms, is to replicate exactly the illogical illusion of superstructural separability Marx is above all concerned to refute. Such constructions spectacularly miss the central point of his argument. The base/superstructure metaphor applies to the relation between social being and social consciousness, it is not a putative model of societal "levels" at all. (pp. 91-2)

The only way to explain the history of society, then, in Sayer's account of Marx's HM, is by a painstakingly empirical tracing through time. The use of a structural or functional logic or a general theory provides no short cuts. (p. 96) Like the account given by Larrain, this has the potential, at least, to take us away from HM to a post-materialist position that builds upon aspects of HM, and again poses the question of the status of Marxism.

The Ecological Reconstructions of Stinchcombe and Godelier

Arthur Stinchcombe and Maurice Godelier have recently quite separately proposed adapting Marxism to wider conceptions of materiality that incorporate an

ecological idea of the social totality and a more developed concept of social formations in which to locate the complexities of actual economies, class structures, and politics. Marx, being the restless, unsystematic thinker that he was, did not stop to develop clear, coherent concepts of modes of production or social formations, or, of course, of the notorious base/superstructure model. Nevertheless, these concepts are of central importance and clarifying their meaning and significance is still one of the main problems for Marxist theory, as we have seen above. These two writers make persuasive attempts to show why Marxism must be reconstructed in an ecological and anti-economistic direction.

Stinchcombe argued in *Economic Sociology* (1983) that what was fundamentally wrong about Marxism was *not* that it needed a theory of politics to counterpose or add to its economic theory in order to avoid economic determinism. While a theory of how politics responds to economic conditions is needed, he believes that what is more important is a better *economic* theory. That requires having a *sociological* theory of productive enterprises under different ecological, technological, cultural, demographic, administrative, and political conditions. He proceeded to show in some detail how all those aspects interrelated in quite different ways within contemporary Karimojong Society, 18th century France, and modern United States. He then argued that a mode of production had ecological, technological, organisational, and populational boundaries, and which was more important for the sociologist depended on what needed to be analysed. (p. 243) These are not strata within a total social formation but different, equally important aspects. (p. 245) The problem then is to analyse how all the modes of production of a particular society add up to the class dynamics of the whole. His answer was that there is no lawful way that they do. The outcome is always contingent. (pp. 245-6) This, then, amounts to a rejection of the base/superstructure model and he provides a powerful case for widening HM but not for rejecting materialism entirely.

Godelier develops in *The Mental and the Material* (1986) a concept of the social totality that allows for the possibility of the dominance of non-economic aspects in non-capitalist societies. He also argues for a widening of the notion of materiality to include the ecosystem with which people interact, and for a blurring of the nature/culture distinction. He is strongly opposed to abstract model building which reifies aspects or levels of the social whole, especially the material/mental or infrastructure/superstructure models. Material action necessarily involves mental activity and mental realities of various kinds. He wrote that

since thought is not an instance separate from social relations, since a society has neither top nor bottom, since it does not consist of superimposed layers, we are forced to conclude that if the

distinction between infrastructure and superstructures is to retain any meaning at all, it cannot be taken as a distinction between levels or instances, any more than between institutions. (pp. 18-19)

His proposal is to isolate relations of production from the totality and to see that they are the most general category. They have three functions:

determination of the social forms of access to resources and control of the conditions of production; organization of labour processes and allocation of members of society to them; determination of the social forms of circulation and redistribution of the products of individual or collective labour. It is then possible to show that in certain societies kinship relations (the Australian Aborigines) or political relations (fifth-century Athens) or politico-religious relations (Ancient Egypt) also functioned as relations of production. (pp. 19-20)

He believes this kind of analysis allows a reformulation of the problem of the domination by a particular institution such as religion, or caste, or kinship:

For while in every society there exist social relations which organize the workings of kinship, the mechanisms of authority and of power, and the channels of communication with gods and ancestors, yet kin, political or religious relations are not dominant in every society. Why then should one set of relations be dominant in one place and a different set in another? I believe I have shown ... that a set of social relations dominates when they function simultaneously as social relations of production, as the social framework and support for the material process of appropriation of nature. (p. 20)

This is reminiscent of a footnote in Vol. One of *Capital* where Marx said that it was the mode of production that determined whether politics or religion dominated a particular society.⁵ Godelier's idea of functions has the merit of empirical flexibility and plausibility and his refusal of abstract formulations allows his version of Marxism, such as remains of it, to incorporate the findings of many non-Marxists. In fact, he too goes a good deal of the way toward a post-materialism.

Habermas's Evolutionary Reconstruction

Jurgen Habermas has proposed in 'Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism'⁶ reconstructing HM to eliminate the supposed teleology and economic determinism that he professes to find in Marxism. His reading and reconstruction are at the most abstract level possible. He reads Marxism primarily as a general theory of history which needs a better theory of systemics and evolutionary mechanisms to make it work. Those mechanisms have to be found, he argues, at the level of learning and communication, not the economy. He sees society as an integrated, evolved, unstable

⁵ K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol One (1971), p. 86.

⁶ Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1969).

system in which there is an endogenous growth of knowledge. The system continually throws up systemic problems. He argued that:

- a. The system problems that cannot be solved without evolutionary innovations arise in the basic domain of a society.
- b. Each new mode of production means a new form of social integration, which crystallizes around a new institutional core.
- c. An endogenous learning mechanism provides for the accumulation of a cognitive potential that can be used for solving crisis-inducing system problems.
- d. This knowledge, however, can be implemented to develop the forces of production only when the evolutionary step to a new institutional framework and a new form of social integration has been taken.

It remains an open question, *how* this step is taken. The *descriptive* answer of historical materialism is: through social conflict, struggle, social movements, and political confrontations (which, when they take place under the conditions of a class structure, can be analyzed as class struggles). But only an analytic answer can explain *why* a society takes an evolutionary step and how we are to understand that social struggles under certain conditions lead to a new level of social development. I would like to propose the following answer: the species learns not only in the dimensions of technically useful knowledge decisive for the development of productive forces but also in the dimension of moral-practical consciousness decisive for structures of interaction. The rules of communicative action do develop in reaction to changes in the domain of instrumental and strategic action; but in doing so they *follow their own logic*. (pp. 147-8)

Since the mid-1970s Habermas has worked on this project of examining the conditions and effects of communicative action. This could perhaps be thought to take us beyond materialism, rather than simply being a reconstruction of it. But the great problem with this text of Habermas is its holistic and systemic theory of society as governed by a cybernetic hierarchy. While it is very important to address the questions of knowledge and communication, their social role has to be examined in concrete rather than highly generalised and abstract ways. We are not dealing with a natural system with universal laws but social systems, characterised by human agency, structural contingency, and enormous local variation.

Giddens' Contemporary Critique

Finally, I come to the sustained attempt by Anthony Giddens, in *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism, Two Vols* (1981 and 1985) to come to terms with Marxism from a sympathetic point of view and move beyond it to a more comprehensive and more powerful post-materialism. His "structurationism" is an attempt to add to certain elements of Marxism a better theory of action, a theory of time, and a better, more complete account of history. He is strongly opposed to functionalism, evolutionism, technological determinism, and economic reductionism. He does not propose a new general theory as such but rather a methodology consisting mainly of a set of general concepts, such

as "agency", "time-space", "institutions", "power", and "structure". This is similar in the programmatic nature of its conception to Max Weber's project in the first part of *Economy and Society* and in terms of concept construction Giddens is attempting to be the Weber of our time, but he lacks Weber's knowledge of economic, social, and cultural history. I shall say more about structurationism later when discussing post-materialism.

In summary, we have here a spectrum of so-called reconstructions, varying from the differing defences of Marxism by Cohen, Miller, Larrain, and Sayer; through the partial defences with considerable amendment by Stinchcombe and Godelier; to the wholesale restructuring and more or less abandonment of fundamental aspects by Habermas and Giddens. The latter have in fact ceased to be materialists and have developed what we could call post-materialist or post-Marxist methodologies and theories. That is, while abandoning materialism they have not adopted idealism or individualism and have retained certain key elements of Marxism.

V THE INADEQUACIES OF SOME EXISTING FRAMEWORKS FOR STRUCTURAL HISTORY

I have argued that minimal HM must be construed as a general *theory* of social history or historical sociology. That is, all versions of it are theories that explain the history of society by reference somehow to the material aspects of the totality. Moderate and maximal versions also contain a *general ontological model* of social structure as being layered and real, and *general concepts* for analysing different social structures. Furthermore, the best existing form of HM, as represented in the readings of Marx by Miller, Larrain, and Sayer, can be characterised as *relational-materialism* because it sees the fundamental social reality as complex structures of social relations rather than as actual material things or systems such as technologies and forces of production. They rightly argue that it is systems of social relations and their representations in forms of consciousness that structure the ways people act and interact with the material world to mould it to their purposes, and the material world in turn helps to mould social relations and consciousness. In this dialectic an inanimate force cannot be the prime mover. Surely the prime social force can only be the mentalities and powers of people *qua* social people. But this element tends to be underdeveloped in relational-materialist theories.

It is this relational-materialism, because of its strength, that must be criticised. If it can be shown to be inadequate and transformable then simpler forms of HM would therefore also become unattractive. In order to begin to assess its adequacy as a general

theory and methodology for the social domain we need to see how it relates to certain methodological and theoretical criteria that together constitute the principles of adequacy for theories of structural history.

Criteria of Methodological and Theoretical Adequacy

Drawing on the discussion of the previous chapters, we can say that an adequate approach to socio-historical explanations must implicitly or explicitly fulfil the following methodological requirements as a minimum programme:

- (I) It must have a coherent general model (or general conception) of social structure -- one, moreover, that views structure as a genuine structure and not merely an instrumental figment of the theorist's view of the world.
- (II) This implies a social realist commitment that holds non-observable systems of social rules, roles, and relations to be real and relatively independent of thought.
- (III) Its model of structure must be sufficiently general and flexible to encompass the changing nature of structures and the enormous empirical diversity of structures.
- (IV) There has to be a general conception of how individual and collective actions are intentionally, psychologically, and sociologically motivated, and therefore of how they relate to social structures.
- (V) There must be a general conception of how thought, including systems of ideas and mentalities, causally interrelates with actions and structures.
- (VI) The general kinds of causes of actual structural processes and transformations have to be theorised.
- (VII) The problems of the relationship of the social enquirer to social realities and the relationship of social phenomena to structures have to be examined and theorised. That is, the epistemological problem of the relationship of observable evidence to theoretically specified non-observable "layers" has to be specified so that the truth conditions (or plausibility conditions) for explanations are made clear.

The Commitments and Weaknesses of Relational-Materialism

Within the ambit of these requirements, the significance of a relational-materialist perspective of the sort adhered to in varying degrees by Larrain, Miller, Sayer, Godelier, Stinchcombe, and some other Marxist and Weberian historians and sociologists, lies in its commitment to five interconnecting principles, on which it must fundamentally be judged:

- (1) It conceives of social reality as being fundamentally a structured set of relations, rules, roles, and positions that exist through time more or less independently of

individual consciousness and action and which have causal power to impel and constrain action.

- (2) Social structure is conceived as being organised into a system of semi-autonomous "levels" or "spheres" of structural relations and activity. This is not a descriptive but an analytical model or concept. The levels or spheres are not independent of the totality but each is in some way present in the others. The significance of the model lies in the power it gives to direct attention to particular, historically specific, causal and/or explanatory priorities in concrete analyses of structural history.
- (3) The production of material existence and material motivations for behaviour are theorised as having long-run (but not necessarily short-run) causal and explanatory priority (within a framework of social power relations) over other kinds of motivation, action, and thought.
- (4) Social change is theorised as the result primarily of structural contradictions that arise within production and the social totality, manifested partly as struggles between social classes defined by the relationship of their members to the material production process.
- (5) Social history in the long term is conceived as the progressive mastery of the material world and the progressive development of human productive forces and co-operative social capacities and arrangements.

While some other approaches to socio-historical explanation such as Parsonian structural-functionalism, Weberian culturalism, and *Annales* structuralism, share many of these principles they do not have them all. But of course they might still be able to meet as many of the requirements of a good approach because the relational-materialist approach is certainly not perfect. It is able to fulfil all the criteria of adequacy listed previously except points IV (on individual motivation) and VI (on the causes of actual historical processes). In those two areas it does adopt a position but the particular way in which it addresses those problems is usually inadequate. (More on that in a moment.) Furthermore, despite the general strengths of this approach there are other serious weaknesses. Its third commitment -- regarding materialism -- and its fifth commitment -- regarding the generally progressive nature of world history -- are both *empirically* unsustainable and must be considered as *a priori* metaphysical assumptions rather than empirical conclusions. Such general kinds of assumptions are necessary to all sciences at some stage but they have to be critically examined in the light of subsequent research, which some later Marxist historians have indeed done. The fourth commitment -- the economic definition of classes and contradictions -- is too historically specific to be

elevated to a general theory of change. I shall return to these two weaknesses in a moment.

The Weaknesses of Individualist Approaches

Despite their weaknesses existing forms of HM are more explanatorily powerful than methodological individualist approaches, such as behaviourist sociology and neo-classical economics, which I believe are inadequate on the following main interrelated grounds:

- (1) Their concept of structure is instrumentalist and so they are opposed to the idea of society as a real system of causally powerful social rules, roles, and relations. Rather, concepts of structure are either eschewed or inadequately based on individualist social ontologies. That is, society is thought to be a mere patterned aggregation of individual behaviour which is motivated by psychological dispositions alone. Social phenomena in the senses of social interactions and group behaviour are supposed to be the result of individual motivations in pursuit of individual goals of satisfaction.
- (2) As this indicates, their theory of human motivation and action gives little or no place to conscious intentions, social and cultural imperatives, or the gaps between psychological states, intentions, and actions. Rather, they adopt a dispositional behaviourist model which tends to see people as making learned responses to environmental stimuli. People supposedly have psychological dispositions always to behave in so-called rational self-interest, and what is perceived to be their self-interest depends largely on the opportunities presented by and learned about the environment. Motivation is then understood by the observer by inference directly from behaviour. There seems to be no place in analysis for unintended or unrealised effects of personal intentions.
- (3) Little or no place is given to non-environmental causes of behaviour or to unobservable intentional motives. Personal material interests, as construed from observable behaviour, are usually given explanatory dominance and the economy is seen as the realm of rational behaviour, which is more or less independent of the rest of society or, more radically, the rest of society is reduced to the economic sphere.
- (4) Epistemologically, these approaches are empiricist and positivist. They therefore do not employ realist concepts about non-empirical social and intentional realities. Society and psychological states supposedly have to be observable, or to result in observable behaviour and/or utterances, to be real. This requirement therefore excludes from explanation unactivated intentions, unintended consequences, and

social relations, and it puts reliance upon preconceived psychological dispositions, such as economic rationality, and upon observable behavioural patterns.

In general, then, individualism misses a good deal of the discoverable reality of society and the causal complexes of behaviour.

The Weaknesses of Holist Approaches

Holist approaches to social history conceive of the social totality as a supra-individual structural or cultural entity, apparently with powers of self-regulation and self-transformation that are employed through the control the whole exercises over the minds and behaviour of the people within it. The main problems with this approach are:

- (1) The specification of this holistic entity, especially by traditional historians, is usually underdeveloped. Vague notions about the "character" of an epoch or society or milieu are substituted for clear analysis. Collective entities such as nations are sometimes attributed with the power to determine functionally the behaviour that is in the "interests" of the collective entity or even attributed with powers of decision-making and self-activation.
- (2) In the case of holistic structural theories where society is theorised as a tightly integrated system it is attributed with powers of self-regulation and self-maintenance which operate through the functions of sub-systems and patterns of human action. The system itself is the agent of its own integration and equilibrium through its supposed power over the behaviour of people within it. But no justification seems possible for such a concept of society as a supra-individual, organic entity.
- (3) It is implausible at least that such macroscopic entities as nations and social systems could bring about their own history. That is, the question of agency is not coherently addressed by holists.

Both individualism and holism rest upon a false dichotomy drawn between the individual and society so by concentrating on one side only they cannot really explain either. What is needed is a conception of the two sides of social reality as constituting a dialectical *duality* in which each structures the other. That is, it is individual and collective action and thought that causally structures society and it is society that organises and structures, but does not directly cause, action and thought. The duality is an evolving, historical process, so time is the essential third dimension of social reality.

VI BEYOND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM: TOWARD A NON-MATERIALIST, STRUCTURIST, THEORY OF STRUCTURAL HISTORY

The theory of sociological structurism is able to build upon points (1) and (2) of the relational-materialist approach (which refer to the relational theory of society and the "levels" model of structure, as well as the ideas of human practice and the historicity of all social forms) in two main areas:

- (1) the theory of action;
- (2) the role of meanings, culture, and ideology.

In addition, the theory is strengthened by an explicit recognition of the centrality of epistemological realism.

From Marxism to an Agent al Theory of Action

A theory of action is certainly contained in an underdeveloped form in Marxism. It tends to be an interests theory which attributes action primarily to the pursuit of what are perceived to be material interests. But according to Marx conscious understanding of one's interests can often be false and this is usually the case if personal interests are placed above class interests. For Marx true interests are those that coincide with the historic advance of world-significant classes. Action, then, is a product of conscious understanding (whether ideological or scientific) of one's own social position. (There can also be found in Marx an undeveloped theory of the unconscious but its status and role in his work is at best uncertain.) The social understanding of actors is in turn largely determined by their social position. Many Marxists (especially dialectical materialists and structuralists) have therefore downgraded the role of *general* human agency and choice especially in regard to the pursuit of supposedly objective interests. Consequently, history has been seen as taking place "behind the backs" of ordinary people as a largely alien, incomprehensible, and usually oppressive process, determining their actions but not being produced by them, at least not until they develop revolutionary class consciousness.

The discovery of the structural determination of action was a great advance by Marx that led him to formulate the outstanding theory of structural change of those developed in the 19th century and one of the best ever. However, we are now able to see that any theory of human action which denies *general* human agency is defective. This is because without it there cannot be a real mechanism of social structuring and social change under any social conditions. Let me elaborate a little.

There are two kinds of causal powers inherent in the structures of material things, material systems, and relational systems. (There is no evidence for the existence of other

kinds of entities in the universe and the existence of relational systems is denied by physicalists.) These are the powers of agency and conditioning. *Agency* is a power that emerges spontaneously from the physical structure of some entities and enables them to control their own behaviour and interactions and to alter their environment within the parameters of their intrinsic natures. Moreover, as I argued in Chapters Three and Five, agency is the power to choose courses of action and influence the action of other entities. A human agent is able to monitor its own action, to monitor its monitorings, and to make adjustments to life courses within certain constraints. It is able more or less deliberately to enter into relations with other entities in order to form relational systems in which there emerge conditioning powers. Weaker, less conscious and unconscious, forms of agency exist in animals, who also have the power and the compulsion to alter the environment to suit their own existence. Animals have little power as individuals but great power collectively within ecosystems. Human agential power varies according to consciousness, personality, and the conditioning power of social and ecological situations.

Conditioning powers, then, are those that set constraints on and impel in certain courses the actions of agents. Such powers emerge within physical and relational systems. They are also the passive powers to produce phenomena that naturally exist within physical systems that are constituted by smaller physical components.⁷ Relational systems, which are animal and human societies and biological ecosystems, have conditioning powers to control their individual constituents. Such powers arise from the precisely organised way in which their constituents interact. In human social systems these interactions are a complex and precise combination of biological, geographical, psychological, cultural, economic and political exchanges and relations.

Relational systems depend on the actions of their agential members (and blind genetic mutations within those agents and within the passive, conditioning elements of the system) for their transformations and therefore for their history. They cannot produce their own history. The imputation of agential powers to societies as holistic entities is an unwarranted (and unnecessary) reification that is unfortunately all too prevalent in the social sciences and everyday understanding. Only people, in groups and as individuals, are the moving forces of social history so we must look to agential people to discover the causes of social change. That is why in the first place a well-developed theory of human

⁷ Of course it is true that all physical things are systems of smaller things (and ultimately all physical matter is solidified energy) held together by fundamental physical forces and chemical bonds. Nevertheless physical emergence is important because new kinds of powers exist in macro physical systems that cannot be reduced to the powers of their constituents.

action and consciousness is necessary to social science. But people must never be studied in isolation from their structurally conditioning social situations. Methodological individualism, as much as methodological holism, must be avoided.

Furthermore, as I argued in Chapter Three, agency is a *capacity* that people have in virtue of being people. It is not an invariably determining disposition to behave in a (so-called) rational egoistic manner as many writers in the neo-classical economics and individualist psychological traditions seem to believe. They adopt an (often unexamined) behaviourism that views people as automatic responders to environmental stimuli which impinge on a limited range of psychological dispositions. According to that theory people are supposedly freely moving individuals but they always seem to move in the same direction -- toward individual material gratification. They are therefore not really agents, in spite of the theory's emphasis upon rational choice, because their behaviour is in fact pre-determined by pre-rational psychological drives. Agents, rather, make genuine choices after a more complex, partly rational, thought process. And their choices are not always just from the limited range seemingly available from their social situations. Their actions can be and often are transformative of their social situations.

In Chapter Three I showed how the theory of action and agency has been much discussed and improved lately by many writers, including Charles Taylor, Donald Davidson, Rom Harré, and Anthony Giddens.⁸ They and others have been converging on a new, rich, powerfully explanatory paradigm that denies the claims of the physicalist, behaviourist, psychoanalytic, voluntarist, and dualist alternatives. The heart of the new paradigm is a conception of the person as a socially powerful agent with intentions and abilities to choose reflectively and to structure society meaningfully according to intentions, and unintentionally. Persons are not strictly-determined physically, nor psychologically, nor culturally, nor sociologically, nor possessing minds that are independent of such determinations in total. Agency is always conditioned in these ways but it remains in an important sense independent of them. If it didn't it would not be agency. But human action is meaningful because of its shared conditions and it cannot be understood apart from them. The dialectic between the powers of agency and conditioning is the core of the sociological and humanistic problem.

⁸ See D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980), especially essays 1 - 5; A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979), especially Ch.2, and *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* (1982), especially Ch.3; R. Harré, 'The Ethogenic Approach: Theory and Practice' (1977) and *Social Being* (1979); C. Taylor, 'What is Human Agency?' (1977) and 'The Person' (1985).

The Importance of Meanings, Culture, and Ideology -- Against The Idea of Primacy

The second area in which the structuralist theory improves on the existing relational-materialist approach is in the place given to meanings, mentalities, cultures, and ideologies. One of Marx's most powerful theoretical devices was the analytical "levels" concept of society. He did not entirely invent this idea -- it had been a part of European thought for perhaps a century or more -- but he gave it a greatly enriched content. Ever since, many of the leading social scientists (including, for example, Max Weber, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Talcott Parsons, Fernand Braudel, and of course most later Marxists and many Weberians) have adopted some version of the levels model or analogues of it. All agree that the "levels" of economy, politics, and culture exist as abstractly-defined (but perhaps semi-autonomous) sub-structures, or sub-systems, or spheres, or forms of activity. Many theorists add to the list other "levels" or "sub-levels" such as ideology, law, and religion.

The point of these models is not to make descriptions. Rather, they are abstractions that serve to isolate putative causal or functional relations between types of social activity, social structures, and forms of social understanding. In the case of Marxism, "primacy" was assigned to the economic and technological "level". Just what "primacy" means has been hotly debated ever since but this point has been the most basic feature distinguishing traditional Marxist materialism as a theory of history from non-materialism. Another such feature has been the way in which Marxism has defined the economy as a set of relations of production and forces of production structured by internal property relations between the owners of labour power and the owners of surplus extracted from production.

The debate over primacy has served to highlight the problem of the role of culture and ideology in structural determination and action. Some Marxists have attempted to remedy this deficiency by developing theories of the "superstructure" of society. Non-Marxist levels theorists, such as Weber, Lévi-Strauss, Parsons, and Harré, and many relational-structuralist historians have also placed much more emphasis upon meanings, culture, and ideology, as we saw in Chapter Three. *This is a necessary development.* To conceive of human motivation as essentially economically oriented, as many Marxists did and still tend to do, is to mistake the appearance of human activity for the deeper reality of human nature. In fact, as Marx showed clearly in his early writings, human activity primarily has a group-oriented, cultural and psychological imperative that is sometimes forced under the exigencies of particular material and social conditions (especially

capitalism and slavery) to take the form of constant materially productive labour. Under conditions where this is not necessary a concentration on cultural production is of greater social significance. Only in modern capitalist society is materialism dominant. As many anthropologists, cultural theorists, and social psychologists have argued; it is the creation of status, respect, moral careers, public personas, psychological domination, meaningful personal relationships, and above all *meaning*, that primarily motivate people.⁹ Material interests and welfare, although obviously very important, are the mechanisms that bring about this cultural and psychological end. There is no constant, universal overriding economic imperative. There are numerous examples of individual and mass psychological, cultural, and ideological motives overriding economic considerations, even in modern supposedly rationalistic capitalist society.

Therefore a viable general theory for structural history must give a central place to the importance of the cultural, ideological, and social psychological aspects of social life to add to the already well-developed economic theory of the relational-materialist tradition. Opting for a Weberian, or Geertzian, or Harréan approach wholesale is not sufficient because of their failures to theorise adequately the importance of internal relations of production and hence the dynamic inherent within some types of economy as opposed to others. As well, the link between the economy and the other "levels" cannot be properly grasped unless internal relations of production are understood as manifest at the other levels in the forms of social class relations, law, ideology, and culture, just as these aspects are inherent within the economic structure. In short, what is required is a better theory of personality and the importance to people of psychological welfare and cultural expression to add to the social relational theory of material production. Sociological economics must also become psychological and cultural economics and economics has to become sociological and anthropological.

A relational-structurist approach, then, is not a materialist theory of history. That is, it does not attribute some general determination or primacy to the technological or economic "level", however the economy is defined. Rather, its theory of action says that in general human motivation is more complex. Action is more *culturally* and *psychologically* oriented than economically, even under capitalism. It has been a fundamental mistake of historical materialists, including many Marxists, to overemphasise human materially productive labour as against cultural and social

⁹ See, for example, E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Behavior in Public Places* (1963); C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) and *Local Knowledge* (1983); R. Harré, *Social Being* (1979) and *Personal Being* (1983).

production. In fact structurism refuses to take a stand on this question of primacy, holding that the tendency and the manifestation of human motivation vary with the prevailing economic, social, and cultural situation. A general theory cannot tell us in advance what the real social situation is, although it can point our search in certain directions.

More emphatically, structurism is strongly opposed to economic reductionism. Marx was not guilty of it but some Marxists and neo-classical economists are. The methodological individualist and rationalist economic approach to socio-historical explanation cannot convincingly account for sociological and cultural imperatives to action or for non-rational behaviour. People display a good deal of behaviour that is *not* directed to supposedly rational economic gratification and is even strictly irrational on any criteria. Human rationality is a variable, hidden, often unactivated, capacity, rather than a determining disposition. Structurism, because of its sociological and psychological realism, is able to accommodate hidden capacities whereas positivist neo-classicism cannot.

CHAPTER SIX

REALISM, STRUCTURISM, AND HISTORY AS THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A UNIFIED AND TRANSFORMATIVE SCIENCE OF SOCIETY

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This final chapter attempts to pull the threads together in such a way as to reveal the *normative* significance of the argument about scientific structural history. The abandonment of the modernist project of building an intersubjective foundation for knowledge in the face of the obvious destructiveness and oppression wrought by the political defenders and employers of (vulgar) science or scientism has been a mistake. To abandon scientific reason is to abandon the only means of identifying and overcoming the causes of the degradation of the ecological, political, and social environment. But science can do its proper liberational work only in a rational, enlightened, democratic community. It is here that the normative level asserts itself -- as the ultimate justification for scientific methodology, theory, and enquiry. That is, science is ultimately justifiable as an enterprise by its critical and explanatory perspectives but it is not normative in itself, or at least it should try to bracket norms.¹ A scientific attitude of truth-seeking provides a framework for a culture of liberation. Once the content of social liberation is spelt out social science can lend itself to the judgment and validation of claims about the structural context of society and politics, and of attempts to relate normative values to social contexts. Science cannot validate the content of liberation but it can try to establish the structural conditions of liberation; in this it is analogous to natural science as the basis of natural engineering. The alternative to intersubjective critical validation is tyranny or nihilism.

¹ Cf J. Freund 'German Sociology in the Time of Max Weber' (1979) for a discussion of the problem of the normative versus value-free content of sociology and how it was perceived in the classical era.

I THE POLITICAL NECESSITY FOR A HISTORICAL SCIENCE OF SOCIETY

The question of the proper methodological foundations for the social, political, and historical studies is now seemingly in a greater state of intellectual contention than at any time this century. Perhaps this is a consequence of the incipient breakdown of neo-Enlightenment modes of thought: with their at least partial coherence around the projects of rational enquiry and promotion of progressive social justice. The propagation of new and ever more sophisticated versions of relativism now poses a serious threat to the whole possibility of intersubjective understanding and explanation, not just of society but of nature too. I fear that with that possibility goes the possibility of rational, democratic, emancipatory transformation of the social world. Social critique and rational emancipation would seem inevitably to depend on some universalistic concepts, as well as on a commitment to the principles of equality and democracy.

The contemporary *methodenstreit* has many similarities with that of the 1880s and 90s in Germany and Austria which Max Weber made such an impressive attempt to transcend. We have today, also, our putative Max Webers -- Jurgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Touraine, and Anthony Giddens are obvious contenders; perhaps we could also include Karl-Otto Apel, Rom Harré, Niklas Luhmann, Peter Berger, Jon Elster, and others, according to one's preconception of the nature of the problem. However, while these writers have made important and influential attempts to recast the general framework of social enquiry from different perspectives, many of them lack a fundamental component that was central to Weber's thought and to the thought of most of the 19th century founders of social science -- that is, a strong commitment to and thorough understanding of general economic and social historiography. A lack of this structural historical dimension is a great weakness in any attempt to provide a way out of the cacophonous philosophical and methodological debates. Its presence can help prevent the turn toward relativism.

Conversely, it is the commitment to historical enquiry that adds strength to those outside this *methodenstreit* who see their primary task as not being explicitly to provide a new methodological framework, or general set of categories, or general theory of change, but to conduct research into the history of societies and cultures using whatever methodological and theoretical materials are found to be useful. Historians such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Barrington Moore, Eric Hobsbawm, Charles Tilly, Reinhard Bendix, Norbert Elias, R.S. Neale, Clifford Geertz, Robert Darnton, and Ernest Gellner have been advancing social understanding and knowledge by doing social science in powerfully plausible ways, even though they have different theories. What is it about

their methodologies and practices that enables them all to produce richly explanatory texts? I have tried to answer this question by attempting to combine an argument about social methodology and theory with articulations of methodologies drawn from structural historians. I have tried to present a synthesis in such a way as to show the significance of each of these strands when woven into a coherent, historically oriented, framework for the social studies. In this way the sources of the richness and strength of the best structural historical work can better be grasped and so the practices not only of socio-historical enquiry but all social explanation can be improved.

Furthermore, I believe that a framework constructed in the historical and structuralist manner that I have articulated is able to point the way toward resolving several persistent philosophical and methodological problems in the social studies. In particular, it shows that the following old problematic dichotomies can be transcended: positive science versus hermeneutics, explanation versus understanding, action versus structure, change versus continuity, and history versus sociology. In case it was thought either that this is rather too ambitious or is flogging a series of dead horses, depending on one's philosophical background, then I tried to show both that these problems are still very much alive in the social studies and that they may be susceptible to comprehensive resolution. I contend, as some other writers have done, that most of these problems have their origin in the failure to comprehend properly the structure of reasoning in physical science.

The social studies have been for centuries greatly influenced by philosophies of science, negatively and positively. The desire for positive, universal knowledge or the complete rejection of its possibility, both in a context of uncritical, naive, and often distorted borrowings of the epistemological ideas of writers about science (including recently those of Carnap, Hempel, Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend, and others) have led to several unfortunate courses of theorising in the social studies, ranging from empiricist pseudo-scientific cliometrics and behaviourism, through functionalism, to radically relativistic interpretism. Moreover, scientism in its various forms has been both philosophically false and politically dangerous. Scientism is the prejudice that the scientific method is one of objectively dealing only with observable facts. Any putative science that does not employ "The Scientific Method" is condemned as merely subjective and therefore not explanatory. Any enquiry that has to rely on subjective interpretation of evidence and whose objects are not observable entities, events, and processes cannot be a science. This prejudice can lead to one of two conclusions about the human and social studies -- that they are irretrievably condemned as subjective or that they have to become

like natural science, especially physics, if they wish to be taken seriously in their claim to produce knowledge.

It is ironic and significant that scientism itself has taken *two* forms when applied to the social and human studies -- holist and individualist. The former sees the task of a genuine science as the study of organic-like systems or wholes. This idea is traceable back to the positivism of Comte. It means that social science can only deal with supposedly objective collectives, systems, or holistic epochs. The individualist version sees science as employing a reductionist empiricism that deals only with atomistic data about objective observable events and actions. This version is traceable to the Viennese logical positivists. Both versions reject the possibility of social explanation on the basis of a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach or an approach that tries to develop explanations employing a combination of hermeneutics and objective empirical enquiry about non-holistic structures.

Both versions of scientism are false for two main reasons. First, the claim that there is only one scientific method to which all empirical explanations must conform if they are to produce knowledge is not borne out by studies of the actual methodologies of various natural sciences, let alone of social sciences. That the scientistic proponents of methodological union and exclusiveness have not themselves agreed over the years is a glaring flaw in the argument for methodological unity. Second, the logical empiricist account of scientific method, on which scientism has recently based itself, does not in fact seem to describe any branch of science. Furthermore, scientism is politically dangerous because it can lead to an attitude of passivity in the face of the supposed impossibility of objective knowledge about the social conditions of action, or to an irrational voluntarism inspired by the idea of the supposed non-existence of objective social structures and hence an absence of social constraints on action.

Nevertheless, in spite of these strictures I have tried to defend the idea that there is or should be a loosely unified form of scientific reasoning that does apply to all branches of empirical explanation and which serves to separate science from non-science. Positivists of various kinds have long strived to achieve such a unity and demarcation. I have tried to develop an alternative to their account that both upholds the important differences between branches of science and maintains the possibility of scientific enquiry into society and its history against the defenders of the radical separateness of the so-called "moral" or human studies. There have been other similar arguments proposed

recently² but the account of science I have proposed has some novel features.

The ultimate rationale for a science of society must be to rescue the possibility of rational, humanistic, democratic social transformation on the bases of, firstly, increasingly truthful understanding of the history, structures, and processual mechanisms of society and, secondly, an empirically developed conception of what a good society should be like in very general terms derived partly from a conception of persons as necessarily social being.³ That is, the possibilities of emancipative action have to be understood and grasped. And this first involves transcending the dichotomies mentioned above. Attempts to do this have recently been made by Jurgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, Roy Bhaskar, Maurice Mandelbaum, and others.⁴

Optimistic belief in the possibility of rational, affirmative, social transformation does require a new foundation because positivism and evolutionism no longer seem to have optimistic explanatory power. Critics of positivism are apt to forget the optimistic, radical, and democratic character that it had in Austria and Germany in the 30s. The original logical positivists, such as Schlick, Carnap, and especially Neurath, saw their work as recasting philosophy to rid it of oppressive idealism, speculative metaphysics, and irrationalism (which could be seen as underpinning Fascism) and to provide the foundation for, among other things, an objective, value-free, social theory and a democratic politics in an irrationalist, totalitarian era.⁵ But positivism was later

² A considerable stream of the large literature relating debates in philosophy of science to social methodology questions has argued that positivism is an inadequate account of science. See the general discussions of positivism and its alternatives in I. Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (1983); F. Suppe (ed), *The Structure of Scientific Theories* (1977); W. Salmon, 'Four Decades of Scientific Explanation' (1989). For defences of the possibility of a science of society from different perspectives see R. Keat and J. Urry, *Social Theory as Science* (1975); R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979), *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (1986), *Reclaiming Reality* (1989); E. Gellner, 'The Scientific Status of the Social Sciences' (1984); A. Rosenberg, 'Philosophy of Science and the Potentials for Knowledge in the Social Sciences' (1986) and *Philosophy of Social Science* (1988); W.G. Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory, Vol. 1* (1983).

³ The importance of conceptualising people as necessarily social by nature as a basis for sociological and moral arguments has been extensively defended by Kai Nielsen in, for example, 'A Rationale for Egalitarianism' (1981).

⁴ For Habermas and Apel, see the Bibliography; R. Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (1986) and *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (1991); and M. Mandelbaum, *Purpose and Necessity in Social Theory* (1987). See also the essays in J. Forester (ed), *Critical Theory and Public Life* (1985).

⁵ For general discussions of logical positivism (more accurately called "logical empiricism") see A.J. Ayer (ed), *Logical Positivism* (1959); H. Feigl, 'The Origin and Spirit of Logical Positivism' (1969); O. Hanfling, *Logical Positivism* (1981). For Neurath's work see his *Foundations of the Social Sciences* (1944) and *Empiricism and Sociology* (1973).

attacked by some philosophers for its reductive empiricism and (wrongly) blamed for some right-wing social engineering carried out under the inspiration of positivist economics and sociology. Social evolutionism was also transformative in its intent in mid-to-late 19th century Britain and Germany. But it became discredited because of its association with Social Darwinism or, in its later structural-functional form, with a holistic and conservative theory that stressed the norms of social inertia and cultural and ideological hegemony. This is unfortunate because an evolutionary epistemology has much to offer social scientific enquiry due to its potential to underline a theory of institutional transformation as the dynamic consequence of attempted social reproduction.⁶

Theories of rational social construction (or "social engineering" of a sort, to use a more problematic and redolent term) must have a central place in the social studies and do so under one guise or another. Social enquiry has always received an impetus, directly or indirectly, from problems of political action, administration, social control, social planning, and social justice. Even so-called "alternative" political movements, such as the Green Movement, need a social theory that purports to grasp correctly existing social processes and person/society relationships on which to base a practical programme. This must not only be fully recognised but made the object of an internal scientific critique that affirms, against irrationalists, autonomists, cynics, conservatives, and pessimists, the basic project of actively promoting democracy, equality, and social progress on the basis of social knowledge. How to liberate people from oppressive structures and arbitrary power should still be on the agenda. A penetrative and critical science that is able to grasp the objectivity of social realities and the possibilities of progressive change is an essential requirement, as the 18th and 19th century founders of the social sciences knew. It is now possible to provide a more viable philosophical foundation for such a social science. And the core of such a science must be a structural-historical perspective.

While it is generally true that practising historians are usually concerned to make descriptions and explanations of particular actions, events, and processes many of them believe that their approach to doing so is quite different from social science and natural science, involving a narrative method, imaginative interpretation, and the ability to be free somehow of social and psychological generalisations and theories. I call this position

⁶ See the different defences of the importance of an evolutionary perspective to social explanation in P. Van Parijs, *Evolutionary Explanation in the Social Sciences* (1981); and R. Harré and U.J. Jensen (eds), *The Philosophy of Evolution* (1981).

"historicism" to contrast it with scientism.⁷ Practising historicalists have usually been complacent about the relevance of philosophical and methodological issues. Social and economic historians and historical sociologists, however, have not on the whole been complacent about such issues because they have been attempting to develop a new kind of enquiry, one which stands between history, as traditionally conceived, and the social studies. They often claim to be studying the social totality, but in what form it exists, how it could have a history, and how it should be explained, are not agreed.

I have tried to argue in this dissertation that social structural history should become the core for a unified science of action and society, past and present, which is like the sciences of nature but different in some respects. A new, much improved account of science derived from critical realist epistemology and ontology overcomes the problem of scientism by underpinning the diversity within unity of the sciences. A similar argument has been advanced by many philosophers and theorists of the social studies in recent years, as we have seen in Chapter Four.

II METHODOLOGICAL STRUCTURISM

I have argued throughout that in order for sociologists and historians adequately to explain any of the moments and levels of social totalities -- actions, utterances, events, production, behavioural patterns, cultures, structures, and so on, and changes in patterns, cultures, and structures -- they need concepts and theories of all of these and of how they relate to each other. However, that is not to say much about actual explanations because it is the content of the theories that is obviously crucial. For example, we can see that the behavioural approaches of James Coleman and George Homans, which are forms of individualist theory, and the structural-functionalism of Talcott Parsons, which is a form of holism, all offer more or less complete approaches to social and historical explanation in the sense that they have theories and explanations of all these aspects. But what is more important is that individualism and holism are fatally flawed by their explanatory concentration on one or other side of the structuring process. Behaviourism attempts to explain social phenomena by reference to the motivations of individual behaviour while structural-functionalism, although purporting to be an action theory, in effect explains action by reference to its supposed functional relation to a social system.

⁷ See my *Explanation in Social History*, pp. 22-3 and 59 for discussion of historicism. What amounts to historicism has been defended by I. Berlin, 'The Concept of Scientific History' (1960); W. H. Dray *Laws and Explanation in History* (1957); G. R. Elton, 'Two Kinds of History', in R.W. Fogel and G.R. Elton, *Which Road to the Past?* (1983).

Methodological structurism tries to tie the micro and macro levels of social analysis together, without subordinating either to the other, by giving an account of how human personality, intentions, and actions interact with culture and structure to determine each other and social transformations over time. In order to do this it is essential that there be a model of humans as social agents. As I have argued, agential persons have innate causal powers to affect intentionally and unintentionally their own actions and bring about changes in the world. Action is thus socially structuring. But structure pre-exists individual actions and conditions them. However, the generality of action through time is necessary for the creation, continued reproduction, and gradual transformation of structures which leads to the creation of new structures. The historical/transformational dimension is essential to the structurist methodology. Both individualists and holists tend to ignore it.

The versions of methodological structurism that have been argued for recently by several social theorists and methodologists, such as those Giddens, Touraine, Elias, Abrams, and Bendix, although not employing this term, recognise and agree with the basic tenets outlined above. All are explicitly concerned to theorise the dialectic between the structuring power of people and the enabling and constraining real structures of society. They have tried to establish methodologies for linking micro and macro analyses and for explaining social structural history. All give a central place to the particular historical processes of active social reproduction and transformation. The structurationism of Anthony Giddens is the most comprehensive but although he has extensively articulated a framework he has not employed it for social historical enquiries. His approach is self-consciously an attempt to bridge the gaps between Marxism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and linguistic theory by developing detailed concepts of human agency and time-space relations. Alain Touraine's action sociology includes both general methodological and theoretical statements and empirical enquiries into contemporary social movements. Like Giddens, he has given a central place to the agential actor who structures the social world. He and his associates have carried out research while participating in certain social movements in order to discover and articulate the unarticulated but significant relationships that the participants have among their action, consciousness, and the concrete conditions of their transformative action. Norbert Elias has also written a good deal about the relationship between, on the one hand, a methodology that emphasises structuring agency and objective social figurations, and, on the other, the importance of historical enquiry into particular figurations. In his detailed historical studies he shows the dialectical relationship between individuals and the

network of roles, rules, and positions in which they act. For him the task of sociology is not the construction of ideal types or generalisations *à la* Max Weber but concrete historical analyses which draw upon theoretical knowledge of social figurations. Similarly, Philip Abrams gave a central place to the interrelationships of personal activity, experience, and social organisation as being continuously constructed in time as the focus of what he called 'historical sociology'. Reinhard Bendix's important contribution has been to show clearly how he believes a historical-structurist conception of social processes is incompatible with general ahistorical theories developed out of an *a priori*, rationalistic perspective.

III STRUCTURIST HISTORY

With this approach we have a philosophical and methodological basis for showing the centrality to social science of the historical study of social structures. Methodological structurism has temporality as an essential component because the socially structuring process in which humans are constantly engaged has the (usually unintended) consequence of producing a history of structures. Therefore genuine social scientists should in effect be structural historians, irrespective of which label is attached to their practices. Conversely, to be good structural historians in the sense of the account of social science established here structurism has to be adopted as a methodology.

I have argued that confirmation of the power of this methodological argument can be found in the writings that have been developed in this structurist and historical mode. Touraine, Elias, Abrams, and Bendix have not only explicitly developed versions of such a structurist methodology but also made rich explanations of particular social processes employing them. They and several others, most notably Geertz and Lalande and the other historians mentioned in Chapter Three, can be seen as belonging to a vaguely defined but identifiable tradition of thought in the social studies that in effect is based on methodological and sociological structurism -- what I called in Chapter Two *The Relational-Structurist Tradition*. This has grown out of particular interpretations of the work of Marx and Weber with some influences coming also from Durkheim, Simmel, Francophone structuralism, Piaget, and phenomenology. The members of this tradition have all attempted to develop similar approaches to explaining how all the moments and levels of social reality relate to each other over time in a structuring manner.

Drawing on the discussion of examples in Chapters Two and Three it is now possible to state in abstract the ideal type or model of the relational-structurist approach

to socio-historical explanation that I believe they collectively contain or is implicit in most of their work. I emphasise that this is not meant to be a precise description of all their methodologies and theories. This is a pure type from which they all deviate in various particulars. It contains the following elements:

1. A structuralist ontology and epistemology, which implies a structuralist methodology. That is, explanations of any moment or part of the social totality presuppose or imply explanations of all the others. In order to explain any moment or part it must be situated in its total structural context. This is because society is a non-reducible macroscopic structure in which there is a dynamic interaction, rather than a holistic determinism, between the parts. No part is necessarily dominant over the others, but as I say below, only humans have structuring power within the social structure. Structures as such do not have any autonomy.
2. A realist-relational concept of social structure. Structure is seen as relatively autonomous of individual actions and understandings but not of the structuring power of collective action over time. Structures consist of real sets of enduring social relations, rules, and roles that organise action and behaviour.
3. An abstract "levels" model of the social totality along the lines of the economy/politics/ ideology/culture set of "levels" or "spheres" of social reality, or something similar. But the reality of and the relationships between the "levels" are major points of debate with considerable variation in the theorisation of and roles assigned to these "levels" and the hierarchical relations, if any, between them.
4. A model of persons as social agents, having self-activating powers of intentionality, rationality, reflexivity, and choice in a context of social and cultural constraint. It is people who are theorised as the makers of history but always within particular enabling and disabling social and cultural situations.
5. An important place is given to concepts of mentality and ideology. While the tradition accords a central place to systems of ideas in forming understandings of reality, it usually holds that ideas, actions, and social structures can be out of phase with each other. Mentalities and ideas have to be studied for their social consequences because of their formation of understandings and motivational effects and criticised for their adequacy as articulations of social structures.
6. An important place is given to the theorisation and study of social hierarchies as organisers of consciousness and loyalties, but simple class models and theories are ruled out.
7. Unintended consequences of action and unrealised results of intentions are seen as highly significant for social change. If ideas, actions, and structures are not mutually

reinforcing then gradual social change happens irrespective of the desires of individual actors and regardless of what other forces may be at work.

8. This leads to the final component -- the idea that all societies are inherently changing and therefore fundamentally historical. The basic structuralist idea -- that society is continually being structured by agential actors, partly as a consequence of their intentions but also unintentionally, "behind their own backs", as it were -- is subscribed to by historians in this tradition. They therefore see the three fundamental moments of the historical process, all of which have to be analysed, as being:
 - (i) given structural and cultural circumstances that motivate, enable, and constrain action and thought;
 - (ii) action that is historically significant for its structuring consequences; and
 - (iii) the intended and unintended consequences of action that turn into the objective structural conditions that motivate, enable, and constrain action and thought, and which often appear to be unalterable.

This approach to history therefore holds that persons and societies are highly complex but determinate entities requiring for the explanation of their composition, functioning, and transformations an order of enquiry which must go beyond pre-theoretical knowledge and common sense observations and understandings. The use of explicit theory is indispensable to socio-historical explanation. This contrasts with historical writing done in the traditional interpretive and "common sense" mode, which subscribes to what I earlier called "historicism". Even many writers who call themselves "social historians", which, on the face of it, should indicate that they are interested in explaining the history of structures as structures, do not employ a social scientific mode of enquiry.

IV TOWARD THE REUNIFICATION OF THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Given the philosophically weak but institutionally strong disciplinary boundaries in our institutes and culture generally, the best structural historians have a peculiar problem of disciplinary delineation, as many of them have recognised, since they wish to be at once historians, social theorists, sociologists, anthropologists, and sometimes economists. They wish both to distinguish themselves from historians of actions and events by enquiring into the social totality, and to transcend and supersede the explanatory practices of traditional historians. So, their aim has to be not just theoretically and empirically to explain the relationships among social structures,

cultures, actions, and events, but also to uncover and account for the history of real structures themselves. If their practice were to be based on the realist-relational approach it would provide a framework for simultaneously explaining particular acts, events, patterns of behaviour, consciousness, and structural change. Such a framework is therefore well suited to be the basis for structural history. Traditional historians do not use such a framework because they see themselves as explaining "unique" individual acts, events, and processes largely by reference to "unique" dispositions, purposes, and reasons, and not to general social, cultural, and psychological imperatives. But they are largely mistaken in this, or at least incomplete in their explanations; although intentions and reasons are certainly necessary to such explanations, as I have argued. It is because of the deeper relation of partly intentional behaviour to both the given structural conditions of behaviour and the production, reproduction, and transformation of structures, that action-oriented and structure-oriented history can be united on a more fundamental level. Such a unified science would ideally then incorporate all the existing empirical and theoretical social and historical studies.

The merging of the existing historical and social discourses could be and has been argued for from several different (but sometimes overlapping) theoretical perspectives:

1. Cultural Holism -- which argues for unity on the basis that all individual actions and events have meaning as part of social and cultural wholes. This perspective aims at an explanatory subsumption of history, sociology, and anthropology under the phenomenological and interpretive study of constellations of meaning.
2. Francophone Structuralism -- which argues for the explanation of social phenomena as the manifestations and bearers of deep structures of minds, culture, and history, which have to be formalised as systems of rules of transformation.
3. Structural Functionalism -- which sees all acts, patterns of behaviour, and culture as functionally related to the maintenance of the equilibrium of holistic, organic-like structures of relations and roles. This perspective aims at explanatory reduction of history, psychology, and anthropology to structural sociology.
4. Sociological Individualism -- which argues for unity on the basis that social phenomena are really only aggregates of individual acts and so attempts to make an explanatory reduction of social science to atomistic history or behaviourist psychology.
5. Sociological Structurism -- in which action, behaviour, culture, and structure are studied in an ongoing structuring context. Intentional and unintentional actions are seen as causally conditioned and enabled by structures; and structures of rules, roles, and relations are seen as the consequence of prior collective action.

Within this last perspective, the relational-structurist approach has the virtues of providing all-encompassing coherence without reduction. Furthermore, it makes it possible to retain a temporal dimension as intrinsic to any study of society since structure, culture, behaviour, and acts are inter-related in a dynamic, transforming historical manner. While this approach does attempt to argue that particular acts and events can only be investigated for their causation, significance, and meaning within a structural context, it does not deny that there is merit in making a division of labour between, on the one hand, the explanation of particular acts and events and on the other, the explanation of patterns of behaviour and structures since, on one level, every act and event is different from every other and the precise mix of mechanisms or imperatives will vary in every case. Nevertheless, on another level, all acts and events do fall under general descriptions and into general patterns and, furthermore, no particular act is the outcome of a truly unique set of mechanisms. The two kinds of history must be methodologically united on this deeper level, and thus able to take account of the relationship of particular acts and events to patterns of behaviour and social structures over time.

Any division between static and dynamic studies has validity only as a heuristic device. Since all societies are in a constant if gradual state of change, both internally and in their connections with their natural environment, any attempt to study them in isolation from either their changing material foundations or relational transformations must be abstract and one-sided. Such abstractions do, however, have their uses but are not confined to any of the existing sub-branches of the historical and social studies. While societies are constantly changing, it is often heuristically helpful theoretically to postulate them as fixed entities; and, in any case, the fact that structures gradually change does not rule out the possibility of scientific enquiry since they do have a relative continuity as structures. Without some continuity scientific enquiry would be impossible and so would social understanding since language and meaning themselves would be impossible, and so would action because it is predicated upon an enabling social context and is mostly oriented toward reproducing that context. Even consciously transformative action requires a relatively stable social object to work upon.

Now, to return to the claim made near the beginning of this chapter regarding the transcendence of those problematic dichotomies, the discussion shows, I believe, how they might be resolved. Firstly, science and hermeneutics are not the opposites they were once thought to be although there is still a distinction between them. There is an important hermeneutical element in all science just as there should also be an element of scientific

enquiry in the hermeneutical study of texts, art forms, and social practices. Therefore, secondly, explanation and understanding are not opposites but have an important area of overlap in the social studies. Explanation partly depends on personal interpretations and hermeneutical understandings of actions and social situations but it must go beyond them, as historians such as Clifford Geertz, Barrington Moore, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and Robert Darnton have shown. Thirdly, a sharp distinction between the studies of action and structure on the grounds of uniqueness versus generality or ephemeral versus continuous is untenable because of the structuring role of action and the conditioning role of structure. Each is dependent on the other. Fourthly, following from the previous point, change and continuity are not distinct aspects of social reality but two intertwined moments of it. And finally, history and sociology cannot therefore be two distinct kinds of enquiry, one concerned with uniqueness and change and the other with generality and continuity. The dialectic between uniqueness/generality and change/continuity is the difficult multi-dimensional reality that social science has to try to grasp and represent through two-dimensional media and often inadequate linguistic and diagrammatical devices.

V TOWARD DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Finally, to return to the significance of advocating a transformative scientific approach to society and history. What actually hangs on the use of the concept of science here? Why does consciously transformative practice require a scientific basis? While none of the methodologists and historians in this tradition directly state political lessons about the present from their historical enquiries most of them do see the contemporary political resonances at least of historical work, as would be expected of historians influenced by Marx and Weber. Indeed, some of them have engaged in discussions about the contemporary socio-political relevance of structural historiography.⁸ They rightly believe that structural historiography must be a necessary component of scientific knowledge of the present. History must be rescued from the ideologues who appropriate it on the basis of individualist or holist philosophies in order to legitimise radical individualist political ideologies or repressive regimes that promote holistic cults of

⁸ See, for example, E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Social Function of the Past: Some Questions' (1972) and 'Looking Forward: History and the Future' (1981); R. Bendix, *Force, Fate, and Freedom* (1984). Much of the contents of the journals *Radical History Review* and *History Workshop* are suffused with a political intent. Perhaps the most outstanding recent example of a historian who has written history, and written about historical methodology, from a politically conscious position in the present is Edward Thompson -- see, for example, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978) and 'The Politics of Theory' (1981). See also the Introduction by Oswyn Murray to the English translation of Paul Veyne's *Bread and Circuses* (1990) where he discusses the political significance of philosophical history, including that of Michel Foucault.

national character and destiny.

There has been a long, acrimonious, and sometimes arid debate, stemming mainly from Marx, about the merits of so-called scientific approaches to political action, but I believe it is worth bringing it up again because of the new arguments about scientific knowledge. But before pointing out the value of this new scientific terminology it is well to point out some of the perhaps obvious dangers in any argument about the relevance of science because the notion of science has been devalued. One is that it leads to political passivity because if correct practice awaits absolutely correct social explanation then it will wait a long time. It is well known that this situation has been common among some Marxist groups who have awaited either the development of the "correct situation" or the "correct theory" before engaging in revolutionary acts and so have done nothing. It has also existed among some academic theoreticians of revolution who have occupied themselves with interminable arcane debates over correct concepts and practices without ever examining concrete events and processes or engaging in piecemeal political or other socially transformative activity.

Another danger is that social transformation is seen as a technical problem only -- a matter of implementing abstract knowledge in an instrumental, dehumanised fashion. This view is prevalent amongst those social scientists (especially economists) and politicians who are inspired by a scientific, positivistic, and decisionistic outlook. For them, society is viewed as a set of rational individuals and their observable behavioural patterns, which can be manipulated by the right stimulus-reward regime to conform to the prior decisions of social managers. Underlying this approach has been an inadequate concept of science and false social and psychological theories, which tend to impute behaviour to a simplistic combination of a supposedly rational drive for gratification in a context of environmental stimuli and rewards.⁹ Such an approach to social engineering is

⁹ Some methodological individualist historians and economists have been strongly influenced by rational exchange theory, which is a kind of behaviourism and contains an empiricist epistemology. The best examples are found amongst cliometricians and some recent institutionalist economists, who argue that economic and social change are a consequence of individual pursuit of deriving maximum utility from exchange with other individuals. For discussions of cliometrics see Donald N. McCloskey, 'The Achievements of the Cliometric School' (1978); and R.W. Fogel, 'Scientific History and Traditional History' (1983). On rational-individualist institutionalist economic history see D.C. North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* (1981) and my *Explanation in Social History*, Ch. 11. Neo-classical theory, which still dominates economics in capitalist countries, provides the behavioural postulates and methodological principles for these historians. Given the economic tenor of modern culture and politics neo-classical economic theory has also come to provide ideological underpinnings for the modern capitalist class and state. Because it sees society in individualist terms and views market rationality as the prime motivation of behaviour and basis for morality in allowed free rein, it therefore sees the task of politics in instrumental terms as being to remove impediments to the operation of supposedly freely moving

doomed to fail in its own terms and has had deleterious unforeseen consequences.

As I have argued, a concept of science as the absolutely truthful result of correctly structured logical enquiry is of no use either as an account of the existing sciences or as a guide to practice. Rather than being the entirely passive reflector of an unchanging external reality, all sciences, as cognitive networks, have to some extent a mutually transformative relationship with their theoretically specified objects. That is, observation and theory interact in the sense that theories determine to some extent what we choose to observe and study and how we understand it and observations in turn determine to some extent the content of our theories. Piaget has persuasively developed the notion of a genetic, structuring, epistemology that weakens the place of absolute objectivity and truth. But this is not the same as advocating relativism or irrationalism. As I have tried to show, we must retain as central the idea of truth as a regulative principle of enquiry and as the provisional result of a gradual convergence between our frameworks, our activities, and the degree of correspondence between our theories and the hidden realities of the way the world is.

While it is true that without approximately correct "common sense" knowledge of the world we could not successfully live our lives (if at all), consciously transformative practice to achieve pre-conceived goals requires a much greater degree of penetrating precision about structural realities and historical processes than that of ordinary actors. And there do seem to have been some advances in the development of such knowledge during the past century. These limited advances are the result of the realism inherent within the social sciences. The reality of society is multi-faceted, multi-levelled, and historical, and is beyond the capacity of pre-theoretical observation and understanding. Just as the understanding and explanation of human physiology require a science that goes well beyond personal understandings about our bodies, so social relations and the rules governing our social interaction and the exercise of social power are also in need of theoretical and structural knowledge.

Therefore if consciously transformative practice is to achieve its goals the structural realities on which such action has to work and which set the limits of what is possible have to be more or less correctly understood. Above all, this involves knowledge

utility-maximising individuals. Some economic theorists have therefore logically seen neo-classicism as the paradigm of all social science. See, for example, M. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) and G.S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (1976). For a trenchant critique of the philosophical foundations of neo-classicism see M. Hollis and E. Nell, *Rational Economic Man* (1975).

of the existing institutionalised and informal power structures and their historical origins. It also involves understanding how attempted transformation actually works and how in turn it feeds back upon practices to modify them. There is an interaction between structures, knowledge, and practice so that social science and political practice have to be continually reflexive. The main beneficial result of a genuinely scientific social knowledge, therefore, is to reduce the unintended effects of transformative action. The social sciences in this respect are not different from the natural sciences. The latter usually aim at least at engineering situations with such precision that they achieve only their goals and do not bring about unintended consequences. That requires precise scientific knowledge of the complexity of natural systems. But of course absolute precision remains as an often very unrealised goal even in natural science and engineering, as we know full well from the failings of machines, medicines, and buildings; the destruction of ecosystems; and the general pollution of the environment on which we all depend. (These failings are of course made worse by ideologies of greed and sectional commitment.) The sea of ignorance still lies all before us and it is the scientific perspective that convinces us that that is so. It also convinces us that the boundary between our knowledge and our ignorance is gradually being extended into the realm of the unknown but not always with beneficial consequences for human life.

A further potentially beneficial consequence of a historical-structurist social methodology is its power to show that violent so-called "voluntaristic" or "autonomous" political behaviour and large-scale, violent social upheavals always have unforeseen, dangerously destructive, consequences. 'Autonomist' behaviour is based on a belief that there is no objective social structural reality, only powerfully repressive individuals, and therefore action is thought to be ruled only by egoistic individualism. But a scientific approach shows that it cannot be so ruled because society is structurally ordered and action cannot easily and wilfully break out of the order or destroy it. This realisation, dimly perceived, often prompts disorganised political terrorism, which sometimes has the actual repressive result that autonomists supposedly wish to avoid but sometimes deliberately provoke. Similarly organised violence of a totalitarian kind is also based on a belief that society can be reordered wilfully and rapidly if sufficient force is applied. This has proven to be partly correct in the sense that violent social reorganisations have sometimes been achieved by mass collective action or through the elite monopolisation of administrative-coercive power. But never has it happened without massive unintended consequences. Military invasions, revolutions, and state-directed terrorisms and repressions have been recurring features of history and have always resulted in dislocations and outcomes that were undesired by the instigators.

Given the value, then, of such a scientific foundation for political action, what form should a scientifically based transformative politics take? I have argued in this paper for a conception of social science that draws on the work of the best practitioners of social historiography. Their work shows the power of a combination of realist epistemology, convergence theory of truth, agential concept of persons and action, historical and levels model of social structure, and methodological structurism. Using this as a framework for political action involves understanding at the outset that science is a methodology that does not guarantee absolutely correct knowledge of any system so political activity done on a social scientific basis certainly cannot be relied upon always to achieve its goals or avoid unintended consequences. And indeed, one of the consequences of this model of scientific reasoning is the realisation of the importance of the dialectic between scientific understanding, social structure, and political practice. This should then prompt a political attitude that centres on:

- a radically egalitarian and democratic conception of the political process and the nature of the good society towards which practice should be moving;
- a theoretically and historically informed empirical understanding of social structure and social power;
- negotiation about the relationship between social theory and social goals;
- a modesty of short-term political aims within the long-term perspective of egalitarianism and democracy; and
- rational *decision making* about actions on the basis of the previous points.

Without these the risk of failure grows. Furthermore, this attitude excludes holistic utopian blueprints of the future good or perfect society towards which practice should be directed. The model of science and of human consciousness outlined above and the principles of egalitarianism and democracy are incompatible with *a priori* utopian thinking and the imposition of grand ahistorical theories.

CONCLUSION

In the Introduction (p. 9), I wrote that by the end I hoped to have established five theses. While "established" is probably too strong a claim, I think that a case for the five theses has been made out. However, these theses are of course on the level of philosophical arguments rather than of scientific hypotheses or empirical claims about history and society so their validity is not open to empirical confirmation in the same way. The cogency and persuasiveness of philosophical arguments depends largely on their coherence and their ability to bridge gaps between what are, on one hand, firmly held and widely agreed general views about the world and, on the other, new possibilities that are only partially and dimly understood. Thus the basic strategy herein has been to present a general argument that moves from an understanding of the nature of scientific enquiry and of the existing methodologies of structural history writing to argue that explanation of structural history can be and sometimes is methodologically similar to the sciences of nature. This similarity is based on the idea of establishing a domain of structural history enquiry on the premise that there is an ontological distinction between real social structures and social events.

The domain of enquiry into the history of social structures needs, like all scientific domains, a unifying conception of subject matter about which there are fundamental problems of composition and evolution, and a unifying methodology. All mature domains also have a unifying general explanatory theory. Structural history, being still in the domain-forming process, lacks all these unifying elements in any but an inchoate and contentious sense. Movement toward delineating a domain framework that takes account of the arguments about composition and evolution that I presented at the end of Chapter One can be detected on two levels. On one level there are conscious attempts being made to provide a framework of methodology, general concepts, and theory such as by Anthony Giddens, Philip Abrams, Pierre Bourdieu, Charles Tilly, and Alain Touraine. On another level, there are conscious attempts to show how structural history should be approached, theorised, and written through practices from which are drawn general methodological conclusions, such as by Clifford Geertz, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Charles Tilly, Reinhard Bendix, and Michael Mann.

I have argued that all of these theorists and historians share a relational-structuralist conception of society and a structuralist methodology. But not all structural historians share these methodological and theoretical foundations so we cannot say that a

genuine shared framework exists. As I have tried to indicate, the advantage of structurism as the foundation for structural historical enquiry arises from its emphasis on the structuring agency of people and the taking seriously of social complexity. Explaining structural history is a task that must employ appropriate methodologies and theories but is not in itself a methodological and theoretical enquiry. Rather, empirical enquiry must stress the real complexity of social processes and attempt to incorporate them into a comprehensive account that leaves no loose ends, no moments of the social totality that are inexplicable or left dangling. At their best structuralist historians of societies have achieved an exemplary level of explanatory complexity and persuasiveness.