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Old Institutionalism, New Marxism

By

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Over the last twenty years, a number of Marxist economists have been critical of classical Marxism and its diachronic emphasis on laws of motion as explanatory strategies, and have resisted as well the lure of methodological individualism. Howard Sherman has been out front in such a rethinking, or as he has put it, a reinvention of Marxism (Sherman, 1987, 1995). In related but different ways Resnick and Wolff, Hindess and Hirst, and many others have also charted the terrain of a new Marxism by developing the seminal work of the Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser. One way in which each has distanced their work from more classical approaches to Marxism is that each has adopted an approach to thinking about causality (e.g. a relational approach or alternatively overdetermination) and social totalities that is both institutionally specific and prognostically cautious.

At the same time, indeed ever since Veblen, “old” institutionalist (Hodgson, 1998) thought has been critical of the methodological approaches and theoretical strategies of both neoclassical economics and classical Marxism. Rather than adopt the methodological individualism of neoclassical theory or the economic determinism of classical Marxism, many institutionalists have tended toward more concrete and historically specific economic analyses. In particular, they have tended to avoid explanatory strategies that reduce causality simply to the logic of individual agents or pre-given structures, in similar ways to the “new” Marxian economics .

This paper looks at the affinities between "older" institutional thought and this "newer" form of Marxism, and argues that their conceptual frameworks are remarkably compatible, as first recognized by Dugger and Sherman in 1997. The paper develops a decentered approach to social totality and argues that along with overdetermination, such an approach provides a useful

framework for institutionalist thought. This raises, then, the possibility for new analytical connections between institutionalism and Marxism.

The question of whether “institutionalist” economics has a deep theoretical structure or basic methodology is an old one. Certainly, institutionalists have eschewed and been critical of those theoretical approaches that seek to understand history as the unfolding of some fundamental essence or laws of motion, as do classical Marxist theories of historical materialism. Likewise, institutionalism, at least “old” institutionalism, has avoided the reductive tendencies of neoclassical economics to ground its theoretical arguments in the social atom of *homo economicus*.<sup>1</sup> Instead, institutionalist economics has employed such fundamental ideas as Veblen’s notion of “blind drift” and the dynamic and contingent concept of “process” as a fundamental constituent of economic life. Moreover, institutionalists reject the idea of history as an evolutionary and teleological process and instead embrace the idea that change is non-progressive in the sense of not tending towards a pre-given telos. Finally, institutionalists emphasize the need to analyze concrete situations as the outcome of unique configurations of institutions, rather than seeking general laws of social or economic rationality.

One could argue that how one conceives the relationship between the individual and society is the most fundamental decision of any social theory. This decision not only structures the manner in which theories apprehend the relationship between theory and the world (the epistemological issue), but also the ways in which the basic elements of a theory are causally related (the methodological issue). In economics, neoclassical economics is perhaps the best example of a theoretical approach that is based on what I will describe briefly below as the Cartesian totality, where parts are given independent to and prior to the social whole. Neo-

Ricardian economic theory and some parts of Marxian theory, especially that approach now known as “Analytical Marxism,” are also based on the Cartesian totality. Classical Marxism and traditional Keynesian theory, as well as the older historicist economics, are examples of economic theories based on what I call the Hegelian totality, where the social whole is understood as ontologically prior to the individual agents.

A third version of social totality is one which might be called an emergent or, as I will refer to it, a decentered totality. In this approach, neither part nor whole is privileged but are seen as mutually constituted and contextually defined. Institutional economics with its attention to social, political and economic structures and the idea that individuals are embedded in, and constitutive of, these structures is, I would argue, based on the idea of a decentered totality. It is also the case, as I detail below, that some very important recent strands of Marxian theory have adopted a decentered approach to thinking the social totality, and therefore have moved closer to institutionalism and further away from Classical Marxism. In so doing, this more institutionalist approach to Marxian theory has developed the concept of “overdetermination” as its methodology, a methodology that might equally well serve institutionalist economists.<sup>2</sup>

The first section of this paper briefly outlines the structure of the Cartesian and Hegelian totalities. The major section of the paper discusses the development of what might be called an “institutionalist” approach to Marxian theory by tracing the development of the decentered Marxian totality from Althusser, to Cutler, Hindess, Hirst and Hussain, to the more recent work of Resnick and Wolff in the area of Marxian economics, and the “relational approach of

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<sup>1</sup> By institutionalist economics I will mean in this paper the “older” institutionalism following in the tradition of Veblen, Ayres’s, Commons, and the Association for Evolutionary Economics. I will not comment here on the so-called “new” institutionalism that follows the work of Oliver Williamson, Douglass North and others.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term methodology to indicate the basic causal structure of a theory. This is a narrower use of the term than is sometimes used to capture not only the causal structure of a theory but also its epistemological and ontological presuppositions.

Sherman. The paper concludes with further discussion about overdetermination and considers the question of whether it is an appropriate method for institutionalist economics.

### The Hegelian and Cartesian Totalities

The Hegelian totality is a particular instance of the tradition of social explanation that is known as holism, which assumes that the whole is a pre-given, structured totality.<sup>3</sup> That is, the whole is presumed to exist prior to and independent from its parts. The parts express in and through their existence the inner essence of the totality. The totality is Hegelian in the sense that its inner essence is dynamic and contradictory. The contradictory nature of the inner essence means that the essence unfolds in a dialectical manner guided by a telos, or end. This dialectical unfolding of the inner essence of the Hegelian totality is often referred to as the law of motion of the totality. The Hegelian totality takes its name from Hegel, especially his Philosophy of History. Much of Marx's original writing on history is also couched in terms of the Hegelian totality, in particular his preface to a Contribution to A Critique of Political Economy and his and Engels's Communist Manifesto.

The Hegelian totality gives rise to a particular type of causality, an expressive causality. Expressive causality means that the parts in the totality act out, or express, their role according to the pre-given nature of the totality. The whole causes the parts, the parts do not cause the whole. In this sense, the Hegelian totality is associated with a particular form of essentialist causality.

The logical or causal structure of the Hegelian totality is conditioned by a rationalist epistemology. The truth of the whole is to be discovered not in the empirical reality of the world, but rather in the logical coherence of theory. According to rationalist epistemology, human reasoning is structured in a manner isomorphic to the ontological structure of the world. The mind is therefore adequate to the task of apprehending the causal, or rational, order of material being. Nature, and society, is consequently knowable through reason. Thus, the role of social

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<sup>3</sup> More detail about the nature of the Hegelian and Cartesian totalities and their impact on economics, especially Marxian economics, can be found in Cullenberg (1994).

explanation in the context of the Hegelian totality is to discover and refine the logical connections of the various parts of the totality once its inner essence is defined.

The Cartesian totality, in contrast, is an assertion about the ontological structure of the world where any totality, whether animate, inanimate, or social is composed of a set of basic elements or atoms which exist prior to and independent from the totality. The totality then is nothing more than the resulting configuration of the patterns of interaction of its independently constituted parts.

The Cartesian totality is the ontological foundation on which numerous social theories are based. These theories of society generally go under the rubric of 'individualism' as they assume that society is nothing more than the patterns that emerge from the interaction of independently constituted individuals. Associated with this ontological assumption is the claim that the proper form of causal explanation should be methodological individualism. That is, all societal facts should be explained on the basis of the pre-given dispositions and beliefs of individuals.

The reductionist approach of the Cartesian totality goes back to the Greeks and their atomistic theory of the universe. Democritus, who lived between 460 B.C. and 370 B.C., was perhaps the earliest atomist. He believed that the physical world consisted of the patterns of a few basic atoms. For Democritus, even the soul was composed of nothing more than atoms. At a slightly later date, Epicurus similarly claimed that all matter, and man too, was composed in the end of nothing more than a few basic atomic elements.

It was Descartes, however, who stamped indelibly on modern thought the idea that the world was ultimately decomposable into a set of independently constituted parts, and therefore that the 'proper' method for understanding reality was to discover, and then analyze one by one, its pre-existing parts. Descartes outlined his approach in part V of his Discourse on Method where he likened the inanimate and animate world to a machine. The machine metaphor has come to dominate Western thought. A machine is a totality whose parts can be disarticulated and examined separately. Each part maintains its essential integrity despite being disconnected from

the totality, the machine. The parts can then be reassembled and the machine, which is nothing more than the summation of the parts, reconstituted. In economics, the general equilibrium models in the tradition of Arrow and Debreu are examples of an economy conceived of as a machine, where the economy (the totality) is understood as an equilibrium result of the interactions of pre-given agents (the parts).

While each of these approaches to totality differs in many and varied ways, each shares a reductionist methodology, wherein social explanations are ultimately constructed on the basis of a rock-bottom essence, whether that be the logical structure of a pre-given whole or the rationality of a fully self-constituted agent. In these approaches, attention to contingent and varied institutional contexts, social embeddedness, and the mutual determination of structure and agent is avoided. These are just the ideas that comprise the institutional approach to economics and, as I explain in the next section, that have also interestingly given rise to an institutional version of Marxian economics.<sup>4</sup>

### The Decentering of the Marxist Totality and the Development of an Institutional Marxist

It is beginning with the work of Louis Althusser that the idea of a decentered Marxist totality first took shape.<sup>5</sup> Althusser stressed in various essays how the concept of a Marxist totality differed fundamentally from both the Hegelian and Cartesian totalities. The Marxist totality, he argued, was not simply a materialist structured Hegelian totality, nor its inversion, a humanist Cartesian totality, but one which radically decentered the structure of the social totality. As will be argued in this section, Althusser's project to decenter the Marxist totality was only partially successful. In the attempt to redress the shortcomings of Althusser's approach, some

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<sup>4</sup> I am not the first to make the observation about similar approaches of institutionalist and some Marxian theories. Dugger and Sherman (1997) have recently argued that these two otherwise different schools of economic thought share a common approach to the evolution of economic institutions. I share the general thrust of their argument, but would argue that not all sub-schools in Marxian economics take an institutionalist approach to economic evolution, especially Classical Marxism and the more recent Analytical Marxist schools. Indeed, as I argue in the next section, it is the Marxist school developed from and around the work of Resnick and Wolff, and which uses the idea of overdetermination as its fundamental theory of causality, that best lends itself to an institutionalist Marxism.

<sup>5</sup> More detail can be found on the genealogy of this school of Marxian theory in Cullenberg, 1996.

have rejected Marxism altogether, while others have developed what might be called an institutionalist approach to Marxian theory. In particular, the work of Hindess and Hirst led to their rejection of Marxism (and the notion of totality), while the work of Resnick and Wolff has inspired a rethinking of Marxism in an institutionalist vein. Each of these theorists, however, have made important contributions along the way towards a more institutionist Marxism

One of Althusser's major theoretical goals was to distinguish between Marx and Hegel's concepts of dialectics and social totality. Indeed, Althusser stressed that the distinction between the Marxist and Hegelian conceptions of totality was of the utmost political, as well as theoretical importance. As Althusser insisted, "It is no accident that the Hegelian theory of the social totality has never provided the basis for a policy, that there is not and cannot be a Hegelian politics" (1979, 204). For Althusser, the impossibility of a Hegelian politics was due to the fact that history, or the Hegelian totality, was reduced to "...the alienated development of a simple unity, of a simple principle, itself a moment in the development of the Idea...every concrete difference featured in the Hegelian totality, including the 'spheres' visible in this totality (civil society, the State, religion, philosophy, etc.),.....are no more than 'moments' of the simple internal principle of the totality which fulfills itself by negating the alienated difference that it posed...." (ibid., 203). In other words, the Hegelian totality reduced difference to an expression of a simple principle. The various cultural and political spheres of society of the 'Hegelian reality' were only apparently autonomous. In point of fact, however, all aspects of society were subservient to the Spirit's inner principle. In the face of such an ubiquitous and penetrating force, political intervention was impotent.

For Althusser, the political impoverishment of the Hegelian totality was not simply a function of the idealist nature of Hegel's system. Indeed, Althusser maintained that those Marxists who substituted a materialist essence (e.g., the contradiction between the forces and relations of production) for the Hegelian spiritual essence, yet still advocated the fundamental structure of the Hegelian dialectic and totality, were equally guilty of effacing political action.

For such Marxists, capitalism was just a phase in history's inevitable progression towards communism.

What, then, are the differences between the Hegelian and Marxist totalities as Althusser saw it? For Althusser, the conceptual differences between the Marxist and the Hegelian totalities were dramatic. Indeed, he claimed that, "All these two 'totalities' have in common is: (1) a word; (2) a certain vague conception of the unity of things; (3) some theoretical enemies" (1979, 203). The main theoretical enemy that they shared was theoretical humanism, or as described above, the Cartesian totality. The dominant variant of theoretical humanism to which Althusser directed his attention is a form of methodological individualism, as it derives its social explanations from the actions of preexisting subjects. This shared enemy of the Hegelian and Marxist totalities reveals, simultaneously, the similarity between them. As Althusser argued, "Marx was close to Hegel in his insistence on rejecting every philosophy of the Origin and of the Subject, whether rationalist, empiricist or transcendental" (1975, 178). However, while Hegel rejected philosophies based on an Origin, he nonetheless maintained, according to Althusser, a concept of a telos guiding history: "...the Hegelian dialectic rejects every Origin, which is what is said at the beginning of the Logic, where Being is immediately identified with Nothingness, it projects this into the End of a Telos which in return creates, within its own process, its own Origin and its own Subject" (ibid., 180).

In contrast to the Hegelian totality, Althusser constructed a Marxist totality that could not be reduced either to the effect of an Origin, or guided by a teleological principle of development. That is, Althusser's Marxist totality neither reduced the parts to an expression of the whole, as does the Hegelian totality, nor the whole to the aggregation of its independently constituted parts, as does the Cartesian totality. Instead, the Marxist totality is conceived to be thoroughly nonessentialist as the parts (contradictions for Althusser) mutually constitute one another.

In "On the Materialist Dialectic" (1979), Althusser constructs in detail his Marxist concept of totality. He does so by comparing the Marxist to the Hegelian notions of unity. He

insists that for the Marxist totality "There is no longer any original essence, only an ever-pre-giveness, however far knowledge delves into its past....There is no longer any simple unity (in any form whatsoever), but instead, the ever-pre-giveness of a structured complex unity" (ibid., 198-199). By 'the ever-pre-giveness of the unity,' Althusser means that there can be no beginning (essence), nor end (telos), to the historical development of the totality. That the Marxist totality is to be conceived as a 'structured, complex unity' implies further that there must be some unifying principle which sutures the totality into a unity (structured unity), yet, does not in turn reduce this unity to an effect of a causal essence (complex unity). That is, the suture plays a binding role for the totality; it gives the totality a unity without reducing it to an expression of itself.

In this essay, Althusser employs the concepts of structure in dominance, principle and secondary contradictions, and overdetermination in order to capture simultaneously the unity and complexity of the Marxist totality. For Althusser, the Marxist totality is not governed by the development of one essential contradiction, as is the Hegelian totality. The Marxist totality is comprised of a number of contradictions, none of which can be reduced to an effect of any other. Yet, for the Marxist totality to be a unity, one contradiction must dominate over all the others. Althusser calls the principle contradiction, that contradiction which is dominant, and all the others he refers to as secondary contradictions. The relationship of domination of the principal contradiction over the secondary ones is essential, he claims, if the Marxist totality is to be conceived as a complex unity rather than a simple unity that expresses an inner essence.

Domination, therefore, does not imply a quantitative superiority, whereby one aspect of society is more important than any other, according to some singular metric. Nor does he mean that the principal contradiction is the causal essence from which all the others are to be derived. For Althusser, all the contradictions comprising the totality mutually determine one another. The contradictions are the conditions of existence of each other, as well as the conditions of existence for the complex totality. The mutual conditioning of the contradictions gives rise to a form of social causality that Althusser calls overdetermination. Overdetermination is a concept that

Althusser uses to encapsulate the 'complexly-structurally-unevenly-determined' development of the Marxist totality (ibid., 209). As he writes, "Overdetermination captures the....essential quality of contradiction: the reflection in contradiction itself of its conditions of existence, that is of its situation in the structure in dominance of the complex whole" (ibid., 209). The reflection of one contradiction in itself of all the others, rules out any one contradiction from being an opaque slate that exists independently from, and determines all the other contradictions in the totality. The reflection, or mutual constitution, of each and every contradiction rejects any form of unidirectional, or one-sided, causality, whether of the form; essence-and-appearance (Hegelian), or cause-and-effect (Cartesian). Instead, overdetermined causality is multi-sided, reflecting and absorbing the mutual determinations of all the totality's contradictions.

Althusser applies the notion of the Marxist totality directly to the analysis of society, or as he calls it, social formation. He maintains that the society's contradictions mutually and unevenly constitute one another. In particular, he discusses how the forces and the relations of production overdetermine each other, and in turn, overdetermine the superstructure.

"As an example, take the complex structured whole that is society. In it, the 'relations of production' are not the pure phenomena of the forces of production; they are also their condition of existence. The superstructure is not the pure phenomena of the structure, it is also its condition of existence. This follows from Marx's principle....that production without society, that is, without social relations, exists nowhere; that we can go no deeper than the unity that is the unity of a whole in which, if the relations of production do have production itself as their condition of existence, production has as its condition of existence its form: the relations of production" (ibid., 205).

On the one hand, Althusser here is renouncing technological determinism (the relations of production are not the pure phenomena of the forces), and on the other hand, economic determinism (the superstructure is not the pure phenomenon of the structure). Again, he stresses the mutual conditioning of all the contradictions of the totality. However, he maintains emphatically that this does not vitiate the importance of the concept of the structure in dominance. He insists that the structure in dominance is critical for the very

concept of a whole to exist at all. He continues by imploring that this point not be misunderstood.

"Please do not misunderstand me: this mutual conditioning of the existence of the 'contradictions' does not nullify the structure in dominance that reigns over the contradictions and in them (in this case, [society, SC..] determination in the last instance by the economy). Despite its apparent circularity, this conditioning does not result in the destruction of the structure of domination that constitutes the complexity of the whole, and its unity. Quite the contrary, even within the reality of the conditions of existence of each contradiction, it is the manifestation of the structure in dominance that unifies the whole" (ibid., 205-206).

This certainly appears to be a paradoxical claim. On the one hand, it is claimed that the contradictions of society mutually constitute each other. Yet, at the same time, Althusser insists that a structure in dominance reigns over them and in them, determined in the last instance by the economy. Does this not imply a form of economic determinism has remained, even if ever so slightly, in Althusser's analysis? Certainly, his insistence of the determination by the economy in the last instance, even if "From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" (1979, 113), has been the source of much criticism directed at Althusser.

It appears that Althusser, despite his concerted attempts to the contrary, could not completely decenter his concept of the Marxist totality. The determination by the economy in the last instance remained for him an anchor without which the Marxist totality would drift away. It would remain for others to cast off completely from the treacherous shoals of economic determinism (even if only in the last instance). Despite his failure to rid Marxism completely of its economism, Althusser certainly took this project in a long, and institutionalist, direction. His work has spawned a number of important extensions, two of the most important being those by Hindess and Hirst and Resnick and Wolff.

Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, together and separately, have been two of the most influential theorists in what can broadly be called the Althusserian tradition. Originally, they were quite sympathetic to Althusser's work, especially in their influential book Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production, but subsequently have rejected much of it for its supposed (according to them) economic determinism, teleology, and rationalist epistemology. Whether or not Althusser was indeed guilty of these theoretical transgressions, the direction in which Hindess and Hirst developed his attempt at constructing a decentered totality has opened an indisputable theoretical space for a non-economic determinist, and more institutionalist Marxism to exist.

It is in their joint, two-volume book with Anthony Cutler and Athar Hussain Marx's 'Capital' and Capitalism Today (1977, 1978), that Hindess and Hirst, et al., spell out in detail their critique of Classical Marxism and develop the beginnings of a more institutionist approach to social theory. They argue that a social formation should not to be conceived as a Hegelian totality whose inner essence governs the development of its parts. They go on to list six institutionalist factors which the conceptualization of any social formation involves:

- "1. relations of production and economic class relations;
2. the specific means and processes of production and forms of distribution of the products and their relationship to the specific forms of possession of and separation from the means of conditions of production and of economic class-relations;
3. forms of State and of politics;
4. cultural and ideological forms, for example, the forms of calculation employed in the organization of production and of trade, forms of political calculation, etc.;
5. relations with other social formations;

6.conditions and possibilities of the transformation of some of these forms and relations-for example, of the transition from capitalism to socialism" (ibid., 230-231).

Hindess and Hirst, et al., never provide a clear theoretical rationale for their identification of these six factors (and not any others) as those that define a social formation.. It appears that they feel that it is 'obvious' that these are 'important' and therefore throw them into the conceptual hodgepodge they label a social formation. In the conclusion to the second volume of Marx's 'Capital' and Capitalism Today, Hindess and Hirst, et al., suggest another rather amorphously defined unit of analysis. They argue that Marxists should focus their analysis on 'national economies' by which they mean "...the factors which operate to determine and delimit the forms and conditions of economic performance within a region" (1978, 244). The factors which define a national economy are not eternally given and may therefore vary over time and region. Hindess and Hirst, et al., list the regulation and supply of labor-power, the form of money and credit, taxation and nature of the legal system as relevant factors. These factors are in no way understood to be causal essences of a reconstituted totality, called now the national economy. Rather, they are the various determinate conditions of existence , or institutions, of a definite social formation.

There can be no question that Hindess and Hirst, et al., in and through their concepts of determinate social formations and emphasis on the policy relevance of national economies have succeeded in eradicating any form of reductionist or essentialist social causality. They have emphasized that the economy is not determinate in any instance, whether first or last. Rather, any society (be it a social formation or a national economy) should always be analyzed with regard to how its economic and noneconomic conditions of existence interact at any particular moment in time. Although they do not use these exact words, Hindess and Hirst, et al., are advocating, in effect, the use of a decentered social totality in opposition to the reductionist Hegelian and Cartesian forms of social totality.

There remains, however, a lingering problem with Hindess and Hirst's, et al., approach. In their attempt to completely 'decenter' the concept of a social totality, Hindess and Hirst, et al., have adopted, however unwittingly, a 'pluralistic' approach to social theory. That is to say, if no condition of existence is the causal essence of the others, then all are equally valid objects of analysis. How then is a Marxist to choose which conditions of existence to focus on? Or, for that matter, what is it in this approach that would differentiate a Marxist from an institutionalist economics? Hindess and Hirst, et al., are silent on this, but presumably they would insist that it depends on the exigencies of the 'current' situation. How does one know what those exigencies are? Well, the current situation informs you. Through their emphasis on the 'current,' Hindess and Hirst, et al., come perilously close to becoming entrapped in empiricist forms of justification for their choice of the pertinent conditions of existence to analyze, and then subsequently, act on.

The problem with the approach of Hindess and Hirst, et al., is that in their concerted, and successful, attempt to eradicate the social totality of any vestiges of a causal essence, they have simultaneously removed any criteria which would establish the basis for a well-defined Marxist social theory. Althusser recognized the danger of pluralism to Marxism that could emerge when one rejects essentialist social theories. He wrote that rejecting essentialism did not necessarily imply at all a "...sacrifice of unity on the altar of 'pluralism'..." (1979, 201-202). As I argued above, Althusser could not, however, successfully extricate himself fully from the powerful grip of economic determinism. Yet, he refused to fall into the pluralism into which Hindess and Hirst, et al., would later plunge. Thus, while Althusser avoided a pluralistic social theory, he nevertheless could not completely elaborate a non-economic determinist one. On the other hand, Hindess and Hirst, et al. succeeded in elaborating a non-determinist social theory, yet could not demonstrate (to my mind at least) what made their pluralistic social theory, Marxist.

The question that must be posed then is this. Is it possible to advocate a nonessentialist form of social totality and simultaneously eschew a pluralistic social analysis, and advocate instead, a Marxist one? That is, is there a solution to what might be called, the Althusser/Hindess-Hirst problem? The answer is yes, I believe, in a manner first suggested by

Resnick and Wolff in their insistence on class process as the specific entry-point of Marxist theory. The original work of Resnick and Wolff, therefore, provides the theoretical structure for what could be called an “institutionalist Marxian economics,” where an explicitly Marxian theory is developed in conjunction with a set of contingent and contextual institutions.

Resnick and Wolff define the concept of entry-point as “...that particular concept a theory uses to enter into its formulation, its particular construction of entities and relations that comprise the social totality” (1987, p. 25). The class process as entry-point does not act as a causal essence for Resnick and Wolff. They share with Althusser and Hindess and Hirst, et al., a commitment to a nonessentialist, decentered social totality. However, they differ from Althusser by rejecting any notion of last instance determination by the economy, structure in dominance, or the differentiation between principal and secondary contradictions. They differ, as well, from Hindess and Hirst et al., in their insistence that it is indeed possible for one condition of existence to be singled out as the defining focus of an analysis without that condition of existence necessarily acting as a causal essence. For Resnick and Wolff, it is in part through its use of class process as entry-point that Marxism is defined, and thereby avoids the decentered pluralism of Hindess and Hirst, et al.

Resnick and Wolff also argue that Marxist social theory is defined in part by its commitment to an overdetermined epistemology and theory of social causality. Resnick and Wolff, unlike Hindess and Hirst, believe that Althusser rejected rationalism as well as empiricism. They claim that Althusser's concept of overdetermination serves a dual role, at once both an epistemology and a theory of causality. As an epistemology, overdetermination implies that thinking (the realm of theory) and being (the material realm) mutually constitute one another. This implies that there is no ontological gap between thinking and being as the traditional epistemologies of empiricism or rationalism maintain. Theory and material reality overdetermine, instead of capture or correspond to, each other's existence. Overdetermination, as a distinct Marxist epistemology, denies, then, that there is a single 'truth', or 'correct' theory, which can adequately apprehend the material world.

The epistemological position of overdetermination is related to non-reductionist theories of social causality. Just as an overdetermined epistemology denies that either theory or material reality can capture the essence of the other's existence, an overdetermined theory of social causality denies that any one aspect of society can be the causal essence of the other. While Resnick and Wolff believe that Althusser's goal was to reject any form of reductionist causality, they nevertheless, as mentioned above, believe that he retained a form of economic determinism in his insistence of the determination by the economy in the last instance. Resnick and Wolff share with Hindess and Hirst a rejection of any last instance determination by the economy or any other aspect of society.

Resnick and Wolff state that "Society is the totality of all designatable processes...." (1987, 4-5). A process for them is the basic element of analysis. Processes are grouped for discursive convenience into economic, political, cultural, and natural categories. Processes, however, can never exist alone. They always occur in particular configurations with other processes. They call such configured sets of processes, relationships. Relationships, and therefore processes, occur together in particular locations, which they designate as sites. Examples of sites would include; an individual, a family, a university, a church, the U.S. Congress, a capitalist enterprise, a society, etc. A site is literally a conceptually defined place where groups of relationships occur.

Resnick and Wolff retain and develop Althusser's basic causal concepts of overdetermination and contradiction. For them, no process, and therefore no relationship, exists prior to or independently from any other process or relationship. Each process exists, literally, as the site of all the other processes in society. Each process also contributes in part to the existence of all the other processes in society. This reciprocal multi-sided causality, or mutual constitution, is what Resnick and Wolff refer to as overdetermination. As each process is uniquely constituted by its particular overdetermination, each process moves in a complex and contradictory manner. That is to say, as one process changes so too do all the others, and therefore any one process is in

a constant, non-teleological flux, overdetermined time and again by the continual, contradictory, movement of its conditions of existence (processes).

As relationships are particular collections of processes, and sites are locations where relationships and processes occur, they, too, are overdetermined and contradictory. This implies that for a given society (i.e., a particular collection of sites delimited by a national boundary), its history will be characterized by an uneven development. A society's development is not conceived in a teleological manner, as it was in the context of the Hegelian totality. Nor is society conceived as the equilibrium configuration which emerges from the interaction of preexisting parts. Society's law of development is instead, the law of uneven development, or as we might say from an institutionalist perspective, society's development is nonteleological and contingent, the result of the emergent complexity of specific economic, cultural and political institutions.

#### Conclusion: Overdetermination as Institutionist Method

I have argued in the previous section that a certain tradition of Marxian theory has developed in remarkably similar ways to institutionalist economics, especially with the work of Resnick and Wolff. In particular, the important institutionalist ideas of blind drift, emergent economies (totalities), process, cultural embeddedness, non-progressive evolutionary theories of change, and so on, reflect insights that are captured and developed by the Marxian concept of overdetermination. I will conclude this essay by elaborating a bit more the idea of overdetermination in order to see how it might be useful as a guide to institutionalist methodology.

Overdetermination is a theory of existence which states that nothing exists in and of itself, prior to and independent from everything else, and therefore all aspects of a society exist only as the result of the constitution (mutual determination) of all of society's other aspects. Overdetermination implies then a theory of causality, one where everything constitutively

determines everything else. This theory of causality is clearly not the dominant notion of causality today, which instead is one where a billiard ball metaphor of mechanistic causality applies, where some things come first and others follow. It is not a theory where you can single out a prime mover(s), and argue that "X" is the cause of "Y". Or even argue that "X" explains, say 46% percent of "Y", so obviously there is an implicit critique here of classical statistical inference. The emphasis is on qualitative analysis, by which I mean non-reductive differences and a refusal to characterize events by formally comparable metrics, whether that implies scalar or vector dominance.

Another way of thinking about this is that overdetermination is a critique of "depth models" of social explanation, a critique of essentialism if you want, where one level of analysis is explained by a different level, somehow thought to be prior to and independent from the first. Classic Hegelian causality of essence and appearance is an example, neoclassical utility analysis grounded in uncaused preferences is another. In this sense, then overdetermination implies a sort of relativism, a relativism of existence. As nothing exists except as the result of everything else, or nothing is assumed to 'underlie' anything else, then there is no meaningful way to argue that something is more important than something else, which would require a metric, that is unavailable in this analysis. Of course, one could choose a metric like weight, labor-time, money, height, etc., and argue that along that dimension something is greater than something else (but you run into an immediate problem when you don't have vector dominance). Simply put, overdetermination is an appeal to qualitative analysis, similar to the institutionalist insistence on the unique context of each analysis.

Let me give a couple of examples, very briefly, which might elucidate further the idea of overdetermination as causal method. These examples emphasize the institutionalist notion of emergence.

1. Consider the simple example of baking a cake. The ingredients would likely consist of sugar, flour, milk, eggs, water, chocolate. In the combining, or overdetermination, of the ingredients of the cake, the cake emerges. But it would be folly to argue that the cake is primarily the result of such and such an individual ingredient, or that 40% of the cake is due to its flour content, and 20% is due to its sugar content, etc. You might want to say that 40% of the weight of the ingredients is due to the flour, but that is a different question which presumes one metric (weight) among the many. The point is that the cake emerges as the result of all of its conditions of existence (ingredients) and is qualitatively different from its constituent parts and it would be a category mistake to reduce the cake's existence to any one, or a percentage of any, ingredient.
2. The same kind of insight can be applied to the long debated nature/nurture distinction. Are we who we are because we are 34% nature and 76% nurture? If that question could be answered that way, then it would certainly be an answer inconsistent with overdetermination. However, as Stephen Jay Gould, among others, have argued persuasively, we are both nature and nurture and their effects can not be legitimately separated out in strict statistical percentages.
3. There are policy implications as well to the idea of overdetermination. Consider the problem of drunk driving and someone who gets into an accident by running into a tree. What is the cause of the injury? Well, we might claim, as is conventional, that it is due to excessive drinking, or it may be the lack of wearing a seat belt, or it might be an unsafe car. Or we might, try to get deeper behind the problem and say it is due to poor education or social problems of the driver, or the lack of safety concerns by automobile manufacturers. All of those reasons and possible causes cry out for policy solutions, many of which have been tried. Of course, however, we could take a radical approach and simply cut down the trees! This sounds ludicrous, but my point is that the event of the accident didn't happen (in this case) without the tree, so we could, if we wanted, make the country look like a southern Californian desert, and avoid traffic accidents

of this type. The reason we don't is not because we really know what finally caused the accident (because all these factors overdetermined the accident) but because of what think is politically feasible or desirable. Cutting down all the trees is an option not ruled out by the constitutive causality of overdetermination, but rather by the failure of it being an acceptable policy option.

4. And then there are political consequences of a greater scope. Consider an example from Richard Lewontin. He argues that tuberculosis is caused only in certain environmental contexts, and that it makes as much sense to say that "industrial capitalism in 19th century Britain" is the 'cause' of tuberculosis, as is the more standard epidemiological claim that tuberculosis is caused by the tubercle bacteria. How and why we focus on certain causes has telling social consequences, which of course is Lewontin's point in this case. We could have ended tuberculosis by doing away with industrial capitalism, but society chose the more acceptable epidemiological solution. The idea of overdetermination in this context carries enormous methodological implications for how we consider solutions to environmental problems, disease and poverty.

That brings me to the last point I want to make here. Overdetermination is a form of relativism to be sure, but that doesn't imply a quietude, whether scholarly or politically (if you want to separate them out). It does imply, I think, an attention to case study and the specificity of each analysis as done by institutionalist economists, and not the strategy of empirical work as is classically done with econometrics, which tries to separate out distinct explanatory factors and weigh or sign them. And, it doesn't mean you can't take a position politically and argue for it. Marxist institutionalists, for example, generally focus on class analysis not because it necessarily explains or underlies other important oppressions or indignities in society (it certainly has its effects to be sure, to be discovered by analysis) but primarily because, in the Marxian view, changing the class structure is an end in itself that is desired and desirable.



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