

## Introduction

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The right attitude towards such bulky artefacts as the Marxist tradition is not one of dutiful conservation, but of ruthless recycling. There is nothing wrong, therefore, in chopping up unwieldy chunks, in discarding stultifying mental pollutants, in using the latest intellectual technology to reshape – sometimes beyond recognition – dislocated parts, or in letting the rest rot into oblivion. Only the unashamed adoption of this attitude can keep the Marxist tradition alive as one essential component of the political culture of the Left, that is, of the thought of those individuals and organizations whose action is guided by a paramount concern for the least advantaged, the exploited, the excluded, the oppressed. Only the stubborn, unrelenting enactment of this attitude can make the Marxist tradition suitable for fruitful, relevant, effective thinking in today's world. This is, at any rate, the conviction that permeates all the essays collected in this book.

The recycling of Marxism, to which these essays claim to contribute, is not for me a central, autonomous intellectual project. It has nothing to do with the reconstruction, let alone the rehabilitation, of an authentic Marxism that would be left unscathed by the tragic, sometimes sordid fate of Soviet regimes. It is rather a by-product of an attempt to do for our times – *multis mutandis mutatis* – what someone like Karl Marx (or, for that matter, John Stuart Mill) tried to do for his. For this purpose, Marxism is just one source of inspiration, one compartment in the tool box – just as French socialist thought or classical economics were for Marx's own purposes. And there is no reason to believe that the outcome will be recognizably Marxist. No doubt those who care about dogmatic purity will find the outcome truncated, impoverished, sullied, adulterated by the admixture of countless alien elements. But for the Left in the sense indicated – the only sense in which I care to belong to it – the intellectual

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tasks ahead are daunting. Steering our complex, heavy societies in a direction which can confidently be expected to make things better, or at least no worse, is a strenuous business. If we are to succeed, no valuable intellectual resource must be wasted. Hence, no time or ingenuity must be wasted on exegetical quibbles. Nor must any patience be spared for the sterile claim that intellectual heritages must be accepted *in toto* or not at all, or for the crazy belief that answers to the vital questions that face us today are to be found in nineteenth-century writings. Never mind purity or orthodoxy. Anything usable must be used, whatever its origins.

For the very same reason, we cannot afford to chuck out the precious concepts and insights that are to be found in the Marxist tradition. Indeed, it takes little effort to discover that the way in which we, the inhabitants of late twentieth-century industrial countries, think about our social world, and in particular about what we find less than satisfactory about it, is permeated by that tradition. Even some of those who see themselves as the fiercest opponents of Marxist regimes cannot help paying tribute to Marxist thought. When identifying exploitation and alienation as two cardinal ills of the capitalist world order, for example, Pope John Paul II is using, vaguely but forcefully, two concepts which have played the most central role in the Marxist critique of capitalism and which owe their current use far beyond Marxist circles to the momentous historical influence of that critique.<sup>1</sup> These concepts are more than handy slogans. They can provide the core of, or at least a fruitful starting point for, meaningful critiques of present conditions and sensible proposals for reforming the latter. In the process of spelling out these critiques and proposals with the help of such concepts, it would be absurd to settle any issue by appealing to some orthodox doctrine. But it would be no less absurd to ignore the rich and insightful critical discussion to which these concepts have been subjected in the Marxist tradition.

If (and only if) it is viewed in this light and mobilized in this way, this tradition is not just alive. It also has a future. But this is not the future of an intact, monolithic, pure, coherent, all-encompassing doctrine. It is the future of an endlessly revised, heterogeneous, motley family of concepts and conjectures, of explanations and justifications, constantly facing challenges from different traditions and mixing with them in a chaotic, heretical and fertile way. Whether in the East or in the West, Marxism does not need to be dumped any more than it deserves to be worshipped. It needs and deserves to be recycled.

Most of the essays that make up this volume were written before the dramatic events of 1989. But these events, I believe, will make it easier for

many to share the attitude towards Marxism that I have been advocating. When Marxism no longer scares, one can allow oneself to listen to what it says. When Marxism no longer exalts, one becomes able to listen to what is being said against what it says. Marxist credentials, as a result, cease to provide sufficient ground for either rejecting or endorsing a claim, and room is thereby made for a more relaxed, easy-going, intellectually fruitful attitude. Adopting the latter does not require us to turn a blind eye to the immense amount of unnecessary suffering inflicted by Marxist-inspired regimes. Nor does it oblige us to belittle the bitter disappointment of the many people, East and West, who had put all their hopes of improving their society in the Marxist creed and sometimes spent their whole lifetimes serving a cause they now realize is lost. Very far from being an insult to the victims of Marxist regimes or to those disappointed by their failure, the attitude advocated and displayed in these essays is a key component of what is needed to rekindle their faith in a better future and to refurbish the intellectual equipment required to fight for it.

The essays selected show this attitude at work on a wide range of topics, not all of which bear a direct connection with political concerns.<sup>2</sup> Part I focuses on historical materialism and explains what makes it a very peculiar instance of a potentially fruitful general approach to social change. In the process, it clarifies how the primacy Marxism ascribes to the forces of production is to be understood, indicates how catastrophe models can be used to shed light on a theory of social revolutions and corrects G. A. Cohen's classic thesis about the role played by functional explanations in historical materialism.

Part II looks at what is undoubtedly the most distinctive variant of Marxist crisis theory – the now infamous theory of the falling rate of profit – and provides a rational reconstruction of the degenerative research programme it gave rise to. From this it draws a number of methodological lessons whose implications reach far beyond this particular controversy, especially concerning the place of microfoundations, their role in fighting empiricist fallacies and their compatibility with structural explanations.

Part III articulates the various Marxist notions of exploitation, shows how the most distinctive among them assumes a theory of justice which is formally very close to libertarianism and indicates how another – the game-theoretical notion developed by John Roemer – can be generalized and then used to illuminate both the class structure of welfare capitalism – providing one makes room for job-based exploitation – and the ethical

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issues raised by the transnational migration of people and capital – providing one allows for citizenship-based exploitation.

Finally, Part IV presents and defends, in a somewhat provocative way, a ‘capitalist road to communism’: in order to get closer to Marx’s ‘realm of freedom’, there is no need for socialism, but rather for a gradually increasing unconditional basic income or universal grant. A number of objections raised against the desirability, the economic feasibility and the political feasibility of the proposal are systematically discussed. And the family of abundance and scarcity concepts is analysed in order to clarify the sense in which the feasibility of the proposal presupposes abundance.

The collection closes with a short, less academic essay, in which I indicate how I reconcile what I find attractive in the Marxist tradition with what drew me, over a decade ago, into the green movement.

All the essays, except the last one, were written and initially published in English. They are reprinted here with only minor stylistic and bibliographical modifications, a couple of abridgements and a number of additional cross references. Written over a ten-year period, they may not be fully consistent. But their purpose, here, is to illustrate an attitude I believe to be scientifically fruitful and politically important, not to set out a systematic theory. A more integrated treatment of some of the issues dealt with can be found in my other books.<sup>3</sup>

Even though some of the essays are older, I doubt that I would ever have written anything resembling this book, had I not joined, in September 1981, what was later to become the ‘September Group’. Attending the yearly meetings of this small group of ‘analytical Marxists and fellow travellers’ (Pranab Bardhan, Sam Bowles, Bob Brenner, Jerry Cohen, Jon Elster, Adam Przeworski, John Roemer, Hillel Steiner, Robert van der Veen, Erik Wright) has been – and will probably remain – the most exhilarating experience of my intellectual life. Several of the pieces included have been discussed at one or other of the group’s meetings. Two of them have been written jointly with another member of the group (Robert van der Veen, to whom I am particularly grateful both for this fruitful collaboration and for having agreed to the present reprinting of both pieces). And throughout the book, the work of my fellow members is often referred to, discussed, used and criticized. But these many explicit references do not give a full picture of what I owe to the tremendous stimulation of this bunch of kindred spirits, gathered in the flesh once a year, but present throughout the year as a

sympathetic though demanding invisible audience. This book is at one and the same time a very imperfect attempt by the group's youngest member to live up to the standards it has instilled in him, a critical introduction to the group's work and a display of the freedom of thought the group has tolerated on the part of one of its 'fellow travellers'.

The book also contains most of my own small contribution to what will have been one of the group's main achievements. Starting a decade before the 1989 events, it has been busy sorting through the Marxist heritage and selecting the insights and lessons worth retrieving before it was too late. While insignificant as long as the vessel's splendour remained intact in many people's eyes, the job is proving invaluable now that the vessel has irreversibly sunk. Invaluable, at any rate, for those people around the world whose confidence and hopes have been shaken, but whose gut feelings are unaltered: this world is too bad to be the best that can be had, let us think and fight towards a better one.

#### Notes

- 1 'The Marxist solution has failed, but the world still contains situations of marginalization and exploitation, especially in the Third World, and situations of human alienation, especially in the developed countries' (John Paul II 1991, §42).
- 2 Not all the articles I have published in English in connection with Marxism have been taken up in this volume. Two pieces on dialectics (Van Parijs, 1982a; 1989) were left out because I find the very project of trying to make sense of 'dialectics' too unpromising to encourage other people to give further (even negative) thought to this question. Two other pieces largely concerned with Marxist-inspired evolutionary explanations (Van Parijs 1982a; 1987) fitted better into the systematic exploration of the deep structure of the social sciences recorded in Van Parijs 1990 (chs 6 and 7). Finally, two pieces in which I assess the resources Marxism provides for the elaboration of a theory of justice (Van Parijs 1983; 1984) fitted better into the critical examination of contemporary theories of justice conducted in Van Parijs 1991 (chs 4 and 6).
- 3 See Van Parijs (1981; 1990) for the epistemological issues in parts I and II; Van Parijs (1991; and forthcoming) for the ethical issues in parts III and IV.

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## Part I

# A new start for historical materialism?

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# 1. From contradiction to catastrophe

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The constitutive *claim* of historical materialism, of the materialist conception of history, consists in giving an explanatory primacy to a social formation's 'material structure', i.e. to its productive forces (over its relationships of production) and to its economic base (over its superstructure). The central *difficulties* of historical materialism consist in reconciling this claim with (1) the idea that 'non-material' structures play a significant role; (2) the idea that history is an (objectively) 'goal-directed' process; and (3) the idea that political action may play a decisive role. These three difficulties I shall call (1) the 'primacy puzzle', (2) the 'paradox of teleology' and (3) the 'riddle of historical determinism'.

Among modern attempts to rephrase or reconstruct historical materialism in such a way that these difficulties can be solved, Althusser's Marxism was, for a long time, the most influential and also, apparently, the most rigorous. Unfortunately, the concepts it used in this attempt – e.g. 'determination in the last instance', 'dominance', 'overdetermination' – are so muddled and confusing, that they seem much more useful for dodging the issue than for shedding light on it.

In this chapter, I should like, with the help of very simple formal tools, to sketch an alternative to the Althusserian attempt to resolve these questions. I shall start with a reformulation of the materialist claim and then, by progressively enriching the basic model, show how the three difficulties mentioned above can be dealt with, without obscurity or *ad-hoc-ness*.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Attractors and the materialist claim

The two central propositions of historical materialism state that, in spite of possibly considerable time lags, there is a necessary tendency towards



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*correspondence*, or non-contradiction, on the one hand between the level of development of the productive forces and the nature of the relationships of production, and on the other hand between the economic base and the (legal-political and ideological) superstructure.<sup>2</sup>

What these laws of correspondence mean is, first, that not all combinations of material structures (productive forces, economic base) and non-material structures (relationships of production, superstructure) are possible, or at least viable – i.e. that only some of the logically possible combinations constitute stable equilibrium states, or *attractors*, of the social system.<sup>3</sup> But the laws of correspondence are more than just equilibrium laws, in which the two dimensions (the material one and the non-material one) could play symmetric roles. Also implied in them – and this is what makes them the core of historical *materialism*, of a *materialist* theory of history – is the claim that, whenever there is *contradiction*, i.e. non-correspondence, between the two dimensions, the non-material structure (relationships of production, superstructure) adjusts to the material one (productive forces, economic base), and *not* the other way round. This fundamental asymmetry between the two dimensions we can call the *primacy* of the material structures.

For the sake of convenience, let us now restrict our attention to the first proposition (which asserts the necessary correspondence between productive forces and relationships of production), and even to a particular fraction of the domain to which that proposition applies. Let us concentrate on the assertion that up to a certain level of development of the productive forces, the ‘corresponding’ relationships of production are *capitalist*, i.e. based on the private ownership of the means of production, whereas beyond that level, the ‘corresponding’ relationships of production are *socialist*, i.e. based on the collective ownership of the means of production. Let us then assume that the two terms of this correspondence can be considered as *continuous* variables – which is fairly straightforward as far as productive forces are concerned, and also as far as relationships of production are concerned, providing one bears in mind that qualitative variables can always be made quantitative by considering the frequency distribution of their values. This assumption enables us to represent in the diagram in figure 1.1 the instance of the first proposition of historical materialism to which we have restricted our attention.

What historical materialism amounts to claiming, in this particular case, is, first, that the curve in this diagram represents the set of stable equilibrium states (or attractors) of a social formation’s mode of production, and, secondly, that the dynamics which leads to this curve is ‘vertical’.

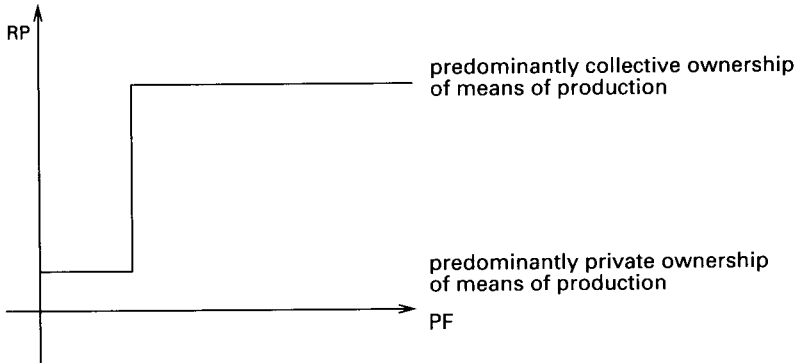


Figure 1.1 Historical materialism without catastrophe

The first point simply means that, if the mode of production happens to be at a point of the surface (which represents all logically possible combinations of *RP* and *PF*) which is not on the curve, it will tend to move towards the latter. The second point means that this movement will occur along vertical lines or, in other words, that from an initial position of contradiction between productive forces and relationships of production (i.e. from a point of the surface which is not on the curve), the mode of production will move towards correspondence by adjusting the level of *RP* (i.e. by an institutional change which privatizes or collectivizes the means of production), not by adjusting the level of *PF* (i.e. by increasing or decreasing the level of development of the productive forces). If the dynamics was 'horizontal' instead of 'vertical', correspondence would be restored by adjusting *PF*, not *RP*, and there would be a primacy of the 'non-material' relationships of production, not of the 'material' productive forces.

## 1.2 Slow versus fast dynamics and the primacy puzzle

The account of historical materialism proposed so far is obviously oversimplified. In particular, it does not accommodate the important fact that the relationships of production exert a crucial controlling influence on the development of the productive forces. Under given conditions, for instance, the introduction of capitalist relationships of production has the effect of freeing the productive forces from their feudal bonds and thus of dramatically fostering their development. And under different conditions, a socialist revolution similarly liberates the forces of production