

The Althusserian Controversy in Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract: The recent ‘ontological turn’ in social theory is a turn to issues that have long been central to Marxian social theory. Althusser made seminal contributions to social ontology by emphasizing complexity and opposing reductionism. His work on ontology is as important as his work on epistemology. This led Balibar and then Hindess and Hirst to rethink the established theoretical concepts of Marxian theory, which at that time consisted of mode of production and social formation theory, and culminated with the controversial call for Marxists to break with this approach. This Althusserian literature provoked an influential response from G.A. Cohen in defense of Marxist orthodoxy. This paper revisits this important literature in light of the more recent work in social ontology. It concludes that the Althusserian emphasis on complexity, non-reductionism, and change, looks increasingly prescient and relevant in modern social theory. This Marxist literature gives a powerful example of the effect that ontology can have on the practice of social theory. This literature can be challenging because it involves contributions based in structuralism, post-structuralism, linguistic and analytic philosophy, and it engages with issues of theory, epistemology and ontology. It is also a record of struggle and discovery as it takes place, and thus is difficult to interpret except retrospectively.

Keywords: Althusser, Balibar, Hindess and Hirst, G.A. Cohen, mode of production, social ontology.

Increasingly social theorists are focusing attention on the issue of ontology. In contrast Bhaskar (2007, 192) notes that in the 1970's ontology was a taboo subject and discussing it directly would be met with "a certain *frisson*". For Marxists the "ontological turn" (Lawson, 2003) should come as no surprise because social ontology is a central concern for Marxist theory and has been since its beginnings. Clearly Marx was concerned with the basic features of social structure and social change, and important distinctions among Marxist social theories, and including political ones, can be traced to differences over this issue. For example, during the course of the twentieth century the dominant Marxist conception of society changed from one characterized by some degree of complexity—there was no consensus how much—to one characterized by expression wherein the parts are understood to simply express the nature of one essential aspect of the whole. The transition of Marxist social theory from the base and superstructure approach that dominated Second International thinking to the mode of production and social formation (MoP-SF) approach distinctive of mid-century "official" Marxism was, in part, the working-out of this new ontological perspective in theory. This change in what Pepper (1942) calls the "root metaphor" of a theory emphasized simplicity, predictability, and order at the expense of complexity, contingency, and change, and the impacts of this displacement remain largely unrecognized.

In orthodox MoP-SF theory the mechanism of expression is simple and direct. This can be seen most clearly in its three "sociological laws"¹:

First Law: "the law of the necessary conformity between production relations and the character of the productive forces."

¹ Lange (1963), 23, 30, 36; see also Kuusinen (1963), 120-25 and Cornforth (1953), chapter 5. Olsen (2009) discusses the origin of these three laws in Marxist theory and their place in orthodox MoP-SF theory.

Second Law: “the law of necessary conformity between superstructure and the economic base.”

Third Law: “the law of the progressive development of the productive forces.”

The first law subordinates the relations of production to the forces, and the second establishes deterministic priority for the economic base or mode of production (combination of the forces and relations) over the political and cultural superstructure. The third law introduces change into the structure via the autonomous, progressive development of the productive forces. Change at the level of the productive forces drives the society or social formation (combined mode of production and superstructure) stadially through a series of qualitatively different forms (primitive communal, slave, feudal, etc.). Thus societies are unified wholes whose character is uniquely determined by the forces of production, both synchronically and diachronically, and simply express the determination emanating from these forces. The fundamental propositions of orthodox MoP-SF theory are therefore ontological in that they “pertain to the most pervasive features of reality, such as real existence, change, time, causation, chance, life, mind, and society (Bunge, 1999, 201)”. The objective of this paper is to examine how debate over these basic ontological issues brought them to the forefront of Marxist theory, and, more importantly, how this fostered a growing dissatisfaction with MoP-SF theory that is now nearly universal. Needless to say this dissatisfaction was less than helpful for the reputation of Marxism generally, but it also served as an important catalyst for the emergence of a new class-analytic Marxian theory.²

²Resnick and Wolff (1987, 2002, 2006), Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) (surveyed by Tonkiss, 2008), Callari and Ruccio (1996) part III, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000, 2001), Chakrabarti and Cullenberg (2003), and Burczak (2006).

Paradoxically the break with MoP-SF theory was the culmination of a sustained effort to establish it rigorously that began with Althusser. The era of de-Stalinization that began in 1956 allowed for a degree of criticism of orthodox theoretical positions, and Althusser led this critical movement from within the French party (Goshgarian, 2003; see also Althusser, 1977c). It is in this context that his work initiated the still ongoing project of ‘rethinking Marxism’. Althusser’s criticism of officially-sanctioned Marxist philosophy focused attention on the issue of ontology:

. . . a certain, let us say ontological version of Marxist philosophy had for a number of years been gaining ground in the USSR, . . . it had been codified by Stalin in his famous chapter of the History of the C.P.S.U.(B.), and that it had become dominant in the Soviet Union and in all Communist Parties. . . . (This) dominant version of dialectical materialism which transforms materialism into an ontology of matter whose ‘laws’ are supposed to be stated by the dialectic, the version which refuses to recognize that the whole virtue of materialism and of dialectics lies in the fact that they state not ‘laws’ but theses – this version has pursued its successful career. *Indeed, it remains dominant even today.* (Althusser, 1977c, 14)

But it was not ontological theorizing *per se* that Althusser criticized, rather it was a particular image of society and economy implicitly based on the Leibnizian concept of expression that dominated both Hegel’s thought (Althusser, 1970, 186, 190) and the

Marxism of the Soviet Union and the Comintern. He criticized this consistently beginning in the early 1960's, and in its place proposed complexity as the basis for the Marxian image of society.³ In short, Althusser identified social ontology as an issue of particular concern for Marxian theory when he stressed that (i) the Hegelian conception of totality and unity is fundamentally different from Marx's⁴, and (ii) that to miss this difference is to miss Marx's "specific difference" from Hegel (Althusser, 1977a, 202). One can reasonably argue that alongside the "epistemological break" that Althusser famously attributes to Marx he also finds an ontological one.

The study of social ontology is often motivated by questions of causality, agency, and determinism; for Marxist social theory these are issues of dialectics. A dialectical ontology—one emphasizing that phenomena are complexly interrelated and mutually constitutive—is an uncomfortable mate with simple determinism. If phenomena are *complexly* related then it is difficult to argue that they can likewise be subject to *simple* determination. Hegel resolves this contradictory tension with his particular notion of social totality. He allows for existents in society to be interrelated, but constituent parts of the society and their relations are subordinated to the primacy of a social essence, which they simply express. This expression relation gives the parts the status of epiphenomena of the social essence, and since this essence has a purpose and a goal so too does its epiphenomenal expression. For Hegel (1956) societies, including his own and its predecessors, were simply vehicles for the development of a spiritual and transcendental essence (the Idea) towards its developmental objective (self-realization, its *telos*), and this imbues each society with an overarching rationality. Society is ordered

³ Most obviously in "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and "On the Materialist Dialectic" (1977a), but this theme runs throughout Althusser's work.

⁴ See esp. Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 17, 96-97, 186-87, Althusser, 1977a, 202-204, and 1977b, 173.

and predictable because it has a specific purpose within this larger teleological progression.

Hegelian social ontology is a type of holism, but it is idiosyncratic in its understanding of the relationship between the whole and its elements. Typically in holistic theories the elements of the whole are objects acted upon by the forces, rules, or laws of the whole rather than subjects capable of acting independently (as in Cartesian theories). For Hegel the elements of society are not acted on by laws, rather they express, in a simple unmediated way, the spiritual social essence. Hegel's holism is therefore reductionist because it reduces the different aspects of the whole to simply expressions of some spiritual essence. Althusser argues that Marx broke with Hegel on precisely this point, and uses the term "overdetermination" to indicate Marx's distinct ontological position. This is characterized by neither holistic nor Cartesian reductionism, but rather that part and whole are complexly and irreducibly mutually constitutive.

Just as the adoption of an ontology based on expression had consequences for Marxian social theory, so too did Althusser's proposed return to complexity, and it was Balibar who first tried to work-out the ramifications. This meant rethinking the basic arguments of MoP-SF theory, which at that time was synonymous with historical materialism, and hence the genesis of Balibar's contribution to *Reading Capital* "On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970). This work was nothing less than an effort to reconstitute the basic concepts of Marxist social and historical theory in a way that is free from the expressive totality social ontology, and to produce a new "general theory of modes of production (Balibar, 1973)". His success was far from complete.

Balibar's unfinished project was taken-up by Hindess and Hirst in their influential *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production (PCMP)* (1975). They took Balibar's initial effort to rethink MoP-SF theory much further than their predecessors but eventually concluded (1977, esp. 2, 22-30, and 49-57) that it was not possible to reconstitute this theory free from the problems associated with Hegel's expressive causality. Initially this Althusserian literature led to a great upsurge of interest in MoP-SF theory. Among some Marxists it is thought of as elevating MoP-SF theory to a new level of rigor. This is curious because it culminated in the outright rejection of MoP-SF theory. Hindess and Hirst draw the right conclusion and achieve a watershed in modern Marxian theory when they propose that MoP-SF theory should be rejected and replaced by "concepts of economic class relations and their conditions of existence in definite social formations (1977, 2)", but neither they nor Balibar accurately diagnose the specific way that MoP-SF theory incorporates expression into Marxian theory. One reason for this is that they attribute many problems with MoP-SF theory to epistemology that are better understood as problems stemming from ontology. These are related but distinct issues.

For several decades MoP-SF theory was the official version of Marxian social theory sanctioned and promulgated by the Soviet Union and affiliated Marxist parties. The Althusserian critique, and especially Hindess and Hirst's call for Marxists to reject MoP-SF theory, was nothing less than a call for a break with the established Marxist world-view. This provoked an influential reaction in the form of G.A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense (KMTH)* (Cohen, 1978), which is a sustained defense of the central tenets of mid-century MoP-SF theory against this critique. Cohen's work provides a useful counterpoint to the Althusserian literature because what they

strive to overcome—certain influences of Hegel’s philosophy of history on Marxian theory—is precisely what he endeavors to preserve.⁵ Cohen’s Marxism is avowedly a secular analog of Hegel’s historical theory. It preserves the simple deterministic character of the social structure and purges dialectical complexity in order to preserve orthodox MoP-SF theory’s underlying reductionist ontology. This debate was left unresolved in part because many plainly ontological differences were never articulated as such. The “ontological turn” in social theory, as well as Cohen’s reaffirmation of his earlier position in a new edition of *KMTH* (Cohen, 2000) and his renewed criticism of Althusserianism (Cohen, 2006), calls for a reconsideration of this important literature. The following three sections thus examine work of Balibar, Hindess and Hirst, and Cohen on MoP-SF theory, with particular attention to their ontological arguments (or lack thereof).

Balibar – *Reading Capital*

Balibar’s contribution to *Reading Capital* is a critical reinterpretation of orthodox MoP-SF theory as it stood in the early 1960’s. At that time MoP-SF theory had only recently been given its first relatively complete theoretical statements in the works of Kuusinen (1963 [1959]), Lange (1963 [1959]), and Cornforth (1953). Balibar largely accepts MoP-SF theory as the definitive interpretation of Marx’s work, but he endeavors to purge the simple holistic Hegelian social ontology that informs it. Though both Althusser and Balibar reject structuralism as “ideology” foreign to Marxism, Balibar introduces a type of structuralism that he calls a “pseudo combinatory” (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 226,

⁵ And what he aims to purge from Marxian theory, i.e. dialectics (Cohen, 2000, xxii –xxv), is what Althusser (1977b, 174) calls Hegel’s “crucial gift” to Marx.

241) in place of the Hegelian ontology. Balibar offers a unique conception of the structure with his pseudo-combinatory, but his alternative retains most of the basic holistic reductionism of both Hegelian and structuralist theory.

The Psuedo Combinatory

Balibar's pseudo combinatory is a relatively direct descendent of Saussure's linguistic theory, which interprets language as a structure wherein the individual elements (words composed of phonemes) are combined systematically to produce meaning and communication. It is a functional system that has to be understood in light of its aim of communication. Words form the basic set of elements that can be combined, and each word has meaning only in its relations with other words in the structure. Words are signs that can be combined in endless variation, but the structure of the language imposes order on the combinations and allows meaning and communication to be produced by the relations that exist among the elements.

The crux of de Saussure's theory, . . . , is the role of relations in a system: signs are constituted partly, and phonemes wholly, by their relations, that is by belonging to a system. For them, to be is to be related. (Wells, 1970, 97)

The "structure" is the rules and regularities of the language-system, and this consists of the manner in which the individual elements of a particular language can be arranged in relations of mutual dependence to achieve its objective. Since the system of relations

differs among languages, the elements of any particular system can only be understood by reference to the system as a whole. Therefore linguistics, it was argued, and by extension all structuralist theories of linguistic origin, must be the study of the system as a whole rather than the individual fact. Later structuralists generalized this conception of a structure. Piaget (1970, ch. 1) gives a useful summary by defining a structure according to three properties: wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation. In his definition structures are self-contained wholes whose elements are subordinated to laws that transform the elements within the structure and make it self-regulating. It is by these laws that the structure is defined, and they are what distinguish a structure from an aggregate, which is merely an amalgam of elements that exist independently of the complexes that they enter.

Balibar argues analogously that society should be understood as a structure whose purpose or center is the extraction of surplus from a class of laborers. A social structure is a combination of elements (a mode of production composed of laborer, means of production, non laborer, the connections between them, and its associated political and ideological superstructure), and historical periods or epochs are simply different articulations of the elements (204, 211-216, 225, *et passim*). Different combinations of the basic elements yield different relations among them, and hence qualitatively different social forms.

While Balibar makes extensive use of the concepts and logic of the Saussurian combinatory, he also makes several modifications that lead him to refer to his ontological conception as a “pseudo-combinatory”. He rejects the idea that what he is proposing is genuinely structuralist because in his combinatory the elements themselves are

transformed in each combination (216, 241). Therefore the logic of the structural combinatory is retained—the mode of production and social formation⁶ consist of structural combinations of a set of elements—but his pseudo-combinatory is a type of dialectical structuralism. Each element is transformed in different combinations, and therefore the identity of each is conjunctural. In Balibar’s combinatory “to be is to be related” remains true, but each system of relations is unique and each element is transformed by each set of relations. Consequently, while each element in the combinatory is an example of the general concepts that he specifies as constituting every mode of production, it also exists *sui generis* as a product of its own unique circumstances. Each of the elements of any given combination, i.e. any existing society, have a genealogy and a history, but it is a “history without any locatable subject”; the real subject of each history of the elements is the combination, upon which depend the elements and their relations, but this is “something which is not a subject (250)”, at least not in the Cartesian sense of an autonomous subject. Furthermore, for Balibar, the elements are not “homogenous” (223), in the sense of being uniformly and essentially of one or another type, but rather since they are always dependent upon one another for their existence, the divisions between them are always incomplete. These divisions are always somewhat arbitrary because the identity of each element is contingent upon, and hence constituted by, its relations within the larger complex.

From this we can conclude that in a limited way the elements of Balibar’s structural combinatory are contingent, interpenetrating, and mutually constitutive. In this

⁶ In *Reading Capital* Balibar uses the term “mode of production” inconsistently. At times he uses it to indicate only the “economic base”, while at other times he uses it to refer to the concept of a social structure in its entirety. “Social structure” and “social formation” are both used to designate the articulated combination of an economic base and its affiliated superstructure.

way he re-introduces several of the basic concepts of a dialectical or overdetermined ontology into the Marxian theory of society. But Balibar still retains the holistic rationality of the structural combinatory and argues that, instead of the simple transitive causality of earlier theories, the distinctive feature of Marxian theory is structural causality (224). He relies on class exploitation as the center or purpose that binds the social domain into a structured whole, and it is this center that gives the economy primary deterministic influence to assign to the other aspects of the social structure their place in that structure. So the elements of the structure are transformed in different combinations, but there is a limit to the variation that is permitted. The mode of production remains the base that determines the place of all other elements of the combination as so many aspects of a superstructure and establishes the limits of their variation. This is the contradictory tension in Balibar's social ontology: contingency is always circumscribed by the necessity to retain both the economy as the base that establishes the limits of play of the structure as a whole, as well as the mode of production and social formation concepts that Balibar accepts as fundamental to Marxism.

Determination and Dominance

Balibar maintains only "in the last instance" economic determination by distinguishing between what we might call determinism and dominance.⁷ He distinguishes between them by first asking the simple but generally overlooked question ". . . how is the determinant instance in the social structure in a given epoch itself determined (220)?"

Balibar takes as a premise that the social structure must always have a determinant element or level that orders and regulates it, and for him this is always the economy. But

⁷ I owe this distinction to Hindess and Hirst (1975, 14, 226-7, 260-61)

Balibar's treatment of the economy within the combinatory is both unique among structuralist analyses and a break with orthodox MoP-SF theory. Structuralism presupposes some center, or function, or purpose for the structure that must be preserved in the process of reproduction. Derrida points out that this center must both be inside the closed structure, but yet not itself altered by the transformations of the structure or by the laws. The center "while governing the structure, escapes structurality. . . . (it) is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside it* (Derrida, 1978, 279)". In other words, for structuralist theories the function or purpose of the structure cannot also be an element of that structure acted upon and transformed by its laws. For Balibar the economy is determinant because one aspect of it—class exploitation—is the source of the primary law of combination of any social structure. But he also makes the economy subject to determination by the structure by drawing a distinction between *dominant* and *determinant*.

Economic exploitation of one class by another is the *raison d'être* of Balibar's social structure, and hence the relations of production are the true center of the economic level at the center of society (and not the forces as in orthodox MoP-SF theory). Therefore, the economy always *determines* the organization and regulation of the structure, but only in some social structures is exploitation secured by the economic level occupying the *dominant* position in that social structure. Whichever level—economic or non-economic—provides the conditions necessary for exploitation to occur serves as the dominant one in any possible social form. These conditions of existence are found by considering the performance of necessary and surplus labor. He reads Marx as stating that if necessary and surplus labor coincide in space and time, as they do in capitalism,

then non-economic pressure is unnecessary to extract surplus from the laborer. The laborer performs surplus alongside the necessary labor and needs no coercion to do so because, “. . . exploitation is ‘mystified’, ‘fetishized’ into the form of a relation between things themselves (217).” In this case the mode of production (economic base) is itself both determinant and dominant in the social structure because it can perform the function of exploitation without direct intervention by the other levels. In exploitative non-capitalist social structures this is not the case. The economy might not occupy the dominant position in these social formations because it requires the other levels of the social structure to provide the conditions of existence necessary to perform its function. In these cases the other levels appear to be the determinant aspect of the social structure because without them the economy is unable to fulfill its function, but they are, in fact, dominant but not determinant. In the feudal mode of production, for example, necessary and surplus labor are assumed not to coincide in time and space, and therefore “other than economic pressure”—the threat of coercion from the feudal state—is required to induce the direct laborers to perform surplus labor. In this case politics occupies the dominant position because the intervention of the state is required to assure that surplus labor is performed. So the economy is not dominant in all social formations, but,

*. . . the economy is determinant in that it determines which of the instances of the social structure occupies the determinant place.*⁸ Not a simple relation, but rather a relation between relations; not a transitive causality, but rather a structural causality. (224)

⁸ As written this statement strikes me as inscrutable; Hindess and Hirst’s distinction between “determinant” and “dominant” resolves the confusion.

So Balibar preserves determination by the economy, but he breaks with the expressive causality of orthodox MoP-SF theory by replacing the Hegelian expressive social ontology with a quasi-structuralist one, which results in determination “in the last instance” by the economy rather than simple unmediated expression.⁹ But his break with structuralism is far from complete. While he may provide a more nuanced presentation of economic determinism by making a distinction between determinant and dominant, his answer is typical of structuralist discourses that point to visible relationships as simply manifestations of deep structures that underlie them.¹⁰ For Balibar the deep structure of economic determinism is made visible by observing society as a combinatory. This preserves the economy as the determinant base of the social formation even in those combinations where it is not dominant. Balibar thereby uses structural causality to maintain the determinant ‘in the last instance’ role for the economy, but the place of the economy is ambiguous in the hierarchy of dominance. Balibar thus challenges the unambiguous place of the economy in orthodox MoP-SF theory. He also places the performance of necessary labor and surplus labor and the issue of exploitation at the center of Marxian analysis by making these the issues that Marxists should look to when conducting social analysis. In so doing he proposes that the relations between classes

⁹ On this point I disagree with Hindess and Hirst (1975, 276), who argue that Balibar’s “Spinozist” structural causality is identical to Hegel’s expressive causality. Hindess (2007, 10) reiterates this point and singles it out as the problem that led to Althusser’s “undoing” among many British Althusserians. But where Hindess and Hirst see identity I also find an important difference. I grant that structuralism and Hegel’s spiritual totality are both holistically reductionist, but the mechanisms they rely on to achieve this are different—secular functionalism in one and supernatural expression in the other. Furthermore, Althusser’s structural causality and Balibar’s quasi-structuralism should be contrasted with what they react against—the simple expressive causality of orthodox MoP-SF theory—to see their work as a less than completely successful attempt to break from simple expressive causality rather than identical to it.

¹⁰ *cf* Godelier (1970, esp. 34-35).

cannot be assumed to be transparently established by the technology of production, the presence of markets, or the assumption of historical epoch. Balibar failed to develop this idea substantially, but this thread was subsequently picked up by Hindess and Hirst, and later became one of the distinctive features of Resnick and Wolff's Marxian class theory.

Hindess and Hirst's *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*

PCMP is an ambitious text that systematically engages with the core ideas of mid-twentieth century Marxism and consistently offers unique insights. It is also profoundly contradictory and exhibits the effects of attempting to reconcile two irreconcilable theoretical positions: MoP-SF theory, which is premised on an expressive totality social ontology, and Althusser's efforts to return complexity and non-reductionism to Marxian social theory. Hindess and Hirst do not clearly acknowledge the distinction between these two positions, and consequently they often attribute problems of MoP-SF theory to Balibar or Althusser, but *PCMP* is best understood as an effort to integrate these two very different streams of thought. Hindess and Hirst's inability to resolve the contradictions between them is not a failure on their part, rather their discovery of it is a lasting contribution to Marxian theory. *PCMP*, along with the subsequent *Mode of Production and Social Formation* (Hindess and Hirst, 1977) brought this contradiction to the fore and Marxists who seriously engage with this work come to realize that they face a choice between MoP-SF theory and complexity.

Hindess and Hirst take their object—MoP-SF theory—more or less where Balibar leaves it in *Reading Capital*, and the bulk of their book is an effort to build systematically from his arguments. *PCMP* describes a social formation as an “articulated structure”

composed of levels, including economic, political, ideological, and perhaps others. Consistent with Balibar's dominance theorem, Hindess and Hirst argue that the economic level determines which aspect of the social formation is dominant (14, 226-7, 260-61). The economic level of every social structure contains a specific mode of production that alone constitutes and orders it. Elements of other modes may also be present, as long as they do not contradict the conditions of existence of the primary mode of production, or, in other words, as long as they do not challenge the unity of the singular mode of production-social formation combination.

For Hindess and Hirst a mode of production is an articulated combination of relations and forces of production in which the relations are dominant, "a complex unity of relations and forces of production (125 and 183)". They make the additional claim that this dominance establishes a unique relationship between one type of productive forces and one type of production relations, with each type of relation of production compatible with only one type of forces of production (12, 125 and 183). The concepts of the different modes of production are constructed using the same elements that Balibar enumerates as part of any mode of production. Like Balibar they focus attention on surplus labor and argue that all modes of production involve the performance of surplus labor and the appropriation of the product of that surplus labor by an individual or group. The relations of production are the relations between the laborers performing surplus labor and the appropriators of the resulting surplus product, and they may take qualitatively different forms (primitive communist, slave, feudal, etc.). The forces of production are also composed of elements (laborer, organization/division of labor, technique, etc.) that can be combined variously, with different combinations constituting

different forces of production. The character of both the forces and relations is conjunctural, varying with the different combinations they might be found in, and hence neither the forces nor the relations can be defined independently of the mode of production in which they are combined (11). If there is a set of forces (combination of elements) that uniquely correspond to a type of relations (way of appropriating surplus labor), thereby forming an articulated combination of forces and relations wherein the relations are dominant, then this combination qualifies as a legitimate mode of production. If no set of forces can be said to uniquely correspond to a way of appropriating surplus labor, then those production relations are not distinct from some other type, and hence this is not a distinct mode of production. Hindess and Hirst develop their distinctive conceptions of the different modes of production from this unique position on the issue of relations/forces correspondence.

While the similarities between *PCMP* and Balibar's contribution to *Reading Capital* are apparent, the differences are only somewhat less prominent. Hindess and Hirst's critique of Balibar begins with their criticism of his theory of transition and what they call "the teleology of structural causality", but the ramifications go well beyond the issue of transitions, extending to their rejection of a general theory of modes of production (Balibar's project in *Reading Capital*) as "idealist and teleological" (7), and to their eventual rejection of MoP-SF theory itself.

Teleology

PCMP states that structural causality requires the conditions of existence of the structure to be effects of the structure itself (273). Structures must therefore be closed and not

subject to causes outside themselves because lacking closure there is no guarantee that causality is in fact from the structure. *PCMP* also argues that in generating its conditions of existence the structure cannot also generate the conditions of its transition. The structure thus reproduces itself indefinitely and is in this sense a ‘Spinozist’ eternity. While Hindess and Hirst acknowledge that Balibar makes no reference to Spinoza, they surmise that “Balibar’s text in *Reading Capital* represents the (non-transitional) mode of production as an eternity in (Spinoza’s) sense (273)”. Structural causality thus assures the reproduction of the mode of production but this also prohibits it from changing, and this poses a dilemma: “if each mode of production is an eternity, then how is transition to be conceived, if transition is possible then how can each mode of production be conceived as an eternity (274)?”

Balibar tries to avoid this dilemma by proposing a distinction between transitional and non-transitional modes of production. Modes that are characterized by a correspondence between the forces and relations of production do not undergo transition; those whose forces and relation do not correspond are transitional, and their functioning transforms the forces to correspond with the relations (304). But this fails to avoid the problem because it cannot account for the movement from non-transitional modes to transitional ones. Hindess and Hirst argue that this movement is unthinkable in Balibar’s theory, and thus the existence of transitions renders his approach theoretically incoherent. Furthermore, Balibar’s idea of a transitional mode of production is teleological: it assumes an objective or *telos*, correspondence between relations and forces, and proposes that the behavior of the structure in the present is governed by the necessity of achieving this future objective. Balibar’s theory thus presents us with modes

of production that are characterized either by unending stasis or teleological transformation.

Having deduced that Balibar's theory of transition is teleological Hindess and Hirst then acknowledge that this poses a much broader indictment of his theory:

The conception of the transition from one mode of production to another is a rigorous effect of the concepts of the modes or production in question. A teleological theory of transition must therefore be considered as the effect of an idealist concept of mode of production. (272)

They argue that diachronic theory is intimately related to the synchronic theory of the object, and follows from it. The implications of this argument are profound. One of them is that if Balibar's theory of transition is teleological and idealist then his entire interpretation of MoP-SF theory must be also. What then should the reader conclude about the bulk of *PCMP*, which is largely an effort to complete Balibar's unrealized project? This is the basic contradiction that calls the bulk of *PCMP* into question. What they initially take as relatively free from the taint of idealism and systematically develop, they ultimately deduce as itself idealist.

Idealism

For Hindess and Hirst a general theory of modes of production is a kind of structuralism that envisions an abstract "mode-of-production-in-general" and any actual modes (slave, feudal, etc.) that might be said to exist in history are simply variant expressions of this

ideal general structure. More importantly, structuralism is taken to be a type of rationalism and rationalism a type of idealism:

A general theory of modes of production must represent each particular mode as a particular variant form of a single general structure. The general theory is therefore a structuralism: it is a theory of a *structure* and of the possible forms in which it may be realised. . . . (This general theory) can be realized only by reproducing the essential structures of the idealist philosophies of history. These doctrines conceive history as a rational order in which determinate historical phenomena are each represented as the expression (the effect) of a determinate idea. Relations between phenomena may therefore be represented as expressions of relations between ideas and the movement of history as the working out, the realisation, of a pre-given complex idea. The idea is the essence of its phenomena. History is a rational order in the sense that an adequate knowledge of a determinate historical phenomenon is identical to its essence, the idea which is expressed in that phenomenon. In such conceptions the essential structure of history (the relations between essences) appears as a structure of relations between ideas—a rational order. (1975, 7)¹¹

In other words, Balibar's general theory is idealist because a general theory is a kind of structuralism, structuralism is a product of rationalist epistemology, and rationalism is a

¹¹ Hindess and Hirst would change their position on what constitutes idealist philosophy (1977, 21).

type of idealism. A rationalist epistemology is taken to be one that assumes theoretical discourse provides privileged access to the essence of phenomena, and the essence of a phenomenon is fully captured by its theoretical concept (see also Hindess (1977, 8)). Since the relations among concepts in discourse are assumed to be rational, so too are the relations among phenomena in rationalist histories. Expressive causality is understood to involve an idealist relation between phenomena and their theoretical concepts, with existents taken to be simply expressions of their concepts.¹² Rationalist theory therefore is a type of idealism because it presents phenomena as something akin to Platonic ideal forms, and any given phenomenon simply expresses a pre-given supra-historical ideal. Thus for Hindess and Hirst expressive causality is an epistemological issue rather than an ontological one, it is a type of idealism that results from rationalism. Both Althusser and Balibar are found to be rationalists and therefore idealists who claim to reject expressive causality but are unable to because of their epistemology.

Problems with Hindess and Hirst's Rejection of MoP-SF Theory

Several problems with Hindess and Hirst's critique of Balibar and their ultimate rejection of MoP-SF theory need to be emphasized here. I do not mean to question their ultimate conclusion—that MoP-SF theory should be rejected in favor of class relations and their conditions of existence—but rather with their means of achieving it. The first issue is that several of the problems they point to with Balibar's theory are not unique to it, but rather are problems of structuralist ontology more generally, and so it is both unnecessary and distracting to attribute these to a 'Spinozist' conception of the mode of production. Recall Piaget's theory of structures, which defines them according to wholeness,

¹² Later they refer to this as the "auto-effectivity of the concept (1977, 27, 35).

transformation, and self-regulation. Wholeness implies that elements of a structure are subordinated to the laws of that structure; transformation means that elements are transformed by the laws of the structure; self-regulation entails “self-maintenance and closure (14)” which allows the structure to reproduce itself. This allows Piaget to say that “the structure is preserved or enriched by the interplay of its transformation laws, *which never yield results external to the system nor employ elements that are external to it* (1970, 5, emphasis added)”. This is a characteristic of structuralist theory, and it is neither necessary nor helpful to attribute it to Spinoza’s influence on Balibar. When *PCMP* states “Complexity is negated by the conception of the totality as eternity (316)”, and argues for a concept of structure wherein the conditions of existence of the structure are contingent rather than assured (14 – 17), it fails to recognize the more general problem of structuralism.

Rather than rejecting structuralism *PCMP* proposes to reject Spinozist notions of eternity by taking the conditions of existence of the mode of production to be contingent rather than assured (17, 278-85). But substituting conditional structures for self-reproducing ones does not eliminate structuralist causality, it only rejects that it must always succeed. This depends on the efficacy of the structure, not the type of causality. Making the reproduction of the conditions of existence of the economy contingent does not change the basic reductionist vision of an economic center and a social structure directly or indirectly determined by that center. The homology with idealist philosophy is essentialist-reductionist ontology, and this does not necessarily entail rationalist epistemology or the influence of Spinoza.

This brings us to the second problem with *PCMP*'s critique of Balibar. Hindess and Hirst's specific criticism focuses on issues of ontology—primarily a conception of society as an eternal structure—but when assessing their critique (esp. 7-8 and 316-317) they characterize these as problems of *epistemology*. The problem of Balibar's structuralism, as they see it, is not ontology but rather *rationalism*:

The conception of the structure as present in its effects is negated by the conception of it as an eternity. It is conceived as an eternity *within knowledge*, but these totalities conceived of as within knowledge are so conceived that they are capable of being taken as concrete totalities and treated as functioning real wholes, within knowledge. The rational becomes the real. The causality of logic displaces the causality of real struggles and practices. (317)

Hindess and Hirst emphasize the problems of rationalist epistemology, rather than structuralist or Hegelian ontology, even more forcefully in their subsequent *Mode of Production and Social Formation* (1977). In this later work they characterize the concept of a mode of production as a type of “totalities-generalities” (2) (roughly: an ideal form), focus on “the expressive causality of rationalism (23)”, and equate structural causality with the “auto-effectivity of the concept (35)”. Since they come to see the problem as epistemological, their solution is also: reject epistemological discourse. This seems intended to free social theory from the supposed ontological entailments of epistemological discourse—the way of knowing the world establishes the way society is

said to exist.¹³ Since Balibar's MoP-SF theory is a product of rationalist epistemology it is idealist must also be abandoned. Their result is a new theoretical object for Marxian theory, economic class relations and their conditions of existence. But if ontology is understood simply as an entailment of epistemology it is not at all clear why rejecting epistemology leads to any new social ontology or theoretical object. Hindess and Hirst's proposed rejection of epistemological discourse neither negates social ontology as an aspect of social theory, nor does it offer an alternative. In the period since the publication of Hindess and Hirst (1975 and 1977) anti-foundationalist social theory has become well established both inside and outside of Marxism, but this has led to ontology becoming more important not less. Its importance, I argue, is political rather than as a substitute in the place formerly occupied by epistemology, though this is not always acknowledged. But if we see ontology and epistemology as irreducible to one another then rejecting epistemology has no necessary consequences for ontology, and gives us no guidance as to what anti-essentialist ontology looks like.

The similarity between Hegelian simple holism and Balibar's structuralism can be identified more convincingly as an ontological issue rather than as an epistemological entailment. Both structuralist and Hegelian theories are holistic and see their objects—language, society, etc.—as wholes with an essence or center. It must have an essence or center or else it cannot be considered a unified whole¹⁴. The differences between these

¹³ While Cutler, *et. al.* plainly state “. . . we have argued elsewhere (Hindess, 1977, Hindess and Hirst 1977) that epistemological doctrines have no necessary discursive effects (1977, 108)” they go on to state “Epistemological doctrines . . . claim to establish the general form all being must take and they do so by specifying it as the form appropriate to a definite conception of the knowledge process (108).” I understand them to be arguing that epistemology *claims* to establish ontology, but since all epistemological doctrines are incoherent and circular (Hindess, 1977) and should be rejected, then their claim to establish the form all being must take must also be rejected. But this leaves ontology as an open question.

¹⁴ This is why Derrida (1978, 279) can say that for structuralism “. . . the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.”

theories are the nature of the essence or center and the mechanism of regulation. For the Hegelian whole the mechanism of regulation is transcendental expression; elements are literally expressions, in a spiritual sense, of an underlying supernatural essence. The elements are in a sense alienated aspects of the essence itself. For structuralism the relations among elements of the structure is determined by the center but they are not reducible to that center. The manner of regulation is the laws that define the structure and allow it to self-regulate, perform its function or purpose, and reproduce itself temporally. The coherence of the structure is therefore functional rather than spiritual. Furthermore, the center of structuralist theories is the purpose of the structure, and since this does not have a developmental objective, change (as well as origins) must be attributed to factors external to the structure.¹⁵ Change is thus contingent rather than teleological.

By substituting the relations for the forces as the essence of the social structure Balibar makes it difficult to argue for the inevitability of change and transition. It is often proposed that technology progresses only from more to less productive, but it is difficult to make a similar argument for the relations of production. Hence by making the relations rather than the forces the essence of the social structure Balibar obviates the teleological imperative of orthodox MoP-SF theory, but in doing so transitions become a problem instead of teleology. The holistic-reductionism of structuralism leads to stasis because Balibar's essence has no necessary objective. So we can say that there is nothing inherently teleological about holistic ontology, but holism enables teleological theory. For a phenomenon *as a whole* to be progressing towards a specific end it must be capable

¹⁵ Wells (1970, 107) states that in Saussure's system "every linguistic change is isolated", which means that: "(1) linguistic changes are not general, and (2) they are not systematic."

of being conceived of as distinct and self-contained, not subject to external influences capable of diverting it from its teleological path. Such external influences would make this development contingent rather than teleological. Hindess and Hirst, like Balibar, never explicitly make the connection between ontological holism and the other aspects of Hegelian theory that they reject. The alternative to holistic reductionism is not Cartesian atomism, but rather a Marxist dialectical or overdetermined ontology premised on complexity, mutual constitution and change.

The third problem with Hindess and Hirst's critique is that it is limited to Balibar's interpretation of MoP-SF theory and fails to engage with other more orthodox statements of the theory such as Lange (1963), Kuusinen (1963), or Cornforth (1953). Thus while they may be able to argue for a rejection of Balibar's interpretation, they are quite far from challenging MoP-SF theory itself. Their rejection of the theory derives from their rejection of Althusser and Balibar's perceived rationalism, but MoP-SF theory is not original to either of them, and hence does not stand or fall on their interpretations of it.

Despite the problems of *PCMP* Hindess and Hirst achieve a watershed in Marxian theory when they call for a break with MoP-SF theory and a turn to "class relations and their conditions of existence". They rightly call for thoroughgoing self-criticism within Marxian theory and point in new and different directions. But the impact of this has been muted by some of the problems discussed here. Taken as a whole the Althusserian literature provides an important but incomplete indictment of orthodox mid-century Marxism. G.A. Cohen's careful scholarship in opposition to this literature helps illuminate both where the Althusserian challenge is successful and where it is incomplete.

G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*

The subtitle of *KMTH* is “A Defense”, and this begs the question of who Marx’s theory of history being defended from. Cohen never directly answers this question, but he singles out Althusserian Marxism for criticism and contrasts his work with it:

My specific doctrinal differences with the Althusserians need not be described here. They are considerable. For it is an old fashioned historical materialism which I defend, a traditional conception, in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth. (x)

Cohen again references his encounters with Althusserian Marxism in the Introduction to the 2000 edition of *KMTH* (xxi) and, more provocatively, in (Cohen, 2006) where he discusses his “misguided Althusserian dalliance” and declares Althusserian Marxism to be “bullshit”. If we put issues of style aside and focus on content, the primary difference between these two approaches is precisely what Cohen points to in the quotation above: Althusserian Marxism’s challenge to the “old fashioned” Marxist orthodoxy of MoP-SF theory. *KMTH* is a restatement, clarification and defense of this theory, and it is also a reaction against the central arguments of the work that has thus far been considered. A theme that runs consistently through the Althusserian literature is the need to purge Marxism of the simple spiritual unity of the Hegelian conception of society, which is traced to Hegel’s philosophy of history. In opposition to this, and uniquely among

advocates of MoP-SF theory, Cohen argues that Marxian social theory *is* in fact little more than a secular and materialist analog of Hegel's philosophy of history:

We put forth Hegel's conception of history as the life of the world spirit, and we show how Marx took that conception, preserved its structure, and changed its content. (1)

. . . Marx's conception of history preserves the structure of Hegel's but . . . (f)or Marx, . . . , the important forms are not cultures but economic structures, and the role of consciousness is assumed by expanding productive power. (26)

Furthermore, Cohen aims to restore the core theoretical propositions of orthodox MoP-SF theory to the central position they once held in Marxist theory. The "old-fashioned historical materialism" that he defends is the orthodox MoP-SF theory established by Cornforth, Lange, and Kuusinen. This is most easily seen in Cohen's three theses of Marxian social theory:

Primacy Thesis: "The nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces (134)."

General Explanatory Thesis: “(Non-economic institutions) have the character they do because of the production relations . . . (they) support. . . . (I)n all cases . . . the (non-economic institutions) change in the service of changes in production relations” (226. See also Ch. VIII, esp. 231).”¹⁶

Development Thesis: “The productive forces tend to develop throughout history (134).”

It is clear that Cohen’s three theses simply restate the three “sociological laws” of orthodox MoP-SF theory. Of the three, Cohen considers the Primacy Thesis the “master thesis of historical materialism” (285). Given this, it is also clear that Cohen retains, and indeed emphasizes, the Hegelian expressive totality as the root metaphor for Marxist social theory. The nature of the production relations in society are explained by the productive forces (Primacy Thesis), while the non-economic relations in society (superstructure) have the character that they do because they support these productive relations (General Explanatory Thesis). In this way both the production relations and the superstructure are determined by and directly come to express the nature of the productive forces. Social change is explained by the Development Thesis: the tendency

¹⁶ I substitute the words “non-economic institution” for “property relation” here. Cohen defines the superstructure as “those non-economic institutions whose character is explained by the nature of the economic structure” (216), and also “Non-economic institutions are largely superstructural” (217). Cohen limits analysis of these non-economic, superstructural phenomena to property relations and “the problem of legality” (217), but it is clear from the context that he believes this specific analysis to be generalizable to the superstructure in total. Furthermore, in his less precise arguments Cohen asserts that it is “society” without modification that adjusts to the development of the productive forces (285). So while he states his “general explanatory thesis” in the context of property relations, it can be inferred that (i) it applies to all non-economic institutions that qualify as superstructural and (ii) that this includes most, if not all, non-economic institutions.

of the forces of production is to develop through history, and society, the epiphenomenal expression of these forces, responds accordingly. Cohen's work thus exhibits the strange combination of Anglo-American analytic philosophy used to defend a Hegelian-idealist theory of society. This dichotomy shows that the disdain analytic and positivist philosophy has typically shown for explicit ontological theorizing is also blindness to it.¹⁷ For Cohen (2000, xxiv) this method represents "nothing less than a commitment to reason itself". But this approach obscures as well as it illuminates; the microscopic analysis of the pieces of the orthodox MoP-SF argument obscures the picture presented by the whole. His analytical technique is itself a rhetorical device that focuses attention on some things while obscuring others.

Cohen's differences with orthodox MoP-SF theory are largely nomenclatural. For example, he rejects the term "mode of production", pointing out that Marx used this expression variously and unsystematically (79). He also prefers the expression "economic structure" to "relations of production" (63), and hardly uses the term "social formation" at all. He never seriously theorizes the superstructure, limiting his consideration of such phenomena to law, and hence does not engage extensively with the social formation concept that earlier theorists found important. But these superficial differences should not be taken to mean that Cohen breaks with MoP-SF theory, he simply uses a somewhat different vocabulary and has a slightly different emphasis. The basic theoretical arguments remain largely unchanged. The Hegelian social ontology,

¹⁷ Latsis, Lawson, and Martin (2007, 3) note that logical positivism, which Cohen sees as an important precursor to his own analytical approach, ". . . adopted a 'flat' ontology of sense data. This went largely unrecognized by both the authors and their critics. It was in this period that metaphysics, as noted, became a pejorative term, used to undermine unpopular philosophical positions and attack ones opponents. As a result the ontological import of philosophical and scientific thought was rarely discussed and was left largely unarticulated."

disproportionate importance given to Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, downplaying of the importance of Engels's late-life advocacy of only "in the last instance" determination by the economy, and the three 'laws' of sociology are all well-established hallmarks of orthodox MoP-SF theory, and Cohen adheres to them closely. Cohen's primary contribution to MoP-SF theory is his argument that its basic laws are functional explanations (160-63, ch. IX and X).

Functional explanations are, according to Cohen ones in which "the character of what is explained is determined by its effect on what explains it" (278). He argues that, contrary to the criticism leveled against them, functional explanations do meet the standards for validity imposed by modern analytic philosophy. On this issue Cohen's work is similar to Bukharin's, which also sought to provide a theoretically tractable mechanism to support the conception of society as an expressive totality and is an important precursor to MoP-SF theory (Olsen, 2009). Bukharin argued that the sole scientific method of explanation was based on the principle of correspondence. His correspondence principle states that if something exists it is because it is called into existence by some other phenomena that it corresponds to: "If certain phenomena are actually present, there must necessarily be also present certain other phenomena corresponding to them (Bukharin, 1925, 31)". Both Cohen's functional explanation and Bukharin's correspondence principle describe the functional relation between an existent and its necessary conditions, and both serve the same purpose: to provide a tractable secular mechanism of causality in a Hegelian expressive totality. Causality in Hegel's original formulation was simply spiritual, and Cohen, like Bukharin, finds it necessary to provide a materialist mechanism of causality in order to preserve expressive holism.

Functional explanation may preserve MoP-SF theory from the criticisms of analytic philosophy, but it does not obviate criticism on ontological grounds. For Cohen a society exists as a singular and unified “social form” (77 - 78) that expresses the nature of the productive forces. Society must be a singular unity because this is necessary for it to serve as a vehicle for the rational and progressive unfolding of its essence. This unitary construction of society and economy poses a significant political problem that I will discuss in the concluding section, but beyond this political issue Cohen’s image of society resembles an artifact from the eighteenth century more so than something useable for contemporary social theory. The theistic origins of the Hegelian approach are clear, as Cohen himself acknowledges, and retaining what is basically a theistic world view in Marxist theory is clearly a retreat to what Marxist social science seeks to escape. The “old-fashioned” aspect of what Cohen defends is, as Althusser originally pointed out, a theological world view.

Furthermore, if Marx’s work is simply a secular inversion of Hegel’s philosophy of history, as *KMTH* argues, then on what grounds can Cohen claim to be defending “Marx’s” theory of history? Marx, in this interpretation, makes only a minor original contribution by secularizing Hegel’s theistic theory of society and history. Cohen is forthright in his assertion that the theory *KMTH* defends owes a debt to Hegel, and if one looks to the underlying social ontology it is clear that it owes much more to Hegel than it does to Marx. But it is precisely the premise of the Althusserian literature that orthodox MoP-SF theory is a retreat to Hegelian theory and a failure to grasp Marx’s distinctive contribution to social theory. *KMTH* confirms this premise, it does not refute it. Given this the challenge Cohen poses to the Althusserians is not over the validity of their

critique of orthodox MoP-SF theory, rather it is to their assertion that Marx achieved a significant breakthrough in social theory. Whatever triumphs Cohen achieves in *KMTH*, refuting the critique of orthodox MoP-SF theory offered by the Althusserian literature is not one of them.

Finally, if what Cohen defends is actually Marx's theory of history then it is, and should be, as dead as the opponents of Marxism claim it to be. The image of society as a simple deterministic expressive totality is not only old-fashioned it is hopelessly inconsistent with important developments incorporating complexity into the social and physical sciences over more than a century. Alternatively, if the Althusserian argument is correct, and Marx not only broke with the Hegelian image of society but went beyond it on precisely the issue of social ontology—complexity and non-reductionism supplanting simplicity and expression—then the Marxism the Althusserian literature points towards is both extremely innovative and entirely relevant today. The social theory that the Althusserian literature struggles to develop bases itself on an understanding of Marx as making a seminal contribution to modern social theory rather than the last great practitioner of eighteenth century social theory.

Conclusion: Struggles with MoP-SF theory, A Summing Up

Althusser and Balibar argue that Marxian theory is not simply a secular inversion of Hegel's philosophy of history. Consequently they seek to reformulate orthodox MoP-SF theory to free it of Hegel's teleology and the expressive totality social ontology that enables it. They failed because what they sought to remedy is not an aspect of the theory that could be excised, rather it informs the basic concepts and propositions of the theory.

What they seek to expunge requires a thoroughgoing reformulation of Marxian theory on a par with the development of MoP-SF theory itself. Thus Balibar and Hindess and Hirst's incremental efforts to revise the theory by substituting a structured totality for an expressive one were undermined by the imperative to preserve the basic concepts of the theory. This is why Hindess and Hirst's call to break with MoP-SF theory is so important. As long as Marxists continue to labor in the confines of that theory—interpreting it as the definition of Marxian theory rather than simply one interpretation—they remain within the basic problematic it establishes. Hindess and Hirst discovered that when they struggled to complete Balibar's unfinished project.

Hindess and Hirst's proposal to break with MoP-SF theory is important, but the way they reach that conclusion makes it difficult to realize the alternative they call for. Notably their reduction of ontology to an entailment of epistemology offers little or no guidance for what should replace MoP-SF theory. Hindess (2007, 17 n2) proposes that Althusser, as he was interpreted in America “. . . was very different from his British counterpart and . . . was considerably less influential. On the other hand, what influence he did have was not much affected by the critique that developed in Britain.” One reason for this is because in America greater emphasis is given to Althusser's ontological arguments *qua* ontology and not simply as entailments of a perceived rationalist epistemology. The key point here is how one interprets Althusser's contribution to Marxian theory. He correctly diagnosed the ontological problem with orthodox MoP-SF theory, and his (and Balibar's) inability to overcome this problem by introducing structuralist concepts into Marxism should not diminish this key point. His work thus points us in the right direction even if he was unable to realize the objective he

established. Hindess and Hirst took Althusser's initial insight to its logical conclusion and correctly conclude that Baibar's attempted reformulation of MoP-SF theory retains within it much of what he claimed needed to be overcome by Marxian theory, and also that somehow these problems are related to MoP-SF theory itself. But this is not a reason to indict Althusser for failing to see this in the first place. As a whole this Althusserian literature serves as an important precursor to modern class-analytic Marxian theory, which endeavors to realize precisely the new approach to Marxian theory it calls for. This new theory shows the influence of these earlier struggles with MoP-SF theory, most obviously when it takes the position that society is infinitely complex, contingent, and without a *telos*—a “bad infinity” to use Hegel's phrase. This is a uniquely Marxist dialectical ontology.

These issues, which have long been central questions for Marxist theory, have become important for non-Marxist social theory as well. For this reason the literature surveyed here should be of general interest. But beyond the theoretical issues there are important political ones as well. Social ontology does not simply provide a way to describe the world, it shapes our ideas about why and how we might change it. The image of society produced by orthodox MoP-SF theory and defended by Cohen makes changes to the class structure an extremely rare occurrence and unachievable through class struggle and political action. The holistic society is a singular, unified totality: it possesses one set of productive forces that uniquely establish one type of production relation and an affiliated hegemonic superstructure that serves to reproduce those relations. Political action is therefore limited to the role of midwife easing the inevitable transition from one social form to another in response to the autonomous development of

the social essence—but only when that social essence makes that change necessary. We might call this the politics of ontology. Gibson-Graham touch on it eloquently when pondering the question of Marxist political practice:

My feminism reshapes the terrain of my existence on a daily basis. Why can't my Marxism generate a lived project of socialist construction? . . . It seems to me that what Marxism has been called upon to transform is something that cannot be transformed . . . Marxism has produced a discourse of capitalism that ostensibly delineates an object of transformative class politics, but that operates more powerfully to discourage projects of class transformation. In a sense, Marxism has contributed to the socialist absence through the very way in which it has theorized the capitalist presence. (Gibson-Graham, 1995, 188)

Gibson-Graham argue for “ontological reframing” (2006, *xxx*) to overcome the powerlessness imposed by the unitary vision of economy and society so clearly expressed by orthodox MoP-SF theory. Althusser’s critique of the ontological similarities between Hegelian theory and MoP-SF theory gives us insight into this larger political question. The subsequent Althusserian literature struggled, and continues to struggle, to develop an alternative class-based vision of society embracing the principles of openness, inter-connection, and aleatory change. This will, one hopes, enable a practice of socialist construction that can be understood to operate efficaciously at a range of social scales while always seeing this as

connected to its constitutive outside, and hence never satisfied within itself. The conclusion, therefore, is that the purpose of ontological theorizing is to change the world, not simply to describe it.

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