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Marx and the Concept of a Social Formation

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Abstract

This paper discusses the significance of the concept of a social formation for historical materialism. It argues that the concept is wrongly thought to be associated uniquely with the writings of Louis Althusser and with structuralist Marxism. It can be found in the writings of Marx himself, as well as those of Lenin, and is central to an adequate understanding of classical Marxism. To illustrate its importance the paper shows how the concept may be used to shed new light on the debate around the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Keywords

Marxism – social formation – mode of production – historical materialism – materialist conception of history – transition debate

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In all social formations [*Gesellschaftsformen*] there is one specific mode of production [*eine bestimmte Produktion*] which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies

their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.

MARX, *Grundrisse*¹



1 Introduction

My primary concern in this article is to examine the part which the concept of a social formation has to play in the thought of Marx, especially in relation to the writing of history. However, to a relatively small extent the article also considers what is said about the concept in Marxism after Marx. I should emphasise that my aim is strictly limited. This account is a selective one and is not intended to be comprehensive. For example, I overlook completely the contribution which was made by a number of figures, not least those associated with the Marxism of the Second International. I say nothing about the views of Italian Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci, Cesare Luporini and Emilio Sereni.² I do not examine in any great depth the ideas of Louis Althusser.³ Nor do I consider the views of those French anthropologists writing in the 1970s who appear to have been influenced by the writings of Althusser, for example Pierre-Philippe Rey.⁴ Finally, I have not included a discussion of the ideas of Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff.⁵ The justification for all of these omissions is that this is a journal article and not a book. Others, of course, may disagree with the selection that I have made.

There was a revival of interest in the concept of a social formation among Marxist intellectuals in Europe in the postwar period. This was associated with the rediscovery, publication and translation of Marx's *Grundrisse* into various European languages at that time. The passage from the *Grundrisse* cited above is of considerable significance in this regard. Following the lead of Ellen Meiksins Wood, I shall refer to it as 'the general illumination passage'.⁶ It has

1 Marx 1973, p. 107; translation modified.

2 For the Italian contribution, see Luporini and Sereni (eds.) 1976; Simoni 2006; and Riva 2009. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing these sources to my attention.

3 Althusser 2005; Althusser 2015a and 2015b.

4 Rey 1971; Rey 1973; Rey 1982; see also Foster-Carter 1978.

5 Resnick and Wolff 2002; Resnick and Wolff 2006.

6 Meiksins Wood 2000, pp. 65, 69.

often been referred to and I shall return to it more than once in the discussion which follows.⁷

The concept of a social formation is often (perhaps usually) associated with structuralist Marxism in the 1960s, especially the writings of Louis Althusser.⁸ Indeed, it is sometimes thought (in my view wrongly) only to be present there. Of particular importance here is *Reading Capital* (1965), which was written by Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey and Jacques Rancière.⁹ Use of the concept had some vogue amongst Marxists writing in the 1970s and '80s, largely as a consequence of the influence of Althusser and his colleagues.¹⁰

Writing in 1980, Perry Anderson claimed that the distinction between the concept of a mode of production and that of a social formation had at that time 'passed into general usage'.¹¹ This may well have been the case three or four decades ago. However, although it has not fallen entirely into disuse,¹² the concept of a social formation receives far less attention today than it has done in the past. There are a number of possible reasons for this decline in interest, at least one of which may be the fact that structuralist philosophy no longer has the influence that it once had amongst Marxist intellectuals, although that too of course is something that requires an explanation.

I repeat that my primary aim in this article is to show that the concept of a social formation has a significant part to play in the writings of Marx himself and that it is an essential category of historical materialism. It is central to Marx's thinking about how history should be written. In particular, Marx assumes that employment of this concept is necessary for an adequate understanding of societies in transition, especially those undergoing the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In my view, the concept of a social formation is a core component of classical Marxism. It is to be found, not only in Marx's

7 E.g. Althusser 2015b, pp. 245, 343; Meiksins Wood 2000, pp. 65, 69; Thompson 1981, p. 157; Thompson 1978a, pp. 151–2; Thompson 1978b, pp. 261, 264. For the views of Ellen Meiksins Wood and E.P. Thompson, see Burns 2021.

8 One of the reviewers for this article has drawn my attention to the fact it was not only in the writings of French structuralist Marxists that the concept was 'rediscovered' in the 1960s, and that the idea was 'in the air' generally at this time. For example, an interest in the concept can also be found in the work of Julian Hochfeld (a Polish sociologist), following that of Oskar Lange. See Hochfeld 1965 and Lange 1963.

9 Althusser, Balibar, Establet, Macherey and Rancière 2015.

10 E.g. Hindess and Hirst 1975; Hindess and Hirst 1977; Cutler, Hindess, Hirst and Hussain 1977.

11 Anderson 1980, p. 67.

12 da Graca and Zingarelli 2015.

writings, but also in those of Lenin, for example his *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*.¹³

I should emphasise that my article is intended to be a contribution to intellectual history. My focus is on the ideas associated with Marx's theoretical framework rather than on the practical value of those ideas for those engaged in empirical research, whether in the field of history or in that of sociology or anthropology. I do consider at one point what Marx has to say about the emergence and development of capitalism in England. However, my reason for doing this is to shed light, not so much on the history of England but, rather, on what Marx meant by the concept of a social formation, and on his reasons for thinking that this concept is of value for historians.

2 The Concept of a Social Formation and Structuralist Marxism

The concept of a social formation is employed by four of the contributors to *Reading Capital*, namely Althusser, Balibar, Establet and Rancière. It is difficult to disaggregate the contribution that was made by each of them to our understanding of it. Perry Anderson, Paul Blackledge and Chris Wickham all attribute the concept to Louis Althusser alone.¹⁴ Anderson concedes that 'the term "social formation"' is 'taken from the 1859 Introduction' to Marx's *Grundrisse*, specifically from what I have referred to as 'the general illumination passage'.¹⁵ However, he also claims that it was Althusser who, in *Reading Capital*, 'invented' the 'distinction between mode of production and social formation', and that 'the notion of social formation itself had little or no currency within Marxism prior to Althusser'.¹⁶ In Anderson's view, then, it was Louis Althusser who introduced the concept of a social formation into the Marxist lexicon in the 1960s. This seems to me to overlook completely the significance of the contribution that was made by Étienne Balibar. It does not acknowledge the possibility that there might have been significant differences in the way in which Althusser and Balibar thought about the concept of a social formation. Most importantly though, for present purposes, it does not acknowledge that the concept can be found in the writings of Marx himself, both in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere.

13 Lenin 2009. I discuss the part the concept has to play in Lenin's thought in Burns 2022.

14 Anderson 1980, pp. 67–8; Blackledge 2006, p. 164; Wickham 1984, p. 7; Wickham 2008, p. 8.

15 Anderson 1980, p. 67; Marx 1973, p. 107; Althusser 2015b, p. 343.

16 Anderson 1980, p. 67.

The term ‘social formation’ (*Gesellschaftsformen*) is used to refer to what people using non-technical language have in mind when they talk either about a particular society, or about a particular type of society. As Balibar has noted, part of the point of using it is to express the idea that the ‘object’ of historical knowledge is a particular society at a particular time, such as English society in the seventeenth century, French society in the eighteenth century, or Russian society in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ However, those Marxists who employ the concept think about these societies in a very particular way. This differs significantly from that which is so often associated with orthodox Marxism. The principal source for that alternative way of thinking about society is the Preface to Marx’s *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*.¹⁸ Both Perry Anderson and David Harvey have argued that the conception of society that is associated with structuralist Marxism departs significantly from the view which is often thought (wrongly) to be expressed by Marx in the Preface.¹⁹

According to Balibar, the justification for using the term ‘social formation’ (‘formation sociale’) is to address two weaknesses in the conceptualisation of society which he associates with orthodox Marxism. These both emerge as a consequence, not so much of an excessive reliance on Marx’s Preface but, rather, on a superficial reading of it, especially by the opponents of Marxism. The first way in which Balibar’s understanding of society differs from that which is sometimes associated with Marx’s Preface, and one of his reasons for thinking that the concept of a social formation is a valuable theoretical tool for Marxist historians, is because it is associated with the rejection of economic, technological or productive-forces determinism. Indeed, as Perry Anderson has noted, ‘the concept of social formation was initially introduced’ by its advocates ‘as a forcible reminder that the diversity of human practices in any society is irreducible to economic practice alone’. The issue it was intended to address, Anderson goes on, ‘was precisely that’ of ‘anxieties about base and superstructure’ which are associated with deterministic readings of the Preface and of Marxism.²⁰

Marxists who attach importance to the concept of a social formation do not, or need not, entirely abandon the ‘base–superstructure’ distinction that is used by Marx in the Preface. However, contrary to the view which is so often associated with orthodox Marxism, they think in terms of a much looser relationship between these two spheres of society, which relies on the notion of

17 Balibar 2015, pp. 365–6.

18 Marx 2010, pp. 19–26.

19 Anderson 1980, p. 68; Harvey 2006, pp. 25–6.

20 Anderson 1980, p. 68.

'conditioning' rather than 'determination' ('Bestimmen').²¹ One consequence of this is that they tend to emphasise the notion of the 'relative autonomy' of a society's legal, political and ideological superstructure in relation to its economic base.²² Social-formation theorists emphasise the importance of the principle of reciprocal interaction, which in their view best expresses the relationship that exists between a society's base and its superstructure. This idea is central to the concept of a social formation, as they understand it.

The second way in which the conceptualisation of society that is associated with structuralist Marxism differs from that of orthodox Marxism is that, for those who employ the concept, a social formation is to be associated with more than one mode of production. As Étienne Balibar puts it, some Marxists have a tendency to assume (wrongly) that a particular society may be 'related to' or associated with just 'one mode of production [his emphasis – TB]'.²³ The crucial point here, once all of the structuralist phraseology has been stripped away, is the commonsense but nonetheless significant claim that Marx accepted, and Marxists writing today should accept, that the economic base of any particular society may contain, and indeed usually does contain, at least two modes of production in combination and interacting with one another. I shall refer to this as the notion of modal combination. In the terminology of structuralist Marxism, this idea is closely associated with the notion of the 'articulation' of modes of production within a given social formation.²⁴

As John Haldon has pointed out, we could of course simply employ the term 'society' to express this view, by drawing the attention of our readers to the fact that this is what we have in mind when using that word, which is therefore to be understood, not in the familiar, common-sense way, but rather in a technical sense.²⁵ In my view, Marx does have a tendency to use the term 'Gesellschaft' in just this way. Balibar suggests that employing the term 'social formation' is the best means of registering this more technical way of thinking about any particular society, or about any particular type of society.

The significance of this second feature of the concept of a social formation has been emphasised by both Nicos Poulantzas and Perry Anderson. Poulantzas maintains that any given social formation, for example 'France under Louis Bonaparte', is best thought of as 'a particular combination' or a

21 Williams 1977, pp. 83–4.

22 Althusser 2015a, p. 60; Althusser 2015b, pp. 247, 252, 334; Balibar 2015, pp. 365, 385, 389, 406, 415, 477.

23 Balibar 2015, p. 366, n. 5.

24 Althusser 2015b, pp. 245, 333; Balibar 2015, pp. 362, 365, 381, 408, 415.

25 Haldon 1993, p. 8.

‘specific overlapping’ of ‘several “pure” modes of production’.²⁶ Similarly, according to Anderson, the term ‘social formation’ is ‘utilized to underline the complexity and overdetermination of any social whole’. Those who use it maintain that ‘any given social formation is likely to contain not just one but a plurality of modes of production’.²⁷

Balibar has argued that there are occasions when Marx *appears* to make the erroneous assumption that a particular society at a particular time might be associated with just one mode of production. One of these occasions is the Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, at least on a superficial reading of it. Another such occasion is Volume I of *Capital*, in which, Balibar argues, Marx seeks to offer an account of ‘the abstract theory of the capitalist mode of production’. However, insofar as he attempts to do this, it is evident that he ‘does not undertake to analyze concrete social formations which generally contain several different modes of production’.²⁸ When discussing the views of Marx later on, I will draw attention to passages in his writings in which he makes it very clear that he does not assume that only one mode of production is present in any particular society at a particular time. These passages demonstrate that Marx himself did possess the concept of modal combination, and therefore also that of a society understood as a social formation, in the specific sense in which Balibar employs the term.

It is important to appreciate that the claim that a particular society at a particular time might contain more than one mode of production in combination with one another, which is central to the social-formation idea as Balibar understands it, does not necessarily entail the abandonment of the distinction which Marx makes in the Preface between a society’s economic base and its legal, political and ideological superstructure. Rather, it may lead to a new and different way of thinking about the concept of the economic base. This is what Eric Hobsbawm has in mind when he talks about the concept of an ‘economic formation’ in Marx’s writings.²⁹ Ernesto Laclau has employed the notion of an ‘economic system’ to express the same idea.³⁰ Laclau argues that it is necessary to distinguish between ‘modes of production’ and ‘economic systems’.³¹ He argues that an economic system, as he understands it, includes as its ‘constitutive elements, different modes of production’.³² Given this usage it follows

26 Poulantzas 2018, p. 15.

27 Anderson 1980, p. 67.

28 Balibar 2015, p. 366, n. 5.

29 Hobsbawm 1978.

30 Laclau 1971, p. 32.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Laclau 1971, p. 33.

that, from Laclau's point of view, what Marxists refer to as a particular social formation can and will possess just one economic system, even though this might be associated with two or more modes of production.

Aidan Foster-Carter has claimed that what Laclau calls an 'economic system' is referred to by others as a 'social formation'.³³ However, this claim seems to me to be mistaken. Although an economic system, in Laclau's sense of the term, is an integral component part of any social formation, nevertheless there is evidently more to a social formation than its economic system. To suggest otherwise, as Foster-Carter does, is to identify a totality or whole with one of its component parts. Nor therefore, as Étienne Balibar, Arif Dirlik and John Haldon have all noted, should we identify the concept of a social formation with that of a mode of production.³⁴ This is something which Chris Wickham appears to do at times.³⁵

There is disagreement amongst scholars regarding the precise meaning of the concept of a social formation. Is it to be associated primarily with the principle of reciprocal interaction, or with the principle of modal combination? Some commentators acknowledge that the concept is an important one for Marx and for Marxism. However, they do so primarily because they associate it with the principle of reciprocal interaction rather than with that of modal combination. For example, E.P. Thompson does this.³⁶

Étienne Balibar associates the concept with both the principle of reciprocal interaction and the principle of modal combination, working together. It is, however, important to note that although his two criticisms of the orthodox Marxist theory of society may be elided or confused, they are in fact distinct from one another. For example, it is possible in principle for a Marxist to hold both that a particular society has a complex class structure because its economic base contains more than one mode of production and also that, nevertheless, it remains the case that events which take place within the superstructure of that society should continue to be thought of as being epiphenomena, or the passive effects of underlying economic causes which are located within its economic base. In other words, it is possible to embrace the notion of modal combination whilst at the same time rejecting that of reciprocal interaction.

Similarly, as Arif Dirlik has suggested, it is also possible for somebody to associate the notion of a social formation with that of a base–superstructure

33 Foster-Carter 1978, p. 50.

34 Balibar 2015, pp. 365–6; Dirlik 1985, p. 216; Haldon 1993, p. 102.

35 Wickham 1984, p. 7.

36 See Burns 2021 for this.

complex within which the principle of reciprocal interaction operates, whilst at the same time assuming that the economic base within this complex contains just one mode of production.³⁷ That is to say, it is possible to endorse the principle of reciprocal interaction whilst rejecting or simply overlooking the principle of modal combination. This tendency can be found in the writings of John Haldon, Wolfgang Küttler and E.P. Thompson.³⁸

3 The Significance of the Concept of a Social Formation for Marxist Historians

There is disagreement about the value of the concept of a social formation for Marxist historians. Here a variety of positions is possible, of which I shall identify four. First, one could simply not talk about it, or ignore the concept altogether. For example, some dictionaries of Marxism do not have a corresponding entry.³⁹ This is also true of a number of works written in English devoted to the subject of Marxism and history. In these works also there is a tendency either to ignore the concept completely, or to refer to it only casually in passing.⁴⁰ Second, one could refer to it or discuss it, whilst concluding that it is of little or no value for Marxists, and indeed may even be an obstacle which gets in the way of Marxist historians when practising their trade. This is the opinion of Jairus Banaji and Ellen Meiksins Wood, though not that of E.P. Thompson.⁴¹

Third, one might agree that the concept is a helpful one for Marxists, without concluding that it is strictly necessary for them to deploy it. On this view, although the concept may well be a useful one, nevertheless it is possible for Marxist historians to do without it. For example, although Tom Bottomore did think it important to add an entry entitled 'Social Formation' in his well-known *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, nevertheless his conclusion was that 'it does not appear that the mere introduction of a new term has brought any greater analytic rigor' to Marxist theory.⁴² Similarly, Alex Callinicos has claimed that although 'the distinction is not made explicitly by Marx, Lenin or any of the other classical figures' but, rather, by Louis Althusser and his followers,

37 Dirlik 1985, p. 216.

38 Haldon 1993, pp. 58, 60, 102; Haldon 2011, p. 46; Haldon 2013, pp. 39–40, 65; Haldon 2015, pp. 208–9, 211, 216, 219, 235; Küttler 2011. For Thompson, see Burns 2021.

39 Fraser and Wilde 2011.

40 Blackledge 2006; Callinicos 2004; Cohen 1978; Kaye 1984; Rigby 1987; Shaw 1978.

41 Banaji 2010; Meiksins Wood 2000. See Burns 2021 and Burns 2022.

42 Bottomore 1991, p. 500.

nevertheless 'the concept of social formation is one that can be put to good use in historical writing'.⁴³

Fourth, one might discuss the value of the concept and arrive at the conclusion that it is in fact essential for Marxist historians to utilise it. For example, Terence J. Byres has argued that for Marxist historians 'to proceed in terms of a single mode of production can only be unrewarding and stultifying'. Byres insists that they 'need the notion of a social formation'.⁴⁴ This is also the view of Perry Anderson, who employed the concept when writing about the history of ancient Greece in *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, and about the history of Russia in his *Lineages of the Absolutist State*.⁴⁵ Chris Wickham has also argued that the concept of a social formation is an essential tool for Marxist historians, and he criticises Perry Anderson for not being consistent in his use of it, especially when writing about the history of China.⁴⁶ It is important to note here that what is assumed to be necessary is possession of the concept itself, as opposed to any particular linguistic term or phrase which may be used to express it. It is possible for the concept to be deployed by certain authors, but only implicitly. If the authors in question lack a corresponding technical term then, although they do possess the concept, they could not be said to use it explicitly, or in a fully self-conscious manner. As we shall see later, this is true of Maurice Dobb in his *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*.⁴⁷ One issue here is whether it is also true in the case of Marx.

Those Marxist historians, like Perry Anderson and Chris Wickham, who think that the concept of a social formation is a valuable theoretical tool do so in part because they think it helps them to grasp the complexities of their subject matter when analysing concrete historical examples. For example, Anderson maintains in his *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* that the point of using the concept is 'to underline the plurality and heterogeneity of possible modes of production within any given historical and social totality'. He claims there that 'every concrete social formation is always a specific combination of different modes of production, and those of Antiquity were no exception'. Social formations, he continues, are 'always concrete combinations of different modes of production, organized under the dominance of one of them'. Anderson also argues, echoing the sentiments expressed by Marx in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse* identified earlier, that in ancient

43 Callinicos 2004, p. 41.

44 Byres 1985, p. 6.

45 Anderson 1986; Anderson 1988.

46 Wickham 1984, p. 8; Wickham 1985, p. 169.

47 Dobb 1975, pp. 11, 19. See below.

Greek society, 'the dominant mode of production', which 'gave its imprint to the whole civilization of the city-state, was that of slavery'.⁴⁸

Similarly, in *Arguments Within English Marxism*, Anderson again claims that 'the term "social formation"' may be utilised in order 'to underline the complexity and overdetermination of any social whole'.⁴⁹ There again he argues that employment of this concept enables Marxist historians to engage in more sophisticated historical investigations than is possible for those who rely on a superficial reading of the text of Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*. In his view, therefore, the contribution of the concept of a social formation to the Marxist lexicon by structuralist Marxists, especially Louis Althusser, constituted an 'historiographic advance' which 'demonstrably permits' and leads towards 'greater discrimination and complexity in the investigation of concrete societies'.⁵⁰ It is for this reason that Anderson utilised the concept in his own historical writings in the 1970s.

Chris Wickham, writing in 1984, expressed his agreement with the views of Anderson on this point. According to Wickham at that time, 'it is empirically fairly evident that societies (as I shall myself usually call social formations for greater ease) can often have more than one mode in them'.⁵¹ Moreover, again like Anderson, Wickham put the concept to use in his own work, when writing about the 'other transition', that is to say, the transition from the ancient world to the feudalism of the early medieval period. When discussing that earlier transition, Wickham observed that the 'terminal point' for historians is 'not simply the feudal mode of production' but, rather, 'a society dominated by the feudal mode of production', that is to say, 'the "feudal social formation"'.⁵² He argued that this terminal point was the moment in European history when among 'the array of modes' of production which existed in the late Roman empire, 'the feudal mode became dominant'.⁵³ Indeed, he went so far as to claim that 'an understanding of the history of the late Roman west can only be obtained' if historians possess 'an accurate description of the nature of its economic structure', that is to say, 'of its *modes* of production' (in the plural – my emphasis). In Wickham's then view, 'a great number of Marxist analyses are vitiated because they have got these descriptions wrong'.⁵⁴

48 Anderson 1986, p. 22.

49 Anderson 1980, p. 67.

50 Anderson 1980, p. 68.

51 Wickham 1984, p. 7.

52 Wickham 1984, p. 8.

53 Ibid.

54 Wickham 1984, p. 4; see also Wickham 2015, pp. 141, 143, 145; da Graca 2015; da Graca and Zingarelli 2015, p. 22.

The above survey does not take account of the possibility that some commentators might change their mind when considering the value of the concept of a social formation. This could happen in two ways. First, a commentator may pay little or no attention at all to the concept at one point, but then come to appreciate and emphasise its significance later. This seems to me to be true of Rodney Hilton, who in 1976 ignored the concept altogether in his Introduction to *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, the now-classic volume devoted to the debate around the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but who nevertheless took its importance for granted in the Introduction which he contributed ten years later to a volume devoted to *The Brenner Debate*.⁵⁵

Second, the importance of the concept might be emphasised by an author in an earlier work, whilst becoming a marginal concern, or even dropping out of the picture altogether, in that author's later writings. An example of this might be Chris Wickham who, despite suggesting that use of the concept is essential in some of the works he published in the 1980s,⁵⁶ nevertheless did not appear to attach a great deal of importance to it later, when he published his *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* in 2005. Indeed, Wickham does not refer to social formations at all in his contribution to a volume entitled *Marxist History Writing in the Twenty-First Century*, which he edited in 2007.

4 The Concept of a Social Formation in the Writings of Marx

As the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse* cited earlier suggests, Marx did distinguish between the concept of a mode of production and that of a social formation. To be more specific, in this passage he endorses the principle of modal combination. He states explicitly there that the economic base of a particular society is likely to be composed of more than one mode of production in combination with one another.

More than one commentator has noted that Marx tended not to employ the noun 'capitalism'. He preferred to use the adjective 'capitalist'.⁵⁷ However, that issue aside, it is a logical implication of his endorsement of the principle of modal combination in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*

55 Hilton (ed.) 1980; Hilton 1985a, pp. 1–9; see also Hilton 1985b, pp. 2, 10, 13, 41–2, 106, 154, 156. Hilton's views on the subject require a separate treatment.

56 Wickham 1984, pp. 7–8; Wickham 1985, pp. 169, 189.

57 Desai 1991; Wilde and Fraser 2011. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing this to my attention.

that the word ‘capitalist’, like the word ‘feudal’, might refer either to a particular mode of production or to a particular type of society as a whole. Moreover, it might refer, not only to a particular social formation, for instance that of nineteenth-century England, but also to the particular *type* of social formation which it represents.

Marx suggests that the reason why a particular social formation may be characterised as being either feudal or capitalist is because the social relations which are associated with one of these two modes of production are dominant in relation to those of the other. On this view, what makes it appropriate to describe a social formation in a particular way is not the complete absence of other modes of production within it, but simply the subordination (or ‘subsumption’) of these other modes to the mode of production which happens to be dominant.

If we consider the history of capitalism, understood specifically as a mode of production, Marx argues that this first emerges in the feudal social formations of Western Europe in the late Middle Ages, from the late thirteenth century onwards. In the *Grundrisse* (1857–8), he associates this development with the emergence of ‘large-scale overland and maritime commerce’, especially in ‘the Italian cities, Constantinople, in the Flemish, Dutch cities, a few Spanish ones, such as Barcelona’.⁵⁸ He also says there that ‘capital as trading capital or as money capital’ first came into existence in the corresponding social formations ‘precisely where capital’, that is to say, the capitalist mode of production, ‘was not yet the predominant element’.⁵⁹

In Volume I of *Capital* (1867), Marx states that ‘the first beginnings of capitalist production’ developed in Europe, in a number of feudal social formations, around the Mediterranean basin, ‘as early as the fourteenth or fifteenth century’.⁶⁰ There he associates the capitalist mode of production, not only with the ‘conversion of products into commodities’, for that occurred to some extent in the case of earlier modes of production, but also with ‘the conversion of men into producers of commodities’.⁶¹ Marx accepts that this too existed to some extent, albeit on a small scale, in pre-capitalist social formations which were dominated by earlier modes of production. Marx insists that in these social formations, although capitalist production did exist, nevertheless it held

58 Marx 1973, p. 510.

59 Marx 1973, p. 108.

60 Marx 1974a, p. 669.

61 Marx 1974a, p. 83.

'a subordinate place', which, however, 'increases in importance' as these social formations 'approach nearer and nearer to their dissolution'.⁶²

In order to capture this idea, when discussing the development of capitalism in England, Marx talks about the capitalist mode of production emerging 'intermittently', 'locally' or 'sporadically' in the 'pores', or the 'interstices', of the English social formation and then growing, developing and expanding over time. For example in the *Grundrisse*, as Eric Hobsbawm has noted, Marx states that 'capital appears at first sporadically or locally, alongside the old modes of production, while exploding them little by little everywhere'.⁶³ Marx also says there that 'manufactures' produced under the capitalist mode of production 'may develop sporadically, locally, in a framework which still belongs to a quite different period', that is to say, in a feudal social formation.⁶⁴

Similarly, in his discussion of capitalist ground rent in Volume III of *Capital*, Marx maintains that the hallmark of pre-capitalist 'social formations' (*Gesellschaftsformen*) is that within them 'it is not capital which performs the function of enforcing all surplus-labour and appropriating directly all surplus-value'. He also argues that in these earlier social formations 'capital', that is to say the capitalist mode of production, 'has not yet completely', but only 'sporadically, brought social labour under its control'.⁶⁵ This indicates clearly that Marx associated the notion of a social formation with that of a combination of two different modes of production. He acknowledged that the capitalist mode of production existed in the feudal social formations of the medieval period, but only sporadically. It had not yet achieved the dominance which it was to achieve later, at which time it becomes appropriate to talk about the transition from a feudal to a capitalist social formation having taken place.

In *Capital* Volume III, Marx also refers to a 'particular method of subsumption' which, he argues, was characteristic of the 'previous dominant modes of production' that existed in the pre-capitalist social formations of Western Europe. Medieval social formations, he argues, were dominated by the feudal mode of production, which is of course why we employ the terms 'feudal' and 'feudalism' to refer to them. This does not mean, however, that the relations of production characteristic of other modes of production were absent, let alone that they *must* have been absent, because the society in question is rightly characterised as feudal. On the contrary, Marx acknowledges that other

62 Ibid.

63 Marx 1973, p. 510; Hobsbawm 1978, p. 48.

64 Marx 1973, p. 505; see also pp. 108, 256, 276–7, 469, 495, 506, 511, 858–9.

65 Marx 1974b, p. 783.

'production relations which no-wise corresponded' to the feudal mode of production were present in these medieval social formations, and could not be said to have been 'standing entirely beyond' them. Rather, Marx argues, these other relations of production, although they were undeniably present, must be regarded as having been 'subsumed under feudal relations' of production, which were dominant in relation to them. As an example of this Marx cites the case of the 'tenures in common socage' in England, which, he claims 'comprised merely monetary obligations', and which in consequence could be said to be 'feudal in name only'.⁶⁶

Marx makes similar remarks in Part Three of his *Theories of Surplus Value*, when commenting on the views of Richard Jones, especially but not only his theory of capitalist ground rent.⁶⁷ Marx argues there that 'landed property', which of course existed in the pre-capitalist social formation of medieval England, had been 'modified' as a consequence of the emergence of the capitalist mode of production there. It had been transformed by coming into contact with what are now 'the dominant relation[s] of production'.⁶⁸

When discussing the views of Richard Jones, Marx clearly had in mind the notion, expressed in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*, of a social formation with an economic system comprising of two modes of production. What he says about Jones and his ideas may be regarded as an elucidation of the ideas contained in that passage. Marx maintains that the presence of these two different modes within this economic system and their interaction with one another affects the character of each. This idea is captured very well by the concept of 'articulation', as structuralist Marxists understand it, even though Marx himself does not use this particular word, or an equivalent term in German. In his remarks on Jones, Marx suggests that it is 'only when the capitalist mode of production has become predominant' in a particular society, or 'when it does not merely exist sporadically [*sporadisch*], but has subordinated to itself the mode of production of society', as a whole, that we might properly speak of the presence of a capitalist social formation.⁶⁹

Marx approved of Jones's view that capital should be thought of as a 'relation of production'. He also liked the fact that Jones 'emphasises' that capital, understood in this way, is 'the basic form of capital' in nineteenth-century society. It is, Marx states, once again echoing the ideas expressed in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse* cited earlier, the specific form of capital

66 Marx 1974b, p. 876.

67 Marx 1972, pp. 399–452.

68 Marx 1972, p. 399.

69 Marx 1972, p. 420.

which 'gives the whole process of social production its distinctive character', which 'dominates it', and which in consequence 'revolutionises all social and political relationships'. Marx praises Jones for his view that it is capital in this sense, that is to say, industrial capital, which 'confronts wage-labour, and pays wages'. At the same time, however, Marx also points out that in pre-capitalist social formations capital 'fulfils other functions and, appears in other, subordinate and historically earlier forms'.⁷⁰ Marx refers here to 'the whole process of social production' within the economic system of a particular social formation, this is to say its 'economic system' in Laclau's sense of the term, which Marx assumes contains more than one mode of production.

Marx deployed Adam Smith's distinction between productive and unproductive labour in this connection, although he claims that 'the full meaning of this difference' is to be found only in the work of Jones.⁷¹ In his view, Jones rightly observes that productive labour, which is the source of the exchange-values of commodities, 'is characteristic of the capitalist mode of production', whereas unproductive labour, which is not involved in the production of commodities for exchange in a market, 'belongs to earlier modes of production', which continue to be present in the same social formation.⁷² Marx accepts that unproductive labour, in this specific sense, did exist in the capitalist social formation of England in his own day. However, he argued that 'it merely plays a subordinate role' and is 'restricted' to 'spheres' of social activity 'which are not directly concerned with the production of wealth' in the form of commodities.⁷³ Once again, therefore, we find here an allusion on Marx's part to the idea of the presence of two different modes of production, and of the relations of production which are associated with each of them. Marx talks about the predominance of the one and the subordination of the other in this connection.

Similarly, in response to Jones's views on slavery, Marx observes that 'so long as slavery is predominant', in any particular social formation, then 'the capital relationship' can itself only ever be 'sporadic and subordinate' and 'never dominant'.⁷⁴ Yet again, therefore, he employs the language of the domination and subordination of the social relationships which are associated with two different modes of production, both of which may be present in the same social formation at the same time, in this case the slave mode of production and the capitalist mode of production.

70 Marx 1972, p. 427.

71 Marx 1972, p. 426.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Marx 1972, p. 419.

In conclusion, Marx argues that although it is true that capitalism as a mode of production first emerged in Europe in the late medieval period, as early as the fourteenth century, nevertheless this is not true of capitalism as a social formation. For the first social formation which might properly be described as capitalist only came into existence later, after the capitalist mode of production had 'taken hold' in medieval society, had expanded, developed and (eventually) become dominant. As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, 'although we come across the first beginnings of capitalist production as early as the fourteenth or fifteenth century, sporadically, in certain towns of the Mediterranean', nevertheless, 'the capitalistic era' proper, containing the first capitalist social formation, in the strict sense of the term, 'dates from the sixteenth century'.⁷⁵ Marx suggests that this transition first took place in sixteenth-century England and that it was associated with the development of the capitalist mode of production in agriculture there, especially but not only having to do with the trade in wool.⁷⁶ As Marx points out, this phenomenon was clearly registered by Sir Thomas More in his *Utopia* in 1516.⁷⁷

Marx accepted, therefore, that the production of commodities under the capitalist mode of production can take place in pre-capitalist social formations. He acknowledged that it can occur in those social formations where 'the great mass of the objects produced are intended for the immediate requirements of their producers', and are in consequence *not* 'turned into commodities [my emphasis – TB]'.⁷⁸ He conceded that the production of commodities by 'free wage-labour' can occur in social formations where 'social production is not yet by a long way dominated in its length and breadth by exchange-value'.⁷⁹ Paradoxical though it might seem, a logical implication of these remarks is that in Marx's view, the capitalist mode of production may be present in social formations which are not capitalist. Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst have claimed that although 'certain elements of the capitalist mode of production may be present in feudal society the capitalist mode of production itself cannot'.⁸⁰ Marx, however, evidently did not agree with this view.

75 Marx 1974a, p. 6.

76 Marx 1974a, p. 670.

77 Marx 1974a, pp. 578, 673, 687.

78 Marx 1974a, p. 166.

79 *Ibid.*

80 Hindess and Hirst 1975, p. 263; see also Hirst 1985, pp. 103–4.

5 The Concept of a Social Formation in the Transition Debate

The above assessment of Marx's views regarding the concept of a social formation has implications for our understanding of his views regarding the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and for an assessment of the various contributions to 'the transition debate', insofar as they rely on a particular understanding of Marx's theoretical framework. Here I argue that, in Marx's view, the distinction between the concept of a social formation and the concept of a mode of production is not merely helpful for those who wish to understand the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England from the late fifteenth century onwards. Rather, going further, Marx evidently thought that it is essential for achieving such an understanding.

There is of course quite a lot of literature which discusses this issue.⁸¹ However, most of it suffers from the fact that those who have contributed to it do not address explicitly the distinction which Marx makes between the concept of a mode of production and that of a social formation. Nor do they appear to regard the concept of a social formation as being of any great significance. At least, they do not invoke the concept explicitly, even if (like Maurice Dobb) they rely on it implicitly.

It appears to be generally accepted that the period of English history in which the transition from feudalism to (agrarian) capitalism took place ran roughly from the second half of the fifteenth century through the sixteenth century and down to the English Revolution of 1640–9 – approximately, from 1450 to 1650. Marx certainly appears to have thought this. It would not therefore be accurate to describe English society in this period of transition as being either exclusively a feudal society or exclusively a capitalist one. Rather, historians who wish to deploy Marx's theoretical framework need some alternative descriptive label, or some other way of capturing theoretically, the notion of a society in transition. Marx suggests that the distinction between the concept of a mode of production and that of a social formation provides the solution to this problem.

As we have seen, Marx held that whether or not a particular social formation should be described as being either feudal or capitalist depends, not so much on the presence or absence within it of the feudal or the capitalist modes of production, but, rather, assuming that both of them are present, on which of the two is dominant. Of course, as Terence Byres has noted, it remains to be established what is required for any mode of production to be said to be

81 For example, Dobb 1975; Hilton (ed.) 1980; Brenner 1977; Aston and Philpin (eds.) 1985.

dominant.⁸² Nevertheless, that issue aside, Marx evidently did believe that if a society or social formation as a whole is to be characterised as being either feudal or capitalist then one or other of these two different modes of production must be dominant in relation to the other.

We saw earlier that a superficial reading of Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* might give the erroneous impression that Marx thought that a given social formation at a particular time is to be associated with just one mode of production. However, this view is evidently problematic. Nor is it a view that was held by Marx – which is not too surprising, given the obvious difficulties to which it leads. These difficulties are demonstrated by the case of England in the period of transition. For if it were true that a particular social formation at a particular time should be associated with just one mode of production; and if it were accepted that England in the sixteenth century, say, might be described as a social formation in transition (i.e. neither feudal nor capitalist); then it follows that there must have been just one mode of production present within its economic system at that time; and it also follows that this one mode of production cannot have been either the feudal mode of production or the capitalist mode of production. The economic system which existed in sixteenth-century England must, therefore, be associated with the notion of an alleged 'transitional mode of production'.

This problem has been addressed by Maurice Dobb who, in his debate with Paul Sweezy regarding the emergence and development of capitalism, drew out the theoretical difficulties which are associated with it. In his *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* Dobb asks 'how are we to speak of the economic system' which existed in England between the final disintegration of feudalism and the later sixteenth century. For this is a period which 'seems to have been neither feudal nor yet capitalist so far as its mode of production was concerned'.⁸³ Dobb agreed that the economic system which existed in English society at this time might plausibly be said to have been 'transitional'. However, he criticised Sweezy for suggesting that this economic system might be associated with just one mode of production, or 'a distinct mode of production *sui generis*, which is neither feudal nor capitalist'.⁸⁴ Dobb maintained, rightly, that to argue in this way would be an 'impossible procedure' for any Marxist to adopt. His conclusion was that in the final analysis 'these two centuries' of English history (roughly 1450–1650) are theoretically speaking 'apparently left suspended uncomfortably' in the air. So far as the historical development of

82 Byres 1985, p. 7.

83 Dobb 1975, p. 19.

84 Dobb 1980, p. 62.

English society is concerned, 'they have to be classified as homeless hybrids'.⁸⁵ In my view, Marx believed that drawing the distinction between the concept of a mode of production and that of a social formation provides a solution to this problem.

Although Dobb does not do so explicitly in his *Studies*, it might be argued that he too relies on this conceptual distinction, if only implicitly, when discussing the problem of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. His reliance on the concept of a social formation when discussing the development of capitalism in England has been noted by Terence Byres, who rightly points out that 'the social formation idea' is deployed by him, albeit implicitly, in his *Studies*.⁸⁶ Like Marx, in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*, Dobb argues there that 'save for comparatively brief intervals of transition, each historical period', and the particular type of society with which it is associated, 'is moulded under the preponderating influence of a single, more or less homogeneous, economic form', that is to say, a particular mode of production.⁸⁷ The particular type of society in question, therefore, ought 'to be characterized according to the nature of this predominant type of socio-economic relationship'.

In his *Studies* Dobb claims that for Marxists the 'chief interest' does not 'lie in the first appearance of some new economic form', for example the capitalist mode of production in the medieval period. Nor does the 'mere appearance' of this new mode of production, considered on its own, 'justify a description of the succeeding period by a new name'. This is so because there will be a period of time in which although the new mode of production is certainly present, nevertheless it has not yet become dominant. In words which clearly echo those employed by Marx in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*, Dobb maintained that 'of much greater significance' is that stage in historical development when the new form 'has grown to proportions which enable it to place its imprint upon the whole of society'.⁸⁸

Given these remarks, it seems to me that Byres is right to claim not only that Maurice Dobb possessed the idea of a social formation, but also that he utilised this concept in his *Studies* when offering an account of Marx's views regarding the emergence and development of capitalism in England. The interesting thing here, however, is that he did not do this explicitly, or in a fully self-conscious manner. In particular, he does not employ the term 'social

85 Ibid.

86 Byres 1985, p. 8; Dobb 1975, p. 11; see also Kaye 1984, pp. 37–8.

87 Dobb 1975, p. 11.

88 Ibid.

formation', or indeed any other technical term to express the corresponding concept. Rather, Dobb talked simply about English 'society' in the transition period. That is to say, he uses a pre-existing everyday term in a technical sense, the full significance of the meaning of which is obscured precisely because the term in question is such a familiar one. It is tempting to suggest that the same is true in Marx's case also. However, it seems to me that to do this would be a mistake. For in Marx's case, unlike that of Dobb, the association of the meaning of the terms 'Gesellschaft' and 'Gesellschaftsformen', or 'society' and 'social formation', in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*, with the principle of modal combination, is not made implicitly. On the contrary, it is made explicitly.

Dobb identified a significant problem for Marxists who are interested in explaining the transition from feudalism to capitalism. However, as his reference to theoretically 'homeless hybrids' when talking about the transition period indicates, he was unable to solve this problem to his own satisfaction, precisely because he lacked the requisite technical vocabulary. That is to say, he did not render explicit, or did not render sufficiently explicit, the distinction between the concept of a mode of production and that of a social formation.

Marx suggests that the problem of getting to grips theoretically with English society in the period of transition, over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, can *only* be solved if the conceptual distinction between a mode of production and a social formation is made. In his view, when seeking to explain the emergence and later development of capitalism in England, it is not necessary to invoke the idea of a third mode of production, a transitional mode, alongside the feudal and the capitalist modes. All that is necessary is for it to be accepted that, as Marx repeatedly pointed out, both modes of production can be present within the same society at the same time. This is, of course, precisely what the use of 'social formation' as a technical term allows us to do. Indeed, precisely because of its association with the notion of modal combination, it compels us (as a matter of logic) to do this.

6 Reassessing the Contribution of Structuralist Marxism

The above account of the part which the concept of a social formation has to play in Marx's thinking about the emergence and development of capitalism has implications for our understanding of what he has to say about the concept of 'society' in the Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, and hence also for our understanding of the concepts which are (or ought to be) associated with classical Marxism.

Earlier, when discussing the views of Balibar, I drew attention to two ideas which lie at the heart of his conceptualisation of a society as a social formation, namely the principle of reciprocal interaction and that of modal combination. The suggestion that the first of these is present in rather than absent from Marx's view of society in the Preface seems to be now widely accepted, at least amongst those who are not hostile to Marxism. This is reflected in the fact that most recent editions of this text translate Marx's 'Bestimmen' as 'conditions' rather than as 'determines'. In other words, as Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar rightly suggest, the ideas which are associated with Marxism, as they are to be found in the Preface, ought not to be associated with economic determinism.

However, going further, it might be argued that the notion of modal combination, and therefore also that of society as a social formation, is also present in Marx's Preface. For when Marx talks about different 'societies', or different types of society, there, it should not be assumed that he took it for granted that only one mode of production is present within them. As we have seen, everything that Marx says elsewhere about the emergence and development of capitalism in Europe from the late medieval period onwards indicates that he did not think this at all.

The English translation of the Preface that is included in the recent edition of the *Collected Works* of Marx and Engels brings this out very clearly, when it renders Marx's original German text as stating that 'no *social formation* [*Gesellschaftsformation*] is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society [my emphasis – TB]'.⁸⁹ Moreover, as Balibar points out, a similar usage can also be found in the French translations of Marx's Preface, which employ the term 'formation sociale' in this connection.⁹⁰

The above remarks have implications for our assessment of the contribution to Marxism which is made by the contributors to *Reading Capital*. They support the view that although this is not entirely without significance, nevertheless its importance should not be exaggerated. In my view, Perry Anderson does exaggerate it when he claims that it was Louis Althusser who 'invented' the 'distinction between mode of production and social formation' and that his doing so constituted an 'historiographic advance' in the history of Marxism.⁹¹

89 Marx 2010, p. 263.

90 Balibar 2014, p. 649.

91 Anderson 1980, pp. 67–8.

It seems to me that the contribution of Étienne Balibar was at least as significant as that of Althusser. However, for present purposes that is beside the point. The more significant issue here is that neither Althusser nor Balibar came up with an entirely new concept, that of a social formation, and added it to the lexicon of Marxism. Rather, what the contributors to *Reading Capital* do is draw the attention of their readers to the existence of a concept which is already there in Marx's own writings, but the significance of which has either been overlooked or to which insufficient attention has been paid, especially by those who rely on a superficial reading of Marx's Preface.

I noted earlier that according to Perry Anderson the concept of a social formation 'had little or no currency within Marxism prior to Althusser'.⁹² Setting aside the question of the identity of the person responsible for this alleged conceptual innovation, when making this remark Anderson did not distinguish, as he should have done, between the concept itself and the term that is employed to express it, whether in the German, the French or the English language. So far as the concept is concerned, Anderson's claim seems to me to be implausible, given that the concept is clearly to be found in Marx's writings, not only in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*, but also (as we have seen) elsewhere.

Nor could it be said that the contribution to Marxism that was made by structural Marxism was to coin a new technical term ('formation sociale': 'social formation'), or to introduce a new vehicle for expressing an already familiar concept in a technical manner. For the German terms 'Gesellschaft' and 'Gesellschaftsformen', which are used by Marx in what I have called the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*, have much the same meaning as that which the French terms 'société' and 'formation sociale' have in the writings of Althusser and Balibar.

Perry Anderson has suggested that the contribution of structuralist Marxism had to do not so much with the introduction of a new term or linguistic expression into the lexicon of Marxist historiography, for he acknowledges that Marx had already employed the term 'Gesellschaftsformen', with much the same meaning as the concept of a 'formation sociale' in *Reading Capital*, in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*. Rather, it involved an alteration of the meaning of the concept that is expressed by this term. According to Anderson, then, the meaning that the concept of a social formation has for structuralist Marxists is significantly different from the meaning that it has for Marx in the *Grundrisse*.⁹³ I have attempted to show that this view is mistaken.

92 Anderson 1980, p. 67.

93 This is also the view of Ellen Meiksins Wood. See Burns 2021.

My conclusion is that the ideas which are associated with the concept of a social formation, when detached from the unnecessary phraseology of structuralist philosophy with which they are associated in *Reading Capital*, are best thought of as a continuation of those of Marx rather than a departure from them. They are not an addition to Marx's theoretical framework. Nor do they represent a significant advance over or development of them, either conceptually or terminologically. As Balibar suggests, they were intended to be (and are) simply a re-statement of views which were held by Marx himself, although perhaps drawing out and emphasising these ideas more forcefully. Even so, given that Marx's Preface is so often read and understood in the superficial way indicated earlier, it might be said that this re-statement was significant because it challenged that 'orthodox' reading and the understanding of Marxism with which it is associated.

7 Conclusion

One of the reasons why the concept of a social formation has been rejected by some Marxists is because of what are considered to be its undesirable associations with structuralist philosophy in late twentieth-century France, the philosophical (i.e. ontological and epistemological) assumptions of which, as set out especially in the writings of Louis Althusser, are considered by them to be incompatible with those of classical Marxism.

Hostility to Althusser and to structuralist Marxism, because of its 'ahistorical theoreticism',⁹⁴ or the 'abstruseness' of the language it employs,⁹⁵ may perhaps have influenced some commentators to think that the concept of a social formation itself is of no help at all to Marxist historians. This is true in the case of Jairus Banaji and Ellen Meiksins Wood, although not in the case of E.P. Thompson.⁹⁶ It seems to me, however, that Marx would have regarded this as a mistake, although perhaps an understandable one to make, given the assertion made by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, two followers of Althusser in the 1970s, that 'the study of history is not only scientifically but also politically valueless'.⁹⁷

The concept of a social formation, encompassing both the notion of reciprocal interaction and that of modal combination, is not uniquely or necessarily

94 Thompson 1981, p. 196; see also Bernstein 2013, p. 326; Nield and Seed 1979.

95 Dirlik 1985, p. 225, n. 11.

96 See again Burns 2021; Burns 2022.

97 Hindess and Hirst 1975, p. 312.

to be associated with the structuralist Marxism of the 1960s. It can be detached from any association that it might erroneously be thought to have with that particular version of Marxism. Not only the phrase, but also the concept itself, with much the same meaning that it has for the contributors to *Reading Capital*, can be found in Marx's own writings, especially but not only the *Grundrisse*. I have argued that it is essential for any adequate understanding of Marx's views regarding the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Eric Hobsbawm has claimed that the concept of a social formation is 'already implicit' in Marx's work.⁹⁸ However, it seems to me that Marx's use of the concept is explicit and not implicit. This is clear from what Marx has to say in the general illumination passage from the *Grundrisse*, which is placed at the head of this article. The German term which Marx employs there to express this concept explicitly is 'Gesellschaftsformen'. On this issue I am in agreement with Terence J. Byres and Arif Dirlik, both of whom have maintained (independently of one another) that Marx employs the concept explicitly in his writings.⁹⁹

Harvey Kaye, in *The British Marxist Historians*, cites Eric Hobsbawm's remark, made in an interview in the 1970s, that Louis Althusser has 'practically nothing to say to historians'.¹⁰⁰ This may indeed be the case. However, Hobsbawm also thought that it was important to publish a selection of those extracts from Marx's *Grundrisse* in which Marx discusses 'pre-capitalist economic formations'.¹⁰¹ Hobsbawm would I think have been sympathetic to the view that the concept of a social formation could in principle be detached from any association which it might wrongly be thought to have with Louis Althusser or with structuralist Marxism.

To employ a phrase that is used by Marx in the Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* Volume 1, the concept of a social formation might perhaps be said to represent the rational kernel which lies within the mystical shell that is structuralist Marxism.¹⁰² I take it that this is what Chris Wickham has in mind when he says, in a passage quoted earlier, that 'almost the only lasting legacy of the Althusserian moment in Marxist history-writing has been the recognition that modes of production can easily coexist', but that in a particular society 'only one of them will dominate' in 'the "social formation" as a whole'.¹⁰³ In my view, however, this is not at all the legacy of Louis Althusser or

98 Hobsbawm 1978, p. 59.

99 Byres 1985, p. 7; Dirlik 1985, p. 225, n. 11.

100 Kaye 1984, p. 209; Hobsbawm 1978–9, p. 123.

101 Hobsbawm 1978.

102 Marx 1974a, p. 29.

103 Wickham 2008, p. 8; see also Blackledge 2006, p. 164.

of structuralist Marxism. Rather, it is the legacy of Marx himself and of classical Marxism.

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