

RETHINKING THE BASE - SUPERSTRUCTURE METAPHOR:
FROM THE NEW LEFT TO POST - MARXISM

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I affirm that the research for this dissertation titled **“Rethinking the Base - Superstructure Metaphor: From the New- Left to Post - Marxism”** being submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, was carried out entirely by me.

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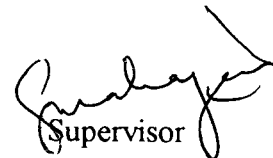
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled **“Rethinking the Base - Superstructure Metaphor: From the New Left to Post-Marxism”** submitted by Mr.G.Ajay is in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university and is his own work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


Chairperson


Supervisor



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PREFACE

Every researcher is often provoked and stimulated by, what one could perhaps refer to as, certain 'Primordial' interests and concerns, such as gender, caste, region, etc. Therefore, my initial interest was in comprehending the complex socio-economic situation of Andhra Pradesh, reflected in the growing people's response through social movements.

Social movements, surrounding the caste, class and gender identities, emerged in Andhra as a response to not only the lackadaisical State policies but also to the stratified and oppressive social hierarchy in civil society. The complex condition of disjunctured and overlapping social hierarchy resulted in both autonomy and inter connection of social movements. Thus, the social movements in Andhra Pradesh not only forged unity on joint platforms against the state but indulged in self - arrogating discourses among themselves. The peculiar situation, where social movements were not only fragmented and sectional but also universal in their demands and conception of transformation, raised certain fundamental theoretical questions.

In course of my inquiry into the dynamics of social movements I realised that, without certain basic clarity over theoretical and methodological tools of analysis, this study cannot be carried out, either rigorously or purposefully, with clarity.

It is at this point that I began to shift the focus of my study to more theoretical and abstract conceptualisations. The present study, therefore, needs to be understood with this specific backdrop in mind.

The rudimentary question that occurred to me in studying class, caste and gender movements is, how are these identities related? In other words, could one conceptualise class as an economic category (or identity) and therefore more fundamental of the three and the other two identities as either subsumed by class or epiphenomenon of 'basic' class struggle. However, is it not true to argue that gender and caste are also 'economic' identities at one level. For instance, caste is defined not only by certain specific cultural traits but it also overlaps with class identity; on the other hand, is class traceable in 'real - concrete' as a 'pure' economic category with culture, politics, ideology etc. being completely external to its identification, formation and functioning; If class is not a 'pure' economic category but imbricated within cultural and ideological processes and relations, how does 'economy' become more fundamental in identifying classes and not caste and gender.

In other words, how are economy, politics, culture, ideology etc., related?, is it that they are self - contained relations or structures interacting and influencing each other externally; or is it that economy itself constitutes non-economic relations and structures. This, I felt, was a significant question that needs to be attended to at a theoretical level.

Clarity at the theoretical and methodological level alone, would make it possible to comprehend social movements as a concrete process.

Thus , social movements (or for that matter, any socio - political event) need to be comprehended in terms of basic structures and structural interaction. It was obvious that in the cognition of the fundamentals of a structure one could understand social events more thoroughly and rigorously.

However, are 'structures' always pre - given, their interaction pre - determined ?, in that case there could be no necessity of empirical studies, all one needs is a knowledge of structures and their modes of interaction. It was, therefore, obvious to me, at the second stage, that comprehending 'structures' (in terms of the relation between various spheres - economic, political, etc.) would be incomplete without understanding their relation with a 'process'. How does the concrete socio - historical process influence the structures (i.e., pre - given relations or a fixed relation between multiple variables) ; are 'structure' and 'process' dialectically related and influence each other mutually , in other words, could one argue that 'structures' get generated in the course of a (historical) process.

In assuming that 'process' would definitely influence the 'structures' (other wise theory would not be a tool or a reference point to analyse the concrete but itself the narration of concrete reality) I had to raise the question, from where does 'process',

independent of the 'structures' get generated ? It is at this point that I had to connect 'structures' to a concrete and dynamic human practice which would account not only for the specificities of the (historical) 'process' but also the medium through which 'process' determines the 'structures' . In other words, it is imperative to enquire into the relation between structure and human praxis ; is human action independent of the dominant structures and thereby voluntary or completely subsumed by the dominant structures and thereby ideological; is there significance in accounting for individual beliefs and desires in his or her interaction with the structure; is structure and human action always juxtaposed to each other in an adversarial relation or do structures also propel constitutive human action.

It is, thus, the complex relation, between the 'Structure', 'Agency' and 'Process', that makes the focus of this study. The relation between 'structure' and 'agency' has been of fundamental significance in Marxian theory. It is with this specific purpose that this study has focused on the neo - Marxist writings and debates that have made the relation between structure and agency their central concern.

This study has taken the base - superstructure metaphor as the vantage point in comprehending the aforesaid problematic . This metaphor not only delineates the specificity of Marxian analysis but has been the reference point for the post - Marxist / post - Structuralist critiques of Marxian understanding of structure and Agency.

Thus, this study has examined the most referred to debates on the problem, from 1960's to 1990's. The span of four decades has been taken not only to examine varied and contrasting view points but to capture the changing methodology and problematic within political theory.

The first chapter of this study examines the writings of Herbert Marcuse, in 1950's and 1960's, who was often referred to as the ' prophet of the New Left'. He has conceptualised a unique model of a 'negative totality' in comprehending structure(i.e. the relation between base and superstructure), agency and their relation.

The second chapter of this dissertation has elucidated the writings of Louis Althusser, of 1960's and 1970's, who has been one of the most powerful influences on political theory in general and Marxian theory in particular. His formulation of 'Structural Marxism' has not only brought new rigour in comprehending structures but displaced 'subject' as a relevant point of analysis. This model of Althusser was rejected , as reductionist in comprehending not only the subject but also the structure, by E.P. Thompson in 1970's and 1980's. He rejected the theoretical anti - humanism of Althusser and extended the mode of concrete historical analysis. He argued that base - superstructure metaphor is inherently reductionist and needs to be debunked.

Finally, the third chapter examines the aforesaid problem, from a contrasting paradigm in Ernesto Laclau's writings, in 1990's. The Post - Structuralist analysis raises

fundamental doubts on the relevance of the categories of 'Structure' and 'Agency' in Political theory. Therefore, they also argue (though in a radically different sense from Thompson) for the irrelevance of the base- superstructure.

The epilogue draws certain tentative conclusions on the relevance and limitations of the base- superstructure metaphor and possible direction in which the 'structure'- 'agency' relation should be problematised.

CHAPTER - I

CRITICAL THEORY: RECONSTRUCTING MARX

During the 1950s and 1960s capitalist societies underwent radical social, political and economic changes. "for the first time in the history, capitalism became stable and normal throughout the advanced industrial world and there was no repetition of the catastrophic slumps of twenties and thirties. On the contrary, world capitalism enjoyed a long boom of unprecedented dynamism and the most rapid and prosperous phase of expansion in its history"¹.

The most prominent political consequence of this unprecedented stability of the capitalist structure was the grand retreat of working class as a revolutionary force and its replacement by ecological, racial, antinuclear, student's and woman's movements. In fact, the latter seemed to be the only moments of negativity in an absolutely closed and one-dimensional capitalist societies.

It was the attempt to theorise these fundamental structural changes that necessitated the New Left to reconstruct classical Marxism. Some of the early responses to a rigidly defined and stabilised capitalist economy was to locate alternate modes of analysis to conceptualise change, within Marx himself. As Maurice Cranston observes, "the Marxism of the New Left is based upon a new Marx. For the Marx these writers follow is not so much the economist, the later Marx, the author of Das Kapital, but rather Marx the sociologist, the author of

1. Perry Anderson, *Considerations On Western Marxism*, NLB, London, 1976, pp. 24-25.

early Philosophical Manuscript. Their Marx is a philosopher of alienation"². It is, therefore, imperative to note that New Left was neither the implementation of a pre-conceived theory nor a response to material deprivation but an improvised act of will. This explains the shift from study of economy to 'superstructural' elements such as culture, art, aesthetics, ideology, etc.

It was against this background of a stabilised 'structure' and dislocated 'agency' that Herbert Marcuse attempted to problematise change or transformation in social processes. The dual concerns of Marcuse were, to conceptualise a 'totality' in which contradictions between various 'spheres' were missing due to overwhelming subsumption under the growing 'economic' (technological) structure and the consequential effects of such a totality on the 'human agency' which is made incompetent of bringing conscious structural changes.

In other words, if Marcuse believed that historically a non- contradictory unity of capitalist structure developed, under which various human activities are subsumed by the dominant economic logic, then how could he problematise 'motion' or change ?

2. Maurice Cranston, *The New Left*, Bodley Head, London, 1970, pp.7-8.

TECHNOLOGICAL RATIONALITY :
CONSTRUCTING A NEGATIVE TOTALITY

Karl Marx believed that historical changes occur due to structural mutations. According to him, any given 'mode of production' is a contradictory unity between antagonising 'elements' and 'spheres'. The base -Superstructure model represents, not only the correspondence between various 'spheres' of a material life (as popularly understood) but also the contradictions between elements (for instance, productive forces v/s production relations) within the base and these contradictions get expressed in the changes in Superstructure, with which the former has a contradictory relation (for instance, between economy and politics) . "Consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production" (Karl Marx, 1859 in the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*). In other words, base-superstructure model does not explain a simplistic unity between activities in the material life, but a dialectical unity of contradictory correspondence . It is essential for the Marxist notion of change that 'contradictions' are constitutive of a 'totality' . These contradictions are 'internal' to a totality (i.e. it is the way a totality exists) and are therefore not brought 'externally' into a pre-existing, harmonious unity of material practices. (Refer to Althusser's exposition of this aspect of Marxian theory in the second chapter).

In fact, this 'contradictory unity' is the source of all structural mutations in Marxist theory. In other words, productive forces contradict the production relations, which gets expressed as a contradiction between economy and politics, culture etc., which is nothing but contradiction between overlapping modes of production which gets expressed as class struggle. The relation between these various contradictions (for instance, between 'structure' and 'agency') is the source of multiple and contrasting interpretations of Marx. However, all contrasting interpretations agree to the point that contradiction itself is constitutive or internal to any 'totality'.

It is this constitutive aspect, of Marxism, that Herbert Marcuse attempts to subvert or dislocate in conceptualising a totality without 'contradiction'. Marcuse conceptualises capitalist society in terms of a totality that is unified by a single logic of growing technology, without opposition. In other words, Marcuse constructed a negative totality in which all contradictions or oppositions became external and the unity itself became constitutive. This was a redefined notion of structure (within Marxism) supposed to approximate the reality of capitalist societies.

" Marcuse concluded that organised capitalism seemed to have stabilised the classical contradictions of capitalism so as to avert major crises and conflicts which were presupposed as necessary conditions for socialist Revolution in Marx's theory. Instead, Marcuse saw that the unparalleled affluence and apparatus of planning and management in advanced capitalism had produced new forms of social control and a 'society without

opposition' that closed off possibilities of radical social change"³.

Marcuse's construction of a 'negative totality' breaks free the hitherto mechanical and static view of base and superstructure and argues that the indissoluble connections between them are complex and change according to specific historical necessities rather than enjoy a clearly demarcated, a priori relation of cause and effect. Marcuse argues that the relation between base and superstructure gets redefined as a 'negative totality' in contemporary capitalist societies due to the unparalleled hold of 'technological rationality'.

According to Marcuse, in contemporary capitalist societies both the 'base' (i.e. economy) and the superstructure (politics, culture, aesthetic, etc.) get subsumed or unified by the logic of 'technological rationality'. The 'contradictions' (source of all 'motion' or change) get flattened and the totality itself functions according to this omnipresent logic. In this sense, Marcuse argues that the difference between 'base' and 'superstructure' gets conflated and both perform the function of 'reproducing' the totality according to 'technological rationality'.

According to Marcuse, in the course of transformation of early mercantile and industrial capitalism into monopoly capitalism individual rationality was transformed into

3. Douglas Kellner ,Herbert Marcuse's Reconstruction of Marxism, in Robert Pippin et. al (ed.), Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia, Bergin and Gageray, Massachusetts, 1987, p.178.

technological rationality which is essentially conformist. This self contained and self-perpetuating technological world allows change only within its own institution and parameters. In this sense, it is 'one-dimensional' and 'has become a universal means of domination' i.e., as capitalism and its technological base developed, advanced industrial society demanded increasing adjustment (of various human activities) to the economic and social apparatus, and submission to increasingly total domination and administration. Hence a 'mechanics of conformity' spread throughout the society. The efficiency and power of advanced industrial society overwhelmed the individual, who gradually lost the earlier traits of 'critical rationality' (i.e. the autonomy, dissent, the power of negation, etc.) thus producing a 'one-dimensional society' and a 'one - dimensional man'.

Under this phenomenon of 'technological rationality', technological development of a certain kind develops a social consciousness, politics, culture and ideology which in turn scuttle the revolutionary potential of technology or productive forces itself. Thereafter the productive forces are compelled to develop according to the 'technological' dynamics of the society.

In other words, Marcuse is questioning two central formulations of Marxism. Firstly, Marcuse is questioning the notion that growth of productive forces automatically gives rise to revolutionary or transformative consciousness, politics and culture which would ignite a class struggle within production relations. Marcuse is attempting to argue

that development of productive forces might give birth to a politics, consciousness and culture of conformity which could potentially scuttle all transformative process. Secondly, Marcuse is questioning the notion of neutrality of productive forces i.e. productive forces (technology) would be neutral, politically and ideologically, as their only purpose would be augmenting the productive capacity of a system. Instead, he is arguing that productive forces would be subjected to the dominant ideology and social relations, which would affect the 'nature' of the technology being produced.

Marcuse is conceptualising a dialectical totality without opposing forces. All determination, in fact, subverts dialectics. Productive forces determine the superstructure, which does not contradict but instead conforms and internalises its logic - this logic (technological rationality) in turn influences the nature of development of productive forces. "In the course of technological process a new rationality and new standards of individuality have spread over a society different from and even opposed to those which initiated the march of technology. These changes are not the effect of machinery on its users or of mass production on its consumers, they are rather themselves determining factors in the development of machinery and mass production"⁴.

Marcuse is formulating a model which hinges on a dialectics that is paradoxical - a dialectics which fails to create radical historical possibilities of transformation, instead creates conditions which subvert it and subsume it to a unifying and closed logic. All

4. Herbert Marcuse, 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology' in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*, Vol. IX, 1941, p. 415.

change occurs within the logic, thus all 'dialectics' occurs within a unifying logic. In other words, historically, productive forces get constituted or develop according to the political, economic, and cultural values and institutions that are dominant in the society. 'Technological rationality' begins to guide the destiny of both the economic base and the superstructure, constitutively flattening a contradictory relation.

Marcuse, at this point redefines the transformative process. For him it no longer signifies establishment of 'counter hegemony' in terms of an alternative radical social organisation and consciousness grounded on a 'conjuncture' provided by the (over) development of a neutral technological (or productive) base. On contrary, he argues for the reconstruction of the 'base' itself, because it is in the 'base' that the social consciousness and political capacities of the dominant classes is most forcefully exemplified. The transition to socialism no longer hinges on the maturity of productive forces, which would (as believed) sharpen the contradictions and the ultimate collapse of capitalist system. These productive forces, the agents of liberation, are themselves subjected to the rationality of dominant classes- they, therefore, simultaneously function as 'ideological apparatus'. The economic 'base' can be understood and defined only in terms of superstructural elements, which constitute it. All transformation, therefore, would require reconstruction of the 'base' itself. " If the completion of the technological project involves a break with the prevailing technological rationality, the break in turn depends on the continued existence of the technological base itself. For it is this base which has rendered possible the satisfaction of the needs and the reduction of toil, it

remains the very base of all forms of human freedom. The qualitative change lies in the reconstruction of this base, that is, in its development with a view of different ends.... the new ends, as technical ends, would then operate in the project and construction of machinery and not only in its utilisation”⁵.

In a rather novel formulation Marcuse is arguing that not only the application of technology but technology itself is domination (of nature and man) - a, methodical, scientific and calculated control. ‘Specific interests and purposes of domination are not foisted upon technology Subsequently and from the outside - they enter the very construction of the technical apparatus’. In other words, technology is always a historical and social project, in it is projected what a society and its ruling interests intend to do with man and things. ‘Superstructure’ becomes not only constitutive part of the ‘base’ but all its socially and historically constructed ‘class interests’ become internal to the motion and dynamics of the ‘base’ . In other words, Marcuse is pleading for an understanding of ‘base’ in terms of the dominant Super- structural relations.

Jurgen Habermas, situates this argument of Marcuse, in the last quarter of 19th century in the most advanced capitalist countries. According to him, “since last quarter of nineteenth century two developing tendencies have become noticeable in the western advanced capitalist countries - increase in state intervention and growing interdependence of research and technology has turned the science into a productive force. The permanent

5. Herbert Marcuse, One- Dimensional Man, Beacon Press, Boston, 1964, p.231-32.

regulation of the economic process by means of state intervention arose as a defence mechanism against the dysfunctional tendencies which threaten the system that capitalism generates when left to itself i.e., if society no longer 'autonomously' perpetuates itself through self regulation as a sphere preceding and lying at the basis of the state - then society and the state are no longer in the relation that Marxian theory had defined as that of base-superstructure. Then critical theory of society can no longer be constructed in the exclusive form of a critique of political economy i.e. politics is no longer only a phenomenon of the superstructure. Base-Superstructure becomes inapplicable when the base has to be studied and comprehended as in itself a function of government activity and political conflicts"⁶. Habermas is explaining the Marcusean formulation of comprehending 'base' in terms of political intervention. However, Marcuse goes beyond this pleading for the comprehension of the 'base' in terms of all 'activities' of the society, including culture, psychology, aesthetics, art etc., because the logic internal to all of them is that of 'technological rationality'.

Thus, within a 'negative totality' all activities enter into an absolute unity reinforcing each other. Economic base is neither neutral nor external to the dynamics or logic of the totality. It internalises, the dominant logic and reproduces the totality. "By extension and by habit, the base has come to be considered virtually as an object or in specification, the 'base' is given very general and apparently uniform properties. (However) It is only when we realise that the 'base' to which it (superstructure) is habitual to refer variations, is itself a dynamic and internally contradictory process that we

6. Jurgen Habermas, *Towards a Rational Society*, Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1971, p.101.

can begin to free ourselves from the notice of an 'area' or a 'category' with certain fixed properties for deduction to the variable process of the superstructure"⁷

In effect, Marcuse is denying a constitutive difference, in terms of purpose or location, between 'base and 'superstructure' . One could, perhaps, draw similarities in analysis between Marcuse and Raymond Williams, a British Marxist. Even, Williams argues not only against the isolation of productive forces as self- subsistent order but also to comprehend them in terms of a 'totality' which creates the conditions of existence. As William observes, " if production , in capitalist society, is the production of commodities for a market, then different but misleading terms are found for every other kind of production and productive forces. What is most often suppressed is the direct material production of 'politics'. Yet any ruling class devotes a significant part of material production to establishing a political order. The social and political order which maintains a capitalist market is necessarily a material production from castle and palaces and churches to persons and workhouses and schools. These are never superstructural activities . They are the necessary material production within which an apparently self - subsistent mode of production can alone be carried on. The complexity of this process is especially remarkable in advanced capitalist societies, where it is wholly beside the point to isolate production and industry for the comparably material production of welfare,

7. Raymond William, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p.93.

‘entertainment’, ‘public opinion’⁸.

It was precisely this extension, of understanding economic and social institutions as material production and preconditions of mode of production and within which a self-subsistent mode of production can be carried on, which Marcuse was theorising. He therefore believes that “fully liberating effects of technology are not applied in technology per se; they presuppose social change, involving the basic economic institutions and relationship”⁹.

In other words, in the construction of a ‘negative totality’, Marcuse denies to refer to the base as the essence of the totality and ‘superstructural’ activities as either epiphenomenon of the ‘essence’ or as external to the logic inherent to the base. The logic inherent to both the ‘base’ and ‘Superstructure’ is a unifying logic and therefore, both ‘base’ and superstructure together reproduce a ‘totality’ not dialectically but uniformly.

For instance, Raymond Williams makes an interesting observation regarding formulations based on notions of self-contained ‘economic base’. “We have first to specify the negative effects in cultural analysis of the specialised versions of ‘productive forces’ and production. We can best specify them in Marx himself. There is a footnote in *Grundrisse* in which it is argued that a piano maker is a productive worker engaged in

8. Ibid p.93

9. Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, Vintage Books New York, 1961, p.241.

productive labour, but that a pianist is not since his labour is not labour which reproduces capital. The extraordinary inadequacy of this distinction to advanced capitalism, in which production of music (and not just its instruments) is an important branch of capitalist production, may be only an occasion for updating”¹⁰. It is this ‘commodified’ production of art, aesthetics, linguistics, sexuality, psychology, which Marcuse studies in his seminal work, *One -Dimensional Man*. Marcuse argues, on similar lines, that various non-economic spheres or activities ‘materially’ reproduce the system. For instance, he believes that culture, in advanced capitalist societies, once operative in a potentially subversive aesthetic realm is now part and parcel of the commodity system. Hence, what was once a subversive force is now a ‘cog in the culture machine’ and an adornment to the society. Art is transformed into a mass-produced commodity form in paperbacks LPs, cassettes, and cheap reproductions which both entertain and indoctrinate. There is thus a “flattening out of the antagonism between cultural and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien and transcendent elements in the higher culture by virtue of which it constitutes another dimension of reality”¹¹.

Similarly, Marcuse argues how liberalised sex promotes acceptance of the established society. He claims that manipulative sexual liberalisation contains ‘repressive modes of desublimation which extends liberty while intensifying, domination’. Marcuse introduces the paradoxical concept of ‘repressive desublimation’(representative of the logic we have referred to, earlier, as ‘paradoxical dialectics’) to describe sexual liberation

10. Raymond William, 1977, op.cit.p.93.

11. Herbert Marcuse, 1964, op.cit.p.57.

which promotes repression, he argues that this release (of sexual energy) is repressive because sexual energy is contracted into a restrictive model of sexuality but at the same time increased permissiveness robs the sphere of protest of vital instinctual energy, thus generating submission to a repressive system.

Critics of Marcuse found the logic of a negative totality to be waffling or incoherent. For instance, Andrew Feenberg objects to the formulation of technology as productive forces in one instance and as ideological apparatus perpetuating existing domination at the other. He writes, “thus at one part he states that a computer or a cyclotron can equally serve capitalism and socialism, apparently oblivious to the fact that, if this is taken as general example, it seems to invalidate his own argument that technology as such cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put”¹². Further he writes, “worse yet, in his considerations on the new emancipatory technology Marcuse seems to waver back and forth between the utopian idea of a technology that liberates nature in responding to human aesthetic needs, and the realistic affirmation that basic needs will continue to be served by the very ‘technological rationality’ he condemns so sharply for its connection to domination”¹³.

Feenberg, has failed to comprehend the logic of a ‘negative totality’, in which there are no constitutive or internal contradictions which create radical possibilities of

12. Andrew Feenberg, ‘The Bias of Technology’ in Robert Pippin (ed.), 1987, op.cit.p.227.

13. Ibid, p.228.

transformation. Such a non-dialectical totality allows Marcuse to argue that, productive forces which are potentially liberating agents turn out to be ideological apparatus of the dominant classes. In other words, science and technology which create possibilities of liberation as productive forces negate them, in the same moment, as 'ideological apparatus'. Agents of liberation subvert their own determination.

Marcuse makes it clear that when he speaks of 'the abolition of the terms of capitalist industrialisation', he is not harking back to an idyllic pre-industrial world, but insists on utilising to the fullest the best productions of science and technology. Marcuse does not, however, believe in the emancipating potential of the forces of production alone, as if their unfettered development would automatically bring about social progress. Far from being a technological determinist¹⁴, Marcuse is aware that forces of production are themselves shaped, structured and even constituted by relations of production. He separates himself from technocrats who believe in unlimited progress through technology by arguing that both the forces and relations of production in advanced industrial societies serve as instruments of domination, and that in order to utilise science and technology in the interests of liberation requires a radical break with current science and technology, as well as the construction of new science and technology¹⁵.

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14. It is paradoxical that while Habermas preferred to study science and technology, in Marcuse, as ideology; on the other extreme Macintyre criticises Marcuse of being a technological determinist.
15. Douglas Kellner, Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism, Macmillan, London, 1984, p.331.



What Marcuse has effectively argued is that at a stage of their scientific technological development forces of production appear to enter a new constellation with the relations of production. In other words, Marcuse 'purged' Marxism of its fundamental contradiction between the forces of production and relations of production. Advanced industrial societies are left with no fundamental contradiction, upon which a prospective revolution could be posited. The fundamental assumption behind this new constellation is the growing affluence of capitalist societies, which has flattened class contradictions.

Thus, in Marcuse's model all 'structures' reinforce each other and enter into a deadlock where no structural mutations are possible. Individual and his activities (the bearers of all 'structures') are subsumed by the 'technological rationality' which spreads politics and culture of conformity. Does Marcuse's notion of 'subject' (or human agency) become superficial and not constitutive? in other words, can his model of 'negative totality' accommodate a new subject of revolution ?

II

EROS:THE NEW SUBJECT OF REVOLUTION

The notion of agent or subject of transformation is always organically connected to the way a 'structure' is conceptualised. One has to' therefore, locate the Marcusean subject within his 'negative totality'.

As aforesaid, in a 'negative totality' all constitutive or internal contradictions are dislocated and thereby we have a 'totality' without inherent contradictions. A subject that is born into a non-contradictory structure has to necessarily be a conformist agent and well integrated into the system. This fundamental assumption that various 'structures' (economy, politics, culture, ideology etc.) do not contradict each other to create a revolutionary rupture, instead flatten the contradictions internal to each other and enable them to integrate under the rubric of a unifying logic, is the backdrop against which Marcuse's construction of an agent has to be comprehended.

Although Marx argued that capitalism created a world in its own image and analysed its bourgeois ideology, he did not believe that ideology, Mass culture and consumerism would integrate the working class into capitalist system. In his political analyses Marx always discounted the possibility of the identification of the working class with capitalist society. This was primarily because Marx believed that production process in capitalism operates with inherent class contradictions and therefore as long as production relations operated as class relations capitalism would grow with an internal or constitutive contradiction. This contradiction can be overcome only at the level of production relations itself because productive activity or production process is the fundamental basis of any society. "The conclusion we reach is not that production distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. A definite

production thus determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as definite relation between these different moments " (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1857).

However, Marcuse believed to the contrary that because of unprecedented growth of social wealth working class gets integrated under the conditions of greater consumption opportunities. In other words, contradictions inherent to the production system (class contradictions) get flatten due to the changing consumption patterns. (This is precisely what is meant by a 'negative totality' -all contradictions are dislocated).

According to Marcuse, under job assimilation in advanced capitalism, the white-collar sector grows at the expense of the blue-collar. Mechanisation displaces traditional working class from the critical positions in the new production apparatus and new found consumption patterns are creating a 'new middle' class within the working class. Thus, scientists, engineers, and technicians, the indispensable candidates for these key positions in the nation's production machinery, acquire a position of unprecedented objective revolutionary potential. However, sustained affluence undermines any subjective revolutionary potential in this group as well. "The intelligentsia obtains an increasing role in this process. An instrumentalist intelligentsia, but intelligentsia nevertheless. This new working class because of its position, could disrupt reorganise and redirect the mode and relationships of production. However, they have neither the interest nor the vital need to do so. They are well integrated and well rewarded"¹⁶.

16. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay On Liberation*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, p.55.

Thus, the classical agent of transformation is dislocated and it is important to observe that no other structure (political, cultural, ideological, etc.) has potential contradiction to construct an identity that could perform the role of a subject or transformative agent. Political, cultural and ideological identities are all integrated into a totality and become part of the process of reproducing it. This model thereby, logically implies that subject or a potential agent of transformation has to be located outside the structure or totality. Affirming the above formulation Marcuse claims that “this tendency (of bringing change or transformation - my addition) would have to be based on those who existed outside the ‘democratic process’ (the ‘totality’ - my addition) the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colours, the unemployed and the unemployable”¹⁷ .

Thus, Marcuse in all his later works, as a logical implication of this model, engaged himself with asocial and dehistoricised categories such as a generic ‘repression of individuals’ ‘Great refusal’ ‘abstract psychology’ etc. “ Indeed in many of his works, Marcuse moved away from the analysis of the contradictions in the political and economic system and class struggles to focus on repression of individuals, which generates refusal and revolt”¹⁸ .

The trajectory of Marcuse’s thought shifts from classes to individuals and from

17. Herbert Marcuse, 1964, *op.cit.* p.201.

18. Douglas Kellner, 1984, *op.cit.* p.84.

political economy to psychology i.e. the shift from production to consumption entails the shift from classes to the category of repressed individuals, and when individuals are the unit of analysis, human psyche, obviously, becomes the reference point. This shift to individuals as the unit of analysis and his attempted synthesis of Marxism with Freud's instinct theory completes the logic of Marcuse's model of a 'negative totality'.

It is the inexplicability of change in terms of social, economic and political 'structures' that pushed Marcuse towards dehistoricised psychic factors which involved in the genesis of social, political, and ideological behaviour of individuals. It is also imperative to observe that 'in the last instance' these psychic factors remain the only 'glimmer of hope' for a mutation within a negative totality. In other words, "Marcuse is confronted with dilemma of on the one hand seeing the need and technological potential for a revolution while on the other hand being faced with an economic, social, political and psychological constellation historically unique that it appears to ensure indefinite containment of pregnant technological possibilities for liberation. The dilemma Marcuse has portrayed there by acts as both the motivation and the justification for revising Marxism. At base this revision is achieved through the introduction of Freud's Later instinct theory to act as the ontological point of departure for the new theory. Further, the introduction of libido 'tightens' the initially perceived political dilemma while at the same time offering a glimmer of hope for a break in the vicious circle"¹⁹.

19. John Fry, Marcuse, Dilemma and Liberation, Humanities Press, USA, 1974, p.10.

Psychic energy in the form of 'Eros' becomes the potential 'motor force' the roots for denial and refusal, which had been undercut and transcended by the achievements of the system.

The central assumption of Freud's later instinct theory is the notion of a constant source of psychic energy - 'libido'. This concept is the point of departure for the subsequently developed idea of the dual instinctual nature of man - the life instincts, represented by 'Eros' and the death instincts, represents lay 'Thanatos'. Consequently, Marcuse argues that the activity and conflict between these two groups of instincts represents not only the instrumentality through which the organism develops, but also it belongs to the inherent essence of the development of civilization²⁰.

These two categories of instincts are confronted by an environment both too poor and too hostile to permit the immediate satisfaction of the demands of the life instincts under Eros. Thus, instead of the 'pleasure principle' (the sum of the demands of the life instincts) the 'reality principle' (degree and nature of restraint imposed upon free satisfaction of the life instincts by social necessity) becomes the general guideline along which the organism develops and preserves the life itself in the face of the restraining environment. "The acceptance by the organism of the dominance of the reality principle results in secure, socially useful, and relatively lasting gratification as well as in the passive acceptance of 'non-libidinal work'"²¹.

20. Ibid, p. 40.

21. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Vintage Books, 1962, p. 51.

However, in a milieu of minimal scarcity and consequently minimal social hostility to relatively unsublimated expressions of Eros, the life instincts gains ascendancy and their increasing strength gives rise to dynamic of its own as ever greater proportions of the constant reservoir of neutral energy are appropriated by the dominant life instincts. The process of appropriation becomes the nodal point of change in highly developed (economically or materially) and advanced capitalist societies.

In other words, the drives of the instincts, which are inhibited by the external socio-historical reality, become the source of all transformations. "This subjugation of drives is an historical phenomenon whereby external expression has been accompanied by a socialised self repression in which repressed individuals have learned to introspect both their masters and their master's dictates. In this sense Marcuse identifies Freud's individual Psychology as one that is thoroughly and inherently social"²².

While it is clear that he believed that primary drives are subject to historical modification (i.e. under the influence of reality principle), he also created in *Eros and civilization* the overwhelming impression that men and women are characterised by their possession across the countries of a common instinctual structure regardless of specific historical circumstances.

The notion of an 'a priori and universally existing instinctual structure' entails the

22. Edward Hyman, 'Eros and Freedom: The Critical Psychology of Herbert Marcuse's', in Robert Pippin (ed.), op.cit.p.147.

argument that when control and repression have gone beyond the stage of mere false consciousness, when the 'commands' of the system have become firmly established in the very biological structure of men, then under these circumstances 'impoverishment does not necessarily provide the soil for revolution'. Therefore, the struggles for liberation must operate increasingly at the individual and subjective levels, prior to the struggle at the socio-economic levels. At this historical juncture a unique situation has emerged with the total manipulation and perversion of man's instinctual structure and biological characteristics, a situation which demands the prior development of radically 'new needs', new men and women. In short, a new historical subject as an essential and indispensable precondition for authentic socialist revolutionary struggle. Marcuse writes, "but the construction of such a society 'presupposes' a type of man with a different sensitivity as well as consciousness ; men would speak a different language, have different gestures, follow different impulses, men who would have developed on instinctual barriers against, cruelty, brutality, and ugliness"²³ .

Marcuse constructs a rather paradoxical subject. He reformulates the dialectical relation between subject and object into a dichotomous relation, where society comes to dominate the individual and assimilates him completely into its dominant relations. Neither there is a scope for 'revolutionary praxis' nor for constructing a 'counter hegemony'. He, therefore, attempts to break this dichotomous and closed relation by empowering the subject with ahistorical powers residing in his psyche and instinctual drives ready to 'burst

23. Herbert Marcuse, 1969, op.cit. p.21.

asunder' the existing reality.

Thus, the relation between the 'structure' and 'agency' is captured by Marcuse, not only at a moment that is dehistoricised but also essentially static. It is the 'abstraction' of the subject from his social conditions, which have to be necessarily understood as complexly inter-related rather than as simplistically unified. Raymond Williams, who negated the self - enclosure of either base or superstructure did not, unlike Marcuse, discount the social contradictions in their constitutive existence. He therefore, is critical of all methods that over look contradictions as a social category. "Yet it is the reduction of the social to fixed forms (such as 'human psyche' - my addition) that remains the basic error. All known complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion are against the terms of the reduction and soon, by extension, against social analysis itself. And from the abstractions formed in their by this act of debarring - the human imagination the human psyche, the unconscious, with their functions in art and in myth and in dream - new and displaced forms of social analysis and categorisation overriding all specific social conditions, are then more or less rapidly developed"²⁴.

In the final analysis, in creating a social whole without contradictions, though Marcuse could reconstruct a constitutive existence for the 'economic base', to break from the negative totality he had to paradoxically construct a self contained domain - 'human psyche'.

24. Raymond William, 1977, op.cit. pp.129-30.

It is therefore essential to comprehend that “society is never only the dead husk which limits social and individual fulfilment (or rather ‘sublimates’, to use Marcusean parlance). It is always also a constitutive process with very powerful pressures which are both expressed in political, economic and cultural formations and to take full weight of ‘constitutive’, are internalised and become ‘individual wills’. These ‘contradictions’- a complex and inter-related process of societal limits and counter pressures- are in the whole social process itself and nowhere else not in an abstracted ‘mode of production’ nor in an abstracted ‘psychology’”²⁵ .

Marcuse’s model of ‘negative totality’, without ‘contradiction’ as a constitutive aspect of base and superstructure, has implied a dehistoricised subject, does it mean that if the ‘structure’ is conceptualised with constitutive contradictions then it would imply a subject that is constitutive in its historic role ?

25. Ibid, p. 128.

CHAPTER - II

STRUCTURALISM VERSUS SOCIALIST HUMANISM:

APPROPRIATING MARX

In 1960's and 70's Althusser attempted a structural interpretation of Marx, where he argued that the problems of correspondence or totality and motion or transformation have to be understood completely in terms of 'structures' and a logic internal to them.

Discovery of structures in social processes marked the 'epistemological break' of Marx, where he shifted his analysis from the vantage point of human essence or human nature (central to all previous philosophical systems) to more scientific categories such as mode of production, social formation etc. Any deviation, in understanding social totality and process, from a structural logic is either unscientific or pre-Marxian.

It is this logic of Althusser which propels him to proclaim that all history is a 'process without a subject', in other words, conscious human activity is always subsumed by structural logic. Subjects or human agents are ideological creatures who are incapable of comprehending the totality and its dynamics, they therefore always live in a make - belief world, incompetent of any conscious, historical action. All history is therefore history of structural mutations.

“ A structure is a system of transformations. Inasmuch as it is a system and not a mere collection of elements and their properties, these transformations involve laws : 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 . In short,

the notion of structure is comprised of three key ideas : the idea of wholeness, the idea of transformation, and the idea of self regulation”¹.

In other words, a structure has elements which are subordinated to laws, and it is in terms of these laws that the structure as a system is defined. Laws governing a structure’s composition are not reducible to cumulative one - by - one association of its elements. Similarly, these laws of the structure are not only internal but are self - regulating (i.e. self - maintenance and closure).

Thus, it is in terms of these self enclosed structures and logic or law, internal to them, that Althusser explains all historical changes. The laws or the contradictions are caused by the co-existence of contradictory structures within a totality. Althusser explains all change in terms of a ‘contradictory unity’ which condenses at a particular historical juncture and then explodes in a ‘revolutionary rupture’ to create ‘structural mutations’.

In this chapter we shall elucidate the Althussean interpretation of a Marxian totality and transformation; whether historical transformations can be subsumed by structural logic without a substantive and constitutive role to human agency.

It is precisely the latter problematic which engages E.P.Thompson in an alternative interpretation of Marx. He argues that change or motion in social structures is created not

1. Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1973, p.5

by a logic internal to them but through conscious human action which dislocates that logic. Thompson locates change within the dialectics between subject and object.

It is this debate that shall engage us in this chapter, along with the limitations with both the models, which shall be the ground for probing these questions from an alternative paradigm in the next chapter.

I

OVERDETERMINED TOTALITY : 'PROCESS WITHOUT A SUBJECT'

Althusser introduces fundamentally novel concepts, such as 'overdetermination', 'structural causality', 'determination in the last instance', distinction between the mode of production and social formation, in order to study the problem of correspondence or totality and transformation or process in Marxism.

Althusser criticises reductionist Marxist writings which propose to explain the social totality through the study of the 'economic instance'. On contrary he believes that "the science of historical materialism , which is a theoretical practice, has precisely to study the different practices in their specificity, and their relation to one another in the complex unity of social practices which is the social formation"².

2. Norman Geras, 'Althusser's Marxism: An Assessment', in *Western Marxism A Critical Reader*, New Left Books, London, 1977, P.239.

In other words, Althusser reformulates the idea of superstructure being the phenomenon of base, with the idea of a complex unity wherein elements which are irreducibly different from each other form a unity.

He argues that specificity of Marxian dialectics is presented not by a simple inversion of the essence - appearance relationship, but rather through the idea of an asymmetrical relationship of mutual determination (expressed in the formulation, relative autonomy of the superstructures - determination in the last instance by the economy) . “The Hegelian notion of totality is what Althusser calls ‘expressive’ in the sense that each specific element or moment of a seemingly complex whole is interpreted as ‘expressing’ in its own particular way some essential character of the whole. By contrast ---- Marxist materialism commits historical materialism to a recognition of the irreducible complexity of social totalities, ideological forms, particular forms of the state and so on, do not ‘reflect’ or ‘express’ any inner principle (or ‘sphere’ - my addition) through which the whole can be grasped”³. Therefore for Hegel, each element of the whole is the ‘phenomenon’ of same essence, for instance, Hegel understands the various instances or practices of the Roman Society - its economy, politics, religion, law etc. - as manifestations of the spiritual principle of abstract legal personality. Similarly, modern societies are manifestations of the principle of subjectivity. Thus, while the ‘spiritual principle’ or the idea, which is itself outside the totality, is the essence, the various

3. Ted Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, Macmillan, London, 1984, p.62.

material practices become mere phenomenon or manifestations of that inner essence . It is this essence - phenomenon dichotomy, which is at the heart of Hegelian dialectic, which makes the ‘Marxist inversion of the Hegelian dialectic (is) something quite different from an extraction pure and simple’.

Hegelian totality is incapable of comprehending the complex inter-relations between various ‘irreducibly’ different ‘instances’ and their ‘elements’. Any attempt to interpret Marx outside a ‘pre-given complex totality’ would mean presenting a reductionist picture of Marxist formulations. Althusser believes, “ If we take Marx’s famous comments on the hand - mill and the steam -mill literally or out of context --- the logical destination of this temptation is the exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic - the only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving successive moments from the idea, but from the economy. This temptation results in the radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating successive modes of production, that is, in the last analysis the different production techniques. There are names for these temptations in the history of Marxism: economism or even technologism”⁴ .

According to Althusser, for Marx, “this tacit identity (essence - phenomenon) of the economic and political disappears in favour of a new conception of the relation between determinant instance in the structure - superstructure complex which constitutes the essence of any social formation”⁵ .

4. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966, p.108.

5. *Ibid.*, p.111.

In other words, Althusser is emphasising on the efficacy of the superstructural factors or instances and that they cannot be relegated to a 'lesser real' domain (either as politics & law being a reflection of economy within the material domain or as ideology being a mere idea or consciousness reflecting the real material relations without itself being a material / social relation) both in situations of stability as well as revolution - this is in fact the only way to comprehend the social totality and its dialectics. The general contradiction (between the forces of production and the relations of Productions) cannot of its simple direct - power induce a revolutionary situation.

Althusser, therefore, proposes to understand a social totality in its 'overdetermined' existence. He insisted that no social entity was ever determined by one or a subset of the other social entities. Rather each and every entity (economy, politics, law, art, culture, ideology, theory, etc.) within society was always presumed to be determined by the effects of all other entities at once i.e. each entity's existence is nothing other than the continued effects of all the others in the social totality. In this precise sense, Althusser refers to the contradiction within every entity as complex, they emanate from the influences exerted by all other entities. Instead of the dualistic notion of contradiction, Althusser counterpoises the notion of 'overdetermination' and hence infinitely complex contradictions constituting every social entity⁶. Althusser's Marxism opened the

6. Presvic and R'Wolff, 'Althusser's Liberation of Marxian Theory' in Athussarean Legacy (ed.) E. Ann Kaplan, et.al, Verso, London, 1993, p. 63.

possibilities of constructing a theory of society in which no process - economic, political, cultural or natural - and site of processes - human agency, state - could be conceived to exist as a cause without itself being caused.

‘Overdetermination’ offers a notion of base and superstructure as conditions of each others existence. The Russian experience confirmed that the economic contradiction is invariably “ inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence and even from the instances it governs: it is radically affected by them, determining and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates, it might be called overdetermined in its principles”⁷.

This notion permits not only an entirely new understanding of the whole but also causation by economy (which is central to Marxism as a theory) within it. Althusser emphasises both the determinate effect of the economy and the location of this effect within multiple social (non - economic) determinations. He attempts to preserve the specificity of the economy (as constituting the contradiction between relations and forces of production) without evacuating it of multiple social relations and processes. Overdetermination is “ an attempt to avoid the isolation of autonomous categories but at the same time to emphasise relatively autonomous yet of course interactive practices”⁸. It is, therefore, imperative for Althusser that “ capital - labour contradiction is never simple

7. L. Althusser, 1966, op.cit, p.106.

8. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, OUP, Oxford, 1977, p.88.

but always specified by the historically concrete forms of the superstructure (the state, dominant - ideology, religion)”⁹.

However, in spite of the interactions between various practices as allowed by Althusser, one might still argue that he presents a model of a self - subsistent ‘economy’ (as it is in second international Marxism) which is not constituted by other instances but only determined externally (as a formal condition of existence). For instance, even for Cohen base and superstructure are each others conditions of existence (‘bases need superstructures’) i.e. productive forces are determining within specific material relations of which social (production) relations are the necessary forms for which in turn, superstructural relations (legal, political, ideological, etc.) are the essential ‘forms’.

Althusser needs to be distinguished from Cohen.¹⁰ For G.A.Cohen ‘form’ and ‘content’ are segregated entities with absolute causal primary located in the ‘content’. Therefore, social is the form of the ‘material - the content. Under such models productive forces can be located outside the economic structure as a free and independent cause, while superstructure becomes the ‘form’ of the ‘economic structure’. Such models can explain, at the most intervention of the form (superstructure) into the ‘content’ (economic base) but fails to explain the constitutive existence of the various instances i.e.

9. L.Althusser, 1966, op.cit, p.106.

10. Detailed account of their differences is made in G.Locke, ‘L.Althusser and G. A. Cohen: A Confrontation’ in *Economy and Society*, vol-4, 1988.

to comprehend economy itself as made of superstructural instances, for example how certain class organisations (trade unions) themselves constitute the production relations. In complete contrast to such models (which Althusser has often been burdened with) Althusser argues unequivocally against the form - content model and in fact interprets Marx and Engels as debunking this model of 'reductionism - essentialism'.

Commentators have failed to observe in what sense Althusser uses the term 'form' for instance, he quotes Engels letter to J.Bloch, (21st Sept, 1890) " ___ even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas - also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles, and in many cases preponderate in determining their form".¹¹ Althusser interprets the above lines in a novel way, he writes " The word 'form' should be understood in its strongest sense, designating something quite different from the formal. History 'asserts itself' through the multiform world of superstructure from local tradition to international circumstance"¹².

Althusser elucidates that the determinate 'Specificity' of all the instances within a constitutive existence (i.e., for instance, the determinate effect of economy on politics can be understood only when political relations are comprehended as internal to economy itself, with their specific effects on the economy. Neither economy nor politics can be

11. L. Althusser, 1966, op.cit, p.114.

12. Ibid.,p.115.

defined without reference to the other) cannot be conceptualised by a linear or transitive causality - where elements are external to each other (as in Cohen). In such a causation though the specificity of each practice is preserved, it fails to conceptualise their constitutive existence - the fact that each 'instance' is made of infinite and complex determinations of all other instances and cannot be defined without these determinations. Similarly, expressive causality (as in Hegel) defines elements in their constitutive existence, however fails to preserve their specificity. Althusser as an alternative, conceptualises the causation between or within the complex base - superstructure relation, in terms of 'structural causality'. He proposes that in such a causation the effects of superstructure are to be located in the way economy itself is constituted - the relation between its elements (forces and relations of production) are structured and vice-versa. The effect of an instance is internal to the other, in the sense that one cannot be defined without the other.

This notion of causality needs further elaboration because it is with this concept that Althusser broke - free from the image of 'self - contained' instances, projected by the base superstructure metaphor, without conflating the hierarchy of effectivity - central to Marxist explanation of social processes.

According to Althusser, the various structures in a totality are not only irreducibly different but are in perpetual contradiction with each other (due to their differential degrees of development), it is within this contradictory relation that they align into a

unity. Further, this contradictory unity is achieved within a 'structure in dominance' i.e. within a (global) 'structure' which has a single primary contradiction and multiple secondary contradictions - economic, political and ideological instances alternate their role as primary and secondary contradictions depending on the social formation. Thus, what is essential in the cognisance of a social formation is the relationship between various structures, it is this relationship which is the cause(which is in turn caused by the multiple determinations of each 'instance' within a totality). If a structure is merely a specific combination of its peculiar 'instances' then the causation caused by the combination or relationship between instances is called the 'structural causality'. The structure is therefore 'immanent in its effects' and not exterior to them. Indeed 'the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects'. The 'cause' is absent present only in and as its effects and not wholly present in any of them.¹³ Thus, to comprehend any element one has to understand the social whole and this specific element's relation with it. As Marx writes, in his *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, " The simplest economic category - -- can only ever exist as the unilateral and abstract relation of a pre-given , living concrete whole" .

It is therefore, immanent that no 'element', 'instance' or 'structure' in any social formation or real - concrete can be found in its pure state. (Notions of a distinct economy or politics or ideology, found in Althusser's writings, are only 'objects of knowledge' and not objects traceable in 'real - concrete'. Althusser cannot be understood unambiguously

13. L. Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, New Left Books, London, 1970, refer pages 161-65.

if this fundamental distinction in his works is undermined notwithstanding the problems with it). “ The economic dialectic is never active in the pure state, in History, these instances, the superstructures etc., are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the time comes, as his pure phenomenon, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the dialectic. From the first moment to the last the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes”¹⁴. Economic determination never strikes in a pure form, even in the ‘last instance’, on contrary it can only be located as internal to all changes in all instances.

Because economic determination or contradiction cannot be located in its pure form, Althusser makes a significant and novel distinction between a mode of production (as ‘object of knowledge’) and a social formation (as ‘real - concrete’). While a mode of production (as a discursively constructed abstraction) refers, in the strict sense, to the economic production i. e . ‘the specific form, in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of direct producers’ (this process can never be located as a pure economic process without being imbricated or interpellated by non - economic relations and processes), social formation refers to a unity of several distinct modes of production such as the ‘ideological mode of production’, ‘Political mode of production’ , ‘theoretical mode of production’ , etc. (It is imperative to comprehend that for Althusser ‘ practice’ refers to a mode of producing something rather than reflecting. Therefore different ‘ Practices are different ‘modes of production’). Thus, while mode of production (in the sense Marx

14. L. Althusser, 1960, op.cit.p.113.

used) refers to the economic instance, a social formation refers to the set of economic, political and ideological relations. Althusser on the basis of this distinction argues that because the non - economic practices are also modes of production in a social totality they cannot be explained by the mode of (economic) production .

Ted Benton notes that Althusser signifies another significant conceptual distinction through these terms. In his second distinction, Althusser distinguishes between a mode of production as a unity of distinct practices (economic, political, ideological) and social formation as a combination of several such modes of production. This explains Althusser's thesis of the complexity of the social totality and the necessary overdetermination of contradictions. "Complexity and overdetermination may derive not only from the relative autonomy of ideological and political practices vis-à-vis the economic, but also from the combination of several modes of production"¹⁵.

However, this firmly unified and yet dialectical totality of Althusser could only explain the coherence or contradictory unity of various structures or overlapping modes of production, it developed cracks in explaining 'determination' or causal factor. Althusser's 'last instance determination' could not bear the weight of dislocated structures and their destructuring effects, i.e. the transformation which the structure undergoes in course of a (historical) 'process', which seemed to operate without any unifying logic.

15. Ted Benton, 1984, *op.cit*, pp. 73-74

Similarly , explanation of 'relative autonomy'(which is nothing but the gap between a pre-conceived 'structure' and the dynamic 'process') within an enclosed totality was incoherent. This space for autonomy made sense only outside a unified logic of economy or 'base'. Althusser's model by its very logic opened alternatives between enclosed structures with unified logic - last instance determination - and a pluralist reading of social structures.

It is this inexplicability of autonomy beyond a unifying structural logic which opened Althusserianism to diverse readings. Althusserians such as Poulantzas attempted to overcome the problem within the Althusserian framework - of unifying structural logic. While, Post - Althusserians, such as Paul Hirst and Barry Hindess questioned the validity of any unifying logic and totality as such to explain ' Structural transformations'.

Poulantzas comprehensively used Althusser's notion of 'last instance determination', in order to argue that his totality is not a random unity of various structures but draws its logic from the 'last instance determination' of production relations. However, according to E.M.Wood, Poulantzas makes a 'subtle but highly significant transformation of Althusserian principle. In the original formula of Althusser, relations of production are always central but may organise themselves in extra - economic ways. For example, "in the 'Asiatic mode of production' the 'Political' may be said to be dominant, not in the sense that political relations take precedence over relations of exploitation (production) , but rather in the sense that exploitative relations themselves

assume a political form to the extent that the state itself is the principal direct appropriator of surplus labour”¹⁶. However, Poulantzas transforms this distinction between the ‘dominant’ and ‘determining’ instance to argue that modes of production vary according to whether the relations of production are themselves dominant at all. When he argues that the political and not the economic is dominant, in essence he means that ‘political relations’ take precedence over ‘Production relations’ (though the latter being determinant in the last instance i.e. even more indirectly).

Poulantzas makes this alteration to relieve Marxism further from the burden of ‘reductionism’. The determinate effect of economy was further relegated into murky terrain bringing into question the notion of totality as such. Though the specificity of superstructural factors was rightly emphasised, problematisation of the determining effect of economy became increasingly vague and erratic. In other words, it was increasingly difficult to explain the specificities of a dynamic ‘process’ in terms of a closed ‘structure’.

The second significant development was the Post-Althusserian discourse that postulated on Althusser’s Marxism. Though they believed that Althusser started on a right note in emphasising the ‘autonomy’ of various social relations, he failed to break free from ‘economism’ or ‘reductionism’ because of his classical Marxist leaning, which reduced all practices, though in the last instance, to an effect of the economy. In other words, the Post - Althusserian discourse believes that the problem of reductionism is

16. E.M. Wood, *The Retreat From Class*, Verso, London, 1986, p.30.

inherent to the concept of totality itself. "What I and my co-authors are arguing for is the rejection of the concept of totality itself, and therefore the rejection of the problems of the relations of the political, economic and other instances in terms of hierarchy of causal effectivity, relative autonomy, etc. In our position, political, economic and other social relations are not unified into instances, that is definite sectors of the totality governed by their place in the whole and subject to its limits"¹⁷. They are pleading for an alternative 'problematic' (epistemological position) to liberate political theory from the problem of reductionism. (This alternative problematic would be the focus of the third chapter of this dissertation).

Finally, within the Marxist discourse, E.P.Thompson rejected the Althussarian project as reductionist and he too pleaded for an alternative problematic. Thompson decries Althusser's attempts to appropriate Marx and argues that Marxism is not a theory of abstract structures but lived, sensuous practice. This alternative problematic of 'social being determines social consciousness' alone could liberate Marxism from its reductionist pronouncements. This broader definition of the material (not in the narrow sense of the economy) opened new vistas in comprehending the problem of totality and transformation

II

'SOCIAL BEING DETERMINES SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS'

E.P. Thompson located reductionism in the 'epistemology' of Althusser i.e. in disintegrating the unitary material reality, constructed by human activities, into spatially

17. P. Hirst, *On Law and Ideology*, Macmillan press, London, 1979, p.18.

and temporally differentiated synchronic structures. He affirms that Althusser's epistemology is inadequate in capturing the ontological complexities.

Secondly, Thompson argues that structure has a motion which is influenced and negotiated by human agency, it is in this inter-relation that he located the concepts 'process' and 'determination'.

The aforesaid characteristics - inadequate epistemology, absence of diachronic motion and inter-relation between structure and agency - according to Thompson, are the faulty foundations of the base - superstructure metaphor upon which Althusser has built his apparently anti - reductionist edifice.

In short, he rejects the base - superstructure model and Althusserian project of anti - reductionist reading of Marx and propounds an alternative 'historical materialism' based on the concepts of 'unitary material reality', 'human agency' and 'process', problematised in the dictum (though inadequately) 'social being determines social consciousness' . We shall attempt to delineate the problems with Althusser's model, and its close links with the necessary expulsion of 'process' and 'human practice', to comprehend the reductionism in the base - superstructure metaphor.

According to Thompson Marx's work evolved in two distinct phases. First was

the '*Grundrisse face*' where he developed a static, anti - historical structure and the second phase was marked by his *Capital* volumes where his method was better equipped to grapple with historical process.

Marx, with the '*Grundrisse face*' " proposed that it was possible not only to identify particular activities as 'economic' but to isolate these as special field of study from other activities (political, religious, legal, moral - as the area of norms and values was then identified - cultural etc.)" ¹⁸. Such a method of study, where economy (or capital to be more specific) is an operative category which laws its own development (where impingement of politics or law upon economic activity is seen as an improper interference with natural economic process), cannot capture the whole society or real historical process because they comprise " many activities and relations (of power of consciousness, sexual , cultural and normative) which are not the concern of political economy and (the bourgeois method of study - my addition) , which have been defined out of political economy and for which it has no terms" ¹⁹. According to Thompson only a historical materialism which could bring all activities and relations within a coherent view could capture the imbricated social processes indissolubly linked in human practice.

However, Marx in his *Capital* volumes seems to have provided this coherent view when he comprehend capital as a social relation and not an isolated economic category . Capitalist production is fundamentally a social relation based on the

18. E.P. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, Merlin press, London, 1978, p.60.

19. *Ibid.*, p.62.

disposition of power which enables it to reproduce its conditions of existence and therefore forms the indissoluble part of the production process itself i.e. capitalist production cannot be visualised without these social relations (or determinations) . This “disposition of power between the individual capitalist and worker (in course of the production process - my addition) has as its conditions the political configuration of society as a whole -the balance of class forces and the powers of the state which permit the expropriation of the direct producer”²⁰. In essence, the social relations in which this economic mechanism is embedded cannot be conceptualised as external, in any real historical process.

However, “Marxists generally adopted modes of analysis which, explicitly or implicitly treat the economic base and the legal, political and ideological superstructures which reflect or correspond to it as a qualitatively different more or less enclosed and regionally separated spheres”²¹. The epistemological distinctions convert into ontological segregations, thereby capturing historical process not at the moment of unitary co-existence of various human activities within a single material life but in terms of artificial discontinuities. In other words, what is imperative to comprehend is that economic base is not just reflected in and maintained by certain superstructural institutions, but that the ‘productive base itself exists in the shape of social, juridical and political forms’. Though Althusser is aware of this constitutive existence of various practices (refer to p.41) he

20. E. M. Wood, ‘Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism’ *New Left Review*, 127, 1981, p.68.

21. *Ibid.*, p.68.

some how assumes that it is important to distinguish, for the purposes of political action, between various structures as political, legal, ideological to preserve their specificity and hierarchy of effectivity. However, Thompson believes that no such segregation can be located because no structure exists in its pure self (for instance, state is both an economic structure as well as political and ideological structure in any given historical moment. For any real historical knowledge it is imperative to capture this structure in its totality). Similarly, effectivity of a structure is contingent on no a prior laws but on the dynamic 'human agency' which defies all teleological process. Thompson therefore perceives class and its historical potential always as a process - in the 'making' . It depends on the way 'human agency' perceives in their consciousness in cultural terms the economic determination . In other words, the effectivity of economic determination (which is for Althusser pre - given in the logic of the structure itself) is contingent on the way human agency intervenes between it and the historical process. Thus, structural determination complexly changes its nature (its effectivity could be absolute or relative) and its form (i.e. economic determination might be perceived by people in terms of changing traditional culture, thus effectivity of economic determination would depend on how strongly is the traditional culture entrenched in the society) .

It is this constitutive existence and complexly interchanging roles of economic political and cultural practices that the base superstructure metaphor, and any model based on it , is incapable of comprehending . As Thompson writes, " the analogy of basis and

superstructure is radically defective. It cannot be repaired . It has an in - built tendency to lead the mind towards reductionism or a vulgar economic determinism , by sorting out human activities and attributes and placing some (as law, the Arts, Religion, “ Morality”) in a superstructure others (as technology, economics, the applied sciences) in a basis , and leaving yet others (as linguistics, work -discipline) to float unhappily in - between”²².

The alternative historical materialism has to capture various structures (mode of production, production relations, etc.) as operative historical principles, that is the way they occur in real history as class antagonisms. “For all these ‘instances’ and ‘levels’ are in fact human activities, institutions, and ideas. We are talking about men and women in their material life , in their determinate relationships, in their experience of these, and in their self - consciousness of this experience”²³. In other words, all structures eventuate in unitary human experience and it is this integral process the object of historical knowledge, which Althusser offers to disintegrate.

The central concern of E.P. Thompson in contrast to Althusser is the cognition of ‘structures’ such as mode of production or production relations within a historical process and not as abstract structures with pre-given laws or determinate and well - defined effects that govern the historical process externally. In other words, mode of production and production relations define their role within the historical process itself i.e. they are open to the determination of the historical process as much as the historical

22. E.P. Thompson, ‘Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History’, in *Indian Historical Review*, Vol.-III, No 2, January 1977, p.262.

23. E.P. Thompson, 1978, *op.cit*, p.97.

process is to their effects (which again can be defined within this process) . Because the historical process constitutes various social relations it is essential to conceptualise mode of production as a social relation i.e. mode of production is not an economic relation first and then reflects this relation in superstructural relations, on contrary mode of production itself is both an economic and non-economic (moral, cultural, ideological, etc.) relation. Now if production relations or mode of production itself is expressed simultaneously in economic, political, legal and cultural relations, what happens to the proposition that economic determination is central to Marxist theory ? what specificity or effective meaning is left for either economy or to production relations ? There is no sense in which the relations of production (i.e. as economic relations) can be said to shape or exert pressure on other aspects of social life.

However, Thompson does not intend to conflate production relations with all social relations in a social formation . “ A distinction must be drawn between the principle that relations of production are all relations between people in a class society, that base is also and at the same time superstructure and Thompson’s own very different proposition”²⁴, where he is primarily arguing that products of social activity, the forms of social interaction produced by men, themselves become material forces as much as natural givens (such as geography, technology, etc.).

24. E.M. Wood, 'Falling Through the Cracks: E.P. Thompson and the Debate on Base and Superstructure' in (ed.) H. Kaye and K.MacClelland, E.P. Thompson Critical Perspectives, Polity press, Cambridge, 1990, p.139.

The point however is 'if forms of social interaction (legal , ideological, cultural, etc.- my addition) , and not just natural or technological forces, are to be treated as integral parts of the material base', where is the specificity of 'production' from other social levels established; where is the integrity and determinate force of production relations preserved ?

This is where Thompson affirms that it is necessary, " to distinguish between juridical- political forms that are the constituents of productive relations and those that are more distant from, or external to these relations - even if there are no sharp discontinuities between them"²⁵. To put it in the base - superstructure language, we need to distinguish between the 'basic' and superstructural juridical - political and cultural attributes of the productive system.

This distinction might be useful to understand 'economy as a social relation' but does it enable us to comprehend the totality of social relations from this extended notion of economy? ' In other words, how are we to problematise the relation between the material (social) relation that are part of the economy and those that are located at a distance ? This dichotomy concerns us because, as Thompson himself argued, historical process needs a 'unitary knowledge' system which understands social process in all its manifold relations.

25. E.M. Wood, 1981, *op.cit*, p.79.

This dichotomy, between the social relations that constitute and correspond to economy and those material relations that are located at a distance, has been central to contemporary Marxist theory and yet it remains an highly untheorised domain (except for vague claims of correspondence with 'basic economic structure', these areas have been increasingly the concern of Post - Marxist discourses from an alternative paradigm, which shall be our focus in the third chapter). Thompson recognises this problematic domain for any theory interested in arguing for an integrated social reality. "But these two reservations - as to the complexity of the 'correspondence' and as to its significance - are so severe as to call in question the effectivity of Marx's general notions. Very few of the critically - significant (the most 'real') problems which we confront in our actual lives appear to be directly and causally implicated in this field of correspondence: nationalism, racism, sexual oppression, Fascism and Stalinism itself are certainly not removed from this field (for the pressure of class antagonisms and class ideologies can be felt in all), but equally certainly they cannot be seen as 'developed forms of the fundamental relation of production', they are forms in their own right, and for their analysis we require a new set of terms"²⁶.

This 'new set of terms' to comprehend correspondence between material relations has been provided by Thompson in his concepts - a constitutive 'human agency', a 'process' that is not subjected to absolute structural determinations, a notion of determination as ' setting of limits'.

26. E.P.Thompson, 1978, op.cit, pp.160-61.

Thompson believes that the problem of 'correspondence' cannot be conceptualised in terms of structures interacting as enclosed domains with an a priori logic of absolute determination. On contrary, it can be understood only in terms of constitutive 'human practice' based on experience i.e. various structures in a totality correspond because they are the various activities of human beings within a unitary material life. This is the only mode through which structures transmute into a process. Human agents are born into given structures (a given material life), they comprehend them through experience in their consciousness and then decide to deal with them in multi-fold manner. This common human 'experience' (of structures as class experiences in a class based society) is the mode through which they correspond. " Kinship, custom, the invisible and visible rules of social regulation, hegemony and deference, symbolic forms of domination and of resistance , religious faith and millenarial impulses, manners, and ideologies - all of which, in their sum, comprise the genetics of the whole historical process, all of them joined, at a certain point, in common human experience which itself (as distinctive class experiences) exerts its pressure on the sum"²⁷. It is only through 'experience' that the mode of production exerts a determining pressure upon other activities. For instance, this unitary experience gets crystalised, in class societies in class formations. The various structures are experienced, primarily (though not exclusively),as class experiences and this is handled in conscious ways, in an open - ended process. Within this 'experience' and the way human agents handle them structures correspond and reproduce themselves.

27. Ibid., p.170.

Thus, it is only in comprehending this labyrinthine terrain of 'human practice' in a historical process, one can understand how structures correspond . Otherwise, correspondence cannot be proved through a logic enclosed in structures and then deal with complexity through notions such as 'relative autonomy' . This 'relative autonomy', according to Thompson , is nothing but dynamic and conscious human practice that operates in an open - ended process. Every 'determination', in other words, could have multiple results or effects (which specific 'effect' is transmuted into historical process is the prerogative of human agency) , within a 'logic'. Thus determination for Thompson, like Raymond Williams, refers to 'setting of limits'. Economic determination sets limits within which process operates, the specificities of this process are as aforesaid determined by conscious human practice. 'We can no longer offer social formation as 'society effects' or as 'developed forms' of an immanent mode'. There is nothing immanent in determination, it only has a logic - not a law.

It is to understand this domain of 'relative autonomy' that one needs to study the varied cherished concerns of humanity (cultural, sexual, normative, etc.) . It is only within the totality of these relations, with complex interactions within a mode of production that continuities are established and social processes made meaningful, logical and occur as a pattern. Other wise, Marxist theory would continue to make the "theorist" error of assuming that "there is some socialist mode of production within which some 'socialist' relations of production are given, which will afford a categorical

guarantee that some immanent socialist society will unfold itself, out of the womb of the mode of production itself²⁸.

Has Thompson, positing on the problematic of human practice, problematised, adequately, on problems of correspondence or totality and transformation? Though Thompson has established the micro foundations of Marxism, in his theorisation of varied immediate concerns of individuals and collectives, which propels them to construct and transform unitary material life around them, he perhaps failed in connecting these conscious human interventions with over-arching structural mutations that are the source of all correspondence in Marxist theory. In other words, how is this human practice linked to the shifting modes of production? If we fail to organically link them, do we not end up in analysing historical and social processes at two discrete levels? One at the level of macro-structural mutation and another at the level of micro-human practice; wouldn't this be proving Althusser right, at least at one level of analysis.

This failure of Thompson (inherent in his problematic and not a conceptual lapse) looms large in his foremost historical work, *The making of English working class*. Thompson, in his work, reduces history to the subjective perception, of the working class, of the objective (structural) processes. He omits the macro-level structural mutations and thereby does not establish a relation of correspondence between agency and necessity. 'In the absence of any objective framework laying down the overall pattern of capital accumulation in these years', there is a little way of assessing how these processes

28. Ibid., p.161.

are linked to human practice . Thus, “it is not the structural transformations - economic, political - which Thompson invokes but rather their precipitates in the subjective experience of those who lived through these ‘terrible years’”²⁹.

Thompson is aware of this caveat, “To be sure, this agency will not be set free from ulterior determinate pressures nor escape determinate limits. It is unlikely to hasten on the resolution of the extraordinary complexity and contradictions of India’s overlapping modes of production. But it might be able to open the gate to the Calcutta gaol and set a prisoner free”³⁰.

Without establishing the necessary relation between structural mutation and human practice it is very difficult to argue that structures need to be understood through conscious human practice. Perhaps the question of ‘correspondence’ or totality (‘structure’) still remains inadequately theorised and apparently validates the project of comprehending the social reality not in its integrated aspect but its discrete and fragmented existence ?

29. Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, Verso, London, 1981, p.34.

30. E.P. Thompson, 1978, *op.cit*, p.161.

CHAPTER - III

POST - MARXISM: DEBUNKING MARX

Post - Marxism, as Laclau claims, is the product of 'disorganised' Capitalism, whose significant feature is the constitutive existence of dislocated (i.e. uneven or incomplete) structures. This changed and contemporary reality enables us to realise hitherto hidden aspects, such as the transitory and contingent character of social formations, 'discursive' construction of 'totality', etc. Laclau and Mouffe , therefore, claim for a paradigmatic shift in comprehending social reality.

It is imperative to note, briefly, that Althusarian framework attempted the cognition of the dynamics of social formations in terms of structures and the logic inherent to them. Althusser attempts to elucidate this logic in terms of complex mediations that occur within and between the multiple structures (as elaborated in the previous chapter) . He believed that a simplistic and reductionist interaction of base and superstructure fails to grasp the constitutive complexity . All structural mutations, therefore, occur somewhere in between the 'last instance determination of the economy' and 'relative autonomy of the superstructure' .

However, E.P. Thompson broke away with this 'structuralist' logic and argued that Marxism imputes motion to history not because of a logic inherent to structures but the one constructed in course of human interaction and conscious reactions to those interactions. He, therefore, argues that no amount of relativist autonomy to the superstructures and postponement of determination by the economy can explain the

deviations and dislocations that occur, in the interaction among various spheres. It can be explained only through the problematisation of constitutive human activity and struggle.

Though E.P. Thompson attempted to explain the multifold dislocations in a structure, which followed no pre - given logic (however, complex), in terms of creative human intervention, he failed to problematise the 'objectivity' that needs to persist by his logic , between specific structural mutations and conscious human intervention in a given conjuncture. Instead , his analysis always ran parallel failing to establish an objective relation between 'structure' and 'agency'.

Chantal Mouffe, and more importantly Ernesto Laclau attempt to theorise the inconsistencies in Althusser and inadequacies of Thompson in terms of rejection of the idea of objective and hierarchy type interaction of various spheres within a totality and arguing for the 'mythical' and 'metaphorical' interaction between structure and agency. 'Discursively constructed' totalities and contingent interactions between subject and object cannot be theorised meaningfully in terms 'objective necessity' and 'constitutive subject' intervention.

It is imperative to observe that in spite of fundamental differences between Althusser and E.P. Thompson, as Marxists they agree that 'objective' nature of any social formation is grounded in given material conditions (i.e. material development and necessities that exist in its transformation) and these conditions with varied structural

formations (economic , political, ideological etc.) ‘determine’ each other and ‘determine’ subject formation in order to ‘determine’ the historical process.

It is these fundamental concepts of Marxism, material necessities and determination, that Post - Marxism purports to discard, not only to reveal the ‘impossibility of the Real’ but to extend a logic inherent to Marxism in its distorted and elementary presence.

The Purpose of the this chapter is to elucidate the alternative method postulated by Laclau and Mouffe, and analyse their claims of developing on some of the best fragments of Marx himself.

I

THE COLLAPSE OF TOTALITY

Laclau affirms that the objective nature of interaction between various spheres hinges on the understanding that all them form part of a ‘Totality’ . While Marxists believe that totality arises from *necessities of material development* that condition all the ‘spheres’ and activities across a given time and space, Post - Marxism denies the existence of any such necessities and thereby a totality becomes a discursive configuration. Base - superstructure dichotomy loses all its essential meaning.

The second significant reason why the base - superstructure model becomes irrelevant is the replacement of *hierarchy of causality or determination* with the notion of 'relational' existence of all spheres and identities in any given conjuncture.

Laclau believes that Marxists have inadequately captured the complexities of material existence of nature, social structures, identities etc. Similarly, they have also failed to theorise the constitutive nature of 'antagonism' or 'negation' because every time the 'negations' are re-absorbed into a higher unity of self-regulating structures. Post- Marxism attempts to problematise these aspects in comprehending social reality and thereby discovers the simplistic and reductionist mode in the base - superstructure model.

According to Laclau, nature, social structures (economic, political, ideological, etc.), identities (class, gender, etc.) have a 'being' which is historical and changing and an 'existence' which is their materiality. " Now, in our interchange with the world, objects are never given to us as mere existential entities; they are always given to us within discursive articulations"¹. For instance, it is because a mountain exists (materially / existentially) it can be a protection from enemy attack, source for extraction of minerals etc. , but none of these things follow necessarily from its more existence. ' As a member of a certain community, I will never encounter the object in its naked existence'. Existence will always be given as articulated within discursive totalities . In other words,

1. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'Post - Marxism without Apologies', *New Left Review*, 166, 1987, p.85.

the idea of nature or social structure is not something that is already there, to be read from the appearances of things, but is itself the result of slow and complex historical and social construction.

Laclau, in other words, is denying the one- to - one relation between matter and idea. Matter or material existence does not possess or project an absolute idea of truth about itself. Thus, all theorisation of 'essence' or 'truth' of material conditions around us is not only relative but also historical and contingent. (This notion of Laclau has roots in Althusser's distinction between 'object of knowledge' and 'real concrete'). There is no hidden 'essence' of truth in any given material condition which needs recognition either through the 'gaze' of an intellectual or through comprehending social structures, natural facts, through a social position (for ex. Working class). " In other words, the truth factual or otherwise , about the being of objects is constituted within a theoretical and discursive context, and the idea of truth outside all context is simply nonsensical"².

This is not essentially a Post - Marxist idea completely incompatible with the fundamentals of Marxism. For instance, Maurice Godelier, a Marxist historian affirms that " every social relationship is born and exists at once within thought and outside it - that every social relation contains an ideal part, from the outset, which is not an a posteriori reflection of it, but a condition of its appearance"³. In other words , Godelier is arguing

2. Ibid., p.86.

3. Maurice Godelier, 'Infrastructures, Societies, and History', in *New Left Review*, 112, 1978, p.92.

that ideas cannot be considered as passive reflection in thought of social relations which are born outside it, without it or before it.

According to Godelier , base - superstructure metaphor, in an important sense, fails to conceptualise that thought does not passively reflect reality but actively interprets it. In addition, its building like edifice cannot account for the process where thought not only interprets reality, but organises all the social practice acting upon this reality, hence contributes to the production of new social realities.

However, Laclau's critique goes beyond these Marxist concerns of structuring the constitutively complex process in terms of the interactions between theory / thought and practice. He purports to reject the base - superstructure model for its very idea of structuring reality in a rational form and privileges the concept of 'unrepresentability', 'impossibility of the real' which, in other words, is to privilege 'contingency' as a constitutive historical and social category.

It is this category of 'contingency' which is central to the Post - Marxist project vis-à-vis the notion of objective social structures in Marxism . Base - superstructure model with its objectively structured notion of totality cannot constitute contingency in historical process.

Contingency of social structures arises essentially at two levels, due to the complex

and non - objective interaction between idea \ thought \ discourse and material existence. This external or 'relational' interaction does not subject this relation to either the necessities of the object nor the historic limitations of thought (certain degree of randomization of history is inevitable to any such project which intends to liberate the thought vis-à-vis the object and vice-versa) . The discursive or historicity of being or in other words , the externality of thought from the object or structure becomes the foundation of 'contingency'. It would imply, the object which lacks 'essence' is open to multiple , possibilities of discursive configuration. As laclau writes, regarding his first contention for contingency, "the contingent and precarious nature of any objectivity has only become fully apparent with dislocatory effects which show the historicity of being; and that this recognition of the historicity of being - and thus of the purely human and discursive nature of truth - opens new possibilities - for radical politics. Such opportunities stem from the *new liberty gained in relation to the object* and from an understanding of the socially constructed nature of any objectivity"⁴ .

(It is important to note that, for Laclau discursive configuration is not just interpretation but includes material structuration . The paradox of his model is that while thought is 'external' (in its source or origin) to the structure, it has no existence outside the structure. While thought and structure are constitutively 'internal' to each other in their existence, they become completely 'external' in their origin, meaning and purpose of

4. Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Verso, London, 1990, p.4.

existence . No commonality in this aspect is acceptable to Laclau.

This paradox in fact extends to his second contention on which he grounds his category of 'contingency'. Social structures, are internal to each other in their 'relational' existence but what is 'internal' is completely 'external' in their origin purpose and meaning. This significant dichotomy goes completely unexplained . This is not an ambiguity between epistemological and ontological categories (as in Althusser and E.P.Thompson) but evasion of dealing with ontological perplexities themselves).

The second contention, on which Laclau grounds his category of contingency and thereby rejects any substantive meaning to totality and base - superstructure model, is the 'relational' existence of social structures or identities vis-à-vis each other. This understanding emanates from the inseparable existence of ideas in social structures. According to Laclau, " One possible way of understanding this embeddedness of ideas in the material conditions of society would be in terms of signifying totalities"⁵. In other words, 'State' or the 'ideas' would not be self - constituted identities but rather differences, whose only identity is established relationally with other differences. Thus, the material reproduction of society is part of the 'discursive totalities' which determine the meaning of economic, political and ideological activities.

The Central point of Laclau is, in any totality all spheres, structures or identities

5. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 1987, op. cit. p.90.

construct or structure themselves in relation to other structures and identities. However, this relation is one of constitutive negation or antagonism. Thus, no structure or identity is able to structure or construct itself completely, instead it is always subverted and therefore construct a structure which is the contingent result of this antagonistic relation .

“Negation is irreducible to any objectivity, which means that it becomes constitutive and therefore indicates the impossibility of establishing the social as an objective order”⁶. The significant point of difference with Marxism is that, these antagonistic forces (for ex - economic sphere and the political sphere) are completely external and do not enjoy any structural linkage which may enable them to reconstitute themselves in a higher and rational unity. In Marxism, according to Laclau, all antagonisms are not constitutive but mere appearances of an underlying unity, so that the two poles of opposition can be referred back to necessary conditions of existence . For example, the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ may antagonise each other in any social formation but this antagonism is not radical and occurs within the limits of a totality or a system and therefore the antagonism and its result is rationally comprehensible . Laclau, in essence , denies the assumption of structural continuity that exists within a totality and argues instead that their continuity is only discursively constructed while their discontinuity is constitutive. For instance, class at the level of production relations has no radical continuity with class as a social or political force. The discontinuity that exists is radical or constitutive and not a mere appearance of an underlying structural unity between the economic and the political existing within a single mode of production . The various spheres or structures or

6. Ernesto Laclau, 1990, op. cit. p.16.

identities cannot be referred back to an intelligible totality in which each constitutes an internal moment. “ In our conception of antagonism, we are faced with a ‘constitutive outside’ . It is an ‘outside’ which blocks the identity of the ‘inside’ (and is nonetheless, the prerequisite for its constitution at the same time) With antagonism, denial does not originate from the ‘inside’ of identity itself but in its most radical sense, from outside; it is thus pure facticity which cannot be referred back to any underlying rationality”⁷.

‘ The ‘outside’ is the thus a radical outside without a common measure with the ‘inside’. What one gets out of the dialectic of the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is a field of ‘relational’ identities which never manage to constitute themselves fully, since relations do not form a closed system.

Thus according to Laclau, firstly, no sphere or structure is self - contained or fully constituted - “ for what is at stake is not the degree of effectiveness of a fully constituted object - the economy - on the rest of the social development, but to determine the extent to which economy is constituted as an autonomous object, separated from its conditions of existence”⁸.

Secondly, these conditions of existence, when they affect any of the spheres, are not structurally linked to the sphere but are completely external. The contradictions

7. Ibid., p.17.

8. Ibid., p.23.

within the 'political' are internal to 'economy' and change the latter, however this does not mean they constitute a structural totality. Instead, this relation cannot be closed in terms of a system or a mode of production, as Althusser wishes to do with 'last instance determination of economy' or E.P. Thompson wishes to do with the concept of 'unitary material life'.

In the final analysis, according to Laclau, structurally disjunctured spheres are inextricably fused and therefore condition each other but form no totality, instead they construct only 'dislocated structures', which cannot be closed or understood rationally from any standpoint, for the simple reason that there is none.⁹ This allows us to overcome the apparently insoluble problems concerning the base - superstructure relation : if state, ideas, relations of production etc., have purely differential identities, the presence of each would involve the presence of others. In this sense, no causal theory about the efficacy of one element over another is necessary⁹. In other words, historical movement is explained not by 'laws of motion' of history but by the 'organic link' between base and superstructure.

Similarly, Laclau's conception of 'determination' also argues against a closed system, a totality within which spheres determine each other and yet remain 'relatively autonomous'. "What our book asserts is not that the autonomy of the state is absolute, or that the economy does not have any limiting effect vis-à-vis the state's action but rather

9. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 1987, op. cit. p.90.

that the concepts of determination in the last instance and relative autonomy are logically incompatible”¹⁰. According to Laclau, Marxism asserts a notion of determination that is either incoherent or inadequate. This notion has created a duality which is central to Marxism and yet it has always been overlooked resulting in incoherent structural logic in Althusser and a parallel analysis of structure and agency in E.P. Thompson.

Laclau believes that determination as a complex system of mediations and as setting of limits does not escape essentialism and therefore all autonomy (relative or otherwise) is meaningless. (Whether it is autonomy of social structures vis-à-vis economy or of agency vis-à-vis structure).

In Marxism, two entities that are related (two spheres of a totality or structure and agency) via mediations or setting limits are not, strictly speaking, separate entities: each is an internal moment in the self-unfolding of the other. In such a case there is no autonomy because autonomy essentially means self-determination; ‘but if the identity of the supposedly autonomous entity is constituted by its location within a totality, and this totality has an ultimate determination, entity in question cannot be autonomous’. The exteriority that a relation of autonomy would require is therefore absent.

Thus, Laclau asserts that “there is no last instance on the basis of which society can be reconstructed as a rational and intelligible structure, but rather that the relative

10. Ibid., p.92.

efficacy of each sphere depends on an unstable relation of antagonistic forces which entirely penetrates the social"¹¹. This is to say, in other words, that the economic space itself is structured as a political space.

(It is imperative to note that, if similarity of unitary material life is denied to various spheres the onus of explaining the nature of externality lies on Laclau. Laclau has to explain this constitutive externality - external to what ? In calling something external to some other thing aren't we explaining their relation as much as their autonomy ? From where is specific dislocation or antagonism created between essentially external entities ? These are some of the questions that go unanswered in Laclau).

In the final, analysis, Laclau has argued that all totality is discursive ; there is no constitutive totality of material and social structures, they are unconditionally external to each other; only such a relational understanding helps in theorising relative autonomy of structures.

Thus, there is what is called a collapse of totality in Laclau. However, this radical indeterminacy does not manifest itself through a cancellation of all determinations but through a subversion of all determination, that is through the assertion of its presence in a context that destroys its own possibility. 'That is precisely what we have termed dislocation'.

11. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 1987, op. cit. p.94.

Laclau has collapsed the object as a differential object with internal contradictions. There is, in fact, no 'contradiction' in Marxian sense left in Laclau, there are only discrete, fragmented structures which dislocate each other. Their existence as a totality is purely discursive and not material or structural. Thus, there can be no structural logic (such as mode of production or structural causality) working in Laclau which can create contradictions and thereby motion or transformation in any given conjuncture. Structures in Laclau can have neither an internal logic nor a motion of their own (as in Althusser) because they form structures only as discursive constructs otherwise the whole social and material life is a floating mass that is essentially unrepresentable.

Laclau cannot explain transformations through fractured or dislocated structures. He therefore has to bring in the category of 'subject' (as E.P. Thompson did) to explain diachronic motion but what space is left for a constitutive subject in Laclau, whose object is essentially discursive and unrepresentable. Without an objective structure can a constitutive subject be possible ?

II

MICRO - FOUNDATIONS OF SUBJECT FORMATION

For Laclau, a structure is perpetually in a process of formation and thereby exists only as a

dislocated (i.e. incomplete) structure. Any entity that determines or is determined by this dislocated structure is structurally outside the latter, without any commonality. This factor of there being a 'constitutive outside' makes all processes, essentially contingent and unrepresentable within any structural or objectified whole.

Thus, the relation between a dislocated structure and the subject is one of the 'outside' without any objective link and determinate effects that can be structured with in a universal or general theory. For Laclau all history is that of concrete circumstances and specific contexts that have not been pre-determined according to an a priori law (or logic).

As Marxists do(especially E.P. Thompson; refer the previous chapter), Laclau does not believe that the crisis of a mode of production (between productive forces and production relations) and class struggle are structurally or objectively linked. According to Laclau, ' the structure of the (above) two contradictions is identical' (in fact the structure of no two contradictions is identical for Laclau). On contrary, he believes that, " the fact that it is impossible for an economic system to expand indefinitely does not necessarily mean that its collapse must take the form of a conformation between groups"¹².

12. Ernesto Laclau, 1990, op. cit. p.6.

It is essential to understand that class struggle is not an internal moment in the endogenous development of productive forces. Thus, if the two contradictions were independent of each other “ the relationship between the two would no longer be fixed down a priori in a general theory of history, but would become *contingent* and based on *power*”¹³.

Laclau is arguing that no objective relation between growing productive forces and struggle within production relations is possible because the latter is not a closed or self-contained category, which can be ignited through the determinate effect of production forces. “ conflict is not internal to capitalist relations of production (in which he is merely a seller of labour power), but takes place between the relations of production and the worker’s identity outside of them. As we shall see, this constitutive outside is inherent to any antagonistic relationship”¹⁴.

Laclau is arguing (on lines of E.P. Thompson) that class is not an economic category but a social category, and therefore is always incompletely structured and its logic is also incomplete and subjected to specificities of a conjuncture. It is always the external, social and cultural categories, that ‘overdetermine’ the economic process. Thus the outcome of this incomplete process (incomplete in terms of being unified by a logic, in this case - the logic of its position within production relations) faced with a permanent -

13. Ibid., p.7.

14. Ibid., p.9.

outside, 'depends on contingent power relations between forces that cannot be reduced to any kind of unified logic' .

For instance, to clarify his argument, he refers to Andrew Levine and Erik Olin Wright's review of G.A. Cohen . He appreciates the former for their criticism that Cohen ignores the disintegrative tendencies of 'Class capacities' arising from capitalist development and assuming the automatism of working class capacities resulting from the development of the productive forces under capitalism dogmatically. There is a systematic evacuation of concrete social relations and irrationally privileging universal and general theories.

However, Laclau himself is critical of Andrew Levine and Erik Olin Wright. Though the latter have historicised the relation between growing productive forces and class capacities, they dehistoricise and abstract the relation between productive forces and class interests. In other words, they establish an objective structural relation between the growth of productive forces and necessary consequence of emergence of class interest . "In this vision, interests are not formed, but recognised. Given a set of positions in the social structure we simply proceed to allocate interests according to our criteria of rationality and then judge the degree of rationality of the different social agents in terms of whether they adapt to them or not. If Levine and Wright have historicized 'class capacities', their conception of 'class interests' remains as abstract and rationalist as that

of Cohen”¹⁵.

It is important to understand from the above argument, that for Laclau any two entities do not enjoy objective relation, whether it is between growing productive forces and class formation, between class as economic category and class as social and political force, between class and other subject positions such as gender, race, democracy, ecology, etc.

It is clear from the aforesaid model that micro foundations of formation of a ‘subject’ hinges on ‘contingency’ and ‘power relations’ vis-à-vis other structures and identities. However, the question that remains is, what sort of a subject is possible? especially when the ‘subject’ does not comprehend the object it is located in and supposed to transform. It fails to comprehend the object not because it lacks experience vis-à-vis a overwhelming structure (as in Althusser, where the structure subsumes the subject) but because the structure cannot be experienced - it has no objective or structured processes for cognition and construction of a project of knowledge system. Therefore, on each occasion, the subject is faced with a fresh and historically unprecedented conjuncture, therefore subject’s discursive constructions of totalities (or subject’s attempts to perceive the object in some form that is structured : object cannot be perceived, rationally in any other form but a structure i.e. a subject needs to freeze time in order to perceive the multiple variables in an object in some rationalised or structured pattern. Even the de -

15. Ibid., p.15.

structuring effects of a dislocated structure can be comprehended only as a structure) are 'external' and have no continuity with the dominant structure. It is this relation of externality that defines a subject for Laclau.

The two novel formulations, on which Laclau grounds his Post - Marxist project are :

- (a) Structure is essentially undecidable therefore any decision (of the subject) of reconstructing it is contingent and external to the structure, in the sense that it is not determined by that particular structure.
- (b) The agent (or the subject) is not entirely internal to the structure, not because it has essence outside independent of the structure, but because the structure has failed to constitute itself fully and thus to constitute a subject.

In other words, the structure - subject relation envisaged by Laclau is radically different from that of Marxism. The distinction operates at two levels that are organically inter - connected. For Marxism, all dislocations (or to use Marxian parlance - contradictions) have objective meaning and operate within a given totality . Secondly, the subject is thereby absorbed by the structure - all his activities are explained as occurring within given structures (It is significant to note that, E.P. Thompson who could not theorise the above point was often lampooned for assuming historical actors to be 'voluntary' subjects).

On contrary , for Laclau, the subject has no identity pre - given to it by a structural

location (for instance, within a productive system ; E.P. Thompson has also attempted to conceptualise this process of an identity (class) in the ‘making’, however this process is grounded in pre- given structural location in the production relations) but radically create it for itself in an act of *identification* i.e. when they actualise certain structural potentialities and reject others. This act of creating an identity (class, gender, race) is completely external to the structure but made possible by it (because of the dislocated existence of the structure). As Laclau writes, “ this means that the subject is partially self - determined . However, as this self - determination is not the expression of what the subject already is but the result of its lack of being instead, self - determination can proceed through process of identification”¹⁶.

Thus it is very clear that the subject is nothing but the ‘distance between the undecidable structures and the decision’. It is the result of a paradox that is contingent - out of an urge to constitute itself (by identifying or structuring the object) vis-à-vis the undecidable, unrepresentable object or structure. This however, does not mean that a subject is born out of a fit of irrational or lunatic urge because it is unable to comprehend the object. “ What we find here is an undecidability located within reason itself. Thus the fact that a decision may, in the final instance, be arbitrary , merely means that the person taking it cannot establish a necessary link with a rational motive”¹⁷.

16. Ernesto Laclau, 1990, op. cit. p.44.

17. Ibid., p.31.

What this principle of undecidability does mean is that if two different groups have taken different decisions the relationship between them will be one of antagonism and power, since no ultimate grounds exists for their opting either way. The identity that finally emerges is in no way objective and structurally grounded instead is contingent based completely on power relations.

Slavoj Zizek explains the consequence of such a model. He argues that, according to Laclau, what we have is a series of particular subject - positions (feminist, ecology, democratic, etc.) the signification of which is not fixed in advance ; it changes according to the way they are articulated in relation to the content of one another. For example, in the series feminism - democracy - peace movement - ecologism : if the participant in struggle for democracy 'finds out by experience' that there is no real democracy without emancipation of women abandoning aggressive (anti - democratic) - masculine attitude towards nature and institutionalising peace, one can understand that "each of the four above mentioned positions is marked with the metaphoric surplus of the other three positions, we can say something like a unified subject - position is being constructed"¹⁸

More significantly, he further adds " what we must not overlook is of course that such a unity is always radically contingent, the result of a symbolic, condensation, and not an expression of some kind of internal necessity according to which the interests of all the

18. Ibid., P.250.

above - mentioned positions would in the long run 'objectively convene' . It is quite possible for example, to imagine an ecological position which sees the only solution in a strong anti - democratic exploitation of natural resources"¹⁹.

This elaboration was necessary to clarify what Laclau means by 'contingency' and undecidability. Now, the interaction among these various subject - positions is neither grounded in the objective structural necessity where one could a priori predict that they would emerge as one unified subject (as Marx predicted regarding the 'universal class'^d which would emancipate the human kind as such) nor is it grounded in a conscious human choice because there is no objective interest or necessity that brings these identities together. The subject is in no position to comprehend the complex interaction of various subject positions not only because each subject position is limited and fragmented but is also necessarily 'external' to all other subject - positions.

It is imperative to recollect that subject's relation to the structure is that of 'externality' . It cannot comprehend the structure in totality because , firstly, the structure itself is a totality only discursively; secondly subject's understanding does not emanate from an underlying structural unity with the object (for instance, as Marxism believes that reality can be comprehended from the subject - position of the working class because it is objectively located in the structure and the necessary internal moment which would, through a socialist revolution subsume the totality under its objective interests) .

19. Ibid., p.251.

In the final analysis, the subject is only 'mythical' and 'metaphorical'. This relation of externality with the dislocated structure and the ambiguities internal to the structure does not allow a constitutive subject, instead he/she always lives in a myth of achieving the impossible - representing the real or structuring the object within a space vis-à-vis its constitutive temporality. "By myth we mean a space of representation which bears no relation of continuity with the dominant 'structural objectivity'. Myth is thus a principle of reading of a given situation, whose terms are external to what is representable in the objective spatiality constituted by the given structure"²⁰.

The subject continues to act and think in this make - belief world of attempting to constitute and re-constitute a structure that is essentially dislocated and lacks an 'essence'. Each time it constitutes a structure - discursively through 'hegemony', it assumes it has comprehended the essence and the direction of the structure, but soon it finds the structure dislocated and thereby moving in an unknown direction. It is within this dialectic of necessity and contingency, presence and absence that a subject is lost.

Laclau, thereby, allows no project of constructing a knowledge system out of historical experience. History is neither a rational linear development nor a cyclical process, on contrary it is a mere temporality of disjunctured events. Process or motion, for Laclau, cannot be comprehended within a synchronic system (such as linear or cyclical, etc.) because it would convert the motion into space or structure where

20. Ibid., p.61.

temporality or politics (creative subject intervention) cannot survive . 'Politics and space are antinomic terms' - any diachronic motion that is comprehended within a pattern or structure becomes synchronic for Laclau. Temporality of an event is preserved by Laclau through its unrepresentability i.e. its externality to any pattern that could be observed hitherto. Subject's location and 'experience' (within discursive configurations) is external to the dominant structure . As Norman Geras observes , "whenever we use the category of 'subject' in this text, Laclau, and Mouffe write, 'we will do so in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure, subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations - not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible - as all "experience" depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility"²¹. Thus, the discursive conditions are not those that have been consciously constructed by the subjects but those that are 'given', into which subjects are born, while on the other hand the source or moorings of these discourses cannot be found even within the dominant structure because they are 'external' to them . Discourse therefore becomes a 'myth' (not knowledge or experience) and thereby converts the structure and the subject (not their material 'existence' but 'being') into contingent and metaphorical categories. As Laclau argues, "in one sense we can say that the duality between subject and object is being overcome: the classical problem of knowledge as the adequation between knowing and being disappears in that myth constitutes the subject and being of objects at the same time"²² .

21. Norman Geras, 'Post - Marxism ?' in *New Left Review*, 163, 1987, p. 68.

22. Ernesto Laclau, 1990, *op. cit.* p.68.

In the final analysis, Laclau's model is a perverted continuity of the agenda set within Marxism . In collapsing an objective totality or object with internal (and not external) contradictions on one hand and projecting a mythical and not a constitutive subject on the other, Laclau is incapable of explaining motion, transformation, progress in human societies in any meaningful way. Transformation occurs neither through structural contradictions nor through constitutive subject - object dichotomy. Though Laclau hinges his model on the constitutive outside or externality of dislocations, discourses, subject - positions vis-à-vis dominant structure, he fails to explain, from where do new dislocations, specific discourses, subject - positions originate ? (however contingent their origin might be) . They do not originate from the contradictions internal to dominant structure (as in Althusser) nor from the conscious human activity (as in E.P.Thompson) their existence is always taken for granted and their absence in a specific conjuncture is explained as contingent absence of specific discursive configurations. This inability is not a lapse but fundamental limitation of his model.

Marxism can account for the sources of ecological, feminist, race discourses or dislocations in both objective structural mutations (i.e. in development of productive activity) and conscious subject reactions (formation of collectives) , however these explanations might not be adequate due to the complex dialectics operating at various levels (macro and micro); complete knowledge of totality or the object might not be possible at any given time and space ; does this make history and human society chaotic,

absolutely contingent and ultimately unrepresentable? As E.M. Wood opines, “ does the abandonment of unilinearism really mean that ‘anything is possible’? are they (Marxists) really obliged to accept for example that capitalism can emerge from a pastoral society, that modern industry can spring , directly from primitive agriculture? Are they obliged to acknowledge that a system of production that generates little surplus can sustain a massive state or religious establishment ?”²³.

However, projects such as Post - Marxism in particular and Post - structuralism in general provide us with an opportunity to unearth the fundamental dualism within Marxism, which was the source of both dogmatic (for example , Stalinist) assertions of scientific Marxism and also creative reconstruction (for example, E.P.Thompson). This dualism , I think, is that of attempting to constitutively or positively explain history and social processes with a negative notion of causality or determination. Determination as ‘setting of limits’ , can only explain the limits within which various possibilities become realisable , it cannot explain the event, structure or identity that has realized itself uniquely. However complex these determinations might be (such as ‘structural causality’ where each sphere is limited by the global structure as such, which makes any one-to-one reading of determination difficult) they cannot explain history as objective; or is it that a positive notion of determination is missing in Marxism because it believes that human agency, Which mediates or is the agent of these determinations, has never been a conscious subject

23. E.M. Wood, ‘ Marxism and the Course of History’ , in *New Left Review* , 147, 1984, p.100.

of history. As Perry Anderson observes that it is only the twentieth century which is a witness of subjects consciously making history. Perhaps, increasing conscious and not 'mythical' and 'metaphorical' activity would provide new vistas in problematising a positive notion of determination.

EPILOGUE

The central purpose and concern of this study has been an attempt to comprehend certain fundamental theoretical and methodological tools of analysis that form the necessary backdrop to any empirical study. It is to this end, that this study has focused on the Marxian formulation of the relation between base and superstructure and the debates surrounding it, as the vantage point, to comprehend certain theoretical concepts such as the 'Structure', 'Agency', and 'Process'.

The fundamental concerns of this study have been , firstly, how should one understand or conceptualise a 'Structure' or a 'totality'¹ or what we often refer to as a system. How does the base - superstructure metaphor enable us in comprehending the dynamics of a structure or in other words the complex relation between various 'spheres' (economic, political, ideological, cultural, etc.) within a totality; is the relation a simplistic unity or a contradictory unity; if it is complex and contradictory, how do they form a totality or a system, is the 'structure' or 'totality' a theoretical 'myth ' constructed in order to make a 'discursive' sense of the objective reality around us.

Secondly, if the base - superstructure metaphor conceptualises the economic, political and cultural spheres as (sub) structures within a totality, what theoretical status does it offer to the concrete 'human practice'. How are structures linked to individuals, collectives that exist within system; are subjects to be comprehended as 'bearers' of over - arching

1. Structure and totality are not only used as interchangeable terms in some contexts but also as sub - structure and a totality in other, through this work.

structures without any constitutive historic role; are they to be considered as external to the structures, struggling against their determinate pressure on the historical process ; or are subjects both internal and external to the object in a complex socio - historical process.

Thirdly, if 'structure' and 'agency' or 'object' and the 'subject' are the fundamental tools of analysis, what conception of 'process' does the base - superstructure metaphor (or Marxist method) problematise. In other words, what is the relation between 'structure' (synchrony) and 'process' (diachrony); how does the conceptualisation of the relation between 'structure' and agency influence or affect the notion of (historical) 'process'.

This study has been an exercise in self - clarification of some of these, aforesaid, elementary theoretical queries. With this central concern of self-clarification, this study has focused on the writings of certain leading theoreticians of the New Left and post-Marxist school. These writers have proposed contrasting and contending views in formulating the notion of a 'structure' (or the relation between 'base' and 'superstructure') and its relation to the 'subject' and the influence of this relation on the 'motion' of the society .

In the first chapter, this study has critically evaluated the writings of Herbert Marcuse, in relation to his formulations regarding the 'structure' and 'agency'. It has been argued

that, he has essentially, posited the relation between base and superstructure as a simplistic unity. According to him, in contemporary capitalist societies, both the 'base' (i.e. economy as a social relation) and the 'superstructure' (politics, culture, aesthetics, etc.) get subsumed or unified by the logic of 'technological rationality'. The contradictions (between the base and the superstructure) get flattened and the 'totality' functions according to the omnipresent logic. In this argument, Marcuse flattens all social contradictions and affirms that a 'totality' is an absolute unity of all structures. He does not argue for the dynamic contradictions within each structure instead argues that in a 'negative totality', all structures including economy, politics , culture, aesthetics, sexuality, reinforce each other because the essence of each of them is 'technological rationality.' (This is, essentially, a model close to Hegel's 'expressive totality' where the principle (such as subjectivity in Hegel or technological rationality in Marcuse) which is external to the totality and therefore there is a simplistic unity of all structures, which reflect the principle, within a totality). In fact, one of the significant contention of Marcuse is that productive forces and production relations enter into a new constellation of absolute unity and do not contradict each other for a radical transformation.

Thus, any 'subject' born into such a structure of absolute unity would also be subjected to the dominant ideology of technological rationality and would thereby be a conformist of the system and reproduce the existing structures through his practice or activities.

In conditions of such a deadlock, where neither the structure has inherent objective contradictions nor the 'agency' is capable of creative and transformative activity, Marcuse believes that human psychology with trans - historical instincts (such as the 'Eros') would be the 'glimmer of hope' for transformation (or motion) .

In the second chapter, this study has focused on the writings of Louis Althusser for an alternative model of the 'totality' . According to Althusser, all structures have to be comprehended in terms of a 'contradictory unity'. Base - superstructure relation cannot be understood as a simplistic unity of essence - phenomenon or content - form relation. Hegelian totality (for instance, that of Herbert Marcuse) is incapable of comprehending the complex inter-relations between various irreducibly different structures. Thus, he proposes an 'over- determined' totality (as opposed to the 'negative totality' of Marcuse) where each structure (economics, politics, culture, ideology etc.)has to be comprehended not only in terms of their specificity (in terms of their historical development, rhythm i.e. differential historical time) but also their 'overdetermined' unity. In other words, while each structure reflects the other because they are nothing but sum total of influences or determinations exerted by all other structures and thereby form a unity or a totality, they are also specific (i.e. not collapsible as epiphenomenon) in their historical development within the totality . Thus, the base - superstructure metaphor reflects a complex and contradictory unity of the economic base with the political and ideological superstructure.

It is this contradictory unity that is the source of all structural mutations . In other words, structures have inherent (social and material) contradictions within them, which 'condense' at a particular historical juncture and cause a 'revolutionary rupture'. This contradictory relation of structures (economics, politics, ideology, etc.) is neither contingent nor evolves out of a conscious human practice, but is always determined in the 'last instance' by the (level of development of the) economy (i.e., the base).

Thus not only is the unity of the totality explained, in the 'last instance' by the development of the economy, but also (historical) 'motion' or 'process', through this trans-historical (a priori) category.

The category of 'subjects' thereby has no constitutive role in the historical process, they are merely the 'bearers' of the structures and (unconscious) representatives of the underlying and deep rooted structural contradictions. 'Subjects' according to Althusser are 'ideological creatures' incompetent of not only comprehending the complex (structured) reality around them but also of conscious transformative activity.

In these two models (of 'negative totality' and 'overdetermined' totality of the base - superstructure relation), it is imperative to observe that not only is the subject evacuated of any constitutive historic role, but 'process' is explained, essentially, through dehistoricised categories such as 'human psychology' (with trans- historical instincts) in Marcuse and a priori 'last instance' determination by the economy (in Althusser). Marxist

theoreticians had to invoke such dehistoricised categories in spite of their methodology being 'motion centric' because of the undialectical relation between the 'structure' and 'subject', which has resulted in a 'synchronic' version of change or 'motion'.

In a synchronic motion process is swallowed by the 'structure' and the logic of the 'structure' (which is a pre - determined relation between base and superstructure, such as the last instances determination by the economy) entirely and absolutely guides the destiny and direction of historical process. All historical events are explained in terms of objective (closed?) structural contradictions. In other words, 'structures' themselves do not undergo radical changes in course of historical 'process', it is only the 'process' that is determined by the 'structure'. Such social theories treat individual actions as structurally determined in that the structural context of action permits only one outcome. Agents are treated, as noticeable in the above two models, as the bearers of social norms and values which dictate their actions, so that as Adam Parzeworski puts it, 'the society becomes internal to individuals who manifest this internalised society in their actions'. In such vulgar functionalism every action particularly by the members or representatives of a ruling class, reveals some hidden pattern and is explicable as part of some long term project some how corresponding to deep - rooted changes in the structure of capitalism. In other words, Marxist method argues that the influence exerted by individuals on the fate of the society is determined by the essence of the internal structure (a pre - determined relation between base and superstructure) of the society. The question however is - is there a single 'essence' in any given structure and does it completely or

absolutely subsume or determine (in an instrumental sense) the agency and there by the historical process?

Thus, Marxist method could cease to use ahistorical categories only when it brings a constitutive agency into its analysis, when it accepts that there is dimensionality to the structures i.e., multiple(material and social) possibilities are located in the structure. It is on the edges of these potential outcomes that a constitutive and conscious agency is located.

In other words, Marxists methodology needs to problematise conditions where not only the historical process is determined by the 'structure' but the latter itself is dislocated and restructured in the course of historical process. Marxist method needs a paradigmatic shift from a synchronic to a diachronic motion, where historical and social process is comprehended not only in terms of contradictions or dialectics internal to the 'structure' but those autonomous dynamics internal to the 'agency'. This involves, as Alex Callinicos opines, 'a search for micro foundations of Marxist social theory'. Individual as the basic unit of analysis (as a member of a collective) should be comprehensively problematised and his desires and beliefs should be socially and historically understood.

It is some of these arguments and observations that E.P.Thompson theorises in his seminal works. These have been the focus of our study, in the second section- 'social being determines social consciousness' - of the second chapter.

E.P. Thompson, emphatically, argues that the misconceptions of Althusser (and Marcuse) owe their origin to the base-superstructure metaphor. According to him the base - superstructure model projects the economic 'base' and legal, political and ideological superstructures, which reflects or corresponds to the former, as a qualitatively different more or less self - enclosed and regionally separated 'spheres' (or structures) . This model has an in-built tendency to lead the mind to reductionism (and 'structuralism') 'by sorting out human activities and attributes and placing some (law, Arts, Religion, etc.) in a superstructure others (as technology) in a basis and leaving yet others (as linguistics) to float unhappily in - between'. This sort of building like edifice not only represents the social reality in terms of fixed structures (with a priori relation) but also evacuates human practice of any constitutive historic role.

Thus the two fold objective of E.P.Thompson is, the cognition of structures such as mode of production and production relations within a historical process and not as abstract structures with pre - given laws or determinate and well - defined effects that govern the historical process externally; and to argue that 'structures' are nothing but human activities, institutions and ideas. They operate in a totality because they are mediated and transmuted into a process through an unitary human 'experience'. Individuals are not only the 'bearers' of structures (i.e. unconsciously reproduce them) but also conscious and creative negotiators. Thus, they partly reproduce the structures and partly transform them.

Both the above arguments are enveloped in his detailed account of class formation . He argues that class is not a physical entity, a pre - given structure which determines historical process, instead it evolves in the course of historical process and becomes its own agency, being responsible for its creation and its evolution . In his formulation, 'working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time --- It was present at its own making'. This is, however, not to deny 'class' (located in production relations) as a structure, instead it is the structure that provides the determinate conditions. "His historical project presupposes that relations of production distribute people into class situations, that these situations entail essential antagonisms and conflicts of interest, and they therefore create conditions of struggle. Class formations and the discovery of class consciousness grow out of the process of struggle as people 'experience' and 'handle' their class situations"² .

This certainly means that no structural definition of class can by itself resolve the problem of class formation - process - and that no model (such as base determines superstructure) can give us what ought to be the 'true' class formation for a certain 'stage' of process.

2. E.M.Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p.80.

It is at this crucial juncture, where the 'structure' is transmuted into the historical process, that a conscious human agent is located. Human collectives and their specificities mediate between the 'structure' and the historical 'process'. "The basic theoretical and methodological principles of Thompson's whole historical project is that objective determinations- the transformations of production relations and working conditions- never impose themselves on 'some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity' but on historical beings, the bearers of historical legacies, traditions and values"³.

In other words, Thompson is hinting at a social analysis which somehow incorporates the role of conscious and active historical beings, who are 'subject' and 'object' at once, both agents and material forces in objective processes.

However, there have been, perhaps, two fundamental limitations with the Thompsonian pronouncements, firstly, he considers 'structure' as a unified whole or a homogenous entity without considering it as a differentiated entity. For instance, human and non-human structures could be one such differentiation(one could, perhaps, term them as 'subjective structures' (such as class or caste) and 'objective structures' (such as level of development of productive forces) respectively), which would interact with the 'subject' radically differently(further elaboration is beyond the scope of this dissertation). Consequently, the second limitation is that he does not problematise the relation between human action and the large scale overarching structural mutations (such as shifts in

3. Ibid., p.92.

modes of production) . It is perhaps the difficulty of explaining the motion in the 'object' vis-à-vis the motion in the 'subject' within a totality or systemic whole. This raises pertinent questions such as the limitations of studying social processes in terms of totalities or systems (or even structures). In other words, perhaps, the 'structure' and the 'subject' do not interact 'objectively' but in a 'fragmented' and 'contingent' manner.

This study examines the above mentioned alternative of comprehending social processes outside totalities and systems (and structures) in its the third and final chapter.

The third chapter - Post - Marxism: Debunking Marx - of this dissertation has focused on the post - Marxist discourse of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. It is interesting to observe that post - Marxist analysis, like that of E.P. Thompson, grounds its arguments on the critique of a mistaken notion of comprehending social reality in terms of self-contained 'spheres' - 'base' and 'superstructure'. However, the alternative proposed by Laclau is radically different from that of E.P. Thompson.

According to Laclau, base-superstructure model does not make any substantive sense because various 'spheres' have (not self - contained existence) 'relational' existence. In other words, production relations ('base'), state and ideas ('superstructure') 'have purely different identities, the presence of each would involve the presence of others . In this sense no causal theory about efficacy of one element over other is necessary' . Thus, without a relation of objective causality between various

'spheres', what is left is that 'negation' becomes constitutive and there fore indicates the impossibility of establishing the social as an objective order'.

In other words, 'spheres' or 'structures' do not interact within an objective totality; cannot be referred back to an intelligible totality. Consequently no (social) 'structure' is able to construct or structure itself completely, instead it is always subverted and thereby construct a 'reality' which is the contingent result of this antagonistic relation.

Thus, structure as a base- superstructure interaction collapses and what we have is social reality as a floating mass with no objective or comprehensible direction and inherent motion out of structural contradictions.

(It is interesting to observe that, while there were no structural contradictions in Marcuse because they reinforced each other under a single dominant principle or logic, structural contradictions are missing in Laclau because there are only 'dislocated' structures with 'destructuring' effects (i.e. dominant relations have no social and material necessities or logic of development)

With the collapse of 'totality', 'subjects' born into the ('dislocated') 'structure' have neither a definite social position nor any 'objective' interests. Thus, not only the conventional notion of 'structure' but the conventional notion of 'subject' becomes a 'mythical' category, it is incapable of any conscious historic role because it repeatedly fails

to comprehend the reality around it. The essential question at this juncture is, how does Laclau propose to explain motion in society, with such a model. While Marcuse with a similar ejection of 'structure' and 'subject' explains motion through dehistoricised categories, Laclau provides us with no answer. The fundamental purpose of a theoretical model- to explain how new dislocations are created in a structure; how new identities are created among subjects- is completely bypassed. In other words, Laclau's model is capable of explaining neither synchronic nor diachronic motion in society.

This is perhaps, central to all post-structuralist modes of analysis. For instance, though there is no blanket rejection of the concepts of 'subject' and 'structure' in Foucault, there is ambiguity regarding their status in his analysis and their relation to the motion in society. Foucault argued that, from being constitutive, the subject would be shown to be constituted, the effect, in particular of specific social practices. As Alex Callinicos writes, "Foucault indeed came to describe his whole project as the attempt to create a history of the modes by which, in our culture human beings are made into subjects"⁴. However, with the above formulation he could not explain resistance and conscious human action. Thus, the aporia of power and resistance, as Callinicos observes, may help to explain the major shift in Foucault's thought that occurred between the first volume of the *History of sexuality* (1976) and second and third volumes (1984). The extent of the shift is indicated by the following remark, "power is exercised only over

4. Alex Callinicos, *Making History*, Polity press, Cambridge, 1987, p.22.

subjects and only in so far as they are free". The distance between 'constituted subjects' and 'free subjects' appears to be vast.

Thus, rethinking the base - superstructure metaphor, one could tentatively conclude that as Marx and Engels used this metaphor to counter idealist arguments and to put forth a distinct Marxist analysis, in contemporary times we need it to counter the post - Marxist/post - modernist arguments against 'objectivity' of social reality.

However, as observed in this study, the metaphor conceptualises the 'structure' not only in terms of self - contained domains but also in terms of static and rigidly pre - determined relations between the 'spheres'. The metaphor also has a disposition towards evacuating 'subject' of any constitutive role and breeds ambiguous notions of the relation between both 'structure' and 'agency' on one hand and 'structure' and 'process' on the other. It is, perhaps, in continuation and extension of a dialectical and concrete, historical mode of analysis, as formulated in E.P. Thompson's writings, that Marxist method would find ingenious insights into the study of concrete social processes. It is with this objective that this study proposes and pleads for a serious and critical rethinking of the famous *Preface* of Karl Marx.

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