

Reading Harold: Class analysis, capital accumulation, and the role of the intellectual

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DRAFT: NOT TO BE QUOTED WITHOUT THE AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

When I first sat down to write this paper, I entertained more than my usual doubts about how I should approach the topic, and about whether or not I had anything to contribute to the discussion. I had accepted an invitation to prepare my thoughts for a conference organized by the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust—and I had never met the man. On top of that, the conference theme is the political economy of South Africa—and I have never been to that country, much less do I consider myself any kind of expert on its political economy.¹

My only real connections to South Africa are relatively minor and indirect: involvement in the anti-apartheid movement (mostly in the United States but also as a member of the Portuguese delegation to the International Conference Against Apartheid, which took place in Lisbon in 1976—a long, and humorous, story), supervising the Ph.D. dissertation of a very bright South African student at Notre Dame (Murray Leibbrandt is now a tenured professor of economics at the University of Cape Town), and my friendship with an inspiring and committed South African cricketer in exile (becoming one of Peter Walshe's colleagues has been one of the highlights of my time at Notre Dame). Indeed, most of my own work in applied or concrete political economy has not been about South or Southern Africa but has mostly concerned Latin America.

As for Harold (if I may), the connection is a bit more direct: I was a member of the founding editorial board of *Rethinking Marxism* and, because of his standing and stature as a Marxist intellectual and activist whose contributions to the rethinking of Marxism we admired and sought to emulate, we invited Harold to join our initial international advisory board.² He graciously accepted, and because we continue to

¹ I want to thank Ann-Marie Wolpe and the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust for inviting me to address the colloquium and for making my visit to Cape Town so enjoyable. I also want to thank Andrew Nash for his generous comments on my paper and to the participants in the colloquium for teaching me both about Harold Wolpe's work and about contemporary issues in South Africa.

² The other members of the original RM advisory board included Michèle Barrett, Rosalyn Baxandall, Johnnetta Cole, Carmen Diana Deere, Terry Eagleton, Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002), Frederic Jameson, Ernesto Laclau, Dominique Lecourt, Rayna Rapp, Stephen Resnick, Sheila Rowbotham, Meredith Tax, Cornel West, and Richard Wolff. Since then, the following scholars have been invited to

want to identify RM with his pioneering intellectual work, Harold's name continues to grace our masthead, in memoriam. Along the way, I have encountered many people who knew him, and I have chanced upon more than a few eloquent testimonies by his comrades and friends. And, of course, I have read (and reread) almost all of his published work. So, while we never met, I feel eerily close to him, and I am quite honored to have been invited to present a paper at a conference in his memory and honor.

From my perspective, this conference is the perfect way to extend Harold's work, by "engaging silences and unresolved issues." Because that's what his theorizing (not to mention his activism, which I know about only indirectly) was all about. And that's what the best tradition of Marxist theorizing, to which Harold made his own seminal contributions, is meant to do: identify and directly engage the issues about which others (especially those in power) want us to remain silent, or from which they want us to deflect attention. We also need to admit the problems and issues that remain unresolved, both in theory and in the social formations within which we work. We need to conduct the abstract theorizing and concrete analyses that, in the end, show that silence reproduces the status quo (or worse) and reproducing the status quo—in theory, in reality—cannot but leave the important topics unresolved.

It was Harold's determined unwillingness to remain silent—in the face of open questions within Marxist theory, confronting and seeking to undo the brutal repressions meted out by South African apartheid and capitalism, imagining both a different Marxism and a different South Africa—and his unrelenting honesty in engaging the unresolved issues of Marxist theory and practice—issues that require us to rethink and not simply abandon the Marxist tradition, even when we draw from and, in turn, contribute to other critical traditions—that should serve as our template of a real intellectual. Those qualities, which separate the best intellectuals of the Marxist tradition and of our own time (and which we can only hope to bequeath to the coming generations) from the academic professionals, expert advisors, and media commentators who either remain silent in the face of, or offer false solutions to, the theoretical and social problems of our time. They seek to find their position within the status quo; our goal is to change it.

So, what is it that made Harold's work so powerful? What is it in that work that allows us, today, to take up the silenced and unresolved issues in political economy? Needless to say, I cannot evaluate the significance or validity of his claims about South Africa per se; I will leave that task to those more qualified than I, and I look forward to reading and hearing their commentaries and interpretations during the course of the conference. For my part, Harold's contributions to Marxism—to the Marxist critique of political economy, his approach to theoretical and social issues, the theoretical incisiveness and innovative methodology he deployed—made the Marxian tradition come alive, by breaking down the limitations that had been imposed on (and, unfortunately, continue to be erected around) Marxian theory from inside and outside that tradition and by using reformulated and reinvigorated concepts to carry out a series of original analyses of contemporary social reality.

As it turns out, those of us associated with RM (and its sponsoring organization, the Association for Economic and Social Analysis) have been pursuing a similar approach for the better part of the past 30 years. We have attempted—in the context of national, anticolonial, and revolutionary struggles across the globe, from Southern Africa to Latin America, as part of the profound questioning of "really existing

join the advisory board: Jack Amariglio, Etienne Balibar, Joseph Buttigieg, Stephen Cullenberg, Nancy Fraser, Julie Graham, Stuart Hall, Manning Marable, Gayatri C. Spivak, and myself.

socialism,” encouraged by the rereading of Marxian theory carried out by Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, and others—to rethink some of the key concepts and methods of analysis within the Marxian tradition, to discover moments within that tradition that had been forgotten or overlooked and to reinvigorate that tradition by taking detours through other approaches to critical social theory (including poststructuralism and postmodernism).

Of course, Harold did not solve all the problems he took up, although he made what can only be considered valiant efforts. And that’s the legacy that has been handed down to us: not the conclusions necessarily, nor formulas that we can merely replicate or repeat, but a way of identifying and grappling with difficult issues and unresolved problems. In other words, he left to us a way of proceeding, of breaking through the theoretical logjams and impasses that have been produced within and by the Marxian tradition, of opening up Marxism to a different encounter—with itself and with social reality.

My aim in this brief paper is to report on our project of rethinking Marxism and to identify the parallels with and departures from Harold’s work, explaining what I consider we have accomplished and identifying what I think remains to be done. In doing so, I want to focus on three areas that are central to Harold’s work and our own: class formation, capital accumulation, and the problem of the intellectual. And while I will not dare directly address issues of South African reality—of the real problems that need to be confronted and engaged in the current conjuncture—I do hope this commentary will contribute to a dialogue wherein those issues that have been met with silence can be given an open and honest hearing and real solutions can be formulated.

Reading Harold

The international Marxist and left intellectual communities, to the extent that they know of and cite Harold’s work, focus most of their attention on his essays concerning the articulation of modes of production and the problem of cheap labor power in South Africa. I am no exception, since that’s where I started many years ago in conducting my own analysis of the history of modes of production in Peru (from the Incas to the 1920s) and, a couple of years later, in beginning my doctoral studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where a group of graduate students and faculty (especially my eventual dissertation advisors, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff) were reading the works of Althusser, Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, and others in what (at least from my perspective) came to be erroneously known as “structuralist Marxism.” In preparation for writing this paper, I had the enormous privilege of rereading Harold’s best-known essays and of rediscovering (and, in some case, encountering for the first time) his other texts.

What struck me most, on this particular re/reading of Harold’s work, was the combination of theoretical rigor and concrete analysis that characterized his writings. On one hand, he was inclined to identify an analytical problem that could ultimately be traced to the use of fuzzy or poorly defined concepts (working class or exploitation) or an essentialist methodology (race or economic reductionism). The solution he then proposed was to carefully develop the appropriate Marxist concept (mode of production, articulation, and so on) in a manner that broke with the kinds of determinisms that have long bedeviled the Marxist tradition.³ On the other hand, and

³ Although certainly not just Marxism. Non-Marxian economic and social theory—such as neoclassical economics and liberal political theory—has been based on more than its share of deterministic concepts

because of the approach he adopted, theoretical clarity and rigor did not represent the final solution but only the conceptual prelude to conducting a concrete analysis of a particular social situation or event. It was never a matter of deducing general laws from the concepts—as if social reality were governed by or could be explained in terms of always-already known “ultimately determining factors” or “iron laws” of necessity—but, rather, of using the concepts to produce new knowledges of a complex, contradictory, and changing social reality. His goal, as I see it, was to overcome theoretical barriers in order to move beyond “false” resolutions (the product of idealist theoretical schemes) such that he was better able to formulate “real” (i.e., materialist) solutions.⁴

In this movement from the abstract to the concrete—in other words, in this resolutely antiempiricist working from relatively abstract Marxist concepts to produce relatively concrete Marxist conceptions of social reality—Harold seems to have been always inclined to emphasize contingent relations and specific characteristics. Thus, instead of presuming or looking for a fixed causal relationship between race and class, he focused on the uneven, asymmetrical, contradictory, shifting, and unstable relationship between those two key elements of the South African social formation. Similarly, he saw white domination and capitalist development in terms of both a functional (i.e., mutually supportive) and contradictory relationship, forever looking for elements of diversity and discontinuity in a pattern of continuity—and, perhaps most controversially, paying attention to “openings” created within and by the apartheid state. He eschewed the idea that there were universal conditions of existence for capital accumulation and sought, instead, to examine the changing economic and political conditions that made the accumulation of capital possible. Following from this, Harold was at great pains to distinguish, and then examine the specific relations that obtained between, different aspects of social reality: race and class, economics and politics, and so on. Thus, for example, he discovered that class struggles could, in certain periods, under specific circumstances, assume the form of struggles over race, and that political battles could not simply be deduced from economic conditions but needed to take into account the real, material specificity of political institutions, levels of organization, and political discourses.

And no matter how nuanced and sophisticated were the analyses Harold elaborated, the point was not just to conduct first-rate academic research (even though his met the highest standards, far exceeding what seems to be the surfeit of mindless research being conducted these days in the academy). He was keen to point out that theoretical positions had political effects, that choosing one set of concepts over another had enormous implications for the conceptions of social reality that were produced, and thus the forms of political intervention that could be imagined and formulated. And, of course, the political strategies he was inclined to advocate, support, and put into practice were those that expressed oppositional political discourses and took the form not of individual stances and actions but of joint, organized activity.

and methods of analysis. In fact, one of the hallmarks of “modernist” social science has been to presume and then search for the ultimately determining factor—some notion of the individual and/or structure—that serves to cause and therefore explain all other social phenomena. See, for example, the discussions in *Postmodern Moments in Modern Economics* (Ruccio and Amariglio 2003) and *Postmodernism, Economics, and Knowledge* (Cullenberg et al. 2001)

⁴ In the past decade, materialism has received renewed attention, especially after the publication of Althusser’s later manuscripts. See, for example, the discussion of “aleatory materialism” in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory* (Callari and Ruccio 1996) and the special issue of RM, “Rereading Althusser” (Callari and Ruccio 1998).

The context of our work was, of course, different. We were not participants in the diverse movement confronting the ravages of South African apartheid capitalism. We had not been imprisoned nor were we living in exile. Instead, we were Marxists, living in the United States, many of us participants in the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and antiwar movements, schooled in both the Old Left and the New Left, searching for ways to keep Marxism alive, especially in the arena of political economy. On one hand, the specificity of Marxism had become lost or underplayed in much of the radical theorizing of the 1960s and 1970s—in favor of a critique of unequal power relations. On the other hand, what Marxist theorizing did exist had, in many cases, been reduced to an economic analysis of the stagnation and fragility of monopoly capitalism and the promise of revolution in the Third World—with little patience for elaborating the terms of Marxism’s philosophical “break” from mainstream social science.

As it turns out, we were inspired to rethink key Marxian concepts and to elaborate what made Marxism different from bourgeois thought, inside and outside economics, by many of the same authors and texts that left their traces in Harold’s writings. Althusser and Balibar, of course—and, through them, both a new encounter with the Marxist tradition (including Lenin, Gramsci, and Lukács) and with new Marxist thinkers (such as Hindess and Hirst, Ernesto Laclau, Nicos Poulantzas, Charles Bettelheim, Pierre-Philippe Rey, Emanuel Terray, and Stuart Hall, to name a few). In our case, this contact also extended into the work of some of Althusser’s colleagues and students, especially Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida. Therefore, while we have long understood our work in terms of an antiessentialist or nondeterminist Marxism, our approach has also been referred to as postmodern or poststructuralist Marxism.

One of the key concepts we borrowed from Althusser was overdetermination, which we used to criticize and move away from essentialist tendencies in traditional or classical Marxist methodology (particularly economism and theoretical humanism) and epistemology (both rationalism and empiricism). In terms of social analysis, the idea was that, instead of either presuming or looking for a causal hierarchy (wherein either the economy or some part of it, such as the relations or forces of production, or some set of universal human attributes, whether labor or desire, would be seen as the ultimate determinant of society and human activity), each practice, event, or institution under analysis would be understood—conceptually produced—as the outcome of an infinite multiplicity of complex, contradictory effects. The overlaps with the antiessentialism and nondeterminism of Harold’s approach are considerable.

For us, one consequence of invoking this combination of “mutual constitutivity” and “relative autonomy” of economics, politics, and culture has been to forego the elaboration of general laws and to reinvigorate the concrete analysis of concrete situations. This has led us beyond the development of new concepts to a Marxist investigation of a wide range of social phenomena, from concepts of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 1996), commodity fetishism (Amariglio and Callari 1993), and capitalist competition (Ruccio and Amariglio 1998) to the Soviet Union (Resnick and Wolff 2002), China (Gabriel 2005), and India (Chakrabarti and Cullenberg 2003). My own research in this vein has focused on such diverse topics as Marxist conceptions of socialism and socialist planning (1986, 1992a) through the role of the state, planning, and the worker-peasant alliance in revolutionary Nicaragua (1987, 1988, 1989) and the problems of stabilization and adjustment (1991), foreign debt (1992), and capitalist industrialization in Latin America (2000) to the role of class in international political economy (1990, with Resnick and Wolff) and contemporary discourses of globalization and imperialism (2003). This antiessentialist approach to Marxism has also meant changing the terms of the Marxian focus on class, from one

of causal essence to discursive priority: instead of presuming or attempting to demonstrate that class was “in the end” the ultimate determinant of social life, we have come to explain the focus on class—the goal of producing a class knowledge of society—as one of the *differentia specifica* of Marxian discourses, the lens that distinguishes Marxism from other approaches to social analysis.

Turning to the Marxian theory of knowledge, we have sought to distance ourselves from absolute and transtheoretical notions of truth in favor of relative, internal criteria (each theory has its own protocols of analysis and produces its own objects or, in Althusserian language, thought-concretes) and an emphasis on the contrasting effects or consequences of different discourses. Thus, for example, Marxism not only has objects that are different from those of mainstream (neoclassical and Keynesian) economics; it also leads to strategies and policies quite different from those put forward by mainstream economists. And, to the extent that we advocate a Marxian, class-analytical perspective and criticize the methods and conclusions of bourgeois thought, we end up with an epistemological position that some of us have come to refer to as “partisan relativism.”

As Harold fully understood, not only do Marxist knowledges of history and contemporary social formations differ radically from those elaborated within liberal and other non-Marxian social theories; different Marxist knowledges—analyses produced by different definitions and uses of key Marxian concepts—also have contrasting implications for how we analyze social problems, what we put forward as solutions, and how we go about implementing or seeking to create the conditions for those solutions.

While RM has, from the beginning, attempted to break down disciplinary barriers, publishing scholarly articles across the range of social thought, as well as visual art, fiction, and poetry, the bulk of our efforts have been directed to issues and problems in the broadly defined area of economics or political economy.⁵ Therefore, I wish to focus the remainder of my comments in this area, especially on two key issues—class formation and capital accumulation—before returning to the problem of the intellectual.

Classes and Class Formation

No one can come away from even a quick perusal of Harold’s work without understanding that classes and class formation were central to his concerns. Those of us associated with RM share that perspective. The question is, why is class important and how are classes defined within Marxian theory?

My own reading suggests that classes and class formation played three key roles within Harold’s research—in relation to structure, agenda, and agency. First, the class structure was central to Harold’s conception of capitalism and of the “structural conditions” that characterized the South African social formation. Thus, the focus of

⁵ In my view, this is not because political economy—or, more accurately, the critique of political economy—is or should be taken to be the core of Marxian theory but, rather, for a rather arbitrary reason: many of us associated with RM completed doctoral studies in economics (or focused on political economy in such disciplines as geography, anthropology, and education) and now teach in departments of economics (and related disciplines) in the United States and around the world. Therefore, our intellectual interventions are within what is traditionally considered the terrain of economics; at the same time, we have sought to challenge the conventional boundaries of economics and economic thought.

Harold's analysis of South African capitalism was not, as in mainstream economics, free markets and private property, macroeconomic stability, and economic growth (although he touched on all three themes), or even as in heterodox economics, large corporations, poverty, or inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth (although, again, he had something to say about all three issues). No, Harold was clear that class exploitation, and the conditions and consequences of exploitation—especially the need for, and policies designed to provide, cheap labor power—were central to the existence and changing nature of South African capitalism.

Second, focusing on the class dimensions of South African development placed certain issues on the agenda of social change, particularly in the replacing of the apartheid regime. Thus, for example, it was not sufficient to dismantle the racial dimensions of apartheid, nor was it desirable to establish independent or semi-independent African zones or forms of self-government. As long as the capitalist extraction of surplus-value continued to exist, whether in the segregationist gold mines and agricultural enterprises or the factories and offices of the apartheid manufacturing sector, national liberation involved the elimination of both racial oppression and capitalist exploitation. My sense from Harold's writings (although I stand to be corrected by those who were acquainted with him and his political views) is that ending capitalist exploitation was both a goal in itself—because collective appropriation of the surplus was preferable to individual exploitation—and an important condition for eliminating racial inequality in South Africa. That is, he seems to have imagined not only a new racially inclusive South Africa but, in contrast to other sectors of the antiapartheid movement, one substantially free from capitalist exploitation.

The third significance of class was bound up with the problem of political and social agency. If South African society was based, at least in part, on capitalist exploitation, and if class transformation was one of the key issues on the political agenda, were class formations such that they—classes, classes in formation, class fractions, class alliances—could or would effectively struggle to transform the social structure in order to end exploitation? In addition, how were these class formations overlain with racial formations, and how did they combine—if indeed they do—to become agents of antiracial and anticapitalist struggle? Here, Harold sought to distinguish the abstract level, where classes (such as capital and labor) are conceived as “unitary and homogeneous,” from the more concrete level where, because of both economic and noneconomic conditions, classes were not unified forces but, rather, “patchworks or segments which are differentiated and divided on a variety of bases and by varied processes.” They only achieved class unity, if indeed they did, not as a natural or inevitable process, but through their practices, discourses, and organizations, as a “conjunctural phenomenon.” (1988, 50, 51).

Of course, the way Harold addressed these three themes—the manner in which he criticized the approaches of others and articulated his own position—depended crucially on how he interpreted the Marxian conception of class. Harold was clear that class should be defined, at the abstract level at least, in terms of relations of production, including the mode of exploitation or the relationship to the appropriation of surplus labor.⁶ He thus rejected other possible (and, then as now, quite common) definitions of class, such as property relations, degrees of compulsion of labor, and income shares. He was particularly adamant that class was a structural position, defined within a mode of production, not a question of ideological self-identification or relative access to or distance from political power. Still, this did not prevent him from

⁶ Harold frequently refers to the complex of relations and forces of production but it is not at all clear how the latter enters into his analysis of classes and class formation.

developing a class analysis that was more complex than that of the traditional capital/labor dyad, leading to his identification of class fractions (such as productive and unproductive workers, large-scale and small-scale capital, and so on) and a new middle class, all defined “in the sphere of production” (1976, 220).

Harold put this class-analytical framework to use for two main purposes: to understand the changing configuration of the capitalist class and its interest in white domination, and to determine the possibilities of an interracial working-class alliance to challenge both white domination and capitalist exploitation. While he provided many important insights along the way, the two key results of Harold’s class analysis were the novel periodisation of South African capitalism (including, famously, the articulation with noncapitalist African modes of production) and the careful deconstruction of the then-prevalent notion of the white working-class (especially its supposed position as exploiter of black workers). In addition, Harold continued to grapple, not always in my humble opinion with complete success, to address the problem of how to move from abstractly defined classes and class positions to more concretely specified classes as political actors and the forms that class struggle might take in the movement against apartheid.

Our own approach to class analysis emerged from concerns similar to those that inspired Harold, and we have pursued approaches that bear a distinct resemblance to the paths he followed. At the same time, those of us associated with RM have reached some conclusions different from those I have encountered in Harold’s work. My hope is that a discussion of this combination of similarities and differences can help us to identify the silences and point in the direction of new resolutions to the remaining problems of South African political economy.

Like Harold, we have interpreted the Marxian definition of class in a relatively restricted manner—in our case, as the way in which surplus labor is performed (by the directed producers) and appropriated (by another group, or by the laborers themselves). We have added to that fundamental or appropriative class process another one: the subsumed or distributive class process whereby surplus labor is transferred (a position which may or may not be occupied by the appropriators) and received (by still others, who thus share in a portion of the surplus labor performed by the direct producers without, however, necessarily being the appropriators).⁷ The focus of such a definition is thus not on classes as economic or social groups but, rather, on class processes and class positions, a particular subset of the social processes and positions that can be said to make up society.

So, as in Harold’s case, the class structure turns out to be richer, more complex, than the one conceived in traditional Marxism (let alone non-Marxian forms of economic and social thought). For example, the capitalist class structure includes processes whereby wage-laborers produce surplus-value (hence the term productive labor), which is appropriated by the functioning or industrial capitalists. This surplus-value is, in turn, distributed and received—within and by such entities as enterprise managers and supervisors (so-called unproductive labor) the state (in the form of taxes), financial capitalists (as interest payments), other capitalists (as competitive super-profits), and so on—in return for providing some of the economic, political, and cultural conditions of existence of continued capitalist exploitation. In addition, any social formation (such as the United States or, for that matter, South Africa) can be expected to include a variety of such class structures: capitalist as well as ancient

⁷ This is one of the notable achievements of Resnick and Wolff (1987), who connected the class analysis of the value theory presented in volumes 1 and 3 of *Capital* via the concepts of fundamental and subsumed class processes.

(where we find individuals appropriating and distributing their own surplus labor), feudal (wherein feudal lords appropriate and distribute the surplus labor performed by serfs), slave (in which slaveowners appropriate and distribute slave surplus labor), and collective or communal (when the direct producers and perhaps others in the community collectively appropriate and distribute the surplus labor).

Based on this definition, one of the key questions for Marxists becomes: what is the class structure—what is the particular pattern or combination of appropriative and distributive class processes—that characterizes any particular social formation or institution within that society? Whether at the level of a country or some national or international entity (from enterprises and households to states and multinational organizations), it is a matter of concrete investigation to determine if one or more class processes are present and, if so, what form they assume. And, while the abstract definition of class is quite restricted, such an investigation necessarily involves an analysis of the most diverse social conditions of existence of those class processes, as well as of the forms of interaction that obtain among and between them. It also means examining the relationship between such a complex class structure and all those nonclass dimensions of political economy—such as markets and property, macroeconomic conditions, patterns and rates of economic growth, the size and market share of corporations, the levels of poverty, and the distribution of income and wealth—that are in part constituted by the prevailing class structure.

Focusing on class in this manner places class transformation on the existing agenda of economic and social transformation. That is, what Marxists bring to the political table, what Marxists place on the agenda for discussion, debate, and action, what they seek to locate within the political imaginary, is the possibility of transforming the prevailing class structure. The idea is to go beyond mitigating the worst effects of exploitative class structures—for example, by calling for more public ownership or state regulation—to actually changing the ways surplus labor is appropriated and distributed and forming alternative class structures. Thus, a new articulation of class structures can involve siphoning off distributions of surplus-value to form new initiatives for the benefit of the community. And it can mean creating collective appropriations of the surplus within new community economies. Adding these issues to the agenda radically transforms the existing debate, by reinforcing the point that capitalism is not the only game in town: both in the sense that noncapitalist economic and social structures already exist, and by reinforcing the demand for additional forms of noncapitalism.

The third consequence of this particular approach to Marxian class analysis is that it redefines the terms of social, including class, agency. Instead of seeing classes as unified, unitary actors, in the place of building from a presumed fixity or givenness of class identities, we have begun to explore the possibility of formulating a class politics based on the idea that class identities are the outcome, not the precondition, of cultural and political processes. That is, we have begun to work on the idea that acting in common to create new, noncapitalist class structures—the idea of “being in common” rather than presuming or imposing a “common being”—cannot simply be read off the insults and injuries meted out within and by exploitative class structures; rather, they are (or, in the case of identities we are interested in fostering, can be) the products of cultural formations, forms of political organization, processes of identity formation.⁸ In other words, the task before us to understand how diverse practices—

⁸ On just this last point, that of identity formation, permit me to refer readers to the remarkable symposium on “subjects of economy” in the April 2006 (volume 18, number 2) issue of RM. There, many of the authors explore the productive role that psychoanalysis, especially Lacanian theory, can

producing theoretical knowledges of a class-structured society and elaborating forms of class justice, understanding how class is represented in the everyday world of music and movies, pursuing a politics of resubjectification, forming organizations to pursue collective goals—combine to produce, instead of merely symbolizing or expressing, identities that both resent the existing class structure and desire new class ways of organizing the economy and society.⁹

Capital Accumulation

One of the obstacles to imagining and formulating such a politics of class is the idea that societies in which capitalist class processes exist are governed by the “laws of motion” of capitalism (Gibson-Graham et al., 2001). That is, when capitalist social formations are posed as unified social totalities, which can be explained in terms of one or another of their key elements or driving forces (often, but not always, an economic one), the existence of a diverse class landscape is met with silence and the possibility of noncapitalist class processes is deferred to a distant, barely discernible future. Political options are then reduced to generally accommodating the “needs” of individual capitalists and of the capitalist “system,” and perhaps alleviating the worst effects of the activities of capitalists and of capitalism as a whole. Focusing on the possibility of strengthening and creating noncapitalism is, in turn, often seen as threatening “real” improvements—more jobs, higher wages, improved safety measures, environmental regulations, and so on—in pursuit of an admirable but ultimately utopian dream.

I can’t follow Harold in speaking directly to the discussion in South Africa. But this “retreat from class” is certainly true in the United States where many radical economists and economic activists view “the economy”—variously referred to as the market, postindustrialism, global capitalism, and so on—as a unified, centered totality that sets the limits on what can be imagined and created. If anything, this perspective has expanded in recent years, as the distribution of income and wealth has been made (through changes in capitalism and government policies) more unequal and (again, through a combination of structural changes and policies) the standard of living of the working-class has slowly but persistently deteriorated. The project of eliminating exploitation and creating new appropriative and distributive class processes is replaced, then, by initiatives to protect and improve existing state programs (such as social security and tax breaks for implementing environmentally friendly technologies) and to raise workers’ living standards (by creating living-wage ordinances, reforming the pension system, and providing wider access to health care). The challenge for the Left, given the ongoing attacks on all manner of public programs, is how to combine support for the idea of state initiatives—through which care is extended to all citizens—with the possibility of class transformation.

Within the Marxian tradition, this tendency to make capitalism a unified and all-powerful entity is the result of seeing the accumulation of capital as the singular logic

play both in imagining spaces of ethical and political possibility and in bringing into being subjects that seek to affirm and participate in noncapitalist class practices.

⁹ Many concrete examples of class analysis of the sort I have summarized here are presented in the two edited volumes, *Re/representing Class* (Gibson-Graham et al. 2001) and *Class and Its Others* (Gibson-Graham et al. 2000). Jonathan Diskin (2005a) critically reviews the essays gathered in these two books. Elsewhere, in his discussion of the Marxian analysis of the Soviet Union carried out by Resnick and Wolff, Diskin (2005b) expresses his worry about the problem of functionalism in class analysis and suggests that we need to pay more attention to the “relationship between class and various notions of collectivity and identity,” especially the “kinds of collectivity and agency people were trying to achieve (or to prevent)” (557).

that governs individual capitalist enterprises as well as the capitalist system as a whole. Studying the process of capital accumulation thus becomes the key to unlocking the “logic” of the economic order—the manner in which capitalism is reproduced and the path it inexorably follows to expansion, both nationally and internationally. And everything else that exists within the social formation—political forces, cultural formations, forms of economy other than capitalism—is rendered functionally dependent on the needs of accumulation.

The problem, as Bruce Norton has pointed out in a series of remarkable studies (1992, 1994, 1995, 2001), is that the various attempts by Marxists (and radical economists more generally) to “discern capitalism’s destiny-determining inner contradictions”—by identifying the laws governing the accumulation of capital to determine the inner contradictions that led to capitalism’s increasing dysfunctionality—have marginalized another dimension of the Marxian project: “to conceive the historically changing dimensions of class exploitation—and envision associated transformational possibilities” (2001, 24). That is, some Marxian economists have focused on one or another inherent contradiction within capitalism—underconsumption, stagnation, a falling rate of profit, and so on—and tied this to the inherent drive on the part of capitalists to accumulate capital. Class only exists in such approaches to the extent it designates positions that entail a categorical imperative. Thus, workers produce and consumer; capitalists, for their part, exploit and expand.

This is how the famous passage in Marx’s *Capital*—“Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!” (1977, 742)—is generally interpreted, as a summary description of the driving force of capitalists, the product of an inner drive of being a capitalist and/or of competitive pressure from other capitalists. In either case, the point is that capitalists have a fixed and unwavering drive to expand based on the use of surplus-value to accumulate additional (constant and variable) capital. There are, however, two difficulties with such an interpretation, one textual, the other theoretical. When Norton reads this passage in its full context, his conclusion is that Marx is not making this claim for himself, in terms of his understanding of capitalists and the capitalist mode of production; rather, he is parodying the classical political economists, who ascribed to capitalists the “historical mission” of creating additional wealth (or, alternatively, of failing to fulfill their mission by consuming the surplus unproductively). Theoretically, for Marxists to focus on capital accumulation and unproductive consumption as the only two uses to which surplus-value can be put means ignoring all the other distributions of surplus-value that capitalists make in order to attempt to secure the conditions of existence of exploitation. As a result, they ignore both the complex pattern of capitalist appropriations and distributions of surplus-value, with the correspondingly complex—shifting, changing—capitalist class structure, and the effects on the wider society of capitalist control over distributions of the surplus. Transformations in the structure of capitalist enterprises and of a capitalist social formation as a whole depend, at least in part, on how and to whom capitalists distribute the surplus and in what manner those who receive a cut of the surplus spend their class revenues. In other words, one of the goals of the Marxian critique of political economy is to call into question the identity of capitalists as presumed within classical political economy (and, for that matter, within contemporary, both mainstream and heterodox, economics) and then, on its own terms, to account for the changing constellation of class processes, positions, and struggles associated with the existence of capitalist class exploitation.

Now, the accumulation of capital figures prominently within Harold’s analyses of South African capitalism. And while he never defines the term (perhaps surprising for such an otherwise meticulous and rigorous theorist), my sense (although, again, I

stand to be corrected here) is that he used it not in the restricted sense to which Norton refers but with a more general meaning. That is, instead of referring to the accumulation of capital as a particular distribution of the surplus (and therefore as the essential condition of capitalist growth and expansion), Harold let it stand for the reproduction of the totality of economic and social conditions associated with capitalist exploitation. Thus, in his texts, the accumulation of capital refers to the changing way in which the continued existence of the extraction of surplus-value from South African workers was secured—by the activities of individual capitalists as well as the various entities (security, military, political, etc.) of the South African state.

If this is in fact what the accumulation of capital means for Harold, then his analyses are relieved of some of the burdens imposed by the strict economic logic of Marxian crisis theories. Yet, even in this more general sense, an understanding of the South African social formation rooted in capital accumulation does carry with it the problems of systemic order and driving force. That is, when the accumulation of capital is placed at the center of the story, all other phenomena—capitalist decisions, state policies, limits on worker demands, noncapitalist forms of economy and social life—tend to be reduced to and explained in terms of a drive, a mission—however complex and contradictory—to reproduce the conditions of existence of capitalist exploitation.

Still, in Harold's texts, such a tendency is combined with a concern to document the process of historical change, by identifying the changes and discontinuities in the manner whereby capitalism continued to exist and even flourish in South Africa. If we follow this path, then the goal of Marxist interventions in political economy is precisely to destabilize the fixed identities and behaviors often attributed to capitalist classes—workers, capitalists, and so on—in order to understand and trace the effects of the changing distributions of surplus-value on capitalist enterprises and the social formation as a whole. When we conduct such an analysis for the current situation—in the United States, South Africa, or anywhere else in the world for that matter—then class analysis is released from being merely a support of given drives and dynamics, of either capitalism's inevitable distress or its systemic integrity, inevitability, and expansion, to become a way of both documenting the injustices of capitalist exploitation and seeking openings for noncapitalist class transformations.

Intellectuals

Just as Marxism can be articulated in different ways, and be put to different uses, so the problem of the intellectual can be posed in various ways. If class analysis is subordinated to economic laws of motion, when capitalist classes and class formations are made to be the supports of an overarching logic of capital accumulation—that is, when a Marxian politics of class becomes an identity politics—then the role of the Marxist intellectual is to conduct an analysis of the existing structure and to translate the conclusions of that analysis, via a given set of interests and identities, into a corresponding set of predictions and political strategies. If, on the other hand, one of the aims of Marxian class analysis is to challenge the existing terrain of political economy, to make it different from itself, to show how new structures and identities can be imagined and invented, then Marxist intellectuals have a different role: to intervene to develop new discursive openings, new ways of seeing the social reality that exists and the social formations that can be brought into being.

It is not at all surprising that Harold was keenly aware of, and offered his views on, both issues: the political effects of different ways interpreting and deploying basic

Marxian concepts in social analysis and what the position of critical/committed intellectuals should be. He showed, for example, that conflating race and class (such as in theories of internal colonialism), and not analyzing the “internal class structures” of racial or ethnic groups, might lead to a contradictory position according to which power is exercised by one entire group (whites) but that the ruling class is constituted by only part of that group (monopoly capitalists) or, alternatively, to the conclusion that a relationship of exploitation exists between modes of production (such that capitalism can be said to exploit noncapitalism). The political implication in both cases is that the real injustices associated with capitalist relations of class exploitation—and therefore the possible class formations and alliances to oppose the particular form assumed by South African capitalism—would be obscured or overlooked.

If different forms of class analysis had contrasting political implications, what should the role of intellectuals and intellectual work be? Harold wrote directly on this topic—and in his characteristic manner, by not addressing the issue abstractly but in the context of quite concrete situations. He outlined two alternative positions: On one hand, in a situation in which intellectuals oppose a government and its policies, they should protect their “autonomy” and resist any and all attempts on the part of the state to direct or curtail critical research. On the other hand, when intellectuals are allied to a movement of national liberation (whether it has already occupied the state or has as its goal the seizure of state power), the position is fundamentally different. Here, intellectuals need to avoid either proclaiming their absolute autonomy or serving the ideological function of conducting research to justify or corroborate already defined political decisions. Harold’s view was that “theory and analysis” are—and, the way I read him, should be—a site of contestation within national liberation movements. Thus, the priorities of the political organization should be adopted by allied or affiliated intellectuals but, and this is crucial, “not as conclusions but as starting points for investigators” (1985, 75). Presumably, it is this “relative autonomy” of critical intellectuals that led Harold later on, after the apartheid regime (but not the effects of that regime) had been dismantled, to support the creation of an Institute for Social Theory, to create an intellectual space that was committed to both national liberation and open-ended critical inquiry.

Harold went on to distinguish between an “analysis of structural constraints” and the “description of the experience, consciousness and struggles of individuals” (1989, 77, 76). The former, he argued, was the proper domain of intellectuals while the latter would be taken care of by the political organizations themselves. Clearly Harold had something quite specific in mind in encouraging intellectuals to eschew “research by means of questionnaires and interviews” (I presume that the results of such methods gave evidence, in the context of widespread state repression, of widespread assent to ideas that ran counter to what the liberation movement was saying about the state of popular awareness and consciousness, but I may be wrong). The danger, of course, is that, to the extent that Marxists are interested precisely in the nexus of structure and agency—in how structures are lived and practiced through social agencies and how such agencies are themselves structured—focusing only on structures tends to render them given and immutable, and reinforces the idea that agency can simply be read off of structural positions. In the case of the United States right now, the texts by nonacademics concerning the tensions and contradictions of the hegemony of certain forms of right-wing thought (I am thinking, in particular, of recent books like Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas*) have more to tell us about the current conjuncture than most of the research being conducted by professional academics, both mainstream and radical.

Part of the problem, as Harold understood, is the position of intellectuals vis-à-vis the ruling ideas and structures. However, the danger, in the United States at least, is less the direct intervention of the state (although that is occurring, on issues ranging from global warming and evolution to Middle East studies) than the “marketization” of higher education. That is, in the name of academic excellence, what is being investigated and published has little to do with what we consider to be critical intellectual work and more with what “sells.” What I mean by that is that the academy is becoming less a protected place where critical ideas are generated than one in which professional recognition circulates in the form of “academic value” that can be measured and rewarded—and punishments meted out to those who refuse to participate, or don’t measure up—in the increasingly formalized “academic market.” The quality of work that is being disseminated has, by any measure, increased but its intellectual significance, at least from the vantage point of critical thought, has certainly deteriorated.

The other part of the problem pertains to patterns of thought. If we reduce our Marxism to the investigation of the underlying structures of capitalism—and here I’m referring to the work that is often recognized as Marxian political economy these days—if we confine ourselves to seeking closure in the present and elaborating a predictable future instead of creating openings of new class possibilities now and in the future, in structures as well as in practices and desires, then we forsake our status as critical intellectuals. However, if we accept our task as the “ruthless criticism of the existing order,” if our stance always necessarily runs counter to the status quo, since we cannot accept either enforced silences or unresolved problems, then we need to turn our critical gaze on our existing modes of thought as well as on the existing structures of social life. This is the major lesson we can all take away from reading Harold.

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