1 The Marxian Context of Regulation Theories

Though the intellectual debt of French regulation theories to Marxism is considerable, the fact that each aspires to develop an original synthesis implies a critique of existing Marxian theories. Yet regulationists have been little inclined to engage in a dialogue with other Marxian contemporaries, notwithstanding attempts to link their theories with mainstream Marxian and non-Marxian debates (for example, Baulant, 1988; Boccara, 1988, 1989a, 1989b; Clarke, 1988; Gartman, 1983; Jessop, 1990).

This chapter intends to contribute to such a dialogue. The issues surveyed form part of the intellectual and political context of the diffusion of regulation theories, which will in part be judged on their ability to elucidate these issues and to draw on the insights, if any, generated from these debates. Situating regulation theories in their Marxian context is a daunting challenge, but it must be faced: all too often regulation approaches have been praised or condemned without the standards for judgment being made explicit.

In the following sections I shall describe as succinctly as possible the problems raised by functionalism, economism and determinism within Marxism. Obviously these cannot be strictly dissociated from each other; but I shall deal with each in separate sections for purposes of clarity. I begin with functionalism as it figures prominently in the Parisian corpus.

1.1 THE PROBLEM OF FUNCTIONALISM

The Parisian regulationist Alain Lipietz distinguishes between a posteriori or weak functionalism, which observes the fact that a structure (for example, the state) fulfills a function (to secure capitalist accumulation), and a priori or strong functionalism, which argues that a structure comes into existence because it fulfills the function (Lipietz, 1987a, pp. 16, 18; 1985c, pp. 16, 18). While accepting the former, Lipietz rejects the latter because of its implications for political action. ‘Pessimistic functionalism’, as Lipietz calls it, ends up by ignoring the capacity of human agents to maintain, modify or resist social structures. ‘If the world is as it is because it was designed to “serve the interests of the powerful” or the “interests of the
system'" (Lipietz, 1987a, p. 4; 1985c, p. 8), then passivity and resignation are the only rational reactions. Marxian class struggle is emptied of meaning.

Lipietz's distinction is fairly simplistic and tells us little about the conditions for a non-functionalist social theory. To ascribe a function or a beneficial effect to a structure is probably not worth regarding as functionalist at all (Cohen, 1978, pp. 253–8; Giddens, 1982, p. 528). Similarly refraining from the language of functions, needs or requirements offers no guarantee that functionalist tendencies have been expunged. Thus even the Paris Group has not escaped the accusations of functionalism it levels against others (Cartelier, 1980a, 1980b, 1982, 1985; Jessop, 1990, pp. 185–88; Ruccio, 1988, pp. 8, 12).

More illuminating are the insights to be drawn from a sustained debate between G.A. Cohen, who admitted that Marxism is functionalist but defended the validity of this form of explanation (Cohen, 1978, 1982, 1986), and Jon Elster, who sought to purge Marxism of its alleged functionalism (Elster 1979, 1982, 1985). At the outset Cohen takes pains to specify the meaning of function. He warns us not to confuse a function with a beneficial effect: not all beneficial effects are functions. According to Cohen, a functional explanation cites the consequences of a phenomenon to account for the phenomenon. This consequence explanation is valid in virtue of a 'dispositional law', which states a disposition or tendency toward a certain outcome under certain conditions. A functional explanation is therefore a consequence explanation in which the occurrence of the phenomenon is beneficial for some other phenomenon.

For Cohen, functional explanation provides the sole means of reconciling the Marxian thesis that productive forces are primary in society with respect to production relations, and the thesis that productive relations endure because they promote the development of productive forces (Cohen, 1978, pp. 160, 162). Cohen's answer is that 'the character of the [productive] forces functionally explains the character of the relations.... When relations endure stably, they do so because they promote the development of the forces' (Cohen, 1978, p. 160). More concisely: 'forces select structures according to their capacity to promote development' (Cohen, 1978, p. 162). The problem with Cohen's reasoning lies in the difficulty of identifying consequence or 'dispositional laws' referring to social phenomena. In fact it is often the search for such 'laws' which is the object of research. This being the case, recourse to functional explanation may render the whole exercise tautological — a beneficial effect is explained in terms of a hypothetical consequence law, which is thereby validated or confirmed.