



CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE PERMANENCE OF PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

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In this paper I respond to Kosmas Psychopedis's critical account of what he termed the Mediation-Analysis (1). I shall develop my response by evaluating the idea of the permanence of primitive accumulation (2), a notion which was rejected by Psychopedis because of its allegedly 'methodological problematic conception resulting from lack of clarification of struggle' (3). There then follow some critical points on his own methodological stand as presented in his paper. This critique will focus on his understanding of 'appearance as complex phenomena which are mediated with the essential relationships of capitalist societies' (cf. Psychopedis 1988 p.73). The thesis of the critique will be that, quite contrary to his intention, Psychopedis grounds his argument in terms of a theory of combination favoured in structuralism. Contrary to Psychopedis I shall argue that the historical mediation of the social relation of capital and labour 'inherently

involves the permanence of primitive accumulation' (cf. Bonefeld 1987b). Polemical overtones may hopefully be regarded in the manner of 'immanent critique' (see Gunn 1988).

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So-called primitive accumulation relates in Marx (1973; 1983) to the historical epoch prior to social reproduction in the form of capital. Capitalism developed out of this epoch. In this sense, primitive accumulation characterises the dimension of time as a break between pre-capitalist history and capitalist history. Marx remains vague as to how long this epoch has lasted. In relation to England he suggests that the epoch of primitive accumulation started in the 16th century and came to an end at about 1850.

Additionally, primitive accumulation refers to the systematic process of the 'clearing of estates', that is the separation of labour from the means of production, from the natural conditions of labour and reproduction and from the objectification of labour power through unalienated labour. "It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital" (Marx 1973, p.489). 'This separation is inscribed in the annals of human history by blood and fire' (cf. Marx 1973). This bloody historical process created and formed the doubly free labourer on the one hand and capital on the other.

The reproduction of the social conditions of the doubly free labourer on the one hand and capital on the other are essential for the existence and continuation of social reproduction in the form of capital. Having said this, it follows that capital has to ensure permanently the

separation of labour from the means of production, from labour's natural conditions and from the objectification of living labour power in work. As such the historical process, as argued by Marx, is not the result of capital, but its presupposition. In turn, this presupposition has to be reproduced in the process of social reproduction of the historical form of capitalist reproduction. The separation of labour from the 'natural community' (Marx 1973), from the means of production and from its objectification, i.e. the very substance of primitive accumulation which made capitalism possible, have to be reproduced permanently in the development and historical existence of capitalism. In Marx (4), there exists a glimpse of economic closure when he argues that the value of labour is solely determined by labour time necessary to reproduce labour power, a value which consists of moral and historical elements which are imposed on capital through the class struggle. This closed formulation is surprising, since the moral element mentioned by Marx relates to the permanent radical reproduction and production of the separation mentioned above and the permanent radical reproduction and revolutionising of the natural conditions on which, in turn, capital depends at the same time. I shall develop this argument in more detail later.

The crisis-ridden development of the capitalist social relation reproduces and regenerates itself permanently through the substantive element of primitive accumulation and the collective experience it generates: the scrapping of labour power in wars, the disintegration of social relations through the bombing of cities, the destruction of the social environment through the burning of land, the expropriation of collective (class) experience through the liquidation social conditions which generated this experience in the first place, etc, in particular in times of war (5). The permanent expropriation of (revolutionary) subjectivity and the permanent expropriation of the collective knowledge of self-organisation and counter-factual experience, and the appropriation of these (moral) values by capital in the course of the reproduction of the separation of labour from itself as force of

objectification, render the classical Marxist prediction of forthcoming revolution immature. There can be no doubt that wars play an important part as a lever of the recomposition of the organisational and repressive presence of labour within capital. There can be also no doubt that capitalism can only reproduce itself through cyclically sharpened revolutionising of the substantive elements of primitive accumulation. 'Socialism or Barbarism' (cf. Luxemburg). Capital reproduces itself through barbarism. The two imperialist world wars at the beginning of this century were both a moment in the crisis-ridden restructuring of capital in the wake of the crisis which started in 1870. Whether or not the solution to the current crisis of social reproduction in the form of capital heads towards a similar recreation of capital through barbarism remains open (see Clarke 1988,1988b). However, given the defeat of the working class since the early 1980s the prospects leave not much space for optimism. The answer of capital's 'remediation' (cf. Psychopedis 1988, see also Bonefeld 1987b and Gunn 1987) as an attempt to restructure its own contradictory existence which promises a radical reshaping of its authoritarian form may take forms of a radical reproduction of the elements of primitive accumulation. In sum, the perpetuation of social reproduction in the form of capital supposes not only the reproduction of capital and labour within the limits of historical and moral elements but also the reproduction of the separation of labour from the means of production etc.. As such, the moral and historical element attributed by Marx to the determination of the value of labour power exists only as long as capital can apply itself profitably. In periods of sustained crisis within which capital faces the barriers of capital to itself as capital, the only solution possible for capital is the radical recomposition of the historical determination of the presence of labour within capital, a recomposition which entails, however rough or smooth, the elements of primitive accumulation. There is no morality and humanism inscribed in capitalism. The only moral is profit. I think that there can be no doubt that sharpening of the historical process of primitive accumulation within the social formation of capital has to be seen as a lever of the recomposition of

the historical determination of social reproduction 'not only as use-values; but surplus-value; not only surplus-value, but the social relation of production between capital and labour" (Clarke 1982, p. 86).

The historical struggle of capital to secure its domination is oriented against the unpredictable moral and historical elements of labour power aimed towards overcoming the separation from the means of production and from itself (abstract labour) in the course revolutionary subjectivity: the expropriation of the expropriators. At the same time, capital has to secure from time to time the moral and historical element of the determination of the value of labour power in order to prevent the destruction of the value of labour power. These lines may read as a tribute to discussions in the 1970s, particularly in the face of one profound success of what is termed Thatcherism: the retreat on parts of the left from the emancipatory content of Marxism and its replacement by 'Critical Realism' (see Gunn 1988) at a time of capitals' offensive.

In sum, Marx's argument on the moral and historical element of the value of labour power has to be treated with caution as it supposes a rather 'harmonistic' (notwithstanding also destructive) mode of existence of domination and exploitation. Capital cannot rely solely on dominating labour through this moral and historical element as this element is permanently undermined by the self-contradictory existence of capital itself. It is for this reason that capital has constantly to impose its domination on labour through the force of primitive accumulation. As Marx argued in the Grundrisse (Marx 1973, p. 515), "the exchange of labour for labour - seemingly the condition of the worker's property - rests on the foundation of the workers' propertylessness". This form of alienation, as Marx continues, "wherein labour appears in the relation of capital and wage labour, and labour, productive activity appears in relation to its own conditions and its own production, is a necessary point of transition - and therefore already contains in itself, in a still only inverted form, turned on its

head, the dissolution of all limited presuppositions of production, and moreover creates and produces the unconditional presuppositions of production..." (Marx 1973, p. 515). This presuppositions of production are the "appropriation of an alien will" (Marx 1973, p. 500)(6). These domination can only be secured by regressing from the moral and historical element of the value of labour power through the sharpening and historical reproduction of the expropriation of the will of living labour by capital. It is on the basis of this expropriation that capital and the state are once again in the position officially to define and atomise the working class (see Agnoli 1975, London ... 1980).

This official definition and atomisation of the working class in an historically determinate moment of the capitalist form of social reproduction reproduces the separation of labour power from the means of production, and from itself as concrete and social labour, in a form which makes it possible for capital to integrate the working class in terms of the moral and historical elements (7). As such, these elements mystify the reproduction of the permanence of primitive accumulation, that is the separation of living labour form itself as the force of objectification.

The historical process of primitive accumulation is not the result of capital, but capital presupposes its historical development and has constantly to reproduce it. Psychopedis is therefore quite right to stress that the 'point is to show that the abstract category of labour presupposes capitalist society' and that 'the historical analysis of pre-capitalist categories presuppose the notion of abstract labour' (cf. Psychopedis 1988, p.75/6). The problem in question for an understanding of capitalism is to show the abstract determination which shapes the material world of capitalism and, hence, which shapes the material world of capitalism as a social form within which an historically specific separation of labour from the means of production etc. is obtained and reproduced. This task was the methodological objective of the mediation approach.

Following Marx (1973) the abstract determination of capitalism is achieved by abstracting from the forms of appearance, a process which in turn allows us to reproduce the appearance by way of thinking. According to Marx, social phenomena around us have manifold determinations. The object of Marxist conceptualisation is to theorise the unity of the diversity of social phenomena as concrete, as interconnected, as different phenomenological forms within unity. Dialectics seeks an understanding of the isolated facts of life and different phenomenological forms of social existence in terms of a concrete social unity in difference. This way of analysing society does not proceed to its object from outside but rather from inside: it is the effort of conceptual appropriation of reality that unifies the existence of its object in its proper motion (see Negt 1984). Hence, every dialectically understood moment comprises the unity of social reproduction of society (see Lukacs 1968). This implies that every moment is a result and a presupposition in its historical, conceptual and social dimension. "While in the completed bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system. This organic system itself, as a totality, has its presuppositions, and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all development to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks. This is how it becomes a totality. The process of becoming this totality forms a moment of its process, of its development" (Marx 1973, p. 278). There is no place here for a theory of combination as suggested by Psychopedis (8).

The question arising here is one of the abstract determination that makes the particular forms of social existence different to each other and that, at the same time, unites them and hence relates each form to one another as a presupposition and result of each other. In Marx, the abstract determination of capitalist society is determined as the social relation between capital and labour, that is the doubly free labourer on the one and capital on the other hand. This is what Marx

discusses as the 'illumination' (Marx 1973) of the difference in unity of manifold phenomena by the antagonism of capital and labour. There is no category of capital external to this antagonism (see Negri 1984). Capital is understood as a social relation, as a relation of domination between capital and labour, as a class relation and hence as a relation of struggle. Understanding capital as a social relation it would be wrong to understand the 'economic' as separated from the 'political' while the former determines the latter as structural Marxism attempted to argue. Rather, the economic and the political are forms of existence of a historically specific form of class relation and hence class domination. The abstract determination of capitalism has to be seen as the conceptually and historically prior existence of capital and labour, a prior existence which suffuses and determines the historical determination of the development of capitalism (see Holloway/Picciotto 1978; Clarke 1982). Hence the notion of the existence of the abstract in the concrete. It follows that capital is not external to struggle, but exists only as struggle. Hence the notion of the 'organisational and repressive aspect of labour within capital' (cf. Bonefeld 1987c; Holloway 1988). The diversity of the manifold determinations comprises a structure of the historical existence of class antagonism, a structure which represents the results and premise of the operation of the antagonistic relation of capital and labour. This derivation of the material world of capitalism opens up an understanding of the material world of capitalism as a relation of class struggle.

This view has to be urged in a distinctive way in order to avoid endorsing an essentialist and romantic understanding. The understanding of class struggle has to focus on the antagonistic relation of capital and labour. It is the historical development of this relation in its contradictory unity of mutual dependence and revolutionary separation which conditions society in terms of a continuous displacement and reconstitution of its own contradictory mode of existence. The movement of this antagonism implies the

possibility of the autonomisation of labour within and against capital (see Negri 1984 and Gunn 1987; Bonefeld 1987a). The working through of this tendency conditional upon the weight of history forces capital to displace its command, a displacement which gives the antagonism a new historical mode of mediation and existence (see Negri 1984). As such, it is the operation of this tendency which forces capital to decompose and recompose the historical form of mediation of class antagonism through reasserting the appropriation of an alien will and the expropriation of the collective experience of revolutionary subjectivity. The 'remediation' (cf. Psychopedis 1988) of the historical form of mediation of the social relation of capital labour 'inherently involves the the permanence of primitive accumulation' (cf. Bonefeld 1987b) and hence the possibility of this accumulations's break-down.

Psychopedis is therefore quite right to stress that 'the essential social relations cannot be artificially separated out as, simply, an 'essential' element consisting in 'struggle' and its 'mediating' forms'. This was not what the mediation analysis attempts, contrary to what Psychopedis claims. What the mediation approach attempted to show was that it is the presence of labour within capital as an antagonistic relation which is the key to understanding the development and instability of capitalism. The notion of the conceptually and historically prior existence of the antagonism of capital and labour opened up an understanding of appearance as a mode of mediation of the abstract determination within the concrete and the 'discontinuous existence of the continuous', that is the permanent reshaping of the historical determination of the mode of mediation, i.e. existence, of the class antagonism. This reshaping not only involves the reproduction of the expropriation of labour but may, under specific historical circumstances, provoke capital to reassert its domination through the negation of the moral and historical elements of the value of labour power as discussed above.

The question remains: on what view of 'abstraction' is Psychopedis's

own methodological consideration on 'mediation' based? He argues that it is through abstraction that a qualitatively new knowledge of social reality can be established. This new knowledge is said to reveal essential relationships that "do not appear as such at the empiricist level of appearances" (Psychopedis 1988,p. 73). He argues that an understanding of complex phenomena can be obtained by reconstructing the appearance from the abstracted essential relations. This reconstruction then makes it possible to understand complex phenomena which are "mediated with the essential relationships of capitalist societies" (ibid.). Hence he seems to advocate the idea that complex social relations at the level of appearance are not mediations of the abstract within the concrete but rather a combination of 'different relationships with the essential contradictory relationships of the mode of production'. This 'associative' method (9), although questioned in a later part of his paper (p. 76) neglects the 'derivation standpoint' advocated by Psychopedis. Contrary to the derivation approach and contrary to his intention, he falls into the trap of structuralism as he develops two 'ontologies': the essential relationships and the 'association of apparent contradictory relationships with the essential contradictory relationship of the mode of production' (cf. Psychopedis 1988 p. 73). As such, Psychopedis contrasts the laws of capitalist development and 'empiricist class struggle' (p. 74) rather than seeing the so-called laws of capitalist development as internal to class antagonism and struggle, as emphasised by the 'derivation standpoint'. "To make the contrast between the laws of capitalist development and class struggle is to fall into the fetishism which is object of Marx's critique in *Capital*" (Holloway 1988, p.9). It is this trap which the mediation analysis attempts to overcome; it is this trap into which Psychopedis's response has fallen into.

FOOTNOTES

1: Kosmas Psychopedis 1988, On Mediation see Gunn 1987; Bonefeld 1987a

2: Cf. Bonefeld 1987a, ' Bonefeld 1987b, 'Negt/Kluge

3: Cf. Psychopedis 1988, p. 77, fn. 7

4: see Marx 1983. This is less true for Marx (1973): see here especially the section on 'Forms which precede capital' and the introduction.

5: Surely, destruction and liquidation in periods of war is not an exceptional case but rather the sharpening and culmination of capital's attempt to reproduce the separation upon which its historical domination rests: scrapping of labour power in production, poisoning of environment, social disasters etc.. The determination of the value of labour power in terms of moral and historical elements relate rather to the moderation of war time imposition of the regeneration and reproduction of capitals' permanent reconstitution of primitive accumulation. What appeared to be yesterday's outrage appears as today's norm, i.e. the moral and historical element of the value of labour power.

6: "Here the master-servant relation [Herrschaftsverhältnisse] as essential element of appropriation. Basically the appropriation of animals, land etc.cannot take place in a master-servant relation,although the animal provides service. The presupposition of the master-servant relation is the appropriation of an alien will" (Marx 1973, p. 500/501).

7: See here for example the discussion on the Keynesian mode of domination in London ... 1980

8: Psychopedis (p. 73) argues that we need a "theory of appearance" which has to be "completed through a theory of the process of social reflection and of the practical possibilities of associating apparent contradictory relationships with the essential contradictory relationships of the mode of production".

9: see footnote 8



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