

DEMOCRACY AGAINST CAPITALISM: BASE, SUPERSTRUCTURE AND MORE DEFINITIONS

The goal of Ellen Meiksins Wood in *Democracy Against Capitalism* is to resuscitate the Marxian method of historical materialism. This seems to be a perennial problem for Marxist thought; it was one of the central issues facing the Frankfurt School as we saw in *The Dialectical Imagination* by Martin Jay. See, e.g. pp. 41 *et seq.* Part of Wood's method is argue her definition of some of the critical terms used by Marxists especially in Chapters 2-5. Wood compares her view to those she considers less valid, a typical approach in technical works. My interest is whether any of this can help us understand the rise of neoliberalism.

Chapter 2 discusses a common metaphor, base and superstructure. This from [Wikipedia](#) gives a good idea of the problem Wood wants to address:

In Marxist theory, human society consists of two parts: the base (or substructure) and superstructure. The base comprises the forces and relations of production (e.g. employer–employee work conditions, the technical division of labour, and property relations) into which people enter to produce the necessities and amenities of life. The base determines society's other relationships and ideas to comprise its superstructure, including its culture, institutions, political power structures, roles, rituals, and state. While the relation of the two parts is not strictly causal, as the superstructure often affects the base, the influence of the base is predominant. In Orthodox Marxism, the base determines the superstructure in a

one-way relationship. Marx and Engels warned against such economic determinism.

This definition contains more terms requiring a definition. What are the relations of production? This is from the [Marxists International Archive Encyclopedia](#):

The objective material relations that exist in any society independently of human consciousness, formed between all people in the process of social production, exchange, and distribution of material wealth.

Examples of objective material relations are listed in [Wikipedia](#): “employer–employee work conditions, the technical division of labour, and property relations”. The [forces of production](#) are the unity of the means of production and labor.

Wood gives a her own list of the relations of production: exploitation, domination and appropriation. Kindle Loc. 1175.

And since we’re doing definitions, here’s a description of the term Capitalist Mode of Production from [Wikipedia](#):

The capitalist mode of production is characterized by private ownership of the means of production, extraction of surplus value by the owning class for the purpose of capital accumulation, wage-based labour and—at least as far as commodities are concerned—being market-based.

The Wikipedia discussion of base and superstructure suggests that the general idea is that the economic base exerts control over the superstructure, and that occasionally changes in the superstructure cause changes in the base. Wood thinks that the two are more closely

related. Capital has a lot of control over the superstructure, and can force changes in the base. At the same time, changes in the economic base can force changes in the superstructure.

All of this seems quite obvious. Changes in the machines and processes used in production can require adjustments to laws and rules both to allow the use and to protect workers. It's also true of other superstructure elements, such as law. In the US, for example, the laws have gradually changed to allow non-compete clauses in contracts between employers and the lowest level of employees. Restaurant chains can require delivery employees, cooks, and window clerks to sign non-compete agreements. That obviously is part of the work conditions between employer and employee, which is identified as part of the base while the change in law is part of the superstructure.

The primary use of this distinction for Wood seems to be that we can use the ideas to isolate parts of society for study and analysis, but that we have to remember always that different parts of a society affect each other.

I draw the following conclusions from this chapter, which I've now read three times so you don't have to.

1. Reading this book is tedious, in part because one or more of the terms I've defined and a few other terms we all sort of know (social formation, class struggle, etc.) appear on every Kindle page, which for me is probably 100 words. But in this kind of work, careful definitions matter. When we look back at the past, we see a vast number of specific events. Historical materialism tries to make sense of these events in terms of forces that amount to more than the individual decisions of all our ancestors, logic and laws that can be derived from study. Wood describes historical materialism as follows:

A materialist understanding of the world, then, is an understanding of the social activity and the social relations

through which human beings interact with nature in producing the conditions of life; and it is a historical understanding which acknowledges that the products of social activity, the forms of social interaction produced by human beings, themselves become material forces, no less than are natural givens. (Kindle Loc. 491.)

To do this, Marxists use the terms I've defined here, although often with other definitions. Each definition has the potential to produce a different interpretation of history. Consequently, these tedious definitions and the tedious prose they help create are necessary.

2. The description of the relation of production as exploitation, domination and appropriation is striking. I wonder if there are any large societies in which these relations do not control production?

3. Domination seems to be the most important, perhaps because of the books I've been writing about. [Pierre Bourdieu](#) made it a central element of his life's work. I didn't get to finish Foucault's *Security Territory and Population* (maybe I will someday), but one of the main ideas of that book and other works by Foucault is [governmentality](#), and the systems that have arisen to produce it. Domination is a central focus of oligarchy, because it enables the oligarchs to achieve their [common purposes](#):

1. Protecting and preserving wealth
2. Insuring the unrestricted use of wealth
3. Acquiring more wealth.

I doubt that Marxism is the best way to study domination in a contemporary complex society like the US or France. I don't see on the google any evidence that Wood engaged with the works of Bourdieu or Foucault. But I am sure that our normal social discourse depends on pretending

that we are not dominated.

4. The three relations have deep roots in our individual psyches. It's easy to see that domination/submission drives behavior in the animal kingdom as pictured in the term Alpha Male. Exploitation and appropriation are frequently found with domination. Perhaps recognition of those fundamental psychological issues drove the scholars of the Frankfurt School to attempt to [incorporate Freudian psychology](#) into their revamped Marxism.

5. Ideology is one part of the superstructure, I plan to take that up using [this article](#) by Wood.