

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Marx's Theory of the Social Formation by Zhongqiao Duan

Review by: Murray E. G. Smith

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instincts. Let us not delude ourselves; electoral contests won't solve the Cuban problem as far as the U. S. is concerned. Multi-party elections in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Nicaragua, or Haiti and their murderous results should make the point. It does not matter if polling was proper if the USA does not like the results. An efficient and competitive corporate empire requires standardized in-line integration of its peripheral units. It cannot compromise on the quality of its profits, its *raison d'être*. Eckstein intones that "capitalism has proved itself the superior economic system." We can only ask, "for whom?" The political economy that seriously addresses social and economic justice as its primary objective is socialism. Cuba has tried its best, tormented by the beast; we who live in its heart must, as well.

CHRIS BRADY

1028 NW 32 Street
Corvallis, OR 97330-4412

Marx's Theory of the Social Formation, by Zhongqiao Duan. Aldershot and Brookfield: Avebury, 1995. \$55.95. Pp. viii, 131.

Zhongqiao Duan, a philosopher at the People's University of China, has produced a concise and provocative reconstruction of some basic components of Marx's historical materialism. According to Duan, the heart of historical materialism is Marx's theory of the "social formation," which is at once "a theory concerning the structure of society and the stages of development of society." In six tightly argued chapters, Duan provides an impressive exegesis of the most important passages in Marx's works pertaining to these issues. Whether or not one accepts all of Duan's own interpretations of this material, one cannot help but feel indebted to him for having unearthed it and for providing us with an occasion for renewed reflection upon it. At a time when all too many are taking smug pride in having always "just said no" to what Raymond Aron once called "the opiate of the intellectuals," Duan gives us many reasons to reaffirm "that historical materialism is not only a rigorously scientific theory, but also . . . a powerful weapon for understanding society and changing it today."

In many respects, Duan's method of exposition recalls the approach of such "analytical Marxists" as G. A. Cohen, John Roemer and Jon Elster. Indeed, he often appears to be concerned, above all, with furnishing ana-

lytically rigorous definitions of such key Marxist concepts as “economic base,” “relations of production,” “mode of production,” “superstructure,” etc., while also seeking to establish the “logical consistency” of various of Marx’s theses on the basis of his own unique understanding of Marx’s texts. Yet while his method is heavily exegetical and analytically preoccupied with “deducing” what Marx “really meant” on any number of controversial issues, Duan often generates interpretive insights and conclusions regarding the fundamental theses of historical materialism that recall the ideas of such “dialectical” Marxists as Bertell Ollman, Derek Sayer, and Ellen Meiksins Wood. Unfortunately, except for a brief yet important affirmation of Marx’s commitment to a philosophy of “internal relations,” Duan avoids engagement with any “Hegelian–Marxist” or dialectical accounts of Marx’s social ontology and theory of history. Such an engagement, I believe, would have enormously strengthened Duan’s critiques of G. A. Cohen’s functionalist account of historical materialism, Louis Althusser’s structuralism, and Teodor Shanin’s attribution to the “late Marx” of a “multilinear” theory of social development; it might also have helped him to avoid certain problematic aspects of his own interpretation of historical materialism.

In the first chapter, Duan establishes that Marx’s concept of the social formation encompasses two meanings: a definite stage of development of human society, and the entire structure of society at a definite historical stage of development. This discussion lays the basis for the subsequent elaboration of the two ideas that Duan sees as basic to Marx’s thought: the thesis that “the economic base determines the superstructure” and the thesis that the development of human society proceeds through the successive replacement of three great social formations, namely pre-capitalism, capitalism and communism. In general, I found Duan’s arguments on behalf of the latter thesis far more compelling and interesting than his arguments on behalf of the former. Both sets of arguments proceed, however, from a distinctive interpretation of Marx’s concepts of “economic base” and “mode of production.”

Contrary to Cohen, who regards the economic base as consisting exclusively of social relations of production, Duan insists that Marx included in the base the mode of production as well. Like Cohen, Duan insists on drawing a very precise line between concepts that refer respectively to the “social” and “material” aspects of human existence. The result is that Duan furnishes a definition of the “mode of production” that excludes the “relations of production” and that emphasizes its materiality, even though he is at pains to show that certain relations of production always “correspond” to particular modes of production. The upshot is that where Cohen sees the material forces of production functionally “selecting” the social relations of production, Duan regards the relations of production as being historically determined by the mode of production (a kind of ensemble of material

productive forces, methods, and forms of organization pertaining directly to the material production process). For Duan, relations of production and modes of production as components of the economic base are “internally related” to one another; Cohen’s approach, by contrast, leads to the conclusion that productive forces and production relations are externally related, and this results in the wrong-headed functionalist notion that productive forces “select” relations of production according to their capacity to promote development.

Duan is quite right to perceive in Cohen’s functionalist account of historical materialism a commitment to a philosophy of “external relations” that is at odds with Marx’s dialectical social ontology. But his attempt to counter Cohen’s errors falters to the extent that it relies on Cohen’s own procedure of drawing hard and fast distinctions between the material and social aspects of reality. A philosophy of internal relations requires a different approach; in Derek Sayer’s words, “we can no longer assume that terms like forces and relations of production, or base and superstructure, refer unambiguously or consistently to different, and mutually exclusive, bits of empirical reality as they would in an atomistic ontology” (*The Violence of Abstraction*, 1987).

Duan’s inconsistency in this respect has two important consequences. First, it permits him to recapitulate an essentially *dualistic* conception of the relationship between “base” and “superstructure,” one that compromises his own argument (against Althusser) seeing people as “both the bearers and the subjects of the social relations” and giving the social formation an “organic character.” Second, it produces some real confusions regarding the status of the concept of mode of production in terms of his account of the development of human society, an account that in other respects has much to commend it.

The starting point of Duan’s discussion of the historical development of human society is the familiar passage from Marx’s Preface of 1859 which states that: “In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society.” Duan is concerned to refute two common (mis)interpretations of this passage: the “theory of five types of social formation,” according to which social development proceeds through the successive replacement of the above four modes of production, culminating in the communist mode of production; and the “multilineal schema” associated with Umberto Melotti and Teodor Shanin, according to which Marx affirmed that the path to communism need not lead through capitalism. Duan seeks first to establish that the Asiatic, ancient and feudal modes of production are all variants (or “phases”) of a “pre-capitalist mode of production” and that Marx was not concerned with establishing any “laws” governing the successive replacement of these modes of production in relation

to one another. Marx's real concern is simply with establishing the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production and social formation — though Marx does regard feudalism as the pre-capitalist social formation most likely to give birth to modern capitalism. Duan proceeds to an examination of the writings of the “late Marx” on the Russian peasant commune, concluding that the latter saw the possibility of a direct transition from this commune to socialism owing entirely to the specific “historical environment” in which the commune was placed. The success of such a transition was dependent on Russia's ability to access the fruits of Western European capitalist development, and this in turn depended on “the victory of the proletarian class in Western Europe.” This interpretation is undoubtedly superior to the Shanin thesis, which holds that Marx in his latter years was a convert to the idea of a “non-capitalist road” to socialism.

MURRAY E. G. SMITH

*Department of Sociology
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario
Canada L2S 3A1*

Mexican Anarchism After the Revolution, by Donald C. Hodges. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995. \$40.00; paper, \$17.95. Pp. 256.

Though anarchism was never a major social movement in Mexico, subtle reminders that libertarianism has long informed the political culture there can still be found scattered throughout the country. Thus, for example, in Zacatecas (located in the “heart” of Mexico) two streets — Once de Noviembre and Calle Mártires de Chicago — honor the memory of the four Haymarket anarchists executed over 100 years ago, while echoes of the fiery rhetoric promoted by Mexico's foremost anarchist, Ricardo Flores Magón (1874–1922), can still be heard today in the defiant pronouncements of the *zapatista* rebels based in Chiapas. Precisely what Mexico's anarchist legacy has amounted to over the past 70 years is the subject of Donald C. Hodges' latest contribution to the history of the Latin American left, *Mexican Anarchism After the Revolution*.

The fact that anarchism ceased to be an independent socio-political force in Mexico after 1931 poses a serious challenge to anyone seeking to answer this question. Yet Professor Hodges is undaunted by such an historiographical challenge, above all because he contends that contemporary