

"On the Materialist
Dialectic

Louis
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FOR MARX

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These pages are dedicated
to the memory of Jacques Martin,
the friend
who, in the most terrible ordeal,
alone
discovered the road to
Marx's philosophy
— and guided me onto it.
L.A.

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tion, between these roles) between what have been called the *political positions* and the *theoretical positions* adopted by Marx in his formative period. Bottigelli has seen this difficulty very well and he takes it by the horns when, for example, he writes (p. xxxii) that the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843) 'signals Marx's adhesion to the cause of the proletariat, that is, to Communism. This does not mean that historical materialism had already been worked out.' So it is a *political* and *theoretical* reading of the writings of Marx's youth. A text such as *On the Jewish Question*, for instance, is a text *politically* committed to the struggle for Communism. But it is a profoundly 'ideological' text: so it cannot, *theoretically*, be identified with the later texts which were to define historical materialism, and which were to be capable of illuminating even the basis of that real Communist movement of 1843 which was born before them and independently of them, and to whose side Marx had rallied at that time. Anyway, even our own experience should remind us that it is possible to be 'Communist' without being 'Marxist'. This distinction is essential if we are to avoid the *political trap* of confusing Marx's theoretical positions with his *political* positions, and justifying the former from the latter. But this illuminating distinction brings us back to the demand formulated by Bottigelli: we must conceive of 'another method' to explain Marx's *formation*, that is, his *moments*, his *paradoxical dialectic* whose most extraordinary episode this is, the *Manuscripts* that Marx never published, but which, no doubt, precisely for that reason, show him naked in his triumphant and vanquished thoughts, on the threshold of becoming himself at last by a radical realignment, the last: that is, the *first*.

December, 1962

Part Six

On the Materialist Dialectic

ON THE UNEVENNESS OF ORIGINS

'All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.'
Karl Marx, *Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach*

Remarks on the Terminology Adopted

This article proposes the term *Theory* (with a capital T) to designate Marxist 'philosophy' (dialectical materialism) – and reserves the term *philosophy* for ideological philosophies. It was in this sense of an ideological formation that the term *philosophy* had already been used in the article 'Contradiction and Overdetermination'.

This terminology, distinguishing between (ideological) philosophy and Theory (or Marxist philosophy constituted in rupture with philosophical ideology) is authorized by several passages from the works of Marx and Engels. In *The German Ideology*, Marx always uses philosophy to mean ideology pure and simple. And Engels writes, in the earlier preface to his *Anti-Dühring*, 'If theoreticians are semi-initiates in the sphere of natural science, then natural scientists today are actually just as much so in the sphere of theory, in the sphere of what hitherto was called philosophy' (English translation, Moscow, 1959, p. 454).

This remark proves that Engels felt the need to encapsulate the difference between ideological philosophies and Marx's absolutely new philosophical project in a terminological distinction. He proposed to register this difference by designating Marxist philosophy by the term *theory*.

However, the fact that a new terminology is well-founded does not mean that it can really be manipulated and diffused. It seems difficult to go against familiar usage by designating the scientific philosophy founded by Marx as Theory. Also, the capital T which distinguishes it from other uses of the word *theory* obviously cannot be perceived aurally. For these reasons, since writing the article 'On the Materialist Dialectic', I have reverted to the terminology in current use, and speak of philosophy to refer to Marx himself, therefore using the term *Marxist philosophy*.

If I had to sum up in one sentence all the criticisms I have received, I should say that, while acknowledging the interest of my articles, they regard them as theoretically and politically dangerous. These critics formulate two essential grounds for objection, with various modifications:

(1) That I have stressed the *discontinuity* between Marx and Hegel. The result: what remains of the 'rational kernel' of the Hegelian dialectic, of the dialectic itself, and, in consequence, of *Capital* itself and the basic law of our age?

(2) That by proposing the concept of 'overdetermined contradiction', I have substituted a 'pluralist' conception of history for the Marxist 'monist' conception. The result: what remains of historical necessity, of its unity, of the determinant role of the economy – and, in consequence, of the basic law of our age?

1. R. Garaudy: 'We should realize how much we risk throwing overboard if we underestimate the Hegelian heritage in Marx: not only his youthful works, Engels and Lenin, but also *Capital* itself.' R. Garaudy, 'A propos des manuscrits de 44', *Cahiers du Communisme*, March 1963, p. 118.

2. G. Murry: 'It would hardly be reasonable to suppose that he [L.A.] should have introduced with such a fanfare a new concept to express a truth known since Marx and Engels. It is more likely that he thought it essential to insist on the existence of an unbridgeable gulf between the terminations coming from the infrastructure and those coming from the superstructure. This must be why he refuses to invert the poles of the contradiction between civil society and the State that Hegel proposed by following Marx in making civil society the dominant pole and the State the phenomenon of this essence. But this solution by continuity artificially introduced into the dialectic of history prevents him from seeing how the internal principle of capitalism itself in its own specific contradiction engenders its own development the highest stage of imperialism, the unevenness of progress and the necessity for the weakest link' (*La Pensée*, April 1963, 'Matérialisme et Hyperimperialisme', p. 49). R. Garaudy: 'Whatever the complexity of the mediations, human practice is one, and it is the dialectic of human practice that constitutes the motor of history. To blur this with the (real) multiplicity of "overdeterminations" is to obscure the essence of

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Two problems are at issue in these objections, and in my essays. The first concerns the Hegelian dialectic: what is the 'rationality' that Marx attributes to it? The second concerns the Marxist dialectic: what is the *specificity* that distinguishes it rigorously from the Hegelian dialectic? Two problems which are in fact only two parts of a single problem, since in its two aspects it always remains a matter of a more rigorous and clearer understanding of Marx's thought.

I shall return later to the 'rationality' of the Hegelian dialectic. For the moment, I should like to examine more closely the second aspect of the problem (which governs the other): the *specificity* of the Marxist dialectic.

The reader should realize that I am doing all I can to give the *concepts* I use a *strict* meaning, and that if he wants to understand these concepts he will have to pay attention to this rigour, and, in so far as it is not imaginary, he will have to adopt it himself. Need I remind him that without the rigour demanded by its object there can be no question of *theory*, that is, of theoretical practice in the strict sense of the term?

Practical Solution and Theoretical Problem. Why Theory?

The problem posed by my last study – what constitutes Marx's 'inversion' of the Hegelian dialectic, what is the specific difference that distinguishes the Marxist dialectic from the Hegelian dialectic? – is a theoretical problem.

To say that it is a *theoretical* problem implies that its theoretical solution should give us a new knowledge, organically linked to the other knowledges of Marxist theory. To say that it is a theoretical *problem* implies that we are not dealing merely with an imaginary difficulty, but with a really existing difficulty posed us in the form of a *problem*, that is, in a form governed by imperative conditions: definition of the field of (theoretical) knowledges in which the

Marx's *Capital* which is above all a study of this major contradiction, this basic law of the development of bourgeois society. Once this is obscured, how is it possible to conceive the objective existence of a basic law of development of our own epoch, the epoch of the transition to socialism? (*op. cit.*, p. 119).

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problem is posed (situated), of the exact *location* of its posing, and of the concepts required to pose it.

Only the position, examination and resolution of the problem, that is, the *theoretical practice* we are about to embark on, can provide the *proof* that these conditions have been respected.

Now, in this particular case, what has to be expressed in the form of a theoretical problem and its solution *already exists* in *Marxist practice*. Not only has Marxist practice come up against this 'difficulty', confirmed that it was indeed real rather than imaginary, but what is more, it has, within its own limits, 'settled' it and surmounted it in fact. In the practical state, the solution to our theoretical problem has already existed for a long time in Marxist practice. So to pose and resolve our theoretical problem ultimately means to express theoretically the 'solution' existing in the *practical state*, that Marxist practice has found for a real difficulty it has encountered in its development, whose existence it has noted, and, according to its own submission, settled.³

So we are merely concerned with filling in a 'gap' between theory and practice on a particular point. We are not setting Marxism any imaginary or subjective problem, asking it to 'resolve' the 'problems' of 'hyperempiricism', nor even what Marx called the difficulties a philosopher has in his *personal* relations with a concept. No. The problem posed⁴ exists (and has existed) in the form of a difficulty signalled by Marxist practice. Its solution exists in Marxist practice. So we only have to express it theoretically. But this simple theoretical *expression* of a solution that exists in the practical state cannot be taken for granted: it requires a real theoretical labour, not only to work out the specific *concept* or

3. *Settled*: this is the very word Marx used in the Preface to the *Contribution* (1858), when, reviewing his past and evoking his meeting with Engels in Brussels, spring 1845, and the drafting of *The German Ideology*, he speaks of *settling accounts* (*Abrechnung*) with 'our erstwhile philosophical conscience'. The Afterword to the second edition of *Capital* openly records this settlement, which, in good accounting style, includes the acknowledgement of a debt: the acknowledgement of the 'rational side' of the Hegelian dialectic.

4. Of course, this is not the first time this problem has been posed! It is at the moment the object of important works by Marxist investigators in Germany, as well as in Italy, where it has inspired historical and theoretical studies of great scientific interest (Della Voipe, Rossi, Colletti, Merker, etc.).

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knowledge of this practical resolution – but also for the real destruction of the ideological confusions, illusions or inaccuracies that may exist, by a radical critique (a critique which takes them by the root). So this *simple* theoretical 'expression' implies both the *production* of a knowledge and the *critique* of an illusion, in one movement.

And if I am asked: but why take all this trouble to express a 'truth' 'known' for such a long time? – my answer is that, if we are still using the term in its strictest sense, the existence of this truth has been *signalled*, *recognized* for a long time, but it has not been *known*. For the (practical) *recognition* of an existence cannot pass for a *knowledge* (that is, for *theory*) except in the *imprecision* of a confused thought. And if I am then asked: but what use is there in posing this problem in *theory* if its solution has already existed for a long time in the practical state? why give a theoretical expression to this practical solution, a theoretical expression it has so far done quite well without? what do we gain by this 'speculative' investigation that we do not possess already?

One sentence is enough to answer this question: Lenin's 'Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary practice'. Generalizing it: theory is essential to practice, to the forms of practice that it helps bring to birth or to grow, as well as to the practice it is the theory of. But the transparency of this sentence is not enough; we must also know its *titles to validity*, so we must pose the question: what are we to understand by *theory*, if it is to be essential to *practice*?

I shall only discuss the aspects of this theme that are indispensable to our investigation. I propose to use the following definitions, as essential preliminary hypotheses.

By *practice* in general I shall mean any process of *transformation* of a determinate given raw material into a determinate *product*, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using *determinate* means (of 'production'). In any practice thus conceived, the *determinant* moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the *labour of transformation* itself, which sets to work,

5. G. Murry quite correctly says: '... it would hardly be reasonable to suppose that he [L.A.] should have introduced ... a new concept to express a truth known since Marx and Engels' (*op. cit.*).

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in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means. This general definition of practice covers the possibility of particularity: there are different practices which are really distinct, even though they belong organically to the same complex totality. Thus, 'social practice', the complex unity of the practices existing in a determinate society, contains a large number of distinct practices. This complex unity of 'social practice' is structured, we shall soon see how, in such a way that in the last resort the determinant practice in it is the practice of transformation of a given nature (raw material) into useful products by the activity of living men working through the *methodically organized* employment of determinate means of production within the framework of determinate relations of production. As well as production social practice includes other essential levels: political practice – which in Marxist parties is no longer spontaneous but organized on the basis of the scientific theory of historical materialism, and which transforms its raw materials: social relations, into a determinate product (new social relations); ideological practice (ideology, whether religious, political, moral, legal or artistic, also transforms its object: men's 'consciousness'); and finally, *ideological practice*. Ideology is not always taken seriously as an existing practice: but to recognize this is the indispensable prior condition for any theory of ideology. The existence of a *theoretical practice* is taken seriously even more rarely: but this prior condition is indispensable to an understanding of what theory itself, and its relation to 'social practice' are for Marxism.

Here we need a second definition. By theory, in this respect, I shall mean a *specific form of practice*, itself belonging to the complex unity of the 'social practice' of a determinate human society. Theoretical practice falls within the general definition of practice. It works on a raw material (representations, concepts, facts) which it is given by other practices, whether 'empirical', 'technical' or 'ideological'. In its most general form theoretical practice does not only include *scientific* theoretical practice, but also pre-scientific theoretical practice, that is, 'ideological' theoretical practice (the forms of 'knowledge' that make up the prehistory of a science, and their 'philosophies'). The theoretical practice of a science is always completely distinct from the ideological theoretical practice of its prehistory: this distinction takes the form of a qualitative

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theoretical and historical discontinuity which I shall follow Bachelard in calling an 'epistemological break'. This is not the place to discuss the dialectic in action in the advent of this 'break'; that is, the labour of specific theoretical transformation which installs it in each case, which establishes a science by detaching it from the ideology of its past and by revealing this past as ideological. Restricting myself to the essential point as far as our analysis is concerned, I shall take up a position beyond the 'break', within the constituted science, and use the following nomenclature: I shall call *theory* any theoretical practice of a scientific character. I shall call 'theory' (in inverted commas) the determinate *theoretical system* of a real science (its basic concepts in their more or less contradictory unity at a given time); for example, the theory of universal attraction, wave mechanics, etc. . . . or again, the 'theory' of historical materialism. In its 'theory' any determinate science reflects within the complex unity of its concepts (a unity which, I should add, is more or less problematic) the results, which will henceforth be the conditions and means, of its own theoretical practice. I shall call Theory (with a capital T), general theory, that is, the Theory of practice in general, itself elaborated on the basis of the Theory of existing theoretical practices (of the sciences), which transforms into 'knowledge' (scientific truths) the ideological product of existing 'empirical' practices (the concrete activity of men). This Theory is the materialist *dialectic* which is none other than dialectical materialism. These definitions are necessary for us to be able to give an answer to this question: what is the use of a theoretical expression of a solution which already exists in the practical state? – an answer with a theoretical basis.

When Lenin said 'without theory, no revolutionary action', he meant one particular theory, the theory of the Marxist science of the development of social formations (historical materialism). The proposition is to be found in *What is to be Done?*, where Lenin examined the organizational methods and objectives of the Russian Social-Democratic Party in 1902. At that time he was struggling against an opportunist policy that tagged along behind the 'spontaneity' of the masses; his aim was to transform it into a revolutionary practice based on 'theory', that is, on the (Marxist) science of the development of the social formation concerned (Russian

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society at that time). But in expressing this thesis, Lenin was doing more than he said: by reminding Marxist political practice of the necessity for the 'theory' which is its basis, he was in fact expressing a thesis of relevance to Theory, that is, to the Theory of practice in general – the materialist dialectic.

So theory is important to practice in a double sense: for 'theory' is important to its own practice, directly. But the *relation* of a 'theory' to its practice, in so far as it is at issue, on condition that it is reflected and expressed, is also relevant to the general Theory (the dialectic) in which is theoretically expressed the essence of theoretical practice in general, through it the essence of practice in general, and through it the essence of the transformations, of the 'development' of things in general.

To return to our original problem: we find that the theoretical expression of a practical solution involves Theory, that is, the dialectic. The exact theoretical expression of the dialectic is relevant first of all to those practices in which the Marxist dialectic is active; for these practices (Marxist 'theory' and politics) need the concept of their practice (of the dialectic) in their development, if they are not to find themselves defenceless in the face of qualitatively new forms of this development (new situations, new 'problems' – or to lapse, or relapse, into the various forms of opportunism, theoretical or practical. These 'surprises' and deviations, attributable in the last resort to 'ideological errors', that is, to a *theoretical* deficiency, are always costly, and may be very costly.

But Theory is also essential for the transformation of domains in which a Marxist theoretical practice does not yet really exist. In most of these domains the question has not yet been 'settled' as it has in *Capital*. The Marxist theoretical practice of *epistemology*, of the history of science, of the history of ideology, of the history of philosophy, of the history of art, has yet in large part to be constituted. Not that there are not Marxists who are working in these domains and have acquired much real experience there, but they do not have behind them the equivalent of *Capital* or of the revolutionary practice of a century of Marxists. Their practice is largely *in front of them*, it still has to be developed, or even founded, that is, it has to be set on correct theoretical bases so that it corresponds to a *real* object, not to a presumed or ideological

object, and so that it is a truly theoretical practice, not a technical practice. It is for this purpose that they need Theory, that is, the materialist dialectic, as the sole method that can anticipate their theoretical practice by drawing up its formal conditions. In this case, the utilization of Theory is not a matter of *applying* its formulae (the formulae of the dialectic, of materialism) to a pre-existing content. Lenin himself criticized Engels and Plekhanov for having *applied* the dialectic externally to 'examples' from the natural sciences.⁶ The external application of a concept is never equivalent to a *theoretical practice*. The application changes nothing in the externally derived truth but its *name*, a re-baptism incapable of producing any real transformation of the truths that receive it. The application of the 'laws' of the dialectic to such and such a result of physics, for example, makes not one iota of difference to the structure or development of the theoretical practice of physics; worse, it may turn into an ideological fetter.

However, and this is a thesis essential to Marxism, it is not enough to reject the dogmatism of the *application* of the forms of the dialectic in favour of the *spontaneity* of existing theoretical practices, for we know that there is no *pure* theoretical practice, no perfectly transparent science which throughout its history as a science will always be preserved, by I know not what Grace, from the threats and taints of idealism, that is, of the *ideologies* which besiege it; we know that a 'pure' science only exists on condition that it continually frees itself from the ideology which occupies it, haunts it, or lies in wait for it. The inevitable price of this purification and liberation is a continuous struggle against ideology itself, that is, against idealism, a struggle whose reasons and aims can be clarified by Theory (dialectical materialism) and guided by it as by

6. V. I. Lenin, 'Philosophical Notebooks' (*Collected Works*, Vol. XXXVIII), p. 266: 'Hegel's Logic cannot be *applied* in its given form, it cannot be *taken* as given. One *must separate out* from it the logical (epistemological) nuances, after purifying them from *ideemyslik*: that is still a big job.' *Ibid.*, p. 359: 'The correctness of this aspect of the content of dialectics (the "identity of opposites", L.A.) must be tested by the history of science. This aspect of dialectics (e.g. in Plekhanov) usually receives inadequate attention: the identity of opposites is taken as the sum-total of *examples* ("for example, a seed", "for example, primitive communism"). The same is true of Engels. But it is "in the interests of popularisation. . ." and not as a *law of cognition* (and as a law of the objective world). (Lenin's emphasis.)

no other method in the world. What, then, should we say for the *spontaneity* of those triumphant *avant-garde* disciplines devoted to precise pragmatic interests, which are not strictly sciences but claim to be since they use methods which are 'scientific' (but defined independently of the specificity of their presumed objects); which, think, like every true science, that they have an *object*, when they are merely dealing with a certain given reality that is anyway disputed and torn between several competing 'sciences': a certain domain of phenomena not yet constituted into scientific facts and therefore not *unified*; disciplines which in their present form cannot constitute true theoretical practices because most often they only have the unity of a *technical practice* (*examples*: social psychology, and sociology and psychology in many of their branches)?

The only Theory able to raise, if not to pose, the essential question of the status of these disciplines, to criticize ideology in all its guises, including the *disguises* of technical practice as sciences, is the Theory of theoretical practice (as distinct from ideological

7. Theoretical practice produces knowledges which can then figure as *means* that will serve the ends of a technical practice. Any technical practice is defined by its ends: such and such effects to be produced in such and such an object in such and such a situation. The means depend on the ends. Any theoretical practice uses among other means knowledges which intervene as procedures: either knowledges borrowed from outside, from existing sciences, or 'knowledges' produced by the technical practice itself in pursuance of its ends. In every case, the relation between technique and knowledge is an *external*, unreflected relation, radically different from the internal, reflected relation between a science and its knowledges. It is this exteriority which justifies Lenin's thesis of the necessity to *import* Marxist theory into the spontaneous political practice of the working class. Left to itself, a spontaneous (technical) practice produces only the 'theory' it needs as a means to produce the ends assigned to it: this 'theory' is never more than the reflection of this end, uncriticized, unknown, in its means of realization, that is, it is a *by-product* of the reflection of the technical practice's end on its means. A 'theory' which does not question the end whose *by-product* it is remains a prisoner of this end and of the 'realities' which have imposed it as an end. Examples of this are many of the branches of psychology and sociology, and of Economics, of Politics, of Art, etc. . . . This point is crucial if we are to identify the most dangerous ideological menace: the creation and success of so-called theories which have nothing to do with real theory but are mere *by-products* of technical activity. A belief in the 'spontaneous' theoretical virtue of technique lies at the root of this ideology, the ideology constituting the essence of Technocratic Thought.

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practice), the materialist dialectic or dialectical materialism, the conception of the Marxist dialectic in its *specificity*.

For we are all agreed that where a really existing science has to be defended against an encroaching ideology, where what is truly science's and what is ideology's has to be discerned without a really scientific element being taken by chance for ideology, as occasionally happens, or, as often happens, an ideological element being taken for a scientific element . . . where (and this is very important politically) the claims of the ruling technical practices have to be criticized and the true theoretical practices that socialism, communism and our age will need more and more established, where these tasks which all demand the intervention of the Marxist dialectic are concerned, it is very obvious that there can be no question of making do with a formulation of Theory, that is, of the materialist dialectic, which has the disadvantage of being *inexact*, in fact of being very inexact, as inexact as the Hegelian dialectic. Of course, even this imprecision may correspond to a certain degree of reality and as such be endowed with a certain *practical* meaning, serving as a reference point or index (as Lenin says, 'The same is true of Engels. But it is "in the interests of popularization"; *Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 359), not only in education, but also in struggle. But if a practice is to be able to make use of imprecise formulations, it is absolutely essential that this practice should at least be 'true', that on occasion it should be able to do without the expression of Theory and recognize itself globally in an imprecise Theory. But if a practice *does not really exist*, if it must be *constituted*, then imprecision becomes an obstacle in itself. Those Marxist investigators working in *avant-garde* domains such as the theory of ideologies (law, ethics, religion, art, philosophy), the theory of the history of the sciences and of their ideological prehistory, epistemology (theory of the theoretical practice of mathematics and other natural sciences), etc. . . ., these risky but existing *avant-garde* domains; those who pose themselves difficult problems even in the domain of Marxist theoretical practice (the domain of history); not to speak of those other revolutionary 'investigators' who are confronted by political difficulties in radically new forms (Africa, Latin America, the transition to communism, etc.); if all these investigators had only the Hegelian dialectic instead of the Marxist dialectic, even if the former were

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purged of Hegel's ideological system, even if it were declared to have been 'inverted' (if this inversion amounts to applying the Hegelian dialectic to the real instead of to the Idea), they would certainly not get very far in its company! So, whether we are dealing with a confrontation with something new in the domain of a real practice, or with the foundation of a real practice we all need the materialist dialectic *as such*.

A Theoretical Revolution in Action

So we shall start by considering practices in which the Marxist dialectic as such is in action: Marxist theoretical practice and Marxist political practice.

Marxist Theoretical Practice

So a practice of theory does exist; theory is a specific practice which acts on its own object and ends in its own product: a *knowledge*. Considered in itself, any theoretical work presupposes a given raw material and some 'means of production' (the concepts of the 'theory' and the way they are used: the method). The raw material worked by theoretical labour may be very 'ideological' if the science is just coming into being; where an already constituted and developed science is concerned, it may be material that has already been elaborated theoretically, concepts which have already been formed. Very schematically, we may say that the means of theoretical labour, which are an absolute condition of its existence - 'theory' and method - represent the 'active side' of theoretical practice, the determinant moment of the process. The knowledge of the process of this theoretical practice in its generality, that is, as the specified form or real difference of the practice, itself a specified form of the general process of transformation, of the 'development of things', constitutes a first theoretical elaboration of Theory, that is, of the materialist dialectic.

Now, a real theoretical practice (one that produces knowledges) may be well able to do its duty as theory without necessarily feeling the need to make the Theory of its own practice, of its process.

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This is the case with the majority of sciences; they do have a 'theory' (their corpus of concepts), but it is not a Theory of their theoretical practice. The moment of the Theory of theoretical practice, that is, the moment in which a 'theory' feels the need for the Theory of its own practice – the moment of the Theory of method in the general sense – always occurs *post festum*, to help it surmount practical or 'theoretical' difficulties, resolve problems insoluble for the movement of practice immersed in its activities and therefore theoretically blind, or face up to even deeper crises. But the science can do its duty, that is, produce knowledges, for a long time before it feels the need to make the Theory of what it is doing, the theory of its practice, of its 'method'. Look at Marx. He wrote ten books as well as the monument that is *Capital* without ever writing a *Dialectics*. He talked of writing it, but never started. He never found the time. Which means that he never took the time, for at that period the Theory of his own theoretical practice was not essential to the development of his theory, that is, to the fruitfulness of his own practice.

However, Marx's *Dialectics* would have been very relevant to us today, since it would have been the Theory of Marx's theoretical practice, that is, exactly a determinant theoretical form of the solution (that exists in the practical state) to the problem we are dealing with: the problem of the specificity of the Marxist *dialectic*. This practical solution, this *dialectic*, exists in Marx's theoretical practice, and we can see it in action there. The method Marx used in his theoretical practice, in his scientific work on the 'given' that he transformed into knowledge, this method is precisely the *Marxist dialectic*; and it is precisely this *dialectic* which contains inside it in a practical state the solution to the problem of the relations between Marx and Hegel, of the reality of that famous 'inversion' which is Marx's gesture to us, in the Afterword to the Second Edition of *Capital*, warning us that he has settled his relations with the Hegelian dialectic. That is why today we so miss the *Dialectics* which Marx did not need and which he refused us, even though we know perfectly well that we have it, and where it is: in Marx's theoretical works, in *Capital*, etc. – yes, and of course this is the main thing, we can find it there, but *not in a theoretical state!*⁸

8. With one remarkable exception which I shall discuss later.

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Engels and Lenin knew this.⁹ They knew that the Marxist dialectic existed in *Capital*, but *only* in a practical state. They also knew that Marx did not give us a 'dialectic' in a theoretical state. So they did not, could not – except in extremely general expositions or in historically defined situations of theoretical urgency – confuse the gesture with which Marx indicated that he had settled his relations with Hegel with the knowledge of this solution, that is, with the theory of this solution. Marx's 'gestures' as to the 'inversion' might well serve as *reference points* whereby we can situate and orient ourselves in the ideological domain: they do represent a gesture towards, a practical recognition of the existence of the solution, but they do not represent a rigorous knowledge of it. That is why Marx's gestures can and must *provoke* us into theory: into as rigorous as possible an expression of the practical solution whose existence they indicate.

Marxist Political Practice

The same is true of the Marxist political practice of the class struggle. In my last essay I took as an example the 1917 Revolution, but a hundred others from close at hand or far afield would have done just as well, as everyone must know very well. In this example, we see the 'dialectic' we obtained from Marx in action and under test (the two are one and the same thing), and in it the 'inversion' that distinguishes him from Hegel – but again, *in a practical state*. This dialectic comes from Marx, for the practice of the Bolshevik Party was based on the dialectic in *Capital*, on Marxist 'theory'. In the practice of the class struggle during the 1917 Revolution, and in Lenin's reflections on it, we do have the Marxist dialectic, but in a practical state. And here again we can see that this political practice, which has its defined raw material, its tools and its method, which, like any other practice, also produces transformations (which are not knowledges, but a revolution in social

9. Cf. Lenin: 'If Marx did not leave behind him a "Logic" (with a capital letter), he did leave the logic of *Capital*, and this ought to be utilized to the full in this question. In *Capital*, Marx applied to a single science logic, dialectics and the theory of knowledge of materialism (three words are not needed; it is one and the same thing) which has taken everything valuable in Hegel and developed it further.' (*Philosophical Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 319).

relations), this practice *also* may exist and develop, at least for a time, without feeling the need to make the theory of its own practice, the Theory of its 'method'. It may exist, survive and even progress without it, just like any other practice – until the moment in which its object (the existing world of the society that it is transforming) opposes enough resistance to it to *force* it to fill in this gap, to question and think its own method, so as to produce the adequate solutions, the *means* of producing them, and, in particular, so as to produce in the 'theory' which is its basis (the theory of the existing social formation) the *new knowledges* corresponding to the content of the new 'stages' of its development. An example of these 'new knowledges': what have been called the contributions of 'Leninism' for the period of imperialism in the phase of inter-imperialist wars; and what will later be called by a name which does not exist as yet, the theoretical contributions necessary for the present period, when, in the struggle for peaceful coexistence the *first revolutionary* forms are appearing in certain so-called 'underdeveloped' countries out of their struggles for national independence.

After this, it may come as a surprise to read that the practice of the class struggle has not been reflected in the theoretical form of *method* or *Theory*,¹⁰ when we seem to have ten decisive texts by Lenin, the most famous of which is *What is to be Done?* But while this last text, for example, may define the theoretical and historical bases for Russian Communist practice, and prepare the way for a programme of action, it does not constitute a theoretical reflection on political practice as such. It does not, and did not intend to, constitute the theory of its own method in the general sense of Theory. So it is not a text on the dialectic, although the dialectic is certainly active in it.

For a better understanding of this point, let us take as an example the texts by Lenin on the 1917 Revolution that I quoted or gave precise references to previously.¹¹ The status of these texts should be made clear. They are not the texts of a historian, but of a political leader tearing himself away from the struggle for an

10. With one remarkable exception which I shall discuss later.

11. It would have been better had I quoted all my texts verbatim and not been content in the majority of cases to give just a reference, even a precise one.

hour or two so as to speak of the struggle to the men involved in it, and give them an understanding of it. So they are texts for direct political use, written down by a man involved in the revolution who is reflecting on his practical experience within the field of his experience itself. I regard it as a great honour to have been criticized for what amounts to having respected the form of Lenin's reflections down to the details and even the expression, presenting them for what they are without any attempt to 'supercede' them straightaway with a real historical analysis.¹² Yes, some of Lenin's reflections do have all the appearances of what might be called a 'pluralism' or a 'hypermultiplicity', 'the theory of factors', etc., in their invocation of the multiple and exceptional circumstances which induced and made possible the triumph of the revolution.¹³ I took them as they were, not in their appearance but in their essence, not in their apparent 'pluralism' but in the deeply theoretical significance of this 'appearance'. Indeed, the meaning of these texts of Lenin's is not a simple description of a given situation, an empirical enumeration of various paradoxical or exceptional elements; on the contrary, it is an *analysis* of theoretical scope. They deal with a reality absolutely essential to political practice, a reality that we must *think* if we are to attain the specific essence of this practice. These texts are an analysis of the structure of the field, of the object, or (to return to our earlier terminology) of the specific raw material of political practice in general, via a precise example: the political practice of a Marxist leader in 1917.

12. Cf. Murry, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

13. 'That the revolution succeeded so quickly . . . is only due to the fact that, as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, *absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous class interests, absolutely contrary political and social strivings have merged*, and in a strikingly, "harmonic" manner . . .' (Lenin: 'Letter from Afar (No. 1)', *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 35). Lenin himself stressed certain words in this passage. A little later he declares: 'This, and this only, is the way *the situation developed*'. This, and this only, is the view that should be taken by a politician who does not fear the truth, who soberly weighs the balance of social forces in the revolution, who appraises every "current situation" not only from the point of view of all its present, current peculiarities, but also from the point of view of the deeper-lying springs, the deeper relations between the interests of the proletariat and bourgeoisie, both in Russia and throughout the world' (p. 36 – this time the stress is mine, L.A.).

Thus conceived, Lenin's analysis is a practical response (his analysis is this response in a practical state) to the general theoretical question: what is political practice? what distinguishes it from other practices? or, if you prefer a more classical formulation: what is political action? Through Lenin, and against the speculative thesis (a Hegelian thesis, but one that Hegel inherited from an older ideology since it is already supreme in Bossuet) which regards the concrete of a political situation as 'the contingency' in which 'necessity is realized', we come to the beginning of a theoretical answer to this real question. We can see that the object of Lenin's political practice is obviously not Universal History, nor even the general History of Imperialism. The History of Imperialism is certainly at issue in his practice, but it does not constitute its particular object. The History of Imperialism as such is the particular object of other activities: the activity of the Marxist theoretician or of the Marxist historian – but in such cases it is the object of a theoretical practice. Lenin meets Imperialism in his political practice in the modality of a *current* existence: in a concrete present, the theoretician of history or the historian meet it in another particular object of political practice does belong to the history which is also discussed by the theoretician and the historian; but it is *another* object. Lenin knew perfectly well that he was acting on a social present which was the product of the development of imperialism, otherwise he would not have been a Marxist, but in 1917 he was not acting on Imperialism in general: he was acting on the concrete of the Russian situation, of the Russian conjuncture, situation whose currency defined his political practice as such. In the world that a historian of Imperialism is forced to see in section, if he wants to see it as Lenin lived it and understood it – because it was, as the existing world is, the sole concrete world in existence, in the sole concrete possible, the concrete of its currency, in the 'current situation' – Lenin analysed what constituted the characteristics of its structure: the essential articulations, the interconnections, the strategic nodes on which the possibility and the fate of any revolutionary practice depended; the disposition and the relations typical of the contradictions in a determinate country (semi-feudal and semi-colonialist, and yet imperialist) in the period

in which the principal contradiction was approaching explosion. This is what is irreplaceable in Lenin's texts: the analysis of the structure of a *conjuncture*, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity, all of which are the very existence of that 'current situation' which political action was to transform, in the strongest sense of the word, between February and October, 1917.

And if anyone opposes or offers these texts the irreplaceable lesson of a long-term historical analysis¹⁴ in which Lenin's 'current situation' is no more than an instant absorbed in a process which began long before it and which will supersede it in the realization of its own future – one of those historical analyses in which imperialism explains everything, which is true, but in which the unfortunate Lenin, struggling with the problems and analyses of revolutionary practice, is usually literally overtaken, swept off his feet and carried away by the avalanche of historical proof – then that person will never make any headway with them. As if Lenin did not regard Imperialism as precisely such and such current contradictions, their current structure and relations; as if this structured currency did not constitute the sole object of his political action! As if a single word could thus magically dissolve the reality of an irreplaceable practice, the revolutionaries' practice, their lives, their sufferings, their sacrifices, their efforts, in short, their concrete history, by the use made of another practice, based on the first, the practice of a historian – that is, of a scientist, who necessarily reflects on necessity's *fait accompli*; as if the theoretical practice of a classical historian who analyses the past could be confused with the practice of a revolutionary leader who reflects on the present in the present, on the necessity to be achieved, on the means to produce it, on the strategic application points for these means; in short, on his own action, for he does act on concrete history! and his mistakes and successes do not just feature between the covers of a *written*, 8vo 'history' in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*: their names will always be remembered, in concrete life: 1905, 1914, 1917, Hitler, Franco, Stalingrad, China, Cuba. To distinguish between the two practices, this is the heart of the question. For Lenin knew better than anyone else that the contradictions he analysed arose from one and the same Imperialism, the

14. Cf. Murry, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–8.

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Imperialism that even produced their paradoxes. But knowing this, he was concerned with something else in them than this general historical knowledge, and it was because a tested science had taught him the latter that he could really concern himself with something else, with what it was that constituted the structure of his practical object: with the typicality of the contradictions, with their displacements, their condensations and the 'fusion' in revolutionary rupture that they produced; in short, with the 'current situation' that they constituted. (That is why the theory of the 'weakest link' is identical with the theory of the 'decisive link'.)

Once we have realized this we can return to Lenin with a quiet mind. However much any ideologue tries to bury him beneath a proof by historical analysis, there is always this one man standing there in the plain of History and of our lives, in the eternal 'current situation'. He goes on talking, calmly or passionately. He goes on talking to us about something quite simple: about his revolutionary practice, about the practice of the class struggle, in other words, about what makes it possible to act on History from within the sole history present, about what is specific in the contradiction and in the dialectic, about the specific difference of the contradiction which quite simply allows us, not to demonstrate or explain the 'inevitable' revolutions *post festum*, but to 'make' them in our unique present, or, as Marx profoundly formulated it,¹⁵ to make the dialectic into a revolutionary method, rather than the theory of the *fait accompli*.¹⁶

To sum up, the problem posed – what constitutes Marx's 'inversion' of the Hegelian dialectic? what is the specific difference which distinguishes the Marxist dialectic from the Hegelian? – has already been resolved by Marxist practice, whether this is Marx's theoretical practice or the political practice of the class struggle. So its solution does exist, in the works of Marxism, but only in a practical state. We have to express it in its theoretical form, that is, to move from what, in most of the 'famous quotations',

15. In the Afterword to the second edition of *Capital*: 'In its mystified form, dialectic . . . seemed to transfigure . . . the existing state of things (*das Bestehende*). In its rational form . . . it is in its essence critical and revolutionary' (*Capital*, Vol. I, p. 20).

16. Which can also be the *fait accompli* of a superseded revolution.

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tions',¹⁷ is a practical recognition of an existence, to a theoretical knowledge of it.

This distinction should keep us clear of one last blind alley. It would be very easy – and is therefore tempting – to take the recognition of the existence of an object for the *knowledge* of it. Because of this facility, I might have found part or the whole of the list of 'famous quotations' used against me as a total argument, or as the equivalent of a theoretical argument. However, these quotations are precious because they say that the problem exists and that it has been resolved! They say that Marx has resolved it by 'inverting' Hegel's dialectic. But the 'famous quotations' do not give us the theoretical knowledge of this inversion. And the proof of this is, as clear as day, that we have to make a very serious theoretical effort if we are to succeed in thinking this inversion which seems so obvious. Indeed, too many of the 'explanations' that we have been given have restricted themselves to repeating the 'famous quotations' in paraphrase (but a paraphrase is not an explanation); to mingling the (gestural but enigmatic) concepts of 'inversion', 'rational kernel' with authentic and rigorous Marxist concepts, as if the theoretical clarity of the latter could illuminate the obscurity of the former by contagion, as if knowledge could be born merely of the cohabitation of the known and the little known or unknown,¹⁸ as if the contiguity of one or two scientific concepts was enough to transfigure our recognition of the existence of the 'inversion' or the 'kernel' into the knowledge of them! It would be more honest to take full responsibility for one's position, for example, to declare that Marx's remark about the 'inversion' is a *true knowledge*, to take that risk, and put the thesis to the test of theoretical practice – and to examine the results. Such a trial is interesting since it is a real experiment and because it leads to a *reductio ad absurdum*, demonstrating that Marx's thought would be profoundly weakened

17. For convenience, I have given this name to the well-known texts from the Marxist classics which serve as guide-lines for our problem.

18. Cf. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875: 'The question then arises: what transformation will the State undergo in communist society? . . . This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flash-hop nearer to the problem by a thousandfold combination of the word people with the word State' (Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 32).

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if it had to admit that he did give us a knowledge with the inversion.¹⁹

In their own way, these temptations and this experiment prove that the theory of the solution is not to be found in a gesture towards its existence. The existence of the solution in a practical state is one thing. The knowledge of this solution is something else.

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I said that Marx left us no *Dialectics*. This is not quite accurate. He did leave us one first-rate methodological text, unfortunately without finishing it: the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859. This text does not mention the 'inversion' by name, but it does discuss its reality: the validating conditions for the scientific use of the concepts of Political Economy. A reflection on this use is enough to draw from it the basic elements of a *Dialectics*, since this use is nothing more nor less than the *Dialectics* in a practical state.

I said that Lenin left us no *Dialectics* that would be the theoretical expression of the dialectic in action in his own political practice; more generally, that the theoretical labour of expressing the dialectic in action in the Marxist practice of the class struggle had still to be performed. This is not quite accurate. In his *Notebooks* Lenin did leave us some passages which are the sketch for a *Dialectics*. Mao Tse-tung developed these notes in the midst of a political struggle against dogmatic deviations inside the Chinese party in 1937, in an important text *On Contradiction*.²⁰

I hope to be able to show how we can find in these texts – in a form which has already been considerably elaborated and which it is only necessary to develop, to relate to its basis and to reflect on continually – the theoretical answer to our question: what is the specificity of the Marxist dialectic?

The Process of Theoretical Practice

'The concrete totally as a totality of thought, as a thought concretum, is in fact a product of thought and conception; but in no sense a

19. G. Murry tries to prove this in *La Pensée*, no. 108, *op. cit.*

20. Cf. *La Pensée*, December 1962, p. 7, no. 6.

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product of the concept thinking and engendering itself outside or over intuitions or conceptions, but on the contrary, a product of the elaboration of intuitions and conceptions into concepts.'

Karl Marx; *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859.

Mao Tse-tung begins with contradiction in its 'universality'; but his only serious discussion centres around the contradiction in the practice of the class struggle, by virtue of another 'universal' principle, the principle that the universal only exists in the particular, a principle which Mao reflects, *vis-à-vis* contradiction, in the following universal form: contradiction is always specific and specificity universally appertains to its essence. We may be tempted to smile at this preliminary 'labour' of the universal, which seems to need a supplement of universality if it is to give birth to specificity, and to regard this 'labour' as the labour of the Hegelian 'negativity'. But a real understanding of materialism reveals that this 'labour' is not a labour of the universal, but a labour on a pre-existing universal, a labour whose aim and achievement is precisely to refuse this universal the abstractions or the temptations of 'philosophy' (ideology), and to bring it back to its condition by force; to the condition of a scientifically specified universality. If the universal has to be this specificity, we have no right to invoke a universal which is not the universal of this specificity.

This point is essential to dialectical materialism, and Marx discusses an illustration of it in the *Introduction* when he demonstrates that although the use of general concepts – for example, 'production', 'labour', 'exchange', etc. – is indispensable to a scientific theoretical practice, this first generality does not coincide with the product of the scientific labour: it is not its achievement, it is its prior condition. This first generality (which I shall call *Generality I*) constitutes the raw material that the science's theoretical practice will transform into specified 'concepts'; that is, into that other 'concrete' generality (which I shall call *Generality III*) which is a knowledge. But what, then, is *Generality I*, that is, the raw material on which the labour of science is expended? Contrary to the ideological illusions – illusions which are not 'naïve', not more 'abstractions', but necessary and well-founded as ideologies – of empiricism or sensualism, a science never works on an

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existence whose essence is pure immediacy and singularity ('sensations' or 'individuals'). It always works on something 'general', even if this has the form of a 'fact'. At its moment of constitution, as for physics with Galileo and for the science of the evolution of social formations (historical materialism) with Marx, a science always works on existing concepts, '*Vorstellungen*', that is, a preliminary Generality I of an ideological nature. It does not 'work' on a purely objective 'given', that of pure and absolute 'facts'. On the contrary, its particular labour consists of *elaborating its own scientific facts* through a critique of the ideological 'facts' elaborated by an earlier ideological theoretical practice. To elaborate its own specific 'facts' is simultaneously to elaborate its own 'theory', since a scientific fact – and not the self-styled pure phenomenon – can only be identified in the field of a theoretical practice. In the development of an already constituted science, the latter works on a raw material (Generality I) constituted either of still ideological concepts, or of scientific 'facts', or of already scientifically elaborated concepts which belong nevertheless to an earlier phase of the science (an ex-Generality III). So it is by transforming this Generality I into a Generality III (knowledge) that the science works and produces.

But *who* or *what* is it that works? What should we understand by the expression: the science works? As we have seen, every transformation (every practice) presupposes the transformation of a raw material into products by setting in motion determinate means of production. What is the moment, the level or the instance which corresponds to the means of production, in the theoretical practice of science? If we abstract from men in these means of production for the time being, it is what I shall call the *Generality II*, constituted by the corpus of concepts whose more or less contradictory unity constitutes the 'theory' of the science at the (historical) moment under consideration,²¹ the 'theory' that defines

21. This Generality II, designated by the concept of 'theory', obviously deserves a much more serious examination than I can embark on here. Let us simply say that the unity I am calling 'theory' rarely exists in a science in the reflected form of a unified theoretical system. In the experimental sciences at least, besides concepts in their purely theoretical existence, it includes the whole field of technique, in which the theoretical concepts are in large part invested. The explicitly theoretical part proper is very rarely

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the field in which all the problems of the science must necessarily be posed (that is, where the 'difficulties' met by the science in its object, in the confrontation of its 'facts' and its 'theory', of its previous 'knowledges' and its 'theory', or of its 'theory' and its new knowledges, will be posed in the form of a problem by and in this field). We must rest content with these schematic gestures and not enter into the dialectic of this theoretical labour. They will suffice for an understanding of the fact that theoretical practice produces *Generalities III* by the work of *Generality II* on *Generality I*.

So they will suffice for an understanding of the two following important propositions:

(1) There is never an identity of essence between *Generality I* and *Generality III*, but always a real transformation, either by the transformation of an ideological generality into a scientific generality (a mutation which is reflected in the form Bachelard, for example, calls an 'epistemological break'); or by the production of a new scientific generality which rejects the old one even as it 'englobes' it, that is, defines its 'relativity' and the (subordinate) limits of its validity.

(2) The work whereby *Generality I* becomes *Generality III*, that is – abstracting from the essential differences that distinguish *Generality I* and *Generality III* – whereby the 'abstract' becomes the 'concrete', only involves the process of theoretical practice, that is, it all takes place 'within knowledge'.

Marx is expressing this second proposition when he declares that 'the correct scientific method' is to start with the abstract to produce the concrete in thought.²² We must grasp the precise

22. Cf. Marx, *Introduction*: 'It would appear to be correct to start with the real and concrete. . . . However, a closer look reveals that this is false. . . .

unified in a non-contradictory form. Usually it is made up of regions locally unified in regional theories that coexist in a complex and contradictory whole with a theoretically unreflected unity. This is the extremely complex and contradictory unity which is in action, in each case according to a specific mode, in the labour of theoretical production of each science. For example, in the experimental sciences, this is what constitutes the 'phenomena' into 'facts', this is what poses an existing difficulty in the form of problem, and 'resolves' this problem by locating the theoretico-technical dispositions which make up the real corpus of what an idealist tradition calls 'hypotheses', etc. etc.

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meaning of this thesis if we are not to slide into the ideological illusions with which these very words are only too often associated, that is, if we are not to believe that the *abstract* designates theory itself (science) while the *concrete* designates the real, the 'concrete' realities, knowledge of which is produced by theoretical practice; if we are to confuse *two different concretes*: the *concrete-in-thought*, which is a knowledge, and the *concrete-reality* which is its object. The process that produces the concrete-knowledge takes place wholly in the theoretical practice: of course, it does concern the concrete-real, but this concrete-real 'survives in its independence after as before, outside thought' (Marx), without it ever being possible to confuse it with that other 'concrete' which is the knowledge of it. That the concrete-in-thought (Generality III) under consideration is the knowledge of its object (the concrete-real) is only a 'difficulty' for the ideology which transforms this reality into a so-called 'problem' (the Problem of Knowledge), and which therefore thinks as problematic what has been produced precisely as a non-problematic solution to a real problem by scientific practice itself: the non-problematicity of the relation between an object and the knowledge of it. So it is essential that we do not confuse the real distinction between the abstract (Generality I) and the concrete (Generality III) which affects theoretical practice only, with another, ideological, distinction which opposes abstraction (which constitutes the essence of thought, science and theory) to the concrete (which constitutes the essence of the real).

This is precisely Feuerbach's confusion; a confusion shared by Marx in his Feuerbachian period: not only does it provide ammunition for a mass-produced ideology popular today, but it also

The latter (the method of those economic systems which move from general notions to concrete ones) is decidedly the correct scientific method. The concrete is concrete because it is the synthesis of many determinations, and therefore a unity of diversity. That is why it appears in thought as a process of synthesis, as a result, not as a point of departure. . . . (in scientific method) abstract determinations lead to the reproduction of the concrete via the path of thought. . . . the method which consists of rising from the abstract to the concrete is merely the way thought appropriates the concrete and reproduces it as a concrete in thought (Marx-Engels, *Werke*, Berlin, Vol. XIII, pp. 631-2).

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threatens to lead astray those taken in by the 'transparency' of its often considerable virtues as a protest, into hopeless theoretical blind-alleys. The critique which, in the last instance, counterposes the abstraction it attributes to theory and to science and the concrete it regards as the real itself, remains an ideological critique, since it denies the reality of scientific practice, the validity of its abstractions and ultimately the reality of that theoretical 'concrete' which is a knowledge. Hoping to be 'concrete' and hoping for the 'concrete', this conception hopes to be 'true' *qua* conception, so it hopes to be knowledge, but it starts by denying the reality of precisely the practice that produces knowledge! It remains in the very ideology that it claims to 'invert', that is, not in abstraction in general, but in a determinate ideological abstraction.²³

It was absolutely necessary to come this far if we were to recognize that even within the process of knowledge, the 'abstract' generality with which the process starts and the 'concrete' generality it finishes with, Generality I and Generality III respectively, are not in essence the same generality, and in consequence, the 'appearance' of the Hegelian conception of the autogenesis of the concept, of the 'dialectical' movement whereby the abstract universal produces itself as concrete, depends on a confusion of the kinds of 'abstraction' or 'generality' in action in theoretical practice.²³

23. Feuerbach himself is an example. That is why his 'declarations of materialism' should be handled with great care. I have already drawn attention to this point (cf. *La Pensée*, March-April 1961, p. 8), in an article on the Young Marx in which I even used *certain notions that remained ideological*, notions that would fall under the ban of this present criticism. For example, the concept of a 'retrait' which acted as a reply to Hegel's 'super-session' and was intended to illustrate Marx's effort to get out of ideology, to free himself from myth and make contact with the *original* which Hegel had deformed - even used polemically, this concept of a 'retrait', by suggesting a return to the 'real', to the 'concrete' *anterior* to ideology, came within a handbreadth of 'positivism'. Or again, the polemical refutation of even the *possibility* of a history of philosophy. The authority for this thesis came from a quotation from *The German Ideology* which does declare that philosophy (like religion, art, etc.) has no history. There also I was on the edge of positivism, only a step from reducing all ideology (and therefore philosophy) to a simple (temporary) phenomenon of a social formation (as *The German Ideology* is constantly tempted to do).

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tice. Thus, when Hegel as Marx puts it,²⁴ conceives 'the real as the result of self-synthesizing, self-deepening and self-moving thought' he is the victim of a *double* confusion:

(1) First, he takes the labour of production of scientific knowledge for 'the genetic process of the concrete (the real) itself'. But Hegel could not fall into this 'illusion' without opening himself to a second confusion.

(2) He takes the universal concept that figures at the beginning of the process of knowledge (for example, the concept of universality itself, the concept of 'Being' in the *Logic*) for the essence and motor of the process, for 'the self-engendering concept';²⁵ he takes the Generality I which theoretical practice is to transform into a knowledge (Generality III) for the essence and motor of the transformation process itself! Legitimately borrowing an analogy from another practice,²⁶ we might just as well claim that it is the fuel that by its dialectical auto-development produces the steam-engine, the factories and all the extraordinary technical, mechanical, physical, chemical and electrical apparatus which makes its extraction and its innumerable transformations possible today! So Hegel only falls victim to this 'illusion' because he imposes on the reality of theoretical practice an ideological conception of the universal, of its function and meaning. But in the dialectic of practice, the abstract generality at the beginning (Generality I), that is, the generality worked on, is not the same as the generality that does the work (Generality II) and even less is it the specific generality (Generality III) produced by this labour: a knowledge (the 'concrete-theoretical'). Generality II (which works) is not at all the simple development of Generality I, its passage (however complex) from the in-itself to the for-itself; for Generality II is the result of a whole process (the history of the science from its foundation), which is a process of real transformations in the strong sense of the word, that is, a process whose form is not the form of a simple development (according to the Hegelian model – the development of the in-itself into the for-itself), but of mutations

24. Marx, *Introduction* (*Werke*, XIII, p 632).

25. *Ibid.*

26. This comparison is well-founded: these two distinct practices have in common the general essence of practice.

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and reconstructions that induce real qualitative discontinuities. So when Generality II works on Generality I it is never working on itself, neither at the moment of the science's foundation nor later in its history. That is why Generality I always emerges from this labour really transformed. It may retain the general form of generality, but this form tells us nothing about it, for it has become a quite different generality – it is no longer an ideological generality, not one belonging to an earlier phase of the science, but in every case a qualitatively new specified scientific generality.

Hegel denies this reality of theoretical practice, this concrete dialectic of theoretical practice, that is, the qualitative discontinuity that intervenes or appears between the different generalities (I, II and III) even in the continuity of the production process of knowledge, or rather, he does not think of it, and if he should happen to think of it, he makes it the phenomenon of another reality, the reality he regards as essential, but which is really ideological through and through: the movement of the Idea. He projects this movement on to the reality of scientific labour, ultimately conceiving the unity of the process from the abstract to the concrete as the auto-genesis of the concept, that is, as a simple development via the very forms of alienation of the original in-itself in the emergence of its end-result, an end-result which is no more than its beginning. That is why Hegel fails to see the real, qualitative differences and transformations, the essential discontinuities which constitute the very process of theoretical practice. He imposes an ideological model on them, the model of the development of a simple interiority. That is to say, Hegel decrees that the ideological generality he imposes on them shall be the sole constitutive essence of the three types of generality – I, II and III – in action in theoretical practice.

Only now does the profound meaning of the Marxist critique of Hegel begin to appear in all its implications. Hegel's basic flaw is not just a matter of the 'speculative' illusion. This speculative illusion had already been denounced by Feuerbach and it consists of the identification of thought and being, of the process of thought and the process of being, of the concrete 'in thought' and the 'real' concrete. This is the speculative *sin par excellence*: the sin of abstraction which inverts the order of things and puts the process of the auto-genesis of the concept (the abstract) in the

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place of the process of the auto-genesis of the concrete (the real), Marx explains this to us quite clearly in *The Holy Family*,²⁷ where we see, in Hegelian speculative philosophy, the abstraction 'Fruit' produce the apple, the pear and the almond by its own movement of auto-determinant auto-genesis. . . . Feuerbach gave what was if possible an even better exposition and criticism of it in his admirable 1839 analysis of the Hegelian 'concrete universal'. Thus, there is a *bad* use of abstraction (the speculative and idealist use) which reveals to us the contrasting *good* use of abstraction (the materialist use). We understand, it is all quite clear and straightforward! And we prepare to put things straight, that is, to put abstraction in its right place by a liberating 'inversion' - for, of course, it is not the (general) concept of fruit which produces (concrete) fruits by auto-development, but, on the contrary, (concrete) fruits which produce the (abstract) concept of fruit. Is that all right?

No, strictly speaking, it is not all right. We cannot accept the ideological confusions which are implicit in this 'inversion' and which allow us to talk about it in the first place. There is no rigour in the inversion in question, unless we presuppose a basic ideological confusion, the confusion Marx had to reject when he really renounced Feuerbach and stopped invoking his vocabulary, when he had consciously abandoned the empiricist ideology which had allowed him to maintain that a scientific concept is produced *ex-abstracto* as the general concept of fruit 'should be' produced, by an abstraction acting on concrete fruits. When Marx says in the *Introduction* that any process of scientific knowledge begins from the abstract, from a generality, and not from the real concrete, he demonstrates the fact that he has actually broken with ideology and with the mere denunciation of speculative abstraction, that is, with its presuppositions. When Marx declares that the raw material of a science always exists in the form of a given generality (Generality I), in this thesis with the simplicity of a fact he is putting before us a new model which no longer has any relation to the empiricist model of the production of a concept by good abstraction, starting from real fruits and disengaging their essence by 'abstracting from their individuality'. This is now clear as far as the scientific labour is concerned; its starting-point is not 'concrete subjects' but

27. *The Holy Family* was written in 1844. The same theme recurs in *The German Ideology* (1845) and *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).

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Generalities I. But is this also true of this *Generality I*? Surely the latter is a preliminary stage of knowledge produced precisely by the *good abstraction* that Hegelian speculation merely uses in a bad way? Unfortunately, this thesis cannot be an organic part of dialectical materialism, but only of an empiricist and sensualist ideology. This is the thesis Marx rejects when he condemns Feuerbach for conceiving 'sensuousness' . . . only in the form of the object, that is, only in the form of an intuition without practice. Generality I, for example, the concept of 'fruit', is not the product of an 'operation of abstraction' performed by a 'subject' (consciousness, or even that mythological subject 'practice') - but the result of a complex process of elaboration which involves several distinct concrete practices on different levels, empirical, technical and ideological. (To return to our rudimentary example, the concept of fruit is itself the product of distinct practices, dietary, agricultural or even magical, religious and ideological practices - in its origins.) So as long as knowledge has not broken with ideology, every Generality I will be deeply impregnated by ideology, which is one of the basic practices essential to the existence of the social whole. The act of *abstraction* whereby the pure essence is extracted from concrete individuals is an *ideological myth*. In essence, Generality I is inadequate to the essence of the objects from which abstraction should extract it. It is this inadequacy that theoretical practice reveals and removes by the transformation of Generality I into Generality III. So Generality I itself is a rejection of the model from empiricist ideology presupposed by the 'inversion'.

To sum up: if we recognize that scientific practice starts with the abstract and produces a (concrete) knowledge, we must also recognize that Generality I, the raw material of theoretical practice, is qualitatively different from Generality II, which transforms it into 'concrete-in-thought', that is, into knowledge (Generality III). Denial of the difference distinguishing these two types of Generality and ignorance of the priority of Generality II (which works) over Generality I (which is worked on), are the very *bones of the Hegelian idealism* that Marx rejected: behind the still ideological semblance of the 'inversion' of abstract speculation to give concrete reality or science, this is the decisive point in which the fate of Hegelian ideology and Marxist theory is decided. The fate

of Marxist theory, because we all know that the deep reasons for a rupture – not the reasons we admit, but those that act – will decide for ever whether the deliverance we expect from it will be only the expectation of freedom, that is, the absence of freedom, or freedom itself.

So that is why to maintain that the concept of 'inversion' is a *knowledge* is to endorse the ideology that underlies it, that is, to endorse a conception that denies even the reality of theoretical practice. The 'settlement' pointed out to us by the concept of 'inversion' cannot then consist merely of an inversion of the theory which conceives the auto-genesis of the concept as 'the genesis of the (real) concrete' itself, to give the opposite theory, the theory which conceives the auto-genesis of the real as the genesis of the concept (it is this opposition that, if it really had any basis, would authorize the term 'inversion'): this settlement consists (and this is the decisive point) of the rejection of an ideological theory foreign to the reality of scientific practice, to substitute for it a qualitatively different theory which, for its part, recognizes the essence of scientific practice, distinguishes it from the ideology that some have wanted to impose on it, takes seriously its particular characteristics, thinks them, expresses them, and thinks and expresses the practical conditions even of this recognition.²⁸ On reaching this point, we can see that in the last resort there can be no question of an 'inversion'. For a science is not obtained by inverting an ideology. A science is obtained on condition that the domain in which ideology believes that it is dealing with the real is abandoned, that is, by

28. This work of rupture was the result of one man's theoretical practice; that man was Karl Marx. This is not the place to return to a question I merely outlined in my article *On the Young Marx*. I should have to show why it is that Marx's theoretical practice, itself also a labour of transformation, should necessarily have taken on in theory the preponderant form of a rupture, of an epistemological break.

Might I suggest that the moment that Marx's relation to Hegel is no longer, in the last analysis, a relation of inversion, but a quite different relation, we may perhaps be better able to understand what seemed so prodigious and paradoxical to Lenin himself (in his immediate reactions of surprise in the *Notebooks*); that there are in Hegel utilizable analyses and even a number of – naturally – isolated demonstrations of a materialist character? Might I suggest that, if the relation between Marx and Hegel is not one of inversion, the 'rationality' of the Hegelian dialectic becomes infinitely more intelligible?

abandoning its ideological *problematic* (the organic presupposition of its basic concepts, and with this system, the majority of these concepts as well) and going on to establish the activity of the new theory 'in another element',²⁹ in the field of a new, scientific, problematic. I use these terms quite seriously, and, as a simple test, I defy anyone ever to produce an example of a true science which was constituted by inverting the problematic of an ideology; that is, on the basis of the very problematic of the ideology.³⁰ I only set one condition on this challenge: all words must be used in their strict sense, not metaphorically.

A 'Pre-given' Complex Structured Whole

'The simplest economic category . . . can only ever exist as the unilateral and abstract relation of a pre-given, living concrete whole . . .'
Karl Marx, *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*.

We seem to have come a long way from the specificity of every contradiction – but, in fact, we have not moved one inch from it. We now know that this specificity is not the specification of any generality whatsoever, that is, in the limit case, the specification of an ideological generality. It is the *specificity of a Generality* III, of a knowledge.

What, then, is this 'specificity' of contradiction?

The dialectic is 'the study of contradiction in the very essence of objects', or what comes to the same thing, 'the doctrine of the unity of opposites'. According to Lenin, 'this grasps the kernel of

29. This 'theoretical image', borrowed from a paragraph by the Young Marx, was put forward on the occasion of my article in *La Nouvelle Critique*, December 1960, p. 36.

30. This sort of challenge will, I think, raise some echoes in all Marxists' political experience. For to defy anyone to make a real change in the effects without changing the cause, the basic determining structure, surely resembles the critique of reformism, the challenge that Communists throw down every day to all the world's reformists, to all those who believe that it is possible to invert the order of things on its own basis, for example, to invert social inequality into social equality, the exploitation of man by man into the mutual co-operation of men, on the very basis of existing social relations. The workers' song says: '*le monde va changer de base*'; it is theoretically irreproachable.

dialectics, but it requires explanations and development'. Mao refers to these texts and moves on to the 'explanations and development', that is, to the content of the 'kernel', in short, to the definition of the specificity of contradictions.

And then we suddenly come upon three very remarkable concepts. Two are concepts of distinction: (1) the distinction between the *principal contradiction* and the *secondary contradictions*; (2) the distinction between the *principal aspect* and the *secondary aspect* of each contradiction. The third and last concept: (3) the *uneven development* of contradiction. These concepts are presented to us as if 'that's how it is'. We are told that they are essential to the Marxist dialectic, since they are what is specific about it. It is up to us to seek out the deeper theoretical reasons behind these claims.

Mere consideration of the first distinction is enough to show that it presupposes immediately the existence of several contradictions (if not it would be impossible to oppose the principal ones to the secondary ones) in the same process. So it implies the existence of a complex process. In fact, according to Mao, 'A simple process contains only a single pair of opposites, while a complex process contains more'; for 'there are many contradictions in the course of development of any major thing'; but then, 'there are many contradictions in the process of development of a complex thing, and one of them is necessarily the principal contradiction'.³¹ As the second distinction (the distinction between the principal and secondary aspects of each contradiction) merely reflects within each contradiction the complexity of the process, that is, the existence in it of a plurality of contradictions, one of which is dominant, it is this complexity that we must consider.

We have found the complexity of the process at the heart of these basic distinctions. Here again we are touching on one of the essential points of Marxism: the same essential point, but approached from another angle. When Mao sets aside the 'simple process with two opposites', he seems to do so for factual reasons; it is irrelevant to his object, society, which does have a plurality of contradictions. But at the same time, surely, he provides for the pure possibility of this 'simple process with two opposites'?

31. Mao Tse-tung, 'On Contradiction', *Selected Works* (English trans. of the second Chinese edition, Peking, 1965), Vol. I, pp. 322, 331 and 337.

If so, it could be argued that this 'simple process with two opposites' is the essential, original process, and the others, the complex processes, are no more than complications of it, that is, the phenomenon developed. Is not Lenin leaning towards this view when he declares that 'The splitting of a single whole and the knowledge of its contradictory parts', already known to Philo. (Lenin's parenthesis), 'is the essence (one of the "essentials", one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of the dialectic'.³² In the single whole split into two contradictory parts, Lenin is surely not just describing a 'model' of contradiction, but the very 'womb' of all contradiction, the original essence manifest in all contradiction, even in its most complex forms? And this would surely make the complex merely the development and phenomenon of the simple? This is the decisive question. For this 'simple process with two opposites' in which the Whole is split into two contradictory parts is precisely the very *womb* of Hegelian contradiction.

Once again, we can and must put our interpretation to the test.

Of course, Mao only refers to the 'simple process' as a reminder, and gives no example of it. But throughout his analysis we never deal with anything but complex processes in which a structure with multiple and uneven determinations intervenes primitively, not secondarily; no complex process is presented as the development of a simple one, so the complex never appears as the phenomenon of the simple – on the contrary, it appears as the result of a process which is itself complex. So complex processes are never anything but given complexities, their reduction to simple origins is never envisaged, in fact or in principle. If we return to Marx's 1857 *Introduction*, we find the same requirement expressed with extraordinary rigour: in his reflections on the concepts of Political Economy, Marx does not only show that it is impossible to delve down to the birth or origin of the simple universal, 'production', since 'when we talk of production we always mean production at a determinate stage in social development of the production of individuals living in society',³³ that is, in a structured social whole. Marx does not only deny us the ability to delve down

32. Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 359.

33. Marx, *Introduction*, op. cit., p. 616.

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beneath this complex whole (and this denial is a denial on principle: it is not ignorance which prevents us, but the very essence of production itself, its concept). Marx does not only show that every 'simple category' presupposes the existence of the structured whole of society,³⁴ but also, what is almost certainly more important, he demonstrates that far from being original, in determinate conditions, simplicity is merely the product of the complex process. This is simplicity's sole claim to existence (again, existence in a complex whole): in the form of the existence of such and such a 'simple' category. Thus, labour: 'Labour seems a wholly simple category. Even the conception of labour in this generality – as Labour in general – is age-old. . . . However, economically conceived in this simplicity, "labour" is as modern a category as the relations which engender this simple abstraction'.³⁵ In the same way, the individual producer, or the individual as the elementary subject of production, which eighteenth-century mythology imagined to be at the origin of society's economic development, this economic 'cogito' only appeared, even as an 'appearance', in developed capitalist society, that is, in the society which had developed the social character of production to the highest degree. Similarly, exchange, the simple universal *par excellence*, 'did not appear historically in all its intensity until the most developed states of society. (This category) absolutely does not stride through every economic relation'.³⁶ So simplicity is not original; on the contrary, it is the structured whole which gives its meaning to the simple category, or which may produce the economic existence of certain simple categories as the result of a long process and under exceptional conditions.

Whatever the case, we are in a world foreign to Hegel: 'Hegel is right to begin his *Philosophy of Right* with possession as it is the subject's simplest legal relation. But no possession exists before the family or before master-slave relations, and these are much more concrete relations'.³⁷ The *Introduction* is no more than a long demonstration of the following thesis: the simple only ever exists within a complex structure; the universal existence of a simple

34. 'The simplest economic category . . . can only ever exist as the unideal and abstract relation of a pre-given, living, concrete whole . . . ' (Karl Marx, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 632).

35. *Ibid.*, p. 634.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 634.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 633.

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category is never original, it only appears as the end-result of a long historical process, as the product of a highly differentiated social structure: so, where reality is concerned, we are never dealing with the pure existence of simplicity, be it essence or category, but with the existence of 'concretes' of complex and structured beings and processes. This is the basic principle that eternally rejects the Hegelian womb of contradiction.

Indeed, if we take the rigorous essence rather than the metaphorical sense of the Hegelian model, we can see that the latter does require this 'simple process with two opposites', this simple original unity, splitting into two opposites, that is still evoked in Lenin's reference. This is the original unity that constitutes the fragmented unity of the two opposites in which it is alienated, changing even as it stays the same; these two opposites are the same unity, but in duality, the same interiority, but in exteriority – and that is why each is for its own part the contradictory and abstraction of the other, since each is merely the abstraction of the other without knowing it, as in-itself – before restoring their original unity, but enriched by its fragmentation, by its alienation, in the negation of the abstraction which negated their previous unity; then they will be a single whole once again, they will have reconstituted a new simple 'unity', enriched by the past labour of their negation, the new simple unity of a totality produced by the negation of the negation. It is clear that the implacable logic of this Hegelian model rigorously interlinks the following concepts: simplicity, essence, identity, unity, negation, fission, alienation, opposites, abstraction, negation of the negation, supersession (*Aufhebung*), totality, simplicity, etc. The whole of the Hegelian dialectic is here, that is, it is completely dependent on the radical presupposition of a simple original unity which develops within itself by virtue of its negativity and throughout its development only ever restores the original simplicity and unity in an ever more 'concrete' totality.

Marxists may well invoke this model or use it as a short-cut or symbol, either inadvertently or intentionally,³⁸ but strictly

38. Intentionally: for example, when Marx wanted to teach his contemporaries 'philosophical stupidity' a lesson, by 'coquetting' with Hegel's terminology in the First Volume of *Capital* ('*kokettieren*'). Do we still need this lesson?

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conceived, Marxist theoretical practice rejects it, just as Marxist political practice does. Marxism rejects it precisely because it rejects the theoretical presupposition of the Hegelian model: the presupposition of an original simple unity. What Marxism refuses is the (ideological) philosophical pretension to coincide exhaustively with a 'root origin', whatever its form (the *tabula rasa*, the zero point in a process; the state of nature; the concept of the beginning that for example, Hegel sees as being immediately identical with nothingness; the simplicity that, for Hegel once again, is the starting-point – and restarting-point, indefinitely – for every process, what restores it to its origin, etc.); it rejects, therefore, the Hegelian philosophical pretension which accepts this original simple unity (reproduced at each moment of the process) which will produce the whole complexity of the process later in its auto-development, but without ever getting lost in this complexity itself,³⁹ without ever losing in it either its simplicity or its unity – since the plurality and the complexity will never be more than its own 'phenomenon', entrusted with the manifestation of its own essence.⁴⁰

Once again, I am afraid that we cannot reduce the rejection of this presupposition to its 'inversion'. This presupposition has not been 'inverted'; it has been eliminated; totally eliminated (absolutely and not in the sense of the *Aufhebung* that 'preserves' what it eliminates . . .) and replaced by a *quite different* theoretical presupposition which has nothing to do with the old one. Instead of the ideological myth of a philosophy of origins and its organic concepts, Marxism establishes in principle the recognition of the givenness of the complex structure of any concrete 'object', a structure which governs both the development of the object and the development of the theoretical practice which produces the knowledge of it. There is no longer any original essence, only an

39. Even its death is no more than the imminence of its Resurrection, as Good Friday is the imminence of Easter Sunday. These symbols are Hegel's own.

40. To forestall any misunderstanding, I should point out that it is this 'Hegelian dialectic' that reigns in glory over Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts*, and what is more, in an extraordinarily pure and uncompromising state. To round off the demonstration I should add that the Hegelian dialectic in the *Manuscripts* has been rigorously 'inverted'. That is why the rigour of this rigorous text is not Marxist.

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ever-pre-giveness, however far knowledge delves into its past. There is no longer any simple unity, only a structured, complex unity. There is no longer any original simple unity (in any form whatsoever), but instead, *the ever-pre-giveness of a structured complex unity*. If this is the case, it is clear that the 'womb' of the Hegelian dialectic has been proscribed and that its organic categories, in so far as they are specific and positively determined, cannot survive it with theoretical status, particularly those categories that 'cash' the theme of the original simple unity, that is, the 'fission' of the single whole, alienation, the abstraction (in the Hegelian sense) that unites the opposites, the negation of the negation, the *Aufhebung*, etc. Given this, it is not surprising that there is no trace of these organically Hegelian categories either in Marx's 1857 *Introduction* or in Mao Tse-tung's text of 1937.

Of course, some of these categories might well be invoked in an ideological context (for example, the struggle with Dühring), or in a general exposition intended to illustrate the meaning of given results; as long as it is on this level of ideological struggle, or of opposition and illustration, these categories can be used with very real results in ideological practice (struggle) and in the general exposition of a conception. But this last 'exposition' (the illustration of the laws of the dialectic by such and such an example) must remain within the zone sanctioned by theoretical practice – for in itself it does not constitute a true theoretical practice, producing new knowledges. On the other hand, where a true practice is concerned, one which really transforms its object and produces true results (knowledges, a revolution . . .), such as Marx's and Lenin's theoretical and political practice, etc., then the margin of theoretical tolerance in respect to these categories disappears; the categories themselves disappear. Where a true practice, organically constituted and developed over the years, is concerned, and not a simple application without organic effects, an application which makes no changes in its object (for example, to the practice of physics), to its real development; where the practice of a man truly committed to a true practice is concerned, a man of science who applies himself to the constitution and development of a science, or a political man who applies himself to the development of the class struggle – then there is no longer any question, there can no longer be any question, of imposing on the object even categories which

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are approximately correct. Then those categories which have nothing further to say are silent, or reduced to silence. Thus, in the only Marxist practices which have really been constituted, Hegelian categories have been dead a long time. They are 'absent' categories. No doubt that is why some people have collected together and displayed to every gaze, with the infinite care that is the due of the unique remains of some former age, the *two sole sentences*⁴¹ to be found in the whole of *Capital*, that is, in some 2,300 octavo pages in the English edition; no doubt that is why they add force to these two sentences by adding to them another sentence, or rather a phrase, an exclamation, made by Lenin, which assures us very enigmatically that because Hegel went unread, Marx was not understood at all for half a century. But let us return to this simple fact: in the only Marxist practices that have really been constituted, the categories in use or in action are not Hegelian: in action in Marxist practice there are different categories, the categories of the Marxist dialectic.

Structure in Dominance: Contradiction and Overdetermination

'The uneven relation of the development of material production with that, for example, of artistic production . . . The only point difficult to grasp, here, is how production relations stand in uneven development to legal relations . . .'

Karl Marx, *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*

We still have to learn the essential feature of this practice: the

41. One very metaphorical reference to the negation of the negation. Another, which I shall discuss, on the transformation of quantity into quality. Engels refers to these two texts and comments on them in the first part of *Anti-Dühring*, Chapters 12 and 13. One further word on the negation of the negation. Today it is official convention to reproach Stalin with having suppressed the 'laws of the dialectic', and more generally with having turned away from Hegel, the better to establish his dogmatism. At the same time, it is willingly proposed that a certain return to Hegel would be salutary. One day perhaps these declarations will become the object of some proof. In the meanwhile, it seems to me that it would be simpler to recognize that the expulsion of the 'negation of the negation' from the domain of the Marxist dialectic might be evidence of the real theoretical perspicacity of its author.

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law of uneven development. For, as Mao puts it in a phrase as clear as the dawn, 'Nothing in this world develops absolutely evenly'.

To understand the meaning of this law and its scope – and, contrary to what is sometimes thought, it does not concern Imperialism alone, but absolutely 'everything in this world' – we must return to the essential differences of Marxist contradiction which distinguish a principal contradiction in any complex process, and a principal aspect in any contradiction. So far I have only insisted on this 'difference' as an index of the complexity of the whole, arguing that it is absolutely necessary that the whole be complex if one contradiction in it is to dominate the others. Now we must consider this domination, no longer as an index, but in itself, and draw out its implications.

That one contradiction dominates the others presupposes that the complexity in which it features is a structured unity, and that this structure implies the indicated domination-subordination relations between the contradictions. For the domination of one contradiction over the others cannot, in Marxism, be the result of a contingent distribution of different contradictions in a collection that is regarded as an object. In this complex whole 'containing many contradictions' we cannot 'find' one contradiction that dominates the others as we might 'find' the spectator a head taller than the others in the grandstand at the stadium. Domination is not just an indifferent *fact*, it is a *fact essential to the complexity itself*. That is why complexity implies domination as one of its essentials: it is inscribed in its structure. So to claim that this unity is not and cannot be the unity of a simple, original and universal essence is not, as those who dream of that ideological concept foreign to Marxism, 'monism',⁴² think, to sacrifice unity on the

42. *Monism*. This is the key concept in the personal conception of Haackel, the great German biologist and valiant mechanical materialist combatant in the anti-religious and anti-clerical struggle between 1880 and 1910; active propagandist, author of 'popular' works which had a very wide diffusion; creator of the 'League of German Monists'. He held religion to be 'dualist' and counterposed to it 'monism'. As a 'monist' he held that there were not two substances (God and the world, Mind or soul and matter) but one only. Haackel himself thought that this Unique Substance had two attributes (rather like the Spinozist substance with its two essential attributes): matter and energy. He held that all determinations, whether

altar of 'pluralism' - it is to claim something quite different: that the unity discussed by Marxism is *the unity of the complexity itself*, that the mode of organization and articulation of the complexity is precisely what constitutes its unity. It is to claim that *the complex whole has the unity of a structure articulated in dominance*. In the last resort this specific structure is the basis for the relations of domination between contradictions and between their aspects that Mao described as essential.

This principle must be grasped and intransigently defended if Marxism is not to slip back into the confusions from which it had delivered us, that is, into a type of thought for which only one model of unity exists: the unity of a substance, of an essence or of an act; into the twin confusions of 'mechanistic' materialism and the idealism of consciousness. If we were so precipitate as to assimilate the structured unity of a complex whole to the simple unity of a totality, if the complex whole were taken as purely and simply the development of one *single* essence or original and simple substance, then at best we would slide back from Marx to Hegel, at worst, from Marx to Haeckel! But to do so would be precisely to sacrifice the specific difference which distinguishes Marx from Hegel: the distance which radically separates the *Marxist type of unity* from the Hegelian type of unity, or the Marxist totality

material or spiritual, were modes of this Substance, for which he claimed 'Omnipotence'. Plekhanov was to take up this theme of 'monism', and no doubt it had affinities with the mechanistic tendencies Lenin was later to reproach him with. Plekhanov was more 'consistent' than Haeckel; he recognized that modern idealism was also a 'monism', as it explained everything by a single substance, Spirit. He maintained that Marxism was a materialist monism (cf. Plekhanov: *The Development of the Marxist View of History*). Perhaps it is to Plekhanov that I owe the simultaneous presence of the term 'monism' in the articles of G. Besse, R. Garaudy and G. Murj, and of expressions declaring that Marxism is essentially 'monist'. Engels and Lenin totally condemned this ideological concept because of its imprecision. Sometimes my critics use it in a strong sense (e.g. Murj), sometimes in a more or less weak sense; they do not oppose it to dualism, as Haeckel and Plekhanov did, but to 'pluralism'; so in their hands the term may be said to have taken on a methodological nuance, but still an ideological one. The concept has no positive use in Marxism, it is even theoretically dangerous. At the most, it might have a negative practical value: beware of 'pluralism'! It has no value as knowledge. To accord it such a value and draw out the theoretical consequences (Murj) is ultimately to deform Marx's thought.

from the Hegelian totality. The concept of the 'totality' is a very popular concept today; no passport is required to cross from Hegel to Marx, from the *Gesamtheit* to Sartre, etc., beyond the invocation of one word: 'totality'. The word stays the same, but the concept changes, sometimes radically, from one author to another. Once the concept has been defined this tolerance must cease. In fact, the Hegelian 'totality' is not such a malleable concept as has been imagined; it is a concept that is perfectly defined and individualized by its theoretical role. Similarly, the Marxist totality is also definite and rigorous. All these two 'totalities' have in common: (1) a word; (2) a certain vague conception of the unity of things; (3) some theoretical enemies. On the other hand, in their essence they are almost unrelated. The Hegelian totality is the alienated development of a simple unity, of a simple principle, itself a moment of the development of the Idea; so, strictly speaking, it is the phenomenon, the self-manifestation of this simple principle which persists in all its manifestations, and therefore even in the alienation which prepares its restoration. Once again, we are not dealing with concepts without consequences. For the unity of a simple essence manifesting itself in its alienation produces this result: that every concrete difference featured in the Hegelian totality, including the 'spheres' visible in this totality (civil society, the State, religion, philosophy, etc.), all these differences are negated as soon as they are affirmed; for they are no more than 'moments' of the simple internal principle of the totality, which fulfils itself by negating the alienated difference that it posed; further, as alienations - phenomena - of the simple internal principle, these differences are all equally 'indifferent'; that is, practically equal beside it, and therefore equal to one another, and that is why one determinate contradiction can never be dominant in Hegel.⁴³ That is to say, the Hegelian whole has a 'spiritual'

43. Hegel's theory should not be confused with Marx's judgement of Hegel. Surprising as it may seem to those who know Hegel only in Marx's judgement, in his theory of society Hegel is not the inverse of Marx. The 'spiritual' principle that constitutes the internal unity of the Hegelian totality cannot be assimilated at all to the one that features in Marx in the form of the 'determination in the last instance by the Economy'. The inverse principle - determination in the last instance by the State, or by philosophy - is not to be found in Hegel. It was Marx who said that the Hegelian conception of society amounts in reality to making Ideology the

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type of unity in which all the differences are only posed to be negated, that is, they are indifferent, in which they never exist for themselves, in which they only have a semblance of an independent existence, and in which, since they never manifest anything but the unity of the simple internal principle alienated in them, they are practically equal among themselves as the alienated phenomena of this principle. My claim is that the Hegelian totality: (1) is not really, but only apparently, articulated in 'spheres'; (2) that its unity is not its complexity itself, that is, the structure of this complexity; (3) that it is therefore deprived of the structure in dominance (*structure à dominante*) which is the absolute precondition for a real complexity to be a unity and really the object of a *praxis* that proposes to transform this structure; political practice. It is no accident that the Hegelian theory of the social totality has never provided the basis for a *policy*, that there is not and cannot be a Hegelian politics.

This is not all. If every contradiction is a contradiction in a

motor of history, because it is an ideological conception. But Hegel says, nothing of the kind. For him, there is no determination in the last instance *in society*, in the existing totality. Hegelian society is not unified by a basic instance that exists inside it, it is neither unified nor determined by any of its 'spheres'; be it the political sphere, the philosophical sphere or the religious sphere. For Hegel, the principle unifying and determining the social totality is not such and such a 'sphere' of society but a principle which has no privileged place or body in society, for the simple reason that it resides in all places and all bodies. It is in every determination of society, in the economic, the political, the legal, etc., down to the most spiritual. For example, Rome: it is not its *ideology* that unifies and determines it for Hegel, but a 'spiritual' principle (itself a moment of the development of the Idea) manifest in every Roman determination, in its economy, its politics, its religion, its law, etc. This principle is the *abstract legal personality*. It is a 'spiritual' principle of which Roman Law is only one determination among others. In the modern world it is *subjectivity*, just as universal a principle: the economy is subjectivity, as is politics, religion, philosophy, music, etc. The totality of Hegelian society is such that its principle is simultaneously immanent to it and transcendent of it, but it never coincides in itself with any determinate reality of society itself. That is why the Hegelian totality may be said to be endowed with a unity of a 'spiritual' type in which each element is *pars totalis*, and in which the visible spheres are merely the alienated and restored unfolding of the said internal principle. In other words, there is nothing to justify the identification (even as an inversion) of the Hegelian totality's type of unity and the Marxist totality's type of unity.

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complex whole structured in dominance, this complex whole cannot be envisaged without its contradictions, without their basically uneven relations. In other words, each contradiction, each essential articulation of the structure, and the general relation of the articulations in the structure in dominance, constitute so many conditions of the existence of the complex whole itself. This proposition is of the first importance. For it means that the structure of the whole and therefore the 'difference' of the essential contradictions and their structure in dominance, is the very existence of the whole; that the 'difference' of the contradictions (that there is a principal contradiction, etc.; and that every contradiction has a principal aspect) is identical to the conditions of the existence of the complex whole. In plain terms this position implies that the 'secondary' contradictions are not the pure phenomena of the 'principal' contradiction, that the principal is not the essence and the secondaries so many of its phenomena, so much so that the principal contradiction might practically exist *without* the secondary contradictions, or without some of them, or might exist *before* or *after* them.⁴⁴ On the contrary, it implies that the secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the principal contradiction, that they really constitute its condition of existence, just as the principal contradiction constitutes their condition of existence. As an example, take the complex structured whole that is society. In it, the 'relations of production' are not the pure phenomena of the forces of production; they are also their condition of existence. The superstructure is not the pure phenomenon of the structure, it is also its condition of existence. This follows from Marx's principle, referred to above, that production without society, that is, without social relations, exists nowhere; that we can go no deeper than the unity that is the unity of a whole in which, if the relations of production do have production itself as their condition of existence, production has as its condition of existence its form; the relations of production. Please do not misunderstand me; this mutual conditioning of the existence of the 'contradictions' does not nullify the structure in dominance

44. This myth of origin is well illustrated by the theory of the 'bourgeois' social contract, which, for example, in Locke, and what a theoretical gem, defines an economic activity in the state of nature before (in principle or in fact, it matters little) any of its legal and political conditions of existence!

that reigns over the contradictions and in them (in this case, determination in the last instance by the economy). Despite its apparent circularity, this conditioning does not result in the destruction of the structure of domination that constitutes the complexity of the whole, and its unity. Quite the contrary, even within the reality of the conditions of existence of each contradiction, it is the manifestation of the structure in dominance that unifies the whole.⁴⁵ *This reflection of the conditions of existence of the contradiction within itself, this reflection of the structure articulated in dominance that constitutes the unity of the complex whole within each contradiction*, this is the most profound characteristic of the Marxist dialectic, the one I have tried recently to encapsulate in the concept of 'overdetermination'.⁴⁶

This becomes easier to understand if we make a detour via a familiar concept. When Lenin said that '*the soul of Marxism is the concrete analysis of a concrete situation*', when Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao explain that '*everything depends on the conditions*', when Lenin describes the peculiar 'circumstances' of Russia in 1917; when Marx (and the whole Marxist tradition) ex-

45. In the *Introduction* Marx gives us the best possible proof of the invariability of the structure in dominance within the apparent circularity of conditioning, when he analyses the identity of production, consumption and distribution through exchange. This might give the reader Hegelian vertigo – 'nothing simpler', then, for a Hegelian than to pose production and consumption as identical' (*op. cit.*, p. 625) – but this would be a complete misunderstanding. 'The result we have obtained is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they are all elements of one totality, differentiations within one unity' in which it is production in its specific difference that is determinant. 'So a determinate production determines a determinate consumption, distribution and exchange, and the determinate mutual relations of these different moments. For its part, production in its unilateral form is really determined by the other moments' (pp. 630–31).

46. I did not invent this concept. As I pointed out, it is borrowed from two existing disciplines: specifically, from linguistics and psychoanalysis. In these disciplines it has an objective dialectical 'connotation', and – particularly in psychoanalysis – one sufficiently related formally to the content it designates here for the loan not to be an arbitrary one. A new word is necessarily required to designate a new acquisition. A neologism might have been invented. Or it was possible to 'import' (in Kant's words) a concept sufficiently related to make its domestication (Kant) easy. And in return, this 'relatedness' might open up a path to psychoanalytic reality.

plains, with the aid of a thousand examples, that such and such a contradiction will dominate according to the case, etc., they are appealing to a concept that might appear to be *empirical*: the 'conditions', which are simultaneously the existing conditions and the conditions of existence of the phenomenon under consideration. Now this concept is essential to Marxism precisely because it is not an empirical concept: a statement about what exists. ... On the contrary, it is a *theoretical concept*, with its basis in the very essence of the object: the ever-pre-given complex whole. In fact, these conditions are no more than the very existence of the whole in a determinate 'situation', the 'current situation' of the politician, that is, the complex relation of reciprocal conditions of existence between the articulations of the structure of the whole. That is why it is theoretically possible and legitimate to speak of the 'conditions', as of something that enables us to understand that the Revolution, 'the task of the day', could only break out here, in Russia, in China, in 1917, in 1949, in 1958, and not elsewhere; and not in another 'situation'; that the revolution, governed by capitalism's basic contradiction, did not succeed until Imperialism, and succeeded in the 'favourable' conditions that were precisely points of historical rupture, the 'weakest links': not England, France or Germany, but 'backward' Russia (Lenin), China and Cuba (ex-colonies, lands exploited by Imperialism). If it is theoretically acceptable to talk of the conditions without sliding into the empiricism or the irrationality of 'that's how it is' and of 'chance', it is because Marxism conceives the 'conditions' as the (real, concrete, current) existence of the contradictions that constitute the whole of a historical process. That is why Lenin's invocation of the 'existing conditions' in Russia was not a lapse into empiricism; he was analysing the very existence of the complex whole of the process of Imperialism in Russia in that 'current situation'.

But if the conditions are no more than the current existence of the complex whole, they are its very contradictions, each reflecting in itself the organic relation it has with the others in the structure in dominance of the complex whole. Because each contradiction reflects in itself (in its specific relations of unevenness with the other contradictions, and in the relation of specific unevenness between its two aspects) the structure in dominance of

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the complex whole in which it exists, and therefore because of the current existence of this whole and therefore of its current conditions, the contradiction is identical with these conditions: so when we speak of the 'existing conditions' of the whole, we are speaking of its 'conditions of existence'.

Is it necessary to return to Hegel once again to show that, for him, the 'circumstances' or 'conditions' are ultimately no more than phenomena and therefore evanescent, since in that form of 'contingency' christened the 'existence of Necessity', they can never express more than a manifestation of the movement of the Idea, that is why 'conditions' do not really exist for Hegel since, under cover of simplicity developing into complexity, he always deals with a pure interiority whose exteriority is no more than its phenomenon. That in Marxism the '*relation to nature*', for example, is organically part of the 'conditions of existence'; that it is one of the terms, the principal one, of the principal contradiction (forces of production/relations of production); that, as their condition of existence, it is reflected in the 'secondary' contradictions of the whole and their relations; that the conditions of existence are therefore a real absolute, the given-ever-pre-giveness of the existence of the complex whole which reflects them inside its own structure - all this is quite foreign to Hegel, who, in one movement, rejects both the structured complex whole and its conditions of existence by his prior assumption of a pure, simple interiority. That is why, for example, the relation to nature, the conditions of existence of any human society, merely has the role of a contingent given for Hegel, the role of the 'inorganic', of climate, of geography (America - is very narrow'), the role of the famous 'that's how it is!' (Hegel's comment at the sight of the mountains), designating the material nature which must be 'superseeded' (*aufgehoben*!) by the Spirit which is its 'truth'. Yes, thus reduced to geographical nature, the conditions of existence really are the very contingency that will be resorbed, negated - superseded by the Spirit which is its free necessity and which already exists in Nature even in the form of contingency (the contingency that makes a small island produce a great man!). This is because natural or historical conditions of existence are never more than *contingency* for Hegel, because in no respect do they determine the

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spiritual totality of society; for Hegel, the absence of conditions (in the non-empirical, non-contingent sense) is a necessary counterpart to the absence of any real structure in the whole, and to the absence of a structure in dominance, the absence of any basic determination and the absence of that reflection of the conditions in the contradiction which its '*overdetermination*' represents.

I am insisting on this 'reflection' that I propose to call '*overdetermination*' at this point because it is absolutely essential to isolate it, identify it and give it a name, so that we can explain its reality theoretically, the reality which is forced on us by the political practice of Marxism as well as by its theoretical practice. Let us try to delimit this concept more accurately. Overdetermination designates the following essential quality of contradiction: the reflection in contradiction itself of its conditions of existence, that is, of its situation in the structure in dominance of the complex whole. This is not a univocal 'situation'. It is not just its situation '*in principle*' (the one it occupies in the hierarchy of instances in relation to the determinant instance: in society, the economy) nor just its situation '*in fact*' (whether, in the phase under consideration, it is dominant or subordinate) but the *relation of this situation in fact to this situation in principle*, that is, the very relation which makes of this situation in fact a '*variation of the - "invariant" - structure, in dominance, of the totality*'.

If this is correct, we must admit that contradiction can no longer be univocal (categories can no longer have a role and meaning fixed once and for all) since it reflects in itself, in its very essence, its relation to the unevenness of the complex whole. But we must add that, while no longer univocal, it has not for all that become 'equivocal', the product of the first-come among empirical pluralities, at the mercy of circumstances and 'chance'; their pure reflection, as the soul of some poet is merely that passing cloud. Quite the contrary, once it has ceased to be univocal and hence determined once and for all, standing to attention in its role and essence, it reveals itself as determined by the structured complexity that assigns it to its role, as - if you will forgive me the astonishing expression - *complexly-structurally-unevenly-determined*. I must admit, I preferred a shorter term: *overdetermined*.

overdetermined
to *overdetermined*

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It is this very peculiar type of determination (this overdetermination) which gives Marxist contradiction its specificity, and enables us to explain Marxist practice theoretically, whether it is theoretical or political. Only overdetermination enables us to understand the concrete variations and mutations of a structured complexity such as a social formation (the only one that has really been dealt with by Marxist practice up to now), not as the accidental variations and mutations produced by external 'conditions' in a fixed structured whole, in its categories and their fixed order (this is precisely mechanism) – but as so many concrete restructurations inscribed in the essence, the 'play' of each category, in the essence, the 'play' of each contradiction, in the essence, the 'play' of the articulations of the complex structure in dominance which is reflected in them. Do we now need to repeat that unless we assume, think this very peculiar type of determination once we have identified it, we will never be able to think the possibility of political action, or even the possibility of theoretical practice itself, that is, very precisely, the essence of the object (the raw material) of political and theoretical practice, that is, the structure of the 'current situation' (in theory or politics) to which these practices apply, do we need to add that unless we conceive this overdetermination we will be unable to explain theoretically the following simple reality: the prodigious 'labour' of a theoretician, be it Galileo, Spinoza or Marx, and of a revolutionary, Lenin and all his companions, devoting their suffering, if not their lives, to the resolution of these small 'problems': the elaboration of an 'obvious' theory, the making of an 'inevitable' revolution, the realization in their own personal 'contingency' (!) of the Necessity of History, theoretical or political, in which the future will soon quite naturally be living its 'present'?

To make this point clear, let us take up the very terms of Mao Tse-tung. If all contradictions are under the sway of the great law of unevenness, and to be a Marxist and to be able to act politically (and, I should add, to be able to produce theoretically), it is necessary at all costs to distinguish the principal from the secondary among contradictions and their aspects, and if this distinction is essential to Marxist theory and practice – this is, Mao comments, because we must face up to concrete reality, to the reality of the history that men are living, if we are to explain a reality in

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which the identity of opposites is supreme, that is (1) the passage in indeterminate conditions, of one opposite into the place of another; (2) the exchange of roles between contradictions and their aspects (I shall call this phenomenon of substitution *displacement*); (3) the 'identity' of opposites in a real unity (I shall call this phenomenon of 'fusion' *condensation*). Indeed, the great lesson of practice is that if the structure in dominance remains constant, the disposition of the roles within it changes; the principal contradiction becomes a secondary one, a secondary contradiction takes its place, the principal aspect becomes a secondary one, the secondary aspect becomes the principal one. There is always one principal contradiction and secondary ones, but they exchange their roles in the structure articulated in dominance while this latter remains stable. *There is no doubt at all that at every stage in the development of a process, there is only one principal contradiction which plays the leading role,* says Mao Tse-tung. But this principal contradiction produced by displacement only becomes 'decisive', explosive, by condensation (by 'fusion'). It is the latter that constitutes the 'weakest link' that, as Lenin said, must be grasped and pulled in political practice (or in theoretical practice . . .) so that the whole chain will follow, or, to use a less linear image, it is the latter which occupies the strategic nodal position that must be attacked in order to produce 'the dissolution of (the existing) unity'.⁴⁷ Here again, we must not be taken in by the appearance of an arbitrary succession of dominations; for each one constitutes one stage in a complex process (the basis for the 'periodization' of history) and the fact that we are concerned with the dialectics of a complex process is the reason why we are concerned with those overdetermined, specific 'situations' the 'stages', 'phases' and 'periods', and with the mutations of specific domination that characterize each stage. The nodality of the development (the specific phases) and the specific nodality of the structure at each phase are the very existence and reality of the complex process. This is the basis of the reality, decisive in and for political practice (and obviously also for theoretical practice), of the displacements of domination and the condensations of the contradictions, which Lenin gave us such a clear and profound example of in his analysis of the 1917 Revolu-

47. *On Contradiction*, op. cit., pp. 338, 339.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

fusion (the 'fusion' point of the contradictions; in both senses of the word, the point where several contradictions *condense*, 'fuse' – so that this point becomes the *fusion* point – the critical point – and the point of revolutionary *mutation*, of '*recrystallization*').

Perhaps these gestures will help us to understand why the great law of unevenness suffers no exceptions.⁴⁹ This unevenness suffers no exceptions because it is not itself an exception: not a derivative law, produced by peculiar conditions (Imperialism, for example) or intervening in the interference between the developments of distinct social formations (the unevenness of economic development, for example, between 'advanced' and 'backward' countries, between colonizers and colonized, etc.). Quite the contrary, it is a primitive law, with priority over these peculiar cases and able to account for them precisely in so far as it does not derive from their existence. Only because every social formation is affected by unevenness, are the relations of such a social formation with other formations of different economic, political and ideological maturity affected by it, and it enables us to understand how these relations are possible. So it is not external unevenness whose intervention is the basis for an internal unevenness (for example, the so-called meeting of civilizations), but, on the contrary, the internal unevenness has priority and is the basis for the role of the external unevenness, up to and including the effects this second unevenness has within social formations in confrontation. Every interpretation that reduces the phenomena of internal unevenness (for example, explaining the 'exceptional' conjuncture in Russia in 1917 solely by its relation of external unevenness: international relations, the uneven economic development of Russia as compared with the West, etc.) slides into mechanism, or into what is frequently an alibi for it: a theory of the reciprocal interaction of the inside and the outside. So it is essential to get down to the primitive internal unevenness to grasp the essence of the external unevenness.

The whole history of Marxist theory and practice confirms this point. Marxist theory and practice do not only approach unevenness as the external effect of the interaction of different existing social formations, but also within each social formation. And within each social formation, Marxist theory and practice do not only

approach unevenness in the form of simple externality (the reciprocal action of infrastructure and superstructure), but in a form organically internal to each instance of the social totality, to each contradiction. It is '*economism*' (mechanism) and not the true Marxist tradition that sets up the hierarchy of instances once and for all, assigns each its essence and role and defines the universal meaning of their relations; it is economism that identifies roles and actors eternally, not realizing that the necessity of the process lies in an exchange of roles 'according to circumstances'. It is economism that identifies eternally in advance the determinant contradiction-in-the-last-instance with the role of the dominant contradiction, which for ever assimilates such and such an 'aspect' (forces of production, economy, practice) to the principal politics, ideology, theory) to the secondary role – whereas in real history determination in the last instance by the economy is exercised precisely in the permutations of the principal role between the economy, politics, theory, etc. Engels saw this quite clearly and pointed it out in his struggle with the opportunists in the Second International, who were awaiting the arrival of socialism through the action of the economy alone. The whole of Lenin's political work witnesses to the profundity of this principle: that determination in the last instance by the economy is exercised, according to the phases of the process, not accidentally, not for external or contingent reasons, but essentially, for internal and necessary reasons, by permutations, displacements and condensations.

So unevenness is internal to a social formation because the structuration in dominance of the complex whole, this structural invariant, is itself the precondition for the concrete variation of the contradictions that constitute it, and therefore for their displacements, condensations and mutations, etc., and inversely because this variation is the existence of that invariant. So uneven development (that is, these same phenomena of displacement and condensation observable in the development process of a complex whole) is not external to contradiction, but constitutes its most intimate essence. So the unevenness that exists in the 'development' of contradictions, that is, in the process itself, exists in the essence of contradiction itself. If it were not that the concept of

unevenness has been associated with an external comparison of a quantitative character. I should gladly describe Marxist contradiction as '*unevenly determined*' granted recognition of the internal essence designated by this unevenness: *overdetermination*.

We still have one last point to examine: the motor role of contradiction in the development of a process. An understanding of contradiction is meaningless unless it allows us to understand this motor.

What has been said of Hegel enables us to understand in what sense the Hegelian dialectic is a motive force, and in what sense the concept is 'autodevelopment'. In a text as beautiful as the night, the *Phenomenology* celebrates '*the labour of the negative*' in beings and works, the Spirit's sojourn even in death, the universal trouble of negativity dismembering the corpse of Being to give birth to the glorious body of that infinity of nothingness become Being, the Spirit – and every philosopher trembles in his soul as if he was in the presence of the Mysteries. But negativity can only contain the motor principle of the dialectic, the negation of the negation, as a strict reflection of the Hegelian theoretical presuppositions of simplicity and origin. The dialectic is negativity as an abstraction of the negation of the negation, itself an abstraction of the phenomenon of the restoration of the alienation of the original unity. That is why the End is in action in every Hegelian beginning; that is why the origin does no more than grow by itself and produce in itself its own end, in its alienation. So the Hegelian concept of '*what maintains itself in being-other-than-itself*' is the existence of negativity. So contradiction is a motive force for Hegel as negativity, that is, as a pure reflection of 'the being-in-itself even in being-other-than-itself', therefore as a pure reflection of the principle of alienation itself: the simplicity of the Idea.

This cannot be true for Marx. If the only processes we are dealing with are processes of the complex structure in dominance, the concept of negativity (and the concepts it reflects: the negation of the negation, alienation, etc.) cannot help towards a scientific understanding of their development. Just as the development's type of necessity cannot be reduced to the ideological necessity of the reflection of the end on its beginning, so the motor principle of this development cannot be reduced to the development of the idea in its own alienation. So, in Marxism, *negativity and alienation*

are *ideological* concepts that can only designate their own ideological content. Nevertheless, the fact that the Hegelian type of necessity and the Hegelian essence of development should be rejected does not mean at all that we are in the theoretical void of subjectivity, of 'pluralism' or of contingency. Quite the contrary, only on condition that we free ourselves from these Hegelian presuppositions can we be really sure of escaping this void. Indeed, it is because the process is complex and possesses a structure in dominance that its development, and all the typical aspects of this development, can really be explained.

I shall only give one example of this here. How is it possible, theoretically, to sustain the validity of this basic Marxist proposition: '*the class struggle is the motor of history*'; that is, sustain theoretically the thesis that it is by political struggle that it is possible to '*dissolve the existing unity*', when we know very well that it is not politics but the economy that is determinant in the last instance? How, other than with the reality of the complex process with structure in dominance, could we explain theoretically the real difference between the economic and the political in the class struggle itself, that is, to be exact, the real difference between the economic struggle and the political struggle, a difference that will always distinguish Marxism from any spontaneous or organized form of opportunism? How could we explain our necessity to go through the distinct and specific level of political struggle if the latter, although distinct, and because it is distinct, were the simple phenomenon and not the real condensation, the nodal strategic point, in which is reflected the complex whole (economic, political and ideological)? How, finally, could we explain the fact that the Necessity of History itself thus goes in decisive fashion through political practice, if the structure of contradiction did not make this practice possible in its concrete reality? How could we explain the fact that even Marx's theory which made this necessity comprehensible to us could have been produced if the structure of contradiction did not make the concrete reality of this production possible?

So, in Marxist theory, to say that contradiction is a motive force is to say that it implies a *real struggle, real confrontations, precisely located within the structure of the complex whole* (it is to say that the locus of confrontation may vary according to the relation of

the contradictions in the structure in dominance in any given situation, it is to say that the *condensation* of the struggle in a strategic locus is inseparable from the *displacement* of the dominant among these contradictions; that the organic phenomena of *condensation* and *displacement* are the very existence of the 'identity of opposites' until they produce the globally visible form of the *mutation* or qualitative leap that sanctions the revolutionary situation when the whole is recrystallized. Given this, we can explain the crucial distinction for political practice between the distinct moments of a process: '*non-antagonism*', '*antagonism*' and '*explosion*'. Contradiction, says Lenin, is always at work, in every moment. So these three moments are merely three forms of its existence. I shall characterize the first as the moment when the overdetermination of a contradiction exists in the *dominant form of displacement* (the 'metonymic' form of what has been enshrined in the phrase: '*quantitative changes*' in history or theory); the second, as the moment when overdetermination exists in the *dominant form of condensation* (acute class conflict in the case of society, theoretical crisis in a science, etc.); and the last, the revolutionary explosion (in society, in theory, etc.), as the moment of unstable global condensation inducing the dissolution and resolution of the whole, that is, a global restructuring of the whole on a qualitatively new basis. So the purely 'accumulative' form, in so far as this 'accumulation' can be purely quantitative (addition is only *exceptionally* dialectical), seems to be only a subordinate form, and Marx only ever gave one pure example of it, an unmetaphorical example this time, but an 'exceptional' one (an exception with a basis in its own conditions), in the unique passage from *Capital* which became the object of a famous commentary by Engels in *Anti-Dühring* (Part I, Chapter 12).

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If I may close by summing up the argument of this analysis, imperfect and didactic as it obviously is, I hope I shall be allowed to remind the reader that I merely undertook to give a theoretical expression of the specific difference of the Marxist dialectic active in the theoretical and political practices of Marxism, and that this was the object of the problem I had posed: the problem of the nature of Marx's 'inversion' of the Hegelian dialectic. If this

analysis is not too unfaithful to the elementary demands of theoretical investigation I defined, at the outset, then its theoretical solution should provide us with more theoretical information, that is, some knowledge.

If this is indeed the case, we should have acquired a theoretical result that might be expressed schematically in the following form:

The specific difference of Marxism contradicts its 'unevenness', or 'overdetermination', which reflects in its conditions of existence, that is, the specific structure of unevenness (in dominance) of the ever-pre-given complex whole which is its existence. Thus understood, contradiction is the motor of all development. Displacement and condensation, with their basis in its overdetermination, explain by their dominance the phases (non-antagonistic, antagonistic and explosive) which constitute the existence of the complex process, that is, 'of the development of things'.

If, as Lenin said, the dialectic is the conception of the contradiction in the very essence of things, the principle of their development and disappearance, then with this definition of the specificity of Marxist contradiction we should have reached the *Marxist dialectic itself*.⁵⁰

Like every theoretical expression, this definition only exists in the concrete contents it enables us to think.

50. Those put off by this abstract definition might consider the fact that it explains no more than the essence of the dialectic at work in the concrete of Marxist thought and action. Those surprised by this unusual definition might consider the fact that it concerns very exactly the understanding of the 'development', of the 'birth and death' of phenomena, which a long tradition has associated with the word 'dialectic'. Those disconcerted by this definition (which does not regard any Hegelian concept as essential, neither definition (which does not regard any Hegelian concept as essential, neither negativity, negation, fashion, the negation of the negation, alienation, 'super-session') might consider the fact that it is always a gain to lose an inadequate concept if the concept gained in exchange is more adequate to real practice. Those yearning after the simplicity of the Hegelian 'womb' might consider the fact that in 'certain determinate conditions' (really, exceptional conditions) the materialist dialectic can represent in a very limited sector, a 'Hegelian' form, but, precisely because it is an exception, it is not this form itself, that is, the exception, but its conditions that must be generalized. To think these conditions is to think the possibility of its own exceptions. The Marxist dialectic thus enables us to think what constituted the 'crux' of the Hegelian dialectic: for example, the *non-development*, the stagnation of the 'societies without history' be they primitive or otherwise; for example, the phenomenon of real 'survivals', etc.

For Marx

Like every theoretical expression, this definition should first of all enable us to think these concrete contents.

It cannot claim to be Theory in the general sense of the term, unless it enables us to think the whole set of concrete contents, those it did not arise from as well as those it did.

We have expressed this definition of the dialectic *vis-à-vis* two concrete contents: the theoretical practice and the political practice of Marxism.

To justify its general scope, to verify that this definition of the dialectic really does go beyond the domain *vis-à-vis* which it was expressed and can therefore claim a theoretically tempered and tested universality, it remains to put it to the test of other concrete contents, *other practices*; for example, the test of the theoretical practice of the natural sciences, the test of the theoretical practices which are still problematic in the sciences (epistemology, the history of science, of ideology, philosophy, etc.) to check on their scope and eventually, as must be, to correct their formulation, in short, to see whether in the '*particular*' that has been examined, the universal has really been grasped that made of it this '*particularity*'.

This could and should be the occasion for new investigations.

April-May, 1963

Part Seven Marxism and Humanism

'My analytical method does not start from man but from the economically given social period.'

Karl Marx, *Randglossen zur Wagners Lehrbuch* . . .
1879-80.