According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools requisite therefore; on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social institutions under which men of a definite historical epoch and a definite country live are conditioned by both kinds of production. (Engels, 1972, p. 26)

In this chapter I shall discuss some ways in which a primary concern with economics has dominated socialist analyses and policies. I shall argue that the analysis of the production process must be extended beyond the traditional boundaries of economics, and suggest some ways in which this can be done.

I discuss some ways in which a coherent conceptual basis for the analysis of non-economic aspects of production have been and might be constructed: for example ‘the production of people’, ‘sex-gender systems’, and the ‘anthroponomic process’. A number of distinct dimensions of social relations of production are marginalised by the hegemony of economics within social science and policy. Like the economic process, these have their own internal dynamics and contradictions, as well as interacting with the economic and one another. Rather than consigning all those activities which are not ‘productive’ in the narrow economistic sense to the realm of ‘reproduction’ or any other single category, and thus assigning them a status secondary to, and defined in relation to, the ‘economic’, these should be analysed in their own right. Their influence on activities taking place within the economic sphere can then be considered, as well as those flowing in the opposite direction.
Political economists, since the days of Ricardo and Marx, have concentrated their analyses on a particular part of the system of production within industrial societies. They have focused on the manufacture of goods within the formal, market economy. Other kinds of social production have been defined in opposition to this. 'Services', for example, variously include the manipulation (as opposed to the physical production) of goods, the application of labour to people (as opposed to inanimate objects), or white-collar (as opposed to manual) jobs. Social and economic analyses of these have often been limited to discussions of the ways in which these areas of production and employment are similar to, or different from, archetypal models of factory production. Production in the domestic and informal economies within industrial society has been little discussed until recently, and has been hindered by similar considerations.

The need for economic analysis to be extended into, or take account of, a wider framework of the type I suggest is urgent for a number of reasons. Recent years have seen the flourishing of a plethora of groups concerned with the politics of gender, the environment, health and a host of other issues which have not traditionally been taken on board by socialist theories except very marginally. An increasing concern has developed among socialists (and others) with issues that are not directly related to economic production; and with aspects of production other than wages and profits. This trend is to be welcomed, since the subordination of other issues to economistic demands has for too long been a feature of labour politics in Britain. Through the narrow focus of British labour politics, a number of issues have been swept to one side and many dimensions of oppression have been perpetuated rather than challenged. However, while the diversity of autonomous groups is in many ways a strength of the oppositional 'fragments' (Rowbotham et al., 1979; Wilson, 1980; Margolis, 1980), the lack of an overall perspective as to how these issues fit together is a weakness.

In addition, the long-term decline in manufacturing employment and in the formal economy (see, for example, Blackaby, 1978; Fröbel et al., 1980; and Gershuny, 1978) also affects the relevance of economic theory in analysing the everyday productive relationships engaged in by the majority of the population, and in developing appropriate policies. The decline in traditional forms of employment in manufacturing industry has not only eroded and weakened the basis of trade unionism, but it also implies a shift in the type of production relations in which a majority of wage-workers are engaged. Classical models of capitalist factory production cannot throw much light on the social relationships involved in employment within, for example, the National Health Service.