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In an article devoted to the Young Marx, I have already stressed the ambiguity of the idea of ‘inverting Hegel’. It seemed to me that strictly speaking this expression suited Feuerbach perfectly; the latter did, indeed, ‘turn speculative philosophy back on to its feet’, but the only result was to arrive with implacable logic at an idealist *anthropology*. But the expression cannot be applied to Marx, at least not to the Marx who had grown out of this ‘anthropological’ phase.

I could go further, and suggest that in the well-known passage: ‘*With (Hegel, the dialectic) is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell*’, this ‘turning right side up again’ is merely gestural, even metaphorical, and it raises as many questions as it answers.

How should we really understand its use in this quotation? It is no longer a matter of a general ‘*inversion*’ of Hegel, that is, the inversion of speculative philosophy as such. From *The German Ideology* onwards we know that such an undertaking would be meaningless. Anyone who claims purely and simply to have inverted speculative philosophy (to derive, for example, materialism) can never be more than philosophy’s Proudhon, its unconscious prisoner, just as Proudhon was the prisoner of bourgeois economics. We are now concerned with the *dialectic*, and the dialectic alone. It might be thought that when Marx writes that we must ‘*discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell*’ he means that the ‘*rational kernel*’ is the *dialectic itself*, while the ‘*mystical shell*’ is *speculative philosophy*. Engels’s time-honoured distinction between method and system implies precisely this. The shell, the mystical wrapping (speculative philosophy), should be tossed aside and the precious kernel, the dialectic, retained. But in the same sentence Marx claims that this

shelling of the kernel and the inversion of the dialectic are one and the same thing, How can an extraction be an inversion? or in other words, what is 'inverted' during this extraction?

Let us look a little closer. As soon as the dialectic is removed from its idealistic shell, it becomes '*the direct opposite of the Hegelian dialectic*'. Does this mean that for Marx, far from dealing with Hegel's sublimated, inverted world, it is applied to the real world? This is certainly the sense in which Hegel was '*the first consciously to expose its general forms of movement in depth*'. We could therefore take over the dialectic from him and apply it to life rather than to the Idea. The 'inversion' would then be an 'inversion' of the 'sense-of the dialectic. But such an inversion in sense would in fact leave the dialectic untouched.

Taking Young Marx as an example, in the article referred to above, I suggested that to take over the dialectic in **rigorous** Hegelian form could only expose us to dangerous ambiguities, for it is **impossible** given the principles of a Marxist interpretation of **any** ideological phenomenon, **it is unthinkable that the place of the dialectic in Hegel's system could be conceived as that of a kernel in a nut**. By which I meant that it is inconceivable that the essence of the dialectic in Hegel's work should not be contaminated by Hegelian ideology, or, since such a 'contamination' presupposes the fiction of a pure pre-'contamination' dialectic, *that the Hegelian dialectic could cease to be Hegelian and become Marxist by a simple, miraculous 'extraction'*.

Even in the rapidly written lines of the afterword to the second edition of *Das Kapital* Marx saw this difficulty clearly. By the accumulation of metaphors, and, in particular, in the remarkable encounter of the extraction and the inversion, he not only hints at something more than he **says**, but in other passages he puts it clearly enough, though Roy has half spirited them away.

A close reading of the German text shows clearly enough that the **mystical shell** is by no means (as some of Engels's later commentaries would lead one to think) speculative philosophy, or its 'world outlook' or its 'system', that is, an element we can regard as *external* to its *method*, but refers directly to the dialectic itself. Marx goes so far as to talk of the '*mystification the dialectic suffered at Hegel's hands*', of its '*mystificatory side*', its '*mystified form*', and he opposes precisely to this *mystified form* (*mystifizierten Form*) of the Hegelian dialectic the rational figure (*rationelle Gestalt*) of his own dialectic. It would be difficult to indicate more clearly that *the mystical shell is nothing but the mystified form of the dialectic itself*: that is, not an **internal** element, consubstantial with the Hegelian dialectic. It is not enough, therefore, to disengage it from its *first wrapping* (the system) to free it. It must also be freed from a *second*, almost inseparable skin, which is itself *Hegelian*

in principle (Grundlage). We must admit that this extraction cannot be painless; in appearance an unpeeling, it is really a *demystification*, an operation which transforms what it extracts.

So I think that, in its approximation, this metaphorical expression – the ‘inversion’ of the dialectic – does not pose the problem of *the nature of the objects* to which a *single method* should be applied (the world of the Idea for Hegel – the real world for Marx), but rather the problem of the *nature of the dialectic* considered itself, that is, the problem of *its specific structures*; not the problem of the inversion of the ‘sense’ of the dialectic, but that of the *transformation of its structures*. It is hardly worth pointing out that, in the first case, the application of a method, the exteriority of the dialectic to its possible objects poses a *pre-dialectical question*, a question without any strict meaning for Marx. The second problem on the other hand, raises a real question to which it is hardly likely that Marx and his disciples should not have given a concrete answer in theory and practice, in theory or in practice.

Let us say, to end this over-extended textual exposition, that if the Marxist dialectic is ‘in principle’ the opposite of the Hegelian dialectic, if it is rational and not mystical-mystified-mystificatory, this radical distinction must be manifest in its essence, that is, in its *characteristic determinations and structures*. To be clear, this means that basic structures of the Hegelian dialectic such as negation, the negation of the negation, the identity of opposites, ‘supersession’, the transformation of quantity into quality, contradiction, etc., *have for Marx (in so far as he takes them over, and he takes over by no means all of them) a structure different from the structure they have for Hegel*. It also means that *these structural differences* can be demonstrated, described, determined and thought. And if this is possible, it is therefore *necessary*, I would go so far as to say *vital*, for Marxism. We cannot go on reiterating indefinitely approximations such as the difference between system and method, the inversion of philosophy or dialectic, the extraction of the ‘rational kernel’, and so on, without letting these formulae think for us, that is, stop thinking ourselves and trust ourselves to the magic of a number of completely devalued words for our completion of Marx’s work. I say *vital*, for I am convinced that *the philosophical development of Marxism currently depends on this task*.

As this is also a personal responsibility, whatever risks I shall run I should like to attempt a moment’s reflection on *the Marxist concept of contradiction*, in respect to a particular example: the Leninist theme of the ‘*weakest link*’.

Lenin gave this metaphor above all a practical meaning. A chain is as strong as its weakest link. In general, anyone who wants to control a given situation will look out for a weak point, in case it should render the whole system vulnerable. On the other hand, anyone who wants to attack it, even if the odds are apparently against him, need only discover this one weakness to make all its power precarious. So far there is no revelation here for readers of Machiavelli and Vauban, who were as expert in the arts of the defence as of the destruction of a position, and judged all armour by its faults.

But here we should pay careful attention: if it is obvious that the theory of the weakest link guided Lenin in his theory of the revolutionary party (it was to be faultlessly united in consciousness and organisation to avoid adverse exposure and to destroy the enemy), it was also the inspiration for his reflections on the revolution itself. How was this revolution *possible* in Russia, why was it *victorious* there? It was *possible* in Russia for a reason that went beyond Russia: because with the unleashing of imperialist war humanity entered into an *objectively revolutionary* situation. Imperialism tore off the 'peaceful' mask of the old capitalism. The concentration of industrial monopolies, their subordination to financial monopolies, had increased the exploitation of the workers and of the colonies. Competition between the monopolies made war *inevitable*. But this same war, which dragged vast masses, even colonial peoples from whom troops were drawn, into limitless suffering, drove its cannon-fodder not only into massacres, but also into history. Everywhere the experience, the horrors of war, were a revelation and confirmation of a whole century's protest against capitalist exploitation; a focusing-point, too, for hand in hand with this shattering exposure went the effective means of action. But though this effect was felt throughout the greater part of the popular masses of Europe (revolution in Germany and Hungary, mutinies and mass strikes in France and Italy, the Turin soviets), *only in Russia*, precisely the '*most backward*' country in Europe, *did it produce a triumphant revolution*. Why this paradoxical exception? For this basic reason: in the 'system of imperialist states' Russia represented the weakest point. The Great War had, of course, precipitated and aggravated this weakness, but it had not by itself created it. Already, even in defeat, the 1905 Revolution had demonstrated and measured the weakness of Tsarist Russia. This weakness was the product of this special feature: *the accumulation and exacerbation of all the historical contradictions then possible in a single State*. Contradictions of a regime of feudal exploitation at the dawn of the twentieth century, attempting ever more ferociously amidst mounting threats to rule, with the aid of a deceitful priesthood, over an enormous mass of 'ignorant' peasants (circumstances which dictated a singular association of the peasants' revolt with the workers' revolution). Contradictions of large-scale capitalist and imperialist exploitation in the major cities and their suburbs, in the mining regions,

oil-fields, etc. Contradictions of colonial exploitation and wars imposed on whole peoples. A gigantic contradiction between the stage of development of capitalist methods of production (particularly in respect to proletarian concentration: the largest factory in the world at the time was the Putilov works at Petrograd, with 40,000 workers and auxiliaries) and the medieval state of the countryside. The exacerbation of class struggles throughout the country, not only between exploiter and exploited, but even within the ruling classes themselves (the great feudal proprietors supporting autocratic, militaristic police Tsarism; the lesser nobility involved in constant conspiracy; the big bourgeoisie and the liberal bourgeoisie opposed to the Tsar; the petty bourgeoisie oscillating between conformism and anarchistic 'leftism'). The detailed course of events added other 'exceptional' circumstances, incomprehensible outside the 'tangle' of Russia's internal and external contradictions. For example, the '*advanced*' character of the Russian revolutionary elite, exiled by Tsarist repression; in exile it became 'cultivated', it absorbed the whole heritage of the political experience of the Western European working classes (above all, Marxism); this was particularly true of the formation of the Bolshevik Party, *far ahead of any Western 'socialist' party in consciousness and organisation*; the '*dress rehearsal*' for the Revolution in 1905, which, in common with most serious crises, set class relations sharply into relief, crystallised them and made possible the 'discovery' of a new form of mass political organisation: *the soviets*. Last, but not the least remarkable, the unexpected 'respite' the exhausted imperialist nations allowed the Bolsheviks for them to make their 'opening' in history, the involuntary but effective support of the Anglo-French bourgeoisie, who, at the decisive moment, wishing to be rid of the Tsar, did everything to help the Revolution. In short, as precisely these details show, the privileged situation of Russia with respect to the *possible* revolution was a matter of ***an accumulation and exacerbation of historical contradictions*** that would have been incomprehensible in any country which was not, as Russia was, ***simultaneously at least a century behind the imperialist world, and at the peak of its development***.

Lenin said this time and time again, and Stalin summarised it in particularly clear terms in his April 1924 speeches. The unevenness of capitalist development led, via the 1914-18 War, to the Russian Revolution because in the revolutionary situation facing the whole of humanity Russia was *the weakest link in the chain of imperialist states*. It had accumulated the largest sum of historical contradictions then possible; for it was at the same time *the most backward and the most advanced nation*, a gigantic contradiction which its divided ruling classes could neither avoid nor solve. In other words Russia was overdue with its bourgeois revolution on the eve of its proletarian revolution; pregnant with two revolutions, it could not withhold the second even by delaying the first. This exceptional situation was

‘insoluble’ (for the ruling classes) and Lenin was correct to see in it the *objective conditions* of a Russian revolution, and to forge its *subjective conditions*, the means of a decisive assault on this weak link in the imperialist chain, in a Communist Party that was a chain without weak links.

What else did Marx and Engels mean when they declared that history always progresses by its *bad side*? This obviously means the worse side for the rulers, but without stretching the sense unduly we can interpret the bad side as the bad side for those who expect history *from another side*! For example, the German Social-Democrats at the end of the nineteenth century imagined that they would shortly be promoted to socialist triumph by virtue of belonging to the most powerful capitalist State, then undergoing rapid economic growth, just as they were experiencing rapid electoral growth (such coincidences do occur . . .). They obviously saw History as progressing *by the other side*, the ‘good’ side, the side with the greatest *economic development*, the greatest growth, with ***its contradiction reduced to the purest form*** (the contradiction between Capital and Labour), so they forgot that all this was taking place in a Germany armed with a powerful State machine, endowed with a bourgeoisie which had long ago given up ‘its’ political revolution in exchange for Bismarck’s (and later Wilhelm’s) military, bureaucratic and police protection, in exchange for the super-profits of capitalist and colonialist exploitation, endowed, too, with a chauvinist and reactionary petty bourgeoisie. They forgot that, in fact, this simple quintessence of *contradiction* was quite simply *abstract*: the real contradiction was so much one with its ‘circumstances’ that it was only discernible, identifiable and manipulable ***through them and in them***.

What is the essence of this practical experience and the reflections it inspired in Lenin? It should be pointed out immediately that this was not Lenin’s sole illuminating experience. Before 1917 there was 1905, before 1905 the great historical deceptions of England and Germany, before that the Commune, even earlier the German failure of 1848-9. These experiences had been ***reflected en route*** (Engels, *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany*; Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, The Civil War in France, The Eighteenth Brumaire, The Critique of the Gotha Programme*; Engels, *The Critique of the Erfurt Programme*, and so on), ***directly*** or ***indirectly***, and had been related to even earlier revolutionary experience: to the bourgeois revolutions of England and France.

How else should we summarise these practical experiences and their theoretical commentaries other than by saying that the whole Marxist revolutionary experience shows that, if the general contradiction (it has already been specified: the contradiction between the

forces of production and the relations of production. essentially embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes) is sufficient to define the situation when revolution is the 'task of the day', it cannot of its own simple, direct power induce a 'revolutionary situation', nor *a fortiori* a situation of revolutionary rupture and the triumph of the revolution. If this contradiction is to become 'active' in the strongest sense, to become a ruptural principle, there must be an accumulation of 'circumstances' and 'currents' so that whatever their origin and sense (and many of them will *necessarily* be paradoxically foreign to the revolution in origin and sense, or even its 'direct opponents'), they 'fuse' into a **ruptural unity**: when they produce the result of the immense majority of the popular masses **grouped** in an assault on a regime which its ruling classes are *unable to defend*. Such a situation presupposes not only the 'fusion' of the two basic conditions into a 'single national crisis', but each condition considered (abstractly) by itself presupposes the 'fusion' of an 'accumulation' of contradictions. How else could the class-divided popular masses (proletarians, peasants, petty bourgeois) throw themselves *together*, consciously or unconsciously, into a general assault on the existing regime? And how else could the ruling classes (aristocrats, big bourgeois, industrial bourgeois, finance bourgeois, etc.), who have learnt by long experience and sure instinct to seal between themselves, despite their class differences, a holy alliance against the exploited, find themselves reduced to impotence, divided at the decisive moment, with neither new political solutions nor new political leaders, deprived of foreign class support, disarmed in the very citadel of their State machine, and suddenly overwhelmed by the people they had so long kept in leash and respectful by exploitation, violence and deceit? If, as in this situation, a vast accumulation of 'contradictions' comes into play *in the same court*, different sense, different **levels** and **points** of application – but which nevertheless 'merge' into a ruptural unity, we can no longer talk of the sole, unique power of the general 'contradiction'. Of course, the basic contradiction dominating the period (when the revolution is 'the task of the day') is active in all these 'contradictions' and even in their 'fusion'. But, strictly speaking, it cannot be claimed that these contradictions and their fusion are merely the **pure phenomena** of the contradiction. The 'circumstances' and 'currents' which achieve it are more than its phenomena pure and simple. They derive from the relations of production, which are, of course, one of the **terms** of the contradiction, but at the same time its **conditions of existence**; from the superstructures, instances which derive from it, but have their own consistency and effectivity from the international conjunctivity itself, which intervenes as a determination with a specific role to play. This means that if the 'differences' that constitute each of the instances in play (manifested in the 'accumulation' discussed by Lenin) '**merge**' into a real unity, they are not '**dissipated**' as pure **phenomena** in the internal unity of a

simple contradiction. The *unity* they *constitute* in this ‘fusion’ into a revolutionary rupture, *is constituted by their own essence and effectivity*, by what they are, and according to the specific modalities of their action. In *constituting* this *unity*, they *reconstitute* and complete their basic animating unity, but at the same time they also bring out its *nature*: the ‘contradiction’ is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal *conditions* of existence, and even from the instances it governs; it is radically *affected by them*, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates; it might be called *over-determined in its principle*.

I am not particularly taken by this term *overdetermination* (borrowed from other disciplines), but I shall use it in the absence of anything better, both as an *index* and as a *problem*, and also because it enables us to see clearly why we are dealing with something *quite different from the Hegelian contradiction*.

Indeed, a Hegelian contradiction is never *really overdetermined*, even though it frequently has all the appearances of being so. For example, in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, which describes the ‘experiences’ of consciousness and their dialectic, culminating in Absolute Knowledge, contradiction does not *appear* to be *simple*, but on the contrary very complex. Strictly speaking, only the first contradiction – between sensuous consciousness and its knowledge can be called simple. The further we progress in the dialectic of its production, the richer consciousness becomes, the more complex is its contradiction. However, it can be shown that this complexity is not the complexity of an *effective overdetermination*, but the complexity of a cumulative *internalisation* which is only apparently an overdetermination. In fact at each moment of its development consciousness lives and experiences its own essence (the essence corresponding to the stage it has attained) *through all the echoes* of the essence it has previously been, and through the *allusive presence* of the corresponding historical forms. Hegel, therefore, argues that every consciousness has a suppressed-conserved (*aufgehoben*) *past* even in its present, and a *world* (the world whose consciousness it could be, but which is marginal in the *Phenomenology*, its presence virtual and latent), and that therefore it also has as its past *the worlds of its superseded essences*. But these past *images* of consciousness and these latent *worlds* (corresponding to the images) never affect present consciousness as *effective determinations different from itself*: these images and worlds concern it only as *echoes* (memories, phantoms of its historicity) of what it has become. that is, *as anticipations of or allusions to itself*. Because the past is never more than the internal essence (in-itself) of the future it encloses this presence of the past is the presence to consciousness of

consciousness itself, *and no true external determination. A circle of circles, consciousness has only one centre*, which solely determines it; it would need circles *with another centre than itself – decentred circles* – for it to be affected at its centre by their effectivity, in short for its essence to be over-determined by them. But this is not the case.

This truth emerges even more clearly from the *Philosophy of History*. Here again we encounter an *apparent* overdetermination: are not all historical societies constituted of an infinity of concrete determinations, from political laws to religion via customs, habits, financial, commercial and economic regimes, the educational system, the arts, philosophy, and so on? However, none of these determinations is essentially *outside* the others, not only because together they constitute an original, organic totality, but also and above all because this totality is *reflected in a unique internal principle*, which is *the truth* of all those concrete determinations. Thus Rome: its mighty history, its institutions, its crises and ventures, are nothing but the temporal manifestation of the internal principle of the *abstract legal personality*, and then its destruction. Of course, this internal principle contains *as echoes* the principle of each of the historical formations it has superseded, but as echoes of itself – that is why, too, it only has one centre, the centre of all the past worlds conserved in its memory; that is *why it is simple*. And its own *contradiction* appears in this very simplicity: in Rome, *the Stoic consciousness*, as consciousness of the contradiction inherent in the concept of the abstract legal personality, which *aims* for the concrete world of *subjectivity*, but *misses* it. This is the contradiction which will bring down Rome and produce its future: *the image of subjectivity* in medieval Christianity. So all Rome's complexity fails to overdetermine the contradiction in the simple Roman principle, which is merely the internal essence of this infinite historical wealth.

We have only to ask *why* Hegel thought the phenomena of historical mutation in terms of this *simple concept* of contradiction, to pose what is precisely *the* essential question. The simplicity of the Hegelian contradiction is made possible *only* by the simplicity of the *internal principle* that constitutes the essence of any historical period. If it is possible, *in principle, to reduce the totality*, the infinite diversity, of a historically given society (Greece, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, England, and so on) *to a simple internal principle, this very simplicity* can be reflected in the contradiction *to which it thereby acquires a right*. Must we be even plainer? This reduction itself (Hegel derived the idea from Montesquieu), the reduction of *all* the elements that make up the concrete life of a historical epoch (economic, social, political and legal institutions, customs, ethics, art, religion, philosophy, and even historical *events*: wars, battles, defeats, and so on) to *one* principle of internal unity, is itself only possible on the *absolute condition* of taking the

whole concrete life of a people for the externalisation-alienation (*Entausserung-Entfremdung*) of an **internal spiritual principle**, which **can never definitely be anything but the most abstract form of that epoch's consciousness of itself: its religious or philosophical consciousness, that is, its own ideology**. I think we can now see how the 'mystical shell' affects and contaminates the 'kernel' – for **the simplicity of Hegelian contradiction is never more than a reflection of the simplicity of this internal principle of a people, that is, not its material reality but its most abstract ideology**. It is also why Hegel could represent Universal History from the Ancient Orient to the present day as 'dialectical', that is, moved by the simple play of a principle of **simple** contradiction. It is why there is never for him any basic rupture, no actual end to any real history – nor any radical beginning. It is why his philosophy of history is garnished with uniformly 'dialectical' mutations. This stupefying conception is only defensible from the Spirit's topmost peak. From that vantage point what does it matter if a people die once it has embodied the determinate principle of a moment of the Idea (which has plenty more to come), once, having embodied it, it has cast it off to add it to that Self-Memory which is History, thereby delivering it to such and such *another* people (even if their historical relation is very tenuous !), who, reflecting it in their substance, will find in it the promise of their own internal principle, that is, as if by chance the logically consecutive moment of the Idea, etc. etc. ? It must be clear that all these arbitrary decisions (shot through though they are with insights of genius) are not just *miraculously confined* to Hegel's 'world outlook', to his 'system', but are reflected **in the structure, in the very structures of his dialectic**, particularly in the '**contradiction**' whose task is the magical movement of the concrete contents of a historical epoch towards their ideological Goal.

Thus the Marxist 'inversion' of the Hegelian dialectic is something quite different from an extraction pure and simple. If we clearly perceive **the intimate and close relation** that the Hegelian structure of the dialectic has with Hegel's 'world outlook', that is, with his speculative philosophy, this 'world outlook' cannot really be cast aside **without our being obliged to transform profoundly the structures** of that dialectic. If not, whether we will or no, we shall drag along with us, one hundred and fifty years after Hegel's death and one hundred after Marx, the shreds of the famous 'mystical wrapping'.

Let us return to Lenin and thence to Marx. If it is true, as Leninist practice and reflection prove, that the revolutionary situation in Russia was precisely a result of the **intense overdetermination** of the basic class contradiction, we should perhaps ask what is *exceptional* about this 'exceptional situation', and whether, like all exceptions, this one does not clarify its rule – is not, unbeknown to the rule, *the rule itself*. For, after all, **are we not**

always in exceptional situations? The failure of the 1849 Revolution in Germany was an exception, the failure in Paris in 1871 was an exception, the German Social-Democratic failure at the beginning of the twentieth century pending the chauvinist betrayal of 1914 was an exception . . . exceptions, *but with respect to what*? To nothing but the ‘dialectical’ schema, which in its very simplicity seems to have retained a memory (or rediscovered the style) of the Hegelian model and its faith in the resolving ‘power’ of the abstract contradiction as such: in particular, the ‘beautiful’ contradiction between Capital and Labour. I do not deny that the ‘simplicity’ of this *purified* schema has answered to certain subjective necessities of the mobilisation of the masses; after all, we know perfectly well that the utopian forms of socialism *also* played a historical part, and played it well because they took the masses at the word of their consciousness, because if they are to be led forward, even (and above all) this is how they must be taken. One day it will be necessary to *do what Marx and Engels did* for utopian socialism, but this time for those still schematic-utopian forms of mass consciousness influenced by *Marxism* (even the consciousness of certain of its theoreticians) in the first stage of its history: *a true historical study of the conditions and forms of that consciousness*. In fact we find that all the important historical and political articles written by Marx and Engels during this period give us precisely the material for a preliminary reflection on these so-called ‘exceptions’. They draw from them the basic notion that *the Capital-Labour contradiction is never simple, but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised*. It is specified by the forms of the *superstructure* (the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organised movements, and so on); specified by *the internal and external historical situation* which determines it on the one hand as a function of the *national past* (completed or ‘relapsed’ bourgeois revolution, feudal exploitation eliminated wholly, partially or not at all, local ‘customs’ specific national *traditions*, even the ‘etiquette’ of political struggles and behaviour, etc.), and on the other as functions of the existing *world context* (what dominates it – competition of capitalist nations, or ‘imperialist internationalism’, or competition within imperialism, etc.), many of these phenomena deriving from the ‘law of uneven development’ in the Leninist sense.

What can this mean but that the apparently simple contradiction is *always overdetermined*? The exception thus discovers in itself the rule, the rule of the rule, and the old ‘exceptions’ must be regarded as methodologically simple examples of the *new rule*. To extend the analysis to all phenomena using this rule, I should like to suggest that an ‘*overdetermined contradiction*’ may either be *overdetermined* in the direction of a *historical inhibition*, a real ‘block’ for the contradiction (for example, Wilhelmine Germany), or in the direction of *revolutionary rupture* (Russia in 1917), but in neither

condition *is it ever found in the 'pure' state*. 'Purity' itself would be the exception, I agree, but I know of no example to refer to.

But if every contradiction appears in Marxist historical practice and experience as an ***overdetermined contradiction***; if this overdetermination constitutes the specificity of Marxist contradiction; if the 'simplicity' of the Hegelian dialectic is inseparable from Hegel's 'world outlook', particularly the conception of history it reflects, we must ask ***what is the content, the raison d'être of the overdetermination*** of Marxist contradiction, and how can the Marxist conception of society ***be reflected in this overdetermination***. This is a crucial question, for it is obvious that if we cannot demonstrate the ***necessary link*** that unites the characteristic structure of contradiction for Marx to his conception of society and history, if this overdetermination is not based on the very concepts of the Marxist theory of history, the category will remain 'up in the air'. For however accurate and verified it may be in political practice, we have only so far used it *descriptively*, that is, *contingently*, and *like all descriptions* it is still at the mercy of any *philosophical* theory that happens to come along.

But this raises the ghost of the Hegelian model again – not of its abstract model of contradiction, but of the concrete model of the ***conception of history*** reflected in it. If we are to prove that the specific structure of Marxist contradiction is based on Marx's conception of history, we must first ensure that this conception is not itself a mere 'inversion' of the Hegelian conception pure and simple. It is true that we could argue as a first approximation that Marx 'inverted' the Hegelian conception of History. This can be quickly illustrated. The whole Hegelian conception is regulated by the dialectic of the internal principles of each society, that is, the dialectic of the moments of the idea; as Marx said twenty times, Hegel explains the material life, the concrete history of all peoples by a dialectic of consciousness (the people's consciousness of itself: its ideology). For Marx, on the other hand, the material life of men explains their history; their consciousness, their ideologies are then merely the phenomena of their material life. This opposition certainly unites all the appearances of an 'inversion'. To push this to extremes, almost to caricature: what do we find in Hegel? A conception of society which takes over the achievements of eighteenth-century political theory and political economy, and regards every society (every modern society of course; but the present reveals what was once only a germ) as constituted by *two societies*: the society of needs, or *civil society*, and the political society or State and everything embodied in the State: religion, philosophy, in short, the epoch's consciousness of itself. In other words, schematically, by material life on the one hand and spiritual life on the other. For Hegel, material life (civil society, that is, the economy) is merely a *Ruse of*

Reason. Apparently autonomous, it is subject to a law outside itself: its own Goal, which is simultaneously its condition of possibility, the State, that is, spiritual life. So here again we have a way of inverting Hegel which would apparently give us Marx. It is simply to ***invert the relation of the terms (and thus to retain them)***: civil society and State, economy and politics-ideology – but to transform the essence into the phenomena and the phenomena into an essence, or if you prefer, to make the Ruse of Reason work ***backwards***. While for Hegel, the politico-ideological was the essence of the economic, for Marx, the economic will be the essence of the politico-ideological. The political and the ideological will therefore be merely pure phenomena of the economic which will be their ‘truth’. For Hegel’s ‘pure’ principle of consciousness (of the epoch’s consciousness of itself), for the simple internal principle which he conceived as the principle of the intelligibility of all the determinations of a historical people, we have substituted *another simple principle*, its opposite: material life, the economy – a simple principle which in turn becomes the sole principle of the universal intelligibility of all the determinations of a historical people. ***Is this a caricature***? If we take Marx’s famous comments on the hand-mill, the watermill and the steam-mill literally or out of context, this is their meaning. The logical destination of this temptation is the *exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic* the only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving the successive moments from the Idea, but from the Economy, by virtue of the same internal contradiction. This temptation results in the radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating the successive *modes of production*. that is. in the last analysis, the different production *techniques*. There are names for these temptations in the history of Marxism: *economism* and even *technologism*.

But these terms have only to be mentioned to evoke the memory of the theoretical and practical struggles of Marx and his disciples against these ‘deviations’. And how many peremptory attacks on economism there are to counterbalance that well-thumbed piece on the steam engine! Let us abandon this caricature, not so as to oppose the official condemnations to economism, but to examine ***what authentic principles*** are active in these condemnations and in Marx’s actual thought.

For all its apparent rigour, the fiction of the ‘inversion’ is now clearly untenable. We know that ***Marx did not retain the terms of the Hegelian model of society and ‘invert’ them***. He substituted other, only distantly related terms for them. Furthermore, he overhauled the ***connection*** which had previously ruled over the terms. For Marx, ***both terms and relation*** are changed in nature and sense.

Firstly, the terms are no longer the same.

Of course, Marx still talks of ‘*civil society*’ (especially in *The German Ideology*: the term is often mistranslated as ‘bourgeois society’) but as an allusion to the past, to denote ***the site*** of his discoveries, not to re-utilise the ***concept***. The formation of this concept requires closer examination. Beneath the abstract forms of the political philosophy of the eighteenth century and the more concrete forms of its political economy, we discover, not a true theory of economic history, nor even a true economic theory, but ***a description and foundation of economic behaviour***, in short, a sort of ***philosophico-economic Phenomenology***. What is remarkable in this undertaking, as much in its philosophers (Locke, Helvetius, etc.) as in its economists (Turgot, Smith, etc.), is that this description of civil society acts as if it were the description (and foundation) of what Hegel, aptly summarising its spirit, called ‘*the world of needs*’; a world related immediately, as if to its internal essence, to ***the relations of individuals*** defined by their particular wishes, personal interests, in short, their ‘needs’. We know that Marx’s whole conception of political economy is based on a critique of this presupposition (the *homoœconomicus* and its ethical and legal abstraction, the ‘*Man*’ of philosophy); how then could he take over a concept which is ***its direct product***? Neither this (abstract) ***description*** of economic behaviour nor its supposed ***foundation*** in the mythical *homoœconomicus* interested Marx – his concern was rather the ‘*anatomy*’ of this world, and *the dialectic of the mutations* of this ‘anatomy’. Therefore the concept of ‘*civil society*’ – the world of individual economic behaviour and its ideological origin – disappears from Marx’s work. He understands ***abstract economic reality*** (which Smith, for example, *rediscovers* in the laws of the market as a *result* of his work of foundation) as the effect of a deeper, more concrete reality: ***the mode of production*** of a determinate social formation. Thus for the first time individual economic behaviour (which was the pretext for this economico-philosophical Phenomenology) is measured according to its *conditions of existence*. The degree of development of the ***forces of production***, the state of the ***relations of production***: these are from now on the basic Marxist concepts. ‘Civil society’ may well have gestured towards the site of the new concepts (‘dig here’), but we must admit that it did not even contribute to their material. But where in Hegel would you find all that?

As for the State, it is only too easy to show that it no longer has the same content for Marx as it had for Hegel. Not just because the State can no longer be the ‘reality of the Idea’, but also and primarily because it is systematically thought as an *instrument* of coercion in the service of the ruling, exploiting class. Beneath the ‘description’ and sublimation of the attributes of the State, Marx finds here also ***a new concept***, foreshadowed in the eighteenth century (Linguet, Rousseau, etc.), taken up even by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* (making it into a ‘phenomenon’ of the Ruse of Reason which triumphs in the State: the opposition of wealth and poverty), and abundantly used by the

historians of the 1830s: *the concept of social class*, in direct relation with *the relations of production*. The intervention of this new concept and its interconnection with the basic concepts of the economic structure transforms *the essence of the State* from top to toe, for the latter is no longer above human groups, but at the service of the ruling class; it is no longer religion and philosophy, but to set them to serve the interests of the ruling class, or rather to force them to base themselves on ideas and themes which it renders *ruling*; it therefore ceases to be the 'truth of' civil society, to become, not the 'truth of' something else, not even of the economy, but the means of action and domination of a social class. etc.

But it is not just *the terms* which change, it is also *their relations themselves*.

We should not think that this means a new technical distribution of roles imposed by the multiplication of new terms. How are these new terms arranged? On the one hand, the *structure* (the economic base: the forces of production and the relations of production); on the other, the *superstructure* (the State and all the legal, political and ideological forms). We have seen that one could nevertheless attempt to maintain *a Hegelian relation* (the relation Hegel imposed between civil society and the State) between these two groups of categories: *the relation between an essence and its phenomena*. sublimated in the concept of the 'truth of ...'. For Hegel, the State is the 'truth of' civil society, which, thanks to the action of the Ruse of Reason, is merely its own phenomenon consummated in it. For a Marx thus relegated to the rank of a Hobbes or a Locke, civil society would be nothing but the 'truth of' its phenomenon, the State, nothing but a Ruse which Economic Reason would then put at the service of a class: the ruling class. Unfortunately for this neat schema, this is not Marx. For him, this tacit identity (phenomenon-essence-truth-of ...) of the economic and the political disappears in favour of *a new conception* of the relation between *determinant instances* in the superstructure complex which constitutes the essence of any social formation. Of course, these specific *relations* between structure and superstructure still deserve theoretical elaboration and investigation. However, Marx has at least given us the 'two ends of the chain', and has told us to find out what goes on between them: on the one hand, *determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production; on the other, the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity*. This clearly breaks with the Hegelian principle of explanation by consciousness of self (ideology), but also with the Hegelian theme of *phenomenon-essence-truth-of*. We really are dealing with *a new relationship* between *new terms*.

Listen to the old Engels in 1890, taking the young 'economists' to task for not having understood that this was a *new relationship*. Production is the determinant factor, but only

*'in the last instance': "More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted". Anyone who 'twists this' so that it says that the economic factor is **the only** determinant factor. 'transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, empty phrase'. And as explanation: "The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure the political forms of the class struggle and its results: to wit constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles. and in m-any cases preponderate in determining their form . . ."* The word '**form**' should be understood in its stronger sense, designating something quite different from the formal. As Engels also says: *"The Prussian State also arose and developed from historical, ultimately economic causes. But it could scarcely be maintained without pedantry that among the many small states of North Germany, Brandenburg was specifically determined by economic necessity to become the great power embodying the economic, linguistic and, after the Reformation, also the religious difference between North and South, and not by other elements as well (above all by the entanglement with Poland, owing to the possession of Prussia, and hence with international political relations which were indeed also decisive in the formation of the Austrian dynastic power)"*.

Here, then are the two ends of the chain: the economy is determinant, but ***in the last instance***, Engels is prepared to say, in the long run, the run of History. But History 'asserts itself' through the multiform world of the superstructures. from local tradition to international circumstance. Leaving aside the *theoretical solution* Engels proposes for the problem of the relation between determination ***in the last instance*** – the economic – and those determinations imposed by the superstructures – national traditions and international events – it is sufficient to retain from him what should be called the ***accumulation of effective determinations*** (deriving from the superstructures and from special national and international circumstances) ***on the determination in the last instance by the economic***. It seems to me that this clarifies the expression ***overdetermined contradiction***, which I have put forward, ***this*** specifically because the existence of overdetermination is no longer ***a fact*** pure and simple, for in its essentials we have related it ***to its bases***, even if our exposition has so far been merely gestural. This ***overdetermination*** is inevitable and thinkable as soon as the real existence of the forms of the superstructure and of the national and international conjuncture has been recognised – an existence largely specific and autonomous, and therefore irreducible to a pure *phenomenon*. We must carry this through to its conclusion and say that this overdetermination does not just refer to apparently unique and aberrant

historical situations (Germany, for example), but is universal; the economic dialectic is never active *in the pure state*; in History, these instances, the superstructures, etc. – are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.

In short, the idea of a ‘pure and simple’ non-overdetermined contradiction is, as Engels said of the economist turn of phrase ‘meaningless, abstract, senseless’. That it can serve as a pedagogical model, or rather that it did serve as a polemical and pedagogical instrument at a certain point in history does not fix its destiny for all time. After all, pedagogic systems do change in history. It is time to make the effort to raise pedagogy to the level of circumstances, that is, of historical needs. But we must all be able to see that this pedagogical effort *presupposes* another purely theoretical effort. For if Marx has given us the general principles and some concrete examples (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*, *The Civil War in France*, etc.), if all political practice in the history of Socialist and Communist movements constitutes an inexhaustible reservoir of concrete ‘experiential protocol’, it has to be said that *the theory of the specific effectivity of the superstructures and other ‘circumstances’ largely remains to be elaborated*; and before the theory of their effectivity or simultaneously (for it is by formulating their effectivity that their essence can be attained) there must be elaboration of *the theory of the particular essence of the specific elements of the superstructure*. Like the map of Africa before the great explorations, this theory remains a realm sketched in outline, with its great mountain chains and rivers, but often unknown in detail beyond a few well-known regions. Who has *really* attempted to follow up the explorations of Marx and Engels? I can only think of Gramsci. But this task is indispensable if we are to be able to express even propositions more precise than these approximations on the character of the *overdetermination* of Marxist contradiction, based primarily on the existence and nature of the superstructures.

Allow me one last example. Marxist political practice is constantly coming up against that reality known as ‘survivals’. There can be no doubt that these survivals exist – they cling tenaciously to life. Lenin struggled with them inside the Russian Party even before the Revolution. We do not need to be reminded that after the Revolution and from then till now they have been the source of constant difficulties, battles and commentaries. What is a ‘survival’? What is its theoretical status? Is it essentially social or ‘psychological’? Can it be reduced to the survival of certain economic *structures* which the Revolution was unable to destroy with its first decrees: for example, the small-scale production (primarily peasant

production in Russia) which so preoccupied Lenin? Or does it refer as much to *other structures*, political, ideological structures etc- *customs, habits*, even ‘*traditions*’ such as the ‘*national tradition*’ with its specific traits? The term ‘*survival*’ is constantly invoked, but it is still virtually uninvestigated, not in *its name* (it has one!), but *in its concept*. The concept it deserves (and has fairly won) must be more than a vague Hegelianism such as ‘*supersession*’ – *the maintenance-of-what-has-been-negated-in-its-very-negation* (that is, the negation of the negation). If we return to Hegel for a second we see that the survival of the past as the ‘*superseded*’ (*aufgehoben*) is simply reduced to the modality of a *memory*, which, furthermore, is merely the inverse of (that is, the same thing as) an *anticipation*. Just as at the dawn of Human History the first stammerings of the Oriental Spirit – joyous captive of the giants of the sky, the sea and the desert, and then of its own stone bestiary – already betrayed the unconscious presage of the future achievements of the Absolute Spirit, so in each instant of Time the past survives in the form of a memory of what it has been; that is, as the whispered promise of its present. That is why *the past is never opaque on an obstacle*. It must always be digestible as it has been *pre-digested*. Rome lived happily in a world impregnated by Greece: Greece ‘superseded’ survived as objective memories: its reproduced temples, its assimilated religion, its rethought philosophy. Without knowing it, as at last it died to bring forth its Roman future, it was already Rome, so it never shackled Rome in Rome. That is why the present can feed on the shades of its past, or even project them before it, just as the great effigies of Roman Virtue opened up the road to Revolution and Terror for the Jacobins. Its past is never anything more than itself and only recalls to it that law of interiority which is the destiny of the whole Future of Humanity.

I think this is enough to show that, though the word is still meaningful (in fact, not *rigorously* meaningful), Marx’s conception of ‘supersession’ has nothing to do with this dialectic of historical comfort; his past was no shade, not even an ‘objective’ shade – it is a terribly positive and active structured reality, just as cold, hunger and the night are for his poor worker. How, then, are we *to think these survivals*? Surely, with a number of *realities*, which are precisely *realities* for Marx, whether superstructures, ideologies ‘national traditions’ or the customs and ‘spirit’ of a people, etc? Surely, with *the overdetermination of any contradiction and of any constitutive element of a society, which means*: (1) that a revolution in the *structure* does not *ipso facto* modify the existing superstructures and particularly the *ideologies* at one blow (as it would if the economic was the *sole determinant factor*), for they have sufficient of their own consistency to *survive beyond their immediate life context*, even to recreate, to ‘secrete’ substitute conditions of existence temporarily; (2) that the new society produced by the Revolution may itself *ensure the survival, that is, the reactivation of older elements* through both the forms of its new

superstructures and specific (national and international) ‘circumstances’. Such a reactivation would be totally inconceivable for a dialectic deprived of overdetermination. I shall not evade the most burning issue: it seems to me that either the whole logic of ‘supersession’ must be rejected, or we must give up any attempt to explain how the proud and generous Russian people bore Stalin’s crimes and repression with such resignation; how the Bolshevik Party could tolerate them; not to speak of the final question – how a Communist leader could have ordered them. But there is obviously much *theoretical* work needed here as well. By this I mean more than the historical work which has priority – precisely because of this priority, priority is given to one essential of any Marxist historical study: *rigour*; *a rigorous conception of Marxist concepts, their implications and their development; a rigorous conception and investigation of what appertains to them in particular, that is, what distinguishes them once and for all from their phantoms.*

One phantom is more especially crucial than any other today: the shade of Hegel. To drive this phantom back into the night we need *a little more light on Marx*, or what is the same thing, *a little more Marxist light on Hegel himself*. We can then escape from the ambiguities and confusions of the ‘inversion’.

June-July, 1962

Further reading: [On Contradiction](#), Mao Zedong | [Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks](#) | [Dialectical and Historical Materialism](#), Stalin | [German Ideology](#), Marx & Engels | [Ludwig Feuerbach & the End of Classical German Philosophy](#), Engels | [Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy in General](#), Marx 1844 | [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) | [Concepts of Capital](#), Geoff Pilling

[Appendix](#) | [Althusser Internet Archive](#)