

# Contradiction and Overdetermination

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*First Jean-Paul Sartre submits to Marxism (conditionally) in the name of existentialism. Then, in the name of structuralism, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss resumes the attack on Marxism in an extended debate with Sartre. Whereupon the phenomenologist Louis Althusser produces a Structuralist Marxism. The French are clearly superior at this.*

*"Contradiction and Overdetermination" is the most difficult essay in this collection, partly just because Hegelian styles of thought, ways of posing questions, are not familiar to Americans, whose philosophical sense is more likely to have been shaped by a generally empiricist outlook. Its difficulty does not diminish its importance, however, for the question Althusser is posing is central to the Marxist view of the world. Very much simplified: is it the general contradictions of the objective economic structure which determine events, or are they determined by the special textual realities of a society—its public ideologies, institutions, superstitions, customs, etc? The conventional Marxist view is that the former produce the latter and are always determinant in the final analysis. Althusser's response is that there is no final analysis except that which remains, by definition, on the other side of history—and that Marx and Engels never argued otherwise.*

IN AN ARTICLE devoted to the young Marx,<sup>1</sup> I have already stressed the ambiguity of the idea of "inverting Hegel." It seemed to me that, strictly speaking, this expression suited Feuerbach perfectly; the latter did, indeed, "turn speculative

<sup>1</sup> "Sur le Jeune Marx," in *Pour Marx* (Paris, 1965), pp. 45–83.

philosophy back onto its feet," but the only result was to arrive with implacable logic in an idealist *anthropology*. But the expression cannot be applied to Marx, at least not to the Marx who had grown out of this "anthropological" phase. I could go further, and suggest that in the well-known passage: "With Hegel the dialectic is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell,"<sup>2</sup> this "turning right side up again" is merely gestural, even metaphorical, and it raises as many questions as it answers.

How should we really understand its use in this quotation? It is no longer a matter of a general "inversion" of Hegel, i.e., the inversion of speculative philosophy as such. From *The German Ideology* onward we know that such an undertaking would be meaningless. Anyone who claims purely and simply to have inverted speculative philosophy (to derive, for exam-

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx: *Das Kapital*, Post-script to the second edition. This is a literal translation of the German original. Here is a translation of the crucial passages: "In principle (*der Grundlage nach*) my dialectical method is not only distinct from Hegel's but its direct opposite. For Hegel, the process of thought, which he goes so far as to turn into an autonomous subject under the name of the Idea, is the demiurge of the real, which only represents (*bildet*) its external phenomena. For me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing but the material transposed and translated in man's head. The mystificatory (*mystifizierende*) side of the Hegelian dialectic I criticized about thirty years ago while it was still fashionable . . . I then declared myself openly a disciple of that great thinker, and, in my chapter of the theory of value I went so far as to flirt (*ich kokettiert . . . mit*) here and there with his peculiar mode of expression. The mystification the dialectic suffered at Hegel's hands does not remove him from his place as the first to expose (*darstellen*) consciously and in depth its general forms of movement. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again if you would discover the rational kernel (*Kern*) within the mystical shell (*mystische Hülle*).

"In its mystified form the dialectic was a German fashion because it seemed to transfigure the given (*das Bestehende*). In its rational image (*Gestalt*) it is a scandal and abomination for the bourgeoisie . . . As it includes in the understanding of the given (*Bestehende*) the simultaneous understanding of its negation and necessary destruction, as it conceives any mature (*gewordene*) form as in motion and thus equally in its ephemeral aspect it allows nothing to impose on it, and is in essence critical and revolutionary."

[Althusser here makes several criticisms of French translations of *Das Kapital*, particularly those of Roy and Molitor. These are not applicable to this passage in the English translation by Moore and Aveling (Moscow 1961) except for the use of "the present" for "*das Bestehende*" (the given)—but elsewhere this translation leaves much to be desired—Translator's note.]

ple, materialism) can never be more than philosophy's Proudhon, its unconscious prisoner, just as Proudhon was the prisoner of bourgeois economics. We are now concerned with the *dialectic*, and the dialectic alone. It might be thought that when Marx writes that we must "discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell" he means that the "rational kernel" is the dialectic itself, while the "mystical shell" is speculative philosophy. Engels's time-honored distinction between *method* and *system* implies precisely this.<sup>3</sup> The shell, the mystical wrapping (speculative philosophy), should be tossed aside and the precious kernel, the dialectic, retained. But in the same sentence Marx claims that this shelling of the kernel and the inversion of the dialectic are one and the same thing. How can an extraction be an inversion? Or in other words, what is "inverted" during this extraction?

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

## THE KERNEL AND THE SHELL

Taking young Marx as an example, in the article referred to above, I suggested that to take over the dialectic in rigorous Hegelian form could only expose us to dangerous ambiguities, for it is impossible, given the principles of a Marxist interpretation of *any* ideological phenomenon, to conceive of the place of the dialectic in Hegel's system as that of a kernel in a nut.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in Marx-Engels: *Selected Works* II, 360-402 (2 volume edition).

<sup>4</sup> On the kernel, see Hegel: *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*; great men "must be named heroes insofar as they have drawn their goals and vocations not only from the tranquil ordered stream of events sanctioned by the reigning system, but from a source whose content is hidden and has not yet attained actual existence, in the still subterranean internal spirit which knocks for admittance to the external world, and breaks its way in, because it is not the almond which suits this kernel." A curious variant on the long history of the kernel, the pulp, and the almond. Here the kernel plays the part of an eggshell

It is inconceivable that the essence of the dialectic in Hegel's work should not be contaminated by Hegelian ideology, or, since such a "contamination" presupposes the fiction of a pure pre-"contamination" dialectic, that the Hegelian dialectic could cease to be Hegelian and become Marxist by a simple, miraculous "extraction."

Even in the rapidly written lines of the postscript to the second edition of *Das Kapital* Marx saw this difficulty clearly. By the accumulation of metaphors, he not only hints at something more than he says, but elsewhere he puts it clearly enough, though our translators have half sneaked it away.

A close reading of the German text shows clearly enough that the *mystical shell* is by no means (as some of Engel's later commentaries would lead one to think)<sup>5</sup> speculative philosophy,

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containing the almond; the kernel is outside and the almond inside. The almond (the new principle) finally bursts the old kernel which no longer suits it (it was the kernel of the old almond); it wants a kernel of *its own*: new political and social forms, etc. This reference should be borne in mind whenever the problem of the Hegelian dialectic of history arises.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Engels *Feuerbach*, *op. cit.* Perhaps we should not take too literally all the formulations of a text on the one hand destined for wide popular diffusion, and therefore, as Engels himself admits, somewhat schematic, and on the other set down by a man who forty years previously lived through the great intellectual adventure of the discovery of historical materialism, and himself passed through the *philosophical* forms of consciousness whose broad history he is writing. The essay does, in fact, contain a noteworthy critique of Feuerbach (Engels sees that for him "nature and man remain mere words," p. 384) and a good sketch of the relations between Marxism and Hegelianism. For example, Engels demonstrates Hegel's extraordinary critical virtue as compared with Kant (this I think particularly important), and correctly declares that "in its Hegelian form this (dialectical) method was unusable," p. 386. Further, and basic: the development of philosophy is not philosophical; it was the "practical necessities of its fight" in religion and politics that forced the neoHegelians to oppose Hegel's "system" (p. 367); it is the progress of science and industry which overturns philosophies (p. 372). Also the recognition of the profound influence of Feuerbach on *The Holy Family* (p. 368), etc. But the same essay contains formulations which, if taken literally, can only lead to dead ends. For example, the theme of the "inversion" is taken so seriously that Engels draws the logical conclusion that "ultimately, the Hegelian system represents merely a *materialism* idealistically turned upside down in method and content" (p. 372). If the inversion of Hegel into Marx is well-founded, it follows that Hegel must already have been a previously inverted materialism; two negations make an affirmation. Later (p. 387), we discover that the Hegelian dialectic was unusable in its Hegelian form precisely because it stands on its head (on the idea, not the real):



or its "world-conception," or its "system," i.e., an element we can regard as external to its method, but refers directly to the dialectic itself. Marx goes so far as to talk of "the mystification the dialectic suffered at Hegel's hands," of its "mystificatory side," its "mystified form" (*mystifizierte Form*), and of the rational figure (*rationelle Gestalt*) of his own dialectic. It would be difficult to indicate more clearly that the mystical shell is nothing but the mystified form of the dialectic itself: that is, not a relatively external element of the dialectic (e.g., the "system") but an *internal* element, *consubstantial with the Hegelian dialectic*. It is not enough, therefore, to disengage it from its *first wrapping* (the system) to free it. It must also be freed from a second, almost inseparable skin, Hegelian in principle. This extraction cannot be painless; in appearance an unpeeling, it is really a *demystification*, an operation transforming what is extracted.

## EXTRACTION, INVERSION, OR STRUCTURE?

To conclude, in its approximation, this metaphorical expression—the inversion of the dialectic—does not raise the problem of the nature of the objects to which a single method should be applied (the world of the Idea for Hegel—the real world for Marx), but rather the problem of the *nature of the dialectic* itself, that is, the problem of *its specific structures*; not the problem of the inversion of the "sense" of the dialectic, but that of the *transformation of its structures*. It is hardly worth pointing out that, in the first case, the application of a method, the exteriority of the dialectic to its possible objects poses a pre-dialectical question, a question without any strict meaning for

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"Thereby the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical motion of the real world and thus the dialectical of Hegel was placed upon its head; or rather, turned off its head, on which it was standing, and placed upon its feet." Obviously these are approximate formulations only, but their very approximation indicates a difficulty. Also noteworthy is a singular affirmation of the necessity for all philosophers to construct a system: (Hegel "was compelled to make a system and, in accordance with traditional requirements, a system of philosophy must conclude with some sort of absolute truth." p. 363), a necessity which "springs from an imperishable desire of the human mind—the desire to overcome all contradictions" (p. 365); and another statement that explains the limitations of Feuerbach's materialism by his life in the country and his consequent rustication in isolation (p. 375).

Marx. The second problem, on the other hand, raises a real question to which it is hardly likely that Marx and his disciples should not have given a concrete answer in theory or in practice.

Let us say, to end this overextended textual exposition, that if the Marxist dialectic is in principle the opposite of the Hegelian dialectic, if it is rational and not mystical-mystified-mystificatory, this radical distinction must be manifest in its essence, that is, in its determinations and specific structures. To be clear, this means that fundamental structures of the Hegelian dialectic such as negation, the negation of the negation, the identity of opposites, "sublation," the transformation of quantity into quality, contradiction, etc., have for Marx (insofar as he uses them, and he uses by no means all of them) a structure different from that which they have for Hegel. It also means that these structural differences can be demonstrated, described, determined, and thought. And if it is possible, it is therefore necessary, I would go so far as to say vital, for Marxism. We cannot go on reiterating indefinitely approximations such as the difference between system and method, the inversion of philosophy or dialectic, the extraction of the "rational kernel," etc., and let these formulae think for us, confining ourselves to the magic of a number of completely devalued words for the understanding of Marx's work. I say vital, for I am convinced that Marxism in its philosophical development is at present hanging back from this task.<sup>6</sup>

## THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

As someone must take the first step, I shall brave the perils of a brief discussion of the Marxist concept of contradiction in a particular case: the Leninist thesis of "the weakest link."

Lenin gave this metaphor, above all, a practical meaning.

<sup>6</sup> Mao Tse-tung's pamphlet *On Contradiction* (1937) contains a whole series of analyses in which the Marxist conception of contradiction appears in a quite un-Hegelian light. Its essential concepts may be sought in vain in Hegel: principle and secondary contradiction; principle and secondary aspect of the contradiction; antagonistic and nonantagonist contradiction; law of uneven development—the contradiction. However, Mao's essay, inspired by his struggle against dogmatism in the Chinese Party, remains generally on a descriptive level, and is consequently abstract in certain respects. Descriptive: his concepts correspond to concrete experience. In part abstract: the concepts, though new, and rich in promise, are presented as specifications of the dialectic in general, rather than as necessary implications of the Marxist conception of society and history.

A chain is as strong as its weakest link. Anyone who wants to control a given situation will look out for a weak point, in case it should render the whole system vulnerable. On the other hand, anyone who wants to attack it, even if the odds are apparently against him, need only discover this one weakness to make all its power precarious. So far there is nothing new here for the readers of Machiavelli or Vauban, who were as expert in the arts of the defense as of the destruction of a position, and who judged armor by its faults. But this is where we should pay attention: if it is obvious that the theory of the weakest link guided Lenin in his theory of the revolutionary party (faultlessly united in consciousness and organization to avoid adverse exposure and to destroy the enemy), it was also the inspiration for his reflections on the revolution itself. How was the revolution possible in Russia, why was it victorious there? It was possible in Russia for a reason which transcended Russia: because with the unleashing of imperialist war humanity entered into an *objectively revolutionary* situation.<sup>7</sup> Imperialism tore off the "peaceful" mask of the old capitalism. The concentration of industrial monopolies, their subordination to financial monopolies, increased the exploitation of the workers and of the colonies. Competition between the monopolies made the war inevitable. But this same war, which dragged vast masses, even colonial peoples from whom troops were drawn, into limitless suffering, drove its cannon-fodder not only into massacre, but also into history. Everywhere the experience, the horrors of war were confirmation of a whole century's protest against capitalist exploitation; a focusing-point too, for hand-in-hand with this shattering exposure went the effective means of action. But though this effect was felt throughout the greater part of the European popular masses (revolution in Germany and Hungary, mutinies and mass strikes in France and Italy, the soviets of Turin) *only in Russia*, precisely the "*most backward*" country in Europe, *did it produce a triumphant revolution*.

Why this paradoxical exception? For this basic reason: in the "system of imperialist states"<sup>8</sup> Russia represented the weak-

<sup>7</sup> Lenin: *Farewell Letter to Swiss Workers* (April 8th, 1917). "It was the *objective conditions* created by the imperialist war that brought the whole of humanity to an impasse, that placed it in a dilemma: either allow the destruction of more millions of lives and utterly ruin European civilization, or hand over power in *all* the civilized countries to the revolutionary proletariat, carry through the socialist revolution." *Collected Works*, xxiii, 370-371.

<sup>8</sup> Lenin: *Report of the Central Committee to the 8th Congress of the RCP(B)*, *Collected Works*, xxix, 153.

est point. The Great War had, of course, precipitated and aggravated this weakness, but it had not by itself created it. Already, even in defeat, the 1905 Revolution had demonstrated the weakness of Tsarist Russia. This weakness was the product of this special feature: the accumulation and exacerbation of all the historical contradictions then possible; contradictions of a regime of feudal exploitation at the dawn of the twentieth century, attempting to control as threats to it mounted, with the aid of a deceitful priesthood, an enormous mass of "ignorant"<sup>9</sup> peasants (circumstances which dictated a singular association of the peasants' revolt with the workers' revolution);<sup>10</sup> contradictions of large-scale capitalist and imperialist exploitation in the major cities and their suburbs, in the mining regions, oilfields, etc.; contradictions of colonial exploitation and wars imposed on whole peoples: the gigantic contradiction between the stage of development of capitalist methods of production (particularly in respect to proletarian concentration: the largest factory in the world at the time was the Putilov Works at Petrograd, with forty thousand workers and auxiliaries) and the medieval state of the country. Again, the exacerbation of class struggles in the whole country, not only between exploiter and exploited, but even within the ruling classes themselves (the great feudal proprietors supporting autocratic, militaristic, police Tsarism; the small aristocracy constantly fomenting plots; haute bourgeoisie and liberal bourgeoisie opposed to the Tsar; the petits bourgeoisie oscillating between conformism and anarchistic "leftism"). The detailed course of events added other "exceptional"<sup>11</sup> circumstances, incomprehensible outside this tangle of contradictions inside and outside Russia. There was for example, the "advanced" nature of the Russian revolutionary elite, exiled by Tsarist repression; in exile it became "cultivated," it absorbed the whole heritage (above all, Marxism) of the political experience of the Western European working classes; this was particularly true of the formation of the Bolshevik Party, far ahead of any Western "Socialist" party in consciousness and organization.<sup>12</sup> There was the "dress rehearsal" for the Revolution in 1905, which, in common with most serious crises, set class relations sharply

<sup>9</sup> Lenin.

<sup>10</sup> Lenin: *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, *Selected Works* III, 412-35.

<sup>11</sup> Lenin: *Our Revolution in Selected Works* III, 821.

<sup>12</sup> Lenin: *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, *Selected Works* III, 379.



into relief and made possible the discovery of a new form of mass political organization: *soviets*.<sup>13</sup> Last, but not least, there was the unexpected respite the exhausted imperialist nations allowed the Bolsheviks for them to make their opening in history, the involuntary but effective support of the Anglo-French bourgeoisie; at the decisive moment, wishing to be rid of the Tsar, they did everything to help the Revolution.<sup>14</sup> In brief, as precisely these details show, the privileged situation of Russia with respect to the *possible* revolution was a matter of *an accumulation and an exacerbation of historical contradictions* that would have been incomprehensible in any country which was not, as Russia was, at the same time at least a century behind the imperialist world, *and at the highest point of its development*.

## THE WEAKEST LINK

All this can be found throughout Lenin's work,<sup>15</sup> and Stalin summarized it in particularly clear terms in his speeches of April 1924.<sup>16</sup> The unevenness of capitalist development led, via the 1914–18 war, to the Russian Revolution. In the revolutionary situation facing the whole of humanity Russia was the weakest link in the chain of imperialist states. It had accumulated the largest sum of historical contradictions then possible; for it was at the same time the most backward and the most advanced nation, a gigantic contradiction which its divided ruling classes could neither avoid nor solve. In other words, Russia was overdue with its bourgeois revolution at the birth of its proletarian revolution; pregnant with two revolutions, at the birth of the first it could not withhold the second. This exceptional situation was "insoluble" (for the ruling classes)<sup>17</sup> and Lenin was correct to see in it the *objective conditions* of a

<sup>13</sup> Lenin: *The Third International and its Place in History, Collected Works*, xxix, 311.

<sup>14</sup> Lenin: *Report to the Petrograd City Conference of the RSDRP(B), Collected Works*, xxiv, 141.

<sup>15</sup> See particularly *Left-Wing Communism, op. cit.*, pp. 379; 412, 435–436; 439; 444–445. *The Third International, op. cit.*, pp. 310. *Our Revolution, op. cit.*, pp. 820ff. *Letters from Afar*, No. 1, *Selected Works II*, p. 31ff. Lenin's remarkable theory of the conditions for a revolution (*Left-Wing Communism*, pp. 434–435; 444–446) deals thoroughly with the decisive effect of Russia's specific situation.

<sup>16</sup> Stalin: *The Foundations of Leninism, Problems of Leninism* (11th edition) pp. 13–93, particularly pp. 15–18, 29–32, 71–73. Despite their "pedagogical" dryness, these pieces are in many ways excellent.

<sup>17</sup> Lenin: *Our Revolution, op. cit.*, p. 821.

Russian revolution, and to forge its *subjective conditions*, the means of a decisive assault on this weak link in the imperialist chain, in a Communist Party that was a chain without weak links.

What else did Marx and Engels mean when they declared that history always progresses by its bad side?<sup>18</sup> This obviously means the worst side for the rulers, but without stretching its sense unduly we can interpret the bad side as that for those who expect the reverse from history. For example, the German Social-Democrats of the end of the nineteenth century imagined they would shortly be promoted to socialist triumph by virtue of belonging to the most powerful capitalist state, then undergoing rapid economic expansion, just as they were undergoing rapid electoral expansion (such coincidences occur). They obviously saw history as progressing through the other side, the "good" side, the side with the greatest economic development, the greatest growth, with its contradiction reduced to the purest form (that between Capital and Labor), so they forgot that all this was taking place in a Germany armed with a powerful State machine, endowed with a bourgeoisie which had long ago given up its political revolution in exchange for Bismarck's (and later Wilhelm's) military, bureaucratic, and police protection, in exchange for the super-profits of capitalist and colonialist exploitation, endowed too with a chauvinist and reactionary petits bourgeoisie. They forgot that, in fact, this simple quintessence of a contradiction was quite simply abstract: the real contradiction was so much one with its "circumstances" that it was only discernible, identifiable, and manipulable *through and with them*.

What is the essence of this practical experience and the reflections it inspired in Lenin? It should be pointed out immediately that this was not Lenin's sole illuminating experience. Before 1917 there was 1905, before 1905 the great historical deceptions of Germany and England, before that the Commune, even earlier the German failure of 1848-49. En route, these experiences provoked more or less direct reflections (Engels: *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Germany*; Marx: *The Class Struggles in France*; *The Civil War in France*; *The Eighteenth Brumaire*; *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*; Engels: *The Critique of the Erfurt Programme*; etc.), and had been related to even earlier revolutionary experience: the bourgeois revolutions of England and France.

<sup>18</sup> *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 121.

## OVERDETERMINATION

How else should we summarize these practical experiences and theoretical commentaries other than by saying that the whole Marxist revolutionary experience shows that, if the general contradiction (it has already been specified: the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production, essentially embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes) is sufficient to define the situation when revolution is the order of the day, it cannot of its own simple, direct power provoke a "revolutionary situation," nor *a fortiori* a situation of revolutionary rupture and triumph of the revolution. If this contradiction is to become active in the strongest sense, to become a ruptural principle, there must be an accumulation of circumstances and currents so that whatever their origin and sense (and many of them will *necessarily* be strangely foreign to the revolution, or even its "direct opponents" in origin and sense), they *fuse* into a *ruptural unit*: the immense majority of the popular masses grouped in an assault on a regime which its ruling classes are unable to defend.<sup>19</sup> Such a situation presupposes not only the fusion of the two basic conditions into a "single national crisis" but each condition considered (abstractly) by itself presupposes the fusion of an accumulation of contradictions. How else could the class-divided masses (proletarians, peasants, petits bourgeois) throw themselves together into a general assault on the existing regime? And how else could the ruling classes (aristocrats, big bourgeois, industrial bourgeois, finance bourgeois, etc.), who have learned through long experience and sure instinct to fix among themselves, despite their class differences, a holy alliance against the exploited, find themselves reduced to impotence, divided at the decisive moment, with neither new political solutions nor new political leaders, deprived of foreign class support, disarmed in the very fortress of their State machine, and suddenly over-

<sup>19</sup> For the whole of this passage, see (1) Lenin: *Left-Wing Communism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 430, 444–445; particularly: "Only when the 'lower classes' do not want the old way, and when the 'upper classes' cannot carry on in the old way—only then can revolution triumph." p. 430. (2) Lenin: *Letters from Afar*, No. 1, *op. cit.*, pp. 35–36, notably: "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 . . . in a strikingly 'harmonious' manner . . .*" p. 35 (Lenin's emphasis).

whelmed by the people they had so long suppressed by exploitation, violence, and deceit? If, as in this situation, a vast accumulation of "contradictions" come into play in the same court, some of which are radically heterogeneous—of different origins, different sense, different *levels* and *points* of application—but which nevertheless group themselves into a ruptural unity, we can no longer talk of the sole, unique power of the general "contradiction."

Of course, the basic contradiction dominating the period (when the revolution is "the order of the day") is active in all these contradictions and even in their fusion. But, strictly speaking, it cannot be claimed that these contradictions and their fusion are merely the *pure phenomena* of the general contradiction. The circumstances and currents constituting it are more than its phenomena pure and simple. They derive from the relations of production, which are, of course, one of the *terms* of the contradiction, but at the same time its *conditions of existence*; from the superstructures, instances deriving from it, but with their own consistency and efficacy; from the international conjuncture itself, which intervenes as a determination with a specific role to play.<sup>20</sup> This means that if the differences constituting each of the instances in play (manifested in the accumulation discussed by Lenin) group themselves into a real unity, they are not dissipated as pure phenomena in the internal unity of a simple contradiction. The unity they constitute in this fusion into a revolutionary rupture,<sup>21</sup> is constituted by their own essence and efficacy, by what they are according to the specific modalities of their action. In constituting this unity, they reconstitute and consummate their basic animating unity, but at the same time they also bring out its *nature*: the contradiction is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence, even from the instances it governs; it is radically affected by them, determining and determined in one and the same movement by the various *levels*

<sup>20</sup> Lenin goes so far as to include among the causes of the success of the Soviet Revolution the natural wealth of the country and its geographical extent, the shelter of the Revolution in its necessary military and political "retreats."

<sup>21</sup> The crisis situation, as Lenin often remarked, has a *revelatory* role for the structure and dynamic of the social formation living through it. What is said of a revolutionary situation can therefore be referred cautiously to the social formation in a situation prior to the revolutionary crisis.



and instances of the social formation it animates; it might be called *in principle overdetermined*.<sup>22</sup>

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

## HEGEL AND MARX

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

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Mao's development of the theme of the distinction between *antagonistic* (explosive, revolutionary) contradictions and *nonantagonistic* contradictions (*On Contradiction*), etc.

sciousness itself, *and no true external determination*. A circle of circles, consciousness has only one center, which solely determines it; it would need circles with another center than itself—*eccentric circles*—for it to be affected at its center by their action, in short for its essence to be overdetermined by them. But this is not the case.

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

We have only to ask *why* Hegel conceived the phenomena of historical mutation in terms of this simple concept of contradiction to reach precisely *the* essential question. The simplicity of the Hegelian contradiction is made possible only by the simplicity of the internal principle constituting the essence of any historical period. If it is possible in principle to reduce the totality, the infinite diversity, of a historically given society (Greece, Rome, The Holy Roman Empire, England, etc.) to a simple internal principle, this very simplicity can be reflected in the contradiction to which it thereby acquires a right. Must we be even plainer? This reduction itself (Hegel derived the

idea from Montesquieu), the reduction of *all* the elements that make up the concrete life of a historical epoch (economic, social, political, and legal institutions, customs, morals, art, religion, philosophy, and even historical *events*: wars, battles, defeats, etc.) to *one* principle of internal unity, is only possible on the absolute condition of taking the whole concrete life of a people for the exteriorization-alienation of an internal spiritual principle, which can never definitely be anything but the most abstract form of self-consciousness of that epoch: its religious or philosophical consciousness, that is, its ideology.

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

Thus the Marxist "inversion" of the Hegelian dialectic is something quite different from an extraction pure and simple. If we clearly perceive the intimate and close relation that the Hegelian structure of the dialectic has with Hegel's world-conception, the latter cannot simply be cast aside without obliging us to alter profoundly the structures of that dialectic. If not, whether we will it or no, we shall drag along with us, 150 years

after Hegel's death, and 100 years after Marx's, the shreds of the famous "mystical wrapping."

## THE EXCEPTION AND THE RULE

Let us return to Lenin and thence to Marx. If it is true, as Leninist practice and reflection prove, that the revolutionary situation in Russia was precisely a result of the intense overdetermination of the basic class contradiction, we should perhaps ask what is exceptional in this exceptional situation and if, like all exceptions, this one does not clarify a rule—is not, unbeknownst, *the rule itself*. For, after all, *are we not always in exceptional situations?* The failure of the 1849 revolution in Germany was an exception, the failure in Paris in 1871 was an exception, the German Social-Democratic failure of the beginning of the twentieth century in producing the chauvinism of 1914 was an exception, the success of 1917 was an exception . . . exceptions, but *with respect to what?* Nothing but the *abstract* idea, which is nonetheless comforting and reassuring, of a pure, simple, dialectical schema, which in its very simplicity seems to have retained the memory (or rediscovered the allure) of the Hegelian model and its faith in the resolving power of the abstract contradiction as such: particularly the beautiful contradiction between Capital and Labor. I do not deny that the simplicity of this purified schema answered to certain subjective necessities for the mobilization of the masses; after all, we know perfectly well that utopian forms of socialism also played their historical part, and played it well because they appealed to the masses within the limits of their consciousness and to lead them forward, here, above all, is where they must be seized. It will soon be necessary to do what Marx and Engels did for utopian socialism, but this time for those still schematic-utopian forms of mass consciousness influenced by Marxism (even the consciousness of certain of its theoreticians) in the first stage of its history: a real historical study of the conditions and forms of that consciousness.<sup>23</sup> In fact, we find that all the

<sup>23</sup> In 1890 Engels wrote (in a letter to J. Bloch, September 21, 1890): "Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasize the main principle vis-à-vis our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place, or the opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their rights." (*Selected Works* II, 490).

In the control of this proposed research, I would like to quote the notes Gramsci devoted to the mechanistic-fatalistic temptation in the



important historical and political articles by Marx and Engels during this period give us precisely the material for a preliminary reflection on these so-called exceptions. They reveal the basic notion that *the contradiction between Capital and Labor is never simple, but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised*. It is specified by the forms of the superstructure (the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organized movements, etc.); specified by the internal and external historical situation which determines it as on the one hand a function of the *national past* (completed or "relapsed" bourgeois revolution, feudal exploitation eliminated wholly, partially, or not at all, local customs, specific national traditions, even the particular style of political struggles and behavior, etc. . .), and on the other as functions of the *existing world* context (what domi-

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history of nineteenth-century Marxism: "the determinist, fatalist element has been an immediate ideological 'aroma' of the philosophy of praxis, a form of religion and a stimulant (but like a drug) necessitated and historically justified by the 'subordinate' character of certain social strata. When one does not have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself is ultimately identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a formidable power of moral resistance, of cohesion, and of patient and obstinate perseverance. 'I am defeated for the moment but the nature of things is on my side in the long run,' etc. Real will is disguised as an act of faith, a sure rationality of history, a primitive and empirical form of impassioned finalism which appears as a substitute for the predestination, providence, etc. of the confessional religions. We must insist on the fact that even in such cases there exists in reality a strong active will . . . We must stress the fact that fatalism has only been a cover by the weak for an active and real will. This is why it is always necessary to show the futility of mechanical determinism, which, explicable as a naive philosophy of the masses, becomes a cause of passivity, of imbecile self-sufficiency, when it is made into a reflexive and coherent philosophy on the part of the intellectuals . . ." This opposition (intellectuals-masses) might appear strange from the pen of a Marxist theoretician. But it should be realized that Gramsci's concept of the *intellectual* is infinitely greater than ours, that it is not defined by the idea intellectuals have of themselves, but by their social role as *organizers* and (more or less subordinate) *leaders*. In this sense he wrote: "The affirmation that all the members of a political party should be considered intellectuals lends itself to jokes and caricature. But on reflection nothing could be more accurate. There must be a distinction of levels, with a party having more or less of the higher or lower level, but this is not what matters: what does matter is their function, which is to direct and to organize, that is, it is educational, which means intellectual." (Antonio Gramsci: *Opere* II, *Il Materialismo Storico*, pp. 13-14; *The Modern Prince*, pp. 69-70. *Opere* III, *Gli Intellettuali*, p. 12).

nates it: competition of capitalist nations, or "imperialist internationalism" or competition within imperialism, etc.), many of these phenomena deriving from the "law of uneven development" in Lenin's sense.

What can this mean but that the apparently simple contradiction is *always overdetermined*? The exception thus discovers in itself the rule, the rule of rules, and the old exceptions must be regarded as methodologically simple examples of the *new rule*. To extend the analysis to all phenomena using this rule, I should like to suggest that an "overdetermined contradiction" may either be overdetermined in the sense of a historical inhibition, a real block for the contradiction (for example, Wilhelmine Germany), or in the sense of a revolutionary rupture<sup>24</sup> (Russia in 1917), but in neither condition is it ever found in the pure state. Purity itself would be the exception, but I know of no example to quote.

## CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

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

But this raises the ghost of the Hegelian model again—not

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Engels (Letter to Schmidt, October 27, 1890, *op. cit.*, II, 493): "The reaction of the state power upon economic development can be one of three kinds: it can run in the same direction, and then development is more rapid; it can oppose the line of development, in which case nowadays state power in every great people will go to pieces in the long run . . ." This demonstrates the character of the two limit positions.

of its abstract model of contradiction, but of the concrete model of his *conception of history* reflected in the contradiction. If we are to prove that the specific structure of the Marxist contradiction is based on Marx's conception of history, we must first ensure that this conception is not itself a mere "inversion" of the Hegelian conception. It is true that we could argue as a first approximation that Marx inverted the Hegelian conception of history. This can be quickly illustrated. The whole Hegelian conception is dominated by the dialectic of the internal principle of each society; as Marx said twenty times, Hegel explains the material life, the concrete history of peoples by a dialectic of consciousness (the self-consciousness of a people; its ideology). For Marx, on the other hand, the material life of men explains their history; their consciousness, their ideologies are then merely phenomena of their material life. This opposition certainly has all the appearances of an "inversion."

To take it to an extreme caricature: what do we find in Hegel? A conception of society which takes over the achievements of eighteenth-century political theory and political economy, and considers any society (any modern society of course; but the present reveals what was once only a promise) as constituted of two societies: the society of needs, or *civil society*, and the political society or state and everything embodied in the state: religion, philosophy; in short, the self-consciousness of an epoch. For Hegel, material life (civil society, that is, the economy) is merely a ruse of reason. Apparently autonomous, it is obedient to a law outside itself: its own goal, its condition of possibility, the State, that is spiritual life. So we have therefore a way of inverting Hegel which would apparently give us Marx. It is simply to *invert the relation of the terms (and thus to retain them)*; civil society and state, economy and politics-ideology—to transform the essence into phenomena and the phenomena into an essence, or if you prefer, to make the ruse of reason work backwards. While for Hegel the politico-ideological was the essence of the economic, for Marx the economic is the essence of the politico-ideological. Politics and ideology are therefore merely pure phenomena of the economic, which is their truth. For Hegel's pure principle of consciousness (of the self-consciousness of an epoch), for the simple internal principle which he conceived as the principle of the intelligibility of all the determination of a historical period, we have substituted another simple principle, its opposite: material life, the economy—a simple principle which in turn becomes the sole principle of the universal intelligibility

of all the determinations of a historical people.<sup>25</sup> Is this a caricature? If we take Marx's famous comments on the hand-mill, the water-mill, and the steam-mill literally or out of context, this is their meaning. The logical consequence of this is the *exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic*—the only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving the successive moments from the Idea, but from the Economy, on the basis of the same internal contradiction. This attempt results in the radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generator of the successive modes of production, that is, in the last analysis, of the different production techniques. There are names for these deviations in the history of Marxism: *economism* and even *technologism*.

But these terms have only to be spoken to evoke the memory of the theoretical and practical struggles of Marx and his disciples against these "deviations." And how many peremptory attacks on economism there are to counterbalance that well-thumbed piece on the steam engine! Let us abandon this caricature, not to hide behind official condemnation, but to examine the authentic principles at work in those condemnations and in Marx's real thought.

## THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

For all its apparent rigor, the fiction of the inversion is now clearly untenable. We know that Marx did not retain the terms of the Hegelian model of society and invert them. He substituted other, distantly related terms for them. Further, he overhauled the relation which had previously dominated the terms. For Marx, both terms and relation changed in nature and sense.

Firstly, *the terms* are not the same.

Of course, Marx still talks of "civil society" (especially in *The German Ideology*) but as an allusion to the past, to denote the site of his discoveries, not to reutilize the concept. The formation of this concept requires close examination. Beneath the abstract forms of the political philosophy of the eighteenth century and the more concrete forms of its political economy we discover, not a true theory of economic history, nor even a true economic theory, but a situation and description of economic behavior, in short a sort of philosophico-economic phenomenology. What is remarkable in this undertaking, as much in its philosophers (Locke, Helvetius, etc.) as in its economists

<sup>25</sup> Of course, as with all "inversions" this retains the terms of the Hegelian conception: *civil society* and *the State*.



(Turgot, Smith, etc.), is that this description of civil society acts as if it were the description (and foundation) of what Hegel, aptly summarizing its spirit, called "the world of needs": a world, in its internal essence, in immediate relation to the relations of individuals defined by their particular wishes, personal interests, in short, their needs. We know that Marx's whole conception of political economy is based on the critique of this presupposition (the *homo oeconomicus* and its moral or legal abstraction, the "Man" of philosophy); how then could he make use of a concept which is its direct product? Neither this (abstract) description of economic behavior nor its supposed basis in the mythical *homo oeconomicus* interested Marx—his concern was rather the "anatomy" of this world, and the dialectic of the mutations of this anatomy. Therefore the concept of "civil society"—the world of individual economic behavior and its ideological origin—disappears from Marx's work. He understands abstract economic reality (which Smith, for example, rediscovers in the laws of the market as a result of his search for a foundation) as the effect of a deeper, more concrete reality: the mode of production of a determinate social formation. Thus for the first time individual economic behavior (which was the pretext for economico-philosophic phenomenology) is measured according to its conditions of existence. The degree of development of the forces of production, the state of the *relations of production*: these are the basic Marxist concepts. Civil society may well have indicated the *place* of the new concepts, but it did not contribute to their matter. But where in Hegel would you find this matter?

As far as the State is concerned, it is quite easy to show that it has a quite different content for Marx from that it had for Hegel. Not just because the State can no longer be the "reality of the Idea," but primarily because it is systematically considered as an *instrument of coercion* in the hands of the ruling, exploiting class. Beneath the description and sublimation of attributes of the State, Marx finds here also a new concept, foreshadowed in the eighteenth century (Longuet, Rousseau, etc.), taken up by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* (which made it into a phenomenon of the ruse of reason which triumphs in the State: the opposition of wealth and poverty), and abundantly used by the historians of the 1830's: the concept of social class, in direct relation with the relations of production. The intervention of this new concept and its relationship with one of the basic concepts of the economic structure transforms the *essence of the state* from top to toe, for the latter is no

longer above human groups, but at the service of the ruling class; it is no longer its mission to consummate itself in art, religion, and philosophy, but to set them at the service of the ruling class, or rather to force them to base themselves on ideas and themes which it renders dominant; it therefore ceases to be the truth of civil society to become, not the truth of some other thing, nor even of the economy, but the means of action and domination of a social class, etc.

But *the relations themselves* change as well as *the terms*.

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

Listen, again, to Engels in 1890, taking the young "economists" to task for not having understood that this was a *new*

relationship.<sup>26</sup> Production is the determinant factor, but only "in the last instance": "more than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, empty phrase." And for explanation: "The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—the political forms of the class struggle and its results; to wit, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles, and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form* . . ." The word "form" must be taken in its strongest sense, as quite different from merely "formal." As Engels also says: "The Prussian state also arose and developed from historical, ultimately economic causes. But it could scarcely be maintained without pedantry that among the many small states of North Germany, Brandenburg was specifically determined by economic necessity to become the great power embodying the economic, linguistic, and, after the Reformation, also the religious difference between North and South, and not by other elements as well (above all by the entanglement with Poland, owing to the possession of Prussia, and hence with international political relations—which were indeed also decisive in the formation of the Austrian dynastic power)." <sup>27</sup>

## BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

Here, then, are the two ends of the chain: the economy is determinant, but *in the last instance*; Engels is prepared to say, in the long run, the run of history. But history blazes its trail through the multiform world of the superstructure, from local tradition<sup>28</sup> to international circumstance. Leaving aside the

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Engels to J. Bloch, September 21, 1890 (Marx-Engels: *Selected Works*, II, 488-489).

<sup>27</sup> Engels adds: "Marx hardly wrote anything in which this theory did not play a part. But especially *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* is a most excellent example of its application. There are also many allusions in *Capital*." (p. 489). He also cites *Anti-Dühring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach*.

<sup>28</sup> Engels: "Political conditions . . . and even the traditions which haunt human minds also play a part." (*Ibid.*, p. 488).

*theoretical solution* Engels proposes for the problem of the relation between determination *in the last instance*—the economic—those determinations imposed by the superstructures, national traditions, and international events, it is sufficient to hang on to what should be called the *accumulations of effective determinations* (deriving from the superstructures and special national and international circumstances) *on the determination in the last instance by the economic*. It seems to me that this clarifies the expression: *overdetermined contradiction*, which I am proposing, *this* specifically because the existence of overdetermination is no longer a fact pure and simple, for in its essentials we have related it to its foundations, even if our exposition has so far been merely gestural. This *overdetermination* is inevitable and conceivable as soon as the real existence of the forms of the superstructure and of the national and international conjuncture is recognized—an existence largely specific and autonomous, and therefore irreducible to a pure *phenomenon*. We must carry this through to its conclusion and say that this overdetermination does not just refer to apparently unique or aberrant historical situations (Germany, for example), but is universal; the economic dialectic is never active *in the pure state*; in history, those instances—the superstructures, etc.—are never seen to step aside when their work is done or, when the time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes.

In short, the idea of a pure and simple nonoverdetermined contradiction is, as Engels said of the economist turn of phrase, “meaningless, abstract, senseless.” That it can act as a pedagogical model, or rather that it served as a polemical and pedagogic instrument at a certain point in history does not fix its destiny for all time. After all, pedagogic systems often change historically. It is time to make the effort to raise pedagogy to the level of circumstances, that is, of historical needs. But we must all be able to see that this pedagogical effort *presupposes* another purely theoretical effort. For if Marx has given us the general principle and some concrete examples (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*, *The Civil War in France*, etc.), if all political practice in the history of socialist and communist movements constitutes an inexhaustible reservoir of concrete “experiential protocol,” it has to be said that the theory of the specific influence of the superstructures and other circumstances largely remains to be elaborated; and before the theory of their in-



fluence or simultaneously (for by formulating their influence their *essence* is attained) there must be elaboration of the theory of the particular essence of the specific elements of the superstructure. Like the map of Africa before the great explorations, this theory remains a realm sketched in outline, with its great mountain chains and rivers, often unknown in detail beyond a few well-known regions. Who has attempted to follow up the explorations of Marx and Engels? I can only think of Gramsci.<sup>29</sup> But this task is indispensable if we are to be able even to set out propositions more precise than these approximations on the character of the overdetermination of the Marxist contradictions, based primarily on the existence and nature of the superstructures.

## **SURVIVALS AND PHANTOMS**

Allow me one last example. Marxist political practice is constantly coming up against that reality known as "survivals." There can be no doubt that these survivals exist; they cling tenaciously to life. Lenin struggles with them inside the Russian Party before the revolution. It does not have to be pointed out that from then till now they have been the source of constant difficulties, struggles, and commentaries. What is a "survival"? What is its theoretical status? Is it essentially social or psychological? Can it be reduced to the survival of certain economic *structures* which the Revolution was unable to destroy with its first decrees: for example, the small-scale production (primarily peasant production in Russia) which so preoccupied Lenin? Or does it refer as much to *other structures*, political, ideological structures, etc.: customs, habits, even traditions such as the "national tradition" with its specific traits? The term "survival" is constantly invoked, but it is still virtually unknown, insofar as it has only been a *name* and not a *con-*

<sup>29</sup> Lukács' essays, which are limited to the history of literature and philosophy, seem to me to be contaminated with a guilty Hegelianism, as if Lukács wanted to absolve through Hegel his upbringing by Simmel and Dilthey. Gramsci is of another stature. The jottings and developments in the *Prison Notebooks* touch on all the basic problems of Italian and European history: economic, social, political, and cultural. There are some completely original and in some cases genial insights into our problem. Also, as always with true discoveries, there are *new concepts*, for example, *hegemony*: a remarkable example of a theoretical solution in outline to the problems of the interpenetration of the economic and political. Unfortunately, at least as far as France is concerned, who has taken up and followed through Gramsci's theoretical effort?

cept. The concept it deserves (and has fairly won) must be more than a vague Hegelianism such as "sublation"—the maintenance-of-what-has-been-negated-in-its-very-negation (that is, the negation of the negation). If we return to Hegel for a second we can see that the survival of the past as the sublated (*aufgehoben*) can simply be reduced to the modality of a *memory*, which, further, is merely the inverse of (that is, the same thing as) an *anticipation*. Just as at the dawn of human history the first stammering of the Oriental Spirit—joyous captive of the giants of the sky, the sea, and the desert, and then of its stone bestiary—already betrayed the unconscious presage of the future achievements of the Absolute Spirit, so in each instant of time the past survives in the form of a memory of what it has been—that is, as the whispered promise of the present. That is why *the past is never opaque or an obstacle*. It must always be digestible as it has been *predigested*. Rome lived happily in a world impregnated by Greece: "sublated" Greece survived as objective memories: its reproduced temples, its assimilated religion, its reworked philosophy. Without knowing it, as at last it died to bring forth its Roman future, it was already Rome, so it never shackled Rome in Rome. That is why the present can feed on the shades of the past, or project them before it, just as the great effigies of Roman virtue opened the road to revolution and terror for the Jacobins. The past is never anything more than the present and only recalls that law of interiority which is the destiny of the whole future of humanity.

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

both the forms of its superstructures and specific (national and international) circumstances. Such a reactivation is totally inconceivable for a dialectic deprived of overdetermination. I shall not evade the most burning issue: it seems to me that either the whole logic of sublation must be rejected, or we must give up any attempt to explain how the proud and generous Russian people bore Stalin's crimes and repression with such resignation; how the Bolshevik Party could tolerate them; and how a communist leader could order them. But there is obviously much *theoretical* effort needed here as elsewhere. By this I mean more than the historical work which has priority—precisely because of this priority, priority is given to one essential of any Marxist historical study: rigor; *a rigorous conception of Marxist concepts, their implications and their development; a rigorous conception and research into their essential subject-matter, that is, into what distinguishes them once and for all from their phantoms.*

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