Introduction

According to the theory of history, the character of the legal and political superstructure is explained by the nature of the economic structure.¹ This is a claim of economic determination. But it is, according to Cohen, a restricted claim: the superstructure only includes those non-economic phenomena that are ‘economically relevant’ in the sense of being functional for the economic structure. This means, roughly, only those phenomena that are necessary to stabilise an otherwise unstable structure. Only these phenomena are functionally explained by the nature of the economic structure and so come within the ambit of the theory of history. In the Preface the superstructure is characterised by Marx as ‘legal and political’, and this suggests that the state looms large in its composition, although it does not follow that the entire state system is included in the superstructure. The theory of history in this restricted form is distinguished by Cohen from Marxist sociology which may make wider claims of economic determination, some of which might be functional in character.

In order to know the content of the superstructure we need to clarify ‘the nature of the economic structure’. It is of the nature of the economic structure that it is, by itself, unstable and, therefore, needs to be stabilised. It is this nature that is explanatory of the character of the superstructure. Thus to say that superstructural items are functionally explained by the base is to claim that their occurrence is explained by their having this stabilising effect. It is the disposition of the economic structure to be stabilised by these items (which is a statement about its nature) that explains why they occur. Thus one way of delimiting the superstructure is to identify legal and political phenomena that

¹ P. Wetherly, Marxism and the State © Paul Wetherly 2005
perform the function of stabilising the base. However we would need to avoid conflating function statements with functional explanations: It does not follow from ‘A is functional for B’ that ‘A is functionally explained by B’. The functional explanation may be justified by an empirical generalisation that ‘whenever A would be functional for B, A occurs’, and/or by elucidating a plausible mechanism connecting the functional item to the functional requirement.

To count as performing a function for the base, legal and political phenomena must meet a genuine ‘functional requirement’: in other words they must be necessary for the stabilisation of the economic structure. This is the sense in which bases need superstructures: bases have functional requirements which superstructures come into being to fulfil. Thus we can delimit the superstructure by starting at the base level, by identifying the functional requirements of the economic structure. What are the sources of instability of the economic structure? And then, what ‘things’ (e.g. institutions, policies, decisions, behaviours) need to happen in order to secure the stability of the economic structure? In order to understand the ‘needs of capital’ it is necessary go beyond Cohen’s narrow definition of the economic structure.

**The nature of the economic structure**

In defining the concept of economic structure in the Preface, Marx says that it is constituted by ‘the sum total of ... relations of production’. Following this guidance, Cohen stipulates that ‘production relations alone serve to constitute the economic structure’ (1978, p. 28). It follows that it is the nature of these relations which has explanatory force vis-à-vis the character of the superstructure. These are social relations in the peculiar sense of being relations of power or effective control, and the terms of production relations, the things which are connected by them, are persons and productive forces. Thus ‘production relations are relations of effective power over persons and productive forces’ (Cohen, 1978, p. 63).

This conceptualisation is highly abstract. It tells us what characteristics social relations of production always display (connectedness of persons and productive forces through relations of effective control) but does not tell us the precise form or pattern of effective control – what might be called the precise structural form. At this high level of abstraction the most general explanatory claims are made, such as that ‘the character of some non-economic institutions is explained by the nature of the economic structure’.

The claim is not made in relation to