

Mode of Production, Social Formation and Political Conjuncture

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1. *The concept of mode of production.* 2. *The concept of social formation.* 3. *What is the object of Marx's Capital?* 4. *The concept of political conjuncture.* 5. *The concept of transition.*

1. The Concept of Mode of Production

Now that we have studied the economic, juridico-political, and ideological levels of society, we can move on to those elements which will permit us to define the Marxist concept of mode of production.

Marx and Engels frequently used the expression "mode of production of material goods" or simply "mode of production" in order to *describe the manner, the form, the mode* by which material goods are produced.

Let us look at some texts:

The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. [Preface to a *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*]

It is not the articles made, *but how they are made*, and by what instruments, that enables us to distinguish different economic epochs. [*Capital*]

At first, capital subordinates labor on the basis of the technical conditions in which it historically finds it. It does not, therefore, change immediately the mode of production. The production of surplus value—in the form hitherto considered by us by means of simple extension of the working-day proved, therefore, to be independent of any change in the mode of production itself. [*Capital*]

The materialist conception of history starts from the principle that production, and with production the exchange of its products, is the basis of every social order: that in every society which has appeared in history the

distribution of the products, and with it the division of society into classes or estates, is determined by what is produced and how it is produced, and how the product is exchanged. According to this conception, the ultimate causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in the minds of men, in their increasing insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the mode of production and exchange; they are to be sought not in the *philosophy* but in the *economics* of the epoch concerned. [Engels, *Anti-Duhring*]

We should not confuse the expression "mode of production of material goods" with the concept *mode of production*. The former is a descriptive notion which only refers to the economic structure of society; the latter, on the contrary, is a theoretical concept which refers to the entire social totality, that is, both to the economic structure as well as to the other levels of the social totality: juridico-political and ideological.

Marx and Engels never defined the concept of *mode of production* which they so often use. The majority of Marxist writers use this term without defining it; and those who do define it, limit its significance to the economic level alone. We think, nevertheless, in accord with Louis Althusser, that the reduction of this concept to only the economic level limits the implicit sense which Marx gave it in his most finished work, *Capital*.

By studying the mode of production of material goods, that is, what we have called the production process, we have seen that, from the Marxist point of view, it is not enough to define it only as a technical process. This technical process takes place under determined social relations, the social relations of production, which, in the last instance, make the process possible. Moreover, we have seen that elements of the superstructure of society enter into the making of these relations. Without the explicit, or implicit consent of the members of society and its institutions, these relations could not remain in force.

Engels affirms this concerning class societies, in the following text:

Former society, moving in class antagonisms, had need of the state, that is, an organization of the exploiting class at each period for the maintenance of its external conditions of production; that is, therefore, for the forcible holding down of the exploited class in the conditions of oppression (slavery, villenage or serfdom, wage labor) determined by the existing mode of production. [*Anti-Duhring*]

In this text Engels shows the necessity for the existence of superstructural conditions to maintain a determined kind of social production.

Let us see now, what Marx says in one of the few explicit passages in *Capital* on this question:

However, it is evident that tradition must play a dominant role in the primitive and underdeveloped circumstances on which these social production relations¹ and the corresponding *mode of production* are based. It is furthermore clear that here, as always, it is in the interest of the ruling section of society to sanction the existing order as law and to legally establish its limits given through usage and tradition. Apart from all else, this, by the way, comes about by itself as soon as the constant reproduction of the basis of the existing order and its fundamental relations assumes a regulated and orderly form in the course of time. *And such regulation and order are themselves indispensable elements of any mode of production*, if it is to assume social stability and independence from mere changes and arbitrariness. These are precisely the form of its social stability and therefore its relative freedom from mere arbitrariness and mere change. Under backward conditions of the production process, as well as the corresponding social relations, it achieves this form by mere repetition of their very reproduction. [*Capital* V. III.]

If tradition and order are “indispensable elements of any mode of production,” as Marx clearly says in this text, this cannot be defined only as the economic structure of society, but includes the entire social totality.

The concept of mode of production is precisely the concept which gives us a scientific way to think about a social totality.

There is a great difference between *describing*—pointing out its visible characteristics—and *knowing* something. When a patient tells his doctor what he feels, he only is describing the symptoms of his illness. The doctor, with his knowledge of the human organism, is able to diagnose a given illness starting from these symptoms, for example, appendicitis. He sums up in one word the extensive description of the symptoms which the patient makes. This word implies a *knowledge* of the illness. The application of the knowledge is what enables him to cure the patient. In order to properly diagnose a given illness, it is necessary to grasp the unity which enables one to understand the different symptoms. Likewise, in order to define an object—to understand it—it is necessary to discover the unity, or the form of organization of the elements which first served to describe it.

It is possible to describe a society; to say for example, that in every society there are industries, cultivated land, post offices, schools, an army, police, laws, ideological currents, etc. But the organization of these elements in different

structures (economic, juridico-political, and ideological) and the determination of the role which each one of these structures plays in the society, permits us to pass from *the description to the understanding* of a social reality, to establish its laws of development and, therefore, the possibility of consciously guiding it. In Marx's time everyone *perceived* and *described* the symptoms of “capitalist illness”: the poverty of the masses, the wealth of certain small groups, the exploitation of women and children, etc. Some rebelled; others sought to explain this situation by returning to fatalistic, divine laws: “there have always been poor people and there always will be.” But Marx and Engels knew how to advance from the description to knowledge of the causes and the laws of capitalist development, knowledge which later permitted Marxist parties to make revolution and establish new social systems.

From what has been said above, it is possible to better understand the statement we have made: the concept of *mode of production* is the theoretical concept which lets us think the social totality.

Every mode of production is constituted by: (1) a *global structure* formed by three regional structures: the economic structure, the juridico-political structure (laws, the state, etc.), the ideological structure (ideas, customs, etc.); (2) In this global structure, one of the regional structures *dominates* the others.

It is important to point out here that it is not always the economic level or structure which plays the dominant role, as those who vulgarize Marxism frequently claim. Marx clearly tells us this in a footnote in the first volume of *Capital*:

I seize this opportunity of shortly answering an objection taken by a German paper in America, to my work, “Zur Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie, 1859.” In the estimation of that paper, my view that each special mode of production and the social relations corresponding to it, in short, that the economic structure of society, is the real basis on which the juridical and political superstructure is raised, and to which definite social forms of thought correspond; that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life generally, all this is very true for our own times, which material interests preponderate, but not for the middle ages, in which Catholicism, nor for Athens and Rome, where politics, reigned supreme. In the first place it strikes one as an odd thing for anyone to suppose that these well-worn phrases about the middle ages and the ancient world are unknown to anyone else. This much, however, is clear that the middle ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism played the chief part. [*Capital*]

If we sum up the essentials of the note, we can see that Marx held that if economics dominates in capitalism, we cannot deny that in the middle ages Catholicism dominated (that is to say, an ideological structure) and in Athens and Rome it was politics which was dominant. But he says: “it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains” why here politics and there Catholicism played the chief (or dominant) role.

(3) In this global structure, the economic structure is always *determinant* in the last instance.

As the text we have just cited indicates, it is the economic conditions which *determine* which of the regional structures will have the dominant role.

The distinction between the *dominant* and *determinant* role in the last instance is a fundamental distinction which must be made, and to which Althusser has given full weight. It is difficult to find explicit formulations about this distinction in Marx and Engels since the object of their study was the capitalist mode of production in which both determinants coincide. In this mode of production economics plays not only the determinant role in the last instance, but also the dominant role.

Let us define more precisely what we mean by a dominant structure. At the level of the mode of production, we consider that regional structure dominant which plays the fundamental role in the reproduction of a given mode of production.

In the case of the capitalist mode of production, its reproduction is assured by laws internal to the economic structure. This does not mean that superstructural elements are absent, but that their presence is not the fundamental element in the reproduction of the system. The laws of capitalist economic development (accumulation, extended reproduction, etc.) determine that form in which the system reproduces itself and give it its specific character. The superstructural factors, only intervene manifestly when obstacles arise which block the unfolding of these laws. This knowledge permits us to affirm that in the capitalist mode of production it is the economic structure which occupies the dominant place within the global structure of the mode of production.

In the case of the feudal mode of production, it is not the economic laws which assure the reproduction of the system. In order that the surplus continue to be appropriated by the landlords, the active and fundamental intervention of superstructural elements is required. Without a fundamental relationship of dependence linked to ideological and juridico-political factors, the serfs would not work the land of the lord, nor would they turn over a part of their labor in other forms of rent (in kind or in money). In this mode of production, therefore, it is the ideological or juridico-political superstructure which is dominant, since it is through them that the reproduction of the mode of production is assured.

(4) Finally, what characterizes every *mode of production* is its dynamism, that is, the continuous *reproduction* of its conditions of existence. The capitalist mode of production, for example, at the same time that it reproduces material goods in a form which requires the division of labor in that social totality into capitalists and workers, and which creates an entire ideology that favors this kind of production and a form of power that defends and stimulates it, also continuously reproduces its conditions of reproduction.

At the same time that it produces material goods, it reproduces capitalist relations of production. And at the same time that it reproduces these relations, it reproduces its superstructural conditions of existence; that is, the ideological conditions and the power relations, as well as the role that they play within the social structure.

MODE OF PRODUCTION is the theoretical concept which permits us to think the social totality as a structure in

dominance,² in which the economic level is determinant in the last instance.

To conclude, we must insist that the structural nucleus or matrix of the mode of production is the relations of production. These relations explain the characteristic type of articulation of the different regional structures in each mode of production; they determine which of the structures will occupy the dominant role. Let us recall that Marx explicitly says that "*the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers*" reveals to us "*the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure.*" [Capital]³

2. The Concept of Social Formation

The concept of *mode of production* refers to an abstract object, a pure social totality, an "ideal" in which the production of material goods is carried out in a homogeneous form. But in the great majority of historically determined societies, the production of material goods is not affected in a homogeneous way. In the same society it is possible to find different kinds of relations of production.

Russia as analyzed by Lenin in his article on "The Tax in Kind" (which corresponds, more or less, to the period between 1917 and 1929) is an example of the combination of different economic systems. Let us see how Lenin enumerated them: (1) patriarchal, peasant economy; that is to say, to a great degree, a natural economy; (2) small commodity production (this category includes the majority of the peasants, who sell wheat); (3) private capitalism; (4) state capitalism; (5) socialism.

Russia was so large and varied that all these different economic and social forms were mixed in it. It is in this that the originality of the Russian situation was constituted.

Another example is France as analyzed by Marx in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. There we had the combination of different modes of production of material goods: feudal, patriarchal, small commodity, and capitalist.

These diverse relations of production which co-exist in a historically determined society do not do so in an anarchic way, nor are they isolated from one another; one of them occupies a dominant place, imposing on the rest its own laws of operation.

In the Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy* Marx says the following: "In every form of society it is a determinant production and the relations engendered by it which assigns to all other productions and the relations engendered by them their place and importance."

If we study, for example, the diverse countries of Latin America, we find there diverse relations of production which range from highly developed capitalist relations to those which characterize an economy of near autarchy in certain regions; with capitalist relations of production dominating in the majority, if not in all of them. The capitalist relations subject to their laws of development the other relations which are subordinated to them.

Therefore, in the majority of the historically determined societies we encounter various relations of production. But in this diversity there is always one relation of production

which is dominant and whose laws of operation have a decisive influence over the rest.

From what has been said above we can deduce that the domination of a given type of relations of production does not automatically make all the other relations of production disappear; these can continue to exist, although modified and subordinated to the dominant relations of production.

We can point out, for example, that since the epoch of their conquest, Latin American countries have been subjected to the world capitalist system, at first under the form of commercial capitalism and later through relations of production distinctly capitalist (in the majority of countries). But to say that this world capitalist system dominates does not mean to deny that there were and still are, in a very diffuse form, pre-capitalist relations of production: relations of production which are close to those of the primitive community in some isolated places, semi-feudal relations in many peasant zones, and a significantly large diffusion of small, artisan production.⁴

The dominant relations of production not only impose their laws of operation on the other relations of production that are subordinated to them, but they also determine the general character of the superstructure of the society.

The complexity of the economic structure and the dominant character of one of the relations of production that co-exist in it, explains the complex character of the ideological and juridical-political structure of every historically determined society.

To designate this historically determined social reality, we use the concept of *social formation*. This concept refers, as we have seen, to a concrete, complex, impure reality, like all reality; to distinguish it from the concept of *mode of production* which refers to an abstract, pure, "ideal" object.

SOCIAL FORMATION is a concrete, historically determined, social reality.

This concrete, historically determined, social totality can correspond to a given country, or to a series of countries which have more or less similar characteristics and a common history. Thus, we can speak of the Chilean, Mexican, etc. social formation, as well as the Latin American social formation.

As with every social totality, this concrete, historically determined social totality is composed of an economic structure, an ideological structure, and a juridico-political structure; but at this level, they have a much more complex character. Therefore, in every social formation, with very few exceptions, we find (1) a *complex economic structure*, in which diverse relations of production co-exist. One of these relations occupies a dominant place, imposing its laws of operation on the other, subordinated relations; (2) a *complex ideological structure* formed by different ideological tendencies. The dominant ideological tendency, which subordinates and deforms the other tendencies, generally corresponds to the ideological tendency of the ruling class, that is, to the ideological tendency belonging to the exploiting pole of the dominant relation of production; (3) a *complex juridico-political structure* which fulfills the function of domination by the ruling class.

The social formation is, therefore, a complex structure, composed of complex regional structures which are articulated starting from the structure of the relations of

production. It is necessary to study each regional structure in its relative autonomy in relation to the rest and in accordance with its own characteristics.

The concept of mode of production refers to an abstract social totality (capitalist, feudal, slave, etc.). The concept of social formation refers to a concrete social totality. This is not a combination of modes of production, of abstract or ideal social totalities; it is a concrete, historically determined reality, structured beginning with the form in which the different relations of production which co-exist at the level of the economic structure are combined.⁵

Therefore, to study a social formation, to study a given country, we must always begin by diagnosing what kind of relations of production exist, how they are combined, what is the dominant relation of production, and how it exercises its influence over the subordinated relations of production.

We know that the fundamental thesis of historical materialism consists in explaining the entirety of the historical processes which are produced in a society, beginning with its economic infrastructure and, therefore, beginning with a complex economic structure in which different relations of production are combined. This thesis does not mean that Marxism denies the importance of the other levels of society. The economic structure determines, in the last instance, social development; but *it produces nothing automatically*. The ideological and juridico-political levels have a relative autonomy, within the margins which the economic structure allows them, that is, within their own laws of development. Their development can be more advanced, or it can lag behind with respect to the economic structure.

The study of a social formation is fundamentally an empirical study. It requires concrete data, statistics or other such data, which must be subjected to critical study. The other structures of the society can *never be deduced* from the economic infrastructure. Economics serves only as a "guideline" in the detailed and specific investigation of the ideological and juridical-political structures.

Finally, at the level of the social formation, the historically determined, social totality takes the form of a "concrete individuality," which maintains a certain identity through all its transformations. One country or a group of countries is distinguished from another country or group of countries by its individual characteristics and its history. Different phases of development can be distinguished in this history; that which determines the passage from one phase to another is a change in the way in which different relations of production which co-exist within it are interrelated. The relations of production which occupy the dominant place in the economic structure determine the character of the phase, and, moreover, they lend it its name. When we speak of capitalist countries, or semi-feudal countries, we are referring to the dominant relations of production in the social formation; but this does not preclude the existence of other relations of production which occupy a subordinate place.

If we were to apply rigorous terminology, we would have to say: a capitalist dominated social formation and a semi-feudal dominated social formation.

3. What is the Object of *Capital*?

With these two concepts—*mode of production* and *social formation*—we can answer this question concerning the object of *Capital*. We can formulate the question more precisely as follows: is the object of *Capital* the study of the capitalist mode of production (an abstract object) in its entirety; or is it only the study of the economic structure of this mode of production; or is it the study of a social formation, that is, an historically determined social reality: England in the second half of the 19th century?

Let us look at what Lenin says in this respect: “The *only* object of *Capital* is the precise study of capitalist society. This study implies a materialist analysis of that society and of its superstructures.”⁶

And, in a note a few pages further on, he adds that if other features of the economic system of the middle ages have been left out, it is because they belong to feudalism, whereas Marx only was studying the capitalist system of production.⁷

In these texts Lenin points out precisely the limits of Marx’s study: it deals with the regime, system, and social organization of capitalism, that is, a pure, abstract object. We ought to mention here that Lenin uses the term “social formation” in the sense of mode of production.⁸

The following text makes the abstract character of Marx’s object clearer:

Our mission, writes Marx, is to explain simply the internal organization of the capitalist system of production in its ideal form, in a manner of speaking. [*Capital*]

The theory of capital assumes that the worker receives the full value of his labor power. This is the ideal of capitalism, but by no means its reality. The theory of rent presupposes that the entire agrarian population has been completely divided into landowners, capitalists, and hired laborers. This is the ideal of capitalism, but by no means its reality. The theory of realization presupposes the proportional distribution of production. This is the ideal of capitalism, but by no means its reality.⁹

Now let us look at what Marx himself says about the capitalist mode of production and about England:

In this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production, and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode. Up to the present time, their classic ground is England. That is the reason why England is used as the chief illustration in the development of my theoretical ideas. [*Capital*]

Therefore, in *Capital* Marx studied an abstract object: the *capitalist mode of production*. England in the second half of the nineteenth century figures in this work only as an example which serves to *illustrate* his theoretical statements, since it is the country where capitalism was most advanced.

But can we say that *Capital* is a study of the entire capitalist mode of production?

Before answering this question, let us see what Lenin says, after having analyzed schematically the characteristics of the economic structure of the capitalist system of production:

Such is the *skeleton* of *Capital*. The whole point, however, is that Marx did not content himself with this skeleton, that he did not confine himself to ‘economic theory’ in the ordinary sense of the term, that, while *explaining* the structure and development of the given formation of society *exclusively* through production relations, he nevertheless everywhere and incessantly scrutinized the superstructure corresponding to these production relations and clothed the skeleton in flesh and blood. The reason *Capital* has enjoyed such tremendous success is that this book by a ‘German economist’ showed the whole capitalist social formation to the reader as a living thing—with its everyday aspects, with the actual social manifestation of the class antagonism inherent in production relations, with the bourgeois political superstructure that protects the rule of the capitalist class, with the bourgeois ideas of liberty, equality, and so forth, with the bourgeois family relationships.¹⁰

In this text Lenin affirms that in *Capital* Marx does not limit himself to studying the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production but he also refers to the superstructures that correspond to it.

The fact of the matter is that *Capital*, as we know it, is an unfinished work. It represents the scientific study of the “economic level” of the capitalist mode of production, and it is for this reason that it is generally considered a work of economics. Marx tried to analyze the laws, the state and the ideology of the capitalist mode of production as well, as we can see from the work plan which he presents in an *Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy*; but time ran out before he could complete it. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that this theory of the “economic level” of the capitalist mode of production necessarily assumes, if not a developed theory, at least certain theoretical elements which refer to other instances of the mode of production: ideological and juridico-political. It is to these elements that Lenin refers in the text cited above.

Therefore, *Capital* is not limited only to economics. It goes far beyond economics, in conformity with the Marxist conception of economic reality, which holds that economics can be understood only as a level, a part, a regional structure organically inscribed in the totality of a mode of production. It is for this reason, in spite of the fact that Marx’s analyses remain fundamentally at the level of the capitalist economy, that important theoretical elements can be found in his work for elaborating the theory of the other levels of this mode of production, elements which up to this moment are yet to be elaborated.¹¹

Finally, it is necessary to point out that *Capital* is limited to the complete and scientific study of the economic level of the capitalist mode of production in its competitive phase, which is fundamentally characterized by the free competition of individual capitalists. In spite of the fact that Marx discovered the tendency of the concentration of capital and the formation of monopolies, he could not carry on a scientific analysis of this stage in the development of capitalism, since, as a thinker, he was limited in his deliberations by the problematic of his own epoch.

4. The Concept of Political Conjuncture

At this point we have looked at the concepts of *mode of production* and *social formation*. The former refers to an

abstract social totality, the latter to an historically determined social totality. Now we are going to study the concept which refers to the most concrete level of analysis of a social formation, the concept of *political conjuncture*.

*The POLITICAL CONJUNCTURE is the "current moment" of the class struggle in a social formation or a system of social formations.*¹²

The political conjuncture is the "current moment" of a social formation. This "current moment" is characterized by a synthesis of the contradictions of a formation or of a system of social formations in a given moment in its development. It is expressed fundamentally as an opposition between different social forces.

The great contribution of Mao Tse-tung to the study of the conjuncture has been to provide us with a scientific method for analyzing it by asserting that every political conjuncture is a system of contradictions.

In this system one contradiction occupies the principal place and the others a secondary place.

There are many contradictions in the process of development of a complex thing, and one of them is necessarily the principle contradiction whose existence and development determine or influence the existence and development of the other contradictions.

For instance, in capitalist society the two forces in contradiction, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, form the principal contradiction. The other contradictions, such as those between the remnant feudal class and the bourgeoisie, between the peasant petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie, between the proletariat and the peasant petty bourgeoisie, between the non-monopoly capitalists and the monopoly capitalists, between bourgeois democracy and bourgeois fascism, among the capitalist countries and between imperialism and the colonies, are all determined or influenced by this principal contradiction. [Mao, *On Contradiction*]

Moreover, each of these contradictions has two aspects: a principal aspect and a secondary aspect.

But, in any given contradiction, whether principal or secondary, should the two contradictory aspects be treated as equal? Again, no. In any contradiction the development of the contradictory aspects is uneven. Sometimes they seem to be in equilibrium, which is however only temporary and relative, while unevenness is basic. Of the two contradictory aspects, one must be principal and the other secondary. The principal aspect is the only one playing the leading role in the contradiction. The nature of a thing is determined mainly by the principal aspect of a contradiction, the aspect which has gained the dominant position.

But this situation is not static; the principal and the non-principal aspects of a contradiction transform themselves into each other and the nature of the thing changes accordingly. [Mao, *On Contradiction*]

After having studied the principal and secondary contradictions, and their principal and secondary aspects, it is important to study the particularities of each one of these aspects. For example, in the case of the proletariat we have to study the level of political consciousness of the militant, revolutionary worker, the level of consciousness of the working masses, the existence or non-existence of a labor aristocracy, the degree of belief in the system of "democratic government," etc.

Finally, it is not enough to know the particular characteristics of each aspect; it is important to analyze what kind of relation is established between both aspects. "We know, for instance, that the exploitative forces, which always have more 'experience' than the exploited forces, use two general forms of struggle: violence and fraud, bullets and 'sugar coated bullets', the gun and the pen." Their political domination permits them to utilize the repressive force of the state against the exploited; the ideological domination gives them the means of information and propaganda to perpetrate collective fraud. In a given moment, the bourgeoisie primarily relies on fraud, in other moments it resorts to violence, depending on the degree of organization, consciousness, and combativeness of the masses.

Concrete analysis assumes the study of the specific form of struggle which takes place between the two aspects of the same contradiction.

Any modification in the system of contradictions which defines a given conjuncture, be it at the level of the principal and secondary contradictions, or at the level of the principal and secondary aspects of these contradictions, produces, at the same time, a modification in the current moment, a change in the political conjuncture.

Only a correct analysis of the political conjuncture, that is, of the current moment, lets us put forward adequate slogans of struggle, that is, slogans which can advance the revolutionary forces.

In Russia, there was a fundamental difference between the contradiction resolved by the February Revolution and the contradiction resolved by the October Revolution, as well as between the methods used to resolve them. The principle of using different methods to resolve different contradictions is one which Marxist-Leninists must strictly observe. The dogmatists do not observe this principle; they do not understand that conditions differ in different kinds of revolutions, and so do not understand that different methods should be used to resolve different contradictions; on the contrary, they invariably adopt what they imagine to be an unalterable formula and arbitrarily apply it everywhere, which only causes setbacks to the revolution or makes a sorry mess of what was originally well done. [Mao, *On Contradiction*]¹³

5. The Concept of Transition¹⁴

In studying the concept of mode of production we say that it refers to a dynamic structure which continuously tends to reproduce its conditions of existence. In this part we shall study the conditions which determine the change from one mode of production to another.

The material base of the transition from one mode of production to another, according to traditional Marxist thought, is characterized by a non-correspondence between the old dominant relations of production which enter into contradiction with the degree of development reached by the productive forces. It becomes a question of replacing the old relations of production by new ones which correspond to the degree reached by the development of the productive forces.

The growth of the productive forces and the embryonic rise of new relations of production have a spontaneous and unpredictable character. The agents of production, by

perfecting the old means of production and creating new ones, thereby developing the productive forces, do not realize the social consequences which they produce. Their thinking, their consciousness does not go beyond the immediate benefit which this process provides for them.

But the development of the productive forces and the changes produced in the relations of production operate spontaneously only up to a certain limit. When the new productive forces and the social relations of production which correspond to them, which have been born within the old infrastructure, enter into conflict with the old social relations of production which had dominated them, spontaneous development is replaced by conscious activity, by the struggle of the most advanced classes; that is, by those which arise from the new relations of production by creating at the economic, juridico-political, and ideological levels conditions which favor the development of the new relations of production.

Thus the old relations of production are defended by the old ruling classes which have at their disposal the state and all the means of ideological influence over the masses. Their interest is to maintain these relations of production, and they use whatever methods at their disposal to resist the advanced social forces which aspire to put an end to the old forms of property in order to open the way for the full development of the productive forces.

Only through the class struggle—through revolution—is it possible to destroy the power of the old dominant classes and the economic consequences of that power.

The revolutionary classes create new power, revolutionary power; and on this basis they destroy the obstacles which prevent the full development of the productive forces and the new relations of production corresponding to them. In this way the spontaneous process of social development, prepared at the level of the infrastructure, is replaced by the conscious activity of the masses guided by the class most interested in breaking with the old system.

The economic basis and cause of social revolutions was explained by Marx in his *Preface to a Critique of Political Economy*:

At a certain stage of their development, the material forces in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work before. From the forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. *Then begins an epoch of social revolution.* (Our emphasis, M. H.)

Utilizing the concepts of modes of production and of social formation, we can say that this “transition from one mode of production to another” always takes place within a given social formation. First, in the complex economic structure of the social formation, where various modes of production of material goods, that is, different relations of production, co-exist; one of the relations of production, until then subordinant, begins to acquire an increasingly more important role, to the point that it comes to constitute the dominant relation of production at the level of the economic structure. Then, since the juridico-political and ideological structures of the social formation have not changed, tending to favor the old, dominant relations of

production, it becomes necessary that the class which represents the new relations of production take over the state apparatus in order to change the ideological and juridico-political conditions which are braking the development of the new relations of production.

The conscious and violent process of destruction of the old relations of production, that is the *revolution*, is the general law which characterizes the change of domination of one social relation of production by another in a given social formation.

What is particular to the transition from capitalism to socialism is that in the heart of capitalist society, that is, in a social formation where capitalist relations of production dominate, *socialist relations of production cannot arise*, as has been the case with all previous societies in which new relations of production were born within the social formation where other social relations of production dominated.

For example, in France the change from the feudal mode of production, dominant until that time, to the capitalist mode of production, in terms of the economic structure, essentially came about before the Revolution of 1789. That is, not only the productive forces but also capitalist social relations of production already existed. From this point, the Revolution of 1789, a revolution at the juridico-political level, took place after the (spontaneous) revolution on the economic level. The seizing of power by the bourgeoisie only served to consolidate and stimulate the productive forces and their corresponding relations of production.

On the other hand, if in the very heart of a social formation dominated by capitalism productive forces are born and developed of an increasingly greater social character that could serve as the basis of socialist relations of production, these relations cannot be established without a revolution which would give political power to the working class.

Establishing social relations of production does not simply involve transforming the factories in such a way that capital is suppressed and that the workers administer the enterprise. If the problem could be reduced to this, seeds of socialism could arise within a capitalist society, like the case of the *kibbutz* in Israel. But since socialist relations of production do not refer to only the factories but to the entire economy of the country—the forms in which different areas of production must be articulated, etc.—they cannot be born within capitalist society whose law of development implies precisely a certain anarchy of social production.

Up to now we have seen that historical materialism shows us that determined social relations of production correspond, to a given degree, in the development of the productive forces, and how it is, on the basis of these relations, that given juridico-political and ideological relations are established. If the relations of production change, then sooner or later the other relations change.

But this thesis of historical materialism which appears to establish a certain order—first step, changes in the infrastructure, second step, changes in the superstructure—must be critically studied.

To what modes of production is Marx referring when he asserts this in the *Preface to the Critique*?

He is referring to the modes of production in which “bourgeois society” is the “ultimate contradictory form.” He says that with this bourgeois society, or capitalist mode of

production, "the pre-history of mankind comes to an end."

Therefore, if until the establishment of the capitalist mode of production it is possible to say, in general, that the juridico-political and ideological relations only arise to confirm and support the relations of production which have arisen spontaneously from the infrastructure, this statement is no longer valid for the transition from capitalism to socialism.

The transition from capitalist relations of production to socialist relations of production does not happen spontaneously.

In the transition from capitalism to socialism, the juridico-political relations are the first to be established. The seizure of political power by the working class, or by the working class and its allies, creates the conditions which permit the establishment of socialist relations of production and the new ideological relations which permit the full development of the productive forces, the necessary basis for the final establishment of communism: "to each according to his needs."

Let us see how Engels described this process:

With the seizing of the means of production by society, production of commodities is done away with, and simultaneously, the mastery of the product over the producer. Anarchy in social production is replaced by plan-conforming, conscious organization. The struggle for individual existence disappears. Then for the first time man, in a certain sense, is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom, and emerges from mere animal conditions of existence into really human ones. The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man, and which have hitherto ruled man, now comes under the dominion and control of man, who for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of nature, because he has now become master of his own social organization. The laws of his own social action, hitherto standing face to face with man as laws of nature foreign to, and dominating him, will then be used with full understanding, and so mastered by him. Man's own social organization, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself. Only from that time will man himself, with full consciousness, make his own history—only from that time will the social causes set in movement by him have, in the main, and in a constantly growing measure, the results intended by him. It is the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. [*Anti-Duhring*]

The transition from capitalism to socialism is, therefore, a transition in which revolutionary political action advances the relations of production. The spontaneist deviation of Marxism does not see the radical difference between the transition from capitalism to socialism and the other previous transitions. It applies the same model to all transitions and remains waiting for the capitalist social formation to evolve spontaneously towards socialism.

Summary

In this chapter we have studied the concepts of mode of production, social formation, and political conjuncture. We

have seen that the first refers to an abstract social totality, the second to a concrete, historically determined social totality, and the third to the "current moment" of a social formation.

Using the concepts of mode of production and of social formation we have been able to show what is the object of Marx's *Capital*. Finally, we have looked at the concept of transition from one mode of production to another.

Therefore, in this chapter we have defined the following concepts of the general theory of historical materialism: *mode of production, social formation, political conjuncture*.

Questions

1. What are the two senses in which the concept *mode of production* is used?
2. What does *mode of production* mean?
3. Why is it important to be able to have a theoretical concept in order to analyze reality?
4. Why does the concept *mode of production* refer to an abstract totality?
5. What does *social formation* mean?
6. Why can we not use *country* as a synonym for *social formation*?
7. What is the object of *Capital*?
8. Can we say that *Capital* has been out-dated?
9. What is a political conjuncture?
10. What is the scientific method to study a political conjuncture?
11. Why is it important to study a political conjuncture?
12. What do we mean by transition?
13. How do we differentiate the transitions prior to capitalism from the transition from capitalism to socialism?

Themes for Reflection

1. Is it possible to speak of a social formation dominated by capitalism if, at the level of the economic structure, it is not capitalist relations of production that dominate?
2. How does one determine when a mode of production of material goods and its corresponding relations of production come to occupy the dominant role in the economic structure of a social formation?
3. Why is it important to carefully limit the object of *Capital*?
4. Could you make an analysis of the current conjuncture of your country by applying the method of the system of contradictions?

NOTES

¹ Here Marx is referring to pre-capitalist relations in which the landlord is the owner of the land and the direct producer is only a possessor. De jure all his surplus labor belongs to the landlord.

² The concept of a *structure in dominance* used here was introduced by Louis Althusser in his article, "On the Materialist Dialectic," in *For Marx*. In the introduction to the Spanish edition (*La Revolución Teórica de Marx*) we gave the following definition of this concept: "the *structure in dominance* defines the Marxist totality as a complex whole which possesses the unity of an

articulated structure, in which there is one element which plays the dominant role and others which are subordinated to it; a dynamic unity in which there is an exchange of roles, the economic level being what determines in the last instance the element of the social structure which will play the dominant role."

³ We think that it is not correct to state, as Poulantzas does in his book, *Political Power and Social Classes*, that the matrix of the mode of production is the type of articulation of its different levels.

If, as Poulantzas himself points out, it is the relations of production (property, real appropriation) which determine the type of articulation of the levels of the mode of production, this type of articulation is only an effect of that which really constitutes the matrix of this mode: the relations of production. We think that Poulantzas' conception constitutes the strategic nodal point of his theoretical errors about the concept of social classes.

⁴ In our opinion the serious error which Andre Gunder Frank makes in his first books and articles on Latin America is to believe that in order to assert the domination of the world capitalist system it is necessary to deny the existence of any type of precapitalist relations. The domination of capitalism in relations of exchange is confused with the domination at the level of relations of production. This error impedes the correct analysis of social classes in Latin America.

⁵ The definition of a social formation as a simple combination of modes of production is given by Poulantzas in his book, *Political Power and Social Classes*.

⁶ Lenin, "What the 'Friends of the People' Are, and How They Fight the Social-Democrats," *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 149.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁸ Lenin uses the term "social formation" in an undifferentiated sense both to refer to an abstract social totality (what we have called "mode of production") and to refer to a concrete social totality (what we have called "social formation"). Therefore, it is necessary to determine in what sense Lenin uses the term, whenever it appears in one of his texts.

⁹ Lenin, "Once More on the Theory of Realization," *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 86-87.

¹⁰ Lenin, "What the 'Friends of the People' Are," pp. 141-42.

¹¹ Louis Althusser, "Teoria, practica teorica y formacion teorica. Ideologia y lucha ideologica," *Casa de las Americas* No. 34 (1966), p. 8.

¹² The concept of "political conjuncture" can refer both to a given social formation and to the world situation, in which take place determined relations between systems of social formations. For example, the world conjuncture which was produced after victory of the socialist revolution in Russia, etc.

¹³ In Lenin's writings from the February revolution to the October revolution of 1917, we find excellent analyses of the different conjunctures which were arising in that situation and of the new political slogans which had to be put forward in each conjuncture.

¹⁴ We want to warn the reader that we consider this section to be one of the weakest in the book.



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bewail the poverty of theory or to abandon the quest for an approach that permits an understanding of the social whole. The theoretical perspective proffered in Gramsci's work also has obvious strategic implications for resolving the political moment of the current crisis in Marxism. A first step in this respect is the improved understanding of the political problems confronting the Left (as evidenced in the analyses of Thatcherism in recent issues of this journal). But this must be accompanied by greater concern with the development of a left Eurocommunist strategy and its successful conduct in a conjuncture that is far from favourable thereto. In this respect the Gramsci debate is still in its infancy and one looks forward to further work on this problem in Britain as well as elsewhere.

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