Chapter Two

Modes of Production in a Materialist Conception of History

...the extremely dubious speculative juggling, with the concepts and terms of the materialist method, which has under the pens of some of our Marxists transplanted the methods of formalism into the domain of the materialist dialectic; which has led to reducing the task to rendering definitions and classifications more precise and to splitting empty abstractions into four equally empty parts; in short, has adulterated Marxism by means of the indecently elegant mannerisms of Kantian epigones. It is a silly thing indeed endlessly to sharpen or resharpen an instrument, to chip away Marxist steel when the task is to apply the instrument in working over the raw material! (Leon Trotsky)

2.1. The retreat into historical formalism*

In his polemic with Dühring, Engels described the theory of surplus-value and the materialistic conception of history as the ‘two great discoveries’ of Marx,

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* Some of the positions proposed in this essay will be argued more extensively in a forthcoming book on Modes of Production and the Peasantry. Parts of the section on Feudal Production have appeared in an article in the Journal of Peasant Studies, April, 1976. It was written before Anderson’s two recent volumes appeared, and therefore contains no reference to them. Although Laclau’s article on Frank is criticised at various points in the essay, my own train of thought derived much of its impetus from the directions of that critique.
through which were established the scientific foundations of socialism. Modern materialism, wrote Engels, characterised history as a ‘process of evolution’ and set itself the task of discovering its ‘laws of motion’.¹ In one of the best reviews of Capital to appear at that time, a bourgeois economist Kaufmann repeated the point to Marx’s approval: Marx treats the social movement ‘as a process of natural history governed by laws’.² In a famous resumé of his conception of history, written closer to our time, Braudel describes Marx as the originator of ‘historical models’.³ In their own way, these writers implied, in a language borrowed from the sciences of their time, that social phenomena like the phenomena of nature are scientifically penetrable, and that we owe the recognition of this fact to the work of Marx. Between the period from which this discovery dates and our own period, roughly in the last hundred years, the foundations of the older traditional conceptions of history collapsed as rapidly as the inherited conceptions of matter. But there the analogy ends. On the ruins of substantialism, a new physics evolved at rapid speed, whereas the ‘programme of a fully scientific history remains not merely to be realized, but even to be drafted’.⁴ In short, the materialist conception of history did not actually produce a specifically materialist history.

In a sense, this abortion is not difficult to understand. Later in his life, Engels repeatedly noted in his correspondence⁵ that the younger elements attracted to Marxism saw in its theory, ‘historical materialism’, the summary of established results or points of arrival. In their conception, between historical materialism and materialist history there was a relation of immediate identity or implicit spontaneous derivation. Liberal-bourgeois historiography of that time and later proceeded as if theory could be derived from ‘facts’; in this positivist conception, ‘facts’ were objects outside theory, constituted, like matter, independently of consciousness. For vulgar Marxism, infected by the illusion which Engels noted, history, already endowed with its theory (‘historical materialism’), consisted in the application of this theory to ‘facts’. By its vulgar conception of historical materialism this tendency implicitly threat-

¹ Engels 1959, pp. 39, 43.
³ Braudel 1972.
⁵ E.g., letter to Schmidt, 5 August, 1890 (Marx and Engels 1934, pp. 496–7).