

Philosophies of Non-Correspondence: Rereading the Mode of Production in Althusser and Balibar

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Abstract:

In the current “second reception” of Althusser, the concept of the capitalist mode of production as explored in *Reading Capital* and *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* has been relatively underdiscussed. The concept, however, remains an important component of larger discussions in Marxist theory. This paper rereads Althusser and Balibar’s early contributions to the concept of the mode of production alongside Marx and contemporary thinkers such as Jairus Banaji. In so doing, preliminary connections are made between Althusser’s second reception and important recent interdisciplinary work on subsumption and heterogenous development.

Keywords: Althusser, Balibar, Banaji, mode of production, heterogenous time

Introduction:

The current upsurge of interest in the work of Louis Althusser, recently styled his ‘second reception,’¹ has been characterized by the recurrence of a particular set of concepts and problems: encounter, intervention, conjuncture, clinamen, void. The importance of recent explorations of these concepts, consequences of the publication of Althusser’s later works over the past two decades, is considerable. The size and scope of political and philosophical work engendered by this second reception should be taken as an indication that Althusser’s oeuvre has once again become a significant force in radical philosophy.

1 For two examples, see: Stefano Pippa and Vittorio Morfino, “Reading Althusser, Again,” in *Revista Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 58 (2019): 11-14, and Dave Mesing, “The Intervening Prince: Althusser, Foucault, and a Theory of Strategy,” in *Filozofski vestnik* XLI, No. 1: 61-85.

However, that we can speak of a second reception at all means that there exist ways of differentiating it from a first reception, and Althusser's first reception remains, for his old foes and advocates alike, a sore theoretical subject. Mentions of the interminable debates over structural causality, modes of production, "the last instance," and other concepts found in Althusser's early works evoke memories of youthful intellectual naïveté for senior scholars and mythic images of May '68 for a new generation of Althusser-curious Marxists. Is it surprising, then, that certain writings and concepts are cited less than others in the works of the second reception? Why return to sorry old conflicts when there remains so much new terrain to explore?²

But demons, for better or worse, are not exorcised by ignorance. The incompleteness and contradiction present in *For Marx* and even moreso in Althusser and Étienne Balibar's³ essays in *Reading Capital* still make themselves heard in contemporary works, even if in muted tones. Perhaps especially the question of the *mode of production*, the object of Balibar's controversial and influential *Reading Capital* contribution, lurks amongst contemporary attempts to understand Althusser's relationship to structuralism and his notion of immanent causality.

The mode of production, Balibar wrote, constituted an "epistemological break with respect to the whole tradition of the philosophy of history."⁴ Balibar and Althusser's attempts to construct a systematic understanding of the implications of this break in Marx's *Capital* would spark both praise and condemnation. The apparent structuralism and formalism of these essays was too much for many social scientists and historians to stomach; the idea of a general, scientific theory of history was mercilessly criticized by humanist and empiricist Marxists and hopelessly distorted by self-styled "Althusserians" who took

² This is not to say that the major thinkers of the second reception do not talk about *Reading Capital* or *For Marx*, but rather that they do so in ways which seek to move beyond the problems and conflicts of the first reception—problems and conflicts which have not, in my view, been resolved.

³ Many English-language works of the first reception based their analyses of *Reading Capital* on its initial English translation, which contained only Althusser and Balibar's contributions. While I will follow the first reception in focusing mainly on these contributions, it is my hope that it will become clear in this piece that the work of the book's other contributors (particularly Macherey) is inseparable from my understanding of structural causality and modes of production.

⁴ Étienne Balibar, "On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism," in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (London: Verso, 2015): 359.

Althusser and Balibar's structuralist leanings for a repudiation of history as a meaningful object of study. In the eyes of later critics, the theoreticism and anti-economism of *Reading Capital* was the catalyst for a decades-long obfuscation of Marx's critique of political economy and a retreat from class into toothless culture critique and poststructuralist philosophy.⁵

However, despite this contentious history, it is necessary for us in Althusser's second reception to acknowledge that Althusser and Balibar's formulations continue to influence—and *should* continue to influence—conversations in Marxist philosophy, history, and sociology, both directly and indirectly. The role of these texts in shaping dominant and emergent understandings of Marx's thought and practice cannot and should not be neglected, even if it is impossible and undesirable to discuss them in the same exact manner Marxists did fifty years ago.

The second reading of Althusser has mainly been confined to comparative literature and philosophy—to an extent for good reason, given the complicated relationship between High Althusserianism and social science. However, Marxist thought should be as interdisciplinary as was Marx's thought. If the second reception has something to offer Marxist theory and practice, it can only do so in tandem with the struggles of Marxist politics and thought in all areas of action and study. I believe that Althusser and Balibar's work on modes of production, reread from the conjunctural vantage point of the second reception, may grant new readers of Althusser a means of entering into dialogue with Marxist thinkers in other fields, especially those concerned with problems of heterogenous time, non-teleological accounts of development, and the contemporary, global role of the capitalist mode of production. By focusing especially on Althusser and Balibar's changing understanding of the non-correspondence between relations and forces of production within a social formation, I illustrate how conceptual and methodological debates in both philosophy and history attempt to grapple with a group of specific problems remarkably similar to those faced by Althusser and Balibar.

5 For characteristic attacks on Althusser from the schools of Political Marxism and Analytic Marxism, respectively, see: Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New "True" Socialism* (London: Verso, 1999) and G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

In what follows, I first present the problem of the capitalist mode of production as it appears in Marx. This exposition may be well-trodden ground for some readers, but it remains essential for contextualizing the conceptual language of the problems at hand. I then discuss Althusser and Balibar's reading of Marx's concept, emphasizing their intention to combat the linear concepts of development dominant in Marxist thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their readings, I argue, were consciously fragmentary from the beginning and changed over time in order to address the inconsistencies they generated. In my third section, I compare Althusser and Balibar's work to recent discussions of subsumption, modes of production, and global history, particularly in the work of Jairus Banaji and Harry Harootunian. I argue that their work, like Althusser and Balibar's, represents a unique effort to break free from traditional Marxist dogmas and wrestle with the same question faced by all inquisitive Marxist theorists of modes of production: *How do we theorize the capitalist mode of production as a world-historical, global phenomenon while simultaneously remaining attentive to the diversity of labor-processes through which valorization occurs?*

I. The Mode of Production in Marx

The concept of *the mode of production*, as well as its attendant concepts the *relations* and *forces of production*, can be found already in Marx's texts of the mid-to-late 1840s, although its meaning and clarity would vacillate as his work progressed. The most programmatic and well-known versions of these concepts appear in Marx's oft-cited preface to the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely *relations of production* appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material *forces of production*. The totality of these *relations of production* constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The *mode of production*

of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.⁶

In this short passage these three concepts are linked in a manner which broadly indicates their orthodox definitions. *Relations of production* (relations between individuals, nature, and forces of production) exist in a manner concomitant to the development of the *forces of production* (means of production, human labor-power). Together the totality of the relations (linked inextricably to the forces) constitutes the mode of production of material life, which itself conditions what Marx calls the *social formation*⁷ (the social totality or whole in a given historical time and place).

Historically, these concepts have often been portrayed as having *mechanical* or *constant* connections with one another. In the orthodox formula justified by certain elements of Marx's work, seized upon by theorists of the Second International, and eventually adopted by Stalin,⁸ the development of the forces of production exercises causal dominance over the relations. "This approach," writes economist John Milios, "is a 'philosophy of history', at the base of which lies a 'general law of human development'. The 'independent variable', i.e. development of the [productive forces], and more specifically of the production technique, determines the course of history. . ."⁹ This reading of Marx goes hand-in-hand with a 'stagist' theory of history which understands economic development as necessarily linear; in each social formation, productive forces must be developed to a certain level before communism can be achieved. The stagist approach tends to describe individual nations as always characterized by a single, defining mode of production: England in

6 Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Part One," in Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol. 29. (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1987): 263, italics mine.

7 The vagueness and relative imprecision of the term "social formation" is acknowledged by Balibar in his *Reading Capital* contribution, although both he and Althusser continue to use the term (see: Étienne Balibar, "Basic Concepts," 365). Althusser's later attempt to clarify the term in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* does little to ameliorate the ambiguity inherent in the concept.

8 See: J.V. Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953): Chapter III. It is worth noting that Stalin actually critiques the productive forces theory, but only insofar as it enabled the political passivity of his old enemies in the Second International; he seems to understand the dominance of productive forces as a frequently misinterpreted idea rather than a mistaken one.

9 John Milios, *The Origins of Capitalism as a Social System: The Prevalence of an Aleatory Encounter* (London: Routledge, 2018): 21.

the 19th century was a ‘capitalist mode of production’ while Poland was a ‘feudal mode of production’, and so on.

It is tempting to accept these relatively simple definitions without interrogating their finer intricacies. However, Marx is very explicit that *Capital* takes as its object “the capitalist mode of production, and the relations of production and forms of intercourse that correspond to it.”¹⁰ If we take Marx at his word (and recognize how theories of the mode of production have played a major role in the political history of communism), then the necessity of a closer examination of the concept in Marx’s work becomes obvious. What exactly is designated by the terms ‘forces’ and ‘relations’, and how does Marx understand their *unity* as the mode of production?

The concept of mode of production appears in forms similar to those present in *Capital* as early as the “Manifesto of the Communist Party” of 1848 but is more seriously interrogated in the *Grundrisse* of 1857-1858. Whereas in the “Manifesto” Marx and Engels refer to the “bourgeois” mode of production, here Marx consistently refers to a “mode of production based on capital” and a “mode of production founded on capital,”¹¹ indicating the notion of a mode of producing best suited to the tendencies, laws, and needs of capitalist development. This wording change should not be read as superficial. Marx indicates that the concept of the capitalist mode of production refers to a group of relations and forces which both reproduce and are reproduced by capital’s autotelic tendency towards self-valorization.

This gives us some idea of the *ends* of the mode of production: it is the system of forces and relations which function to reproduce and multiply capital. But how do we differentiate the roles of forces and relations in a conceptually significant way? As Göran Therborn writes,

10 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1992): 90. In this passage from the first preface to *Capital*, Marx asserts the capitalist mode of production in England as the “*locus classicus*” of the concept. For productive debates on this claim’s relation to Marx’s later writings on colonialism and uneven development, see essays by Teodor Shanin, Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan, and Haruki Wada in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the ‘Peripheries of Capitalism’*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

11 See See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Classics, 1993): 251 and 604 for typical examples.

Marx and Engels neither defined their concepts systematically nor used them entirely consistently, even after their new theory had matured. In a loose sense, their signification is clear. ‘Forces of production’ denotes the level of technological development, and ‘relations of production’ includes at least the distribution of the means of production.¹²

This definition of forces of production is consistent with Marx’s, though it is important to note that immediate labor practices should also be understood as key components of the forces of production.

Therborn’s definition of relations of production, on the other hand, is still ambiguous here, and understandably so, for Marx is often unclear as to which social relations should be counted among the relations of production. The assertion in the above quote that the relations of production must minimally include the distribution of the means of production is strongly supported by Marx’s assertion in *Capital, Vol. III* that “the relations of distribution are essentially identical with these relations of production, the reverse side of the same coin, so that the two things share the same historically transitory character.”¹³ Yet in this very same passage, Marx refers to relations of production more broadly as “relations into which men enter in their social life-process, in the production of their social life.”¹⁴ The distributive definition of capitalist relations of production as the control of the means of production (capitalist ownership), dominion over surplus-labor (surplus-value valorized), and mode of exploitation (wage-labor) can thus be contrasted with a broader definition which understands relations of production as social relations *in general* insofar as they are determined by the processes of capitalist production. This second definition grants Marxist theorists the leeway to explore how seemingly non-economic relations can be understood as products of exploitation; it also risks functionalist readings which see culture and politics as wholly dependent extensions of

12 Göran Therborn, *Science, Class, and Society: On The Formation of Sociology and Historical Materialism* (London: New Left Books, 1976): 354.

13 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Classics, 1993): 1018.

14 Marx, *Capital, Vol. III*, 1018.

production proper. Consequently, the more textually grounded and conceptually narrow understanding of relations of production as relations of distribution will be more fruitful for my analysis in later sections, although it should be said that some production relations (value-form, money-form, commodity-form, etc.) cannot be explained purely in reference to the distribution of a given group of elements.

In the capitalist mode of production, forces and relations of production yield changes and are in turn affected by the changes they produce.¹⁵ Marx himself noted early in the drafting of the notebooks published as the *Grundrisse* the importance of examining the nature of the “[d]ialectic of the concepts productive force (means of production) and relation of production, a dialectic whose boundaries are to be determined, and which does not suspend the real difference.”¹⁶ The fundamental ambiguity of this dialectic has resulted in ardent debates over whether relations or forces hold causal primacy. As previously mentioned, the dominance of forces was espoused by both the Second International and Stalin—by the former to insist on the unavailability of revolution in industrialized turn-of-the-century Europe and by the latter to underscore the importance of strengthening industry within the Soviet Union. However, as global revolution failed to materialize in Europe but erupted in the 20th century throughout the so-called peripheries of capitalism, theorists and revolutionaries like Mao Zedong would argue contra Stalin that it was relations, rather than forces, which determined changes in the mode of production.¹⁷ In a series of drafts to the Russian revolutionary

15 In an early draft chapter of *Capital*, “Results of the Immediate Production Process,” Marx argues that the capitalist mode of production is capable of surmounting obstacles which “would prevent it from buying this or that kind of labour-power as it sees fit, or from appropriating this or that kind of labour.” Yet, at the same time, this process of overcoming inevitably results in the creation of new obstacles for the capitalist mode of production to surpass; it “raises obstacles in the way of its own tendency” even as it “pushes to one side all *legal* and other *extra-economic* obstructions standing in the way of this versatility” (Karl Marx, “Results of the Immediate Production Process,” in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1992): 1013). It is possible to read this as an explanation of capital’s power to totally subsume all elements opposed to it, but I would suggest that the passage be read as evidence that even when the capitalist mode of production subsumes a particular labor-process, the mode of production changes as it begins to produce new obstacles for itself as an effect of this subsumption. This gives us an (admittedly vague) idea of how Marx thinks the effectivity of past labor-processes within capitalist labor-processes.

16 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 109.

17 Rebecca Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 94.

Vera Zasulich written shortly before his death, Marx seems to foreshadow Mao's argument when he suggests that the Russian agrarian commune could, supported by technological achievements already attained in Western Europe, provide a *relational* basis for Russia to shift from a pre-capitalist mode of production to a communist one: "[the commune] may become the direct *starting-point* of the economic system towards which modern society is tending; it may open a new chapter that does not begin with its own suicide."¹⁸

However, Marx's highly qualified suggestion in the letter to Zasulich sharply contrasts with numerous passages in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* wherein he insists that shifts from pre-capitalist modes of production to a capitalist mode require a certain level of technological and practical development of productive forces.¹⁹ As Jason Read notes, Marx "vacillates between ascribing the determinant role to forces or relations of production—at times leaning toward a technological determinism and at times implying that technology is only an effect or a sign of a larger social process."²⁰ Coming to terms with this vacillation shifts the emphasis of the forces/relations problem away from debates of primacy towards a comprehension of forces as distinct from (but united with) relations such as the value, commodity, and money-forms, wage-labor, capitalist ownership of the means of production, the division of labor, as well as the constitutive *struggles* between the classes produced by the totality of these relations.²¹ In this understanding of forces and relations "it is not so much a matter of deciding between the economic transformation of forces and political conflicts of classes, but of comprehending the point where one effects and transforms the other."²²

Marx's understanding of the capitalist mode of production as a specific combination of forces and relations is supplemented throughout his work by a related but distinct view of the capitalist mode of production

18 Karl Marx, "Drafts of a reply" in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the 'Peripheries of Capitalism'*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 121.

19 For one of many such passages, see Marx, *Grundrisse*, 297.

20 Jason Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003): 115.

21 See: Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital* (London: Verso, 2019): 199-210.

22 Jason Read, "Mode of Production," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019): 345.

as representative of a particular historical period. For Marx, the capitalist mode of production characterizes an epoch in global history. Old organizational and economic forms which exist alongside the capitalist mode of production in a given social formation or which come into contact with capital via the world market are transformed by its hunger for valorization:

. . . as soon as peoples whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave-labour, the *corvee*, etc. are drawn into a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production, whereby the sale of their products for export develops into their principal interest, the civilized horrors of over-work are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom etc.²³

Even if some of the specific relations and forces which constitute the mode of production best suited for capital are absent from a given social formation, labor-processes in this formation may still be dominated indirectly by other capitalist relations—the commodity-relation, production for surplus-value, and the vicissitudes of global commodity-exchange.

Marx grapples with the distinction between the mode of production proper to capital and the period dominated by the capitalist mode of production in part with the concepts of *real* and *formal subsumption*. Formal subsumption is the “general form of every capitalist process of production”²⁴ in which non- or pre-capitalist labor-processes are adopted by the capitalist for the generation of surplus-value—at this stage, “the labour process itself is no more than the *instrument* of the *valorization process*.”²⁵ In formal subsumption, improvements in the labor-processes itself are minimal, and “surplus-value can be created only by lengthening the working day, i.e. by increasing *absolute surplus-value*.”²⁶ It is only in real subsumption, where capital influences the practical and technological

23 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 345.

24 Marx, “Results of the Immediate Production Process”, 1019

25 Ibid, 990.

26 Ibid, 1021.

development of the labor-process itself, that the forces of production are developed to produce *relative surplus value*. Here, the full array of relations of production are realized: “capitalist production now establishes itself as a mode of production *sui generis* and brings into being a new mode of material production.”²⁷

Even if the concepts of real and formal subsumption explain that the capitalist mode of production can adopt a labor-process without fully transforming it, there remain in Marx’s work a great number of ambiguities and questions about the relationship between different kinds of labor-processes and the capitalist relations which dictate the distribution of surplus-value these processes generate. Concepts of subsumption are a formal means of explaining disparate labor-processes which all yield surplus-value, but they do not explore the differential effects of capitalist relations of production taking hold of diverse forms of labor. Marx leaves us to ask: what concepts are adequate for describing the ways in which capital’s autotelic drive for self-valorization unevenly exerts its influence over a variety of labor-processes? It is this question, perhaps more than any other, which animates Althusser and Balibar’s approach to modes of production.

II. Balibar and Althusser’s Interventions

Reading Capital, a collection of essays which emerged from a Marx seminar at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris, was first published in France in 1965. Over the next fifteen years, Althusser’s comments on modes of production in “The Object of Capital” and Balibar’s more comprehensive essay “On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism” were both embraced, analyzed, and eventually lambasted and discarded. Marxist *doxa* rapidly shifted accordingly, and *Reading Capital*, it was more or less agreed, was little more than an abortive attempt to turn Marx structuralist.

However, *Reading Capital* and Althusser’s later writings on the capitalist mode of production remain some of the most ambitious attempts to retheorize the mode of production in opposition to simplistic orthodoxies, both bourgeois and Marxist. These texts were part of an earnest effort to lay out the basic concepts of a Marxist scientific theory

27 Ibid, 1035 (italics removed).

of history as established by Marx in the three volumes of *Capital*. They were also an early attempt to understand the heterogeneity of historical time and the non-teleological development of the capitalist mode of production.²⁸ In contrast to Second International and Stalinist orthodoxy, which placed the forces of production or economic relations broadly construed at the heart of all historical development, Balibar and Althusser insisted on the importance of non-economic social determinations and the non-linear and overdetermined nature of historical development.

Balibar's *Reading Capital* essay, "On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism," was, at the height of its popularity, the ur-text for Althusserian work on the mode of production.²⁹ In it, Balibar controversially attempted to find within *Capital* a general theory for all historical modes of production, not just the capitalist mode. Importantly, Balibar repeatedly emphasizes that the text should be viewed as a *beginning* of such a theory, stating at the outset that "weak and open points will appear which will demand the production of new theoretical concepts explored by Marx, and make this production possible."³⁰ Moreover, Balibar's text is not an attempt to devise methods for empirical work; it is, along with the rest *Reading Capital*, a philosophical reading of *Capital*. That these simple caveats were ignored by a number of the essay's advocates should not be held against it.

In the text, Balibar establishes the mode of production as the central concept of Marx's theory of history. As I indicated previously, the concept of the mode of production (for our purposes, the capitalist mode of production especially) can be understood as an indicator of a particular

28 Althusser and Balibar's conceptual novelty, while considerable, should not be overstated. Leon Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development was a few decades old when *Reading Capital* was written, and Antonio Gramsci's work had emphasized the importance of non-economic factors in social causality. For compelling accounts of the concept of heterogeneous time in the work of Trotsky and Gramsci as well as José Carlos Mariátegui, Ernst Bloch, Wang Yanan, Walter Benjamin, Uno Kōzō, and others, see Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) and Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*, trans. Peter D. Thomas and Sara R. Farris (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

29 Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst's *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*, perhaps the most infamous 'Althusserian' work of this period, draws heavily (and critically) on Balibar's text, whereas Althusser is scantily mentioned (See: Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975)). Based on the influence of "On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism," much of High Althusserianism might have been better termed High Balibarism.

30 Balibar, "Basic Concepts," 367.

world-historical phenomenon and as a concrete combination of relations and forces. Balibar refers to these two definitions as the two principles of the mode of production, “the principle of *periodization* and the principle of the *articulation of the different practices* in the social structure.”³¹ Each mode of production is constituted by the unity of a particular *combination* (*Verbindung*) or *distribution* of forces and relations over which the relations are *in a technical sense* always dominant.³² Yet, as Robert P. Resch notes, this framing is misleading, as it is the *unity* of forces and relations which is of key importance for Balibar:

The class struggle is determined by the unity of a mode of production: the level of economic development defines the universe of class interests and powers, but economic development is nothing but the manifestation of the interests and powers of social classes. The primary contradiction between the forces and relations of production does not turn on the “primacy” of one or the other—economism or voluntarism—but rather on the antagonistic class interests and powers produced by both.³³

Balibar, drawing on *Capital, Vol. 2*,³⁴ explains that this unified combination of relations and forces contains common elements (specifically the laborer, non-laborer, and means of production) which can be found in all

31 Ibid, 362.

32 Althusser and Balibar, in contradistinction to both orthodox Marxism’s rigid definitions and Marx’s somewhat indeterminate characterizations of forces and relations, define forces of production as specific, *technical* relations between the object of labor, the means of labor, and labor-power/the worker which make up the real appropriation/immediate labor-process of production (Balibar, “Basic Concepts,” 416). The other relations of production which make up Marx’s combinatory are relations of ownership (Ibid, 373-374)—in the capitalist mode of production, capital dominates the means of production and exercises control over the labor-process and its fruits.

33 Robert Paul Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 87. It should be noted that Resch’s use of the term “interest” here is of his own choosing and is not used in Balibar’s essay in any systematic manner.

34 “Whatever the social form of production, workers and means of production always remain its factors. But if they are in a state of mutual separation, they are only potentially factors of production. For any production to take place, they must be connected. The particular form and mode in which this connection is effected is what distinguishes the various economic epochs of the social structure.” In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume II*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Classics, 1992): 120.

historical modes of production, not simply the capitalist mode of production. It is this group of general components which grants historians and social scientists the philosophical basis for making comparisons between different historical modes.³⁵ However, Balibar emphasizes that these combinations, detached from the concrete-real, are “only notional elements”³⁶ which have nothing to tell us about the unfolding of history. These categories form a conceptual *ground* rather than a methodological *model* for the Marxist theory of history; social scientists cannot simply rearrange the component elements of the combination as they wish in order to dream up possible modes of production. In this sense Marx’s *Verbindung* is completely distinct from the *combinatory* of linguistic structuralist thought, “in which only the place of the factors and their relationships change, but not their nature, which is not only *subordinate* to the system in general, but also *indifferent*.”³⁷

Balibar’s principle of *periodization* attempts to explain how Marx’s theory understands diachronic changes in relations between elements in the synchronic mode of production combination. He posits that transition can be explained by a dynamic of *correspondence* or *non-correspondence* between the relations of production and the forces of production in a given mode of production. Resch writes:

When in correspondence, the forces and relations of production are in a relationship of “reciprocal limitation” such that the social formation reproduces both relations essentially unchanged. In the case of non-correspondence, by contrast, the reproduction of the relations of production induces a progressive transformation of the productive forces and, eventually, a displacement of the instances within the social formation.³⁸

Transitions between different modes, whether taking place at the level of a single capital or multiple capitals, occur via relations of non-

35 Balibar, “Basic Concepts,” 369.

36 Ibid, 387.

37 Ibid, 388.

38 Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, 95.

correspondence within transitional modes such as manufacture, whereas relations of correspondence (present in really subsumed industrial capitalism) reproduce relations as they are. Importantly, multiple modes may coexist within the same formation, rendering transition on a mass scale uneven and overdetermined. Yet, it is at times unclear whether Balibar's analysis of transition refers to determinations *internal* to each individual mode of production—that is, each mode of production as it exists as an individual capital—or if Balibar is implying that the concept of transition can only be theoretically analyzed as a concatenation of concentrated but distinct modes.

While Balibar is careful to disavow the structuralist combinator, his attempt to generalize concepts of transition between vastly different modes of production maintains its coherence only because it is derived from Marx's vague indications regarding transitions between modes of production other than feudalism and capitalism. This lack of specificity in Marx's work is a theoretical deficit calcified by its conceptualization in Balibar's essay. Marx's critique of political economy is firstly a critique of capitalism; it is comprehensive and precise when Marx addresses the specific tendencies of the capitalist mode of production rather than questions of production in general. Consequently, Balibar's own analysis is strongest when it uncovers how Marx's concepts shape his understanding of the capitalist mode of production and weakest when it asserts the universal, transhistorical utility of the Marxist theory of history.³⁹

These deficits aside, it can still safely be asserted that Balibar's essay was fundamentally misunderstood by many of its readers in the English-speaking world. Both its critics and adherents tended to view it as the very thing Balibar repeatedly emphasized it was *not*—a model for historical analysis designed to replace the methods and practices of empirical history.⁴⁰ While footnotes mentioning anthropologist Claude Meillassoux and historian Charles Bettelheim in “On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism” do suggest that the text promotes the incorporation of these

39 This should not be taken to mean that Marx's work can *only* be used to study capitalist labor-processes, but rather that Marx is, above all, a theorist and critic of capitalism, and his work reflects this.

40 Balibar, “Basic Concepts,” 421.

concepts into these fields, Balibar takes great pains in the original text to emphasize that the point of his analysis is to explain the *grounding concepts* for Marx's historical theory in *Capital*, not to provide a handbook for sociology, anthropology, or history. In a 1973 self-criticism, he returned to this point:

These concepts only indicate and in some sense formally orient the general problematic (I say problematic and not theory) of 'historical materialism' at work in certain definite theoretical analyses of Marx's. They cannot anticipate their content. Logically this means that at most I can suggest the following: when the (social) form of the combination that characterizes the mode of production in the strict sense (a combination of determinate 'relations of production' and 'productive forces') changes, then the conditions in which an 'economic', 'political' or 'ideological' instance intervenes historically, i.e., the conditions in which effects, themselves combined, of specifically 'economic', 'political' and 'ideological' class struggles are constituted and occur, necessarily change too in a determinate manner.⁴¹

Of course, social scientists of various fields, including Bettelheim and Meillassoux, were heavily influenced by Althusser and Balibar's work on the mode of production, and many of them did treat *Reading Capital's* generalized theory of history as a model rather a means of orienting the general problematic. In many cases, such as the work of Meillassoux, Bettelheim, and others like Pierre-Philippe Rey and Emmanuel Terray, the deployment of Balibar's concepts produced important pieces of scholarship which are still discussed today. In the work of others, particularly sociologists Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, rigid formalizations of Althusser's admittedly inconstant concepts of science, ideology, and production provoked a kind of mass anti-Althusserian reaction among esteemed Anglophone social scientists and historians,

⁴¹ Étienne Balibar, "Self-Criticism: Answer to Questions from 'Theoretical Practice,'" in *Theoretical Practice* 7-8 (1973): 62.

which would continue in subdued form within some strains of Marxist thought for decades to come.⁴²

Both productive and unproductive readings of *Reading Capital* tended to relate to misunderstandings of how for Althusser and Balibar structure relates to what Marx calls the *concrete-real*, which we might commonsensically call the objective world. Althusser, wishing to avoid attributing social causality to an essence or expression in the vein of Hegel or Leibniz *or* to a brute empiricism, argued that structures have a real effectivity in social totalities, but not an effectivity which can be understood as an essence exterior to the totality or one which can function as a single explanatory principle for all social phenomena. Somewhat cryptically, Althusser wrote that the concept of *structural causality*

implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that *the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.⁴³

In his important book *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser*, Panagiotis Sotiris lays out two possible readings of structural causality. In the first, “we can read [structural causality] as a highly original conception of structural determinations and/or law-like tendencies that do not have any existence of their own other than that in concrete social formations. In this sense, structure is not ontologically prioritised, nor is it considered to be beneath the surface.”⁴⁴ On this reading, structure is the totality of specific interrelated social determinations, tendencies immanent to the concrete-real in its embodiment: “The structure exists at the same ontic level with concrete historical events, providing the mechanism of their

42 Hindess and Hirst’s *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*, in which the authors announced “We reject the notion of history as a coherent and worthwhile object of study,” (Hindess and Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes*, 320), famously incurred the wrath of Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, whose anti-“Althusserian” polemic *The Poverty of Theory, or an Orrery of Errors* (London: Merlin Press, 1978) was little more than a veiled attack on Hindess and Hirst’s theoreticism.

43 Louis Althusser, “The Object of Capital,” in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (London: Verso, 2015): 344.

44 Panagiotis Sotiris, *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser* (Leiden: Brill, 2020): 58.

necessarily contradictory unity and articulations, in a line similar to Deleuze's concept of the plane of immanence."⁴⁵

Many readers in Althusser's first reception did not take up this definition, instead drawing their understanding from the places where:

Althusser seems to suggest [...] that the break between science and ideology means bringing forward what exists beneath the veil of ideological mystification, a deeper or latent social reality. It is here that the actual danger of 'structuralism' lies, in the treatment of structure not as a relational conception of social reality, but as the hidden secret, the inner grammar of social reality.⁴⁶

Pierre Macherey was cognizant of the possibility of such a "transcendental conception" of structure during the writing of *Reading Capital* (as Warren Montag has detailed) and his exchanges with Althusser indicated that he too was concerned about the possibility of this reading.⁴⁷ Yet in a reply to Macherey, Althusser indicated his uncertainty that he would be able to clarify this ambiguity, "to leap over this barrier means of course to replace the provisional concepts with better defined concepts. I still lack the latter. If you can help me and enlighten me, I ask you to do so immediately. It's of the greatest importance. . . to know if it is possible today to go further."⁴⁸

Perhaps as a response to their inability to comprehensively explain the relationship between structure (and thus a mode of production) and concrete-reality, both Althusser and Balibar would later criticize the abstract nature of the High Althusserian *combination*. In his self-critical period of the early 1970s, Balibar stated that his struggle to construct a general theory of history had slipped into structuralist excess, and plainly asserted "that every historical "transition" is different, materially and consequently conceptually."⁴⁹ Althusser, undoubtedly recognizing

45 Sotiris, *Philosophy for Communism*, 59.

46 Ibid, 60.

47 Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013): 96.

48 Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 74.

49 Étienne Balibar, 'Sur la dialectique historique. Quelques remarques critiques à

problems and tensions in his and Balibar's texts (but remaining dedicated to defending it),⁵⁰ attempted to provide a more flexible formulation of the mode of production theory in his manuscript *Sur la reproduction*, published in English in 2014 as *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

In the text, Althusser explores the conceptual consequences of the thesis of the coexistence of multiple modes of production within the same social formation. His explanation hinges on the notion that one mode in a social formation *exercises dominance* over all others in said social formation. A cursory reading of this argument might lead a reader to infer that this dominance refers to a simple majority of modes: if in a given social formation, the majority of labor-processes meet the criterion of the specifically capitalist mode of production, then and only then is that social formation capitalist.

Yet, Althusser is more cautious in his analysis than it may at first appear. Although he seemingly describes a dominant mode imposing itself totally over dominated modes, he is actually saying something more complex. Althusser's argument is, in fact, that the *relations* of the capitalist mode of production exert influence over and even partially replace the relations of the dominated modes while retaining (or leaving relatively or temporarily unchanged) the dominated forces of production:

It is... a question of the contradiction, in the social formation under consideration, between the productive forces of the whole set of modes of production in that social formation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the relations of production of the mode of production currently dominant. This distinction is crucial. If we fail to make it, we will talk wildly and inaccurately about 'correspondence' and 'non-correspondence', confusing two very different types of

propos de "Lire le Capital", *La Pensée* 170: 45. Quoted in Sotiris, *Philosophy for Communism*, 65.

⁵⁰ Althusser explicitly defends the notion of *Verbindung*/combination in multiple texts, especially as it appears in "On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism." In a footnote in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Althusser passionately defended Balibar's contribution against critics and thoughtless adopters, writing "it is an original, fruitful 'contribution'. This is worth noting, in order to distinguish those who make the risky attempt to discover something from those who content themselves with repeating things they owe to others so as not to have to 'think for themselves'." Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014): 26.

unity: first, the unity, internal to a mode of production, between its productive forces and relations of production, and, second, the (always contradictory) ‘unity’ between the dominated modes of production and the dominant mode of production.⁵¹

If this is the case, it is imprecise to simply say that a dominant mode dominates subordinate modes—we instead must speak specifically of relations of production as determinations which dictate the character of multiple kinds of forces of production within a given social formation.

Althusser is clearly attuned to the limitations of the schema of dominating relations/dominated forces. In fact, he makes his concern quite clear when he clarifies that

We clearly ‘sense’ that the productive forces put into operation in the various labour processes in the productive process of a single mode of production are not just added up or added up any which way. Addition is the record of an observation that ‘counts things up’. We have to set out from it, of course, but we cannot remain at that level. We suspect that what we are describing in the form of a sum is not a random aggregation; but a specific combination that has, for each mode of production, a specific unity which, precisely, founds the material possibility of this combination or conjunction; we come to terms with it empirically by breaking it down into the form of elements that we then add up.⁵²

An interrelated group of labor-processes governed by specific relations of production, forms of appropriation, or laws of motion should not, then, be treated as a uniform aggregate comprehensible purely through its submission to a particular set of dominant relations of production. Rather, this federated combination must be taken as a unity of *particular* labor-processes or forces of production, in which no labor-process can be

51 Althusser, *On Reproduction*, 20.

52 Althusser, *On Reproduction*, 26.

reduced to or obfuscated by another for the sake of a more homogenous analysis. It is this simplifying theoretical tendency which reduces regions or nations entirely to ‘Asiatic’ or ‘feudal’ modes of production while failing to consider them as constituted by a rich diversity of interrelated labor practices governed, in the last instance, by more-or-less unitary forms of social domination.

Althusser’s comments on the mode of production, best read as a reply to *Reading Capital’s* critics, open the door for a new discussion of a genuinely non-teleological concept of the capitalist mode of production which regards specific labor-processes as determined by dominant relations of production or relations of *exploitation*. In other words, diverse labor-processes governed by shared relations remain diverse; they are not all homogeneously subjected to a law which ineludibly destines their arrival at the specifically capitalist mode of production even if they are still bound together by certain necessary capitalist relations.

In this way, Althusser offers a needed corrective to Balibar’s incisive but woefully misconstrued essay. Here correspondence between relations of production and productive forces/specific labor-processes is only ever one-to-one in a relative sense. When a particular labor-process matches the criteria set out by Marx as the “specifically capitalist mode of production” in *Capital*, it may, as Marx argues, represent the most efficient means for an individual capital to valorize value and survive the war of attrition that is the competitive market, but it does not represent the inevitable form of capitalist development, nor does it help us understand the real combination of labor-processes, ownership, and exchange which allow for total social capital of the capitalist class⁵³ to valorize itself and expand transnationally.

Capital, Marx explains, “*does nothing but bring together the mass of hands and instruments which it finds on hand. It agglomerates them under its command.*”⁵⁴ Althusser and Balibar’s work on the mode of production, despite its controversial pretensions towards generality, is a careful response to the problem posed by the obvious follow up question to Marx’s assertion: *If capital brings together only the elements it finds on hand, then how does the diversity of its findings influence the path of its development?* Althusser and Balibar’s

53 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. II, 177.

54 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 508.

misinterpreted but ultimately powerful efforts to locate the answer to this question in Marx's work offers us a means of connecting Althusser's second reception to work attempting to answer this question today.

III. Revisiting Exploitation and Subsumption

The mode of production debates of the 1960s and 1970s in which Althusser and Balibar's texts played a notable role were, in truth, a global affair. Thinkers and revolutionaries across multiple continents, cognizant of the need to oppose dogmatic understandings of the capitalist mode of production, took to examining the diverse forms of exploitation produced by colonialism and the global development of the capitalist market. The ensuing debates, which were taken up in sociology, anthropology, economics, and history, dealt with a number of interrelated problems: capitalism's origins, its development, its key characteristics, its unevenness. Marxists found themselves increasingly asking when and how capitalist social relations had emerged in colonized nations and whether global exchange or local labor practices were primarily responsible for the emergence of capitalist production.⁵⁵

In a series of articles written in the early-to-mid 1970s (and republished recently to acclaim alongside more recent works in *Theory as History*), Marxist historian Jairus Banaji offered a challenge to what he

55 A number of the debates of the 1960s and 1970s were explicit or implicit responses to Maurice Dobbs and Paul Sweezy's 1950s "transition debates" on the causal primacy of production vs. circulation, which are compiled along with works from other interlocutors in *The Transition From Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. Rodney Hill (London: Verso, 1978). World-systems theorists such as Giovanni Arrighi, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Samir Amin, as well as dependency theorist André Gunder Frank, later put forth theses emphasizing circulation over production. It was in part in response to these figures that the so-called Brenner debate emerged, wherein Robert Brenner put forth that the emergence of agrarian capitalist production in England was the result of a fundamentally political class struggle over the commons (see: *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe*, ed. T. H. Aston, C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)). Debates between Utsa Patnaik, A. Rudra, and others, which focused on capitalist farms as a metric for examining the emergence of capitalism in India, analyzed which empirical methods could be used to determine the form of a mode of production (For a summary, see: Anjan Chakrabarti and Stephen Cullenberg, *Transition and Development in India* (London: Routledge, 2003)). For a helpful commentary on these debates and a helpful synthesis of both productionist and circulationist positions, see Andrew B. Liu, "Production, circulation, and Accumulation: The Historiographies of Capitalism in China and South Asia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 78, No. 4 (November 2019): 767-788.

called the “model of co-existing modes of production.”⁵⁶ Banaji argued that the co-existing modes model, formulated in response to the extraordinary diversity of labor processes during the colonial period, ultimately failed to recognize a necessary distinction between the *forms of exploitation* and *relations of production* which together constitute a mode of production. Forms of exploitation are individual types of labor-processes which range from “chattel-slavery, sharecropping or the domination of casual labour-markets, to the coerced wage-labour peculiar to colonial regimes and, of course, ‘free’ wage-labour.”⁵⁷ These types of labor-processes, Banaji claimed, have been wrongfully understood in empirical work as conceptual shortcuts for identifying a society’s mode of production: in this mistaken view, a society dominated by chattel-slavery possesses a slave mode of production, free wage-labor always indicates capitalism, and so on. However, it is *relations* of production, that is, relationships of ownership, distribution, exchange, and valorization, which ultimately indicate the presence of a mode of production in a particular place and time. For Banaji, these relations are compatible with a number of different forms of exploitation, making it possible to speak of American chattel slavery, forced labor in India,⁵⁸ and various forms of sharecropping as potentially capitalist forms of labor.

Banaji’s reconceptualization of the mode of production is an important practical effort to combat schematism and empiricism alike within Marxist historiography—and in fact Banaji’s work has already influenced innovative new histories of capitalism.⁵⁹ However, Banaji’s distinction between forms of exploitation and relations of production

56 Jairus Banaji, “For a Theory of Colonial Modes of Production,” in *Economic and Political Weekly* 7, no. 52 (Dec. 23, 1972): 2499. Banaji explicitly references Pierre-Philippe Rey’s work here, leaving little doubt of the connection between Althusser and Balibar’s work and the concept Banaji critiques here.

57 Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History* (Leiden: Brill, 2011): 359.

58 Banaji criticizes traditional Marxist thought for obfuscating the meaning of Marx’s free/unfree labor dichotomy. See: “The Fictions of Free Labour: Contract, Coercion and so-called Unfree Labor,” in *Theory as History*, 131-154.

59 For two of several recent economic-historical texts on the global history of capitalism which cite Banaji’s influence, see: Andrew B. Liu, *Tea War: A History of Capitalism in China and India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), and John Milios’ *The Origins of Capitalism as a Social System: The Prevalence of an Aleatory Encounter* (London: Routledge, 2018).

should also be understood as an intervention that cuts through from the empirical to the philosophical, from the fact to the concept itself.⁶⁰

At the conceptual level, Banaji's ideas are admittedly somewhat approximate at times—perhaps understandable given his opposition to formalism, which he identifies with staid and linear Stalinist philosophies of history.⁶¹ In earlier work, Banaji defines the form of exploitation as “the particular form in which surplus is appropriated from the direct producers” while relations of production are “the specific historically determined form which particular relations of exploitation assume due to a certain level of development of the productive forces, to the predominance of particular property forms (feudal landed property, etc.) and so on.”⁶² In a recent interview, however, Banaji indicates that the relations of production are in fact “*all* the relations of a given mode of production, including those that belong to the sphere of competition (under capitalism)” and goes on to state that “To reduce the wealth of determinations that belong to ‘relations of production’ to this initial level of abstraction is like saying that Marx did not need to write the rest of *Capital*, he could just have stopped at Volume One. But had he done so, we would have no idea what he really meant by ‘capitalism’.”⁶³ Banaji's understanding of relations of production at times appears deliberately vague or broad in order to permit its flexible application within empirical historical work. Any possible *rapprochement* between Althusser and Balibar's work on modes of production and Banaji's recent innovations requires that both the structuralist-formalist leanings of *Reading Capital* and the empirically motivated opacities of *Theory as History* should be understood as deliberate and integral components of the texts, rather than

60 To quote Banaji on this subject: “Historical materialism as Marx understood this was an integrated conception or field of research, not one divided into disciplines. It is impossible to think of capitalism, for example, in purely economic terms, in abstraction from the state; or to think of the state in abstraction from the cultures that inure large masses of people to passive acceptance (Sartre would say ‘serial acceptance’) of authority and all the values it presupposes and sustains.” Jairus Banaji, “Towards a New Marxist Historiography,” interview by Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée and Frédéric Monferrand: <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/interviews/jairus-banaji-towards-new-marxist-historiography>

61 Banaji, *Theory as History*, 61.

62 Banaji, “For a Colonial Mode of Production,” 2498.

63 Banaji, “Towards a New Marxist Historiography.”

unfortunate deficiencies which can be neatly solved by grafting elements of one work onto the other or vice-versa.

Ambiguities aside, Banaji's intervention stands out as a particularly penetrating example of recent multi-disciplinary work which has taken up the challenge of the original mode of production debates: to theorize historical time, economic change, and the process of subsumption as necessarily uneven and non-teleological. Harry Harootunian's recent book *Marx After Marx* draws upon a myriad of thinkers, including Banaji and the Althusser-influenced Meillassoux, to argue that Marx's formal subsumption represents a *general logic of capital*. This logic continues to have both structural and conjunctural analytic utility in a world continually shaped by the practices and temporalities of the elements capital finds at hand during the subsumption process. As Harootunian explains, "The operation of formal subsumption set up the temporal structure of every present, through its mission to appropriate what it found useful in prior practices and procedures."⁶⁴ Thus for Harootunian, it is always essential to recall Marx's observation that capital's overcoming of the old is always simultaneously the creation of a new which is *defined* by the character of the very old that is overcome. Even a total dominance of capitalist relations over labor-processes is inevitably only ever a dominance over labor-processes which in turn embed themselves within capitalist relations, indirectly dictating the character of their development.

It would be insufficient and unproductive to simply note that Althusser and Balibar, like Banaji, Harootunian, and others,⁶⁵ are also interested in theorizing a heterogenous understanding of modes and relations of production. Few academic Marxists working in the

64 Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University, 2015): 13.

65 I would be remiss if I did not mention the important work on the heterogenous, non-teleological development of labor-processes currently taking place in the *Rethinking Marxism* journal. I am skeptical of this work's reliance on J. K. Gibson-Graham's critique of "capitalocentrism," which I believe bends the stick too far in response to dependency theorists such as Gunder Frank by positing a diversity of individual labor-processes as a constitutive outside to capitalist relations (See: J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Nevertheless, the value of this work for theorizing transition, subsumption, postcolonialism, and feminist socialism is incalculable. For a recent example of the RM approach, see Anjan Chakrabarti, Stephen Cullenberg, and Anup Dhar, "Primitive Accumulation and Historical Inevitability: A Postcolonial Critique," in *Knowledge, Class and Economics: Marxism without Guarantees*, ed. T. A. Burczak, R. F. Garnett Jr., and Richard McIntyre (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018): 288-306.

contemporary conjuncture would deny the necessity of this general disposition. What is actually of note in the meeting of these works is that Banaji/Harootunian and Althusser/Balibar are attempting to deal with a shared *problem* in relation to two different fields, history and philosophy—the problem of the relation between capitalist laws of motion and the tremendous diversity of economic (as well as ideological and political) processes which constitute the sum total of capitalism’s real existence.

For Balibar and Althusser, the major problem is not the problem of multiple modes of production (a.k.a. the co-existing modes thesis critiqued by Banaji) but rather the problem of correspondence between relations and forces of production. In Althusser and Balibar’s conception, transition between modes is characterized by this non-correspondence. Yet if it is true, as Balibar later argued, that transition is never complete but instead *permanent*⁶⁶ and that a one-to-one correspondence between the relations of production (in Harootunian’s terms, *the general form of capitalism*) and the productive forces (similar to Banaji’s *forms of exploitation*) really only represents a collection of relations and forces conducive to capitalist valorization under particular historical circumstances, then actual one-to-one correspondence is nothing but a useful myth of both the concept and concrete-reality, derived from a reading of Marx’s *Verbindung* as a necessary progression towards a specifically capitalist mode of production. On this reading of Althusser and Balibar, there is always a slippage, a *décalage*, between the individual labor-processes in a capitalist society and the relations of production which dictate the extraction of surplus-value in these processes, a *décalage* which defines the relative autonomy of these processes from capital’s homogenizing tendencies.

This reading of Althusser and Balibar contradicts much of the old theoretical doxa which emerged from the first reception of their work. But if we take their self-critical amendments to their project seriously, we can see that they recognized the difficulties inherent in their reading of Marx

66 “Chased away from the definition of contradiction, the metaphor of the “fight to the death” or of the “climb to the extremes” then reappears in the definition of transition, or rather of history as a permanent transition exceeding all structures” in Étienne Balibar, “Les apories de la « transition » et les contradictions de Marx,” in *Théorie sociologique de la transition* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 89, translation mine.

from the beginning and were always attentive to the necessarily fragmentary and changeable nature of *Reading Capital's* tentative theory of history. If the task of the first reception of Althusser was to minimize the problems of *Reading Capital's* theoretical provocations, then the task of a return to the text amidst the second reading would be to ask what these problems imply and how these implications relate to the work of other communist thinkers and militants.

In their work, Banaji and Harootunian ultimately engage in a *political* intervention within historiography. Despite the fact that it has become old hat in some Marxist circles to superficially acknowledge the relationship between Marx's work and the socio-historical context in which it emerged, it has been a slow and contentious war of attrition to articulate the ways in which traces of England are embedded in Marx's thought. The emerging trend in Marxism represented by Banaji and Harootunian, among many others, constitutes a genuine effort to carry out this task while still recognizing the importance of Marx's thought and concepts. Reading Althusser and Balibar alongside this developing tendency allows us to see the ways in which their early texts mirror these new ones, to understand how these new developments surpass some of *Reading Capital's* theoretical limitations, and to ask how the similarities and disparities between the two help us to articulate an understanding of capitalism in the current conjuncture as characterized by a relative *consistency* in its relations and an ephemeral *heterogeneity* in its particular labor-processes.

A return to the problems of "On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism" and *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* can and must take on a distinct meaning within the second reception of Althusser, and within the contemporary conjuncture taken as a whole. A vast array of new theoretical avenues has opened up as a result of recent (re)discoveries of Althusser's esoteric concepts and concerns. A return to concepts rendered verboten by the theoretical failings of the first reception will only be enriched by the company of the concepts of the second reception. Both sets of concepts, explored together in light of their practical and philosophical potential rather than the possibility of their formalization, offer the thinkers of the second reception a chance to reinvigorate past theoretical adventures, and to unite with Marxist thinkers of all disciplines to embark on new ones.

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