

Review of: *History and Structure: An Essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History*
Alfred Schmidt, 1981, M.I.T. Press. 146 pages. (Trans. by Jeffrey Herf).
Lee Harvey *Reviewing Sociology*

This translation is the first available of Schmidt's book originally published in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1971. It is unfortunate that it has taken ten years for this short but important work of an eminent German Marx analyst to become available in English as the debate it addresses has become somewhat stale over the intervening decade, although not entirely dead, witness 'People's History and Socialist Theory', recently reviewed in *Reviewing Sociology*, 2(3). Schmidt's book does serve as a useful outline of the fundamental features of the structuralist-historicist debate and makes some useful links to Hegelian philosophy.

The long running structuralist-anti-structuralist debate over Marx's methodology is the essential theme of Schmidt's book. In *Capital* Marx used a method which was both structural-analytic and historical-genetic. Opponents and adherents of structuralism agree on that, according to Schmidt, although the consequences of this, the nature of the dialectic involved and so on are points of contention. Schmidt analyses the debate by analysing the interrelationships between history and structure. He reviews Marx's work, concentrating on *Capital*, shows the Hegelian influences in Marx's methodology and then assesses two opposing interpretations of Marx. The two alternatives are the Marxist structuralism as embodied in Althusser's work and the humanist historicism exemplified by Gramsci. Neither Althusser nor Gramsci come out of the analysis unscathed although, as is the current fashion, Gramsci receives a more sympathetic hearing than Althusser. Schmidt, whose sympathies lie with critical theory joins in the now familiar pursuit of 'Althusser bashing' with a thinly disguised relish. While admitting that Althusser has been useful as a counter-balance to the cult of the 'Younger Marx', by pointing to the philosophical content of *Capital* and attacking the notion that Marx's philosophical work resides solely in his early publications, Schmidt has no time for Althusser's 'anti-Hegelian' insistence on the non-identity of structure and chronology, that is, Althusser's acceptance of the structuralist distinction between diachrony and synchrony.

Schmidt argues that history constituted part of Marx's dialectical way of thinking, but that Marx (and Engels) treated history logically rather than as narrative. What this amounts to is that Marx constructs history schematically in terms that are given by a logical analysis of the prevailing structural mode. In the analysis of capitalism, Marx first grasps the essence of capital theoretically and then adhered to the logic of that analysis in constructing the history. Empirical history then appears to be processed to remove vicissitudinal instances. Marx denied the positivist historicist view of a self-evident unproblematic history. The past cannot be reclaimed, merely reconstituted, and such reconstitution is ideologically imbued. Similarly, Marx denied the utopian view of the linear progress of history. For Marx, history could only be appropriately understood if one had a 'correct grasp of the present'. This required that the primary pivot of attention in the construction of history be the logically generated theoretical perspective. Thus, in effect, the historical data in *Capital* serves primarily to illustrate a theory that has been developed logically. This does not simply mean that Marx rationally reconstructed history to fit his theory as have philosophers of science, such as Lakatos, in order to illustrate the supremacy, logic and rationality of natural science. Indeed, Schmidt points out that Engels, aware of the difficulties presented by the use of history in *Capital*, provides an explanation in the 1859 review of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In this review he points out the reciprocal relationship embodied in the dialectical analysis. Engels argues that it is only in the primary focus of attention that theory dominates empirical history, that essentially, there is an interrelationship between the theory and the empirical history at a critical rational level. There is only a relative deviation between the historical and the logical

methods, the latter being nothing but the former stripped of 'diverting chance occurrences'. Schmidt quotes Engels to the effect that

'The point where history begins must also be the starting point of the train of thought, and its further progress will be simply the reflection in abstract and theoretically consistent form of the historical course. Though the reflection is corrected, it is corrected in accordance with laws provided by the actual historical course, since each factor can be examined at the stage of development where it reaches its full maturity, its classical form'.

Some clarification of Marx's methodology is necessary here, which, incidentally, will be shown to be less nomological than Engels implies. Marx was opposed to the analytic approach of the classical economists because it accepted surface appearances at face value. Marx was concerned to lay bare the essential relationships manifested in capitalism. His aim was to analyse the structure of bourgeois economy dialectically. This involved, initially, taking the social structure as pre-given, and by concentrating on the fundamental unit of capital relations (commodities) to decompose the nature of commodities and thereby reconstitute the relations of production thus revealing the essential structure. History would then be logically reconstructed using this revealed structure as guiding principle. Thus Marx uses structure to guide history, but this theoretical orientation is not a timeless abstraction, it is historically specific, and its illustration is grounded in material history. Essentially, the process incorporates history in the grasping of the essential nature of the totality.

Schmidt argues that Hegel had advocated a process of 'ascending' from the abstract to the concrete and provided a critique of conceptless empiricism. Concrete in this sense does not mean a 'classifiable fact' but a synthetic knowledge, which is more than the subsumption of a mass of cases under a general principle. Schmidt argues that Marx adopted and developed this Hegelian concept. Ideas and facts are not separate realms for Hegel and Marx, rather they are concerned to develop a synthetic knowledge of concrete-universals. First and foremost, knowledge resides in the grasping of the totality, not in empiricist fragmentation.

Schmidt demonstrates how in Hegel and in Marx there is no 'unbridgeable gap' between inductivist and dialectical science.

Marx also reflects Hegelian methodology, according to Schmidt, in preserving the starting, or fundamental unit of analysis throughout. Schmidt suggests that although this point of departure is mediated during the analysis, it remains immanent and effectively the outcome of the analysis is only a further determination of the point of departure. This assessment is somewhat contrived, while Hegel may proceed in such a manner, Marx firmly grounds his dialectical critique in the material world, thus providing the basis for a substantive transformation of the fundamental unit of analysis. Similarly, in proposing the Hegelian heritage in Marx's methodology, Schmidt maintains that Hegel contended that science, once 'complete', must no longer start out from empirical data but from itself. Marx, he contends, reflects this in his analysis of bourgeois economy by starting out from the existent social relations rather than beginning with an analysis of the origin of bourgeois social relations. Marx conceives of bourgeois society, irrespective of its origins, as a closed system explicable in terms of itself. Marx sees nothing inevitable or natural in bourgeois relations of production, essentially they are arbitrary historically specific relations. Thus Marx sees no need to uncover the historical origins. The notion of a closed system of arbitrary relations provides the basis for a structuralist analysis. However, Schmidt argues that while there is a structuralist element in Marx, the way Althusser and Poulantzas have developed it distorts Marx's methodology. Althusser, who in effect, in *Reading Capital* claims the only correct

exegesis of Marx, in fact distorts Marx in two ways, according to Schmidt. Althusser rejects any Hegelian influences on Marx and construes his approach as anti-humanistic and anti-historicistic.

Contrary to the structuralist view, Schmidt maintains that Marx does not reject either the theme of history or of human nature as being ideological. Clearly, in *Capital*, there is no ontological construction of the nature of humanity external to the scientific process of cognition but this does not constitute theoretical anti-humanism. On the contrary, although aiming at analysis of structures and concentrating on the commodity as fundamental unit, Marx, in confronting the surface appearance of 'reality', evolves a view of commodities as fundamentally as social relations between persons.

That such people are mere representatives of a world of commodities is not indicative of anti-humanism, it is not, for Marx, a scientific norm, rather it constitutes a negative condition which is to be transcended. Schmidt maintains that Althusser's concentration on the pre-given structure and his dismissal of historical evolution in total means that history is in fact excluded from the Marxist structuralist account and thus a rigid totalism replaces a dialectical totality.

Although Althusser's attack on historicism was primarily aimed at Lukacs, Satre and Lefebvre, it was Gramsci, according to Schmidt, who initially projected historicist Marxism. Gramsci saw Marxism as a philosophy of praxis which required a general methodology of history. He wanted a historiography that would, without degenerating into a descriptive chronicle, conform to historical sequence and retain the specificity and non-repeatability of events and not sacrifice them to abstract laws. Marx's approach was to get at the essentials of capitalism and then to trace them through structural elements, such as the division of labour, in an historical fashion, using highly generalised material. Gramsci's historiographical approach is less abstract and more philological, specifying the detail of historical 'units'. Gramsci wanted a philosophy of praxis to present a 'concrete historicization of philosophy and its identification with history'. For Gramsci, philosophy without history is nothing but metaphysics. Despite his leanings towards Gramsci, Schmidt is unable to ignore the logical element of historical construction and can see in Gramsci nothing adequately analytic to use in the contemporary analysis of capitalism. While Gramsci and other historicists breathed life into a Marxism being stifled by crude naturalistic social democratic and Soviet Russian orthodoxy in the 1920s and 1930s it did so at the expense of an idealist relapse.

Schmidt's book is a valuable contribution to the debate on structure and history. However, it is not easy reading unless one has some background appreciation of the nature of the problematic addressed. Furthermore, his presentation of the dialectical methodology of Marx presumes a prior knowledge of the general processes of dialectical thought and may lead the less informed reader to presuppose that Marx simply reconstituted history in order to legitimate a preformed theory. The reciprocal nature of the dialectical process at both structural and historical levels is underemphasised. Nonetheless, the essay provides a fairly clear, concise analysis that is worth reading, although no solutions to the debate are offered. Both humanistic historicism and structuralism are shown to be inadequate and Schmidt concludes with the pragmatic advice to Marxist theorists that they should strive at 'determinately negating the structuralist negation' without simply reintroducing a 'mere eschatological philosophy of history'.