

## A New Perspective on Marx and Marxism\*

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### Marx's Epistemology

Marx had neither the time nor the leisure to formulate a theory of his own theoretical practice. He could not even finish his fundamental work. The last books of *Capital* appeared after his death, care of Engels and based on his manuscripts, but the chapter in which Marx planned to study the classes of developed capitalist society and the class struggle necessarily implied by this organisation, and to show that this was the effective and real result of the capitalist period, was missing. This lacuna is particularly regrettable, for by examining social classes, as he wished to do, Marx would doubtless have helped us avoid the misunderstanding that made his theoretical work into a work of pure economics. *Capital* is the exposition of a region of historical materialism and cannot be reduced to a mere study of economy, in the strict sense of the term.

Historical materialism for Marx is a science, the constitutive concepts of which he believed he had formulated. A propos the production of these concepts, we are not reduced to conjectures alone. The origin of *Capital* goes back to 1859, when Marx wrote a *Critique of Political Economy*, preceded by a methodological introduction which

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was only published after his death. And while Marx invokes the chemistry or the biology of his time, he continues to invoke Hegel as well. Perhaps it is useful to reproduce the text of the 1872 preface to the second edition of *Capital*:

My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea', is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought.

I criticised the mystificatory side of the Hegelian dialectic nearly thirty years ago, at a time when it was still the fashion. But just when I was working at the first volume of *Capital*, the ill-humoured, arrogant and mediocre epigones who now talk large in educated German circles began to take pleasure in treating Hegel in the same way as the good Moses Mendelssohn treated Spinoza in Lessing's time, namely as a 'dead dog'. I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even, here and there in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the mode of expression peculiar to him. The mystification from which the dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.<sup>2</sup>

These texts raise difficult questions. How can we reconcile Marxist science with the Hegelian dialectic? What could be the meaning of this metaphor—'to invert the Hegelian dialectic', 'to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell'? Perhaps we ought not to take them literally; if, as Marx says, the subject in his work is no longer the spiritual subject, but pre-given reality, can the dialectic remain in the same form when the totality is no longer that of spirit [*celle d'un esprit*]? Is it enough, as certain Marxists have believed, to add to the science a few general dialectical laws in order to demonstrate dialectical

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, (London: New York, N.Y: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990), pp. 102–103.

materialism and historical materialism? Each time the natural sciences have encountered theoretical problems, Marxists have spoken of the dialectic, but later developments in those sciences have hardly demonstrated the usefulness of this rather formal dialectic. Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* does not comply with the demands of contemporary science.

Until now, the interpreters of Marxism have shuttled between two poles: The first, which we could call 'totalitarian Marxism', emphasises the positive sciences, while claiming to be materialism since it adds the dialectic to these sciences. The second, which we could call 'fundamental Marxism', drawing on the works of the young Marx and the influence of Hegel and Feuerbach on them, becomes a philosophical anthropology.<sup>3</sup> The central theme of the latter interpretation is *alienation*. It is no longer a matter, as it is in Hegel, of the alienation of absolute spirit, but of an alienation of humanity, which has collectively become the subject of history. Capitalism, then, is the monumental alienation that humanity must overcome. This interpretation relies on the writings of the young Marx, in particular the article 'Political Economy and Philosophy' from 1844. But in 1857, Marx broke away from ideologies. In *The German Ideology*, he attempted to explain ideologies through real history. What becomes then of this science, historical materialism, of which *Capital* marks the beginning of its creation, and of the reflection on the conditions of the science that dialectical materialism should be? Our study here seeks only to show how a new interpretation of Marxism becomes possible within this problematic.<sup>4</sup> This interpretation comes about in the contemporary context of world history, which implies a peaceful coexistence and its concomitant difficulties, the opposition of developed peoples and developing peoples, the diversity (to say the least) of the capitalist world, and also that of the communist world. Marxism is not just another philosophical doctrine, since it has ceaselessly been developed within the advent of communism and commentaries on the works. This is why a new way of thinking about Marxist epistemology and its relationship to Hegelianism will be of interest not only to

3 The expressions 'totalitarian Marxism' and 'fundamental Marxism' are borrowed from Alain Badiou, 'Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique', *Critique*, 1967, 438-467.

4 This interpretation is that of L. Althusser and his students. Our goal is only to present it—with reference to Marx—and to clarify a particular problematic.

historians of thought. This new way of thinking emerges precisely when there appears what we must call a sort of watering-down of totalitarian Marxism and fundamental Marxism, of 19<sup>th</sup> century scientism (even when injected with dialectic) and a humanist ideology in which the term 'alienation' has become so over-used that it has lost its meaning. While theory, understood this way, has stalled, and humanism is heralded throughout a world that is hardly humane, the general situation offers a striking contrast with the watering-down of totalitarian and fundamental Marxism. Hence this reflection, even with its limitations, might be meaningful (in a way that remains unpredictable).

That *Capital*, for Marx, was a scientific work, and not an ideology, cannot be doubted. But the scientific epistemology of Marx's time is not ours. He seems to be referring to a kind of empiricism when he says that 'the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought'.<sup>5</sup> Is science not therefore the reflection of its object? Is it enough to read the real—here, human history—in order to formulate its concept? Thanks to the history of science, to the new scientific spirit, the generative activity of which G. Bachelard has described both in the realm of theory and in the laboratory where phenomena are created ('phenomenotechnique'), we know today that science is a theoretical practice. But Marx knew this as well, and what he calls transposition (or translation) appears, in the 1857-1859 introduction, to be an elaboration of abstract concepts that together constitute a science as science. He tells us so:

It would seem to be the proper thing to start with the real and concrete elements [...]. Closer considering shows, however, that this is wrong. [...] The concrete concept is concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions [...]. It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not the starting point [...].<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> For these introductory texts by Marx, written for the *Critique of Political Economy*, I have consulted the German edition, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 3, chapter 13, 615-642. [English quotations taken from: Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. by Maurice Dobbs, trans. by S. W. Ryazanskaya, (New York: International Publishers, 1970), pp. 205-206. (trans.)]

The construction of the object of knowledge through abstractions and concepts is necessary for science, but this genesis of the thought object is not the genesis of the object itself.

This is not at all the process by which the concrete is generated.

Thus to consciousness—and this comprises philosophical consciousness—which regards the comprehending mind as the real man, and hence the comprehended world as such as the only real world; to consciousness, therefore, the evolution of categories appears as the actual process of production—which unfortunately is given an impulse from outside—whose result is the world; and this [...] is true in so far as the concrete totality regarded as a conceptual totality, as a mental fact, is indeed a product of thinking, of comprehension; but it is by no means a product of the idea which evolves spontaneously [...].<sup>7</sup>

This long quotation is necessary to show, first, that for Marx, scientific conceptualisation is not an empirical reading of a given world (it is perhaps for this reason that he insists on recalling Hegel); and second, to show that the production of an object of thought that is a part of the world is not a production that exists in things, that would be the production of the world itself (it is certainly here that he distinguishes himself, and perhaps more than he knows, from Hegel).

The totality as a conceptual entity seen by the intellect is a product of the thinking intellect which assimilates the world in the only way open to it, a way which differs from the artistic, religious and practically intelligent assimilation of this world. The concrete subject remains outside the intellect and independent of it—that is so long as the intellect adopts a purely speculative, purely theoretical attitude.<sup>8</sup>

We are rather far here from a confusion between thinking and changing the world, between the theoretical production of concepts and social or political practice (which has, in any case, the former as its condition). But the difference from Hegel is also very characteristic. Hegel was attempting to find a dialectic of thought that would emerge from the things themselves (and this is why he was opposed to mathematics as a

<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Critique*, pp. 206–207.

<sup>8</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 207.

knowledge that is exterior to its object). For Marx, Hegel placed the concept and its development within things, rather than seeing them as a product of a 'thinking brain'.

Hegel accordingly conceived the illusory idea that the real world is the result of thinking which *causes its own synthesis, its own deepening and its own movement*; whereas the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is simply the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete and reproduces it as a concrete mental category. This is, however, by no means the process of evolution of the concrete world itself.<sup>9</sup>

In these conditions, can we still speak—even metaphorically—of an *inversion*? Can the real object that remains unchanged by the thought which thinks it be a totality of the same nature as a thought that 'causes its own synthesis, its own deepening and its own movement'? With these expressions, Marx describes the movement of a consciousness that reflects itself and becomes self-consciousness, and for Hegel, this reflection is immanent to the object which in-itself is already virtually for-itself. In the material object, however, there cannot be any such thing: that is to say, for Marx, the totality—nature, history, society—cannot be of the same order as a totality whose essence is to think itself, to reflect itself.

Of course, we are simplifying both Marx and Hegel here. Hegel is not a prisoner of this self-knowledge; the richness of the content of Hegelian thought surpasses the notion of self-realisation and self-knowledge. His conceptual elaboration—what he calls 'the strenuous effort of the concept'—does not amount to a reduction to a subjective process. And while we might speak of the rational kernel of the dialectic, we must look for it where it does not appear as a system. For his part, Marx knows the importance of self-realisation, even if he does not make it the single motor of history; and he can also recognise the possible conjunctions of moments of the thought object and the real object, but in a form that is no longer that of Hegelian systematics.

What results from this new perspective on Marxist epistemology is that, for Marx, the real thing can be neither the totality, nor the ontological negativity, of Hegel. If it were otherwise, Marxism would be

<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 205. My emphasis.

either an onto-theology that refuses to acknowledge itself, or a self-generating anthropology in the style of Feuerbach.

### Totality in Hegel and in Marx

The expressions 'inverting Hegelianism' and 'putting the Hegelian system back on its feet' should be understood with a great deal of reservation then. They describe Feuerbach better than Marx, for it was Feuerbach who formulated an anthropological translation of Hegelian alienation, Feuerbach who saw in Hegel's *absolute idea* a representation of humanity estranged from its creator. Must we then say that Marx continues and extends Feuerbach? This would mean admitting that *Capital*, and indeed 1859's *Critique of Political Economy*, are developments of the 1844 study *Political Economy and Philosophy*. On this reading, Marx would only have deepened and justified the humanism of his earlier work. This is in fact Lukács's interpretation, as well as the interpretation that in part inspired my first investigations of *Capital*. Great is the temptation to see in *Capital* the expression of the alienation of human labour in history, and in the formation and development of the working class, the means by which this alienation might be overcome, by which the generic person, who would have lost and almost perverted their essence in the production and unconscious reproduction of the self that constitute the capitalist world, might be found again. The discovery of the works of the young Marx can only favour this interpretation, which we have called 'fundamental Marxism'. If we cannot completely disregard this interpretation, as I believe we cannot, we must however admit that it is more ideological than scientific.<sup>10</sup>

The *Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital* see things otherwise. In writing *The German Ideology*, Marx formulated a new critique of ideologies. They are to be explained primarily by real history; they may stand centre-stage, but they refer to conditions that they do not

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<sup>10</sup> Without insisting on this point, I am not sure that we can completely disregard this interpretation insofar as Marxism remains a philosophy, dialectical materialism, in which the ideological and the scientific must at the same time distinguish themselves from each other and meet each other. Dialectical materialism is the place where the diversity of practices- including theoretical practice- is considered as such.

translate immediately; in this way, they contain something illusory; in order to understand them, one must consider them more as symptoms than as texts that one might read directly. One must then go from ideology to science, via a 'break', via what G. Bachelard has thought as an 'epistemological break'. In 1859, Marx experienced the political radicalism of the French working class and came to know, by the intermediary of Engels, English capitalism. For him, it now became important to understand the field of history, the historical totality of which capitalism was an illustration. The method must be adequate to its object, and the totality which was his starting point could only be a pre-given totality. And while this totality is not, as in Hegel, the *concept*, while it is anterior to his conceptual reflection, which leaves the totality itself unchanged, nevertheless this totality must necessarily be different from a subject. Marx did not thematise this difference; it only appears in the way that he treats the problem (of historical materialism), and it ought to have found its way into Marxist philosophy proper: that is to say, into *dialectical materialism*. This is why the new perspective on Marxist epistemology that I am examining here, and its relationship to Hegel, can only be supported by a few texts, and by reflections based on Marx's last work—*Capital*.

Breaking with ideology means breaking with the theme of a self-consciousness immanent to natural being or even to historical being. In Hegel, religion is already self-consciousness of the spirit, and the movement from religion to absolute knowledge is the progress of that which is still only representation to a conceptualisation. Real self-consciousness is the truth of a self-consciousness that represents itself instead of thinking itself. There is nothing like this in Marx. If the absolute is the subject in Hegel, this is because the absolute, through its development, its contradictions, thinks itself, reflects itself. I would emphasise these reflexive pronouns. They mark the difference between Hegel and Marx. The return to self through an internal opposition is the motor of the Hegelian dialectic. This explains how one moment can be the truth of another through sublation, negation of the negation; or how the whole movement can tend toward a self-knowledge that is somehow implicated in the first stirrings. Certainly, Hegelian thought is much more complex and much deeper than the summary I am giving here, than the summary Hegel himself explicitly gives; but if we want to clarify the difference between Marxist science and Hegelian thought, this is how we



must proceed. The Marxist dialectic can no longer be an affirmation, an internal contradiction, a holistic retaking of the self, because there is no Self; the historical totality might have moments that oppose one another, relationships that are likely to evolve, and thus a certain dialectic, but it is no longer the dialectic of the Hegelian subject that posits itself, contradicts itself and resolves its contradiction through a reaffirmation of itself in a higher form.

This difference was understood by Lenin. Lenin was not a philosopher (doubtless he had other things to do), but he attributed great importance to theory; he knew what Marx said he owed to Hegel, and during Lenin's time in prison and exile, he read and annotated Hegel's *Logic*. Often he copied Hegel's text: he indicated what might lead the latter in the direction of historical, or dialectical, materialism. He also noted passages that appeared to him more meaningful than others. Thus in the logic of essence, in which Hegel opposes the essential to the inessential, the essence to the appearance, only to often reverse the terms of this opposition, Lenin insists on the importance of the inessential and the apparent, for it is often in the surface agitations that we can best see the real opposition. For example, 'the movement of a river—the foam above and the deep currents below. *But even the foam* is an expression of essence!<sup>11</sup> When one knows the explanation that he gave for the Russian Revolution—the weakest link—these notes take on their full meaning. In fact, communist revolutions have never been achieved according to a simplistic economic dialectic; they appeared in forms that were considered exceptional. But when the exception becomes the rule, it is necessary to reconsider and understand the complexity of developments in another way. We know that according to Lenin, the error was to wait for the revolution to emerge out of an automatic development of the economy. There are other aspects, other instances, where the struggle attains its culmination, which does not mean that the relations of production are not decisive, but that they are so in a way that cannot manifest itself as a pure and simple expression. Thus in our life and even in our dreams, a decisive opposition disguises itself and is displaced. The field of history could be constituted in such a way that these displacements, these condensations, these transpositions are in fact the

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11 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, translator unknown, Collected Works (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), xxxviii, p. 130.

rule. Nevertheless, these metaphors, which L. Althusser borrows from psychoanalysis, remain inadequate. But then it is necessary to think this totality otherwise than as the expression of a subjectivity. This too was noted by Lenin apropos of the concept, which, in Hegel, is the *subject*. This is still, he writes, 'a tribute to mysticism = idealism'.<sup>12</sup> 'Subjectivity (or the Notion) and the object—are the same and not the same'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Lenin sought a refutation of subjective idealism in Hegel's logic, and also sought and discovered in Hegel's work the conditions for a living history and for a practical, human activity; he therefore does not push his criticism of the concept as subject to its endpoint. He did not understand that dialectical materialism could no longer accommodate the Hegelian ideas of *totality* and *negativity*. It has been, in my opinion, L. Althusser's great virtue to have emphasised this necessity. Indeed, we must here say a little bit more than Marx himself said, for in the exposition of *Capital*, he practised a method whose characteristics he did not describe completely. If the field of history, envisioned both at a certain period and in the succession of periods (synchronically and diachronically), is a totality, characterised by a structure, and even a structure of structures, that structure could not be deduced from putting Hegelianism back on its feet.<sup>14</sup> Marx starts with a pre-given field that he reconstitutes in thought; that is to say, with abstractions that are not, in principle, moments of the real (the field remains unchanged after, as before, this reconstruction). Each moment is not an image of a moment of the real. In the structure that thought reconstitutes, the instances—that is to say, the particular practices articulated one on top of the other—are not expressions of a subject (which Leibniz would call a *pars totalis* or *monad*), but neither are they terms or particular structures exterior to one another, as in a mechanical sequence in which there are only things and relationships of exteriority. This is why we can, if we want—and Marx did so himself—speak of dialectic, but it is necessary to replace the interiority of the terms, or the exteriority of the elements, with a causality of another order that would be neither the expression (as a painting representing a person expresses the unity of a character or a way of being—only a spiritual subject expresses itself), nor the mechanism of an exteriority. We must conceive a structural causality that would govern the

<sup>12</sup> Lenin, xxxviii, p. 177.

<sup>13</sup> Lenin, xxxviii, p. 184.

<sup>14</sup> The term structure has long been used to translate Marx's German term *Bau*.

various instances; each of these would not be the expression of the Whole, but neither would it be one of several components, of which the whole would be the result. There might well be a dominant instance that does not exclude determination by the relations of production; but this determination does not manifest itself as such in the instances that occupy the field of history in a given time period. The dominant instance might be political, religious (as was the case in the 18<sup>th</sup> century), etc. Let us recognise that the study L. Althusser gave of this structure is not to be found as such in Marx's works. It is nevertheless towards a structure of this order that we must orient ourselves if we want to think both determination by the relations of production and the diversity of instances that present themselves within this historical totality.

Some have attempted to think of Marx as if he had only added history to political economy, pointing out the mistake of economists who mistook that which was in fact a product of history for eternal conditions. Thus, Marxism has often been reduced to a historicism. But Marx himself explains, as we shall see, that he is not referring to historical events in the banal sense of the word—wars of conquest, or the reduction of one group of human beings to slavery by another. There is truly a structure of history, in which the relations of production are tightly bound to the forces and modes of production that Marx wants to think. This is neither pure historicism, nor an *a priori* concept in the Hegelian sense. The field of history—the historical totality, with all of the instances that manifest themselves therein, the political, the juridical and the ideological—is doubtless determined by the relations and modes of production, but this underlying determination (which can also be *represented* by a particular economic instance) is not present as such; it is neither a subject that expresses itself, nor an external cause.

It is the interest of L. Althusser's study to have attempted to think through this causality: certainly, Marx asked the Hegelian notion to play this role, but at the same time refused it the characteristics given to it by Hegel: its *subjectivity* and its *expressive* form, which here lose their meaning. L. Althusser too insisted on Marx's rationalism, drawing him closer to contemporary epistemology. He rightly opposed the 'reconstruction by the thinking brain by means of constructed abstractions' to the empiricism that claims to read experience directly and receive all of the elements of its construction from the outside. We accept this thesis, on the condition that it be extended by the following remark:

Contemporary science produces its theories and constructs its phenomena in laboratories, but it still finds them in nature. The laboratory is also a part of nature, and in a certain sense, nature is a laboratory. While it is true that the Marxist idea of labour in its most general and abstract form is an element of thought which aids comprehension, it is also an element that can be found accomplished in certain forms of economy.

Marx writes:

The most general abstractions arise on the whole only when concrete development is most profuse, so that a specific quality is seen to be common to many phenomena, or common to all. Then it is no longer perceived solely in a particular form. This abstraction of labour is, on the other hand, by no means simply the conceptual resultant of a variety of concrete types of labour. The fact that the particular kind of labour employed is immaterial is appropriate to a form of society in which individuals easily pass from one type of labour to another, the particular type of labour being accidental to them and therefore irrelevant. Labour, not only as a category but in reality, has become a means to create wealth in general, and has ceased to be tied as an attribute to a particular individual. This state of affairs is most pronounced in the United States, the most modern form of bourgeois society. The abstract category 'labour', 'labour as such', labour *sans phrase*, the point of departure of modern economics, thus becomes a practical fact only there. The simplest abstraction, which plays a decisive role in modern political economy, an abstraction which expresses an ancient relation existing in all social formations, nevertheless appears to be actually true in this abstract form only as a category of the most modern society.<sup>15</sup>

Thus moments of thought construction can indeed be found in experience as well; it is true that one discovers them only when the elaboration has already been completed. Rare or unstable elements, which are nonetheless essential to materiality and which the laboratory was able to produce, are thereafter found in interstellar space. But this secondary empiricism, if I may call it that, does not allow us to link the development of categories in thought to their development in reality, as Hegel thought. As for this overall causality which governs historical

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 210.

structure and justifies the name of historical materialism as a new method of explanation, Marx foresaw its originality and tried to register it with an eloquent metaphor:

There is in every social formation a particular branch of production which determines the position and importance of all the others, and the relations obtaining in this branch accordingly determine the relations of all other branches as well. It is as though light of a particular hue were cast upon everything, tingeing all other colours and modifying their specific features; or as if a special ether determined the specific gravity of everything found in it.<sup>16</sup>

We must of course recognise that the problematic opened here by Marx is not closed; the theme of this determination of positions within the determined conjuncture remains to be deepened by that which Marx calls, without separating the terms, 'a particular branch of production [...] and the relations obtaining in this branch'.<sup>17</sup> A similar determinate causality has raised difficult questions for all interpreters of Marxism, some returning to a non-dialectical materialism and to a simplistic and obviously illusory explanation of historical totality, others returning to a relationship of expression, as Hegel frequently understood it. I say frequently because Hegelian thought does not allow itself to be confined to this term 'expression', which belongs most clearly to art and religion. One might even say that in Hegel, the subject is an infinite process, a mediation or a becoming, but there is always in his work an understanding of the return, of the circle, that we cannot easily eliminate from his dialectic; there is also in Hegel's work a totality all of whose parts seem to be images of the whole itself; thus we might, on the contrary, think that these parts, these instances of the historical field, do not have in Marx the same rhythm of temporal development, but even then, can we not find in Hegel different temporal rhythms that cannot be so easily reduced to the evolution of a single totality? The more one reflects on these nuances, the more one is led to think of the originality

<sup>16</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 212.

<sup>17</sup> [In the French translation that Hyppolite quotes, the terms are not separated: 'une production déterminée et les rapports engendrés par elle [...] assignent à toutes les autres productions et aux rapports engendrés par celles-ci leur rang et leur importance' (trans.)]

of the Marxist explanation, but by a sort of hindsight, one is also led to take up reading Hegel again. What speaks volumes is that Marx, in his preface to *Capital*, no longer refers to Feuerbach, but to Hegel; he refers to the one who reflected on conceptual elaboration as such. The 'inversion' of Hegel does not, then, have the literal meaning we might give to it; but the reference to Hegel nevertheless retains a deep meaning, when we exclude from it what derives from ideological 'expression'.

### Historical Materialism and Political Economy

What is the relationship between historical materialism and political economy, as it evolved from Adam Smith to Ricardo? The very title of the 1859 work is meaningful: Marx speaks of a *Critique of Political Economy*. His understanding of society and its existence, if we take this term in its fullest extension, derives from a reflection on political economy. He says that he owes much to economists, particularly to Ricardo, but the precise criticisms that he formulates (the confusion of constant capital with variable capital, misunderstanding of the common source of annuities, interest and profit in surplus-value, substitution of labour force for work actually performed)—all of these criticisms translate a different way of understanding the historical object; this new way of understanding things has not always been noticed. Many have not seen that the object of *Capital* is neither that of political economy, nor that of history. For it is in the elaboration of the concepts of production, distribution, exchange and consumption that the epistemological break becomes manifest, the break which exposes political economy as being merely ideology. Louis Althusser has rightly insisted on this subject of *Capital*, although he has perhaps misunderstood to some extent how much Marx owed to Hegel, even here. To see this, it does not suffice to evoke the Hegelian schema of the four-term syllogism (there are often four terms in Hegel, the particular being divided in its double relationship to the universal and the singular). Marx speaks, with a little humour, about this Hegelian syllogism to which we might compare the chain: production – distribution – exchange – consumption.

But this reference remains significant. It refuses the purely logical dialectic, but it borrows Hegel's conceptual construction, the only one that he could oppose to the horizontal exposition of political economy. Doubtless, it is also from Hegel that Marx borrowed the construction that

integrates content to form, and this even in the analysis of civil or bourgeois society. Hegel understood that his State suffered from the discordances of civil society; hence the necessity of a new way of thinking about the historical object that Hegel, according to Marx, did not formulate himself. The core of the Marxist construction is to detect the multiple implications of the four terms, one among the four being the deciding term, being the universal, as it almost already is in Ricardo. It is production. But this construction deals more with content, when it integrates the relations of production into production itself; then history becomes tied to economy, as economy to history, but by a reconstruction of thought which does not add from the outside the historical to the economic. Marx has no trouble in the beginning demonstrating that in certain ways, production is already a consumption of vital forces or of the means of production, and that, in its turn, consumption is productive, or, as he puts it, reproductive, of life and human existence in a given milieu, but this immediate identity is also a mediation. Consumption—use value—is the endpoint of production; it is in consumption that the product truly becomes a product: 'a dress becomes really a dress only by being worn, a house which is uninhabited is indeed not really a house',<sup>18</sup> and a railway line that no-one uses would lose its meaning. But this endpoint also plays the role of motor: it determines the production and is in turn determined by production. Without need, no production; but consumption reproduces need, and production in turn creates new needs. Economists have recognised this productive consumption, but they make a more particular distinction between distribution and production.

It sometimes even happens that distribution is used to define political economy, as in this definition taken from a glossary of philosophical terms: 'Science, whose object is knowledge of the phenomena and the determination of the laws that concern distribution of wealth, as well as the production and consumption of wealth, insofar as these phenomena are linked to those of distribution'.<sup>19</sup>

Distribution is the first division of products, the first particularisation, that which furnishes, for example, salaries, annuities, profits. Exchange is the adaptation of these products to individual consumption.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> Élie Halévy, 'Économie politique', *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1951), p. 261.

Production creates articles corresponding to requirements; distribution allocates them according to social laws; exchange in its turn distributes the goods, which have already been allocated, in conformity with individual needs; finally, in consumption the product leaves this social movement, it becomes the direct object and servant of an individual need, which its use satisfies.<sup>20</sup>

But this clear-cut separation between distribution and production is precisely what Marx contests. This is the *crux* of the question for him. Distribution is already implicated in the mode and form of production.

The relations of production—slavery or wage labour, for example—are implicit in production. 'The structure of distribution is entirely determined by the structure of production. Distribution itself is a product of production [...].'<sup>21</sup> This intertwining of the two structures is the concept that must be thought, and by which Marx criticises political economy and constructs a science.

When one says that Marx adds history to political economy, one must understand that this is a new notion.

Economists like Ricardo who are mainly accused of having paid exclusive attention to production, have accordingly regarded distribution as the exclusive object of political economy, for they have instinctively treated the forms of distribution as the most precise expression in which factors of production manifest themselves in a given society.<sup>22</sup>

For the isolated individual—the slave, the serf, the proletarian—distribution looks like a social law that determines their function within the process of production. As soon as they are born, they are reduced to wage labour by social distribution. But the fact that they are reduced to that condition is the result of the existence of capital, of landed property, as independent agents of production. One must not believe that history in the form of wars or revolutions precedes production, by some sort of originary distribution that would be alien to the process of production; for before the distribution of products, there was a distribution of the instruments of production, and the distribution of members of society

<sup>20</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 194.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 200.

<sup>22</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 201. [Translation slightly modified (trans.)]



among different types of production; and, if one insists that we must, at any cost, start with natural givens, we must conclude that

[i]n the course of production [...] [natural givens?] are transformed from naturally evolved factors into historical ones, and although they may appear as natural pre-conditions for any one period, they are the historical result of another period. They are continuously changed by the process of production itself. For example, the employment of machinery led to changes in the distribution of both the means of production and the product.<sup>23</sup>

Starting from this point, we can understand everything in *Capital* that concerns population and the development of wage labour.

Marx also shows that exchange is linked to production and is, in turn, also a productive activity, for there is no exchange without a division of labour. Private exchange presupposes private production, and the intensity of exchange and its mode are determined by the development and structure of production. Marx writes that the result this leads to, in what must indeed be called a dialectic, is not the identity of the four terms, but the fact that they are all elements of a totality, differentiations within a structure. It is a matter of truly understanding the object of history, and not of reflecting the sequence of these terms as though it were a logical sequence. Marx speaks simultaneously of cycles and of irreversibility, insofar as the sequence of the cycles transforms the starting conditions, without forgetting *the other conditions which are linked to the former*.

We cannot speak of juridical relations without considering that any form of production will engender its own juridical relations, its own form of the State: 'It is a sign of crudity and lack of comprehension', Marx writes, 'that organically coherent factors are brought into haphazard relation with one another in a mere relationship of reflection',<sup>24</sup> that is to say, an external link that is not a part of a structure, of an organic totality. We have already insisted on the specific character of this structure, of this totality, which is not the totality of a subject. The difficulty here is thinking through the mutual actions and reactions of the terms, insofar as they are not properly speaking the expressions of a whole. 'While the social conditions appropriate to a particular stage of production are either

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 202.

<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 193. [Translation modified (trans.)]

still in the course of evolution or already in a state of dissolution, disturbances naturally occur in the process of production, although these may be of varying degree and extent'.<sup>25</sup> Marx says very explicitly that this structure does not behave as a singular subject: 'nothing is simpler for a Hegelian than to assume that production and consumption are identical. [...] If one considers a nation – or mankind *in abstracto* – then its production is its consumption'.<sup>26</sup> But this means forgetting the creation of the means of production; it especially means forgetting the specific character of the relations of production that to a greater or a lesser extent oppose individuals; therefore, it doubtless means forgetting social classes. On this point, in an overall assessment, economy, just as much as a logical subject, erases the divergences as well as the convergences that conceptual reflection reveals. The conception of the total structure is not that of a whole that thinks itself; furthermore, it could not be a calculus that substitutes itself for the concept and precedes it, rather than following it. 'It is moreover wrong to consider society as a single subject, for this is a speculative approach. [...] [I]n society, the relation of the producer to the product after its completion is extrinsic, and the return of the product to the subject depends on his relations to other individuals'.<sup>27</sup>

All of this analysis seemed necessary in order to understand the difference between political economy and historical materialism, in which economy is rethought, developed in its concepts, which are those of the conditions of human history, without thereby being inspired by humanist ideology, which is of another order. Starting with this difference, we understand the criticisms Marx makes of the economists, the way in which he reads them, the lacks, as L. Althusser calls them, that he perceives in their texts. Ricardo, who returned all the way to the notion of abstract labour, nevertheless did not see, according to Marx, the common source, the concept from which one must think annuities, profits, interest. Ricardo allowed the three of them to persist in their diversity, because he had not understood the original surplus-value. The latter is not the observation of an economic fact, but rather that alone which makes possible the ruses of the capitalist economy. It is the same for the slippage of labour theory of value into labour power. The economist substituted—without appropriate wariness regarding the

<sup>25</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 193.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 198.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 199.

possible confusion of domains—the means of reproducing labour power for work actually performed. Thus, for Marx, classical political economy or the vulgar economy that followed it, appear, in light of historical materialism, to be ideology. In *Capital*, Marx gave only a partial presentation of this science. A situation, an historical conjuncture, is of course determined by economic practice; but this determination is not simple, for it is not simply a mechanical expression or effect. The visible field is occupied by various practices—political, ideological, etc.—and the economic practice that determines conjunctural changes is therein merely represented. L. Althusser's new perspective on Marxism allows us to distinguish the dominant instances of an historical situation (which might be diverse and not solely economic) from determination by economic practice, which constitutes historical materialism as such. But this determination and its causality are not immediately visible. If 'historical materialism' is the science of this determination of a complex structure, we must separate this science of ideologies, or rather we must reflect on this difference, rethink it within a 'dialectical materialism', which is the proper philosophy of Marxism.

#### Science and Ideology

'The truth of history cannot be read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures'.<sup>28</sup> The sector that *represents* economic practice in a given historical situation needs itself to be conceived of in relationship to the other sectors, and this conceptualisation is not simple, since 'while, as Marx often says, what is hidden in capitalist society is plainly visible in feudal society or in the primitive community, we can plainly see in the latter societies that *the economic is not directly and plainly visible*'.<sup>29</sup> The entirety of the new perspective that we are studying here depends upon the distinction between the ideological and the scientific; it leads first of all to a clarification of these two terms.

We already mentioned the notion of 'epistemological break' borrowed from G. Bachelard. There is a moment in which a truly scientific concept

28 Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 17.

29 Althusser and Balibar, p. 178.

will free itself from an experience that we might call lived or immediate, in order to construct itself, to produce itself theoretically; we might think of the science of heat, for the scientist, and of all that preceded that science in the human imagination, but we must not simply say *preceded*, for even afterwards the ideological remains. If the physical science reveals ideology in what preceded it, it does not thereby do away with ideology. Louis Althusser extends Marx here, characterising ideology 'as a system of representations [... in which] the practico-social function is more important [than the theoretical function] (function as knowledge)'.<sup>30</sup> Henceforth, the ideological never disappears to the extent that it brings together inextricably *the real relation and the imaginary relation that human beings have to the world*: the ideological is the unconscious of consciousness, of 'lived' experience; it 'expresses a will [...], a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality'.<sup>31</sup> What appears condemned here is the return to things themselves, the ideology of a philosophy of immediacy.

The consequences of this clarification are multiple and far-reaching. The ideological is not a mystification; it is not to be devalorised for itself, since it is the very function that allows the subject to take its place in the world, to play its role; and this is why L. Althusser can say, which Marx did not say explicitly (he even at times seems to say the opposite) that 'it is not conceivable that communism, a new mode of production implying determinate forces of production and relations of production, could do without a social organisation of production, and corresponding ideological forms'.<sup>32</sup> We can see that ideologies persist in the countries of the East and it could not be otherwise; but we must know to what real conditions they correspond and, therefore, what effective situations they translate into their own imaginaries. The comprehension of ideology cannot be made to happen without leaving the level of ideology; as Marx writes in *The German Ideology*, we must go back from ideologies to their real conditions, and only change in those conditions can modify ideologies.

This is why, while communism inevitably allows ideology to persist—and in some cases, humanist ideology—Marxist science itself is not what we might confuse with an ideology, in particular with humanist ideology. Nevertheless, while L. Althusser's new perspective seems to clarify the

<sup>30</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (NLB, 1977), p. 231.

<sup>31</sup> Althusser, p. 234; emphasis Althusser's.

<sup>32</sup> Althusser, p. 232.

difference between science and ideology, it does not fail to encounter some kind of impurity in this difference.

Althusser seems to single out one ideology as more worthy than others when he speaks of

[t]his 'break' between the old religions or ideologies, even the 'organic' ones, and Marxism, *which is a science*, and which must become the 'organic' ideology of human history by producing a *new* form of ideology in the masses (an ideology which will depend on a science this time—*which has never been the case before*).<sup>33</sup>

This new form of ideology raises questions, as, for Marx, does the persistence of certain kinds of art when their objective conditions have disappeared: 'The difficulty we are confronted with is not, however, that of understanding how Greek art and epic poetry are associated with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still give us aesthetic pleasure and are in certain respects regarded as a standard and unattainable ideal'.<sup>34</sup> The questions raised both by the possibility of a new ideology and by the permanence of certain older forms are not of the same order, but they have the virtue of making us reflect on the nature of ideology as such and its role in lived experience. Ultimately, we must recognise that in L. Althusser's perspective, dialectical materialism—that is to say, Marx's philosophy—has a primordial status. It determines the scientificity of science, which raises the most difficult questions concerning the human sciences; it reflects, in a history of science, the breaks that detach a particular science from the ideologies that blocked its way; it is also the only knowledge that can determine itself [*décide de lui-même*], and reflects its own difference. It would not be absurd therefore to compare it, with all necessary reservations, with what Hegel called absolute knowledge. The science-ideology difference, which *at first* appeared clarified, in this philosophy *yet* retains a certain impurity. Perhaps this indicates a certain necessity, insofar as there remains a philosophy—even that of dialectical materialism—next to the sciences.

All I have wished to do in this text was to present this new perspective in light of those texts of Marx's which might justify it, without concealing the difficulties it encounters, and without wanting to close off the

<sup>33</sup> Althusser and Balibar, p. 331.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, *Critique*, p. 216.

problematic that it opens. It is moreover certain that this problematic is located within the context of the historical situation in which we live, and that its importance is linked to the historical development of communism itself.