

Socialist Humanism and the Critique of Economism

Simon Clarke
University of Warwick

Richard Johnson's essay in *History Workshop* 6 is an important contribution to a debate that has simmered, in one form or another, for several years.[1] The arguments presented are not altogether new, but coming from a respected socialist historian they cannot be ignored. Already in the responses published in HWJ 7 it is clear that Richard Johnson's essay promises to bring the debate to the boil, and those responses alone justify the publication of the original essay, however tentative and undeveloped its arguments may be.

In many ways Richard Johnson's essay reproduces, clearly and concisely, a fairly orthodox 'Althusserian' critique of the 'empiricism' of Anglo-Saxon historiography in the name of 'theory', part of a debate that has so far tended to be singularly one-sided in view of the woeful historical inadequacy of the 'theories' proposed, whether sociological or Marxist. Historians have managed to hold the theorists at bay by showing that the particular theories on display cannot be reconciled with the clear evidence of the historical record: there is no reason for historians to take the charge of empiricism seriously until they are offered a theory that at least has the prospect of making some sense of history. The importance of Richard Johnson's contribution is that it claims to do just this. Richard Johnson does not follow the wilder Althusserians in asserting the absolute primacy of theory, and in the last analysis his argument for the necessity of theory is not justified on methodological grounds, but by pointing to the historiographical achievements of a particular theory, that embodied in Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* that has inspired more than one generation of Marxist historians.

The discussion of Richard Johnson's essay in HWJ 7 has centred on the nature and role of 'theory', and the arguments put forward are well rehearsed, emphasising the interdependence of the theoretical and empirical dimensions of historical research and the fact that for Marxism 'theoretical' concepts can never be deprived of historical content. I agree with the broad outlines of these responses, though not with the way in which Keith McClelland and Gavin Williams formulate the argument, but I suspect that in the last analysis Richard Johnson would not disagree too heartily either, for it is at this point that he dissociates himself from Althusser to renounce theoreticism and return to Dobb.

My feeling is that these contributions miss the most significant aspect of Richard Johnson's essay which is that, implicitly at least, it shifts our attention from the question of 'how much theory?', to the much more interesting and important question of 'what kind of theory?'. Instead of simply reproducing the old sociological critiques of the historians' lack of theory, Johnson tries to draw out the theory that is implicit in the tradition of historiography that he is criticising, and to counterpose to it a different, and for him more adequate, theory. This is important because the valid critique of empiricism is not that it doesn't have a theory, but that it does not make its theory (its background assumptions and its central concepts) explicit and subject it to rigorous empirical and logical criticism. Every description, however singular the event described, subsumes particulars under general concepts, and these general concepts together imply theoretical connections that the empiricist takes for granted. The danger of empiricism for a Marxist is that the kinds of concepts and assumptions that are most easily taken for granted, that are felt to need critical examination the least, are those of the dominant intellectual tradition and the dominant ideology it expresses. The danger of empiricism, therefore, is not that it lets the facts speak for themselves, but that it risks letting the dominant ideology speak through the facts.

In this context Edward Thompson's clear distinction between 'empiricism' and the 'empirical idiom' in *The Poverty of Theory* is of paramount importance. On the one hand, Thompson emphasises that the challenge to the dominant ideology embedded in British empiricism has been a central feature of British Marxist historiography. On the other hand, he emphasises the historiographical and political importance for Marxists of a commitment to the empirical mode. Thompson too poses the question not as a question of 'how much theory?', but as a question of 'what sort of theory?', and he insists above all else that speculation (which is all there is to 'theory' when it comes down to it) must be constrained by the testimony of experience. This is not bourgeois empiricism, it is the fundamental tenet of historical materialism, for there is no higher testimony than that of experience, nor is there any justification for a socialist to privilege one man or woman's experience over that of another.

It seems to me that the crucial issue raised by Richard Johnson's essay, and much more powerfully by *The Poverty of Theory*, is not the hoary old issue of theory versus the empirical, it is the issue that is of central concern to all Marxists: 'how do we understand our past, and how do we make use of that understanding to gain control over our future?'

This debate is not simply of academic importance. What is ultimately at issue is our understanding of socialist politics, for the way we understand history cannot be dissociated from the way in which we try to make it. The issue is of paramount importance at a moment when Britain really does seem to be entering a period of economic and social crisis which calls for socialist solutions and in which our conceptions of a socialist strategy must come under acute critical examination.

Although Richard Johnson's essay relies heavily on the work of Althusser, in the end it is to Maurice Dobb that he bids us return. His key suggestion is that 'we take stock and recover some of the elements of the older Dobbian practice' (p.98). In the rest of this essay I should like to turn away from Johnson and try to do just this, to see what light a critical examination of the work of Maurice Dobb, and in particular his *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, can throw on the work of Thompson, Hill, Hilton, Hobsbawm, Genovese and the rest. I want to argue that it is precisely that aspect of Dobb's work that Johnson holds up to us as an example, his theory, that is its greatest weakness; that this weakness is both political and historiographical; and that the significance of 'socialist-humanism' is precisely the break it makes, implicitly if not always explicitly, with the theorisation to which Dobb still adhered. To recommend a return to Dobb's theory is to deny altogether the achievements of British Marxist historiography over the last 30 years.

RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION AND FORMS OF EXPLOITATION

Edward Thompson has rejected 'recent attempts to suggest a rupture in British Marxist historiography between the work of Maurice Dobb, and the historiography of the 1960s' [2], although he recognises the 'differing emphases' of the two schools. I want to argue that the differing emphases cannot be reduced to a difference in the object studied, Dobb concentrating on the economy, the others (with the exception of Hilton) on political and cultural phenomena. I want to argue that Dobb's contribution, important as it was and as it remains, was fundamentally flawed, and that it is in relation to the major flaw in Dobb's work that one can best see the 'socialist-humanist' tradition.

Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* derives its power and its inspirational qualities from its command of the empirical material it handles and from the new perspectives that it opened up. The great strength of Dobb's work is that he submitted his Marxist concepts to the test of history, and expected history to be the judge of those concepts. Dobb's work gave rise to a debate in which the point at issue was not the epistemological status of his enterprise, but the fruitfulness of his conceptualisation. It is in this respect that there is continuity in the British Marxist historiographical tradition. It was this, rather than the specific conceptualisation that he proposed, that was Dobb's great contribution.

In the debate that followed the publication of the *Studies*, and by implication in the work of the historians who followed him, Dobb's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism was found wanting. However the debate did not lead to an attempt to develop a more adequate conceptualisation than that offered by Dobb. It led instead to a turn away from 'theory' to a self-conscious, and often aggressive, absorption in the 'empirical mode' [3]. Thus Dobb's original theory was never subjected to an explicit, let alone a systematic, critique. Part of the reason for this is that in practice Dobb's theory is fairly schematic and is not well integrated into the body of the *Studies*. In that work the theory seems to function more as a signpost than as a rigid framework, which had served its purpose once it had raised certain questions. In the development of Dobb's work, therefore, his theory was largely ignored.

For Johnson the strength of Dobb's work is precisely his theory, and in ignoring it subsequently his successors are accused of suppressing 'some earlier strengths of the tradition' (p.98). It is important, therefore, to turn back to Dobb's long-forgotten, and perhaps tactfully ignored, theory and to ask whether this really is a strength of his work. I want to argue that the contrary is the case, that Dobb's theory is inadequate to the historiographical task that he set himself. I shall go on to look at the historiographical weaknesses of Dobb's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, as these have emerged from the subsequent development of Marxist historiography, and argue that these historiographical weaknesses reflect failings in the underlying theory. I shall, moreover, argue that the critique of Dobb's account is not merely academic but is much more fundamentally an implicit, if not often explicit, critique of the conception of politics that underlies Dobb's work.

The major weakness of Dobb's work is that he has a very reduced view of the relations of production. Dobb discusses the social relations characteristic of a particular mode of production in terms of the particular forms of exploitation of labour found in the immediate process of production. Although Dobb

formally defines these social relations in terms of the relations between social classes, he only examines these social relations in the context of the enterprise. He does not examine the class relations within which the relations of the immediate process of production are inserted. Capitalist social relations are effectively reduced to the employment of wage-labour within the capitalist enterprise, feudal social relations to the forcible extraction of tribute within the feudal estate. Social relations are reduced to the forms of labour *within the enterprise*.

This reduction has become so ingrained in the orthodox tradition that its significance is usually not noticed, the difference between relations of production and forms of labour being ignored. However, the distinction is absolutely fundamental, for relations of production are class relations and class relations cannot be defined at the level of the enterprise. Wage-labour is only wage-labour for capital when it is inserted within the class relation between capital and labour. Forced labour is only characteristically feudal when it is inserted in the feudal class relation of dependence. The relations of exploitation within the immediate process of production imply the existence of class relations within which social production takes place[5].

In *Capital*, although Marx is concerned primarily with the economic form of the relations of production, this distinction is quite clear. In volume 1, Marx introduces the commodity labour-power in its relation to capital in the production of surplus-value, and goes on to argue that this encounter between labour and capital presupposes the more fundamental social relation between capital and free labour. It is the class relation between capital and free labour that is the precondition for the particular economic form of the relation between capital and wage-labour in the capitalist enterprise.[6]

If we simply look at the particular relation between capital and labour constituted by the purchase of labour-power we cannot find any class relations:

since sales and purchases are negotiated solely between particular individuals, it is not admissible to look here for relations between whole social classes. [7]

Marx reiterates his conception of the relation between the commodity labour-power and the class relation of production when he discusses the circuits of industrial capital in volume 2 of *Capital*. Here Marx argues that the purchase of labour-power as a commodity is 'generally... regarded as characteristic of the capitalist mode of production' not because of its role in the valorisation of capital, but

on the contrary, it is so regarded because of its form, since money in the form of wages buys labour ... Money however appears very early as a buyer of so-called services, without the transformation of M into money-capital, and without any change in the general character of the economic system.... Once labour-power has come into the market as the commodity of its owner and its sale takes the form of the payment for labour, assumes the shape of wages, its purchase and sale is no more startling than the purchase and sale of any other commodity. The characteristic thing is not that the commodity labour-power is purchasable but that labour-power appears as a commodity.[8]

This wage-labour is, for Marx, characteristic of the capitalist mode of production because it is the characteristic form in which labour is recombined with the means of production in a society in which the fundamental social relation is that between a class which has the power to monopolise the means of production and subsistence and a class which is thereby separated from the means of production and subsistence. This fundamental social relation cannot be defined simply as an economic relation: it is a relation of class power that is sustained and reproduced by 'economic', 'political' and 'ideological' means, it is a relation of class power that pervades every institution of capitalist society for the simple reason that within a class society people enter social relations as members of particular social classes. Class power therefore appears in a series of different institutional forms.

The forms in which class power appears cannot be taken as given, for these forms themselves depend on the character of the class relation they express. Within a capitalist society class power appears in differentiated economic and political forms, but this differentiation is specific to capitalist society and cannot be imposed on other modes of production. Moreover, although these forms can be separated for analytical purposes, they cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but only as differentiated historical forms of the fundamental relation of production. The individual relation between capitalist and worker in the immediate process of production can only be understood in the context of the differentiated economic and political forms of class domination and the cultural forms in which that domination is experienced. It is a relation that depend on the reproduction of the worker as 'free', a reproduction that is determined outside the immediate process of production by the subordination of the working class to capital within the circuit of capital and to capitalist state power.

These two aspects of the workers' subordination can be analytically separated, but each aspect is conditional on the other and both are aspects of the fundamental relation of production.

Within a feudal society the subordination of the labouring class is not enforced in the same institutional forms. Although the state is institutionally separated from the fragmented units within which production takes place this does not correspond to an institutional separation of economic and political forms of class domination, and it is not legitimate to impose on feudal society a differentiation that is characteristically capitalist.

Concentration on the forms of exploitation characteristic of a feudal society has led to a serious neglect of the fundamental class relation of that form of society, to a neglect of the role of state power in constituting the relation between exploiter and exploited as a class relation. The classic form of feudal society is often taken to be that in which the exploited is a personal dependent of the exploiter. In this case the dependent status of the exploited is enforced collectively through the state, and individually through the productive unit (whether guild or estate), but in each case the status is imposed by both political and economic means. In this form of feudal society the differentiation is not between economic and political exercise of class power, but between the collective and individual exercise of that power (although this division is no more clear cut in a feudal society than is the division between economic and political power in a capitalist society). In a capitalist society, it is possible to separate analytically the political and economic forms of class domination, but it is not possible or legitimate to reduce the relations of production to their economic form: materialism is not the same thing as economism. Within classical feudal society not only is this reduction impossible, but the analytic separation cannot be carried out either.

I hope that I have said enough to establish that for historical materialism the relations of production, the particular antagonistic or non-antagonistic forms of social relations through which the relation between humanity and nature is mediated, are fundamental and cannot be reduced to any particular form in which they appear. On the contrary, the relations of production are multi-faceted relations which are expressed in, and reproduced through, a number of interdependent social relationships which are thereby to be understood as forms of the relations of production. The differentiation of these forms cannot be taken as given, nor deduced theoretically, but must be analysed concretely for each particular society. Thus while the relations of production cannot be reduced to any particular form in which they appear, nor do they have any existence independently of the totality of the social relations through which class relations are manifested. Thus the political and ideological dimensions of the relations of production are just as central to, and cannot be dissociated from, the production and reproduction of exploitative class relations as is the narrowly economic dimension.

To argue thus is not to postulate an alternative reductionism, to another anonymous 'structure' that works itself out in history behind the backs of men and women. In an earlier formulation of this argument I may have given the impression that I was proposing to understand history as the evolution of the concept of relations of production, for which Edward Thompson has quite rightly taken me to task [9]. But I do not conceive of the relations of production as things that exist independently of, or prior to, the forms in which they appear. The relations of production are, and can be no more than, the specific, historically located, differentiated social relationships in which people engage in their daily life. The concept itself expresses the Marxian hypothesis that these various social relationships have a unity that belies their apparent diversity, that they cannot be adequately understood in isolation from one another. In a class society, a society in which one class of people compels another class of people to perform surplus labour that is appropriated by the exploiting class, these diverse social relations have a twofold unity. On the one hand, the social relations into which particular individuals enter cannot be understood solely as relations between individuals, but must be understood as relations between individuals who are members of social classes. That is to say that individuals are interdependent and that in a particular society that interdependence is structured in a particular way. On the other hand, the different social relations that particular individuals enter cannot be understood in isolation from one another, since they have a complementarity as forms within which the subordination of the individual as a member of a class is imposed *and resisted*. The applicability of the Marxian concept of the relations of production (the *extent* to which social relations can be conceptualised as class relations, and the *extent* to which social relations can be conceptualised as differentiated forms of the relations of production) is not something that can be determined *a priori*. It must be determined through historical research that examines the practical reality of the everyday interaction of men and women in particular societies. Like every concept the concept of 'relations of production' has its limits, and these limits cannot be known *a priori*.

BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

The conception of relations of production that takes the fetishised fragmentation of capitalist social relations as its starting point is a conception that is fundamentally uncritical and ahistorical. Categories that are the historical product of capitalist relations of production are fixed and attain the status of eternal verities: their historical status as social forms is abolished, and the possibility of their development and ultimate abolition is denied.

It is this fetishisation of the forms in which capitalist social relations appear that is the most fundamental characteristic of economism. The reduction of relations of production to forms of exploitation, the substitution of a naturalistic economism for historical materialism, is an aspect of the isolation and naturalisation of the economic form of capitalist relations of production.

This fetishisation is classically expressed in the base-superstructure model that Dobb espouses. However, it is equally present in the more sophisticated 'levels model' that Johnson seeks to impose on 'socialist-humanism'. Thus, although Johnson hopes to preserve the anti-economism of the 'socialist-humanists', his commitment to the 'levels model' commits him to reproduce a formulation which cannot escape its own economism. Once the levels have been isolated from one another, there is no basis for restoring their unity that is not reductionist: the choice is therefore between a reductionist economism and an empiricist pluralism. It should not therefore be surprising that when confronted by the choice Althusserians descend into rhetoric, Hindess and Hirst abandon Marxism for pluralism, and Johnson abdicates responsibility without offering any way out of the impasse.[10]

The point is that Dobb's economism does not consist in the fact that he ignored the cultural and the political (he frequently refers to such phenomena, but as secondary influences), or that he regarded them as epiphenomenal (he clearly did not), but in the way that he conceived of society in the first place. By adopting the same formulation as his Althusserian 'privileged vantagepoint' (p.82) (privileged by what authority?) Johnson immediately imposes an economic grid on 'socialist-humanism': the 'socialist-humanists' are read as changing levels, from the economy to culture and politics; they are accused of studying culture without a thorough study of the economic level of its 'determination in the last instance'; they are guilty of 'culturalism'. Hilton is partially exonerated only because he still studies the economic 'level'.

It does not occur to Johnson that the most important feature of the work of Hilton, Thompson, Hill, Hobsbawm and others is that they reject this formulation in terms of levels. Their rejection of economism does not consist in turning their back on the economic dimension of class relations, it consists in their rejection of the 'base-superstructure' model with its fetishised categories. They are not studying particular levels of a social formation, but have restored a unitary conception of relations of production as relations between people who, in a class society, relate to one another as members of antagonistic social classes. These relations have political and cultural, as well as economic, dimensions, the unity of which consists in their human character. The fetishised fragmentation of capitalist social relations is criticised from the standpoint of the experience of those who live within those social relations, for it is only from that standpoint that the unity of capitalist social relations can be understood, and only from that standpoint that the fragmentation of those social relations can be overcome. This experience is not the experience of atomised individuals, but is a class experience, the collective experience of oppression in all its forms. The unity of this experience is realised and expressed through the culture of the class. This culture is not some 'relatively' autonomous level, it is the way in which the oppression of the class is lived and experienced. It is not simply an inert mental structure, it is created in the course of class struggle, in the course of the struggle against economic, political and cultural oppression, and it expresses not only the fragmentation of that oppression, not only the divisions within the class, not only the mystifications imposed by the exploiting class, but also the unity, the hopes and the aspirations of the class that are forged in struggle.

All the epithets that Johnson throws at 'socialist-humanism' describe aspects of this fundamental critical project, describe what is the political and the historiographical strength of the tradition. It is the empirical study of the cultural experience of the exploited class that constitutes the 'empiricism', 'culturalism', 'humanism' and 'populism' of the tradition, 'isms' that Johnson detaches completely from the project. Yet it is the study of the unitary, revolutionary and creative character of the struggle of the exploited class that provides the basis both for a political critique of the fragmented and fetishised character of the social relations of capitalist society, and for a historiographical critique of the static and ahistorical categories provided by a theory that does not penetrate that fetishistic fragmentation. This project is not without its own risks, but these do not arise because it has gone too far, but because there is further yet to go: The result can be an ahistorical romanticism, that detaches the creative and revolutionary spirit of the class from its experience, and an empiricism that counterposes historical experience to theoretical categories. I shall return to these questions in the last section.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL WEAKNESSES OF ECONOMISM

In this section I want to show in more detail how Dobb's narrow conception of the relations of production underlies the historiographical weaknesses of his account that have been identified in the *Science and Society* debate and in the subsequent work of Marxist historiography. I shall concentrate on the weaknesses in Dobb's account of the decline of feudalism and the transition to capitalism.

A. Feudal relations and commodity relations

For many Marxists Dobb's account of the transition was vindicated in the debate with Sweezy that followed the publication of the *Studies*. Sweezy argued that the decline of feudalism, conceived as a method of production for use (which Sweezy distinguished from a natural economy), had to be directly linked to the rise of the market. Dobb argued that a Marxist account could not focus on relations of exchange, but had to concentrate on relations of production. Thus the rise of the market for Dobb was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the decline of feudalism. (This debate was reproduced in the critique that Laclau offered of Frank's account of underdevelopment, a critique that many Marxists also read as definitive). [11]

What Dobb's response ignored was that market relations cannot be seen simply as relations of exchange independent of the relations of the immediate process of production, for relations of exchange are themselves a differentiated form of the relations of production, the analysis of commodity fetishism showing precisely how exchange relations express the social connection between apparently independent producers. Thus the emergence of the market cannot be considered as an external factor, as both Dobb and Sweezy tended to regard it, but has to be seen as an aspect of the development of feudal relations of production. Sweezy was quite correct to remark that Dobb's account underemphasised the role of the market, even if his own formulation was also inadequate in dissociating relations of exchange from forms of exploitation. Because Dobb has a narrow conception of the relations of production he does not integrate the market into his analysis of the development of social relations.

Had Dobb regarded relations of exchange as a form of the relations of production he would have had to confront the connection between the rise of the market and the development of feudal class relations more directly, and, in particular, he would have had to pose the question of the consistency of the commodity form with the feudal form of social relations. Had he done this he would surely have reached the conclusion that the commodity form of relation, classically based on equivalent exchange between free and independent commodity owners, is not consistent with the feudal form of social relations, classically based on dependence and mutual obligation. The study of the transition would then have to focus on the development of the social relations of feudal society in terms of the conflict not between the market and the feudal form of exploitation, but between commodity and feudal forms of the relations of production. This is not to argue that social relations must be either feudal or commodity relations: the production of commodities may initially be subordinate to, and inserted within, feudal forms of social relation. But the development of exchange provides an economic basis for the independence of the commodity owner, and so for the evasion of feudal obligations that prove disadvantageous (whether based on mutuality between members of the same class or on dependence within and between classes). Thus commodity relations were at first subordinated to feudal relations of production, without thereby becoming consistent with those relations. In the course of development of feudal society, commodity relations progressively eroded feudal relations within the exploiting class and then between the exploiting and exploited classes.

The transition from one form to another was a gradual one, and in the course of the transition 'bastardised' forms emerged, expressing not the 'coexistence of modes of production', as some latter-day schematists would have us believe, but the historical development of a society marked by a fundamental contradiction between the form of social relation that corresponded to its concept, as Marx might put it, and the form of social relation to which it gave rise. Both these forms were essential aspects of the historical reality that was feudal society. The rendering of services and payments in the form of debt peonage, or the payment of rent by an increasingly independent peasantry (a form that developed from payments in recognition of personal dependence, through payments enforced by a class monopoly of land, to the eventual payment of capitalist ground-rent as feudal class power was finally destroyed), were as much examples of forms of exploitation corresponding to feudal relations of production as was legal serfdom.

This development of social relations was by no means a mechanical process, commodity relations inevitably displacing relations of mutual obligation and dependence, for these are both forms of the social relations in which people engage with one another, and people are not indifferent as to these forms, nor are they agreed on the relative merits of different forms. The feudal exploiting class did not stand idly by and allow the ground to be cut from under its feet. While the development of commodity

and money relations between members of the exploiting class proceeded relatively smoothly, having obvious advantages for feudal nobles, merchants and the crown, this was not the case with regard to the members of the exploited class. Within the towns the market could only be prevented from having a solvent effect on feudal social relations by denying artisans access to it, and the development of commodity relations was accompanied by intensified struggle for control of the guild and corporation through which the independence of the direct producer could be limited. Correspondingly in the countryside the market could only be prevented from having a solvent effect by excluding the peasantry from it, either by preventing them from having the time and resources to produce a marketable surplus, or by the direct use of force. To the extent that members of the exploited class did gain direct access to the market, to a basis for economic independence, the use of political measures to confine commodity exchange within feudal relations of production became all the more necessary, and all the more difficult to enforce.

B. Power and the state

This brings us directly to the second major defect of Dobb's account, his neglect of the role of power and the state in the constitution and development of relations of production. Dobb's weakness here is not simply that he neglected the state to concentrate on the economy, a neglect that would have been remedied by Anderson's complementary account of the development of the state^[12], but that it is impossible to understand the development of the relations of production without seeing the state, and the exercise of state power, as having a central role in their defence and even in their definition. Neither Dobb nor Anderson try to understand the state as a differentiated form of the class relation of production, and this weakens their understanding of both.

The form of the state changes dramatically in the process of feudal historical development. Anderson explains these changes by reference to factors internal to the state and its relations with the ruling class. He does not relate the form of the state to the other forms of the relations of production, and does not, therefore, relate the changing form of the state to the changing relationship between dependence and mutual obligation and the commodity form. The neglect of this connection in the past has derived from the historiographical bias towards examining the state only in relation to itself and to the ruling class, a bias that was centrally challenged by the 'socialist-humanist' historians and that is increasingly challenged by 'bourgeois' academic orthodoxy historians as well (absence of this challenge from Anderson's book gives it its peculiarly old-fashioned English flavour). Recent historiography has focused on the relation between the state and the exploited class, bringing into sharp relief the class character of the feudal state and its central role in regulating social relations and defining their class character. If these social relations are indeed characterised by the contradictory unity of forms of dependence and mutual obligation and the commodity form, one would expect to find this contradictory unity reproduced within the evolving feudal state. The precise connection is one which needs elucidation, but I find very striking the connection between the particular stage of development of this contradictory unity and the particular form of the state, on the one hand, and the specific struggles over state power at particular times, on the other.

Because any historically existing feudal society involves a contradictory coexistence of 'feudal' and commodity forms of social relations we must go rather further than simply arguing that the state expresses this unity to argue that the state plays a central role in *defining* the class character of the relations of production. If we look at individual productive units we see only relations between individuals, we cannot directly observe class relations. Thus within a given society we find a whole range of different kinds of social relation, representing different degrees of adaptation of dependence and mutual obligation to the existence of commodity relations and even, soon enough, the emergence out of the commodity form of capitalist forms of exploitation. Only reference to the state can tell us whether these particular social relations exist in a context in which state power is being used to subordinate the development of commodity and capitalist social relations to the perpetuation of feudal relations of production, in which case the dominant class relation may be said to remain feudal, or whether the society has a different, 'transitional' or capitalist, class character. The importance of the state in the constitution and reproduction of capitalist relations of production need hardly be emphasised in view of the importance Marx attaches to it in the discussion of the working day, the formal subsumption of labour, and primitive accumulation in volume 1 of *Capital*.

The neglect of the role of the state in the determination of the relations of production illuminates the lack of a satisfactory treatment in Dobb's *Studies* of the transitional period. The much-maligned Sweezy pointed to the failure of Dobb's account to give a satisfactory explanation of the class character of the transitional phase. Sweezy argued that because of the predominance of petty commodity production in the transitional phase we should characterise this period as being dominated by a transitional petty commodity mode of production. This characterisation is a logical consequence

of defining the mode of production by the predominant form of relation in the immediate process of production, and it leads us to see the transitional period either as a classless society, or a society dominated severally or collectively by a number of different classes. For both Dobb and Sweezy a whole series of different relations of production simply coexist with one another. Because they do not have the means of understanding the contradictory character of this coexistence in the transitional period, they do not have the means of understanding the central role of the state in defining the dominant relation of production. It is only if the state is brought to the centre of the stage that the question of the dominant form of the relations of production can even be posed in a meaningful way.

For Dobb and Sweezy the decline of feudalism is separated from the rise of capitalism. Feudal forms of exploitation were eroded because of the inefficiency of feudal methods of production in relations to the demands of the lords (Dobb) or the requirements of the market (Sweezy). Feudalism collapsed to be followed, after a decent interval, by the emergence of capitalist forms of exploitation. Neither Dobb nor Sweezy develop the connection between the progressive growth of the productive forces in the middle ages, spurred on by the struggle for rent, and providing the basis for the growing division of labour, and the expansion of commodity production. Nor do they see the development of feudal society in the transitional period as marked by the contradiction between the desire of the exploiting class to increase and diversify its realisable surplus and its desire to sustain feudal class relations. Nor do they see the political developments within feudal society as being marked by the development of this contradiction within the city, the estate and the state. Hence they do not see the central significance of the political struggles within feudal society in determining the class character of that society, as the feudal exploiting class sought to preserve by political means, and increasingly through the state, a position that was being eroded by economic developments. Neglect of the role of the state means that Dobb and Sweezy identify the demise of the feudal exploiting class with the decline of classically feudal forms of exploitation in the immediate process of production and cannot explain the continued dominance of that class as it used state power to perpetuate its increasingly parasitic position, as it degenerated into a class of tax farmers, coupon clippers, state pensioners and plain rentiers. They cannot see the definitive and final erosion of the position of a feudal exploiting class in the long series of struggles centred on the interventionist role of the early modern state.

The conception of the role of the state that I have outlined here as an alternative to that of Dobb, Sweezy (and Anderson) is hardly an original one. It is surely, in schematic form, the conception that informs the work of all the 'socialist-humanist' historians. These historians do not look on the state as a superstructural level whose role is to enforce relations of production that have only an economic form, they look at the state as a complementary form of the fundamental class relations of the society, only to be understood in its connection with the other differentiated forms of that relation. This comes out clearly in the development of Hill's work, from his early work in which the state did appear as a 'superstructural' phenomenon, to his later work in which the development of class relations is seen as a total social process that has economic, political and ideological dimensions inextricably interwoven in it. This conception of the state is equally apparent in the work of Thompson, Hobsbawm and Hilton. All these historians have examined the specific historical forms in which struggles over the exercise of state power have contributed to the specific character of the development of feudal into capitalistic relations of production.

C. The creative role of the working class

The third major area of neglect in Dobb's work is that on which the 'socialist-humanists' have most explicitly focussed their attention, and so on which least needs to be said here. This is the area of ideology, or culture. Dobb paid lip-service to the importance of ideological, as of political, factors, but assigned these factors a secondary significance because for Dobb the struggle took place at a more fundamental level - the level of relations of exploitation. The privilege given to the 'economic' struggle against feudal forms of exploitation is again not simply a matter of emphasis within the structured totality, but reflects a particular conception of the totality itself. Because Dobb tends to reduce relations of production to forms of exploitation he tends to see the exploited class only in terms of the role it plays in the immediate process of production: the worker is simply considered in his or her role as an agent of production subject to the direction of the exploiter, and the worker's struggle is therefore confined to a struggle over the terms under which he or she will perform that role. For Dobb the workers do not contest the relations of production as such. They do not struggle over the wage-form, but only over the size of the wage. They do not struggle over their dependent status, but only over the level of the exactions imposed on them. Hence the transition from one form of social relation to another is not determined by the struggle of the exploited and subordinate class, it is determined by the conscious and self-interested decisions of the exploiters: feudal relations of production are not overthrown because the workers rebel against their dependent status, they are overthrown because

feudal entrepreneurs decide that the employment of wage-labour or the leasing of the demesne have become more profitable forms of exploitation than the extraction of a surplus on the basis of legal serfdom (compare the account offered by Laclau of the preservation of feudalism in the third world).[13] Thus the workers have no active role to play as makers of history - history is made by the decisions of the exploiting class, decisions made on the basis of purely 'economic' (and specifically capitalist) criteria of profitability. This is in the end why the questions of ideology and of politics are secondary for Dobb. It is also why the work of Hilton, although it continues to look at forms of exploitation, is neither more nor less in the Dobbian mould than is that of the other 'socialist-humanists'.

As soon as the relations of production are seen in the wider sense that I have already discussed the question of class culture becomes central. If relations of production develop not on the basis of purely 'economic' decision-making by the exploiting class, but on the basis of a differentiated struggle between social classes, the cultural terms in which this struggle is fought out become crucial, in defining what the contending classes believe they are fighting for and what they believe they are fighting against. Thus the emphasis on class culture that is the most striking feature of the work of the 'socialist-humanist' tradition does not simply represent the introduction of another level of a social formation. It represents a direct challenge to the economic conception of the relations of production themselves, an assertion of the permanent role of the struggle of the labouring classes in transforming exploitative and oppressive social relations in all their forms. Nor is culture a factor introduced from outside, for it is a central and inextinguishable dimension of the struggle, both as the way in which the struggle is experienced by its participants and as an object of the struggle. Thus the struggle between class cultures is a central dimension of the struggle over the relations of production. The oppressed classes cannot turn the world upside down without challenging the cultural forms in which the existing world is presented to them. The emphasis on culture in the 'socialist-humanist' tradition therefore cannot be reduced to a 'culturalism', for it expresses the central theoretical and political significance of the 'socialist-humanist' project: theoretically it expresses the implicit adoption of a broader conception of the relations of production than that characteristic of economism. Politically it asserts against economism the central role of the self-activity of the working class in the transition not only from feudalism to capitalism, but above all in the transition from capitalism to socialism.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 'SOCIALIST-HUMANISM'

We are now back at the starting-point, for I think that when we see the project of 'socialist-humanism' as a political project we are better able to see its theoretical strengths and weaknesses, and in particular to understand its very defensive reaction to attempts to theorise history. The 'socialist-humanist' project emerged on the basis of opposition to the politics of the orthodox Communist Parties. What 'socialist-humanism' emphasises above all is the unitary, revolutionary, and creative character of the struggle of the exploited class. What the socialist-humanists are trying to do is to recapture through their historiographical work the irrepressible spirit of resistance to class exploitation, to tell the heroic, if often tragic, story of the constant attempt of the exploited class to realise its vision of an alternative society. It is not therefore a 'culturalist' response to theoretical 'economism', it is a revolutionary response to the politics of economism. It is a revolutionary response whose significance is twofold: it is a response to the politics of a bureaucratised and authoritarian Communist Party that suppresses and deflects the revolutionary aspirations of the working class, and thus a response that emerges historically out of the political struggle to democratise the Party. It is also a response to the reformist politics of Social Democracy that seeks to deny the very existence of such revolutionary aspirations. The form of the response is to recover the history of those revolutionary aspirations, and so to intervene politically by reasserting, or even in its more ambitious moments by creating, an authentic British revolutionary tradition. (This, incidentally, is why Perry Anderson's and Tom Nairn's critique was so debilitating, because it simply wrote off the British experience.)

It is this political context that illuminates the 'socialist-humanist' approach to theory. On the one hand, orthodox Communism had annihilated any alternative Marxist theoretical tradition: Marxist theory in practice served as an ideological weapon that simply denied the legitimacy of the 'socialist-humanist' enterprise. The only available defence against such attacks, in the absence of any alternative developed interpretation of Marx, was to fall back on a defence of the integrity of experience against all attempts to theorise that experience. This did not involve a blind empiricist rejection of all conceptualisation, but it did involve an insistence on the subordination of concepts to the immediacy of experience. Those who did turn back to theory could find only Lukács and the early Marx, and, perhaps, Gramsci and Sartre. The importance of these theorists is not their 'historicism', but their critique of the reification of the fragmented and fetishised categories of capitalist society both in

experience and in theory. Thus the defensiveness of the political project of 'socialist-humanism' underlies the defensiveness in the face of a totalitarian conception of theory.

On the other hand, theory as such did not seem immediately necessary to the particular historiographical tasks that confronted 'socialist-humanism'. The first task was to develop historiographical methods appropriate to recapturing the historical experience of resistance to exploitation and oppression. Although the facts by no means speak for themselves, this experience is a matter of historical record whose discovery does not require a battery of sophisticated concepts, and certainly not of concepts that reduce experience to the status of an epiphenomenon whose true meaning escaped those whose struggles are expressed in that experience. Unless that experience is first recovered from the historical evidence, there is nothing for concepts to work on. Thus the 'empiricism' of 'socialist-humanism' has to be related to the political and intellectual circumstances in which the project developed.

With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to be critical of the 'socialist-humanist' project. It is too easy to argue that the enterprise quickly lost its political direction, that it was absorbed into bourgeois academia (a charge that ignores the sustained and vindictive resistance of the academic establishment), that instead of invigorating a revolutionary class politics it led in the second generation to a proliferation of ethnographic accounts of quaint and archaic labour and leisure practices devoid of any political significance. However, it is difficult to see what else could have been done, precisely because the 'socialist-humanists' lacked any political base. They lacked such a base not of their own choosing, but because they suffered a massive political defeat. In the wake of this defeat, as historians working in political isolation, it is difficult to see that they could do more than recover and preserve a tradition for posterity, providing weapons that others could take up in more propitious political circumstances and polemicising against the Hydra that confronted them. That the second generation lost the political dimension that still characterises the work of the 'socialist-humanists' cannot be blamed on the latter.

Nevertheless, it is important not to be uncritical, not to neutralise 'socialist-humanism' by 'understanding' it, eulogising it, consigning it to a roll of academic honour. It is important to breathe new life into the project, to criticise it constructively, to develop it, to draw it out of its defences hell and capitalise on changed political circumstances by launching a counteroffensive that does not merely hold political and theoretical absolutism at bay, but which attacks it in its lair. To do this it is not sufficient to abandon the ground of 'theory' to economism. It is necessary to combat the economists' monopoly of theory by offering a theoretical interpretation that challenges economism both in its form and in its content. In doing this it is essential that the political impetus of the 'socialist-humanist' project is not lost. Marxism must be developed as a theory of liberation, a theory that embraces and does not suppress the revolutionary aspirations expressed in the experience of struggle.' Socialist-humanism' has recovered that experience for us, and any theory that is developed henceforth must be adequate to that experience.

THE WEAKNESSES OF 'SOCIALIST-HUMANISM'

Edward Thompson appears to argue, in *The Poverty of Theory*, that 'socialist-humanism' has already accomplished its theoretical task. He insists that the historiographical work of the tradition could not have been accomplished without concepts such as 'class', 'exploitation' and 'oppression'. These concepts, Thompson argues, are fluid and cannot be separated from the varieties of experience which alone give them meaning. He implies that such concepts cannot be transferred to another level of analysis or be enclosed within systems of concepts. On the other hand, Thompson does recognise a role for some sort of systematic theorisation within economics, and in particular recognises the validity of the concept of 'mode of production' within that strictly (but imprecisely) demarcated field.

This argument concedes both too little and too much to theory. For Thompson's own project it may well be that a sophisticated array of concepts is not required. Not much theory is required to establish that the struggles he examines in, for example, *The Making of the English Working Class* involved exploited and oppressed workers, whose spirit of resistance played an important part in establishing an authentic working-class culture of struggle against the tyranny of capital. But the question does arise as to what is specifically Marxist about this study, and this is the question that Johnson is right to raise, even if he raises it in a 'theoreticist' way.

The problem arises because Thompson often seems to subordinate his concepts strictly to experience: he correctly insists that concepts are only adequate to the extent that they illuminate the experience of the exploited and oppressed masses, but he seems to argue that they can have no valid content beyond this experience. He has good reason to fear the tyranny of concepts, but the problem is that within this framework it is difficult to see how the unity of experience as the experience of a class can be established. People do not experience oppression and exploitation immediately as

class oppression and exploitation, they experience it in a series of fragmented and differentiated forms: as exploitations and oppressions imposed by specific individuals through specific institutions. The unity of the exploitation and oppression of one class by another cannot be discovered immediately in experience, nor, *a fortiori*, in the consciousness that develops on the basis of that experience. In resisting the differentiated forms of exploitation and oppression the working class gradually, but always incompletely and imperfectly, realises a practical unity as workers begin to organise on a progressively wider basis. Thus the fragmentation of individual experience gives way to the unity of class consciousness to the extent that the fetishised fragmentation of experience is overcome practically in the course of struggle. But this achievement of a practical unity is always incomplete, provisional, and precarious, something forged in a struggle against exploiters and oppressors who seek at every turn to reimpose the fragmentation of working class experience.

At certain points of heightened struggle sections of the working class do achieve, however imperfectly and imprecisely, a consciousness of their struggle as a class struggle, as the conscious struggle of an exploited and oppressed class against a class of oppressors and exploiters. But we can only claim that this consciousness is in some sense privileged if we can establish that it is in some sense true, that the unity achieved in struggle is not a purely subjective unity, but also has an objective foundation. Thus we have to establish that the fragmented experiences of the working class, whatever the consciousness members of the class may have of these experiences, are in fact fetishised and differentiated forms of a more fundamental unity, the unity of class experience that is underpinned by the objective unity of the class relations of production. It is only a view of capitalist society as a whole that can provide the basis for the assertion that relations of exploitation and oppression have a unity that is more fundamental than the fragmented forms in which they are experienced. It is only a theory that can underpin the privilege that Marxist historians give to the consciousness developed in periods of heightened class struggle. This theory must explain both the unity of class relations and the fragmentation and fetishisation of these relations in experience, and the latter is as important as the former if the theory is to avoid theoreticism and to have claims as a historical materialist theory, a theory whose ultimate reference can only be experience. The need for a historical materialist theory is not simply a matter of epistemology, it is a central political need, for only theory can explain the truth of class unity, and its necessity if exploitation and oppression are to be overcome.

Fortunately we do not have to invent this theory, for this is surely what Marx's work seeks, however incompletely and imperfectly, to achieve. It is important in this context to emphasise that Marx's work did not emerge on the basis of epistemological breaks within a closed system of concepts inherited from classical political economy. Marx's work emerged precisely out of an attempt to develop and to deepen the insights achieved by the working classes in Britain, France and Germany in their developing struggle with capital. Moreover the need to do this was repeatedly impressed on Marx by the experience of defeat, by the realisation that the heroism of the working class was not enough to overcome capital. Thus for Marx the working class could only overcome capital if its experience of exploitation and oppression and its heroic spirit of resistance were complemented by a knowledge of the source of its exploitation and oppression. The importance that Marx attached to the ideological forms of the struggle is best demonstrated by his passionate involvement in ideological struggles within the working-class movement. What Marx was attempting to do above all was to achieve an understanding of the objective basis of the unity of the experience of the working class that was achieved practically, but temporarily, in moments of heightened class struggle. Thus Marx's theory of the capitalist 'mode of production' is absolutely central, both politically and theoretically, to the historical materialist enterprise.

This notion of theory is missing from 'socialist-humanism'. The experience of the 'socialist-humanists' in their own political struggles was, just like the experience of those they have studied, an experience of defeat. In each case it was a defeat with honour, a defeat from which the vanquished emerged with their principles and spirit intact, but it was still a defeat. Unless the lessons of these defeats are learned there is a danger that the revolutionary spirit that arose out of these struggles as a weapon of the working class will be detached from the historical struggle and glorified as an abstract and ahistorical moralism that is, paradoxically, divorced from the contemporary experience of the working class. This would be ironic given the stress that Thompson puts on the close integration of moral consciousness with the historical struggle in his historical writings. It is precisely the enforced separation of a morality that affirmed the human and liberating character of socialism from the working class movement in the 1950s that was at the heart of the political defeat of 'socialist-humanism'. It is precisely because of this political defeat that Althusserianism is able to masquerade as a critique of Stalinism. I think that the great weakness of 'socialist-humanism' is that in withdrawing to its own ground it is too readily conceding defeat. It preserves its principles intact, but the price it pays is its exclusion from the struggle for socialism. Politically it comes to play the role of a detached

commentator on that struggle. Intellectually it abandons its claims to the heritage of historical materialism.

This is where I part company with Edward Thompson. Both politically and intellectually there have been major changes in the last decade and it seems to me that there is now a basis for optimism. Although Marxism is still dominated theoretically and politically by an economism that seeks to deny the creative and imaginative powers of the working class, an effective opposition to this domination is gradually emerging. The task of Marxist intellectuals is to build on this opposition, to develop the intellectual weapons appropriate to it, to rediscover Marxism as a theory that finds the source of human liberation in the struggles that emerge within capitalism, and not simply in a morality that is introduced from outside history. Intellectually this means that we must renounce Thompson's Brest-Litovsk, which allows economism to persist so long as it remains within its own borders, the 'economy', which abandons *Capital* to economism and so abandons the possibility of understanding experience and culture as class experience and culture, forged in the struggle of the working class, a struggle at whose core is the struggle to recover an intentionality and a creativity that is appropriated by and subordinated to capital not in the form of a disembodied culture, but most fundamentally in the process of social production.

POSTSCRIPT

Lest this paper be misread it must be emphasised that it is not an exercise in intellectual history. Much more plausible, and accurate, stories could be told of the development of Marxist historiography, and it is important that these stories are told. This paper, however, is a response to Richard Johnson's story, and Richard's story is a myth, a myth that overlooks all that was intellectually and politically positive not only in the development of Marxist historiography, but also in the much broader movement whose groping attempts to recover a revolutionary Marxism are now referred to with some disparagement as the 'socialist-humanism' of the New Left: the misguided generation of Suez, Hungary, Clause IV and CND which one would imagine today was motivated by no more than a sloppy sentimental liberalism. To Richard's myth I therefore counterpose another myth that stresses Towards a Socialist History 155 what I regard as being the intellectually and politically positive legacy of 'socialist humanism', an epithet that I would think any socialist would consider to be a tautology rather than a slur. It is especially important today that we recover just what was positive about the politics of the New Left as disillusionment after the failures of the wildest hopes of 1968 drives so many on the Left back into a politics that has an ominous ring to those with longer memories. It is essential to stress that 'socialist-humanism' is not the same thing as sentimental liberalism, and it is important to resist the strong tendencies to a polarisation between what can only be described as a resurgent Stalinism, on the one hand, and a nihilistic liberal pessimism on the other. This, in the end, is the choice that Richard Johnson's essay seems to foist on us, and it is a choice that we must resist. In the midst of its confusions, its utopianism and its sentimentality the New Left secreted a politics from which we can still learn, the lessons of which it is important that we do not lose.

NOTES

1 Richard Johnson, 'Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist Humanist History', *History Workshop*, 6, December 1978. I would like to thank Edward Thompson and Simon Frith for their very helpful comments on the first draft of this essay, and the editors of HWJ for an interesting and wide-ranging discussion to which I have been unable to do justice in my revisions.

2 Edward Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, London 1978, p.396, n.168.

3 This is not entirely true. In the original *Science and Society* debate, collected in R. Hilton and others *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, 1976, Takahashi and, much more pertinently, Hilton did develop Dobb's theorisation. John Merrington's recent essay, also printed in the collection, is an important advance on the original contributions. My remarks on the transition later in this paper owe much to Hilton's suggestive comments. I should make it clear that my remarks here, and later on the transition, do not aim to provide an alternative theory, but have a purely methodological significance, offering, at best, alternative signposts. For this reason I do not discuss the recent contributions of Robert Brenner and the ensuing debate in *Past and Present*. Although Brenner makes many provocative and stimulating observations, I think that his contribution confuses the issues in question here by introducing the class struggle as a factor that transforms the relations of production from without. I don't think that this is unconnected with his definition of relations of production in Dobbian terms as forms of exploitation.

4 J. Banaji, 'Modes of Production in a Materialist Conception of History' *Capital and Class*, No.3, 1977. I would not endorse Banaji's bold formulation of the argument, or the way in which he develops it.

5 It is significant that Johnson dissociates class relations from relations of production, arguing that the identification of the two is a major source of weakness of 'Socialist Humanism'. But if relations of production are not relations between individual people grouped into social classes, they cannot be social relations at all. Thus this dissociation leads directly into technologism. For parallel reasons Hindess and Hirst conclude that because there are no people, there cannot be any history.

6 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Harmondsworth 1976, Chap. Six.

7 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p.733.

8 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 2, Moscow 1957, pp.27-8.

9 Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, p.349. Simon Clarke, *Althusserian Marxism*, 1977, mimeo. (Allison & Busby, forthcoming).

10 It is never very clear who or what inhabit the levels (or instances) of this model, or even how many levels there are. For some the levels represent different orders of reality: economic = social relations, political = institutions, ideological = disembodied thought; for some they represent different sets of institutions: economic = markets and factories, political = non-economic, non-coercive institutions; for Althusserians they represent different 'practices': economic = practice on nature, political = practice on social relations, ideological = practice on ideas, artistic = practice on the violin. I have argued this point at interminable length in my paper on Althusserian Marxism. See also Simon Clarke, 'Marxism, Sociology, and Poulantzas's Theory of the State', *Capital and Class* 2, 1977.

11 Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, New York 1967. E. Laclau 'Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America', *New Left Review* No. 67, 1971. The Dobb-Sweezy debate is reproduced in the Hilton collection.

12 Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, London 1974. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London 1974.

13 Laclau, as in note 11.