Orthodox Marxism versus Political Marxism

Robert Brenner and political Marxists have come under fierce criticism in recent studies by orthodox Marxists such as Chris Harman, Henry Heller and Neil Davidson. Material production – the imperative for human beings to produce the means with which to reproduce themselves – lies at the heart of historical materialism. Political Marxists prioritise the established social-property relations of a particular society, and they therefore focus on how these relations, both within and between the main classes, determine access to the means of production, subsistence and the distribution and use of the surplus product. Orthodox Marxists locate the immediate processes of production at the forefront of their perspective and they therefore prioritise the productive forces – that is, the means, methods and techniques in the immediate production process and its social organisation. The extent of the differences in approach can be gauged by a recent deliberately provocative statement by Neil Davidson:

Perhaps more than any other Marxist tendency since Althusserianism… political Marxism claims to have discovered a unique insight into the meaning of Marx’s writings, a meaning undisclosed to previous generations of Marxists and perhaps even to Marx himself. I regard these claims as wholly illusionary, but they have been accepted by people who fail to understand the extremity of what is implied. If the Brenner thesis – and certainly the version associated with Wood – is correct, then any aspirations we may have for a socialist future are solely dependent on the outcome of the voluntarist clash of wills… and that if Marx had held the position that political Marxism ascribes to him, then he would effectively have abandoned not merely the less precise early formulations found in, for example, The German Ideology, but the entire theoretical basis of historical materialism.1

This recent orthodox Marxist critique against Brenner and political Marxists often falls into the same category as the non-Marxist critiques that have been presented in earlier chapters, not in the least because the latter have often provided the historical authority for the former: for example, the charges include the so-called detachment of social relations from economic and demographic

forces, the lack of an endogenous source of change, and a top-down, ruling-class centred approach to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. But, as the above quote indicates, rather than generate a plausible, objective historical analysis which has the potential to persuade those who do not hold orthodox Marxist views, the critique is entirely driven by the requirement to protect and promote a vision of revolutionary socialist transformation in the future. As we shall see, the accusation of voluntarism – among other things – against Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood (the Wood referred to in the above quote) stems from a total misreading of Brenner’s thesis and its application by Wood and other political Marxists such as George Comminel, Benno Teschke and Charles Post. Far from abandoning historical materialism, Brenner’s social-property relations perspective has sought to bring it to life by rejecting the tendency to teleology and techno-determinism in earlier orthodox accounts. This tendency leads to easy dismissals of Marxism by historians such as Steve Rigby who otherwise recognise the fruitfulness of a historical materialist approach in generating historical knowledge. Unfortunately, by also reading Brenner through the prism of orthodox Marxism, he has understandably resorted to a liberal pluralism as the most plausible way forward.2

The aim of this chapter is to address this recent challenge to political Marxism by the orthodox Marxist perspective, particularly the work of Davidson. I aim to demonstrate that Davidson’s work, both historical and theoretical, repeats the teleology and techno-determinism found throughout Marx’s work and the subsequent orthodox tradition and that, moreover, its flaws are further exposed in Davidson’s misreading of every aspect of Brenner’s thesis. At the same time, given the tendency for historians to read Brenner’s thesis through the prism of orthodox Marxism, the contrast will hopefully further illuminate Brenner’s distinctive approach, and lead historians such as Rigby to re-examine their preference for a pluralist approach over Brenner’s class-centred thesis.

i The Theoretical Foundations and Project of Orthodox Marxism

Historical materialism is an ambitious totalising theory which claims to account for the whole social process of history or, in other words, the economic, social, political and ideological interrelations of a particular society, its historical development and transition to another form of society. Historical materialism as theorised by orthodox Marxism achieves this interrelated

2 Rigby 1998; Chapter Two above.