FURTHER NOTES ON FISHING AND SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION IN WESTERN VENEZUELA*

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Abstract: This paper intends to show how two perspectives sometimes considered as mutually exclusive can be used simultaneously in order to acquire a deeper understanding of a historical process. Using data from fishing communities of Western Venezuela it is shown that external articulation and formal subsumption of a simple commodity production are merely complementary ways of looking at the same process.

Résumé: Le but de ce travail est de démontrer que deux participants qui, d'ordinaire, s'excluent mutuellement peuvent, dans certaines circonstances, s'accommoder simultanément afin d'acquérir une meilleur compréhension du procédé historique. En tenant compte du résultant d'études faites sur les villages de pêcheurs situés dans l'ouest de Vénézuèla, on peut établir qu'une articulation externe et une subsomption formelle de la production d'une simple commodité ne sont que des façons complémentaires d'étudier le même procédé.

Simple Commodity Production (hereafter referred to as SCP) has always been a problematic notion in Marxist literature. Originally, and from an evolutionary viewpoint, it was considered to be a mode of production completely alien to the logic of capitalism and bound to disappear with the advancement of the latter. The transitional nature of SCP was thus emphasized, leaving its dynamics unstudied. A different position is derived from the "Articulation of Modes of Production Approach." Here, non-capitalist modes of production exist outside the capitalist mode of production (hereafter referred to as CMP) but are nevertheless articulated to and dominated by the latter. A third position was taken by the "Dependentista" school and world-system theorists. While proposing the existence of a single capitalist world-system, these

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authors transformed SCP-and any other mode or relation of production which at first sight appear as non-capitalist—into an internal articulation of the CMP which is now seen as a complex system embracing all forms of development and underdevelopment.² The issue then is whether SCP exists as a mode of production by itself, that is, whether it has its own specific logic and dynamics different from those of capitalism. Needless to say, at no time is it considered that SCP exists independently of the CMP. Rather we are dealing with only two positions: SCP as an internal articulation of capitalism or SCP as externally articulated to capitalism. The former is usually associated with mechanisms of subsumption³ while the latter implies the characterization of the mode of production. At first sight, these two approaches seem to stand so completely opposite to each other that even the very definitions of SCP are different.⁴ However, a closer look suggests a possible reconciliation between them because the position adopted seems to depend upon the perspective used to examine a historically determined situation. That is, SCP is externally articulated to the CMP and becomes a mode of production if one looks at it from within the SCP.⁵ Equally, if the analysis of the relationships between the CMP and SCP is based only on the capitalist dynamics, the result is SCP internally articulated in capitalism. Therefore, articulation and subsumption are but two ways of looking at the same process. Thus, the aim of this paper is to show how these two approaches rather than negating each other, can be complementary for the study of a historically determined situation, namely, the fishing organization of Villa Marina, on the Western Coast of Venezuela.

Simple Commodity Production Outside

The assertion that SCP is externally articulated to the CMP requires, first of all, the determination of the conditions for its emergence. Historically SCP has often been associated with the disappearance of tribal society or the dissolution of communal property (Kahn 1978:114) because the three main conditions for the emergence of SCP are:

- 1. The separation between producers and non-producers whereby there is no class of non-producers with property rights over the means of production.
- 2. The separation of the producers from each other so as to allow them to engage in economic relations as individuals.⁶
- 3. The existence of markets because the product of the SCP is geared towards exchange.

Evidently, these conditions may result from a situation other than the breakdown of tribal society. In fact, in Villa Marina these conditions resulted from changes occurring in an economic organization which had nothing to do with tribal society.

At the turn of the century Villa Marina⁷ was inhabited by fishermen, shepherds, labourers on the salt-marshes, and the owners of the fishing boats who were also the owners of large herds of goats and of the land where the salt-marshes were located. Fishing did not produce enough wealth to reproduce itself and depended on the other activities for its maintenance. Nevertheless, fishing was geared not only to personal consumption; a major portion of the produce was salted, sold, and transported by ships which were part of the commercial networks linking the main ports of the country (Travieso 1973:61). Thus, although fishing did not represent in itself great benefits for the owners, it was part of several commercial transactions which included the selling of salt, milk, cheese, furs, etc. In this way, the boat owners obtained benefits from all of these commercial transactions and did not differentiate the benefits obtained from each product. The total benefit was measured in terms of the owner's consumption and not according to the costs of production of each activity.8 Therefore, there was no differentiation between the selling of fish and, say, the selling of salt; what mattered were absolute numbers: income and consumption. The economic activities were centred on commercial transactions rather than on production and, consequently, merchant capital dominated the economy of the zone. This situation was compounded by the fact that most of the things fishermen needed and used could not be produced by themselves because the land surrounding the village is barren, and even the wood for the boats which the fishermen built had to be brought from other parts of the country. This meant that, on one hand, fishermen were not the owners of the instruments of labour—separation between the direct producer and the means of production—and, on the other hand, fishermen did not produce the goods they needed—separation between direct producers and means of subsistence. Nevertheless this separation was not complete. Although the fishermen were paid in proportion to the total catch of the boat in which they worked, this payment was made not with money, but with fish. They had then certain rights over the product of their labour and were not completely alienated from it; they decided when and to whom to sell their fish, and even though the usual buyer was the owner of the boat, it was also possible to sell it directly to the ships. Another important aspect is that there existed a strong mutual dependence between proprietors and fishermen due to the scarcity of labourers and of alternative employment for the workers. As the boat owners were also the owners of the herds and of the salt-marshes, the employers were the same regardless of the activity in which the labourer decided to work. Nevertheless, migration to the hinterlands was not unusual. So it was in the interest of both proprietors and fishermen to maintain strong links among themselves. This bond was reinforced, first, by the selling of the fish the fishermen had earned to the boat owner. Secondly, on occasion the

law was used to force fishermen to work, and it was not unusual that a fisherman would be jailed for refusing to go fishing on a particular day. Finally, proprietors would give certain fishermen prerogatives such as special payments according to their seniority and the possibility of inheriting fishing gear at the proprietor's death. These prerogatives worked in two ways: the favoured ones would be less willing to seek new jobs, and for those who did not receive them, the prerogatives became a kind of goal to be attained by staying on their job. Therefore, fishermen were not free workers who could sell their labour power to anyone they wished. Thus, the form of payment and the strong link between proprietors and labourers, based not only on economic factors, make it impossible to consider fishermen as totally separated either from the means of production or from the product of labour; that is, they were not wage labourers in the sense of wage labourers within capitalism. It should be noticed here that one of the above conditions was already taking shape, that is, the market. But, although the disposal of the product took place through the market, both means of production and means of subsistence had to pass through the proprietor before reaching the fishermen. Therefore the market had not emerged completely.

This economic organization was affected by several changes between 1900 and 1960 that resulted in the establishment of SCP. Between 1907 and 1925, the whole area was afflicted by severe droughts and a large number of people left the hinterlands and moved to the coastal zone, because fishing remained unaffected by the droughts. The main consequence of this situation was that fishing started to play a relevant role in the economy of the area and the number of people interested in building fishing boats increased. However, the increase in investors did not keep pace with the increase in labour supply. By the mid-thirties there were about twenty fishing boats in Villa Marina, that is, an increase of approximately 50% compared to the beginning of the century. At the same time, the population is estimated to have increased by 100%. Eventually, some people moved away while the majority of those who stayed started working as seasonal fishermen and survived during the low seasons doing whatever job they could get. There were some who found permanent jobs in the newly constructed boats.

During the forties, motorboats and nylon nets became widespread and replaced traditional instruments of labour like rowing-boats, sails, and nets made of vegetable fibre. Consequently, fishermen stopped making their own gear and had to acquire the new ones through the market. This signalled two important changes. First, proprietors lost their control on the production of fishing implements; they were now being produced by industry, and anyone with enough money could acquire them. Several fishermen, who either saved or borrowed the money, bought their own implements directly and started fishing independently, doubling as proprietors and workers. This happened

without the breakdown of the system because many of these new proprietors were replaced as workers by the seasonal labourers, and because those proprietors who found themselves short of workers started fishing in their own boats. The second change was the total commoditization of the means of production, means of subsistence, and product of labour. The first two no longer passed through the proprietor before being acquired, because the increase in both population and total amount of circulating money attracted many traders and merchants who were not only interested in the commercialization of fish. but also in the trading of all the goods needed by the population. Therefore, merchants from outside the area started handling the commercialization of the fish, as well as the providing fishing gear, sometimes even boats, and food and clothing for the fishermen.

Finally, the changes brought about by the technical innovations of the forties were consolidated by the establishment, in the mid-fifties, of oil companies in the area. These companies required a large number of workers and recruited them from the neighbouring fishing villages. Fishermen saw this as an opportunity either to break away from the hardships of fishing, or to save enough money to buy their own boats and implements. Consequently, after five years, the number of fishermen owning their fishing instruments had increased noticeably. By the end of that decade all the boats in Villa Marina were motor boats, with the exception of small rowing boats used for fishing from the coast with nets tied to the beach. Also, due to the sudden shortage of labour power, more former proprietors were forced to work as fishermen in their own boats. In fact, most of the motor boats were being captained by their owners. Only those owners who still had investments in other economic activities did not themselves captain their own boat. Nevertheless, as indicated above, this approach to investment had been in practice since the beginning of the century and was related mainly to proprietors who did not live in Villa Marina. With the increasing independence of fishing from other activities the role played by these outside owners diminished greatly. It can be seen, then, that the emergence of SCP in Villa Marina resulted from the interplay of several forces and not from the breakdown of a previous organization.

The next step is to describe how SCP has been maintained, that is, how these conditions are reproduced. The transitional nature attributed to SCP springs mainly from the fact that the conditions for its reproduction can be easily altered. Only as long as the producers continue to be independent and equal to each other can this mode exist (Kahn 1978:118). There are several reasons for the maintenance of SCP in Villa Marina. First, as in any other fishing economy, accumulation is precluded to some extent by the absence of resource ownership. 11 The resource—the sea—remains the subject of labour but it never becomes an instrument of labour; it is a means of production only because it is one of the conditions for the existence of the labour process but

it is never the receptacle of value because labour cannot be incorporated into it. Secondly, technical innovations have not resulted in the concentration of the conditions of labour in a small group of people because the levels of production, measured in terms of size of catches, vary constantly. This variation is due to the fact that fishing grounds are periodically exhausted not only because of overfishing but also because of of the pollution originating in the oil refineries established in the area. Before 1960 fish was available very near the coast and the boats never went more than three kilometres from the coast. After the establishment of the oil refineries, fishermen were forced to go further and further into the sea in order to obtain sizeable catches. This increased the level of risk, not only in terms of the safety of fishermen and fishing instruments but also because fishing expeditions going very far from the coast cannot rely anymore on previously known patterns of fish migration and behaviour. Accordingly, the size of the catch is unpredictable and it is common that an expedition of several days ends with just a few kilos of fish to distribute as payment between the members of the crew.

Therefore, the innovations have helped to counteract this variation by allowing the exploitation of new areas rather than by increasing capital accumulation. Furthermore, the surplus brought by the innovations is used up in the reproduction of the means of production because they can no longer be replaced by the direct labour of the producer. Accordingly, the process of accumulation which may result in a deep social differentiation among producers is continually hindered. Finally, the state has reinforced the SCP through a loan scheme which allows small producers or workers to acquire their own boats and fishing gear under the condition that the owner works on the boat. The loans were originally given to individual fishermen but by 1970 they were being given only to "peasant companies." These companies are constituted only to apply for a government loan. The minimum number of fishermen varies according to the size of the boats the company intends to buy. Thus, for a small motorboat, the company is usually constituted by two relatives and it is not rare to find that in fact only one of them actually works as a fisherman, the other being used only as a name to fulfill the legal requirements. Companies applying for a large loan—to buy a boat with a central engine—are constituted by at least four fishermen. In the larger companies usually all the members work as fishermen. The members of a company all have the same rights and all are owners, and as they also constitute the crew, the benefits are distributed equally among them. This scheme thus reinforced a tendency observed in the area since 1960, namely, that due to the high level of uncertainty of the fishing and the lack of capitalization there has been a proliferation of small-scale enterprises based on SCP as a kind of adaptive response.12

It has been shown, then, how SCP originated historically and how it has been maintained through time. Nevertheless, if SCP is to be examined in a regional and/or national context, it is necessary to change perspectives and see it as an internal articulation of the capitalist mode of production.

Simple Commodity Production Inside

The study of the SCP as an internal articulation of capitalism is based on the notion of Formal Subsumption. Here the relations of production of labour processes formally subsumed under capital are capitalist even though the forms of labour cooperation do not correspond to the capitalist mode (Mansutti 1983:289). This is possible because capital subsumes non-capitalist labour processes without changing their nature but using them for the extraction of surplus value (Marx 1971). Consequently, pre-capitalist labour processes do not disappear immediately but rather progressively and can be considered as being formally subsumed under capital. ¹³

It is possible to analyze the fishing organization in Villa Marina as being subsumed under capital, and therefore as capitalist.¹⁴ Thus, it is necessary to show how SCP in Villa Marina is part of a process of surplus-extraction, that is to say, it is necessary to determine the part that SCP plays in the extended reproduction of capital. The first point to be noted is that the product of SCP. i.e. fish, is a commodity regardless of the difficulties in measuring the quantity of labour spent to produce it. 15 It is in the nature of fishing as an economic activity that its product is geared towards exchange because the producers, in contrast to peasant economies, cannot live only on what they produce. A fishing economy requires some articulation with other types of economy in order to obtain its means of subsistence. In Villa Marina this need is accentuated by the fact that the natural environment largely precludes the diversification of economic activities. Therefore, by necessity, fish is a commodity. Thus, as a commodity, it has an exchange-value, and the question is whether this value is realized by the actual producer or by some other agent. 16 Going back to the history of Villa Marina, it can be seen that SCP became important at the same time as motorboats and nylon nets were introduced. This means, on the one hand, that SCP had to take part in a market controlled by capital. The surplus value appropriated in the production of motorboats and nylon nets was being fully realized in their prices. In other words, motorboats and fishing nets were being produced by a capitalist economy to which SCP was articulated but the value of these commodities was appropriated before they became part of the labour process of fishing. On the other hand, the direct producer—the fisherman—failed to realize the full value of his product because there was a difference between the value he realized and the price the commodity would have were it produced within the system of capitalist production.¹⁷ This difference springs from the fact that

no surplus value is appropriated by the fisherman in the production of fish as he himself is the worker, and whatever benefit he may obtain is determined by the capitalist forces controlling the market. In other words, by establishing a circuit whereby value originating in the SCP was realized outside the SCP. a mechanism was established for the extended reproduction of capital. The main reason for this circuit lies in the "backwardness" of fishing as an economic activity: fish is a scarce commodity because fishing in Venezuela has not undergone a process of industrialization; there is no national fishing fleet and capitalist enterprises are small and few. This is especially the case in Villa Marina because it is located in the more industrialized part of the coast and, although a rapidly expanding population in the area has had expanding food requirements, this demand is very often satisfied by importing fish. As we remarked above, there are two large oil companies which employ thousands of workers; this has meant that the majority of the people not employed by the companies is engaged in commercial activities geared towards the provision of the workers. Therefore, the demands of the regional economy were better met by the importation of fish rather than by investment in its production. From a historical perspective it is important to note that the period between 1900 and 1960 which saw the emergence of SCP in Villa Marina also witnessed a period of deep transformation of the national economy: from an agricultural country with 70% of its population living in rural areas, Venezuela became an oil-exporting country with 70% of the population living in cities (Paez 1974:40). Evidently the industrialization of oil-extraction which began in the twenties also hindered the industrialization of fishing due to the drain of capital and especially of labour; nevertheless, it did not disappear completely because it was integrated in the mechanism of capital accumulation of the national economy.

Concluding Remarks

It should be clear by now that each of the approaches throws light on different aspects of the same process: the SCP perspective aids in the comprehension of the horizontal organization of productive units and the dynamics of the economy at the micro-level; on the other hand, the CMP perspective adopts a vertical point of view which allows the understanding of the relationships between the national economy and small-scale production. The exclusion of either perspective will result in a partial comprehension of the historically determined situation. Evidently many criticisms can be raised against both perspectives because neither is all embracing. On the one hand the "outside" perspective alone cannot explain the characteristics specific to capitalism that allow the articulation between SCP and capitalism, i.e. extended reproduction of capital. On the other hand, the "inside" perspective results either in an oversimplification of the SCP or in attributing capital-

ist features to SCP such as maximization, self-employnent, and the like, not to mention the risk of a "capitalistically determined history." Equally, a number of objections can be made to the simultaneous use of these perspectives, but, as the literature on the subject very well illustrates, there seems to be little agreement on what each perspective implies. As long as notions such as SCP and subsumption remain trapped within self-contained theoretical discourses there is no common ground to reach that agreement. However, if they are used as tools to examine historically determined situations, then they complement each other and result in a deeper comprehension of those situations. Going back to the case examined in this paper it seems clear that many forces have been in play in the shaping of the fishing organization of Villa Marina and that the only way to get some understanding of this process was to look at it from both ends. At the micro-level, that is, at the level of the community, the concept of subsumption lacks the subtlety to help us understand the history and the character of the situation, because there are elements such as the relationship between labourers and proprietors at the beginning of the century that are not even regional but local. Equally the extremely complex relationships between local, regional, and national forces fall completely outside the scope of an external SCP. Therefore we believe that some of the shortcomings of both perspectives have been overcome by using them simultaneously.

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Notes

- * This article is an attempt to resolve a theoretical conundrum raised in a previous publication (Carillo and Suarez 1986), namely, the apparent inadequacy of notions such as Simple Commodity Production, External Articulation and Formal Subsumption as explanatory apparati when applied to certain historical situations.
- 1. Kahn (1978:112-113) explains the importance of petty (otherwise simple) commodity production: "I do not claim that petty commodity production is the basic structure of all peasant societies. Nor do I argue that all features of any peasant society can be explained by this concept. I am arguing simply that a definition of petty commodity relations of production is particularly illuminating with respect to particular forms of neo-colonialism. At the outset, therefore, I want to make it clear that I am dealing with an abstract, theoretical concept and not a description of a particular society." By contrasting petty commodity production with feudalism and capitalism he illustrates its signification in current Marxist discourse: "We can illustrate the use of these concepts with the case of the feudal mode of production. Here the direct producer is said to possess the means of production, while ownership of those same means of production lies with a class of non-labourers. The terms describe the two-sided nature of the economic

relation between labourers and non-labourers under feudalism. At the same time labourers are dominated politically by non-labourers, a political domination necessary to, and predicted upon, the economic instance. This is to be distinguished from the capitalist mode of production in which the means of production are both owned and appropriated by the capitalist class. Here the economic instance alone is sufficient to reproduce its own conditions of existence. The labourer is compelled economically to work and hence deliver a surplus to the capitalist class. With petty commodity production, as for feudalism, the direct producer possesses the means of production. In other words, producers appropriate the means of production and set the productive process in motion without the intervention of a non-producer. At the same time, however, each producer owns the means of production individually, i.e. there is no class of non-producers standing over the labourers with property rights in the means of production. The relationship of usurer to producer, so commonly found in societies of individual producers, cannot be said to be a relation of production so long as the usurer does not own any means of production (ibid:113,114) (Editorial note)."

- On the first position see Kautsky 1970. For the Articulation approach Rey 1973; Wolpe 1980. For world-system theory see Frank 1978; Wallerstein 1976, 1979.
- For a discussion of the notion of subsumption see notes 13 and 14 below and the concluding section of this article.
- 4. Compare for example Kahn's definition (1978) with Chevalier's (1983).
- 5. Probably this explains why many supporters of this perspective are anthropologists: participant observation reinforces the view from within.
- 6. A similar point has been made by Friedmann (1980:165) for household production.
- 7. The history of Villa Marins presented in this paper is based on interviews with the elders of the village, documents contained in the Archivo Historico de la Universidad Francisco de Miranda, Coro. At the beginning of the century Villa Marina did not exist with that name and in fact was considered as part of Los Taques. The latter is an older town situated about two kilometres from the coast. The separation between both towns went hand in hand with the increase in fishing activities till the mid-fifties when Villa Marina acquired its own name and was recognized as a different town.
- Cf. Banaji 1976:306.
- 9. For the analysis of factors outside a market system see Kula 1974a:39; 1974b:361.
- 10. Cf. Gonzalez 1984:203.
- 11. Cf. Faris 1977:240.
- 12. Cf. Long 1978:191; Meillasoux 1978:169. These small-scale enterprises are not based on household production (Cf. Friedman 1980).
- 13. For a different classification of the process of subsumption see Bennholdt-Thomsen (1977) who differentiates four forms of subsumption, namely, real, formal, under the market, and marginal.
- 14. Before carrying on the study of SCP through the perspective of Formal Subsumption it is necessary to clarify certain points concerning previous attempts to study the subsumption of SCP. First, the presence or absence of wage labour cannot be used as the only criteria for distinguishing between SCP and capitalist production as Mann and Dickson have proposed (1978:468), because this form of labour also appears in modes of production clearly characterized as non-capitalist (cf. Banaji 1977:6). Second, Friedmann's characterizatio of SCP (1980:163) as the end point of commoditization may well apply to household production, but in any other context the logical end point of this process is the emergence of a proletariat. Indeed, Friedmann's SCP is really a smale-scale capitalist enterprise as there is nothing in this form of production that is particular and unique to it. Third, the analysis of SCP cannot rest on subjective assumptions as to whether the logic of SCP is subsistence in a broad sense (Berstein 1979:425) or whether there is some form of "maximization without capitalization" (Chevalier

1983:178). Finally, the notion that the simple commodity producer's labour power is a commodity with its value being realized either in a labour market (Friedmann 1980:167) or, without taking part in a monetized exchange, but "subjected to the determinate action of market calculation" (Chevalier 1983:162) seems to go exactly against the idea of SCP even as a particular form of internal articulation, because the only defining characteristic left would be the property of means of production and, like wage labour, it is not sufficient to support the whole notion.

- 15. This point has been made by Vergopoulos (1978:449) for agricultural production.
- 16. When there is no formal subsumption, a monetary relationship is established where both capitalist and direct producer are equal: one possesses money and the other products. On the contrary, if the labour process is formally subsumed, the direct producer is involved in a surplus extraction and personifies the labour factor. At the same time, an increase in the continuity of work takes place in the latter case because now the producers have a permanent buyer personified by the capitalist and no longer depend on occasional. Nevertheless, these changes do not transform the organization of the labour process; "it is in the nature of the case that the subsumption of the labour process under capital takes place on the basis of a pre-existing labour process, prior to its subsumption and is constituted on former production processes and on other conditions of production" (Marx 1971:55).

Now work is intensified and, in a sense, more "efficient" but its nature is changed only when a real subsumption of the labour process takes place, i.e. with the establishment of the capitalist mode of production. In other words, a monetary relationship derived from the *real* content of this relationship is established: the producer possesses labour power and the capitalist possesses the conditions of labour. This, in its turn, implies that the objective conditions of labour—means of production—and the subjective conditions of labour—means of subsistence—confront the producer as monopolized by the buyer of his labour power. And as these conditions become more alien to him the formal relationship between capital and wage labour is reinforced, creating one of the conditions for the real subsumption, that is, the emergence of CMP.

17. See Vergopoulos 1978:447.

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