1 The Surplus and Class Structure

The aim of political economy is to explain the predominant mode of production within the socio-economic system under consideration; to explain how it has developed, how it presently functions and how it may develop in the future. It is, therefore, an attempt to comprehend a dynamic process which is neither finished nor static, but is characterised by motion and change. Furthermore, the subject matter is often contradictory and complex, with superficial similarities to other periods of time and other social systems. It is for this reason that the mechanical transposition of categories from one social system to another, on the basis of little or one-sided empirical knowledge, as already noted, is doomed to failure. However, there are elements of methodology which are ahistorical and applicable to all epochs, and from a Marxist perspective these provide the starting point.

The key to understanding the nature of the social system and its mode of production is the socially produced surplus (Marx, 1983, p. 85). This is based upon the notion that purposive human activity, particularly when carried out in cooperation with others, acts upon nature and can produce more than is necessary to simply reproduce human life (Marx, 1977a, p. 315; 1977c, p. 818). Marx (1977a, pp. 208–9) identifies, as a consequence, a division within labour time between necessary labour (necessary labour time), that is, labour socially necessary to reproduce the direct producer, and surplus labour (surplus labour time), that is labour over and above necessary labour, when the direct producer produces not for himself but for another or others. This idea of a socially produced surplus, based upon surplus labour time, is therefore, according to Marx, a non-historical category (1977c, p. 819).

Capital has not invented surplus labour. Wherever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the labourer, free or not free, must add to the working time necessary for his own maintenance an extra working time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owners of the means of production (1977a, p. 226).
The basic antagonistic relationship, therefore, in any hierachically structured social system, is between the direct producers of the surplus and the controllers of the surplus once extracted. This relationship is fundamental to all hitherto known class societies. However, the actual form of surplus extraction will differ between different historical modes of production.

The essential difference between the various economic forms of society, between for instance, a society based upon slave labour, and one based upon wage labour, lies only in the mode in which this surplus labour is in each case extracted from the actual producer, the labourer (Marx, 1977a, p. 209).

The nature of the extraction of the surplus will provide the general contours of the social system, its class structure.

The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself, and in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element (Marx, 1977c, p. 791).

For example, in societies based upon slavery the extraction of the surplus is direct and unfetishised, because the direct producers are the property of the class owners and function simply as an instrument of production (Marx, 1977a, p. 191; 1983, p. 98). The surplus is extracted in a relationship ultimately based upon force and the class structure can be identified around this process, slave and non-slave. As Marx (1977a, p. 505) points out, it appears as if the whole of the slave's labour is unpaid work for the master and the onus is on the master to provide for the slave's reproduction. The relationship is one of complete dependency. In the end, any slave failing to fulfil his or her economic function can simply be disposed of and replaced, as well as being subject to barbarous conditions whilst working.

Under feudalism the nature of the surplus extraction process changes but is still direct and non-fetishised. As Marx (1977a, p. 81) suggests, under feudalism, 'we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence characterises the social relations of production'. Here the surplus is extracted via the medium of compulsory labour. The dependent labourer can clearly identify the magnitude of both surplus labour