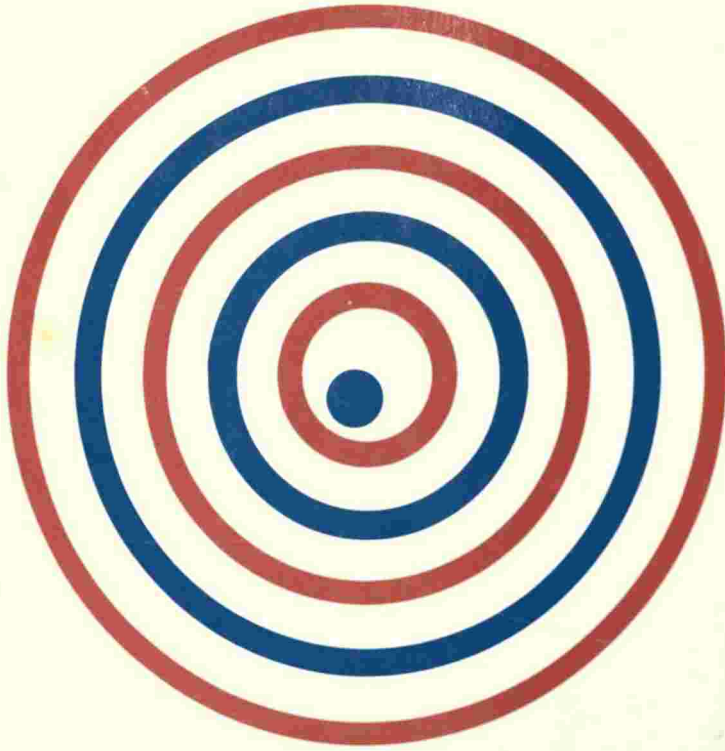


From Rousseau to Lenin

Studies in Ideology and Society
Lucio Colletti



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Lucio Colletti

*Translated by John Merrington
and Judith White*



Monthly Review Press
New York and London

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First published as *Ideologia e Società* by
Editori Laterza, Rome, Italy. Copyright
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First Modern Reader Paperback Edition 1974

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Colletti, Lucio

From Rousseau to Lenin

Translation of *Ideologia e società*.

1. Communism and society. I. Title.

HX542.C6213 335.43 72-92035 ISBN 0-85345-278-4

Monthly Review Press

62 West 14th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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Bibliographical Note: 'Marxism as Sociology' was originally delivered as a paper to a conference on Marxism and Sociology organized by the Gramsci Institute of Rome in 1958; it was published in 1959 in *Società*. 'Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International' was written as the introduction to an Italian edition of Bernstein's *Socialism and Social-Democracy*, published in 1968. 'Rousseau as Critic of "Civil Society"' and 'From Hegel to Marcuse' first appeared in the March and June 1968 issues of the journal *De Homine*. 'Mandeville, Rousseau and Smith' was previously unpublished. 'Lenin's *State and Revolution*' appeared in the August 1967 issue of *Problemi del Socialismo*, and 'Marxism: Science or Revolution?' in the July 1969 issue of *Il Manifesto*.

Part One

Marxism as a Sociology

THE OBJECT OF 'CAPITAL'

We may start by turning to the preface written for the first edition of *Capital*. Two important circumstances stand out straight away, the first of which is as follows. Unlike all the economists who had discussed society 'in general' before him, Marx is concerned with *one* society only, modern *capitalist* society. He claims to have examined the laws of development of *this* society and none other. In other words, *Capital* is not a study of society as such, that is of the *abstraction* society 'in general', but a study of *this* particular society. Which means that the analysis concerns not an *idea* (an ideal object) but a *materially determined* or real object. This is the first point of departure. Since this first point is already thought-provoking it is worth pausing to consider it more closely.

In the first place, who are those reduced to discussing society *in general*? The answer can be given: those who regard the factor of 'consciousness' as the specific element of human society and history, and accordingly hold that societies should be investigated exclusively at the level of *ideological* social relations. For in this perspective the juridical and political forms of such societies (ideological forms in general) must inescapably appear, remarked Lenin, as 'originating in this or that idea of humanity' and hence as mere *products or moments of thought*. It follows that analysis cannot engage with a *real* object, but only with an ideal objectivity. The relation between the theory and its object contracts, due to the ideal character of the latter, into a mere relation of idea to idea, an internal monologue within thought itself. The object of analysis thus slips through our fingers; it is, as Lenin pointed out, impossible for us to undertake any study of the *facts*, of social processes, precisely because we are no longer confronting *a* society, a real object, but only the *idea* of society, society *in general*. This is the hypostasis which reaches its high point in bourgeois sociology. The sociologists talk of society 'in general', they argue with Spencer about 'the nature of society in general, about

the aim and essence of society', i.e. about how society *should* be organized to satisfy this or that 'requirement' of 'human nature'; they cannot see, Lenin wrote, that 'such theories are useless because of the very fact that they exist, they are useless because of their basic methods, because of their solid unrelieved metaphysics'. Indeed, the most obvious sign of metaphysics, from which every science originated but always by contrast, is precisely this: so long as men did not know how to approach the study of the facts, they invented *a priori* general theories which always remained sterile. In other words, they *substituted* or superimposed a *generic* or *ideal* object for the *real* object to be explained. In short, metaphysics never produces an effective analysis since for it, strictly speaking, facts no longer exist; or, more precisely, because in the place of concrete historical phenomena it has interpolated the *idea*; in the place of a concrete, determinate society it has substituted society 'in general'.¹

Lenin makes this point most acutely:

The metaphysician-chemist, still unable to make a factual investigation of chemical processes, concocts a theory about chemical affinity as a force. The metaphysician-biologist talks about the nature of life and the vital force. The metaphysician-psychologist argues about the nature of the soul. Here it is the method itself that is absurd. You cannot argue about the soul without having explained psychical processes in particular: here progress must consist precisely

¹ Lenin, 'What the "Friends of the People" Are', *Collected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 136-45.

The quotations which follow are also taken from the first part of this work. The hypothesis or substitution of 'ideas' for 'facts' discussed here is a critique which goes well beyond positivist sociology of the Spencerian type, contrary to what some might believe. On this question, cf. the following interesting admission of Alfred Weber, from *Wesen und Aufgabe der Soziologie*. In considering the general characteristics of sociology after Marx, he observes how at this point a 'rupture' occurred. 'Major forces governing historical development' such as capitalism, modern science, etc., disappeared from the scope of analysis. Instead, there emerged 'a myriad of sociologies, which, however diverse they may be, for the most part no longer pose for themselves the task of providing an analysis - an analysis of the present - as a *particular* historical epoch. . . . On the contrary, these sociologies, in their treatment of "society" substitute for a historical reality a "concept" or, more precisely, a concept applicable only to the everyday situation as they represent it.' (*Einführung in die Soziologie* von A. Weber in Verbindung mit Herbert von Borch, Nicolaus Sombart, Hanno Kesting, Graefin Leonore Lichnowsky, Heinz Markmann, Götz Roth, Erwin Faul, Hans-Joachim Arndt, Heinz Hund; Munich 1955, pp. 13-14.)

For a clear testimony to the spiritualist and irrationalist orientations of modern *Konstellationssoziologie* and of 'subjectivism in sociology' in general, see the above quoted *Einführung* and especially the essays in it by Alfred Weber; *Wesen und Aufgabe der Soziologie, Geistige Einordnung der Soziologie, Allgemeine Probleme*.

in abandoning general theories and philosophical discourses about the nature of the soul, and in being able to put the study of the facts about particular psychical processes on a scientific footing.

Progress, then, consists in restoring and re-establishing these 'facts', these *real processes*, eluded and transcended by metaphysics, and opposing the hypostasis that conceal them. Their objective existence is, in short, the indispensable premiss for any kind of scientific enquiry.

However, if an analysis of society limited to the *ideological* level necessarily involves eluding the *real* object and hence the contraction of the analysis into an *a priori* mode of reasoning, it clearly follows, at least hypothetically, that the sole way of guaranteeing the possibility of a scientific analysis can only be that of investigating society at its *material* level, i.e. at the level of the real basis which specifies it and prevents its dissolution into an idea. Which means, in turn (since only *this* object is material and not *the* object in general, only *this* process, not *the* process *in general*) that Marx, in order to study the determinate object 'society', had inevitably to study precisely *this* society. The first circumstance emerging from the preface of *Capital* seems, therefore, to be more or less clarified.

However, there is also the other side of the coin. If limiting the study of society to the ideological level implies the contraction of the analysis into an *a priori* and metaphysical discourse, can we conclude that for a scientific approach it suffices to concentrate *exclusively* on the material level? And indeed, is it sufficient to say that an object is *material* because it can be said to be *determinate*, and thus to be *this* object?

To start with, we can state that everything is material, any thing *exists*, not excluding even the most hopelessly spiritualist philosophies. The 'spirit' is not the 'letter', but these philosophies are determinate philosophical entities none the less. They *are* (exist) insofar as they are *expressed*; in other words, as Marx wrote, insofar as 'the element of the vital manifestation of thought, *language*, is of a sensory nature'. To say, therefore, that an object is material is still to say nothing. Materiality as such does not specify, it is rather a *generic* attribute, a property common to *all* things. Indeed, however strange it may seem, and at the risk of provoking protest from some over-zealous 'materialist', it should be said loud and clear that *matter* as such is itself only an *idea*, a mere *flatus vocis*. In one of the most brilliant passages in the *Dialectics of Nature*, where Engels, arguing as a consistent materialist, provides arguments (even though involuntarily) for rejecting all the *idealist* generalizations to which he himself resorts quite frequently in other parts of this same work; and where, for

instance, he puts us in a position to understand that it is meaningless to speak (as he himself does elsewhere) of 'motion in the most general sense, conceived as the mode of existence, the inherent attribute of matter', which 'comprehends all changes and processes occurring in the universe, from mere changes of place right to thinking'; and that therefore it is also meaningless to speak of a law of this motion in general, of any 'general law of development of nature, society, and thought'; in one of these passages he writes:

Matter as such is a pure creation of thought and an abstraction. We leave out of account the qualitative differences of things in lumping them together as corporeally existing things under the concept matter. Hence matter as such, as distinct from definite existing pieces of matter, is not anything sensuously existing.

Elsewhere he writes:

... matter as such and motion as such have not yet been seen or otherwise experienced by anyone, but only the various, actually existing material things and forms of motion. Matter is nothing but the totality of material things from which this concept is abstracted, and motion as such nothing but the totality of all sensuously perceptible forms of motion; words like matter and motion are nothing but *abbreviations* in which we comprehend many different sensuously perceptible things according to their common properties. Hence matter and motion *can* be known in no other way than by investigation of the separate material things and forms of motion.³

Thus in conclusion, while it is impossible to specify without matter, *as such* and of itself matter itself awaits its specification. This in turn implies that the same transformation of a determinate society into society 'in general' must occur whether we examine the *ideological* level to the exclusion of (without) *material* relations of production, or, conversely, if we consider only material production, excluding ideological relations. Indeed, in the latter case, to what is 'production' reduced when one abstracts from the element which makes that *material* production simultaneously a production of *ideas* and hence a production of human relations (for which however, precisely, thought, language, and communication exist)? This could only reduce it to a relation between *individual* man and nature (the notorious bourgeois Robinsonades), that is to a *presocial* or *asocial* fact. The result, in other words (remembering that here *society* precisely is the object of our study), is to remove 'production' from the field of enquiry

³ Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, Moscow, 1966, pp. 255, 235-6.

altogether, evading the very object in question. In the first case we have considered, society was eluded by transcending it. In the second, it is also eluded, insofar as it is never even touched, insofar as the social 'level' is simply not attained. With ideological relations alone, society dissolved into the *Spirit* or Ideal; now, with the material level alone, it dispersed into the great framework of *Nature*.

As *The German Ideology* already had it:

In the whole conception of history up to the present, this real basis of history (i.e. production) has either been totally neglected or else considered as a minor matter, quite irrelevant to the course of history. History must, therefore, always be written according to an extraneous standard; *the real production of life appears to be beyond history* (i.e. pre-social), *while the truly historical appears as something extra- and superterrestrial*. With this the relation between man and nature is excluded from history and the antithesis of nature and history, of nature and the spirit, is created.³

If we *isolate*, that is abstract, either the ideological alone or the material alone, the result as we can see is a dualistic separation between production as production of *things* on the one hand and production as production of *human relations* on the other. Or else a division of *production* and *distribution*⁴ (the latter understood here above all as the distribution of human labour-power in the various branches and sectors of production). Or else a division between *production* and *society*. Or, finally, the separation of a relation (assumed to be) purely *material* or natural on the one hand, and a relation (assumed to be) exclusively human or better still exclusively *spiritual* on the other. In other words the relationship of man to nature is thereby excluded from relations between man and man; and in man, so to speak, mind and body are divided, considering only as a body the worker, the man who is in a relationship to nature (and hence the entire productive process as a process regulated by 'natural', eternal laws), and inversely, only as mind, only as consciousness, the man who is in relation with other men (and hence the entire historical process as an exclusively spiritual or ideal process).

Clearly, we cannot have a *concrete* society without taking both together: production and distribution; relations of production and social relations; economic structure and the ideological-political level; structure and superstructure. This in turn, however, is only possible on one condition:

³ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, London, 1965, p. 51.

⁴ For analysis of this relation, cf. Marx, '1857 Introduction' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, London, 1971, the whole of the second section.

that we reach reality, that we break with the method of *generic* or *in-determinate abstraction* from which, as we have seen, arises the double abstraction of *Monsieur l'Esprit* and *Madame la Matière*. Hence the need for a new method, a new type of abstraction. More precisely, on the one hand the need for an approach which can encompass the *differences* presented by one object or *species* with respect to all the others – for example bourgeois society as against feudal society – and which does not, therefore, arrive at the *generic*, idealist notion of society ‘in general’, but rather hangs on to this determinate society, the particular object in question. (The need for a method which does not give us abstractions, but facts.) On the other hand, however, the individual fact, in its unique, absolute singularity, is as generic as the abstract genus. Hence the need for a non-empiricist method which is also – as well as fact – abstraction, and does not preclude the specific *identity*, the *species*, and hence that typicality by which each object is what it is precisely because it is an expression of its ‘class’. On one side, therefore, the need for observation-induction; in this respect an object or process is inconceivable if it is not this particular process, this particular *nature*. Yet on the other side, the need for hypothesis-deduction, i.e. a particular process or phenomenon is inconceivable for us if it is not itself a *model* or typical phenomenon. For us, ‘this’ determinate *natural* event is impossible unless it is not simultaneously a *natural law*, and hence simultaneously individual and *repeatable*.

The same applies when we turn to the example quoted above. Neither abstraction from the differences between bourgeois society and other social regimes; nor abstraction, in examining a particular case such as nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, from what is the specific or *essential* aspect of this case – namely, its *capitalist* organization. The need, in sum, for the method of *determinate*, specific or scientific abstraction; i.e. the need for a method which (forgive the paradox) is no longer nor exclusively a method – at least in the traditional, formalist sense in which thought and logic are still assumed to be self-enclosed, autonomous spheres. In the latter case, we can discern the classic alternative: on the one hand of those who believe that discourse on method need not in itself be a mode of implicating reality (Kant and the Neocritical School); on the other, of those who resolve discourse on reality into discourse on logic (Hegel and Company).⁵ For Marx, on the contrary, the discourse on method implies also a particular assumption of reality; but without ever

⁵ In my view, the whole debate some years ago between the partisans of Marxism as a ‘method’ and Marxism as a ‘world-view’ was still framed by these alternatives.

resolving reality into itself or negating it. For Marx, in fact, the theoretical requirements we have elaborated are fulfilled. *A parte objecti*, the necessity of grasping both production and distribution, *the economy and politics*, since only thus is the object *determinate* and 'society' *this* society. *A parte subjecti*, the necessity that 'this' society nevertheless be a specific *generalization*, a *type* or 'model' – i.e. not Britain, but the capitalist *socio-economic formation* (or, better still, Britain only *insofar* as it is the 'classical' example of one phase of capitalist development). In this case, it is clear how a particular methodological assumption implies a particular structuration of the object, and vice versa. Hence Marx's method can never be divorced from the particular objective patterns which are reflected in it (still less, therefore, from materialism). Nor can any serious Marxist substitute or integrate these objective material patterns with 'objects', as offered him by the procedures of other methodologies.

Here (finally) we encounter the second circumstance which should emerge just by reading the preface to *Capital*. Marx indeed studies this society *hic et nunc*; but this society is 'modern' society, the capitalist mode of production and exchange, not Britain, France, etc., as such.

The physicist either observes physical phenomena where they occur in their most typical form and most free from disturbing influence, or, wherever possible, he makes experiments under conditions that assure the occurrence of the phenomenon in its normality. In this work I have to examine the *capitalist mode of production* and the conditions of production and *exchange* corresponding to that mode. Up to the present, their classic ground is England. That is the reason why England is used as the chief illustration in the development of my theoretical ideas. If, however, the German reader shrugs his shoulders at the conditions of the English industrial and agricultural labourers, or in optimist fashion comforts himself with the thought that in Germany things are not nearly so bad; I must plainly tell him, *De te fabula narratur!*

England does indeed enter the analysis, but, as Marx says, for a *particular* reason: only because, and insofar as, within it, at a certain historical moment, an objective situation was produced such as to realize the 'model' conditions indispensable for a scientific analysis. The subject of Marx's enquiry is not, in fact, England as such, but *the development of the capitalist mode of production*, which, in a particular phase, found in that country the conditions and theatre for its dynamic and parabola to unfold in a 'classic' or 'typical' form.⁶ 'Intrinsically', Marx immediately goes on, 'it is

⁶ cf. G. Pietranera, 'La Struttura Logica del "Capitale"', in *Società*, August 1956. We note this study in particular here for the important considerations it offers on the

not a question of the higher or lower degree of development (in different countries) of the social antagonisms that result from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of *these laws themselves*. . . . The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.'

On one side, then, *Capital* is not a study of 'society' but of *this* society; not an abstraction, but rather a real process (a natural process), not an *Objekt* but a *Gegenstand*. On the other side, however, 'this' society is 'the typical, generalized form of all existing capitalist societies' (Dobb), that is, it is an abstraction reached by 'distinguishing, to use an example, the differences between each capitalist country from what is common to them all' (Lenin). On one side we have a natural phenomenon; on the other, this *nature* is a *law* of nature. On the one hand, this society *hic et nunc*; but on other, this *hic et nunc* is a socio-economic formation.

THE UNITY OF ECONOMICS AND SOCIOLOGY

The term 'socio-economic formation' is a vivid linguistic expression of the fact that the object of *Capital* has the character of a 'whole', and this is so, as we have seen, because of the impossibility of any dualistic separation between the *material* and *ideological* levels, or because the object only really becomes an object and hence something *determinate* through the contribution of both of these its two modalities. It is, therefore, a *totum*, i.e. something including in its scope both social *being* and social *consciousness*, or rather both conditions *a parte objecti* and conditions *a parte subjecti*.

But this in turn raises the question of how subject and object are combined within this whole. One mode of combination is clearly as follows: the subject is *part* of the object, a moment within the object, and hence is itself *objective*. Both subject and object are part of an *objective* object-subject process. The superstructure is itself an aspect and articulation of the structure; consciousness is itself a mode of being; the knowledge of life is itself a mode and manifestation of life. From this standpoint, art, philosophy or science are realities, social institutions, i.e. expressions or articulations of society. Criticism of them, reflection on them, is already an investigation of society, i.e. a sociology. In Marx's

historical character even of Marx's assumption of an 'equal organic composition of capital in all branches of production' – which is, of course, the condition for the validity of the labour theory of value, but which is still often considered (even at times by Dobb) as an abstraction of the Ricardian type.

early work, for example, we find that in studying Hegel, and in particular (not by chance) his *Philosophy of Right*, Marx was studying not only the bourgeois *theory* of the state but the bourgeois *state* itself. Similarly, in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, in Smith, Ricardo or Say, he was studying not only bourgeois economic theory but (if only as a first attempt) also the objective relations between capital and ground rent on the one hand and wage labour on the other.

Granted this, it is, however, equally true that the superstructural or ideological level, though it may be *part* of the structure and of social being, nonetheless is so as *consciousness* or ideology; i.e. it has a *specific* role *vis-à-vis* other parts of the structure. A work of art or science, such as Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*, is not the French railway system. Indeed, precisely and solely because of this is it part of society: because through it society realizes one of its functions that could not be otherwise realized (for example, by producing bolts). Hence what makes it a *part* is precisely what *distinguishes* it from the *totum* to which it belongs. The distinguishing feature of consciousness is, as we know, that while it is part of social being and is therefore internal to life, at the same time it *reflects* on the latter and embraces it mentally within itself. While it embraces society within itself it is also *part* of society, i.e. it is only *one* of its functions and has the others *outside itself*. Marx wrote: 'Thought and being are *united*, it is true, but are also *distinct* from one another.' Consciousness does indeed belong to being, to social practice; theory is itself life, practice; there is a unity and inter-relationship of the two. However, consciousness belongs to life insofar as it is *one* of its parts. Theory is practice insofar as it is *one* aspect or moment of practice: i.e. insofar as it is reincorporated within the latter as one of its specific functions – and hence insofar as it does not absorb practice within itself, but is instead surrounded by it, and has it outside itself. Similarly, production, in one sense, is distribution, exchange and consumption; but the latter are nonetheless only moments of the former and presuppose production as their antecedent. Once understood correctly, therefore, it is precisely the unity of being and consciousness, their inter-relation, which implies the fundamental character or priority of being over thought, i.e. *materialism*.⁷

⁷ For the relationship production-distribution-consumption, see again: Marx, 'Introduction' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, op. cit., second paragraph. Hans Kelsen claims to have identified a 'contradiction' in the Marxist conception of law in that it is understood both as a *social relation, or reality*, and a form of consciousness or *reflection upon* this social relation. But this is merely a result of his own failure

However, if this is correct, then two consequences clearly follow. The first concerns *method*: since the superstructure reflects the structure and is *part* of it, the content of theoretical generalization can only be *verified* as a determination or aspect of the object of analysis. Secondly, as a *structural* consequence, if the structure always includes both 'structure and superstructure' and 'society' is always an objective object-subject process, the objective terms of analysis must also themselves be seen as *active*, as objects capable of referring theoretically to one another, and hence as objects susceptible to description in purely *physical* terms on the one hand and also social *agensis* on the other. The process is a *natural* one, but this nature is *socio-historical*.

In other words, the analysis of the *structure*, of the real basis of capitalism, does indeed constitute the *skeleton* of *Capital*. However, as Lenin pointed out: 'The whole point is that Marx did not content himself with this skeleton, that he did not confine himself to "economic theory" in the usual sense of the term, that, while explaining the structure and development of a given social formation *exclusively* through productive relations he nevertheless everywhere and incessantly scrutinized the superstructure corresponding to these productive relations and clothed the skeleton in flesh and blood'; that is, his analysis encompassed both economics and history, economics and sociology.

Obviously Marx did not attain this result by a mere work of juxtaposition. He did not start with a *purely* economic analysis and then fill the data of this analysis out with historical and political elements. He did not work with *two* criteria, but with categories which represented from the outset, in their most intimate structure, at once *factors* (objects, conditions) of production and socio-historical agents. His categories were *both* economic and historical.

In the last pages of *Capital* we read:

Scientific analysis of the capitalist mode of production demonstrates . . . that the distribution relations essentially coincident with these production relations are their opposite side . . . the wage presupposes wage-labour, and profit - capital.

to grasp the central nexus of Marx's thought: that the superstructure is at once a *part* or moment of the structure and a form of the latter. This nexus or unity of heterogeneous elements seems a contradiction to Kelsen because his own approach is based on the old neo-critical separation between 'fact' and 'value'. Contemporary juridical *sociologism* and *normativism* derive precisely, but in opposite ways, from this same separation. (H. Kelsen, *The Communist Theory of Law*, London, 1955.)

These definite forms of distribution thus presuppose definite social characteristics of productive conditions and definite social relations of productive agents. . . .

Never in Marx do we find economic categories that are *purely* economic categories. All his concepts, on the contrary, are both economic and sociological. The most abstract and simplest capitalist relationship, M-C-M, is already the relation between capital and labour power. In other words, it is already a relationship between two *social classes*.

As Schumpeter writes:

We have seen how in the Marxian argument sociology and economics pervade each other. In intent and to some degree also in actual practice, they are one. All the major concepts and propositions are hence both economic and sociological and carry the same meaning on both planes – if, from our standpoint, we may still speak of two planes of argument. Thus the economic *category* ‘labour’ and the social *class* ‘proletariat’ are, in principle at least, made congruent, in fact identical. Or the economist’s functional distribution – that is to say, the explanation of the way in which incomes emerge as returns to productive services irrespective of what social class any recipient of such a return may belong to – enters the Marxian system only in the form of distribution between social classes and thus acquires a different connotation.⁸

This ‘wholeness’, and the stupendous effect even as literature thereby achieved in the pages of *Capital*, is not, therefore, the result of any mechanical superimposition of ‘levels’. To use Lenin’s metaphor, the ‘skeleton’ is not analysed *first* and *then* clothed in ‘flesh and blood’. Rather, it is achieved by the end, because it is already there in that initial, so abstract and rarified relationship M-C-M, with which *Capital* commences and which is the true ‘sphinx’ of the entire gigantic construction. On the one hand, the relationship money-commodity (M-C), or capital-labour power, expresses the relation between *constant* and *variable capital*, i.e. a relation between simple *objects*, raw materials and machinery on the one hand and the rest of the means of production on the other, under capitalism. Yet on the other hand, this relation between the mere *objective conditions* of production, between the mere means or instruments by which the objective *material* process of production proceeds, is indeed a relationship between objects, but one between *active* objects, i.e. between capital and labour-power, between the employer and the wage worker: in short, a relationship between socio-historical *agents*.

We can now understand how this *unity* of economics and sociology,

⁸ J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London, 1954, p. 45.

of nature and history in Marx does *not* signify an identity between the terms. It involves neither a reduction of society to nature, nor of nature to society; it does not reduce human society to an ant-hill, nor human life to philosophical life. But we can also understand, conversely, how the avoidance of these two unilateral antitheses on Marx's part is due precisely to their organic composition, i.e. to their unification in a 'whole'. This whole is a totality, but a *determinate* totality; it is a synthesis of *distinct* elements, it is a unity, but a unity of *heterogeneous* parts. From this vantage point, it is easy to see (if in foreshortened form) both Marx's debt to Hegel and the real distance that separates them.⁹

In other words, *Capital* does indeed analyse a process between men, relations that are social and not between objects; but this social process is itself a natural-objective process. So, if it is true that *Capital* deals with a human social process, it by no means follows that this process is simply reducible to *ideological* social relations, i.e. to merely intentional conscious patterns of behaviour, to a mere relation of ideas. Rather, the relation is between subjects who are *objective entities*, despite the fact that these entities in their turn have the peculiarity of being *subjects*.

The historical subject then is neither Idea, World-Spirit, Vico's Providence, nor a transcendental subject. Nor is the subject conceived as Evolution, Struggle for Existence, Societal Instinct, Race, etc. Against these generic abstractions, all equally fruitless, Marx produces a new concept of the subject as a historical-natural entity, as a *species* or collectivity of empirical formations – such, precisely, as are social *classes*. He analyses these species in the light of determinate or scientific concepts, precisely those 'pseudo-concepts' so abhorred by the theological leanings of idealist historicism. The organic unity of economics and sociology lies here: in the concept of class. 'Class' has a double significance: firstly as factors or *objective conditions* of production (as a certain historical phase of the division of labour, of course); and secondly as the *political agents* of the whole human social process. Classes are precisely sections which cut vertically and horizontally through the entire society, from top to bottom. Hence the profound and organic unity between Marx's historical-*economic* work and his historical-*political* work. Lenin said as much when he observed that *Capital* 'shows the whole capitalist social formation as a living thing, with its everyday aspects, with the actual social manifestation of the class antagonism inherent in production relations, with the

⁹ * For this fundamental concept of a unity of heterogeneous elements, see G. della Volpe, *Logica come scienza positiva*, Messina and Florence, 1956.

bourgeois political superstructure that protects the rule of the capitalist class, with the bourgeois ideas of liberty, equality and so forth'.

Schumpeter supports the same point:

Marx's synthesis embraces all those historical events – such as wars, revolutions, legislative changes – and all those social institutions – such as property, contractual relations, forms of government – that non-Marxian economists are wont to treat as disturbing factors or as data. The trait peculiar to the Marxian system is that it subjects these historical events and social institutions themselves to the explanatory process of economic analysis or, to use the technical lingo, that it treats them not as data but as variables.¹⁰

The conclusion is evident. *Capital* is itself and above all a great *historical* work. All the so-called 'historical' works of Marx, the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the *Class Struggles in France* and so on, not only have their roots in *Capital*, not only presuppose it and have it as a foundation but, far from representing a 'passage to a different genre' in Marx's research, are located within the same horizon. To fail to see this (as even many Marxists still do) means in practice to fail to grasp the historico-social pregnancy of all the economic categories in *Capital*, including the most 'abstract' ones. It means to reproduce the bourgeois separation of economics and politics, of nature and history. This is to ignore that for Marx the movement of society is 'a movement in its base and not merely on its base';¹¹ it is a *natural-historical* process, rather than one still to be simply relegated to the sphere of 'ideological social relations'.

We are confronted, then, by an organic unity of both these 'levels'. This is proved by the fact that the four volumes of *Capital* present not only the analysis of the capitalist *economic structure*, i.e. the history and dynamics of the mode of production of bourgeois society, but also the analysis of bourgeois political economy (*Theories of Surplus Value*), in other words the history of *economic thought*. It is proved even more incontrovertibly by the original plan of the work, according to which it was to have extended to embrace the following themes: 'the state as the epitome of bourgeois society. The "unproductive" classes, taxes, National debt. Public credit. Population. Colonies. Emigration. International conditions of production. International division of labour. International exchange. Export and Import. Rate of exchange. World market and crises.'¹²

¹⁰ Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹¹ M. Dobb, *Political Economy and Capitalism*, London, 1937, p. 58.

¹² Marx, 'Introduction' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *op. cit.*, p. 214. An interesting insight into the reciprocal relation between the 'problem of

Clearly, the *method* and *object* are organically linked. This helps to explain how those Marxists who have hitherto failed to penetrate the profound originality of Marx's method have also failed to identify the object of his work. In contrast to the dynamic living character of the bourgeois regime of production and exchange as it bursts out from the pages of *Capital*, they have appealed to the 'false mobility' (Marx) of the Hegelian dialectic, the formal conceits of the 'negation of the negation'; they have not seen that the dynamic character of Marx's analysis derives precisely from that *unity of heterogeneous elements* (in which, to repeat, the *objective* factors of production are simultaneously presented as *subjective* agents or social classes).¹³ At the same time, led astray by the 'particularized', literary character of the historical narrative of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the *Class Struggles in France*, and so on, they have erected a basic distinction between these works and *Capital*, without realizing that since the protagonists of this 'history' are always social *classes*, these writings cannot but be *scientific* historical works, analyses of a *model* situation which – insofar as the development of bourgeois *political* institutions is concerned, and the manner in which the class struggle is articulated at that level – Marx (as is well known) found in French society. There the modern representative state, bureaucratic centralization, and indeed all the political upheavals of bourgeois class society, produced that exemplary or 'classic' phenomenology of which he provided not merely the description, but the socio-historical analysis.¹⁴

history' and the 'theoretical history of the problem' is to be found in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London, 1971, pp. 33–5). In a discussion of Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital*, he considers the major methodological merit of this work to lie in her having linked into a unitary whole both the treatment of the *actual problems* and the *theoretical history* of these problems, i.e. the analysis of the real problems and the analysis of the theoretical interpretations of these problems. '*Capital* and *The Theories of Surplus Value*', he writes, 'are in essence a single work.' However, it is worth noting that Lukács immediately reverts to an idealistic reduction of real history to the history of theory. Instead of seeing in *historia rerum gestarum* a function of the *res gestae*, he reverses the relationship in the Hegelian manner.

¹³ Weber, op. cit., p. 107: 'With this work [*Capital*], Marx became not only the discoverer but at the same time the first analyst to see the modern capitalist economy as a gigantic mechanism endowed with its own movement.'

¹⁴ This significance of Marx's historical-political writings was grasped with clarity by Engels in his celebrated preface to the third German edition of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: 'France is the land where, more than anywhere else, the historical class struggles were each time fought out to a decision, and where, consequently, the changing political forms within which they move and in which their results are summarized have been

'DARWIN AND HEGEL'

In a letter to Kautsky of 26 June 1884, Engels made some critical comments on the latter's *Anti-Rodbertus* manuscript; they provide a conducting thread at least for a preliminary orientation in that complex region, the history of the interpretation of Marx in the period of the Second International.¹⁶ The letter contains this observation: 'As soon as you speak of "means of production" you speak of "society", specifically society co-determined (*mitbestimmte*) by these means of production. Means of production *in themselves*, outside society, without influence upon it, are just as non-existent as is capital *in itself*.' The same point is reiterated and spelled out further in a letter of September 1884, again referring to Rodbertus's method of abstraction and the errors it shared

stamped in the sharpest outlines. The centre of feudalism in the Middle Ages, the model country of unified monarchy resting on estates, since the Renaissance, France demolished feudalism in the Great Revolution and established the unalloyed rule of the bourgeoisie in a classical purity unequalled by any other European land. . . . This was the reason why Marx not only studied the past history of France with particular predilection, but also followed her current history in every detail.' (Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 245-6.)

This sociological nature of Marx's historical-political writings and the importance for his analysis of historical or real *models* was also clearly seen by Lenin in *State and Revolution* (*Selected Works in Three Volumes*, Moscow, 1967, pp. 289-90). After posing the question: 'Is it correct to generalize the experience, observations and conclusions of Marx, to apply them to a field that is wider than the history of France during the three years 1848-51?' he quotes the passage of Engels cited above. He then continues: 'Let us, however, cast a general glance over the history of the advanced countries at the turn of the century. We shall see that the same process went on more slowly, in more varied forms, in a much wider field: on the one hand, the development of "parliamentary power" both in the republican countries (France, America, Switzerland) and in the monarchies (Britain, Germany to a certain extent, Italy, the Scandinavian countries, etc.); on the other hand, a struggle for power among the various bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties which distributed and redistributed the "spoils" of office, with the foundations of bourgeois society unchanged; and, lastly, the perfection and consolidation of the "executive power" of its bureaucratic and military apparatus. There is not the slightest doubt that these features are common to the whole of the modern evolution of all capitalist states in general. In the three years 1848-51 France displayed, in a swift, sharp, concentrated form, the very same processes of development which are peculiar to the whole capitalist world.' For the character of *Histoire Raisonnée* in the work of Lenin himself, see the acute observation of Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (p. 35); he notes that *State and Revolution* is both a theory of the revolution and at the same time an 'inner history of the European revolutions of the nineteenth century'.

¹⁶ Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, 1965, pp. 376-8.

with that of Kautsky. In both cases, Engels draws our attention to a crucially important theoretical motif: namely, the deformation that the concept of *social relations of production* was then just beginning to suffer at the hands of both the so-called 'orthodox' Marxists (principally Kautsky and Plekhanov) and, later and in the opposite direction, of the Austro-Marxist school.

Later I shall show how each of these tendencies can be traced in turn to the two basic orientations into which bourgeois culture was split in the second half of the nineteenth century. For the moment, however, I shall restrict myself to the 'orthodox' interpretation: for here the basic terms of the divergence can be located precisely in the manner of conceiving the unity of *material* production and production of *ideas*, of production of *things* and production of human *relations*, by which, as we have seen, Marx had succeeded in welding together history and nature.

Production is at once both the unity of distribution, exchange and consumption, and the basis of their entire interrelation. It is the totality of this relation and also what conditions and determines the relation itself. It cannot be regarded as a *prior* determination from which we can *then* pass on to the remaining ones; it is not the skeleton which we subsequently clothe in flesh and blood. The M-C relationship, to repeat, is not only simultaneously a relation between social classes; it already implies a whole series of political and superstructural conditions. To take one example: the relationship between labour-power and the other means of production, i.e. capital, is inconceivable unless we already take into account the juridico-political forms which make the modern labourer a 'free' labourer, that is a labourer free to dispose of his own person, to enter into a *contract*. In other words, unless we already take into account that formal or legal 'equality' which Marx is *obliged* in fact to bring to our attention at the end of the chapter on 'The Transformation of Money into Capital', i.e. just before the section devoted to 'The Production of Absolute Surplus Value' (*Capital*, Vol. I, Chapter 6, p. 176). It is, then, only from *within this* unity of the economic and the political that Marx induces the primary or fundamental role of the economic. This is, to repeat, precisely because it is only by virtue of this unity that the object truly becomes an *object* and hence something *determinate*. The need to consider relations of production and exchange together (and to consider the former as dominant *from within this correlation*) is a necessity inseparable from the one I have already emphasized: namely, that analysis, if it is really to be analysis and hence engage with a determinate object, must

always move from *the present*, or, in our case, from the 'present-day capital' which, as Engels wrote, is the 'only really existing capital'.

However, the framework we find when we turn to Kautsky and Plekhanov is different. For them, production and social relations, material and ideological relations, are on the contrary disposed in a chronological series, as *before* and *after*. Nature and history are re-separated; the necessary reference to the present moment is lost and consequently we are left with nothing but a *philosophy of history*.

It would not be appropriate here to examine concretely how this new theoretical framework considerably affected even the interpretation of the Marxist theory of crisis, either producing an 'under-consumption' version, which precisely considered consumption *only* insofar as it is a phenomenon external to production; or a version, which goes back to Tugan-Baranovsky,¹⁶ based upon the opposite hypothesis – as Hilferding correctly showed in *Finanzkapital* (second edition, pp. 378–9) – of production alone *in itself* understood as a *purely* economic base. Quite apart from this, it remains true that in Kautsky and Plekhanov the *unity of heterogeneous elements* the axis about which Marx's theoretical forces turned, was transmuted into a series of formally combined but intrinsically disunited 'factors', stratified one on top of the other in a chronological sequence. Here, for example, is how they are presented in *The Fundamental Problems of Marxism*: '1. The state of productive forces; 2. the economic relations conditioned by these forces; 3. the socio-political regime, established upon a given economic "base"; 4. the mentality of men living in society . . . determined in part directly by the economic conditions obtaining, and in part by the entire socio-political system that has arisen on that foundation; 5. the various ideologies reflecting the above mentality.'¹⁷

It has been noted by one commentator that, in terms of this conception, 'the productive forces develop by themselves, automatically, outside their form of production and independently of the productive relations'; they therefore appear in the guise of an 'abstract premise for the development of all the remaining "factors".'¹⁸

Some might assume that this refers to an isolated or exceptional case;

¹⁶ M. Tugan-Baranovsky, *Theoretische Grundlagen des Marxismus*, Leipzig, 1905: especially Section III, pp. 209 ff.

¹⁷ G. Plekhanov, *The Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, London, 1969, p. 80.

¹⁸ W. A. Fomina, *Die philosophischen Anschauungen G. W. Plechanows*, Berlin, 1957, p. 303. However, this work, by a Soviet author, is practically useless. L L 2

it is worth emphasizing that it is in fact the basic position which emerges from the writings of Plekhanov and Kautsky. 'The production of the means of subsistence and the production of men are two essentially different processes', Kautsky affirms in *Vermehrung und Entwicklung*: 'the relationship between the labourer and things, technique, like that between the consumer and the things he consumes, is clearly something quite different from the relation entered into by men in the labour process, in the economy. Only the latter is social; the former are not.'¹⁹ Hence the unity by virtue of which Marx could affirm in *Capital* that 'the capitalist process of production, considered as a whole, or as a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus value, but produces and reproduces the capitalist relation itself; on one side capital, on the other wage labour', reappears here, dissolved into its abstract, elementary components; on the one side, the *natural* process, on the other the *socio-historical* process.

First nature, then society: the relationship is not encapsulated in its only possible concrete form, namely, by thinking the primacy of nature from within the concrete historical condition in which the problem arises, which is clearly a condition in which, besides nature, there is already also man interrogating nature and hence society, and in which the simply natural process has already been surpassed in a *historico-natural* process. Here, however, we are ingenuously transported to the origin of all worlds. We are referred back from the *Wechselwirkung* to a 'third' or 'higher' principle;²⁰ in effect, to the principle of Monism (in Hegel the Idea and here Matter *as such*), which now appears as the foundation of every *historico-deductive* process. There is no awareness that this too is to start from an *abstraction*.

Plekhanov writes: 'The characteristics of geographical environment determine the development of productive forces, which, in turn, determines the development of the economic forces and therefore of all other social relations.'²¹ Up to a certain point he is thus in complete agreement with Buckle; subsequently, as the categories become increasingly stratified in the course of the chronological succession, the agreement diminishes. Productive activity, which in primitive society is seen to exercise a

¹⁹ K. Kautsky, *Vermehrung und Entwicklung in Natur und Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart, 1910, p. 149 and p. 10.

²⁰ Plekhanov, 'Zu Hegel's sechzigstem Todestag', in *Die Neue Zeit*, Vol. I, 1891/2, p. 202.

²¹ Plekhanov, *The Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, op. cit., p. 51.

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