

# 1

## Questions of Method

I would like, then, to begin with a warning against two common errors. The first consists of deducing concrete reality from immanent laws which are themselves deduced from a universal concept (Imperialism, Dependency). The second is simply the other side of the same coin: analysing every concrete development in terms of the needs of the said concept, or, to be more specific, analysing the internal evolution of national socio-economic formations as though they were merely parts of a musical score conducted by a world maestro, even if we do admit that the maestro is not himself a (bad) subject.

### **Imperialism, or The Beast of the Apocalypse**

A few years ago, Umberto Eco, an Italian intellectual who has seen it all before but who is not totally disillusioned, published a remarkable detective novel entitled *The Name of the Rose*. It tells how William de Baskerville, a Franciscan Sherlock Holmes, solves a mysterious series of murders that take place in a medieval abbey. The murders seem to follow on from one another like the curses of the Apocalypse. By pursuing this line of investigation, William discovers both the murderer and the motive, and realizes that there is a specific reason for each murder. Each has its immediate

causes, and they have nothing to do with the Apocalypse. But (and this is the final twist) the murderer himself is convinced that he is acting out the scenario of the Apocalypse. At least one of the murders was staged accordingly. In the final analysis, he did play the role of the Antichrist – in a very specific sense.

William (who is of course primarily a mouthpiece for William of Ockham, the great English Franciscan philosopher of the Middle Ages, and one of the founders of modern rationalism, but who is also, in turn, a mouthpiece for C.S. Peirce, the American who founded semiotics) concludes that general laws are of weak help when it comes to analysing the complexity of particular events.

It is a very good novel, and a very instructive one. By conceptualizing, generalizing and turning our thoughts into dogma, we invented our own Beasts of the Apocalypse ... and then tried to deduce future developments in concrete history from their characteristics. In the sixties, we argued that the immutable laws of imperialism would inevitably widen the gulf between nations and that they would always lead to a polarity between wealth and poverty. And then we deduced an inevitable sequence of stages of development and underdevelopment. We forecast the impossibility of industrial development in the dominated countries. Yet what did we have to say when, in the seventies, Britain's decline accelerated, the USA slowed down, and the 'Newly Industrializing Countries' started to take off in imperialism's 'backyard'?

Some of us immediately began to retheorize everything and went back to other verses from the Apocalypse that prophesied a different but equally necessary future. Bill Warren dug out Marx's old text on how the Indian railways would bring capitalist relations in their wake just as surely as the productive forces were going to revolutionize the relations of production.<sup>1</sup> That, however, was one of the great prophet's more memorable howlers!

Others, meanwhile, began to reconceptualize history; forecasting that the Centre of the World Economy was going to shift to a vague but watery point somewhere between Tokyo and Los Angeles, and that a new international division of labour was going to emerge fully armed from some

obscure upheaval in World Capital. And when in the 1980s the NICs began to be hit by the crisis, yet others who had believed all along in the old division of labour smiled knowingly and said, 'We told you so.' Needless to say, I did not avoid these traps either, and sometimes fell into all three at once.

The truth of the matter is that, as Lenin used to say, history has infinitely more imagination than we have. I mean by this the history of the human race, of an 'objective subject'<sup>2</sup> which makes its own history. It is not a subject with a project, but a vast body made of up millions of subjects struggling against one another. Its history is the history of their victories and defeats.

Marx, not to mention Mao Zedong, also warns us in very nominalist terms against the temptation to believe in the 'realism of concepts', against the idea that all we have to do in order to understand the Particular is to grasp the Universal. The Universal is no more than an intellectual systematization of our practical experience of the real, and it takes no account of the concrete nature of the real. According to Marx, concepts thus risk becoming fetishes: 'In the *language of speculative philosophy* ... I am declaring that "Fruit" is the "Substance" of the pear, the apple, the almond, etc. ... I therefore declare apples, pears, almonds, etc. to be mere forms of existence, "*modi*" of "*Fruit*". ... It is as hard to produce real fruits from the abstract idea "the fruit" as it is easy to produce this abstract idea from real fruits.'<sup>3</sup>

He makes the same point in the first version of the First chapter of *Capital*: 'If I say that Roman law and German law are both laws, I make myself understood. But if I say that law, that abstract thing, is realized in both Roman and German law, that is in concrete laws, the connection between the two becomes mystical.'<sup>4</sup> This methodological warning is not without its political implications; it is our capacity to analyse history that is at stake. In his critique of Mikhailovsky, Marx compares the proletarianization of the peasantry in Russia and in the Roman Empire: 'Strikingly analogous events which occur in different historical contexts can lead to very disparate results. If we study each of these developments in its own right and then compare them, we can easily find a key to understanding the phenomena,

but we will never understand them by using the pass key of a historico-philosophical theory whose main virtue is that it is supra-historical.<sup>5</sup> And as Engels argues in a letter to Schmidt, if we always define 'mammals' as animals which give birth to living young, we eventually have to 'beg the duck-bill's pardon.'<sup>6</sup> How much longer do we have to go on begging the poor thing's pardon?

### The 'Habits of History'

Does this mean that no rational knowledge is possible in the face of the freedom of history? Are there no universal laws, no necessity, and therefore no science, no generalities and no concepts? Or as Adso, who plays Dr Watson to William's Holmes, says, 'If all laws limit God's freedom, can one conceive of necessary being which is totally polluted with the possible?' William (I mean the real William of Ockham) would say 'Yes'. Because, on the one hand, God in his freedom is subject to the principle of non-contradiction; therefore, not everything may happen. And because, on the other hand, the power of God is materialized in His creation, which is reified, objectified and therefore governed by identifiable regularities. It is a conditioned potentiality, conditioned by the habits of nature as it has been created.

Don't worry; I am not going to give a lecture on theology. But Spinoza did say 'God, or nature, if you prefer', thereby making a distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. And Marx, who knew of only one science – that of history – made it quite clear that men make their own history, but on the basis of conditions inherited from the past.

If we cling firmly to dialectical materialism, there is then a scientific project for understanding history. It implies: 1) the study of the *regularities* which past struggles have imposed upon human relations; 2) the study of the *crises* which arise within those regularities because contradictions are only provisionally resolved; and 3) the study of the *changes* within those regularities that result from humanity's ongoing struggles for or against freedom.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the concepts we use do not drop from the

skies. Rather, they come from the partial systematization of a reality which is itself only partially a system. They then help us to recognize in other situations the general features they elucidate. Either they prove to be pertinent, and can help to liberate people who are oppressed by the habits of history. Or they prove to be ineffective and have to be modified or, if necessary, discarded. It also follows that a number of different partial systematizations or concepts can help to shed light on the same object. Neither sectarianism, concept-fetishism nor book-fetishism – which is even worse – are admissible in concrete analysis.

It is, of course, in studying the system of the world economy that we have to be most careful; Charles-Albert Michalet is quite right to stress that the system itself is no more than a process of partial totalization.<sup>8</sup> Economists study only certain aspects of it, even though we do flatter ourselves into believing (with some reason) that those aspects are 'determinant in the last instance'.

I would stress that our Masters were not unaware of the need for caution. I have quoted Marx and Lenin; now let me quote Cardoso and Faletto, the Fathers of dependency theory: 'The concept of dependence tries to give a meaning to a series of events and situations that occur together, and to make empirical situations understandable in terms of the way internal and external structural components are linked.'<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, it has to be admitted that the concept of Dependency, like the concepts of Modes of Production and Imperialism, soon takes on a life of its own. Too often these concepts plunge us into systems which are not intellectual servants which help us to understand the real, but masters which obscure the real, its specificities, its differences and its transformations. This is why fundamentalism must never prevent us from enriching our concepts, especially by using other concepts which are capable of grasping just what it is about the real that makes it stable enough to be amenable to conceptualization. This is the only way to come to terms with its evolution and its specificities.

Take the case of *the capitalist mode of production*. This is already a rich concept in that it identifies the stabilization of a certain system of human relations in certain countries at a certain time. We know its tendencies and counter-

tendencies, the former from observation and the latter by deduction.

One of the great contradictions of this mode of production relates to its 'commodity' side. Although capitalists can organize production in their factories down to the last detail and can, given their habits and their calculations, establish there an 'iron law of proportionality',<sup>10</sup> in their dealings with the rest of society they behave like any other gambler: their products may or may not find a buyer at a price which makes production profitable (this is the famous 'realization problem'). Yet it works ... except, of course, when there is a crisis. In order to understand how it works we have to produce new concepts. A number of French research workers have proposed the concepts of '*regime of accumulation*' and '*mode of regulation*'.<sup>11</sup> I will describe these concepts in detail later, but we must first say a word as to their methodological status.

A *regime of accumulation* describes the fairly long-term stabilization of the allocation of social production between consumption and accumulation. This implies a certain correspondence between the transformation of the conditions of production and the transformation of the conditions of the reproduction of wage-labour, between certain of the modalities in which capitalism is articulated with other modes of production within *a national economic and social formation*, and between the social and economic formation under consideration and its 'outside world'.

In mathematical terms, a regime of accumulation can be described as a schema of reproduction. Regimes of accumulation exist because their schemas of reproduction are stable; therefore, not all regimes of accumulation are possible. There is of course no reason why all individual capitals should come peacefully together within a coherent schema of reproduction. The regime of accumulation must therefore be materialized in the shape of norms, habits, laws and regulating networks which ensure the unity of the process and which guarantee that its agents conform more or less to the schema of reproduction in their day-to-day behaviour and struggles (both the economic struggle between capitalists and wage-earners, and that between capitals).

The set of internalized rules and social procedures which incorporate social elements into individual behaviour (and one might be able to mobilize Bourdieu's concept of habitus here<sup>12</sup>) is referred to as a *mode of regulation*. Thus, the dominant regime of accumulation in the OECD countries during the postwar period – an intensive regime centred upon mass consumption – has a very different mode of regulation to that operating in nineteenth-century capitalism. In a gesture of homage to Gramsci, we now refer to it as *Fordism*.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that not every mode of regulation can regulate every regime of accumulation and that a single mode can take the shape of different combinations of *partial forms of regulation*. Indirect wages do not, for instance, have the same importance in the USA and in northern Europe.

The important point, however, is that the emergence of a new regime of accumulation is not a pre-ordained part of capitalism's destiny, even though it may correspond to certain identifiable 'tendencies'. Nor is the stabilization of a mode of regulation an expression of the needs of a regime of accumulation which emerges from Plato's cave and dictates its laws to us as though we were mere shades. Regimes of accumulation and modes of regulation are *chance discoveries* made in the course of human struggles and if they are for a while successful, it is only because they are able to ensure a certain regularity and a certain permanence in social reproduction. But, just as nature is full of oddities like duck-bills and toucans which survive in scattered colonies between the 'discontinuous equilibria' that punctuate the evolution of species, so the history of capitalism is full of experiments which led nowhere: aborted revolutions, abandoned prototypes and all sorts of monstrosities. It is pointless to attempt to fit all social formations into the framework of a regime of accumulation adapted to a model situation (such as Fordism). It is not simply that they do not necessarily all conform to *that* regime of accumulation; it may be that they conform to *no* stabilized regime of accumulation. In other words, they may simply be in a state of crisis.<sup>14</sup>

## Pessimistic Functionalism

The above comments on the scarcity of examples of successful capitalism; on the scale of the contradictions it has to resolve if it is to get under way and go on reproducing itself; on the need to 'find' a suitable regime of accumulation and to 'set up' a suitable mode of regulation; and on the fact that the existence of concrete capitalisms is more improbable than necessary – should not be taken as meaning, *a contrario*, that 'if it works, it's because it has been designed to work', that the 'function' of a mode of regulation is to make a regime of accumulation work, that the Welfare State was invented 'in order to' make mass production go on smoothly, etc. ...

It is simply that a given regime of accumulation and certain forms of regulation stabilized at the same time because they allowed social relations to be reproduced for a certain length of time without a crisis arising. At best, we can adopt an *a posteriori* or almost metaphoric functionalism: 'It is as though ...'. It is as though the underdevelopment of the periphery helped capitalism to work in the centre. Which brings me to my second warning.

It is probably in theories of international relations that the tendency to lapse into functionalism or even finalism, which are both the outcome of a belief in systems, is most obvious, and that it inflicts most damage.<sup>15</sup> Ricardo and the supporters of the Heckscher-Ohlin-Samuelson theorem seem, for instance, to believe that the international division of labour is the result of some world conference at which brilliant economists explained to an admiring gallery of politicians that – given relative levels of productivity, collective preferences and the initial endowment of factors – the free play of market forces would ensure the optimal division of production, and that each participant then went home convinced not only of the virtues of free trade but that the law of comparative costs ensured that the lot that had fallen to his or her country was quite justified, and that they could therefore force it to adopt the requisite specialization.

The great achievement of the theoreticians of Imperialism and Dependency is to have swept aside these apologetic fables and to have shown that the undeniable empirical dif-

ferences that exist between economic spaces are differences in wealth and power, and that those who found that this state of affairs worked to their advantage were more likely to rely upon the invisible handshakes of corruption or the eminently audible boots of the military to establish or maintain it, than upon the invisible hand of the market.

Going back to the tradition of Adam Smith rather than that of Ricardo, the Marxists and then the Dependency theorists demonstrated quite correctly that the existence of the 'uneven international development' of capitalism and the stabilization of a certain structure of trade did lead to a more rapid accumulation of capital in the centre because the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production were resolved in capitalism's favour in those countries. It is as though a regime of accumulation existed on a world scale, with the centre-periphery polarization acting as a regulator. They then baptized this state of affairs, or the tendency to impose and reproduce international relations which in one way or another favoured the accumulation of capital in the more developed countries, '*Imperialism*'. And they baptized the corresponding state of affairs or tendencies in countries with a less developed capitalism, '*Dependency*'.

Insofar as they are states of affairs, Imperialism and Dependency are realities: we can of course call a reality whatever we want to call it. But this is only one step away from saying that the regime was imposed (and I stress the impersonality of the grammatical form) on the dominated countries because certain zones *had* to perform the *function* of resolving capitalism's contradictions or, worse still, that 'someone' imposed those relations of domination *in order to* resolve its contradictions. As to whether one believes in finalism or in functionalism, that too is a question of style. One can either take the view that some conscious subject forced the periphery to serve the needs of the centre, or that some immanent world reality separated the centre and the periphery to serve its purposes in the same way that God divided the firmament from the waters of the earth.

Needless to say, the step in the direction of finalism and functionalism was taken very early. To restrict the discussion to the Dependency school, Cardoso took that step in very subtle fashion: 'There is no metaphysical distinction