HINDESS AND HIRST: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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Readers of Socialist Register cannot fail to have noted a steady flow of texts by a group of writers in England which has attempted nothing less than the cleansing of marxism of all its impurities. From this vast stream, we have chosen to examine one particular current—the work associated with Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, especially their four book length statements: Pre-capitalist modes of production (hereafter PCMP), Mode of production and social formation (an autocritique of PCMP, hereafter MPSF), and the two volume work Marx's "Capital" and capitalism today (MCCT, I, II). The latter, in particular, "intervenes" politically and may be taken to condense the socialism of their project.

Despite our authors' bans and proscriptions, we happen to believe that we are living in a material world which has a history. It is thus, for us, of some moment briefly to stress the location of their work within one wider tradition which has entailed an extraordinary intellectualisation of both marxist theory and the socialist project. The work we are criticising represents perhaps the most notorious example of this. There is thus a similarity in the styles and practices of this kind of work and its basic division between mental and manual labour—contributing to the de-skilling of the working class that has accompanied the restructuring of capitalism since the 1950s. These two bases have important implications for the notions of socialism within the texts we are examining.

We begin our critical survey where they begin, with their apriorism, with their commitment to a world which is only discursive—the spoken and thought world—a universe of concepts. We show how this, and indeed many of their errors, springs from a misunderstanding of production, of both what it is and how Marx analysed it. This leads us briefly to consider their claim of "necessary non-correspondence" and the fundamental circularity of their arguments. We conclude by stressing the political and theoretical significance of history as part of the socialist project—that of exposing and overcoming "the Obvious", the many and misleading forms in which Capitalism's relations present themselves "on the surface of society."
Starting with concepts

Despite their denial of what they misleadingly call the "epistemological project" (Cf. MPSF; MCCT, I: 227, 238), their own project has always entailed an epistemology. They have assumed that "Classical marxism" begins with concepts. They have argued that we have to cleanse our theoretical and philosophical equipment. Marx fought this fallacy for most of his life. He recognised that it enshrined the most general of all ideological distortions—a metaphysical notion of consciousness—which sustained the seeming vanguard role for intellectuals and recuperated the fundamental division between mental and manual labour. This is why our scholars start with concepts. If this seems harsh, consider the following passage.

Political problems cannot be taken simply as they arise and are specified in political debate. They require critical theoretical evaluation and they may require reconstruction, but they are nevertheless of fundamental importance for the conceptualisation of definite social formations as arenas of political practice. The mode in which political problems are posed and theorised depends on the level of development of both politics and of Marxist theory and on the extent to which they are inscribed one in the other. Mode of Production and Social Formation has suggested that one reason for the signal failure of Marxist analyses of modern British capitalism lies in the weakness of the "left" in this country, its doctrinaire gesture politics, its failure to engage major political issues and forces and its consequent failure to generate political problems for theorisation. (MCCT, I: 316)

Like so many of the heavy pronouncements of these writers, this finely mixes the trivial but true and the novel but erroneous—a reproduction of the obviousness of the world we all live within! The left is weak in England, it seems, because, that is to say, the left is weak... Behind this schema, however, is a set of judgements on the essentially nonpolitical "nature" of the working class. This, of course, reinforces their own significance as the theorists who can supply this "lack." Consequent upon this profound "analysis" and their celebration of the separateness and discreteness of the phenomenal forms of capitalist social relations of production, they argue that "it follows"—as Hindess and Hirst text follows Hirst and Hindess text no doubt—

that the working class is not automatically or essentially socialist, that working-class politics are not automatically progressive. (MCCT, I: 242)

This is carried further:

There is in capitalist social relations no necessary process that subjects this category of agents [that is, economic agents] to tendencies toward homogenization or unification at the political level. It follows [N.B.] that the basis of support for socialist politics must be created by the effects of the political actions of socialists themselves. (MCCT, II: 258)
Behind these unexceptional (and largely Leninist) claims are the most profoundly anti-socialist (and un-marxist) commitments which stem from their beginning with concepts.

Marx said of the first Confusius in 1880—"So many words, so much idiocy"—and we do urge readers to study these texts carefully. Behind the volume of words is a specific commitment. Engels and Marx waged a struggle through their lives against those who thought history comprised only theoretical struggles, who argued that liberation was primarily a mental action. As The German Ideology states, such scholars seek to solve "the mystery of theoretical bubble blowing" by:

resolving the ready-made nonsense into some other freak, i.e. of presupposing that all this nonsense has a special sense which can be discovered; while really it is only a question of explaining these theoretical phrases from the actual relations.\(^5\)

Later, in a general argument against idealistic apriorism, Marx and Engels note that for such ideologists "relations become concepts. . . the concepts of the relations also become fixed concepts in their mind." (Ibid., p. 92) Over a decade later—in a work safely on the "scientific" side of the Grand Canyon of the epistemological break, the much abused 1857 "Introduction" to his Grundrisse—Marx again discusses that philosophic kind of consciousness:

for which conceptual thinking is the real human being, and for which the conceptual world as such is the only reality, the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production. . .\(^6\)

He goes on to talk about the "real" subject, and its necessary priority to any thinking ("this holds for science as well" he emphasised). Finally, in a famous passage in the 1880 "Notes on Adolph Wagner", which first identified the species Confusius, Marx wrote:

In the first place I do not start out from "concepts". . . What I start out from is the simplest social form in which the labour-product is presented in contemporary society, and this is the commodity. I analyze it, and right from the beginning, in the form in which it appears. . .

. . . our obscurantist. . . has not noticed that my analytic method, which does not start out from man, but from the analytically given social period, has nothing in common with the academic German method of connecting concepts ("with words we can in heat debate/With words a system designate").\(^7\)

Hindess and Hirst, and their co-workers, employ a universalistic and idealistic notion of language. Ominously, in their autocritique, they have warned us that "Theoretical discourse, like discourse in general, speaking and writing, is an unlimited process." (MPSF, p. 7) Marx's view of language
was rather different, indeed he frequently argued against exactly the "mentalization of language" which our obscurantists employ. Apart from the (generally ignored) sustained arguments in *The German Ideology* we find very clear statements in the 1857 "Introduction", for example:

Production by an isolated individual outside society—a rare exception which may well occur when a civilised person in whom the social forces are already dynamically present is cast by accident into the wilderness—is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other.

Against *his* Confusius' idealism, Marx argued that people begin "with taking hold of certain things in the external world in action." Through these extended and specific histories, people:

will christen these things linguistically, distinguished empirically \(\text{erfahrungsmassig,}\) i.e. by experience] from the rest of the external world. . . . this linguistic designation only expresses as an idea what repeated corroboration in experience has accomplished. . . . \text{(Ibid.)}

Our new scholars seem to understand language as did the Left-Hegelians—materiality, specificity, along, of course, with historical experience, have all but disappeared. But, as Marx, Volosinov and many others have established—language is a social phenomenon, patterned and fissured through the modes of its production. Even though, as Rossi-Landi has argued:

in linguistic production, as in material production, it can happen, and it usually does, that the constant capital takes on a sort of apparently autonomous, monstrous life of its own, subordinating to itself those expenders of linguistic power, without whom it could never have forms nor could it continue to exist.

That is to say, the power of language is not a property inherent in it (language is not a thing), "but comes from the fact that we use it when we speak" (a social relation amongst people). Capitalism transforms the properties of relations (and the power of people) into qualities of things. This is not, however, merely an illusion. As Rubin emphasised:

in capitalist society the "material" element, the power of capital, dominates. This is not an illusory, erroneous interpretation (in the human mind) of social relations among people, relations of domination and subordination; it is a real, social fact.

When Althusser (and he was by no means the first) argued that there is a
difference between an object and the idea of that object, he did it to make possible the eventual emancipation of the working class from the "violence of things", to show, in brief, the potential infinity of the ways that things could be (used and thought). Marx, one might hazard, was also committed to the view that "things could be different." Hindess and Hirst separate ideas, from the things the ideas relate to, as a form of conceptual essentialism; ideas have been so distanced from things that the world is left as it is. This is clear, for example, in their rejection of the idea "of money as a sign and thus money as the measure of value." (MCCT, II: 14—the "and thus" as so often—does not follow, but we will let that go). They stress that this means we have to understand "commodities, money, etc" as entities, as things. Not, that is, ways of seeing/saying things. Marx frequently noted how an "uncritical idealism" regarding concepts eventuates in an "uncritical positivism" regarding the world. Such concepts are not free-floating, they are "categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations."¹⁴ These forms may be, and in capitalism frequently are, systematically misleading, thus to begin with "pure" concepts entails the theoretical reproduction of precisely that Obvious, taken-for-granted world which socialists ought to be overcoming.

This systematic reproduction is compounded by what we can only charitably call a partial reading of the "Great Marxists" they constantly invoke. Thus, for a single example, they use a quotation from Lenin's "The discussion of self-determination summed up" at least three times¹⁵ to justify their general argument for the "specificity" (i.e. the non-class-relatedness) of the political. There is within this single text—let alone the range of Lenin's work—scope for a different interpretation, and we urge readers to study his whole text. The point is simply that Lenin does not begin with perfect concepts and then engage in an analysis, he is enmeshed in a set of struggles. His work is, in fact, riddled with contradictions—as is Bolshevism—because of the extremely complex problems of socialist construction.

A related way in which Hindess and Hirst reproduce "the Obvious" involves their typically Kautskyan (and Leninist in the sense of What is to be done?) conception of where correct ideas come from. Certainly, it seems, not from political struggles waged by subordinated groups. Our scholars systematically misread the fragility and complexity of historical experience, seeing in poverty—as Marx argued against Proudhon—nothing but poverty. They thus fail to see the ways in which an apparent acceptance of the "powers that be" can accompany a sustained contempt for those powers. Power has to be respected—it can only be treated lightly by those who have never felt, or who no longer feel, its consequences. Mao, in various speeches, has outlined this in a coherent programme: strategically we should despise all our enemies, but tactically we must take them seriously. If we do not despise them strategically, we can easily become
opportunist, "all unity and no struggle"; if we refuse to take the all-pervasive problems of capitalism seriously, we shall make adventurist errors, "all struggle and no unity." The work\textsuperscript{16} of Edward Thompson has demonstrated how the English working class was made by taking capitalism seriously in each and every particular whilst retaining an extensive contempt for it, manifest in many ways (several of them theoretical) as intense resistance. Speaking of an earlier period, Thompson has recently argued how within an apparent "hegemony" the subordinated groups do not accept the definitions forced upon them from above, how, in sum, there is an alternative culture which "constitutes an ever present threat to official descriptions of reality."\textsuperscript{17}

**Classical marxism** and production

We should, of course, know better than to talk of origins. But when the classical marxism Hindess and Hirst "problematise" as often as not turns out to have been given its phenomenal form in certain seminars which graced the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1965, there is a point in drawing attention to the fact. For these obscurantists repeatedly write as if classical marxism, in their version, and their own "alternative" exhausted all possibilities. The rhythmic emphasis "\textit{Either...}" "\textit{or...}" is one of their favourite devices:

Either, economism, or the non-correspondence of political forces—that is the choice which faces Marxism.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Either} the articulation of relations and forces of production is conceived in terms of some kind of necessity so that the character of one thing [N.B.] the relations or the forces, is deducible from the concept of the other, or it must [N.B.] be conceived in terms of the connection between social relations and the forms in which their conditions of existence are secured. (\textit{MCCT}, 1: 226)

\textit{Either} economism: political and cultural means of representation are determined by the economy. Or the means of representation are not determined by the economy and there is no necessity for the political and cultural representation of classes and their interests.

The choice for Marxism is clear. \textit{Either} we effectively reduce political and ideological phenomena to class interests determined elsewhere (basically in the economy)... Or we must face up to the real autonomy of political and ideological phenomena...\textsuperscript{19}

We shall return to these notions in a later section, we cite the passages to show the form of their discourse—\textit{either} this fictive dogmatically formulated version of classical marxism \textit{or} the latest, sensible cure-all bearing their own brand-name.
This is not to deny that there are problems with the claim—centrally advanced by Marx's 1859 Preface (even if taken with Engels' clarifications of the 1890s)—that the economic is determinant in the last instance. Both "ultimate" in "ultimate determination" and "relative" in "relative autonomy" are capacious concepts. Althusser's own solution is well known: any social formation has several distinct "instances", the economic, the political, the ideological, etc. At any given time these are related through a "structure in dominance" in which the economic determines through the combined effectivity of all the instances. We are thus talking, to use Althusser's terms, of a structural rather than a mechanical causality. What matters here is that *this* conception is taken by our luminaries as "classically marxist" (Cf. MCCT, I: Ch. 7). And, in their usual pioneering way (the relevant points being made a decade previously, in reviews of Reading Capital, by Glucksmann and Poulantzas) they have "discovered" where Ecole Normale marxism went wrong. Teleology, needless to say: Althusser's structural causality entails the clearly teleological claim that "the economy secures its own conditions of existence in the form of suitable political and cultural-ideological levels." (MCCT, I: 223) This error it is argued, springs from Althusser's "rationalism":

transposing a relation between concepts, between the concept of an economy on the one hand and those of its conditions of existence on the other, into a relation of determination between objects. . . (MCCT, I: 223; Cf. MCCT, II. 241f)

To regard concepts as descriptive of real objects in no way necessitates ascribing those objects the power to secure their own conditions. But we will—again—let that (as with many "slippery" features of their logic) pass since what interests us is their ensuing argument.

From the valid point that:

if relations of production presupposes [sic] conditions of existence provided by other social relations they cannot generate those conditions or determine the social relations which provide them. (MCCT, I: 227)

a number of critical conclusions are drawn. First, it is argued, any "last instance" thesis must in consequence be abandoned, and the same holds for any postulate of forces/relations correspondence. Second, in the absence of the correspondence postulate and the last instance clause, there remains no good reason for according the mode of production the primacy it has traditionally enjoyed in historical materialism. For them, what results is:

a reduced concept of a mode of production consisting of an economy, a definite combination of relations and forces of production, having definite political, legal
and cultural conditions of existence which cannot be secured through the action of the economy itself. (MCCT, I: 224)

The primary object of marxist analysis ought to be the social formation understood as "a definite set of relations of production together with the economic, cultural and political forms in which these conditions of production are secured." (MCCT, I: 222, our emphasis) Third, and more specifically, given this general non-derivability of social formation from mode of production, our authors conclude that:

political institutions and practices, ideologies and other cultural forms cannot be conceived as classes [sic] or the direct representation of their interests. (MCCT, I: 231-2)

Classes are "categories of economic agents", defined by their relations of possession of/exclusion from the means of production, no more. This is the basis, through necessary non-correspondence and massive circularity, for the notorious revisionism of the conclusions to MCCT, II.

At this point it is pertinent to do something no longer thought worthwhile by many marxists, in their haste to trump the latest cards in the Parisian pack—look at Marx. We will start where so many have before, with the much maligned 1859 Preface. This informs us that "social production" entails "definite relations":

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual process of life.

Let us begin with an apparent lacuna. Neither here, nor anywhere else within the 1859 Preface, does Marx enlighten us as to what sort of social relation may or may not be a relation of production. Unlike Hindess and Hirst (and virtually all marxists since Engels) he provides no substantive definition whatsoever. Had Marx's latest revisers troubled to glance back beyond 1965, to those texts of the 1840s which the 1859 Preface quite explicitly summarises, this "omission" might have given them pause. The German Ideology (a work falling uneasily, in Althusser's fragmented Marx, between the purity of maturity and the danger of youth) explains why Marx could not consistently have given any such specification of the concept:

definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate...
instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production.\textsuperscript{24}

On this premise the only general concept of production relations we can develop is precisely the empirically open-ended one implicit in the 1859 Preface, viz., any social relation indispensable to any such mode. Since, furthermore, “the economic structure of society” comprises the totality of these production relations, we cannot produce a substantive \textit{a priori} definition of that either. We have, therefore, no grounds for \textit{a priori} inclusion or exclusion of any substantively defined class of relation from “the economy.” What \textit{defines} a relation as economic cannot be any innate property which is to be apprehended outside of historical context, but simply its indispensability to a given “way in which people produce their means of subsistence.”

If this is the “economic structure”, what then of the “superstructure?”\textsuperscript{25} The foregoing shows how there can be clearly necessary political, legal and cultural relations of production—relations internal, that is, to the economic structure—which means that the notion of “the political” etc., as distinct, as practices, as levels, as instances, or as institutions within a social formation, is distinctly dubious. Let us return to our text again.

Later in the 1859 \textit{Preface}, Marx writes:

\begin{quote}
With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations, the distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical—\textit{in short}, ideological—forms in which men become conscious of this conflict \textit{of forces/relations} and fight it out.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

What we suggest is that the base/superstructure metaphor relates to the latter forms of consciousness alone. This has additional warrant from the employment, in \textit{The German Ideology}, of the adjective “idealistic” or “ideological” whenever the metaphor of superstructure is used.\textsuperscript{27}

To extend the argument. \textit{Capital}, as a number of recent authors\textsuperscript{28} have established, is, \textit{inter alia}, an explanation of ideology. Marx seeks to combat the ways in which the apparent separability of “ideas” actually diminishes the power of human groups. Moreover, when this separation is challenged

\textit{“Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence.”}\textsuperscript{29}

That formulation, again, is taken from \textit{The German Ideology}. To return to \textit{Capital}: there Marx explains the illusions of capitalist production in terms
of the material experience which sustains them. He distinguishes, specifically, between what he calls *essential relations*, capitalism's "material groundwork or set of conditions of existence," and the *phenomenal forms* in which these relations manifest themselves in our daily experience. It is the empirically explicable deceptiveness of the latter which accounts for the ideological character of our "spontaneous" conceptions, of "the Obvious." We are arguing that the base/superstructure metaphor can best be understood as a popularised expression of just this distinction. The base is the totality of production relations, in the sense clarified above; the superstructure is not a separate body or kind(s) of relations, but simply the phenomenal forms in which these selfsame relations of production manifest themselves "on the surface of society" and to which everyday conceptions—common sense, in brief—"correspond." Such would include not only the numerous deceptive "economic" forms which Marx analysed in *Capital*, but equally, and from our point of view crucially, the apparently independent legal and political "instances" of bourgeois society. It is supremely ironical, therefore, that many marxists have taken the base/superstructure metaphor as an orthodoxy, as a model. Our recent epigones go further—they *celebrate* the separateness and autonomy of all these fetishized appearances, here again they translate qualities of relations into things!

Our reading here, finally, forces us to rethink determination—the "Base" will have much that is "non-economic" *within* it, while links between "base" and "superstructure" cannot be those of external cause, but are internal relations. As MacIntyre argued—before 1965:

As Marx depicts it the relation between basis and superstructure is fundamentally not only not mechanical, it is not even causal. What may be misleading is Marx's Hegelian vocabulary. Marx certainly talks of the basis "determining" the superstructure and of a "correspondence" between them. But the reader of Hegel's *Logic* will realise that what Marx envisages is something to be understood in terms of the way in which the nature of the concept of a given class, for example may determine the concept of membership of that class... The economic basis of a society is not its tools, but the people co-operating using these particular tools in the manner necessary to their use, and the superstructure consists of the social consciousness moulded by and the shape of this cooperation.

Fundamentally—and this they share not only with Ecole Normale marxism but with many others—Hindess and Hirst misunderstood production. This has been the central theme of our writings for some years so we can be brief. Marx included within "the economic structure of society" all social relations entailed in a given mode of production; he sees the "superstructure" as the forms (including the mental concepts and images) in which these relations are presented. The entire Hindess and Hirst project rests upon a fallacious problem. There is no question of having to deduce non-deducible conditions of existence from the concept of an
economy or having to attribute to this economy the power to secure them. First, the relevant concept (if it is to be accurate to reality and not "forcibly abstracted") includes "non-economic" conditions; second, it is not in any case a matter of deduction. What is or is not germane to production is to be ascertained empirically; scientific concepts are a posteriori constructs.  

Starting with a false problem, employing a conventionalist epistemology and an a prioristic methodology, our authors produce not so much false, as redundant solutions. With a more realistic concept of production, one which is fundamentally neither a prioristic nor reductionist (but is both materialist and historical) there is no need to expunge the central place which social relations and social forms of production have always had within marxism. As the Grundrisse phrases it:

> When we consider... society in the long view and as a whole, then the final result of the process of social production always appears as the society itself, i.e. the human being in all its social relations. ... The conditions and objectifications of the process are themselves equally moments of it...  

Production entails definite social (political, legal, moral, cultural...) relations and thus their "superstructural" forms of manifestation; that is (part of) what it is. To say this does not entail a claim to the effect that all social relations are "reducible" to production, the question is always an empirical one. Marx held that as a matter of fact production relations were the core social relations—establishing the limits of variation for given epochs—in all hitherto existing formations. Indeed, one way in which he conceptualised communist society was in terms of the more conscious and more collective recognition/realisation of the centrality of production relations. In such a social formation politics would become the "administration of things" because the "violence of things" would be diminished as the emancipation of labour begins.

* * *

Necessary non-correspondence and circularity

As Stuart Hall has perceptively noticed, what Hirst proposes is a necessary noncorrespondence—leading, as he quite rigorously understands, to the absolute autonomy of all practices, the impossibility of history and the abandoning of any concept of "complex unity."  

In particular, there is a sustained series of arguments (repeated in different texts in almost the same words) to "prove" that class should only refer to categories of economic agents. In this perspective class struggle becomes
"the struggle of organised bodies of labourers and capitalists" that is "economic class relations" plus "the intervention of definite political, legal, and cultural determinations." There are acute tensions here:

Where there are capitalist relations of production there must be conflicting political forces. (our emphasis)

Where there are economic class-relations there must be political and ideological forces having different effects on those classes. (MCCT, I: 241, our emphasis)

A precondition for political programmes adapted to the conditions of struggle is a recognition of basic political realities and the limits they enforce. It is toward this end that this book is directed. (MCCT, II: 293, our emphasis)

There are problems with the force of the "must" and "limits" in these statements. The second quotation continues:

But there are no grounds for supposing that these forces are the products of the classes representing themselves and their interests in political and ideological forms. There is no necessity for political and ideological forces to be polarised around the membership of the different classes. (MCCT, I: 241-242)

The "grounds" here seems to relate to historical investigations; the "necessity" (like the uses of "automatically" or "essentially" in other quotations) simply caricatures historical materialism. Socialist groups have paid attention to the contradictory nature of political and cultural relations since the 1830s. But, of course, having declared (along with Henry Ford) that history is rubbish, our Confusiuses will not discover anything of the real foundations of socialist construction.

In fact, because they do not understand production, they simply split off a thoroughly economistic conception of "the economy" (with, now, "economic agents") from ideational versions of all other production relations. This distinctive methodology has been generalised in Hirst's much quoted analysis of "the classic [N.B.] problem of ideology": this it seems, requires:

that there be a correspondence (the latter determines the former) and a non-correspondence (the former misrepresents the latter) between ideology and the reality it represents.

This, it must immediately be stressed, presupposes (i) that "corresponding" relations are "determining" relations between independent entities, and (ii) that ideology is simply ideational. But, let us follow the vanguard further:
If there is any determining action of the means of representation in constituting what is "represented" by them then these forms of correspondence/non-correspondence are shattered.

There is no necessary relation between the conditions of existence of the means of representation and what is produced by those means, no necessity that they "represent" those conditions. *(Ibid.)*

We do not know any "means of representation" that cannot assist in constituting what it represents—whether it is the code of the Hollywood cinema, the materials used by J.M.W. Turner or the language on this page. 39

The second part of the quotation is confused, the point being not that means of representation (sign systems) demonstrate their own conditions of existence in what they represent (but it is necessarily the case that their own conditions have to be sustained and reproduced) but that they represent quite other realities. That is to say, with Marx, that representations (and images) of the real relations can never totally exhaust concrete reality. Indeed to dogmatize the correctness of "Theory" or "Science" will distort and even prevent human emancipation. For Marx, the task of science was to make possible the accelerated transformation (and not merely understanding) of the realms of stubborn, human-limiting, "objectivity." Thus are the boundaries of necessity to be pushed back! But then Hirst and his colleagues have abandoned scientific socialism in favour of the rule of discourse—a fitting slogan for these authors.

Having sundered production relations, it is to be expected that their texts will be disfigured by a constant circularity which, if we may play their game for a moment, was inscribed in their project from the start. Their claim to found a newly cleansed politics is simply not substantiated. As Putnam has seen, their work argues that concepts "are formed and deployed in the definition and solutions posed by political practice... Hindess and Hirst's ground is the constantly shifting one of political practice." 40 But we then have to ask with Graham Burchell "what is this 'politics' of which they speak?" 41 It follows, it seems, that:

Accepting non-correspondence means abandoning the evaluation of political forces in terms of correspondence, and evaluating them instead relative to one's conception of socialist organisation and ideology and relevant to one's conception of the dominant political issues. 42

Really? One's very own judgements? Matters become murkier since evaluating ideologies "always entails political calculation and always takes place from the standpoint of a political position." 43 Whilst politics must be evaluated "in terms of a definite conception of socialist organisation and ideology and an estimation of the dominant political issues of the day." *(MCCT, I: 238)* This is their "solution", vicious circularity: ideologies
must be evaluated from a political position and political positions must be calculated from a (correct) ideological commitment. The latter entails a notion of "socialism". How is this defined?

Socialism is a political ideology which bases itself on the objective of constructing a planned and non-commodity form of production and distribution. . . (MCCT, II: Cf. MCCT, I: 49f.)

If there is no revolutionary conjuncture, the process of socialist construction must first take the form of building the economic and political conditions [N.B.] for a socialist economy. (Ibid., 264)

But there are problems entailed in the more detailed specification.

First—after much rolling of drums and clashing of cymbals—what they revealingly call the "dichotomy between reform and revolution must collapse." (MCCT, I: 317) This is:

Socialist politics can no longer be conceived as necessarily oriented toward the one big push that finally knocks capitalism out of the way and clears the ground for something else. (Ibid.)

An anti-capitalist standpoint need not imply ignorance of the role of management or an inability to intervene with a definite position on questions of capitalist organisation or calculation where there is political debate and a question of public policy. (MCCT, II: 260)

Who really operates on the big push theory as a set of tactics? Who does not operate on the basis of being able to understand capitalism? The problem is precisely the relation between these two kinds of work—some element of the former's total view, its sustained contempt, has to be retained. Or, if the latter alone is extensively practised then precisely that "reformism" they castigate within the leaders of Trades Unions and the Labour Party is what results.

Second, while they correctly support Marx's contention that "planned and co-operative production":

would overcome the "anarchy" of capitalist production. . . In doing so socialism must deconstruct capitalist forms of economic organisation; breaking up the forms of independence Marx calls socialisation. (MCCT, I: 151)

They show real restrictions on this "deconstruction." They accept the distorting prism of "national" economy—not as the obvious and elementary starting point, but as the final constraints and conditions of socialist struggle. (MCCT, II: 243f.) They also declare:

Most advanced capitalist societies have removed significant areas of education
from the sphere of commodity forms of distribution and several have done the same for the distribution of medical care. (MCCT, I: 317; Cf. MCCT, II: 264f., 285f.)

This follows from their reductionist and economistic notion of production (and their decision that “commodities, money, etc.” are entities). They—from the same premises—operate with an impoverished notion of power. Hirst has argued:

I would assert that... outside specific institutional forms state power does not exist... Classes do not have “interests” and are not political actors. Only definite organisations, or even individual agents, are political forces. . . . 45

From this, of course, it follows:

State apparatuses and their powers have differential degrees of utilisation in the promotion of socialist policies, they do not form “one reactionary mass”, any more than the “state” forms a single entity (except in the constitutional sense). (MCCT, II: 267, our emphases)

We are into the land of “taking power” and not “transforming circumstances and selves.” Unless socialist construction is concerned to challenge each and every relation, image and “fact”—and to transform them where they are found to relate to capitalist modes of production or other forms of inhuman constraint, then what is called “socialism” will reproduce domination, subordination and impoverishment. If you take away history—as fictive delusions—then all this dangerous nonsense follows. In fact, State apparatuses condense and represent centuries of bloody formation, always-ever (to sing their tune for a second) against class alternatives and “foreign competition”, favouring particular forms of capitalist production. This has been well documented in the case of England since the start of the 16th century. 46 Innocently use any of those cultural or political relations of production specifically forged internally in capitalism’s long rule and you will reproduce the deformations and crippling agonies of capitalist production and divert, slow-down or even halt (and perhaps reverse) the long struggle for socialist forms of life.

* * *

Conclusion: on the political necessity of history

Hindess and Hirst and their co-workers reproduce the Obvious world. They do not provide us with any means of comprehending that world as historically constructed. They do not share Marx’s commitment to the fact that things could be different. They do not understand that for Marx
(and others) socialist construction entails the simultaneous transformation of circumstances (things) and people themselves. In this revolution—as Marx defined it through his life—all the complicatedly connected relations and forms of capitalist production must be subject to the most comprehensive—because collective, as for once the subordinated can take their destiny into their own hands—scrutiny and change.

What we find in these texts—apart from a general historical ignorance (which does not, of course, stop historical facts from being employed, Cf. MCCT, II: 248, 249, 251)—is a failure to come to grips with the ways that socialist practices in the last ten years have challenged and opened what was taken as marxist political theory. For them, for example, Mind is not only all but sexed:

No one in his right mind would consider that the conditions for a revolutionary seizure of power exist in this country. (MCCT, II: 240; Cf. Ibid., p. 260)

The manliness of mind is, as they say, “pertinent in its effects” (does it not also reveal its conditions of existence?).

The category of economic agents is fissured by numerous divisions with various determinations and effects (differences of income, working conditions, type of occupation, “race”, nation and region, to name the major ones). (MCCT, II: 258)

Their general strategy involves:

taking seriously issues that may, superficially, appear remote from socialism and giving them a high order of priority in the struggle. Issues such as civil rights, the position of women, the control of environment and living space, all involve moving outside the traditional appeals of workerism. (MCCT, II: 292, our emphasis)

This is not merely a polemical point either. Lucy Bland, Rachel Harrison, Frank Mort and Christine Weedon have noted:

it is their initial failure, in the construction of their problematic [in PCMP], to reveal that sex and gender relations are power relations (involving domination and subordination) which enables Hindess and Hirst to consider the maintenance and reproduction of social relations as relatively unimportant.

In a sense, the internal consistency of Hindess and Hirst’s conceptual framework can remain intact by virtue of the absence of what is perhaps the most significant determinant in those societies, that is, the level of gender politics. What we would question here is not merely an omission from their analysis, but the overall conceptualisation of the political level itself. (Ibid., p. 160)
Although this is said of early pre-capitalist societies (and PCMP), things have not progressed. There are many similar absences.

It is as well to remember—since his apostles have clearly forgotten—that Althusser celebrates (in a form and to a degree with which we entirely concur) Marx's theoretical discovery as "the continent of history."

In the same text, Althusser also stressed that:

*There is no such thing as a process except in relations (sous des rapports): the relations of production (to which Capital is restricted) and other (political, ideological relations)*.

Marx's method cannot be broken into (correct) analytic and (false) historic portions: Marx's notion of a critique establishes "the points where historical investigation must enter in." Marx's critique produces concepts which are rational for analytic purposes, as "primary equations... which point towards a past lying behind the system" *(Ibid.)*: they expose neither the naturalness nor the logicality of phenomenal forms/concepts, but their historicity. Hindess and Hirst, by contrast, engage in conceptual *reproduction*: handing us back a mystified version of the Obvious, a dehistoricized, universalized, mentalized, desocialized world in which the violence of things and the separateness of phenomena are not simply massively evident but positively celebrated.

Hindess and Hirst are part of those whom Marx called the "vulgar mob" who offer us such scraps of bourgeois wisdom as that the study of history is "not only scientifically but also politically valueless." *(PCMP*, p. 312). We call them bourgeois because that is whom their anti-history premises serve.

Marx was clear on this very point:

from the moment that the bourgeois mode of production and the conditions of production and distribution which correspond to it are recognised as historical, the delusion of regarding them as natural laws of production vanishes and the prospect opens up of a new society. . .

To support Marx here is not to deny the difficulty of the struggles for that society. Socialist construction begins long before any convenient benchmark called "The" revolution and has to work within the area of theory because it begins and continues with a commitment to *practical materialism*. We are also stressing that the resources of socialist construction are already here—they are, moreover, the only resources there are—the human beings whose current labour sustains capital's rule and whose images and relations are "stamped and marked" "through and through" as Marx and Lenin agreed, with the restrictions of capitalism. Neither, finally, are we denying that during the long struggle for communism there will have to be struggles (as part of the way that authentic socialist construction is made
possible) against forms of domination and restriction not directly generated within, although frequently sustained or utilised by, capitalist relations. We are thinking here of relations constituted as "gender" or "race (skin colour)" or those founded upon the Three Great Differences identified in the history of socialist construction in this century—those between industrial and agrarian production, town and country and—centrally relevant to the texts we have been criticising—between mental and manual labour.

The real emancipation of labour entails a struggle on the broadest front and in that struggle historical materialism—marxist theory understood in terms of accumulated historical experience—remains our only major and fundamental starting point.

NOTES


2. For some general observations Cf. Simon Clarke, Capital and Class (2) 1977 and his "Althusserian Marxism: a bourgeois disorder" (mimeo. October 1976), plus J. Rancière, Radical Philosophy (7) 1974. We should also stress that the increasingly accepted notion that marxism is ideational—a project constructed through establishing "Heroes and Icons of the Left"—permeates many journals
and publishing houses, notably *New Left Review* and *New Left Books*.


4. We do not intend to engage in a similar diversion as that of the very project we are criticising, thus we shall not discuss this aspect of their project. It has been well covered, see the *Radical Philosophy* and *Economy and Society* reviews listed in n. 1 above, plus the exceptionally useful text by G. McLennan in *Economy and Society* 7(2) 1978. For general criticism—Sayer "Science as critique" in J. Mepham and D. Ruben (eds.) *Essays in Marxist Philosophy* (Harvester, 1979) and Sayer Marx's *Method*, Ch. 1, which detail Marx's critique of all speculative theorising.


8. For example *CW*: 5, pp. 43f.


20. Engels' letters to Schmidt, August 5 and October 27, 1890; to Bloch, September 21-22, 1890; to Mehring, July 14, 1893; to Borgius, January 25, 1894 (in Selected Correspondence, Moscow, Progress, 1975 or Selected Letters, Peking, ELPH, 1977) and Engels to Starkenberg, January 25, 1895 in the 1956 ed. of Selected Correspondence.


22. Space limitations mean that we do not develop or document this argument as fully as we wish. For amplification see Sayer, "Method and Dogma in Historical materialism", Sociological Review 23(4) 1975; Marx's Method, Ch. 4, Section 1; "Science as Critique" and Corrigan, Ramsay, Sayer, Socialist construction and marxist theory: Bolshevism and its critique (London, Macmillan; New York, Monthly Review Press, 1978), Ch. 1.


24. CW: 5, p. 35, our emphases. That this is no youthful aberration can be seen from Capital, III (Moscow, Progress, 1971, p. 792) where Marx speaks of the need for "analysis of the empirically given circumstances."

25. This analysis differs from that we have presented earlier (e.g. Sayer, "Method and Dogma"). Although we stand by the criticism of traditional readings given there, we would no longer draw the conclusion that the base/superstructure metaphor should be entirely displaced.


27. e.g. CW: 5: 89, 373. The stress on forms in some of Engels letters (e.g. to Mehring, July 14, 1893; to Bloch, September 21-22, 1890) is extremely pertinent here. Cf. Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire", in this light.

28. Cf. the material cited in n. 3 above.

29. CW: 5, pp. 26-27. Note the similarity of the language to that of the 1859 Preface.


31. Nicolaus, in his "Foreword" to the Penguin ed. of the Grundrisse (p. 52) suggests this, as does Colletti, op. cit. It is central to recent debates on the State, e.g. in Germany, J. Holloway and S. Picciotto (eds.) State and Capital, Arnold, 1978; Cf. Corrigan, Ramsay, Sayer, "The State as a relation of production", paper to B.S.A. 1977 Conference, in revised form as Ch. 1 of P. Corrigan (ed.) State formation and capitalism, (Quartet, 1979).


33. This is a central constituent of the two collective volumes already cited—Socialist construction and marxist theory, and For Mao. Other sketches can be seen in Corrigan, Journal of Peasant Studies, 2(3) 1975; Sayer, "Method and Dogma."

34. As we indicated above, n. 4, we are not examining this issue here—for a general analysis see Sayer, "Science as Critique."


36. S. Hall: "Some problems with the ideology/subject couplet", Ideology and Consciousness (3) 1978, p. 120. Cf. his "Culture, the media and the 'Ideological effect' " in J. Curran (et. al. eds.) Mass communication... Arnold, 1977; "Re-thinking the 'base-and-superstructure' metaphor" in Bloomfield (op. cit., n. 1 above) and "The 'political' and the 'economic' in Marx's theory of..."
classes" in A. Hunt (op. cit., n. 1 above).


41. Burchell, op. cit., n. 1 above, p. 32.
42. "Hirst in Hunt", p. 131.
43. Hirst on Althusser (op. cit., n. 1 above), p. 397.
45. "Hirst in Hunt", p. 152. Their view of power is Left-Weberian in tendency.
46. Marx was clear on this, e.g. Capital I (ed. cit.) p. 751. The "systematical combination" that is imperialism which Marx there described shows the dangerous limitations of any marxist analysis of socialist politics founded upon the "prism" of the national economy. Cf. P. Corrigan, "Feudal relics..." Sociology, 11, 1977; State formation... (op. cit., n. 31 above).

48. Women take issue... (Hutchinson, 1978), pp. 157-158. The criticism here can be applied to other texts e.g. "Hindess in Bloomfield" or "Hirst in Hunt."
51. Marx, Theories of Surplus Value, III (Moscow, Progress, 1972), p. 429. Cf. Sayer, "Science as Critique." Meillassoux makes a similar point in his criticism of PCMP: Hindess and Hirst's denial of the significance of "historical social and political context" "throws doubt on their claim to be working within historical materialism." Meillassoux, as we do, sees their "point of view" as "a strict codification of the idealist-judicial approach of bourgeois science under the guise of Marxism." C. Meillassoux, Economy & Society 7(3) 1978, p. 329.