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DEBATE

Economic Base, Social Classes and Superstructure: Some critical remarks on Stephen A. Resnich & Richard D. Wolff's, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR*, London, Routledge, 2002

George Economakis

University of the Aegean

Abstract

The theoretical purpose of Resnich & Wolf (R&W) in the book under discussion is to demonstrate that the USSR and similar “socialist democracies” were not socialist-communism regimes but regimes of a state capitalist type, regardless of the state ownership of the means of production and the abolition of market economic functions. Although the apperception of the ex-socialist regimes as a state capitalism is a valid one, the concepts that R&W form and apply to it indicate they are rather doubtful, and lead to a turn over of Political Economy to pre-Marxist presumptions and postmodern conceptions in crucial theoretical questions such as the determination of social classes, the class definition of a social structure, the relation (and relevance) between economic base and superstructure.

KEYWORDS: Surplus; modes of production; social classes; superstructure; communism

JEL classification: B14, B24, B51, P10, P16, P20

Introduction

In this paper I will not attempt a book review.¹ I will also not enter into R&W's concrete analysis of Soviet history. My interest will focus on some major theoretical concepts that R&W proposed – which are exposed mainly in the first part of their book – and on the basis of which they apprehend the notion of communism and view Soviet history. Furthermore, as R&W bring out in the introduction of their book, “this is not, in the main, a work of empirical history” (p. xiii).

The notion of class and socioeconomic systems in terms of surplus: introductory remarks

From the first page of their “Introduction” (p. x) R&W make it clear that their “distinctive” notion of class is based on “surplus”. More precisely, “class refers to how society organizes the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus”, where “surplus” is the “excess” “quantity of output” above “the portion that is returned” to the producers of output (p. xi). It follows that: “Any society's class structure refers to how it organizes its population in relation to the surplus as (1) surplus producers, (2) surplus appropriators (and hence distributors), and/or (3) recipients of distributed shares of surplus” (p. xi).

On the basis of these distinctions, the “basic alternative ways to organize the surplus” arise. “These are the capitalist, feudal, slave, ancient and communist class structure... Each class structure is a distinctive combination of a unique fundamental class process (producing and appropriating surplus labor) and its subsumed class process (distributing the appropriated surplus).” “[T]he feudal, slave and capitalist class structures exhibit exploitation. This is defined as a fundamental class process (...) in which the performers of surplus labor are not also the appropriators and distributors of the surplus. Serfs, slaves and proletarians produce surpluses appropriated and distributed not by themselves but rather by feudal lords, slave masters, and capitalists. By contrast, the ancient class structure – in which an individual produces, appropriates and distributes his/her own surplus individually – [...is] not exploitative by definition” (pp. 13-14).

On the basis of the same distinctions the difference between capitalism and communism, private and state capitalism, also arises: “a communist class

¹ Besides, a documental review of R&W's book has already published in *East-West* (see Zouboulakis 2003).

structure is then one in which the producers and appropriators are the same people, whereas the class difference of capitalism is precisely that the appropriators are different from producers. ... In private capitalism, one or more individual with no official position in the state apparatus functions as surplus appropriator/exploiter, whereas in state capitalism, the surplus appropriator/exploiter consists of one or more state officials” (p. xi).

1st absence: “relations of production”

Therefore it is obvious that based on the definition of the historical social classes and socioeconomic systems put forward by R&W, the notion of *relations* and *modes of production* is completely absent. Accordingly, the structural determination of class struggle on the level of the mode of production, is also absent, “since the relation of production is the relation of class struggle” (Althusser 1978: 163).

Let us examine this point more closely: According to Bettelheim (2005: 34), classes and class struggle “are inherent... in the *relations of production*, that is in the *form of social process of appropriation*”. So, if we accept that

- class struggle is (inherent in) the relations of production,
- the relations of production is the form of social process of appropriation, and thus
- class struggle is inherent in the form of social process of appropriation,

then it follows that R&W analysis, in as much as it excludes the relations of production from the notion of surplus (and therefore from its appropriation), introduces a notion of surplus that is dismantled from the form of social process of appropriation, therefore it is dismantled from (the inherent in that form of appropriation) class struggle and as such it is “neutralized”.

It also follows that if such a “*neutralized*” *notion of surplus* is used for the definition of social classes and socioeconomic systems (that is historical systems under the domination of a historical mode of production – Economakis 2000), this definition is also “neutralized” in the sense that it cannot apprehend the *differentia specifica* of the historical social classes and socioeconomic systems.

Before proceeding it is necessary to put forth some major definitions of my analysis.

Relations of production, modes of production and social classes: basic definitions

A (“*pure*”) mode of production refers to the particular (and historically variable in its forms of manifestation) combination of the relations of *ownership*, *possession* and *use* of the means of production, which jointly rise the relations of production. Use of the means of production is defined as the exclusive performance of the function of labour. Ownership as an economic relationship consists in the control of the means, objects and results of the productive process. In distinction from formal-legal ownership, ownership as an (real) economic relation presupposes possession of the means of production, i.e. the management (direction) of the production process and the power to put the means of production to use. That is to say, real (economic) ownership exists in a relation of homology (coincidence-correspondence) with the possession (management). In the event of non-homology, ownership is a purely formal or legal relation (see Economakis 2005).

This particular combination (that is, the economic structure of a mode of production) comprises the “matrix” of a mode of production and defines which of the three constituent structures of a historical mode of production (economic, juridico-political and ideological) is dominant, playing in all cases the role of the decisive-in-the-last-instance structure (see *ibid*).

Considering that the particular combination of ownership, possession and use comprise the “matrix” of a mode of production it winds up that (different) social classes are formed within (different) modes of production as the result of their “matrix” and the “carriers” of these relations. Social classes are thus characterized, according to Althusser (1986: 180), by the class positions of which the “carriers” are “the occupants”.

Althusser here follows Marxian analysis that classes’ members are “embodiments” and “personifications” of “specific social characters” –since the relations of production of a mode of production determine the so called “social characters”– and as such they are the “principal agents” of a mode of production (Marx 1991: 1019-1020).

Social classes in a mode of production determined as above are defined here as the *fundamental* social classes in a mode of production (the principal agents of a mode of production to use the Marxian terminology). Correspondingly, I define as *non-fundamental* social classes those social groupings (if they exist) of a mode of production that are not “carriers” of relations rising the relations of production, i.e. classes that do not adequately embody a discernible or

“specific social character”.² The fundamental classes of a mode of production are the *basic* social classes of a socioeconomic system if this mode is the dominant mode of production (see Economakis, 2005).

Questions of class determination in R&W's analysis: two examples

A common feature among slaves, serfs and proletarians is indeed that they produce surpluses appropriated not by themselves but rather by slave masters, feudal lords and capitalists. This means that slaves, serfs and proletarians are objects of exploitation while slave masters, feudal lords and capitalists are exploiters. However, which is the structural difference (the *differentia specifica*) between slaves, serfs and proletarians (the objects of exploitation) on the one hand, and between slave masters, feudal lords and capitalists (the exploiters) on the other hand, on the basis of a class definition in terms of surplus? In other words, how does it rise to prominence (on the basis of surplus class determination) the “distinctive combination” of the “fundamental class process” of production-appropriation-distribution of surplus, that is “each class structure”?

What I imply is that questions concerning the structural characteristics of historical social classes (and historical socioeconomic systems –see below) cannot be answered within a notional framework like the one proposed by R&W, that is a framework in which the exploitation is perceived from a Ricardian point of view as an undifferentiated extraction of surplus –as if the Marxian (Critique of) Political Economy, which founded the study of historical forms of exploitation on the basis of the notion of the relations and modes of production, did not exist.

Let us examine two examples.

Serfs and proletarians

Is it possible for a theory of surplus dismantled from the form of social process of appropriation (relations of production) to expound on why the serf *producer* is submitted to extra-economic coercion (vassalage) while the proletarian *producer* is a free person who offers his/her labor power without coercion but mainly because of the force of the need? I think that such a theory cannot explain these kinds of structural differences. The only thing that a theory of

² This distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental social classes is irrelevant to the distinction (posed by Resnick and Wolff 1982: 2 ff.) between “fundamental and subsumed classes”, which pertains to “the distinction between the production and the distribution of surplus value”.

surplus could indicate is the fact of exploitation –the general division of a society between those that are subjected to exploitation and those that exhibit exploitation.

Schematically:³

In the serfdom the serf is the possessor but not the owner of the means of production and subsistence. This non-homology between ownership and possession forms the peculiar structural characteristic of the “matrix” of the feudal mode of production (FMP). From this –that is from the “matrix” of FMP – it results that the extra-economic coercion (vassalage) is the necessary structural condition for the extraction of surplus by the feudal lord (the ruling class of feudalism). Or, the extra-economic coercion (vassalage) is a structural element of the FMP. This means that class struggle in this mode of production is determined structurally as extra-economic coercion –point at issue of which is the extraction of surplus. In this frame then, the basic distributive relation between serfs and feudal lords is also established.

On the contrary, the wage-earner under capitalism is free to offer his/her labor power to any employer and at the same time he/she is expropriated from the means of production and subsistence; this is the free worker with the double meaning (free individual and expropriated), according to Marx (1990: 272-73). This coincidence of ownership and possession in the capitalist class “in conditions of ‘individual freedom of immediate producer forms the peculiar structural characteristic of the ‘matrix’ of the capitalist mode of production (CMP). From this – that is from the “matrix” of CMP – follows that the extra-economic coercion is not a necessary structural condition for the extraction of surplus (value) by the capitalist class.

Marx (1990: 899) writes in this connection:

The silent compulsion to economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the ‘natural laws of production’.

Or, the absence of extra-economic coercion and the individual freedom of (expropriated) immediate producer are structural elements of the CMP. This means that the class struggle in this mode of production is determined structurally as “silent compulsion to economic relations” – point at issue of

³ For a detailed analysis, among other works, see Marx 1981 &1990; Poulantzas 1975; Milios 1997; Economakis 2000.

which is the extraction of surplus (value). In this frame then the basic distributive relation between wage-earners and capitalists is also determined.

“Officers” “NCOs” and “common soldiers”

Lets now query if there exist, and (if yes) how class differences within wage-earners are indicated in capitalism on the basis of a surplus class definition. The question of class determination of the so-called *petty bourgeoisie*, in distinction to *working class*, belongs here.

According to Marx (1990: 458, see also 468), it is in manufacture (in “formal subsumption of labor under capital”) that the “collective worker formed out of the combination of a number of individual workers” originates, as “the living mechanism of manufacture”. The collective worker obtains its latent characteristics in “real subsumption of labor under capital”.

In keeping then with Marx’s (*ibid*: 1040) analysis, this collective worker is identified with productive labour.⁴ The manager (I suppose not the *top* manager – see Economakis 2005), the engineer, the technologist, the overseer, the manual labourer constitute this collective worker.

This collective worker, therefore, stands on the level of the technical division of labour in the capitalist production process as the bearer of overall-combined labour, which is identified with the total of wage-earners (productive labour-productive workers).

Given my previous definitions, the capitalist class is the “carrier” of real ownership. The other class of the CMP is the working class, understood as being the “carrier” of the third component relation, the use relation. Where use relation in the CMP means direct labour within the capitalist productive process, that is *manual labour (vis-à-vis mental labour)*, *experience (vis-à-vis science)*, *acting (vis-à-vis management)* (see Poulantzas, 1975).⁵

From this point of view, the fundamental classes of the CMP are the capitalist class (the ruling class of capitalism) and the working classes, since they adequately embody a discernible or “specific social character” and consequently the capitalist and the working class are the basic classes of a capitalist socioeconomic system.

⁴ “Productive labour” from the standpoint of the capitalist production process is the labour paid from variable capital (Marx 1975 & 1990; Stamatidis 1992; Economakis 2000).

⁵ These terms are comprehensible only in their contrariety, comparativity and historicity (see Gramsci 1972; Poulantzas 1975; Balibar 1986-a).

The question then is the following: is (capitalistically) hired (that is, productive) labour including all these different kinds of labour identical with the class “carrier” of the use relation, that is the working class?

According to Marx (*ibid*: 450), since the origin of capitalist production – “formal subsumption of labour under capital” – within the collective worker there is an industrial army with a special kind of wage-labourer (“officers and NCOs”). For this special kind of wage-labourer (to which belong lower-level managers, foremen, overseers) the work of management-supervision (*as opposed to the performance of actual manual labour*) becomes its established and exclusive function, a function that flows from capital.

Consequently, the wage-earners belonging to this special category of wage-labour do not exclusively perform the function of labour but on the contrary exercise powers of capital. Thus, although part of the collective worker, i.e. productive workers –workers directly exploited by capital and subordinated to its processes of production and expansion– they are not “embodiments” and “personifications” of a completely discernible or “specific social character”. That is, they are not *prima facie* elements either of the class “carrier” of the use relation, i.e. the working class or, evidently, of the class “carrier” of real ownership, i.e. the capitalist class. Thus, they do not belong to any of the fundamental classes of the CMP and consequently are part of a non-fundamental social class of the CMP, which is positioned between the capitalist and the working classes. This class is part⁶ of the so-called “*new petty bourgeoisie*” (Poulantzas mainly 1975: 234, 236-237, 239-241) –or “*new middle class*” according to Carchedi’s (1977: 62-92) terminology.

Thus, if it is required for the class affiliation in the working class, as a necessary economic criterion, the relation of exploitation (that is production of surplus value and its appropriation by the capitalists), then the *relation of exploitation is not identified with the class affiliation in the working class*. The “common soldiers” (Pannekoek 1909-internet) of the capitalist labour process (working class) do not belong to the same class than the “officers” and “NCOs” (new petty bourgeoisie).

The (out of the relations of production) criterion of surplus (that is a “neutralized notion of surplus) of R&W is unable to pose a criterion of differentiation between class exploitation and class affiliation to the working class. Therefore, the criterion of surplus cannot indicate the split of the

⁶ Inasmuch as another part is formed in capitalist superstructure (see mainly Poulantzas 1973 & 1975).

productive-collective worker in its working class and new petty bourgeoisie part.⁷

Economic base, superstructure and over determination

2nd absence: "last instance"

R&W maintain that they reject "determinism". Then, on the basis of this rejection they support that "one aspect of society is not the ultimate determinant of others. A superstructure of politics and culture is not reducible to being the effect of an economic base"(p. 9). This means that R&W's rejection of determinism implies *the complete disconnection between economic base and juridical-political-cultural superstructure*.

Afterwards, on the basis of this disconnection R&W reject the "classical Marxian [... thesis] that the economic base of society determines in the last instance the functions and survival of the social superstructure" (p. 38).

Having rejected the Marxian concept of "*decisive-in-the-last-instance*" economic base, R&W propose a notion of "overdetermination", according to which "all aspects of society condition and shape one another" (p. 9). It is about a notion of "overdetermined complexity" (p. 9) without "last-instance", and without the notion of "dominant structure" (see below), where, on the one hand all (or almost all) are possible, and on the other the micro economic level separates itself from the overall social context within which it exists.

Before seeing some aspects of the theoretical application of this *structural indefinability-fortuity* and *separation* it is necessary to review in brief some conceptual notions on the subjects under discussion.

3rd absence: "dominant structure"

The notion of "dominant structure" refers to three related levels (see Economakis, 2000, 2005, 2008):

- First level: *The mode of production*; the question of the dominant structure of a mode of production with the economic one ("matrix" of a mode

⁷ In another work on class determination, Resnich & Wolf (1982) attempt to exclude a part of new petty bourgeoisie (that of supervisors) from the working class (while including that of technicians) on the base of a false conception of productive labour. In the same work they propose an apprehension of the working class as "a variable alliance of distinct classes", confusing thus completely different class positions and potential class stances. For a critique see Economakis 2008.

of production) playing in all cases the role of the “decisive-in-the-last-instance” structure (see above). The dominant structure of a dominant mode of production forms the dominant structure of a socioeconomic system.

- Second level: *The economic base of a historical socioeconomic system*; the question of domination of a historical mode of production (and of a historical ruling social class) in the frame of economic base (the notion of the *dominant mode of production*), where the economic base must be understood as the articulation of different modes or forms of production and thus of different social classes under the domination of a ruling class.
- Third level: *The overall historical socioeconomic system*; the question of the structure (economic, juridico-political and ideological) which occupies the dominant role in the reproduction of a historical socioeconomic system, with the economic structure (economic base) playing in all cases the role of the “decisive-in-the-last-instance” structure. The dominant structure in this level forms in its turn the nature (the specific structural characteristics that is the *differentia specifica*) of a historical superstructure.
- Since, the economic structure defines the dominant structure either on the level of a mode of production or on the level of a historical socioeconomic system it is always the “decisive-in-the-last-instance” structure prevailing.

Then, inasmuch as the notion of the “decisive-in-the-last-instance” economic structure presupposes its distinction from the notion of the “dominant structure”, the absence of the former presumes at first glance the absence (or the abolishment) of the latter. The absence of the notion of “dominant structure”, however, from R&W’s analysis is also the result of the first mentioned absence (relations of production) as we will see below.

Let us begin from the first and third levels that connect the concepts of “dominant mode of production”, “dominant structure” and “superstructure”.

Dominant mode of production, dominant structure and superstructure

In his famous “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) Marx (1859-internet) had brought out that the economic base (relations and modes of production) determines the juridical-political-cultural superstructure.

The totality of... relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of

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

Then, R&W's complete disconnection in the name of indeterminism of economic base from juridical-political-cultural superstructure conflicts with Marxian analysis. Does this mean that Marx's (and Engels') analysis is a deterministic one?

Marx (and Engels), had made clear that the determination of the economic base (relations of production) asserts itself always "*ultimately*" that is it is "decisive" always "in-the-last-instance".

In his letter to Borgius (January 25, 1894) Engels (1894-internet) wrote:

There is, rather, interaction on the basis of the economic necessity, which *ultimately* [that is in-the-last-instance] always asserts itself [...] the economic relations, however much they may be influenced by the other political and ideological ones, are still ultimately the decisive ones, forming the red thread which runs through them [the non-economic relations] and alone leads to understanding.

This means that the economic base is not always the dominant structure – although in any case it plays the "decisive-in-the-last-instance" role in the formation of the nature of the non-economic relations (superstructure). This apprehension is even clearer in Marx's analysis (1867) in the 1st volume of *Capital*:

One thing is clear: The Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor could the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the manner in which they gained their livelihood which explains why in one case politics, in the other case Catholicism, played the chief part (Marx 1990: 176).

Then, Marx poses the nodal distinction between "dominant structure" (that is the structure that plays "the chief part") and "decisive-in-the-last-instance" structure ("manner to gain the livelihood", that is the historical dominant mode of production). In this way the explicit rupture with (economic) determinism (the superstructure is not a simple transparent reflection of the economic base) does not lead to a structural indefinability-*fortuity*: the dominant mode of production consists of the "red thread" that "runs through" the non-economic structures (that is the superstructure) forming invisibly their *specific historical structural characteristics* (nature). Accordingly, it is this "red thread" that "alone leads to understanding" of these characteristics.

In this point we have already met the critical notes of the previous analysis. Let us see why:

Inasmuch as it is the “matrix” of a mode of production that determines its dominant structure, the absence of the notion of the relations and modes of production from R&W’s analysis involves the fact that the structure which becomes dominant in the level of the mode of production cannot be determined. If the dominant structure of a mode of production forms the dominant structure of a socioeconomic system, then it also follows that R&W’s analysis cannot also determine the dominant structure of a socioeconomic system. Moreover, since the dominant structure of a socioeconomic system forms the nature (the specific structural characteristics) of a historical superstructure (and of the state)⁸, R&W’s analysis cannot understand and explain the *differentia specifica* of the superstructure (and of the state) of a historical socioeconomic system.

Thus, for example, the fact that, as Marx writes, in the Middle Ages the dominant structure in the level of feudal socioeconomic system (and thus in its superstructure) is the religious ideology (and the related with it juridico-political context) is, “in-the-last-instance”, the result of the domination in the level of (dominant) FMP of the juridico-political and ideological structure (Harnecker no publication date: 137-140). This domination in the level of the FMP is the result of the “matrix” of this mode of production: the non-homology between ownership and possession means that the force of superstructure (extra-economic-coercion-vassalage) is the necessary structural condition for the extraction of surplus by the feudal lord. The individual illiberalness (vassalage) is structurally traceable in the “matrix” of FMP.

Correspondingly, we can also understand that the absence of extra-economic coercion, the individual freedom and rights etc. in the level of capitalist socioeconomic system (as the specific structural characteristics of the capitalist superstructure) are, “in-the-last-instance”, the result of the domination in the level of dominant CMP of the economic structure (Harnecker *ibid*, Amin no publication date: 245-246). It is this domination that Marx underlines, writing that “in the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the ‘natural laws of production’”. This domination in the level of the CMP is the result of the “matrix” of this mode of production: the homology between ownership and possession means that it is the force of the need (“the silent compulsion to economic relations”) and not the force of superstructure the necessary structural condition for the extraction of surplus (value) by the capitalists.

However, if the economic base determines “in-the-last-instance” the superstructure, the latter also affects the former, that is affects the class

⁸ “It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers (...) in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of... the special form of the state in each case” (Marx 1991: 927).

domination and struggle. And from this point of view the “direct extra-economic force is still of course used”, as Marx tells us, even in the capitalist socioeconomic system.

Engels (1890-internet) in his letter to Bloch (September 21, 1890) explicitly posed this reverse influence.

The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure –political forms of the class struggle and its results..., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views...– also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*.

This reverse influence, of superstructure to economic base, under the determination “in-the-last-instance” of the economic base, constitutes the Althusserian concept of *overdetermination of superstructure to economic base* (see Althusser 1978: 134-135, 141-146, 162-163; Althusser 1986-a: 117 ff.). However, this overdetermination, linked with the notion of the “last-instance”, is not the case of R&W’s overdetermination of indefinability and fortuity type.

Dominant structure within economic base

Let us now go back to the second level of “dominant structure”, within the economic base.

Marx (1981: 106-107) writes:

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the other. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.

Here Marx qualifies the impact of a dominant economic structure (dominant mode of production) on a dominated economic structure (*subordinate* modes or forms of production), giving as example the domination of industrial capital to agriculture in the conditions of “bourgeois society” (*ibid*: 107). This impact of the dominant mode of production *modifies the particularity of all other modes or forms of production, formed them in accordance to the terms of its existence and reproduction*; this is the “general illumination which bathes all the other colors” and the “particular ether which determine the specific gravity or every being which has materialized within it” (see also Lipietz 1983: 20-21). According to Althusser (1986: 98-99) the “dominant structure... introduces a

specific order into the articulation (...) of the limbs and their relations” This “specific order”, introduced by the dominant structure (dominant mode of production), consists then in the modification of the dominated economic forms to the priorities of the reproduction of the dominant mode of production. From this point of view, the articulation of different modes or forms of production under the domination of a historical mode of production is an articulation coherent to the reproduction of this dominant mode of production. (See also Amin *ibid*: 247.)

This impact of the dominant mode of production to subordinate economic forms constitutes the Althusserian concept of *overdetermination of dominant mode of production to economic base* (Althusser *ibid*: 187-188).

R&W’s “communisms” and micro-economic units

In the rest of this paper I will confine myself to some characteristic examples (aspects of application of R&W’s theoretical admissions) that substantiate my critical points.

The “neutralized” notion of surplus in communist determination

On the basis of the surplus principle R&W determine two communist class processes. The first one is the “communist *fundamental* class process [...] which] is defined as one in which the same individual who perform the surplus labor collectively also receive it collectively.” Within this process the class of “communist laborers” or “communist producers-appropriators” (pp. 14-15, 18) is formed. The second one is the “communist *subsumed* class process [which] is one in which these collective receivers of surplus labor also collectively distribute it” (p. 14). “[T]his distribution aims to secure those non-class processes of social life (political, culture, and economic) that induce, inspire or compel communist laborers to work... extra hours (...) beyond what is necessary (...) to their reproduction as laborers”. The receivers of “such distribution” are the “communist subsumed classes”; e.g. “lawyers, teachers, entertainers, security personnel”. (pp. 14-15). According to R&W, “individuals occupying the subsumed class state agency positions... will decide how much surplus labor workers will perform, the technical conditions of their labor, and how much social product will be returned to the workers for their consumption” (pp. 34-35).

According then to R&W, the “non-class processes of social life” “*compel*” the “communist laborers” to perform surplus labor. Moreover, the state apparatus

decides (simply!!!) for... everything: surplus product - technical conditions of labor - wages. And all these in the name of a supposed communist process, in which the “communist producers-laborers” are the appropriators and the distributors of the produced surplus.

Which is then the content of the notion of “appropriation” of surplus by “communist laborers”, if others decide how much is to be produced, and others –and not the “communist laborers”– decide how it is to be distributed?

R&W answer: “Power is one thing; appropriation is another” (p. 18). This means that the appropriation does not have a reference to the power on surplus product. Then, what does it have reference to? This is unknown. At any rate, if we take into account that the power on the surplus product comprises exactly the content of real (economic) ownership, then the “communist” class process that R&W describe is (not a communist, but) an exploiting (of a rather capitalist type) process since the non-laborers (and not the laborers) have the power over the labor product. The absence of the notion of the relations of production is again obvious in this confusion.

Moreover, how are the “communist laborers” compelled to produce surplus product –if they do not come around? What kinds of relations of production are implied in this “communist” extra-economic coercion? Because, if the laborers possess the means of production only in conditions of extra-economic coercion will they give the surplus product to others.

We find then here once again what I have called “neutralized” notion of surplus. Thus, the “communist labourers” of R&W’ analysis are actually “common soldiers”, that is, they are performers of actual labour, while the mental labour-science and management is exercised by others: the state “officers” and “NCOs” of “communist subsumed classes”. Once more: The absence of the notion of the relations of production is obvious in this confusion.

Consequently, R&W are not in the position to give a Marxist concept of communist relations of production, just like they are not in the position to give a Marxist concept of slave, feudal or capitalist relations of production. The absence of class criteria for the distinction of working and petty bourgeoisie class is coherent. Thus R&W are unable to relate theoretically the concept of appropriation-distribution of surplus product with the *differentia specifica* of the different socioeconomic systems. It follows that their concept of “distinctive combination” of the “fundamental class process” of production-appropriation-distribution of surplus is meaningless, since it cannot indicate what it supposingly ought to indicate: *the historical differentia specifica in the appropriation-distribution of surplus*.

The “utopian socialism”

R&W make it clear that communist economic structures may exist within capitalism, whether they concern “family households”⁹ or “independent industrial or farm enterprises” (pp. 17-18), or even within the framework of “religious movements” (p. 143).

The impact of the dominant mode of production which modifies the particularity of all other modes or forms of production, forming them in accordance with the terms of its existence and reproduction (the Althusserian overdetermination of dominant mode of production to economic base), is therefore absent from R&W analysis. In their conception, the “micro-economic” units remain “undefiled” in their class character and separated from the external-world despite their “communication” with it. A concept of a rather “*utopian socialism*” replaces then the “*scientific socialism*” (Engels, 1975; Rubin 1989: 346ff.).

The disconnection of production from distribution

In the 2nd chapter of their book, “The Many Forms of Communism”, R&W develop and exhibit some scenarios of “communism” with cases and sub-cases. For example in section “Class and Property” (pp. 52 ff.) we find an analysis of a rather “stock communism”. Here it is worthy of note that according to R&W “the distribution of resources and products is different from production and hence different from class structure of production. [...] Mechanism of distribution and class structures of production” are not “identical or fixing” and thus there is not “only one possible relationship” (p. 59). The same disconnection of production from distribution is supported by R&W in the next section “Class and Markets” (pp. 59 ff.). In this section we find an analysis of a “market communism”, that is a “communism” with a free market of commodities and labour power. The main argument is again that it would be a “coexistence of communist class structures with alternative... product distribution” (p. 65).

Then, the absence of a notion of (relations and) modes of production and the indefinability-fortuity of R&W’s analysis, where all (or almost all) are possible, is extended here up to the disconnection of production from distribution. In

⁹ According to R&W family households could be also of ancient or feudal type under capitalist or feudal socioeconomic system. This determination is not based on the notion of the relations of production. For a critique of that point of R&W’s analysis see Economakis, 2008.

R&W's approach the distributive relation remains unconnected with the productive relation. Thus, R&W become followers of J. S. Mill's "dualism between the laws of production and the laws of distribution" (Rubin 1989: 355).

The "Communist" Political Oligarchy

In section "Class and Power" (pp. 65 ff.) R&W analyze different power structures which, according to them, are compatible with "communism". They write: "Communist class structures may coexist with alternative structures of power and thereby display still more variant forms of communism." (p. 65). Thus, according to R&W "[p]olitical oligarchy can interact as well with communist class-structured enterprises"¹⁰ (p. 69). This is the case "of a despotic form of communism". In this case: "Cultural processes persuade the population that this despot's power secures both social cohesion and progress. By endorsing communist class structures –ordering the workers to produce, appropriate, and distribute their surpluses collectively– despotic power provides crucial conditions for their existence. A portion of the surplus that the despot orders from communist enterprises finances the agents who manage politically and legitimate culturally this form of communism... They interpret and disseminate the despot's grand design (or that of God, whose chief agent is the despot), which is, in our terms the coexistence of absolute oligarchy and communist class structures in enterprises" Then, R&W parallel such a regime with Marxian "oriental despotism" (p. 70).

In the above extracts, almost all the already mentioned critical allegations of R&W's analysis are depicted very clearly. Thus, I will restrict myself to some short comments.

First of all we meet their "neutralized" notion of surplus again. If the despot orders the surplus, then the meaning of "appropriation"- "distribution" of surplus by "communist laborers" that R&W induce is meaningless.

The absence of the concept of "decisive-in-the-last-instance" economic base, and the following "overdetermined complexity" (indefinability-fortuity) is clearly depicted in R&W's despotic "communism". A communist economic base ("communist class structures in enterprises") coexists with any juridical-political-cultural superstructure, even with a theocratic regime of an "absolute oligarchy" or with a "classless communism" (pp. 71 ff.). All (or almost all) are

¹⁰ "For example (...) the Soviet collectivization" (p. 69; see mainly part 3). For a critique of R&W's analysis on Soviet collectivization, see Economakis 2008.

equally possible: “communist class structures can coexist with a wide variety of social distribution of power” (p. 70).

R&W completely ignore the Marxist (Althusserian) notion of overdetermination of superstructure to economic base. Even a despotic juridical-political-cultural superstructure, does not affect the “communism” of economic base. Their “overdetermined complexity” once more leads them to disconnect completely economic base and supersaturate.

Finally, the rejection of fundamental notions of Marxist Political Economy leads even to the confusion of communism with the “oriental despotism”, that is the Asiatic mode of production (see Economakis, 2000).

Conclusion

The absence of the notion of the relations and modes of production, R&W’s kind of rejection of determinism, which concludes with the overlooking of “the red thread which runs through” the non-economic relations (“last-instance”) and the related absence of the notion of “dominant structure”, leads to a Political Economy without “thread” which cannot bring out the *differentia specifica* of the historical social classes and socioeconomic systems. Then, R&W’s “overdetermined complexity”, rather leads to a postmodern “complexity” (Preve 1998) where all (or almost all) are possible and where *all (or almost all) are compatible with all*.

*Don Quixote... long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagine that
knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society*
(K. Marx, 1st Volume of *Capital*, p. 176).

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