The Concentration of Many Determinations

Rethinking Asymmetrical Determination in Social Reproduction Theory

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SRT's "general problematic" (Cinzia Arruzza)

1. give some sort of (causal or deterministic) **priority to "capitalist relations of production"**
   → asymmetric determination

2. while **avoiding economic reductionism**

> The creation of a **nonreductionist** framework for analysing the relations between capitalism, gender and sexuality that accounts for the **determining role of capitalist relations of production**.
>
> Arruzza, Cinzia. 2015a. "Gender as Social Temporality: Butler (and Marx)." *Historical Materialism* 23 (1): 28–52, p. 31.

Idea of asymmetric determination in SRT

> I argue that **capitalist accumulation** […] has a **greater consequential and determining power** than other forms of social hierarchy, and that it poses necessitating constraints that determine all other forms of social relations.

Arruzza, Cinzia. 2015b. "Logic or History? The Political Stakes of Marxist-Feminist Theory." *Viewpoint Magazine*, June 23.

> We must jettison […] the implication that the various categories [e.g., race, class, gender] are equal in causal weight.

Vogel, Lise. 2017. "Foreword." In *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, 1st ed., edited by Tithi Bhattacharya. Pluto Press.

Metaphors for this asymmetric determination

1. General Illumination

2. Base-Superstructure

1. General Illumination metaphor

> It is my contention that **the logic of capitalist accumulation** is pervasive (that is, that it **has the capacity of coloring all other social relationships**).

Arruzza, "Logic or History?"

> 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 others. It is a **general illumination** which **bathes all the other colours** and modifies their particularity.

Marx, Karl. (1939) 1993. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin Classics, pp. 106-7.

1. General Illumination metaphor

- illustrates pervasive constraints:
  - pervasive: can *affect* everything
  - constraints: set limits

> The **constraints** posed by capitalist accumulation are **pervasive** and have the capacity of coloring all other social relations.
>
> Arruzza, Cinzia. 2017. "Capitalism and the Conflict over Universality: A Feminist Perspective." *Philosophy Today* 61 (4): 847–61, p. 857.

Determination as setting limits or constraints

- Ernest Mandel's "parametric determinism"

> Indicating several possibilities within a given set of parameters.
>
> Mandel, Ernest. 1989. "How To Make No Sense of Marx." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary Volume* 15 (January): 105–32, p. 121.

Caveat:

> In practice determination is never only the setting of limits; it is also the exertion of pressures.
>
> Williams, Raymond. 1977b. "Determination." In *Marxism and Literature*, Repr. Marxist Introductions. Oxford University Press, p. 87.

2. Base-superstructure metaphor

> The model of historical materialism as a system of explanation of the 'superstructure' (politics, ideology, etc.) in terms of the 'base' (economic, or more generally 'material').

Collier, Andrew. 1998. "Stratified Explanation and Marx's Conception of History." In *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, edited by Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson, and Alan Norrie. Routledge Critical Realism: Ontological Explorations. Routledge, p. 265.

2. Base-superstructure metaphor

often avoided & eschewed for it's "orthodoxy":

1. **unidirectional** (mechanical) determination:
   base determines/affects superstructure, not vice versa

> The traditional base-superstructure model fails to recognise both the relative autonomy of culture and that the relation of determination is not unidirectional, because cultural-ideological constructions also affect and act upon the relations of production and their development.

Arruzza, "Gender as Social Temporality," p. 30.

2. Base-superstructure metaphor

2. **reification** of levels or spheres

> Orthodox analysts began to think of ‘the base’ and ‘the superstructure’ as if they were **separable concrete entities**.
>
> Williams, Raymond. 1977a. “Base and Superstructure.” In *Marxism and Literature*, Repr. Marxist Introductions. Oxford University Press, p. 81.

> Treat “economy” as **a thing** rather than as a set of living social relations. […] A model of **spatial separation** between spheres acting upon each other (i.e. the economic structure and the ideological or cultural sphere).
>
> Arruzza, Cinzia. 2016. “Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist: Social Reproduction Feminism and Its Critics.” *Science & Society* 80 (1): 9–30, 25, 30.

2. Base-superstructure metaphor

> The mechanical base/superstructure model […] allows only **two unacceptable choices**: *either* we adhere to the 'orthodox' simplistic reductionism according to which the **basic 'economic' box is simply 'reflected' in superstructural boxes**; *or* we can avoid 'crude economism' only by **postponing determination by the 'economic' to some infinitely distant 'last instance'**.

Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 1995. "Rethinking Base and Superstructure." In *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*. Cambridge University Press, p. 60.

Similar accusations against “unitary theory”/SRT

> Intersectionality theorists allege that Marxists **reduce all social, political, cultural and economic antagonisms to class**.

Bohrer, Ashley. 2018. “Intersectionality and Marxism: A Critical Historiography.” *Historical Materialism* 26 (2: Identity Politics): 46–74, p. 49.

> The notion of social reproduction articulated by Marxist feminists within a unitary theory of gender oppression and capitalism has been accused in the past of being either **functionalist** or **economic and biological determinist**. […] It is thus worth trying to reassess a unitary theory, capable of **escaping [economic] reductionism and determinism**.

Arruzza, “Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist,” p. 15.

Throwing out the base with the bathwater

What is overlooked in discarding the base-superstructure metaphor?

“ordered hierarchy”, stratification

Critical realism: Andrew Collier & Roy Bhaskar

> Bhaskar's theory of the stratification of nature, the **explicability of the mechanisms of the upper strata in terms of those of the lower**, and the irreducibility of the upper to the lower strata, provides a coherent and well-exemplified general theory, of which the base/superstructure stratification can be seen as an instance.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 271.

materialist direction of explanation

> This **materialist direction of explanation operates as between mechanisms** but **not as between the concrete events** governed by those mechanisms: it is the laws of chemistry which explain the laws of biology, but the presence of C_2H_5OH (alcohol) in the demijohn is explained by the life-process of the yeast.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 262.



Stratified determination

> The various determinants stand in one-way relations of vertical causality. […] It **retains the one-way vertical explanation of superstructure by base**; and it is certainly not a fatalistic doctrine of 'historical inevitability'.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," pp. 274-75.

Meaning of “more basic” strata

> To say that **chemistry is a more basic science than biology** is to say that the mechanisms of chemistry explain (vertically) the mechanisms of biology; it is not to say that the act of adding ‘chemicals’ to the demijohn is somehow more effective in producing the wine than is the life-process of the yeast.
>
> Collier, “Stratified Explanation,” p. 271.

mechanisms, not entities

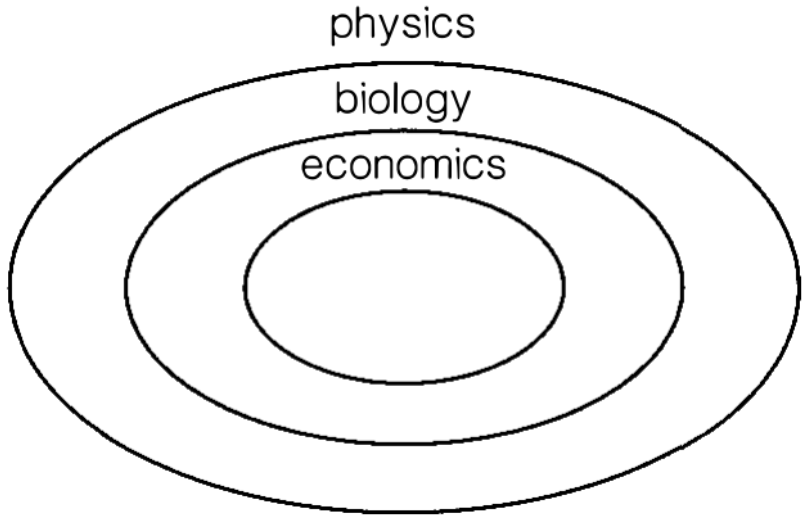
> According to Bhaskar, **stratification is between generative mechanisms not between entities**. […] Applying this to society: it is generative mechanisms which are economic or political or ideological, not institutions or events. […] This is in accordance with the classical Marxist position that these **strata are separable only by abstraction**, and the recognition that an institution may have aspects at all levels.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 271.

stratification of nature is reflected in plurality of sciences

> For Bhaskar, the **plurality of sciences** is necessary because of the **irreducibly stratified character of the mechanisms at work in the real world**, so that the unity of nature is that of a laminate.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 261.

> Bhaskar argues that the distinctions between the sciences reflect distinctions between strata.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 266.

Asymmetrical relation of strata



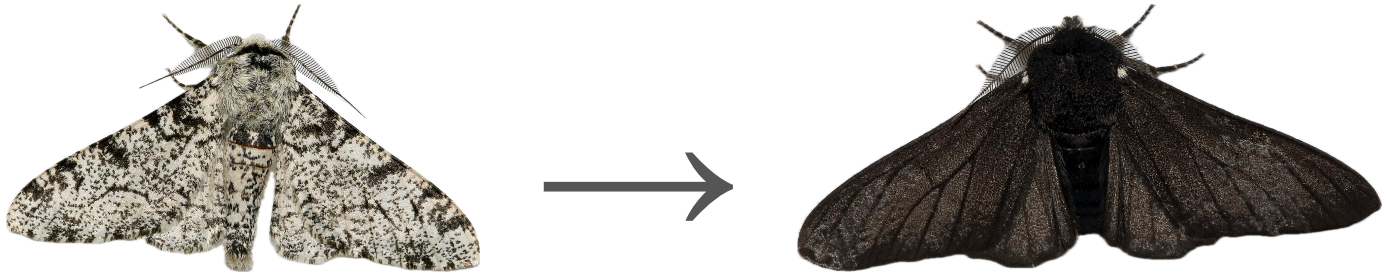
> Relations between the realms consisting of entities governed by the various sciences. **Asymmetrical relations** of inclusion. All 'biological' entities are 'physical' but **not vice versa**, etc.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 263.

govern <> affect

> Let us distinguish between the area of reality **governed** by laws at a given stratum, and that **affected** by them. […] Granted that a given law governs any stratum, there is nothing which cannot be affected by it. But this does not mean that all laws govern all entities.

Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 262.

Example: industrial melanism in the peppered moth



pale *typica*, before 1848

black *carbonaria*, from 1848

> The human activities of the production and exchange of goods are governed by economic laws. The colour of moths is not governed by economic, but by biological laws. However, it is affected by economic laws, as the rise and fall of industrial melanism illustrates.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 262.

Horizontal <> vertical causality

> At the level of **horizontal causality** […], generative mechanisms of any stratum may play their part, and no one can say in advance what the relative weight of those various parts might be. But at the level of **vertical causality** […] it is true that the ideological and political mechanisms are what they are because the economic (and more generally, material) ones are what they are - and not at all vice versa.
>
> Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 272.

Horizontal <> vertical causality

Implication: economic is not always more determining on horizontal level

> Sometimes one level is dominant, sometimes another. In revolutionary periods, as Marxists have long recognised, politics is always dominant. In ‘theocratic’ societies, ideology may be dominant. In classical capitalism, economics is dominant. But whatever is dominant, the economic structure is determinant in the last instance.
>
> Collier, “Stratified Explanation,” p. 270.

Horizontal <> vertical causality

In Althusserian terms:

- horizontal causality = “dominance”

- vertical causality = “determinance in the last instance”

Horizontal causality & the need for conjunctural analyses:

> The concrete situation is always a conjuncture, i.e. a joint effect of several interacting processes.

Collier, "Stratified Explanation," p. 277.

> [Stuart] Hall (1988, 130) defined a conjuncture not as a simple slice of time, but as 'the accumulation/condensation of contradictions, the fusion of different currents and circumstances. It is a moment, not a period – over-determined in its principle'

Bilge, Sirma. 2025. "Intersectionality in Interregnum: A Conjunctural Keyword Analysis." *Dialogues in Sociology*, ahead of print, October 31, p. 2.

Hall, Stuart. 1988. *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. Verso, p. 130.

Marx' concrete

> The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.
>
> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 101.

concrete = con - crescere
= together - growing

Vertical causality: Other stratified Marxist models

2 stratified models for modern society:

1. Georgi Plekhanov: 5 “storeys”
2. Bertel Ollman: 7 levels of generality

1. Plekhanov's 5 "storeys"

1. the state of the productive forces
2. the economic relations these forces condition
3. the socio-political system that has developed on the given economic 'base'
4. the mentality of men living in society
   - a mentality which is determined in part directly by
     - the economic conditions obtaining,
     - the entire socio-political system that has arisen on that foundation
5. the various ideologies that reflect the properties of that mentality

2. Ollman's 7 levels of generality

1. The concrete individual
2. People functioning in modern capitalism
3. Capitalism
4. Class society
5. Human society
6. Animal world
7. Material natural world

> Each level, beginning with seven, establishes a range of possibilities for what can occur on the more specific levels that follow.

Ollman, Bertoll. 2003. *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*. University of Illinois Press, p. 98.

2. Ollman's 7 levels of generality

> For example, if social and economic inequality, exploitation, unemployment, social alienation, and imperialist wars are due in large part to conditions associated with capitalist society, then they can only be understood and dealt with through the use of abstractions that bring out their capitalist qualities. And that involves, among other things, abstracting people as capitalists and workers. Not to do so, to insist on sticking to levels one [the concrete individual] and five [human society], leaves one blaming particular individuals (a bad boss, an evil president) or human nature as such for these problems.

Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, p. 92.

Back to SRT

Social reproduction as	Ollman's level	level of generality
life-making	animal world	6
society as a whole	human society	5
reproduction of labour power	capitalism	3

> The question is not which of these different abstractions is true. They all are in so far as people possess qualities that fall on each of these levels of generality. The relevant question is: which is the appropriate abstraction for dealing with a particular set of problems?
>
> Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, p. 92.

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