A politico-intellectual trajectory
Professor Mark Harvey, Talk at the workshop '**Instituted Economic Process. Reflections on the work of Mark Harvey**' University of Essex, 5th Oct 2018

Having completed my PhD on the historical development of Jean Piaget's own work at the London School of Economics (1969), I did a post-doc at his Institute of Genetic Epistemology in Geneva (1969-71). In the Anglo-Saxon world, Piaget is mostly thought of as a psychologist of child cognitive development. He was not. He was an epistemologist, trying to understand the development of scientific, social, and moral knowledge. He was also a biologist, deeply interested in evolutionary theories, having published his first paper in a scientific journal, on the evolution of molluscs in Swiss lakes, at the age of nine. A bright lad.

He described himself as a dialectical materialist, contrasting his theory with social constructionism, conventionalism, linguistic framing, and a priori realism. He wrote a book called Wisdom and Illusions of Philosophy, in which he claimed epistemology as a topic for theoretical and empirical research rather than a field of philosophy. What could philosophy tell us about knowledge? Well, given how philosophers go about knowing what they know, he argued, not much. He deployed two main research agendas, one historico-critical, analysing the development of logico-mathematical and empirical scientific thought from the Greeks to the present day, the other experimental, studying the same knowledge development in children. In both cases he argued for a concept of structural genesis, that is, changes in the deep structures of knowledge. The theory needed to account for the difference in the way that logico-mathematical thought developed – the emergence of algebra or set theory, for example – from the way that empirical scientific theories developed – the Copernican revolution, for example. He was undoubtedly a post-Enlightenment Eurocentric, but considered the most challenging epistemological questions to be the explanation of the emergence of universals, the common bases of human knowledge, of which the permanency of objects, the universality of mathematical concepts, physics theories of gravity, evolutionary biology, etc remain the

prime examples. Structural genesis however doesn't take universality for granted, quite the contrary, any knowledge universalities emerge through conflict and structural contradiction, and are historically transient.

These perspectives were formative for me, and, you might be surprised that I went to Geneva to undertake mathematical experiments with young children. What possible connection could this have with tomatoes, genomes, biofuels – and, indeed inequalities? At one level, following Piaget, I take the research knowledge process as an interaction between a social agent and a world, physical or social, existing as a reality independent of, and often resistant to, the practices of knowing it. However, departing from Piaget, and especially his epistemological experiments with children, I would claim that my experiments demonstrated that these were not experiments about the development of knowledge in children, but social interactions between experimenter and child manifesting a peculiar but interesting form of social reproduction of knowledge. They were the experimenter's mathematical games, with mathematical objects and mathematical questions, not invented by the children, but transformative of their thinking. There was no overt teaching, or, in Bourdieu's terms symbolic or pedagogical violence, completely non-directive. They could not be understood as psychology experiments, they were not about the experimental subjects, but about the experimenter-subject interactions. The implications for the discipline of psychology/psychoanalysis are profound, but I won't go into that. But there was one other critical aspect of this interaction. However non-directive, they relied fundamentally on a knowledge inequality and hence knowledge power relations between experimenter and subject. The experimenter brought contemporary mathematical concepts – set theory, for example – into the experimental interaction. Set theory was not, as Piaget had it, spontaneously discovered by children, but discovered under the experimental rules of the game, and under questioning by the experimenter. More broadly, the Piagetan

misinterpretation of this type of experimentation masked both the significance of social reproduction in the production of new knowledge, and, as importantly, the inequalities of knowledge generated by social reproduction, formal educational and informal social, and indeed experimental. The universals he sought to explain are far from common knowledge in any societal context, even when they are so within scientific communities. It showed, to me, the limits of this kind of experimentation: on their own, they couldn't get a handle on what made them possible as a particular form of social interaction. It was a kind of dead end, nonetheless an illuminating one.

So, then I was appointed lecturer at Brunel University (1971-74). They were turbulent times, at the tail end of the students' movement, the emergence of the women's movement, national liberation struggles in Vietnam, Africa and Latin America, and the Cultural Revolution in China. I should perhaps explain that I was already a sort of Marxist by the age of 15, and indeed had staged a mock-debate between Marx, the anarchist Bakunin and the socialist Lassalle while at school. At Brunel, I was involved in organising collective work with students, boycotting exams and individual assessment, video-ing sociology students' interventions in engineering lectures, and generally making a nuisance of myself. It was a very different world to the one we live in today. And it was in that context, that I quit academia to become a building worker.

I went for a job as a general labourer in a local authority Direct Labour Organisation that built and maintained social housing, at that time, 1974, a very significant sector of the housing market, with a large construction workforce of over 1500 manual workers. I remember the day. I went into a local building yard in Camden, London, was told to turn up next Monday morning at 7.30. Didn't even want to know my name. Many of you will probably think I was mad, and I have to say, most of my fellow workers, including the politicos and militant trades unionists thought so too. I never hid my social/educational

background. Working in construction, you are always moving from site to site, job to job, and in each new situation, there was initial distrust and distance, although I continued to work there for 17 years. I did all kinds of jobs, working with gangs of painters, for several years I was a plasterer's mate (one of the dirtiest and heaviest jobs), worked on refurbishing old tenement blocks as a general labourer, built public toilets…..

In my most recent book (2018), I identify how my seventeen years as a building labourer changed my world-view. When I started, the public sector construction industry was a kind of safe haven, and some of my closest mates were Communist Party building workers who had been involved in the major strikes of the 1960s and 70s in the City and Barbican, now blacklisted. Their experience and knowledge had a profound influence on me. In spite of my social background, I was elected a shop steward for labourers, then chairperson of the shop stewards committee. We democratised the union, holding regular mass meetings. It was one of my scariest moments when first chairing a mass meeting of a 1000 building workers, with other shop stewards gleefully taking the piss out of me and my accent. We fought for and won a 35 hour week for manual workers – to gain parity with managers and office staff. 35 hour week – you dream! We won a landmark equal pay case for women building workers, and for the first time promoted women craft apprentices.

But the safe haven of the 1970s was shattered by Thatcher's election in 1979. Within weeks, public sector construction became the first target for privatisation spearheaded by Heseltine, and an instant moratorium was placed on all new building of social housing. The political instrument deployed against us was called compulsory competitive tendering, establishing a market for building contracts where the rules of competition were heavily stacked against the public sector. One of the key aspects of this market was that private contractors employed bogus self-employed. Employers paid no National Insurance, no sick pay, no holiday pay, no pension rights, and trained no apprentices. With labour a prime cost

in the industry, it was a market politically constructed to destroy the public sector. The subsidised sale of council houses came later, so reducing the already frozen stock of social housing. For the next twelve years, we were fighting for our jobs and suffering wave after wave of compulsory redundancies. Defeated, when I was made redundant in 1991, there were just 65 left of the original 1500. I was particularly involved in trying to build links between council housing tenants and building workers, consumers and producers. Even though most of my fellow building workers were themselves council tenants, however, the divide between workers and consumers was as if they were two completely different kinds of people, with no social ties or interests binding them together. That was the case even within the public sector, let alone between private enterprise and consumers in commodity markets.

When I say my mates at work thought I was mad, and continued to think so when they knew me very well, it wasn't, or wasn't only, because they knew that I could be earning much better money. It was because I had a choice not to be a manual worker, a choice, broadly, they did not have. They had to do that kind of job. Moreover, it wasn't because of my middle class and their working class background, it was what job I could be doing by virtue of my education – which they also thought was entirely wasted when knocking up cement, breaking up concrete, tiling walls, day after day after day. The experience taught me the deep significance of the inequalities deriving from divisions of education in ways you don't find out about through academic research.

More broadly, political struggles, fighting for survival against Thatcherite politics of privatisation made me understand the significance of law and state power in shaping the economy. You get a different kind of understanding of the balance of forces only by pushing against them. We were unable to mobilise tenants and workers together, even across London, let alone nationally, to exercise sufficient countervailing power, especially in the context of the defeats of other major public industries, coal, steel, railways….There were lessons from

defeat. One of the key features was rethinking the whole nature of labour markets in capitalist societies. *Pace* Marx, labour is not a commodity like any other. The politically instituted competition between proper employment and bogus self-employment show how the price of labour was bound up with a bundle of rights for some and not for others, depending on legal and fiscal status. In 1995, I wrote a booklet for the Institute of Employment Rights arguing that if bogus self-employment was to spread on the same scale to other sectors of the economy, it would undermine the fiscal basis of the 20th century capitalist state, a huge loss of state income. That is exactly what is happening today in the gig economy, and much of the service sector. The state is losing grip of its fiscal handle on employment-based taxation. I pursued this strand of research for UCATT, the building Trades Union, with Felix (Behling), and we recently published a paper in Work Employment and Society (2015).

So life as a building worker was another dead-end, this time not of my own choosing, and even more illuminating and life-changing. I clawed my way back into academia, first as a contract researcher, then as a full-time researcher in Manchester. The first job I got was part of a European research network, comparing wage and pension systems in different European countries. Roland (Atzmuller) worked with me on that project. Since then, I've been involved in a number of European projects, including one on Trust in Food, funded by the EU following the BSE , mad cow, crisis, another crisis inflicted on Europe by Britain (with Alan Warde and Lotte Holm). Quite apart from the significance of the topics of research, what I valued most was collaborating with European colleagues, because they challenge and undermine parochial British assumptions on the most basic issues for social science. What is labour, employment, retirement? It is not just that the words are different, but they signify the radically different historical evolutions lying behind them. Conceptions of trust, for example, provoked huge arguments between the Scandinavians, the Brits and the Italians, before we could get an agreed way of exploring what underlay those conceptions. Agreement, of course,

meant abandoning one's own national preconceptions. These European collaborations reinforced an aspect of all my research, that it has to be comparative, has to be historical, these major sources of societal variation. When I'm at my most dogmatic, I'd say you can't understand any aspect, even micro-aspect, of one's own society without understanding why it is different from another society's, and how it came to be so.

Since re-entering academia, and looking back over the succession of research projects I've been involved in, I'd say that each was probing into some key questions about capitalist societies in their natural environments, rethinking a historical materialist analysis of the contemporary world. I shall just put up one slide (below), which some of you will be familiar with, and it is really a research tool for exploring these questions, and derives from Karl Polanyi's concept of Instituted Economic Process. Although I can blame him for coining the phrase, I have to admit that it is an extremely clunky expression, most unappealing. His cuddly concept of embeddedness – which I have argued, was in fact quite marginal to his own thinking – grabbed and continues to hold a much wider academic fan club. Yet, I'm stuck with it, hence the title of this workshop.

So, with the tomato, I used this tool to explore the emergence of mass production for mass consumption, and the historical variations of how the tomato became something people ate, in all kinds of different ways, from the nineteenth century onwards. It was a pioneer, pre-dating Ford's motor cars by decades, in standardisation, branding, advertising, market research, assembly line production, and cultures of consumption. For me, one of the big surprises was to find that Italians only started eating tomatoes the way only Italians do from the late 19th century, following unification. What did Italians eat before they ate pizzas and spaghetti bolognese? But it was also a study of asymmetries of economic power, which has been critical for much of my work. I was interviewing a senior production manager in a Campbell Soup factory in England, Campbell's being the iconic tomato soup from the early

twentieth century, a symbol of American capitalism as captured by Andy Warhol. But, they were making the whole range of Tesco's tomato soups, branded as Tesco, as well as their own. As a consumer, we buy Tesco not Campbell soup, and Tesco's were telling them the recipes. In the UK context, they had the power-leverage over Campbells. The power of supermarkets in the UK, the historical retail revolution that occurred distinctively in this country, as an integrated national market, affect what we eat and how we eat it. These are asymmetries of economic power, between supermarkets and manufacturers or logistics companies, supermarkets and consumers, supermarkets and their workforces: the diagram is a tool for exploring the whole nexus of power relations. When I said we can't understand even a micro-aspect of a given society without understanding how it is different from others, when I choose and then eat a pack of Tesco cherry tomatoes, its different from an American, French, Italian or Greek tomato, not just the tomato itself, but how I buy it, what I pay for it, how it gets to the supermarket shelf, who produces it. The organisation of capitalist mass production for consumption varies radically from one country to another. It is not a homogenous, universal, system, but exhibits radical heterogeneity both within and between different contemporary societies.

When researching the tomato, we discovered that it was also a pioneer in genetic modification, not for use of pesticides, but for enhancing the quality of taste and durability of tomatoes. Serendipitously, this led to a different probe into capitalist societies in their natural environments, a particular kind of transformation of nature involved in genomics and bioinformatics. This was research Andy (McMeekin) and I did, while at the ESRC Centre for Research in Innovation and Competition (University of Manchester). There are some views of capitalism which suggest that it drives to commodify everything, and consequently, capitalist societies are quintessentially market societies. At a critical time in the 1990s, it appeared that genomics and bioinformatics could well have confirmed this view. The race to

produce the human genome, patenting genetic material, securing digitised genomic knowledge behind firewalls, suggested that the human genome itself, the genome of the human species, and indeed that of a single private entrepreneur, Craig Venter, would become a market commodity, to be traded like any other. Genomes, diagnostic tools, the bioinformatics software tools for analysing genomic data, drug targets, and so on, would all be owned by private companies, creating new markets, making profits, accumulating capital. It did not happen. Andy and I looked at a critical genome, that of the bacterium involved in genetically modifying plants (*agrobacterium tumefaciens*), a genome of prime commercial value, used by Monsanto, DuPont and major multi-national corporations. After an extraordinary race, Monsanto were forced to place their genome in the public domain, alongside Washington Seattle's public science version of the genome. Moreover, Monsanto depended on, and benefitted from the fact that the genome was not privatised, but was developed and open within the public domain. It demonstrates how capitalism is multi-modal, in this case, depending on the public science base, and all that entails in terms of developing educational institutions, from primary schools through to elite research laboratories. And of course, it is multi-modal in all kinds of other ways.

Including, even in the US, the provision of drinking water through public piped infrastructures. Drinking water is a very different kind of public good than knowledge, not least because it is consumed by more or less everyone in any given societal context where piped infrastructures exist. In a project led by colleagues at the Sustainable Consumption Institute, the project compared historical trajectories of evolution for the provisioning of drinking water in the UK, Italy, Germany, India (Delhi, working with Aviram Sharma), Taiwan and Mexico City. It showed how different were the private-public splits, and that there is not just one type of public good, because how the public is constituted in different political systems, dictatorships and democracies, varies fundamentally. The drinking water

project brought to the foreground the significance of the interactions between different economies of water and their immediate natural resource environments, not just in terms of plenty or scarcity of water, but especially how different societies, in producing and consuming water, create different sustainability crises, in terms of pollution of so many different kinds (of which plastics has just received a lot of attention), over-abstraction, environmental damage through dams and reservoirs. From this the concept of sociogenesis of sustainability crises was developed, different crises with different societal impacts: the spread of water-borne diseases, chemical and mineral poisoning, flooding and drought.

You may have noticed that from the human domestication of tomatoes onwards, there has always been a strand of transformations of nature by human economic activity running through my work. In the last project before retirement, together with Zareen (Bharucha) and Jen (Gresham), we explored the generation of climate change through, especially, the production of food, a major source of greenhouse gases. Climate change is now the pre-eminent and potentially devastating sustainability crisis. But it is not one crisis generated by one type of human activity for which all are equally responsible, and, as we have already witnessed, its impact varies not only in different regions, but especially on the most socially vulnerable within those regions. The sociogenesis of climate change through the production and consumption of food again involved looking at how and where food (rice, soybeans, meat), was produced, traded, and consumed in very different ways in Brazil, China, India and Germany. A significantly vegetarian society like India has a very different greenhouse gas footprint than a beef-eating society like Brazil, or a pork eating society like China. It is not capitalism in general, but different societal economies both of production and consumption, that generate different greenhouse gases in different ways in their different spatial contexts. Fundamental to this perspective is conceiving how societal economies are instituted in

different natural resource environments, notably of land, water and sun, in temperate and tropical zones, with or without fossil fuel or mineral resources.

Coming full circle, when talking about human activity in different societal economies I am talking about human labour. I hold to the view that human labour is the source of all societal wealth, both private-market and public wealth, whether the labour of scientists or building workers, managers or assembly-line workers, whether unpaid labour of child care and upbringing in the household or paid labour in the public sphere of health care, the labour of students in acquiring skills and knowledge, as well as the labour of teachers, the labour of consumers doing what is necessary to complete the processes of market production and activities of searching and shopping. Creating wealth is one thing, owning it quite another, and I use the diagram of that nexus of relations between how labour is produced and reproduced, how inequalities of education are generated, how labour is engaged and exchanged, how labour is distributed within and across borders, or, as with slaves across the Atlantic, and how labour is used in production. Asymmetries of power in exchange critically generate both accumulation of capital and profit, requiring in my analysis both the exchange between worker and employer, and between consumer and sellers. The nexus of asymmetric power relations which give Amazon or Microsoft their quasi-monopoly dominance is multi-faceted, towards us as consumers, but to workforces, finance capital, suppliers, manufacturers, and so on.

I have been privileged to be associated with the Centre for the Study of Legacies of British Slave-ownership (UCL) over the past few years (Keith McClelland is here today). Looking at the long history of the British industrial revolution, what the IEP analysis demonstrates is how that revolution drove the massive expansion of slavery and then forms of coerced indentured labour deep into the 20th century, alongside the slow legal and fiscal evolution of what we now call free wage labour in the capitalist metropole. There was

combined development of different regimes of exploitation, critical to the understanding of the racialized inequalities that persist to this day. They demonstrate not only the internal heterogeneity within a national spatial frame, but processes of hybridisation, fusing together different regimes of exploitation. If you look at many of the major market commodities today, you find the contemporary forms of heterogeneity and hybridity, for computers and smart phones, clothing and white goods, cars and computer games. Forms of slavery in extraction industries in the Congo or Brazil, distinctively exploitative factory systems in China or Bangladesh, are fused in the value chains with high tech labour and insecure coercive service and gig-economy work in the advanced socio-economies of the West. Abstract models of closed circuit systems of capitalist market economies epistemologically suppress this heterogeneity and hybridity of combined regimes of exploitation.

And to conclude with the perplexing concept with which I continue to struggle, the I in IEP. In work on biofuels Andy McMeekin and I worked on, it was clear that mandated markets were politically instituted markets: as with many of the renewable energy markets, they emerge only as a consequence and in the context of considerable state intervention, prescriptions as much as incentives. I now think, especially after studying slavery and its legal legitimation and patchy delegitimation, that legal and fiscal instruments defining and imposing property rights, the nature of exchange, the varying rights of capitalists in different societies to the wealth produced by labour, mean that economies are in a deep sense politically instituted, so giving them a spatial and temporal fix. Perhaps the most striking example facing us today is Brexit. The four freedoms of the EU were politically instituted. Extricating the British economy from 40 years of politically instituted integration has been likened to the task of reconstituting the original eggs that made an omelette, only, of course, by now, outside the omelette, those eggs will have gone thoroughly rotten. It is a political process of de-instituting and re-instituting economies with new boundaries and borders, new

regimes of exchange and trade, new regimes of exploitation under divergent labour laws and labour migration, new regulations for financial flows across the continent and the globe. It really makes a difference if you see economies, historical and contemporary, as a fundamentally political institutions, rather than a separate sphere with their own dynamics, sometimes presented as having its own laws, quasi-natural and universal. It makes a difference especially when addressing the major challenges of the world today, whether of extreme inequalities or climate change.

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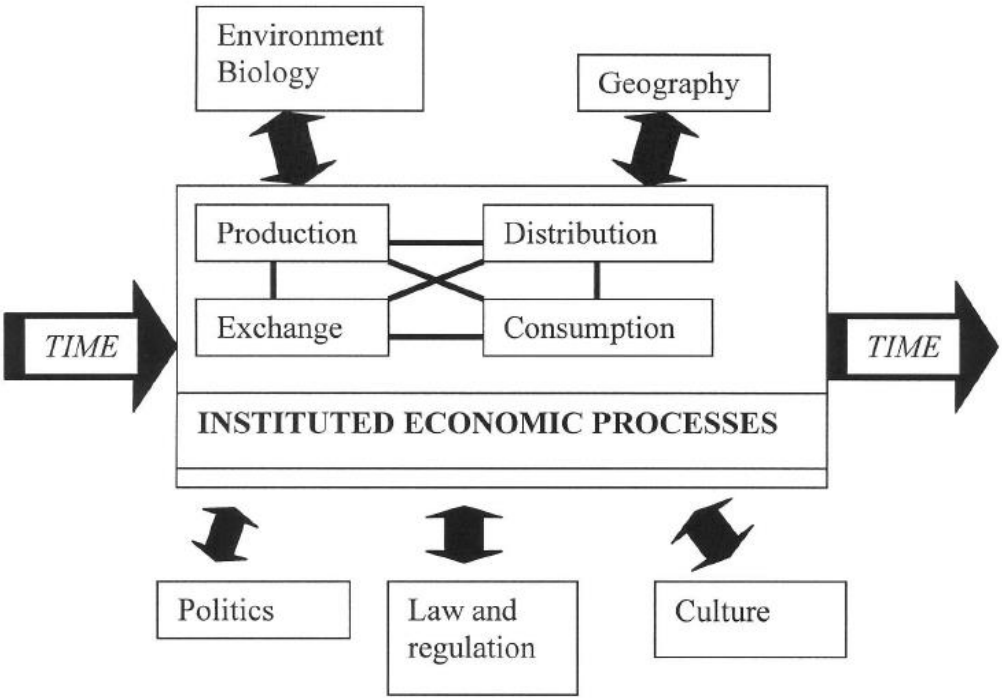
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