

Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Social Formation

A: at-tasakkul al-iğrimā'ī. – F: formation sociale. G: Gesellschaftsformation. – R: obshestvennaya formatsia. S: formación social. – C: shehui xingtai 社会形态.

In historical materialism, 'social formation' is a central category of the structure and development of human societies. It serves to 'explain [...] why and how societies change and transform themselves' by bringing together the 'existence of social structure and its historicity, or in other words its internal dynamic of change' (Hobsbawm 1998, 149). Yet **Marx** and **Engels** did not systematically develop the concept of social formation, either as a fundamental historical concept, or as a societal model. The various definitions found throughout their works have evoked contradictory interpretations in the Western-Marxist and Marxist-Leninist traditions.

The concept is used by **Marx** in order to indicate the articulation [*Gliederung*] of the process of material reproduction of human society (MECW 29, 264). In doing so, an analogy in terms of content and – in the total social and historical concretisation – also a tension is established with regards to the concept of mode of production. It covers that which is occasionally referred to as 'historical formations' (MECW 24, 351). Without further specification, 'social formation' is used synonymously with 'social form' (MECW 28, 42, 196), on the one hand, and 'totality' (MECW 28, 37) on the other. Additionally, it refers to concrete social systems of distinct spatio-temporal extension. Finally, particularly in the work of **Engels**, the term stands in close relation to the base-superstructure dialectic (MEW 37, 489 et sqq.).

From a genetic [*genetisch*] perspective, the development of 'social formations' refers, in the first place, to progressive formation through continuing attempts to secure basic needs of existence (MECW 29, 264). Second, in association with the theory of succession of formations – wherein capitalism is eventually overthrown as the highest antagonistic form – it refers to the societal emancipation of the proletariat under communism (MECW 5, 81 et sqq.). At the same time, social formation is the object of study of an historical science, as opposed to speculative historical philosophy. In historical studies, the term has, in the sense of formative process, a subject and operation-oriented relation (**Jaek** 1988, 27 et sqq.).

1. The emergence of the Marxian concept of social formation was shaped by the consequences of the French Revolution and the emergence of industrial capitalism – in other words, the bourgeois-industrial 'double revolution' (**Kossok** 1989, 14). The development of bourgeois society and the emergence of new social demands of capital and labour changed social and historical perspectives (**Bock/Plöse** 1994, 13ff.). Society, culture and history, in their complex interrelations, were problematised from contradictory perspectives. Attempts to explain the structure and development of society were articulated within classical German philosophy (most notably in **Hegel**), English political economy and French revolutionary history (**Förster** 1982; **Förster** 1983), and in those notions of progress of the early socialists and communists that surpassed the framework of bourgeois society (**Grandjanc** 1989). The origins of positivism in Auguste **Comte** testify of attempts towards an intra-bourgeois [*innerbürgerlich*] justification

of ideas of development [*Entwicklungsvorstellungen*] with a scientific social *analysis*.

Marx opposed previous models of social structure and development by taking as his point of departure, with reference to the former, the practice of material production, human labour, and with reference to the latter, the goal of overcoming bourgeois society. Not bourgeois society, but ‘human society, or social humanity’, ought to be the vantage-point of a science aimed at practical intervention (*Theses on Feuerbach*, *MECW* 5, 6). From the mid-1840s onwards, **Marx**, together with **Engels**, posits the question of social perspectives as a problem of the contradictions of the capitalist economy and its revolutionary overthrowing by the proletariat.

The general hypothesis supporting this aim was formed by the concept – coherently developed for the first time in *The German Ideology* – that the foundations of human history were to be found in the individual activity [*Tätigkeit*] of production and reproduction of the material conditions of existence and society (*MECW* 5, 32). This point of departure relates both to the active process of formation of society by humans, as well as to the pre-existing social forms that constituted its preconditions. Both of these senses are implicit in the concept of ‘*formation*’ that was common in French. Thus, the sketch can be regarded as a ‘theory of the historical process of formation [*Formierung*] of society’ (**Jaek** 1978, 72).

2. Particularly in *The German Ideology*, efforts to conceptualise ‘social formation’ repeatedly employ the term ‘forms of intercourse’ (*MECW* 5, 51, 81 et sqq.; cf. *MECW* 31, 66). Shortly after, **Marx** wrote that man does not freely ‘choose *his productive forces* – upon which his whole history is based’, but is rather ‘circumscribed by the conditions [...] already acquired by the form of society which exists before him’ (letter to **Annenkov**, 28.12.1846; *MECW* 38, 97). In order ‘not to be deprived of the results obtained or to forfeit the fruits of civilization, man is compelled to change all his traditional social forms as soon as the mode of intercourse ceases to correspond to the productive forces acquired’ (98).

In *Wage Labour*, he goes one step further: The ‘*social relations of production* [...] are transformed with the change and development of the material means of production, the productive forces. The relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and, specifically, a society at a definite stage of historical development [...] with a peculiar, distinctive character’ (*MECW* 9, 213).

In the preparatory works for *Capital* and in *Capital* Volume I, ‘social formation’ maintains its methodological position in the economic theory of capitalism as well as in the analysis of its genesis and preceding social forms. This helps to clarify the heuristic function of the term: **Marx**’s primary concern was with the spatio-temporal preconditions from which capitalism emerged as a modern bourgeois mode of production; his second concern was critically establishing its character as the last antagonistic formation which was bound to be followed by total social emancipation (*MECW* 13, 264).

Through the examination of capitalist development in Russia, the USA and the European continent (in particular, Germany), as well as of the global colonial expansion from the 1860s onwards, **Marx** and **Engels** expanded the empirical foundation for their theories of social formation. One of the reasons for this was that a one-sided, economically oriented theory of social formation could not meet the demand of the growing workers’ movement for practical-theoretical orientation. These two ‘moments’ provoked research into the reciprocal efficacy [*Wechselwirkung*] of base and superstructure (*MEW* 37, 463, 489 et sqq.; *MEW* 39, 96 et sqq.).

From the mid-1870s onwards, the ethnological and pre-historical studies of Johann J. **Bachofen**, Georg L. **von Maurer**, Maxim M. **Kowalewski** and especially Lewis H. **Morgan**, as well as **Marx**’s and **Engels**’s own studies of the British and Dutch colonies, provided a new foundation for their views on ancient communal life [*ursprüngliches Gemeinwesen*]. Ancient society [*Urgesellschaft*] is taken to be an autonomous stage of formation; the ancient social forms of communal life [*Gemeinwesen*] were now considered to be the strata of a later

process of social formation. Similar to feudalism in Europe, these social forms constitute the point of departure and the accompanying circumstances [*Ausgangs- und Begleitumstände*] from which capitalism proceeds to expand in non-European societies. With India as his empirical referent, **Marx** had begun to study this process already in the late 1850s (*MECW* 12, 126 et sqq.). He also analysed late forms of ancient societies that had partly transitioned to private-property arrangements as a possible foundation of relations of domination in antagonistic high cultures, up until modern Russia. In this perspective, the ‘Asiatic mode of production’ became a concept for the formation and structure of society in its totality (Küttler 1976; Tökei 1977; Herrmann 1999). This expanded approach to formation-history is expressed most clearly in **Marx**’s drafts of a letter replying to the Russian revolutionary Vera **Zasulich**. Here he comments on the future perspectives of Russian rural communities (*MECW* 24, 347–72).

These studies and deliberations resulted in a diachronic and synchronic universalisation of the concept of social formation. The study of ancient societies revealed the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous [*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*] in all eras of formation, which had already become clear in the context of the various forms of capitalist genesis in Europe, America, Russia and Japan. This concerns not only formative development leading from hominisation to civilisation, which is characterised as ancient society, or primary formation, based on tribal order and common ownership of the means of production. Rather, it also regards the study of prehistoric social forms of communal life as strata of later processes of formation, whose existence, stability, and decline influenced the structure of precapitalist antagonistic class-societies (Herrmann 1999), or, with regards to the ‘periphery’ – such as colonial India or the Russian *Obstschinas* [village-communities] – also as the initial conditions [*Ausgangsbedingungen*] for the global expansion of capitalism (Eichhorn/Küttler 1999).

In a synchronic and diachronic examination of the relationship between communal

and private forms of appropriation that takes these elements into account, the Mediterranean-European formation-stage now appears to be a particular case in a more general process of formation, which is characteristic for the primary development of capitalism and, consequently, for the preconditions of modern communism. Though **Marx** never synthesised these studies and conceptual designs, **Engels** pursued them further in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. His limited focus on the Mediterranean-occidental history of formation (*MECW* 26, 132–4) resulted later in many one-sided interpretations (cf. Herrmann/Köhn 1988).

The treatment of capitalism as a transition to the ‘real’ history of human society was supported by the new dimension of the history of formation that included the ancient societies as well as their later developments. **Marx** believed that thereby his critique of private property of the means of production was confirmed at the same time as was his assumption that class-antagonistic civilisation was only a necessary transitional stage between original primitive communism and modern communism.

3. The development and usage of the concept of social formation in **Marx**’s work reveals that its various respective dimensions draw upon distinct theoretical and heuristic-methodical functions. Decisive was the recognition in the 1859 ‘Preface’ that ‘neither legal relations nor forms of state could be grasped whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but on the contrary, they have their origin in the material conditions of existence, the totality of which Hegel, following the example of the Englishmen and Frenchmen of the eighteenth century, embraces within the term “civil society”; that the anatomy of this civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy’ (*MECW* 29, 263).

Accordingly, in *Capital*, **Marx** set himself the task of studying, with the hand of English industrial capitalism and its immediate socio-economic conditions, the ‘natural laws of capitalist production’ as ‘tendencies working

with iron necessity towards inevitable results' (MECW 35, 7). The prognosis of revolution in the *Manifesto* reappears in the conclusion of the analysis of the contradictions in fully developed capitalism as an economic-nomological hypothesis [*Gesetzesaussage*]: 'capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation' (MECW 35, 750).

In Marx's analysis of the 'Method of Political Economy' ('1857 Introduction', MECW 28, 50 et sqq.), a dimension emerges of a *complex social economy of bourgeois society*, which encompasses not only genuinely economic but also sociological and historical aspects. The economic laws of capitalism should be analysed not only in the constitutive sphere of production-processes, but in all their functional manifestations, i.e., of circulation (*Capital* Volume II) and distribution and class-structure (*Capital* Volume III). Furthermore, there were plans to incorporate 'Forms of the state and forms of consciousness in relation to relations of production and circulation. Legal relations. Family relations.' (MECW 28, 45). In this context, the concept of formation refers transhistorically to the becoming [*Werden*], development and progressive overcoming of a mode of production no longer founded upon land as the predominant means of production, but rather in freely traded labour and capital-formation, and thus market-relations.

From a historical perspective, the emergence and development of bourgeois society is analysed as a progressive development of the commodity-economy, starting from the numerous forms of small-scale production in the city and rural areas, through manufacturing, and up until large-scale industry in Western and Central Europe (MECW 35, 704–51; Küttler 1983). This overall process is taken to result in the dissolution of the immediate nexus between producers and means of production, of stable communities and of personal relations of interdependency. Historically-retrospectively, this implies the contradistinction between the capitalist mode of production and the 'forms which precede capitalist production' (MECW 28, 400–40).

With regards to future outlooks, Marx considers capitalism to be both the highest stage

of development and the start of the dissolution of 'social formations' based on private property. In the formation-process of capital, small private property is destroyed first. Later, through increasing concentration, large private property is in turn disrupted. Its limit of development is inversely correlated to the private appropriation of socially produced wealth in the presence of progressive socialisation of the productive forces (MECW 35, 748 et sqq.).

The concept of social formation serves both as a concept to bring economic analysis together with its implications for all other areas of life in bourgeois society, and as a conceptual framework for the methodological grounding of this procedure in a more general conception of history and society. To this end, in clarifying his methodology (MECW 28, 18–46; MECW 28, 262–6), Marx referred back to the historical-materialist concept of development and structure outlined in *The German Ideology*. At the same time, with reference to the *Communist Manifesto*, the connection with the revolutionary and transformative perspective of communism is explained (MECW 35, 750). In this dimension of total history, the historical process of the formation of human society can be structurally explained by beginning from the respective material conditions of production and reproduction – that is, the mode of production that 'conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life' (MECW 29, 263) – and their corresponding relations of production and class. Social revolutions are the result of emerging contradictions between the development of productive forces, on the one hand, and the corresponding prevalent relations of production, on the other. They are 'eras of social revolution' (MECW 29, 264), in which class-struggle constitutes the decisive mediation between the processes of base and superstructure. An explicit correlation of the class-concept to that of social formation remains merely implied (MECW 37, 870 et sqq.).

Finally, historical progress is linked to the coming of age of the economic possibilities and contradictions of a particular 'social formation'. Mankind 'thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve', since a problem arises only 'when the material conditions

for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation' (MECW 29, 264). The often-cited and widely contested line: 'In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of the social formation' (MECW 29, 264; translation modified), provides a rough historical sketch of the course of this development in the light of the well-known eras of Mediterranean-occidental history. 'Epochs marking progress in the economic development of social formation', or 'epochs of social revolution' should capture the critical innovative shifts, not the entire history of formation. The 'modern' bourgeois mode of production constitutes, on the one hand, the last 'antagonistic form' in the sense that it contains contradictions in economic and social classes, and yet, on the other hand, these very 'productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism' whereby 'the prehistory of human society' comes to an end (MECW 29, 264).

Overall, **Marx** kept his approach principally open for the critical inclusion of additional developments of capitalist relations, new insights regarding non-European societies and earlier epochs, as well as for the incorporation of anthropological and scientific elements. His intention was not to develop a universal scheme of a particular sequence of formations [*Formationsfolge*], or a generally applicable structural model of the concrete developments of capitalism. He warns against the desire to use his theory as a 'universal key' (MECW 24, 202), instead of as a guiding principle for the discovery of individual concrete-historical developments. With regards to the concept of social formation, **Marx** never retracted the careful heuristic formulation in *The German Ideology*, which claimed that guiding theoretical concepts [*Leitbegriffe*] can never be more than a 'summing up of the most general results [...] abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men' (MECW 5, 38). At most, they can serve, by means of facilitating 'the arrangement of historical material', to prepare the 'study of the actual life-process and the

activity of the individuals of each epoch' (ibid.). The practical-theoretical application of the concept of social formation that was preliminarily established in *The German Ideology* was realised in contemporary works such as *Class Struggles in France*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *The Civil War in France* (cf. **Engelberg** 1980; **Jaeck** 1985; **Jaeck** 1988).

Concerning the concrete applicability of the concept of social formation, a distinction arises between its theoretical-systematic (economic) and historic (total-social) dimension (**Bollhagen** 1966). In **Marx**, the former corresponds to the level of statements of economic law. As was proposed in the 'Introduction' of 1857, the 'anatomy' of bourgeois society is the key to gaining 'insight into the structure and the relations of production of all previous forms of society, the ruins and components of which were used in the creation of bourgeois society' (MECW 28, 42). This, however, is not related to historical concretisation, because otherwise all 'historical differences' would be erased and one would see 'the bourgeois' in all 'forms of society' (ibid.). In this sense, the critique of political economy does not represent a real type [*Realtyp*], but rather a *theoretical model*, the validity of which with regards to developments in particular countries is tied to the presence of necessary initial conditions.

With regards to the capitalisation of Russian agriculture – which was marked by the conditions of rural communities – **Marx** makes clear that, instead of the Western-European 'transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property', this is a case of a transformation of 'communal property [into] private property' (MECW 24, 346). In further developing his treatises on precapitalist forms in the *Grundrisse*, **Marx** generalises these insights into the concept of large developmental sequences [*Entwicklungsreihen*] of social forms based on communal property (primary) or private property (secondary) (**Engelberg/Küttler** 1978, 254–92). Making a deliberate analogy to the geological concept of formation (MECW 24, 361), **Marx** remarks: 'The archaic or primary formation' contains 'a series of layers of differing ages, one superimposed on the other' (364). It reveals to

us 'a series of different types, marking progressive epochs' (ibid.). In the West, on the other hand, 'the death of communal property and the birth of capitalist production are separated from one another by an immense interval embracing a whole series of successive economic revolutions and evolutions, of which capitalist production is merely the most recent' (362). This 'secondary formation, of course, includes the series of societies resting on slavery and serfdom' (368). The capitalist formation which, being based on exploitation and private property, belongs to these secondary formations is, through its dualism of private appropriation and socialisation of productive forces, just as transitory in its character at the end of this series of formations as the Russian rural community, which still has communal ownership of land, and already private ownership of home, cattle and machinery (403 et sqq.; additionally, **Küttler** 1976; **Eichhorn/Küttler** 1999).

Overall, by means of interrelation and contradiction, two notions of 'progress' rooted in **Marx's** theories of formation are revealed here: on the one hand, this is rooted in a theory of class and revolution in light of an unambiguous power-struggle [*Machtentscheidung*] by means of revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. 'Progress', on the other hand, is largely synonymous with the by no means linearly progressing historical process of the progressive securing of civilisational-societal existence of humanity on the basis of the achieved conditions of production and reproduction and its higher development. This does not exclude the possibility of reversals through stagnation or even in revolutions, but points toward the general developmental tendency of the process of formation.

In an overview of the various developmental stages from *The German Ideology* to the draft-letters to **Zasulich** (1881), three dimensions of the history of formation and of formation-structures can be recognised: *First*, as a complete process of production and reproduction, as formation of society; *second*, as an 'anatomy of [...] civil society' (*MECW* 29, 263), for example, an integral economic and total social system of developed industrial

capitalism (with a contested analogy for the preceding social formations); *third*, as a series of diachronic and synchronic developments of the distinct layers and formation of communal-property and private-property based societies (**Engelberg/Küttler** 1978, 719 et sqq.). In addition, there is the inclusion of '*determinateness of nature*'; subjectively and objectively. Tribes, races, etc.' (*MECW* 28, 47), and, thus, also family and gender-relations (*Origin*). This moment appears in the context of formation-analysis predominantly as a description of the destructive implications and developmental limits [*Entwicklungsschranke*] of capitalism (**Tjaden** 1990b).

4. The Marxian concept of understanding history as a progressive development of economic 'social formations', and the practice of analysing concrete societies in their development and structure accordingly, has evoked divergent interpretations. A more indirect strand of interpretation began from the partial, and largely critical relation to **Marx's** ideas in the development of the historical and social sciences since the 1870s (**Hobsbawm** 1998, 100 et sqq., 204 et sqq.). However novel, particularly the linkage of history and materialism in this approach may have been, the trends of scientific development contained considerable heuristic elements (**Jaeck** 1988, 11 et sqq.) that provided **Marx's** approach with innovative impulses of lasting effect, most prominently with regards to methods for the analysis of the socio-economic structure and historical formation of concrete societies (**Iggers** 1994, 63 et sqq.).

Within the workers' movement, the concept of 'social formation' served both as theory and world-view (**Florath** 1999). In the Marxism of the Second International, the systematisation of the formation-view in the direction of modern processes of transformation and revolution was dominant. **Lenin** took the 1859 'Preface' as the basis for an attempt at systematisation that emphasised the integral/holistic restructuring of society by the dominant relations of production (*LCW* 1, 138–42; *Karl Marx, LCW* 21, 55–7). In this, he saw the systematic and historical function of the

concept as the ‘basic idea that the development of the social-economic formations is a process of natural history’ (*LCW* 1, 137–8). Further, he claimed that ‘it goes without saying that without such a view there can be no social science’ (*LCW* 1, 141). The one-sidedness of this and other interpretations was partly due to ignorance with regards to key texts, such as *The German Ideology*, some late excerpts and the letters to **Zasulich**. That being said, Lenin’s accentuation of the dominant relations of production as the basic structure of society, and the emphasis he placed on the coerciveness of systemic relations, was directed at showing the capitalist character of Russia, in spite of the presence of some underdeveloped elements, and thus at demonstrating its readiness for proletarian revolution (**Küttler** 1978).

Stalin’s canonisation of Leninism restricted the projected course of world-history to the development and implementation of socialism in one country. The interpretation of the concept of social formation after the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (1956) was also closely related to the development of a theory of formation founded upon the Leninist system-conception of social formation. The historical-materialist perspective on history and society focused on one aspect only – the transition to socialism in the era of coexistence with the capitalist world-system (**Kelle/Kowalson** 1975; 1981). At the same time, the concept of social formation increasingly served as the heuristic foundation for the science of history and sociology (**Bollhagen** 1966).

In Western Marxism, social formation was predominantly discussed in relation to other basic principles. Parallels and commonalities with the debate in the East were demonstrated in the discussions concerning the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the nature of precapitalist (traditional, agrarian) societies. Moreover, the term was discussed in terms of its historical-methodological application as well as the historically structural features (cf. **Küttler/Lambrecht** 1978).

In a general philosophical and socio-theoretical sense, the concept of social formation was predominantly a component theme in

debates regarding the Marxist theory of class and revolution, as well as the relation between modes of production and total social structures [*gesamtgeseftlichen Strukturen*] – in this context, above all regarding base and superstructure. There were conceptions of a coordination of modes of production and social formations in a multi-structural complex notion of society such as, for example, in Althusser (*FM*; cf. **Wolpe** 1980); or conceptions of the subordination of social formations under the determination and differentiation of modes of production, as well as its inverse, the constricted designation of modes of production in direct relation to social formations and their unequal development, for example, in the process of bourgeois revolution (**Poulantzas** 1973).

In the 1980s, the discussion concerning formation in the Western Left stepped further to the background. However, the socio-economic and cultural revolutions [*Umwälzungen*] following the collapse of state-socialism called forth holistic [*ganzheitlichen*] socio- and historico-theoretical concepts (**Hobsbawm** et al. 1999). The challenges of high-tech capitalism and globalisation make it necessary to comprehend changes in the mode of production (**Haug** 2001). Given the social, economic, ecological and total-cultural complexity and advancing differentiation of processes of rupture [*Umbruchsprozesse*] since the last third of the twentieth century, an examination of **Marx**’s approach to understanding history as the development of social formations appears particularly important for developing a theory of formation that will be able to comprehend these events and transformations (**Eichhorn/Küttler** 1999).

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African mode of production, anatomy, articulation/structuration, Asiatic mode of production, base, bourgeois-civil society, bourgeois revolution, capitalism, communism, domestic mode of production, end of history, epoch, feudalism, formation-series (precapitalist social formations), formation-theory, gender-relations, gender-egalitarian societies, Greek antiquity, guiding theme, historical materialism, history, imperialism, industrial revolution, laws of history, mode of production, non-contemporaneity, oriental despotism, periodisation of history, periphery/centre, philosophy of history, precapitalist modes of production, prehistory, productive forces/relations of production, progress, relations of intercourse, revolution, slavery/slave-owning society, social system, society, structure, superstructure, system-competition,

theory of social development, theories of society, whole, world-system.

Afrikanische Produktionsweise, Anatomie, Artikulation/Gliederung, asiatische Produktionsweise, Basis, bürgerliche Gesellschaft, bürgerliche Revolution, Ende der Geschichte, Epoche, Feudalismus, Formationenfolge (vorkapitalistische Gesellschaftsformationen), Formationstheorie, Fortschritt, Ganzes, Geschichte, Geschichtsgesetze, Geschichtsphilosophie, Geschlechterverhältnisse, geschlechtsegalitäre Gesellschaften, Gesellschaft, Gesellschaftstheorien, griechische Antike, häusliche Produktionsweise, historischer Materialismus, Imperialismus, industrielle Revolution, Kapitalismus, Kommunismus, Leitfaden, orientalische Despotie, Periodisierung der Geschichte, Peripherie/Zentrum, Produktionsweise, Produktivkräfte/Produktionsverhältnisse, Revolution, Sklaverei/Sklavenhaltergesellschaft, soziales System, Struktur, Superstruktur, Systemkonkurrenz, Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung, Ungleichzeitigkeit, Verkehrsverhältnisse, Vorgeschichte, vorkapitalistische Produktionsweisen, Weltsystem.