



# BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

**Chris Harman**

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In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces.

The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite form of social consciousness.

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

At a certain stage in their development the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto.

From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution.

With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.

In considering such transformations, a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the material conditions of production, which can be determined with

the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical – in short ideological – forms in which men become conscious of the conflict and fight it out.

... We do not judge a period of transformation by its consciousness; on the contrary this consciousness must itself be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflicts between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic foundation of society

[Karl Marx: from the *Preface* to **A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy**].

There is a confusion at the very centre of Marxism. Marx and Engels provided a method of analysing society which has been of enormous fecundity. This

has been shown in every generation since the method was first outlined in **The German Ideology** in 1846. Every pronouncement of the ‘death of Marxism’ by bourgeois ideologues has been proved wrong within a decade or so by a new range of Marxist studies of society, the economy and history. Yet when it has come to spelling out what exactly is the Marxist approach there has been enormous confusion, with ‘Marxists’ saying apparently contradictory things.

The confusion centres around the couplet ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’. Marx wrote in the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1857 that ‘the economic structure of society’ forms the ‘real basis’ on which ‘rises a legal and political superstructure.’ [1]

Ever since then, Marxists have been arguing about the statement. What is the ‘base’? The economy? The forces of production? Technology? The relations of production? What is included in the superstructure? Obviously the state. But what about ideology (and revolutionary theory)? The family? The state when it owns industry?

Finally, what is the relation between the ‘base’ and the ‘superstructure’? Does the base determine the superstructure? If so, what exactly is the nature of the determination? And does the superstructure have a degree of ‘autonomy’ – and if so, how can this be reconciled with talk of ‘determination’ (even if it is only ‘determination in the last resort’)?

## **Mechanical materialism and its aftermath**

The answers given to these questions lead to very different views about how society develops.

At the one extreme, there is the view that the base is the forces of production, that they inevitably advance, and that this in turn leads to changes in society.

Political and ideological struggle is then seen as playing no real role. Human beings are products of their circumstances, and history proceeds completely independently of their will. The outcome of wars, revolutions, philosophical arguments or what-not is always determined in advance. It would have made not one iota of difference to history if Robespierre had walked under a carriage in 1788 or if the sealed train had crashed in April 1917.

This view of Marxism is based upon a certain reading of Marx himself, in particular upon a powerful polemical passage in **The Poverty of Philosophy**:

In acquiring new productive forces, men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing their way of earning a living, they change all their social relations. The handmill gives you society with a feudal lord; the steam mill society with an industrial capitalist. [2]

It is in the years after Marx's death that such a mechanical, determinist view of history comes to be regarded as 'Marxist' orthodoxy. It was during this period that Marxism came to hegemonise the German workers' movement, and through it the Second International. But it was Marxism as seen through the eyes of Karl Kautsky, the 'Pope of Marxism'.

For Kautsky, historical development had inevitably produced each mode of production in turn – antiquity, feudalism, capitalism – and would eventually lead to

socialism. There was an 'inevitable ... adaptation of forms of appropriation to forms of production'. [3] Revolutionary movements could not alter this pattern of development. Thus the Hussites of the 15th century and the revolutionary Anabaptists of the 16th century had been able to fight courageously and to present the vision of a new society; but, for Kautsky, they could not alter the inevitable development of history:

The direction of social development does not depend on the use of peaceful methods or violent struggles. It is determined by the progress and needs of the methods of production. If the outcome of violent revolutionary struggles does not correspond to the intentions of the revolutionary combatants, this only signifies that these intentions stand in opposition to the development of the needs of production.

Violent revolutionary struggles can never determine the direction of social development, they can only in certain circumstances accelerate their pace ... [4]

The task of revolutionary socialists under modern capitalism was not to try to cut short the historical process, but simply to reflect its development by carefully building up socialist organisation until capitalism was ready to turn into socialism. But, at the same time, counter-revolutionaries could not stop the onward march of the forces of production and, therefore, of historical evolution. Kautsky insisted that 'regression' from more advanced to more backward forces of production never occurred. [5] 'Economic development', said his most influential work, his introduction to the German Social Democratic Party's **Erfurt Programme**, 'will lead inevitably to the ...

conquest of the government in the interests of the [working] class'. [6]

Very close to Kautsky's formulations were those of the pioneer Russian Marxist, Plekhanov. He held that the development of production automatically resulted in changes in the superstructure. There is no way human endeavour can block the development of the forces of production. 'Social development' is a 'process expressing laws'. [7] 'The final cause of the social relationships lies in the state of the productive forces.' 'Productive forces ... determine ... social relations, i.e. economic relations'. [8]

He provides a 'formula' which sets out a hierarchy of causation in history. The 'state of the productive forces' determines the 'economic relations' of society. A 'socio-political system' then develops on this 'economic basis'. 'The mentality of men living in society [is] determined in part directly by the economic conditions obtaining and in part by the entire socio-political system that has arisen on that foundation.' Finally, the 'various ideologies ... reflect the properties of that mentality'. [9]

He would assert that 'history is made by men', but then go on to insist that 'the average axis of mankind's intellectual development' runs 'parallel to that of its economic development', so that in the end all that really matters is the economic development. [10]

The outcome of great historical events like the French Revolution did not depend at all on the role played by individuals like Mirabeau or Robespierre:

No matter what the qualities of a given individual may be, they cannot eliminate the given economic relations if the latter conform to the given state of the productive forces.

Talented people can change only individual features of events, not their general trend. [11]

Just as Kautsky's interpretation of Marxism dominated in the parties of the Second International, Plekhanov's was taken up as the orthodoxy by the Stalinist parties from the late 1920s onwards. [12] In the hands of Stalin and his 'theoreticians' it became an unbendable historical law: development of the forces of production inevitably led to corresponding changes in society, so the growth of industry in Russia would inevitably lead from a 'workers' state' to 'socialism' and from 'socialism' to 'communism', regardless of the misery and hardship involved; by contrast, the clearest indication that Western capitalism had outlived its lifespan was the decline in its forces of production.

### **The reaction against determinism**

Stalinist Marxism did not long outlast Stalin himself. The 'new left' of the late 1950s and the Maoist left of the mid-1960s both launched assaults on the crude mechanical determinist account of history.

They insisted, rightly, that in Marx's own historical writings – the **Class Struggles in France, The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, The Civil War in France** – there is not a hint of a passive, fatalistic approach to historical change. They also laid great emphasis on certain remarks Engels had made in a series of letters he wrote at the very end of his life, in the 1890s, criticising an



over-crude use of historical materialism. Engels had written to Starckenburg:

Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc. development is based on economic development. But these all react on one another and also upon the economic basis. It is not that the economic situation is cause, solely active, while everything else is only passive effect. There is rather interaction on the basis of economic necessity which ultimately always asserts itself. [13]

And to Bloch:

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than that neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless abstract senseless phrase.

The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by victorious classes after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms and even the reflexes of these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form ...

There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents, the economic element finally asserts itself as necessary.' [14]

The post-1956 new left went on to argue that even the terms 'base and superstructure' were simply a

metaphor, not to be taken too seriously. The ‘reciprocal’ influence of the superstructure on the base meant that ‘determination’ was not to be seen as a strict causal relationship.

The Maoist left did not begin with such an explicit break with the past. The doyen of this school, Louis Althusser, was quite willing in his early 1960s writings to quote Stalin himself favourably.

But the Althusserians created a new theoretical structure which destroyed most of the content of the old notions of ‘base’, ‘superstructure’ and ‘determination’. Society consisted of a number of different structures – the political, the economic, the ideological, the linguistic – each developing at its own speed, and having an impact on the others. At any particular point in history it could be any one of them that dominated the others. It was only ‘in the last instance’ that the economic was ‘determinant’.

The new left and the Maoist-Althusserian schools were initially very hostile to each other. [15] Yet both of them redefined historical materialism in a way that opened the door to a great dose of voluntarism.

For the 1950s new left, this meant moving away from any tight definition of class or any real concern with how social being might affect social consciousness. In the writings about current events by the most prominent British new left figure, E.P. Thompson – right through from his 1960 essay ‘Revolution’ [16] to his anti cruise missile writings of 1980 – there is the insistent message that energy and goodwill and a repudiation of tight categories can be enough in themselves to open the road to victory. In his more theoretical writings he rejects the view that ‘economic’ factors play any sort of determining role in history, or even that they can be

separated out from other factors such as the ideological or judicial. [17]

Althusser's tone is different: in his earlier writings the key to change is still a party of an essentially Stalinist sort. But there is the same element of voluntarism as in Thompson: if only the party understands the articulation of the different structures, it can force the pace of history, regardless of 'economic' factors.

Most of his followers have abandoned any notion of 'determination', even in 'the last instance', and have moved to positions that deny any possibility of understanding how societies change. So, for instance, one English post-Althusserian, Gareth Stedman Jones, now tells us that the only way to understand any ideology is in its own terms and that you must not make any attempt to interpret its development in terms of the material circumstances of those who adhere to it. [18] We are right back to the old empiricist adage, 'Everything is what it is and nothing else.' Such is the mouse that the elephantine structures of Althusserianism have given birth to.

The convergence of the old new left and the Althusserians has created a sort of 'common sense' among Marxists which holds that any talk of base and superstructure is really old hat. So widespread has the influence of this 'common sense' been that it has even affected people who reject completely the political conclusions of Thompson or Althusser. [19]

The only concerted resistance to this tendency has come from admirers of the orthodox analytical philosopher G.A. Cohen. [20] But his defence of Marx involves a complete retreat to the mechanical interpretation of Kautsky and Plekhanov.

## **The revolutionary materialist alternative**

Historically, however, there has always been a revolutionary alternative to either mechanical materialism or voluntarism. It existed in part even in the heyday of Kautskyism in some of the writings of Engels and in the work of the Italian Marxist, Labriola. [21]

But the need for a theoretical alternative did not become more widely apparent until the years of the First World War and the Russian Revolution proved the bankruptcy of Kautskyism. It was then that Lenin reread Hegel and concluded, ‘Intelligent (dialectical) idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid (metaphysical) materialism’. [22]

In the years that followed, thinkers like George Lukács, Karl Korsch and Antonio Gramsci all tried to provide versions of historical materialism which did not see human activity as simply a passive reflection of other factors. And in his magnificent **History of the Russian Revolution**, Leon Trotsky provided an account of a world historical event which placed massive emphasis on subjective as well as objective factors – and was criticised from a Plekhanovite point of view for doing so. [23]

A non-mechanical, non-voluntarist version of historical materialism is absolutely vital today. It can easily be found in the works of Marx himself, if you supplement his classic account in the *Preface* to **A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy** with what he says at various points in **The German Ideology**, **The Poverty of Philosophy**, **The Communist Manifesto** and elsewhere.

## **Production and society**

Marx first sets out his account of historical materialism in **The German Ideology** of 1846.

He starts from a materialist recognition that human beings are biologically part of nature:

The premises from which we start are not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find existing and those which they produce by their own activity.

The first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relationship to the rest of nature ... The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the actions of men.

We must begin by stating the first real premise of human existence, and therefore of all human history, the premise that men must be able to live in order to 'make history'. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. .

[This is] a fundamental condition of all human history which today as thousands of years ago must be daily and hourly fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. [24]

So there is a core activity at any point in history which is a precondition for everything else which happens. This is the activity of work on the material world in order to get food, shelter and clothing.

The character of this activity depends upon the concrete material situation in which human beings find themselves.

This determines the content of the most basic forms of human action. And so it also determines what individuals

themselves are like.

The mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part.

As individuals express their life so they are. What they are therefore coincides with their production, both of what they produce and how they produce.

The nature of individuals thus depends on the material circumstances determining their production ... [25]

These passages cannot be properly understood unless Marx's central point about human activity – best expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (written at the same time as **The German Ideology**) – is understood. For Marx humanity is part of nature. It arises as a product of biological evolution, and one must never forget its physical dependence on the material world around it. All of its institutions, ideas, dreams and ideals can only be understood as arising from this material reality – even if the route through which they so arise is often long and circuitous. As Labriola put it, 'Ideas do not fall from heaven and nothing comes to us in a dream'. [26]

But that does not mean humans are not qualitatively distinct from the rest of nature. Like any other species, humanity has its own defining features. For Marx the key such defining features are that human beings have to react back upon the material circumstances in which they find themselves in order to survive:

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life. [27]

Humans cannot act independently of their circumstances. But this does not mean they can be reduced to them. They are continually involved in 'negating' the material objective world around them, in reacting upon it in such a way as to transform both it and themselves.

At each point in history, human beings have to find some way to cope with the needs of material survival. How they cope is not something independent from the objective physical world; rather it is a product of that world. Yet it can never be grasped simply as a mechanical consequence of the physical constitution of nature. It is not mechanical causality, but human action which mediates between the world in which human beings find themselves and the lives they lead.

## **Social production**

Production is never individual production. It is only the collective effort of human beings that enables them to get a livelihood from the world around them.

So the central core activity – work – has to be organised socially. Every particular stage in the development of human labour demands certain sorts of social relationships to sustain it.

In **The German Ideology** Marx refers to the social relations between people at any particular point in history as the ‘form of intercourse’. And he insists that, ‘The form of intercourse is again determined by production’. [28]

The various institutions that embody human relationships can only be understood as developing out of this core productive interaction:

The fact is that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations ... The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life processes of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they appear in their own or other people’s imaginations, but as they really are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will. [29]

In order to maintain their material lives, human beings are forced to act on the world in certain ways – to engage in material production. But that requires certain forms of cooperation between them.

These core relationships provide a framework which everything else humans do has to fit on to. Everything else is, in this sense, based on them. They provide the limits to what is possible in any society.

So, for instance, a hunter-gatherer society does not have the means to store food for more than a few days, and can only survive if its members are continually on the move looking for more foodstuffs. It is therefore restricted in a number of ways: it cannot be made up of bands of more than 20 or so people; the women in it cannot bear more than one child every four or five years, since the children have to be carried when the band looks for food; there is no means by which one section of society could be freed from labour in order to engage in writing, reading, higher arithmetic, etc.



This is the narrowest way in which you can grasp Marx's argument. But he sees it as having even wider implications than this. The relations of material production not only limit the rest of relations in society, they are also the source of the content of these wider relations as well.

The history of society is the history of changes in the ways in which production takes place, each associated with changes in the relations between human beings immediately around the productive process. And these changes in turn then exert a pressure on all the other social relations.

If, for instance, a band of hunter-gatherers adopts a me of radically increasing the food available to them (by, say planting root vegetables for themselves instead of having search for them) and of storing food for long periods of time (for instance, in earthenware pots), this necessarily changes their social relations with each other. Instead of continually moving, they have to stay in one spot until the crop can be harvested; if they are staying in one spot, there is no longer any necessity for restriction on the number of children per woman the crop becomes something which other bands of people can seize, so providing, for the first time, an incentive for warfare, between rival bands.

Changes in the way material production takes place lead changes in the relations of society in general.

And even relations between people which do not arise out production – the games people play with each other, the forms sex takes, the relations of adults and young babies – will be affected.

Marx does not at all deny the reality of relations other than directly productive ones. Nor does he deny that they can influence the way production itself takes place. As he puts it in **Theories of Surplus Value**:

All circumstances which ... affect man, the subject of production, have greater or lesser effect upon his functions and activities, including his functions and activities as creator of material wealth, of commodities. In this sense it can be truly asserted that all human relations and functions, however and wherever they manifest themselves, influence material production and have a more or less determining effect upon it.

[39]

This is even true in pre-class societies. There is a tendency for old patterns of working and living to crystallise into relatively inflexible structures. They become 'sanctified' with the development of systems of religion, magic, taboos, rituals and so on. At first these systems are carried on even in 'bad times', when the short term needs or desires of the individual might lead to actions which ruin the long term interests of the social collectivity. But, by this very fact, they discourage innovation and move to new forms of production, which would be of long-term as well as short-term benefit.

## **Exploitation and the superstructure**

Something more is needed than simple cooperation between people for the forces of production to develop beyond a certain point. Exploitation is also needed.

While the surplus left after the satisfaction of everyone's minimal needs is small, resources can only be gathered together for further development of the forces of production if the surplus is controlled by a small, privileged minority of society. Hence it is that wherever there is the development

of agriculture proper out of horticulture, the growth of trade, the use of dams and canals for flood prevention and irrigation, the building of towns, there are also the beginnings of a polarisation within society between those who exploit and those who are exploited.

The new exploiting group has its origins in its role in production: it is constituted out of those who were most efficient in introducing new methods of agricultural production, or those who pioneered new sorts of trade between one society and its neighbours, or those who could justify themselves not engaging in backbreaking manual labour because of their ability to foresee flood patterns or design waterworks. But from the beginning the new exploiting group secures its control by means other than its role in production. It uses its new wealth to wage war, so further enhancing its wealth through booty and the taking of slaves. It establishes 'special bodies of armed men' to safeguard its old and its new wealth against internal and external enemies. It gains control of religious rites, ascribing the advance of the social productive force to its own 'supernatural powers'. It rewrites old codes of behaviour into new sets of legal rules that sanctify its position.

The new exploiting group, in short, creates a whole network of non-productive relations to safeguard the privileged position it has gained for itself. It seeks through these political, judicial and religious means to secure its own position. It creates a non-economic 'superstructure' to safeguard the source of its own privileges in the economic 'base'.

The very function of these 'non-economic' institutions means that they have enormous economic impact. They are concerned with controlling the base, with fixing existing relations of exploitation, and therefore in putting a limit on changes in the relations of production, even if this also

involves stopping further development of the productive forces.

In ancient China, for example, a ruling class emerged on the basis of certain sorts of material production (agriculture involving the use of hydraulic installations) and exploitation. Its members then sought to preserve their position by creating political and ideological institutions. But in doing so they created instruments that could be used to crush any new social force that emerged out of changes in production (eg out of the growth of handicrafts or trade). On occasions that meant physically destroying the new productive means.

So great is the reciprocal impact of the ‘superstructure’ on the base, that many of the categories we commonly think of as ‘economic’ are in fact constituted by both. So, for instance, ‘property rights’ are judicial (part of the superstructure) but regulate the way exploitation takes place (part of the base).

The way the political and judicial feed back into the economic is absolutely central to Marx’s whole approach. It is this alone which enables him to talk of successive, distinct ‘modes of production’ – stages in history in which the organisation of production and exploitation is frozen in certain ways, each with its distinctive ruling class seeking to mould the whole of society to fit in with its requirements.

Far from ignoring the impact of the ‘superstructure’ on the ‘base’, as many ignorant critics have claimed for more than a century, Marx builds his whole account of human history around it.

Old relations of production act as fetters, impeding the growth of new productive forces. How? Because of the activity of the ‘superstructure’ in trying to stop new forms of production and exploitation that challenge the monopoly of wealth and power of the old ruling class. Its laws declare the

new ways to be illegal. Its religious institutions denounce them as immoral. Its police use torture against them. Its armies sack towns where they are practised.

The massive political and ideological struggles that arise as a result, decide, for Marx, whether a rising class, based on new forces of production, displaces an old ruling class. And so it is an absolute travesty of his views to claim that he 'neglects' the political or ideological element.

But the growth of superstructural institutions not only freezes existing production relations, it can also have profound effects on the relations between the members of the ruling class themselves, and therefore on the way they react to the other classes in society.

Those who command the armies, the police and the priesthoods live off the surplus obtained by exploitation just as much as do the direct exploiters. But they also develop particular interests of their own: they want their share of the surplus to be as great as possible; they want certain sorts of material production to take place to suit the particular needs of their institutions; they want their sort of lifestyle to be valued more highly than that of those involved in direct production.

Their attempt to gain their own particular aims can lead to the building of ever more complex institutions, to elaborate rules about social behaviour, to endless battles for place and influence. The end result can be labyrinthine structures in which the source of wealth and privilege in material production is completely forgotten.

When this happens, the superstructure can go beyond simply freezing the economic activities on which it is based. It can become a drain on them that prevents their reproduction – and, in doing so, destroys the resources upon which the whole of society, including the superstructure itself, depends. Then material reality catches

up with it and the whole social edifice comes tumbling down.

But none of these developments take place without massive political and ideological struggles. It is these which determine whether one set of social activities (those of the superstructure) cramp a different set of social activities (those involved in maintaining and developing the material base). It is these which decide, for Marx, whether the existing ruling class maintains its power until it ruins society, or whether a rising class, based on new forms of production, displaces it.

‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle’, wrote Marx and Engels at the beginning of **The Communist Manifesto**. But the class struggle is precisely the struggle between those who use the political and ideological institutions of the superstructure to maintain their power over the productive ‘base’ and exploitation, and those who put up resistance to them.

The superstructure exists to defend exploitation and its fruits. Any real fight against the existing structures of exploitation becomes a fight against the superstructure, a political fight. As Lenin put it, ‘Politics is concentrated economics.’

Marxism does not see political struggle as simply an automatic, passive reflection of the development of the forces production. It is economic development that produces the class forces that struggle for control of society. But how that struggle goes depends upon the political mobilisation that takes place within each class.

## **The key role of changes in production**

We are now in a position to reassess Engels' statement that 'various elements of the superstructure ... also exercise their influence on the course of historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their forms'. [31]

Under any form of class rule a range of structures are built to reinforce and institutionalise exploitation. Those in control these institutions have interests of their own, which influence everything else which happens in society – including the nature of material production itself.

However, that cannot be the end of the matter, as the 'voluntarist' rendering of Engels' remarks implies. There is still I question of where the superstructural institutions themselves come from. And there is the all-important question of what happens if the superstructure develops in such ways as to impede the reproduction of its own material base.

Marx insists that simply to assert that everything in society influences everything – the superstructure the base as well as vice versa – leads nowhere. He takes the point up in **The Poverty Philosophy**, his polemic against Proudhon, written soon after **The German Ideology**:

The production relations of society form a whole. M Proudhon considers economic relations as so many social phases engendering one another, resulting one from the other ... The only drawback to this method is that when he comes to examine a single one of these phases, M Proudhon cannot explain it without having recourse to all the other relations of society; which relations he has not yet made his dialectical movement engender. [32]

In his writings Marx points to three different consequences of such a view of society as an

undifferentiated whole, with everything influencing everything else.

Firstly, it can lead to a view in which the existing form of society is seen as eternal and unchanging (the view which Marx ascribed to bourgeois economists, seeing social relations as governed by 'eternal laws which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any'; it is the view that underlies the barrenness of the modern pseudo-science of society, sociology).

Secondly, it can lead to viewing the dynamic of society as lying in some mystical force that lies outside society (Hegel's 'world spirit' or Weber's 'rationalisation').

Thirdly, it can lead to the view that what exists today can only be grasped in its own terms, through its own language and ideas, without any reference to anything else (the position of those idealist philosophers who followed Hegel in 19th century Germany, and of more recent thinkers like Collingwood, Winch and the ex-Althusserians).

Marx's way out of this impasse is to locate the one element in the social whole that has a tendency to cumulative development of its own. This is the action of humans in working on their environment to get a living for themselves. Past labour provides the means for increasing the output of present labour: both material means (tools, machines, access to raw materials) and new knowledge. But in adopting the new ways of working, humans also adopt new ways of relating to each other.

These changes will often be so small as to be barely perceptible (a changed relationship between two people here, an additional person engaged in a particular labour process somewhere else). But if they continue, they will bring about systematic molecular change in the whole social



structure. The succession of quantitative changes then has a qualitative impact.

Marx does not deny the possibility of changes in other aspects of social life. A ruler may die and be succeeded by another with a quite different personality. People may tire of one game and start playing another. The accident of birth or upbringing may produce a gifted musician or painter. But all such changes are accidents. There is no reason why they should lead to cumulative social change of any sort. They can produce random change in society, but not a dynamic which moves society in any specific direction.

Material production, on the other hand, does have a tendency to move in one direction rather than another. Its output is wealth, the resources that allow lives to be free from material deprivation.

And these resources can be piled up in ever greater quantities.

This does not mean that forces of production always develop as Kautsky, Plekhanov and, more recently, G.A. Cohen have claimed. As we have seen, the clash between new ways of producing and old social relations is a central feature in history.

Marx noted in **The Communist Manifesto** that ‘conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was the first condition of existence of all earlier industrial classes’. [33] The outcome of the clash between the new and the old did not have to be the defeat of the old. It could be the stifling of the new. There could be the ‘mutual destruction of the contending classes’. [34]

‘Regression’ (from more advanced forms of production to more backward) is far from being exceptional historically. Civilisation after civilisation has collapsed back into ‘barbarism’ (i.e. agricultural production without towns) –

witness the dead 'cities in the jungle' to be found in Latin America, south east Asia or central Africa; there are several instances of hunter-gatherer peoples who show signs of once having been horticulturalists (e.g. some tribes of the Amazon). [35] It depends upon the particular, historically developed features of any society whether the new forces of production can develop and the classes associated with them break through. At one extreme, one can imagine societies which have become so sclerotic that no innovation in production is possible (with, for instance, closely circumscribed religious rites determining how every act of production is performed). At the other extreme, there is modern capitalist society where the be all and end all of life is meant to be increasing the productivity of labour.

In fact, most human societies have been somewhere in between. Because human life is harsh, people have wanted to increase the livelihood they can get for a certain amount of labour, even though certain activities have been sanctified and others tabooed. Generally speaking, there has been a very slow development of the forces of production until the point has been reached where a new class begins to challenge the old. What has happened then has depended on the balance of class forces on the one hand, and the leadership and understanding available to the rival classes on the other.

However, even if the development of the forces of production is the exception, not the norm, it does not invalidate Marx's argument. For those societies where the forces of production break through will thrive and, eventually, reach the point of being able to dominate those societies where the forces of production have been stifled. Very few societies moved on from the stage of barbarism to that of civilisation; but many of those that did not were enslaved by those that did. Again feudal barons and oriental

despotic gentry were usually able to beat back the challenge of urban tradesmen and merchants; but this did not stop them all being overwhelmed by the wave of capitalism that spread out from the western fringe of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It did not matter, at the end of the day, how grandiose or elaborate the superstructure of any society was. It rested on a 'base' in material production. If it prevented this base from developing, then the superstructure itself was eventually doomed. In this sense Engels was right to say that the 'economic element finally asserts itself as dominant'.

As a matter of historical fact, the forces of production did succeed in breaking down and transforming the totality of social relations in which they grew up.

## **Base, superstructure and social change**

Much of the confusion which has arisen among Marxists over the interpretation of Marx's *Preface to A Critique of Political Economy* lies in the definition of the 'base' on which 'the legal and political superstructure' rises.

For some people the 'base' has, in effect, been the material interaction of human beings and nature – the forces of production. For others it has been the social relations within which this interaction occurs, the social relations of production.

You can justify any one of these positions if you take particular quotations from the Preface in isolation from the rest of the passage and from Marx's other writings. For at one point he talks of the 'sum total of these relations of production' as 'the real basis on which arises a political and

legal superstructure'. But he says earlier that 'relations of production ... correspond to a definite form of development of their material productive forces', and he goes on to contrast 'the material transformation of the material conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science' and 'legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophical forms'. It is the 'material productive forces' which come into conflict with 'the existing relations of production'.

In fact he is not making a single distinction in the **Critique** between 'base' and 'superstructure'. Two distinctions are involved. There is the distinction between the 'forces of production' and the relations of production. And then there is the distinction between the relations of production and the remaining social relations.

The reason for the confusion is this. The 'base' is the combination of forces and relations of production. But one of the elements in this combination is 'more basic' than the other. It is the 'forces of production' that are dynamic, which go forward until they 'come into conflict' with the static 'relations of production'. Relations of production 'correspond' to forces of production, not the other way round.

Of course, there is a certain sense in which it is impossible to separate material production from the social relations it involves. If new ways of working do involve new social relations, then obviously they cannot come into existence until these new social relations do.

But, as we saw above, there are reasons for assigning priority to the forces of production. Human groups who succeed in changing the ways they work in order to develop the forces of production will be more successful than those that don't. Small, cumulative changes in the forces of production can take place, encouraging changes in the

relations between people which are just as small but also just cumulative. People change their relations with each other because they want to produce the means of livelihood more easily: increasing the means of livelihood is the aim, changes in the social relations of production the unintended consequence. The forces of production rebel against the existing relations of production, not the other way round.

So, for instance, if hunter-gatherers decide to change their social relations with each other so as to engage in horticulture, this is not primarily a result of any belief that horticultural social relations are superior to hunter-gatherer social relations; it is rather that they want access to the increased material productivity of horticulture over hunting and gathering.

In the same way, it is not preference for one set of relations around the production process rather than another that leads the burghers to begin to challenge feudal society. It is rather that for this particular grouping of people within feudalism, the only way to increase their own control over the means of livelihood (to develop the forces of production under their control) is to establish new production relations.

Even when the way one society is organised changes, because of the pressure of another society on it (as when India was compelled to adopt a European style land tenure system in the 19th century, or when hunter-gatherers have been persuaded by colonial administrators and missionaries to accept a settled agricultural life), the reason the pressure exists is that the other society disposes of more advanced forces of production (which translate into more effective means of waging war). And the 'social relations of production' will not endure unless they are successful in organising material production – in finding a 'base' in material production – in the society that is pressurised into adopting them. Where they do not find such a 'base' (as with

the Ik in Northern Uganda) the result can even be the destruction of society. [36]

Expansion of material production is the cause, the social organisation of production the effect. The cause itself can be blocked by the old form of organisation of society. There is no mechanical principle which means that the expansion of material production – and with it the changes in social relations – will automatically occur. But in any society there will be pressures in this direction at some point or other. And these pressures will have social consequences, even if they are successfully resisted by those committed to the old social relations.

The distinction between forces and relations of production is prior to the second distinction, between ‘economic base’ and the superstructure. The development of the forces of production leads to certain changes in the relations of production. These in turn result in changes in the other relations of society being made, until a whole range of institutions of a non-economic sort help reproduce existing economic relations (and so resist further economic change).

The point of these distinctions is to provide an understanding of how society changes. If the forces of production are static, then there is no reason why any society should undergo systematic change at all. The existing social relations will simply tend to reproduce themselves, so that at most there can be random, accidental changes in the relations of people to each other. Neither the social relations of production nor the wider social relations will provide any impetus to the revolutionary social changes that do occur (eg from societies of small bands to those of settled villages, or from those of medieval feudal manors to those of advanced industrial capitalist cities).

There is a further confusion in some of the discussion on forces and relations of production. This concerns what the

‘relations of production’ are.

At one point in the *Preface* Marx equates the social relation of production with property relations. People like Cohen have given this view a central place in their own accounts of historical materialism.

It seems to me to limit the notion of the ‘social relations of production’ far too much. Much of the power of Marx’s account of history lies in the way in which it shows how small changes in the forces of production lead to small, cumulative changes in the social relations arising directly at the point of production, until these challenge the wider relations of society. These small changes might involve new property relations, but in many, many important cases do not.

For instance, an increase in the number of journeymen working for the average master craftsman in a medieval city is not change in property relations. But it does change the social relations in the town in a way which may have very important implications. Similar considerations apply with many other significant historical developments, from the first planting of seed by hunter-gatherers to changes in production methods in capitalist countries today.

To sum up the argument so far. There is not one distinction in Marx, but two. The forces of production exert pressure on the existing relations of production. And those in turn come into conflict with the existing superstructure.

Once this is grasped, it is possible to deal with the questions which are sometimes raised as to whether particular institutions belong to the base or the superstructure.

There is a sense in which the questions themselves are misframed. The distinction between base and superstructure is not distinction between one set of institutions and

another, with economic institutions on one side and political, judicial, ideological, etc institutions on the other. It is a distinction between relations that are directly connected with production and those that are not. Many particular institutions include both.

So, for instance, the medieval church was a superstructural institution, defending ideologically existing forms of feudal exploitation. But it acquired such large landholdings of its own that no account of the economic structure of medieval society can ignore it. In the same way, modern capitalist states arose out of the need for 'bodies of armed men' to protect particular capitalist ruling classes. But such protection has rarely been possible without the state intervening directly in production.

In pre-capitalist societies, even the question of the class people belong to comes to depend upon superstructural factors. The attempt to preserve existing relations of production and exploitation leads to elaborate codes assigning every individual to one or other caste or estate. This, in turn, determines the productive activity (if any at all) open to them. As Marx put it: '... when a certain degree of development is reached the hereditary nature of castes is decreed as a social law'. [37] And 'in the estate ... a nobleman always remains a nobleman, a commoner a commoner, apart from his other relations, a quality inseparable from his individuality'. [38]

There is a sense in which it is true to say that only in bourgeois society do there exist 'pure' classes – social groupings whose membership depends entirely upon relations to exploitation in the productive process, as opposed to privileges embodied in judicial or religious codes. [39] Of course, these codes had their origin in material exploitation, but centuries of frozen social development have obscured that fact.



The situation with the capitalist family is somewhat similar to that of the medieval church or the modern state. It grew up to preserve and reproduce already existing relations of production. But it cannot do this without playing a very important economic role (in the case of the working class family, organising the vast amount of domestic labour that goes into the physical reproduction of labour power, in the case of the capitalist family defining the way in which property is passed from one generation to the next). [40]

This has led to attempts to assign it to the 'base' because of its economic role. [41] But the distinction between base and superstructure is a distinction between social relations which are subject to immediate changes with changes in the productive forces, and those which are relatively static and resistant to change. The capitalist family belongs to the latter rather than the former category, even in its 'economic' function of reproducing the labour force.

Changes in the way reproduction is organised in general follow changes in the way production takes place. The simple fact is that the 'forces of reproduction' do not have the tendency to cumulative change that the forces of production do. The possible ways of restricting the number of births hardly changed from the hunter-gatherer societies of 30,000 years ago until the 20th century – whether these means were used depended not on the sphere of reproduction at all, but on the sphere of production. (For instance, while a hunter-gatherer society is forced to restrict the number of births, many agricultural societies have an interest in as many births as possible.) The material conditions under which children are reared do change – but as a by-product of material changes taking place elsewhere in society. [42]

Finally, these considerations also enable us to dispose of another argument that is sometimes raised – the claim that

all social relations are 'relations of production'. [43]

All parts of any social structure owe their ultimate genesis to the realm of production. But what Marx quite rightly emphasised by talk of the 'superstructure' was that, once generated, some parts of the social structure have the effect of constraining the development of others. The old stand in contradiction to the new. The old form of organisation of the state, for instance, rose out of the needs of exploitation at a certain point in history and has continuing effects on production. But it stands in contradiction to the new relationships that are continually being thrown up by further developments of production. To say that all social relations are 'relations of production' is to paint a picture of social development which ignores this important element of contradiction. [44]

## **Base and superstructure under capitalism**

So far this article has been about the relationship of base and superstructure in general. But there are certain peculiarities about their relation under capitalism that deserve a brief mention.

First is the peculiar effect of relations of production on the forces of production. Marx stresses that, for pre-capitalist societies, the established relations of production tend to retard the forces of production. Under capitalism, by contrast, the survival of each individual capital depends upon expanding the forces of production at its disposal more rapidly than its rivals:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production and thereby the relations of production and with them the whole relations of

society ... Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. [45]

Marx holds that the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production still comes to the fore eventually, but in a quite specific way.

The growth of the social productive forces of humanity – increased productivity – involves combining ever greater amounts of past labour to each unit of present labour. Under capitalism this takes the form of an increase in the ratio of investment to the workforce. Investment grows more rapidly than the source of all potential profit, living labour. Yet the mainspring of production in this system is the rate of profit, i.e. the ratio of profit to investment.

The contradiction between the drive to invest and the low level of profit to sustain investment finds expression, for Marx, in a growing tendency to stagnation in the system, ever greater disproportions between the different elements of the economy, and ever deeper economic crises. For those of us who live in the 20th century, it also means an ever present tendency for economic competition to turn into military conflict, with the threat of the forces of production turning into full fledged forces of destruction. [46]

A second difference lies in the way in which under capitalism there is not only a conflict between the development of economic relations and non-economic constraints on them, but also a conflict between different elements of the economy, some of which are seen by Marx as ‘more basic’ than others. The source of surplus value lies in the realm of production. But growing out of the realm of production are a whole range of activities to do with the

distribution of this surplus between different elements of the capitalist class – the buying and selling of commodities, the credit system, the stock market, and so on. These take on a life of their own in a similar way to the different elements in the political and ideological superstructure, and that life affects what happens in the realm of production. Yet, at the end of the day, they cannot escape the fundamental fact that the surplus they dispose of comes from exploitation at the point of production – something which expresses itself in the sudden occurrence of cyclical crises.

None of this means that the distinction between base and superstructure is redundant under capitalism. What it does mean is that there are even more elements of contradiction in this system than previously. Analysing these concretely is a precondition for knowing the way the system is moving and the possibilities of building a determined revolutionary opposition to it.

## **Superstructure and ideology**

What is the relationship of ideas and ideology to the dichotomy of base and superstructure?

Marx is insistent that ideas cannot be divorced from the social context in which they arise. He says: ‘Definite forms of social consciousness *correspond* to ... the economic structure, the real basis’, ‘the mode of production of material life *conditions* the social, political and intellectual life process in general’, ‘social being ... *determines* ... consciousness’ [my emphases].

To understand these strong assertions you have to understand how Marx sees ideas and language as developing.

Ideas arise, for him, out of the material interaction of human beings with the world and each other:

The production of ideas of conceptions of consciousness is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the material intercourse of men appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religions, metaphysics, etc of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc – real active men, as they are conditioned by the development of their productive forces and the forms of intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process. [47]

Every idea can be shown to have its origin in the material activity of humans:

We set out from real active men and on the basis of this we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. The phantoms of the human brain are necessarily sublimates of men's material life process, which can be empirically established and which is bound to material preconditions. [48]

He implies there are a number of stages in the development of consciousness. Animals do not possess consciousness; at most they are immediately aware of fleeting impressions around them. Humans begin to move beyond this stage of immediate awareness only as they begin to interact socially with each other on a regular basis, in acting collectively to control their environment. So he argues that it is only when humans have developed to the stage of 'primary

historical relations do we find that man also possesses  
“consciousness”.’ [49]

In the process of acting together to get a livelihood, humans create for the first time a material medium that enables them to fix fleeting impressions as permanent concepts:

From the start the ‘spirit’ is afflicted with the curse of being ‘burdened’ with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short in language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists for other men and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language like consciousness only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men. [50]

Or, as he puts it elsewhere, ‘language is the immediate actuality of thought’. [51]

Knowledge, then, is a social product. It arises out of the need for communication, which in turn is a product of the need to carry out social production. Consciousness is the subjective expression of objectively existing relations. It originates as consciousness of participation in those relationships. Its embodiment, language, is a material process which is one of the constituents of these relationships. ‘Ideas and thoughts of people, then, are ideas and thoughts about themselves and of people in general ... for it [is] the consciousness not merely of a single individual but of the individual in his interconnection with the whole of society’. [52]

Marx’s materialism amounts to this. Mind is developed upon the basis of matter. It depends for its functioning upon the satisfaction of the needs of the human body. It depends for the form of its consciousness upon the real relationships between individuals. The content of the individual mind

depends upon the individual's material interaction with the world and other people.

But the human mind cannot simply be reduced to matter. The individual human being who thinks has the ability to act. The subjective develops out of the objective, but is still real.

As Marx put it in the first of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of an object of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, not subjectively ... Feuerbach does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity.'

However, if Marx asserts the reality of individual thought and activity, he also emphasises their limits. Thought arises from activity. And as soon as the link with activity is broken, thought is seen to lose some of its content: 'Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking, in practice.'

So thinking is only 'real' in so far as it has practical application, insofar as it alters the world. There is an objective reality apart from human awareness. But it is only through their activity that humans can make contact with this reality, link their consciousness to it 'The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question ... the dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question'. [53]

It is in the coming together of humanity and the world in activity that both the reality of the world and the truth of thought are determined.

Marx's historical materialism does not hold that will, consciousness and intention play no part in history. Human action is continually changing the world in which human

beings find themselves, and their relationships with each other.

The mechanical materialist Kautskyite interpretation of Marxism makes the very mistake Marx himself ascribes to Feuerbach. It fails to see that history is the history of human activity. But social activity involves consciousness.

It is human beings with particular ideas who invent new tools, challenge existing ways of living, organise revolutionary movements or fight to defend the status quo. The contradictions between the forces of production and the relations of production, between the base and the superstructure, find expression in arguments, organised disagreements and bitter struggles between people. These are part of the real development of society. To deny that is to present a picture of society in which explosive antagonisms no longer exist.

But consciousness never arises in a void. It is a subjective link between objective processes. The ideas of any individual or group develop on the basis of material reality and feed back into that reality. They cannot be reduced to that reality, but neither can they be divorced from it.

It is this link which enables us to make sense of Marx's notions of 'false consciousness' and 'ideology'.

## **False consciousness**

When people are engaged in material practice they have an immediate awareness of their action and of the part of the world it impinges on which is unlikely to be false. Unless they are blind or deranged they know they are digging into the ground or aiming rifles



at other people, or whatnot. At this level their activity and their consciousness coincide. But the content of this consciousness is minimal. In fact it hardly deserves the name ‘consciousness’ at all.

But alongside such immediate awareness there is always a more general consciousness. This attempts to go beyond that which people immediately know and to provide some overall conception of the context they find themselves in. It tells them, for instance, that they are not simply digging, but are providing themselves with a future livelihood, or that they are not simply aiming their rifles, but are defending their ‘fatherland’.

There is no guarantee of the ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ of this general consciousness. An economic crisis can mean that, however hard you dig, you won’t be able to sell the crop you grow and gain a livelihood; your rifle may be defending the profits of a multinational, not some alleged ‘fatherland’.

Whereas immediate consciousness is part and parcel of your activity and therefore must be ‘real’ in certain very limited senses, general consciousness can be no more than a blind accompaniment to activity. In this sense it finds no expression in the world. It has, in Marx’s words, no ‘this-sidedness’ and no ‘reality’. Or the outcome of the activity it guides is different to what is expected. Its objective content is different to its subjective content. It is at best partially ‘real’. [54]

Yet Marx is insistent that even ‘false’ general consciousness originates in real activity. So in criticising one particular form of ‘unreal’ consciousness, the ‘German’ ideology of idealist philosophy, he writes:

The philosophers would only have to dissolve their language into the ordinary language from which it is abstracted to recognise it as the distorted language of the actual world and

to realise that neither thought nor language in themselves form a reality of their own, that they are only manifestations of actual life ...

For philosophers one of the most difficult tasks is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world. Language is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they had to make language into an independent realm. This is the secret of philosophical language in which thoughts in the form of words have their own context. The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life. [55]

We have seen that the whole problem of the transition from thought to reality, hence from language to life, exists only in philosophical illusion. [56]

Such a view of abstract philosophical thought leads straight to the contempt for it expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'Social life is essentially practical. All the mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the contemplation of this practice.'

On the face of it, the view he puts forward is very close to that of philosophers who have denied any possibility of general philosophical, social or historical notions. Thus the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein claims that all the traditional problems of philosophy arise because philosophers have taken the concepts of ordinary life and used them out of context. [57]

In a somewhat similar way 'historicist' thinkers have insisted that no idea or social practice can be understood outside the particular historical and cultural context in

which it is found; any attempt at a wider explanation must be false. [58]

But Marx's view is very different to these. They see false notions as arising as a result of the strange desire of philosophers to generalise, of a weird 'mental cramp' which afflicts people. And they conclude that all generalisation is wrong.

Marx, by contrast, sees false generalisation, the result of the divorce of theory from practice, as itself having material roots. Only in a society without classes can the general notions develop straight out of the immediate experiences of people, without distortion. For everyone in society is then involved in a single, shared cooperative activity.

### **Ideology and class society**

Once there is a division between exploiting and exploited classes, and, based on that, a growing division between mental and manual labour, the single practice disintegrates and with it, the possibility of a single view of the world.

In a class society the social whole is continually rent asunder by the clash between the development of the forces of production and the existing relations of production, a clash which finds expression in the struggle between different social groups.

Different groups will have different practical aims, some in the preservation of existing social relations, some in their overthrow so as to allow the development of new social relations based upon new forces of production. The result is that different sections of society have different experiences

of social reality. Each will tend to develop its own overall view of society, which will be markedly different to that developed by the others.

Such views are not only accounts of what society is like. They also serve to bind people together for the practical task of preserving or transforming society, for each prioritises some sorts of practical social activity to the detriment of others.

It is only in the minds of certain empiricist philosophers that description and prescription, fact and value are distinct. What is 'good' or 'valuable' from the point of view of one social group and its activity will be 'bad' for another social group. What one section of society sees as essential to the preservation of social life, because it preserves the existing relations of production, will be seen as bad by another because it obstructs the development of new forces of production. Categories which were previously unproblematic, simply descriptions of what was necessary to maintain society and human life, become prescriptions expressing the desires of different, opposed groups.

The struggle for social domination between the different groups is, in part, a struggle by each to impose its view of society, its way of organising social activity, upon the others. It has to assert that its notions are 'true' and the others 'false'; or at least to show that the meaning given by other social groups to their activities can be subordinated to its own overall visions of the world.

The attempt of philosophers to measure rival conceptions of the world against a single lodestone of 'truth' is part of this struggle. They attempt to generalise the experience of a particular class in such a way as to enable it to dominate the thinking of other classes. But because of the real contradictions between the experiences and interests of different classes, this is an endless quest. Any philosophical

view can always be countered by another, since each has roots in the contradictory experiences of material life. That is why every great philosophy eventually slides into mysticism.

But this does not mean, for Marx, that different views of the world are equally valid (or equally false). For some provide a more comprehensive view of society and its development than others.

A social group identified with the continuation of the old relations of production and the old institutions of the superstructure necessarily only has a partial view (or a series of partial views) of society as a whole. Its practice is concerned with the perpetuation of what already exists, with 'sanctifying' the accomplished fact. Anything else can only be conceived as a disruption or destruction of a valuable, harmonious arrangement. Therefore even at times of immense social crisis, its picture of society is one of a natural, eternally recurring harmony somehow under attack from incomprehensible, irrational forces.

### **Ideology and science**

A rising social group, associated with an advance of the productive forces, has a quite different approach. At first, at least, has no fear of new forms of social activity which disrupt the old relations of production and their superstructure along with it. It identifies with and understands these new forms of activity. Yet at the same time, because it is also in collision with the old order, it has practical experiences of that as well. It can develop some sort of view of society which

sees how all the different elements fit together, the forces of production and the relations of production, the base and the superstructure, the oppressed class and the oppressing class.

Because it has a practical interest in transforming society, its general ideas do not have to be either a blind commentary on events or a mysticism aimed simply at preserving the status quo. They can be a source of real knowledge about society. They can act not just as a banner to rally people behind, but as a guide to effective action. They can be scientific, despite their origin in the practice of one social group.

Marx certainly thought this was the case with classical political economy. Again and again he refers to the ‘scientific’ merit of the writings of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and even of some of the mercantilist and physiocratic economists who preceded them.

They were ‘scientific’ because they tried to cut through the superficial appearances of society to grasp the ‘inner connections between the economic categories – or the hidden structure of the bourgeois economic system’, ‘to attempt to penetrate the inner physiology of bourgeois society ...’ [59]

This ‘esoteric’ approach, which looks to the underlying social reality, is in marked contrast with a simply ‘exoteric’ approach which takes for granted the existing external social forms. The classical political economists never succeed fully in breaking with the ‘exoteric’ method, but they begin to move in that direction, and in doing so lay the basis for a scientific understanding of the inner structure of capitalism.

Their ability to develop a scientific understanding is related to the class they identify with – the rising industrial capitalists. Marx described Smith, for instance, as ‘the

interpreter of the frankly bourgeois upstart' [60], 'writing in 'the language of the still revolutionary bourgeoisie, which has not yet subjected to itself the whole of society, the state, etc'. [61]

Because the industrial capitalists do not yet control society, they have to adopt a critical view of its external features, to seek an objective analysis of the extent to which these features fit in with the drive to capital accumulation. This leads to the attempt to locate the production of wealth in the labour process, and to contrast 'productive' labour which creates surplus value with the parasitic functions of the old state, church and so on.

## **Ideology and the superstructure**

The situation changes radically when the rising class has consolidated its hold. Then it no longer has any use for a revolutionary critical attitude towards society as a whole. The only practical activity it is interested in is that which reproduces existing economic and social relations. And so its 'theory' degenerates into attempts to take different superficial aspects of existing society and present them as if they provided general laws about what all societies must be like.

For Marx, 'ideology' is a product of this situation. The dominant social class controls the means by which a distinct layer of people can be freed from physical labour so as to engage in intellectual production. But, dependent upon the ruling class for their sustenance, these 'intellectuals' will tend to identify with it – the ruling class establishes all sorts of mechanisms to ensure that.

Identifying with the ruling class means stopping short of any total critique of existing social relations and taking for granted the form in which they present themselves. The particular aspects of existing society are then seen as self-sustaining, as lacking any common root in social production.

So you get a series of separate, self-contained disciplines: 'politics', 'neo-classical economics', 'psychology', 'sociology' and so on. Each of these treats aspects of a unitary social development as if they occurred independently of each other. 'History' becomes a more or less arbitrary linking together of events and personages. And philosophy becomes the attempt to overcome the separation of these disciplines through looking at the concepts they use at ever greater degrees of remoteness from the world of material production and intercourse.

Such ways of looking at the world are 'ideological', not because they are necessarily conscious apologetics for the existing ruling class, but because the very way in which they are structured prevents them seeing beyond the activities and ideas which reproduce existing society – and therefore also the ruling class – to the material processes in which these are grounded. They sanctify the status quo because they take the concepts it uses at face value, instead of seeing them as transitory products of social development.

'Ideology' in this sense is linked to the superstructure. It plays about with concepts which arise in the superstructure, seeking to link and derive one from the other, without ever cutting through surface appearances to look at the real process of social production in which the superstructure and its concepts arise.

It is the contradictions of such 'ideological' arguments that can only 'be resolved by the descent from language to life'.



But this descent can only be made by thinkers who identify with a rising class. For they alone are identified with a practice which puts into question all existing social relations, seeking to criticise what happens on the surface of society, linking it to underlying relations of material production and exploitation.

While the thinkers of an established ruling class are confined to continual elaboration in the realm of ideology, the thinkers of a rising class can begin to develop a scientific understanding of social development.

### **Our theory and theirs**

A rising class' thinkers cannot simply proclaim that they have the truth. They have to prove it.

First, they have to show that they can take up and develop the insights which the thinkers of earlier rising classes made. So, for instance, Marx set out in his economic writings not simply to give his explanation of the workings of capitalism, but also to show how he could complete the work of classical political economy by solving problems it had set itself without success.

Second, it has to be able to show how the superficial social features which ideology deals with can be derived from the underlying social processes it describes. As Marx puts it, it has to be able to derive the 'exoteric' from the 'esoteric'. So a scientific Marxist analysis of any society has to be able to provide an understanding of the various ideological currents of that society, showing how they arise out of the real world, expressing certain aspects of it, but in a distorted way.

Finally, at the end of the day, there is only one real test of any science: its ability to guide practice. And so arguments

within Marxism itself can only be finally resolved in the course of revolutionary working class struggle.

A very important point underlies all this discussion. Not all ideas about society are 'ideological'. The scientific understanding which the thinkers of a rising class develop is not. Nor is the immediate awareness which people have of their actions. This only becomes 'ideological' when it is interpreted through a framework of general ideas provided by an established ruling class. By contrast, if it is interpreted through the theory of a rising class, it is on its way to becoming the true self-consciousness of a society.

'Ideology' is part of the superstructure in the sense that it is a passive element in the social process, helping to reproduce old relations of production. But revolutionary self-consciousness is not. It is an active element, arising out of people's material circumstances, but feeding back into them to change them.

In the real world there are all sorts of hybrid sets of ideas which lie somewhere in between science and ideology, between true and false consciousness. People's experience can be of partial challenges to the existing society. They gain partial insights into the real structure of society, but seek to interpret them through piecemeal adjustments to old ideological frameworks.

Even the output of the ideologies of the existing order cannot be dismissed out of hand. The worst of them cannot completely ignore those experiences of the mass of people which challenge the ruling class's view of the world: their ideological function means they have, somehow, to try to prove that those experiences are compatible with the ruling class's view. So the worst hack journalists or TV commentators have to recognise that there is opposition to the ruling class, reporting on strikes, demonstrations and so on, if only to condemn such struggles and to isolate those

involved in them. The worst pulp novelists have to start from some image of ordinary people's lives, however distorted, if they are to find a mass audience. The most reactionary priests are only effective insofar as they can provide illusory relief to the real problems of their parishioners.

This leads to all sorts of contradictions within the ruling ideology. Some of its most prominent proponents can be those who make most efforts to relate to people's lived experiences. The ideology itself encourages 'social scientists', historians, writers, artists and even theologians to make enormous efforts to fit empirical observation and experience into their accounts of reality. But this inevitably leads to contradictory accounts, with some of the ideologues beginning to question some of the tenets of the established ideology. Marx recognised that a great writer or artist is able to reflect all the contradictory experiences that beset people who live in his or her society, and, in the process to begin to go beyond the limits set by his or her class position. In a few cases this even leads them to a break with their own class and to identify with the revolutionary opposition to it.

A scientific understanding of social development demands a complete break with the whole method of the pseudo-social sciences of those who defend the existing social order. But that does not mean that we can neglect the elements of truth that those who practise these disciplines stumble across. Still less can we ignore the often quite profound grasp of the social process to be found in certain non-Marxist historians or in great novelists like Balzac or Walter Scott.

Marxism shows its superiority over bourgeois thought not by simply treating all bourgeois thinkers with contempt, but rather by showing that it can encapsulate the advances made by bourgeois thinkers into its own total view of reality –

something which no bourgeois 'social scientist' can do and which no bourgeois thinker has attempted since Hegel.

## **The central role of class struggle**

The Marxist approach begins, then, by pointing to the contradictory ways in which the forces of production and the relations of production, the base and the superstructure, material reality and people's ideas, develop. But none of these contradictions simply resolve themselves, as the mechanical materialists assert. Their resolution only takes place on the basis of the struggles of human beings, of class struggles.

Once you have societies divided between those who produce directly and those who live off a surplus product, any growth of the productive forces, however slow and piecemeal, leads to a corresponding change in the objective weight of the different classes in society. And some ways of developing the productive forces lead to qualitative changes, to new ways of extracting a surplus, to the embryos of new exploiting and exploited classes (and, eventually, to the formation of a class that can run society without exploiting anyone).

But the new ways of producing always face resistance from at least some of those whose interests lie in preservation of the old ways. The advance of every new mode of production is always marked by bitter class wars (even if, as with the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, these wars do not always involve clean breaks between classes, but often complicated, cross-cutting alliances between the most dynamic section of the rising class and certain interest groups within the old order).

Whether the new ways of producing break through depends on who wins these struggles. Economic developments are very important in this. They determine the size of the different classes, their geographical concentration (and therefore the ease with which they can be organised), their degree of homogeneity, the physical resources at their disposal.

Such direct economic factors can certainly create a situation in which the rising class cannot gain a victory, whatever it does. The objective balance of forces is too powerfully weighted the other way. But when the objective factors create a situation of near equality of forces for the rival classes, what come to matter are other factors – the ideological homogeneity, the organisation and the leadership of the rival classes.

For the mechanical materialist, ideas are simply an automatic reflection of material being. But in real historical processes of social transformation it is never that simple.

The institutions of the old ruling class are continually trying to define the ways in which people throughout society see themselves and their relations with others. The members of the rising class at first accept these definitions as the only ones available to them: so for instance, the early medieval burghers accepted the precepts of medieval Catholicism in their totality.

But the members of a rising class get involved in practical activity which cannot easily be encompassed by the old definitions. People begin to do things which the old world view says they should not. The institutions that enforce the old worldview then threaten punitive action against them.

At this point two options are open. Those involved in the new forms of activity concede to the pressures on them from the old order, and the new forms of activity cease. Or they generalise their clash with the old ideology, developing out

of elements of it a new total worldview, behind which they attempt to rally all those in a similar objective situation to themselves.

A new system of ideas is not just a passive reflection of economic changes. It is rather a key link in the process of social transformation, mobilising those affected by cumulative small-scale changes in production into a force whose aim is to change social relations in their entirety.

Take, for instance, the classic debate on Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. According to opponents of Marxism, like Max Weber, it was the autonomous 'non-economic' development of a new religious ideology which alone provided the ground in which new capitalist ways of producing could take root. Puritanism caused capitalism.

According to the mechanical materialists, it was the other way round. Protestantism was simply a mechanical reflection of the development of capitalist relations. Capitalism was the cause, Protestantism was the effect.

Each missed out a vital link in the chain of historical development. Protestantism developed because some people in a feudal society began to work and live in ways that are not easily reconcilable with the dominant ideology of medieval Catholicism. They began to reinterpret some of its tenets so as to make sense of their new forms of behaviour. But this led to clashes with the ideological guardians of the old order (the church hierarchy). At this point a series of figures emerged who tried to generalise the challenge to the old ideology – Luther, Calvin, etc. Where the challenge was unsuccessful or where those who made it were forced to compromise (as in Germany, France and Italy), the new ways of working and living became no more than marginal elements in a continuing feudal society. But where the challenge was successful (in Britain and the Netherlands) it

liberated the new ways of working and living from the old constraints – it generalised bourgeois forms of production.

The same relationship holds between the workers' struggle under capitalism and the ideas of revolutionary socialism.

Initially, workers try to fit their experience of fighting back against aspects of capitalism into ideological frameworks that are bequeathed to them from the past. These frameworks shape the form their struggles take, so that the struggles are never a simple reflection of material interests. 'The deadweight of the past hangs like a nightmare on the brain of the living', as Marx put it. [62] But the process of trying to interpret their new experiences through old frameworks creates a tension within the old frameworks, which is only resolved as people try to change the frameworks.

As Antonio Gramsci put it, 'The active man of the masses works practically, but he does not have a clear, theoretical consciousness of his actions, which is also a knowledge of the world insofar as he changes it.' So there are 'two sorts of consciousness', that 'implicit in his actions', and that 'superficially explicit, which he has inherited from the past and which he accepts without criticism':

This 'verbal' conception is not without consequences; it binds him to a certain social group, influences his moral behaviour and the direction of his will in a more or less powerful way, and it can reach the point where the contradiction of consciousness will not permit any action ... [Therefore] the unity of theory and practice is not a given mechanical fact, but a historical process of becoming. [63]

Thus the Chartists of the 1830s and 1840s attempted to come to terms with new experiences through older, radical democratic notions. But this created all sorts

of contradictory ideological formulations. That was why some of the most popular orators and writers were people like Bronterre O'Brien, Julian Harvey and Ernest Jones who began to articulate people's experience in newer, more explicitly socialist ways.

Marxism itself was not a set of ideas that emerged fully formed out of the heads of Marx and Engels and then magically took a grip of the working class movement. The birth of the theory was dependent on a distillation by Marx and Engels of the experiences of the young workers' movement in the years prior to 1848. It has been accepted by workers since then, insofar as it has fitted in with what struggles were already beginning to teach them. But its acceptance has then fed back into the struggles to influence their outcome.

The theory does not simply reflect workers' experience under capitalism; it generalises some elements of that experience (those of struggling against capitalism) into a consciousness of the system as a whole. In doing so, it gives new insights into how to wage the struggle and a new determination to fight.

Theory develops on the basis of practice, but feeds back into practice to influence its effectiveness.

The point is important because theory is not always correct theory. There have historically been very important workers' struggles waged under the influence of incorrect theories:

- Proudhonism and Blanquism in France in the second half of the 19th century;
- Lassallianism in Germany;



- Narodnism and even Russian Orthodoxy in Russia in the years before 1905;
- Peronism in Argentina;
- Catholicism and nationalism in Poland;
- and, of course, the terrible twins, social democracy and Stalinism.

In all of these cases workers have gone into struggle influenced by 'hybrid' views of the world – views which combine a certain immediate understanding of the needs of class struggle with a more general set of ideas accepting key elements of existing society. Such a false understanding of society in its totality leads to enormous blunders – blunders which again and again have led to massive defeats.

In the face of such confusion and such defeats, nothing is more dangerous than to say that ideas inevitably catch up with reality, that victory is certain. For this invariably leads to a downplaying of the importance of combining the practical and the ideological struggle.

## **The role of the party in history**

The other side of the coin to the mechanical materialists' downgrading of the ideological struggle has been a tendency for certain socialist academics to treat the ideological struggle as something quite separate from practical conflicts. This is especially

true of the reformists of the now defunct **Marxism Today** and of the Labour left.

But the struggle of ideas always grows out of struggle in the world of material practice, where ideas have their root, and always culminates in further such material struggles. It was the everyday activity of craftsmen and merchants under feudalism which gave rise to heretical, Protestant, religious formulations. And it was the all too real activity of armies which fought across the length and breadth of Europe which, at the end of the day, determined the success or failure of the new ideology.

The new idealists often claim their theoretical inspiration from Antonio Gramsci, but he was insistent on the connection between theoretical and practical struggle:

When the problem of the relation of theory and practice arises, it does so in this sense: to construct on a determined practice a theory that, coinciding and being identified with the decisive elements of the same practice, accelerates the historical process in act, makes the practice more homogeneous, coherent and efficacious in all its elements, that is, giving it the maximum force; or else, given a certain theoretical problem, to organise the essential practical elements to put it into operation. [64]

If you want to challenge capitalism's ideological hold today, you cannot do so unless you relate to people whose everyday struggles lead them to begin to challenge certain of its tenets. And if you want to carry the challenge through to the end, you have to understand that the ideological struggle transforms itself into practical struggle.

The transformation of practice into theory and theory into practice does not take place of its own accord. "A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself and does not become

independent 'by itself' without organising itself, and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is, without organisers and leaders ..." [65]

A rising class develops a clear set of ideas insofar as a polarisation takes place within it, and what is, at first, a minority of the class carrying the challenge to the old ideology through to its logical conclusion.

At a certain stage in the ideological and practical struggle that minority crystallises out as a separate 'party' (whether it calls itself that or not). It is through the struggle of such parties that the development of the forces and relations of production find expression in new ideas, and that the new ideas are used to mobilise people to tear the old superstructure apart. In a famous passage in **What is to be Done?** Lenin said that 'political ideas' are brought to the working class from outside. If he meant that workers played no part in the elaboration of the revolutionary socialist world view he was wrong. [66] If he meant that practical experience did not open workers up to socialist ideas he was wrong. [67] But if he meant to stress that socialist ideas do not conquer the class without the separation off of a distinct socialist organisation, which is built through a long process of ideological and practical struggle, he was absolutely right.

The famous discussions of the mechanical materialists were about the 'role of the individual in history'. [68] But it was not the individual, but the party, which became central for the non-mechanical, non-voluntaristic materialism of the revolutionary years after 1917.

Trotsky explains in his masterpiece, the **History of the Russian Revolution**, that revolutions occur precisely because the superstructure does not change mechanically with every change in the economic base:

Society does not change its institutions as the need arises the way a mechanic changes his instruments. On the contrary,

society actually takes the institutions which hang upon it as given once and for all. For decades the oppositional criticism is nothing more than a safety valve for mass dissatisfaction, a condition of the stability of the social structure. [69]

The 'radical turns which take place in the course of a revolution' are not simply the result of 'episodic economic disturbances'. 'It would be the crudest mistake to assume that the second revolution [of 1917] was accomplished eight months after the first owing to the fact that the bread ration was lowered from one and a half pounds to three quarters of a pound.' An attempt to explain things in these terms 'exposes to perfection the worthlessness of that vulgarly economic interpretation of history which is frequently given out as Marxism'. [70]

What become decisive are 'swift, intense and passionate changes in the psychology of classes which have already been formed before the revolution'. [71] 'Revolutions are accomplished through people, although they be nameless. Materialism does not ignore the feeling, thinking, acting man, but explains him'. [72]

Parties are an integral part of the revolutionary process:

They constitute not an independent, but nevertheless a very important element in the process.

Without the guiding organisation, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston box. But nevertheless, what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam.

[73]

But parties always involve a subjective element in the way that economic forces and the formation of classes do not. Parties have to be organised around certain

ideological postulates, and that requires the effort, activity and argument of individuals.

In Russia in 1917 the contradictions in material reality could not be resolved without the working class seizing power. But the working class could not become conscious of that need without a minority in the class separating itself off from the ideas of the majority. There needed to be 'the break of the proletarian vanguard with the petty bourgeois bloc'. [74] Many workers began to move, under the pressure of events, to make this break. But they were held back at first from consummating the break because of their own confused ideas: 'They did not know how to refuse the premise about the bourgeois character of the revolution and the danger of the isolation of the proletariat'. [75] 'The dictatorship of the proletariat was to be inferred from the whole situation, but it had still to be established. It could not be established without a party'. [76]

The fact that the human material existed to build a party before 1917 was a result of objective historical developments. But these developments had to find expression in the activity and ideas of individuals. And once the revolution started, the activity of the party was not a blind reflection of reality. True, 'The party could fulfil its mission only by understanding it', [77] but that depended on the ability of different individuals to articulate ideas about the objective situation and to win party members to them.

This was where, for Trotsky, one individual, Lenin, did play an unparalleled role. He was 'needed' for the party to understand events and act effectively. 'Until his arrival, not one of the Bolshevik leaders dared to make a diagnosis of the revolution.'

He was not a 'demiurge of the revolutionary process', acting on it as an arbitrary element from outside. 'He merely

entered into the chain of objective historical forces. But he was a great link in that chain.' Without Lenin many workers were beginning to grope towards a knowledge of what needed to be done. But their groping needed to be generalised, to become part of a new total view of the revolution. 'Lenin did not impose a plan on the masses: he helped the masses to recognise and realise their own plan.'

[78]

The arguments would have taken place without him. But there is no guarantee they would have been resolved in a way which would have enabled the party to act decisively:

Inner struggle in the Bolshevik Party was absolutely unavoidable. Lenin's arrival merely hastened the process. His personal influence shortened the crisis.

Is it possible, however, to say confidently that the party without him would have found its road? We would by no means make bold to say that. The factor of time is decisive here, and it is difficult in retrospect to tell time historically.

Dialectical materialism at any rate has nothing in common with fatalism. Without Lenin the crisis, which the opportunist leadership was inevitably bound to produce, would have assumed an extraordinarily sharp and protracted character. The conditions of war and revolution, however, would not allow the party a long period for fulfilling its mission. Thus it is by no means excluded that a disoriented and split party may have let slip the revolutionary opportunity for many years. [79]

The individual plays a role in history, but only insofar as the individual is part of the process by which a party enables the class to become conscious of itself.

An individual personality is a product of objective history (experience of the class relations of the society in which he

or she grows up, previous attempts at rebellion, the prevailing culture, and so on). But if he or she plays a role in the way a section of the class becomes conscious of itself and organises itself as a party, he or she feeds back into the historical process, becoming 'a link in the historical chain'.

For revolutionaries to deny this is to fall into a fatalism which tries to shrug off all responsibility for the outcome of any struggle. It can be just as dangerous as the opposed error of believing that the activity of revolutionaries is the only thing that matters.

The point is absolutely relevant today. In modern capitalism there are continual pressures on revolutionary Marxists to succumb to the pressures of mechanical materialism on the one hand and of voluntaristic idealism on the other.

Mechanical materialism fits the life of the bureaucracies of the Labour movement. Their positions rest upon the slow accretion of influence within existing society. They believe the future will always be a result of gradual organic growth out of the present, without the leaps and bounds of qualitative change. That is why a Marxism which is adjusted to their work (like that of the former Militant tendency or the pro-Russian wing of the old Communist Party) tends to be a Kautskyite Marxism.

The voluntarism of the new idealism fits in with the aspirations of the new middle class and of reformist intellectuals. They live lives cut off from the real process of production and exploitation, and easily fall into believing that ideological conviction and commitment alone can remove from the world the spectres of crisis, famine and war.

Revolutionary Marxism can only survive these pressures if it can group fighting minorities into parties. These cannot jump outside material history, but the contradictions of

history cannot be resolved without their own, conscious activity.

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## Notes

1. Karl Marx, **A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy**, London 1971.
2. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, **Collected Works**, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1975, Vol.6, p.166.
3. Karl Kautsky, **The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx**, London, 1925, p.365.
4. Karl Kautsky, **Vorläufer der neuen Sozialismus, Erster Band: Kommunistische Bewegungen im Mittelalter**, Berlin 1923, p.365. An English translation of part of this work was produced in the 1890s, but is virtually unobtainable today. This is unfortunate, since the weakness in Kautsky's method did not prevent him producing interesting historical studies.
5. Karl Kautsky, **Ethics and the Materialistic Conception of History**, London 1906, p.81.
6. Like most other mechanical materialists, Kautsky could not stick rigidly to his own method. At points he does suggest that human activity has an important role to play, as when he suggests in his introduction to the **Erfurt Programme** that unless 'society shakes off the burden' of 'the system of private ownership of the means of production' in the way that the 'evolutionary law' decrees, the system will 'pull society down with it into the abyss'. **The Class Struggle**, Chicago 1910, p.87.
7. Georgi Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History*, in **Essays in Historical Materialism**, New York 1940, p.41.
8. **ibid.**
9. Georgi Plekhanov, **Fundamental Problems of Marxism**, Moscow n.d., p.83.
10. **ibid.**, p.80.
11. Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History*, **op. cit.**, p.44.



12. Which is not at all to blame Plekhanov, who was often quite sophisticated theoretically, for the crudeness of the Stalinist use of his writings.

13. Letter of 25 January 1894.

14. Letter of 21/22 September 1890. Cf. also his letters to Schmidt of 5 August 1890 and 27 October 1890, and his letter to Mehring of 14 July 1893.

15. See, for instance, E.P. Thompson's vigorous polemic against the Althusserians, **The Poverty of Theory**, London 1978.

16. In **New Left Review**, No.3, May 1960.

17. See **The Poverty of Theory, op. cit.**, pp.251-252.

18. See, for instance, his essay, *Rethinking Chartism*, in **Language of Class** (Cambridge, 1983).

19. See, for instance, Norah Carlin's remark that 'the distinction between base and superstructure is misleading more often than it is useful', in *Is the Family Part of the Superstructure?* in **International Socialism**, Vol.26; and Alex Callinicos' suggestion that the Marxist method involves 'starting from relations of production and treating them, not forces of production, as the independent', **Marxism and Philosophy**, London 1983, p.12.

20. G.A. Cohen, **Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence**, Oxford 1978.

21. See A. Labriola, **Essays on the Materialist Conception of History and Socialism and Philosophy**, Chicago 1918.

22. V.I. Lenin, **Collected Works**, Progress Publishers, Moscow, Vol.38, p.276.

23. See the criticism of Trotsky's position in Isaac Deutscher, **The Prophet Outcast**, pp.240-247.

24. **The German Ideology** in Marx and Engels, **Collected Works**, vol.5, pp.31, 41-42. This article was written using an older translation which is marginally different in places from that in the **Collected Works**.

25. **ibid.**, p.31.

26. Labriola **op. cit.**, p.55.

27. **The German Ideology**, *op. cit.*, p.31.
28. *ibid.*, p.32.
29. *ibid.*, p.35.
30. **Theories of Surplus Value**, Part I, Moscow n.d., p.280.
31. Quoted earlier.
32. **The Poverty of Philosophy**, *op. cit.*, p.166.
33. **The Communist Manifesto** in Marx, Engels, Lenin, **The Essential Left**, London 1960, p.7.
34. *ibid.*, p.15.
35. For an excellent account of how successive Bronze Age civilisations collapsed into 'dark ages', see V. Gordon Childe, **What Happened in History**, Harmondsworth 1948, pp.134, 135-136, 165. For 'regression' in the Amazon, see C. Levi Strauss, *The Concept of Archaism in Anthropology* in **Structural Anthropology**, Harmondsworth, 1968, pp.107-112.
36. Cf. C. Turnbull, **The Mountain People**, London, 1974.
37. **Capital**, Vol.1, pp.339-340.
38. **The German Ideology**, *op. cit.*, p.93.
39. This is the point Georg Lukács makes in **History and Class Consciousness**, London 1971, pp.55-59.
40. See the brief outline of this process in Lindsey German, *Theories of Patriarchy* in **International Socialism**, No.12.
41. This is what some patriarchy theorists do, and so does Norah Carlin in *Is the Family Part of the Superstructure?* in **International Socialism**, No.26.
42. Norah Carlin gives a lot of attention to these changes, but does not consider where they originate. Her refusal to take the categories of base and superstructure seriously prevents her from doing so.
43. This is the argument of Simon Clarke, *Althusser's Marxism*, in Simon Clarke *et al.*, **One Dimensional Marxism**, London 1980, p.20: 'Social relations of production appear in specific economic, ideological and political forms.'

44. Simon Clarke ends up trying to relate to such contradictions by talking of the ‘extent that any social relation is subsumed under the capitalist relations’. The phrasing is much more cumbersome than Marx’s own ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’, and does not easily enable one to distinguish between the contradictions of the capitalist economy and other elements of contradiction that emerge at points in the concrete history of the system. All conflicts produced by the system are seen as being of equal importance. Politically this leads to a voluntarism very similar to that of post-Althusserianism.

45. Marx & Engels, **The Communist Manifesto in Selected Works**, Moscow 1962, Vol.1, p.37.

46. For a much fuller development of these ideas see my **Explaining the Crisis**, Bookmarks, London 1984.

47. The German Ideology, **op. cit.**, p.36.

48. **ibid.**, p.36.

49. **ibid.**, p.43.

50. **ibid.**, pp.43-44.

51. **ibid.**, p.446.

52. **ibid.**, p.83.

53. Marx & Engels, **Collected Works**, Vol.5, pp.3-5.

54. The distinction between different forms of consciousness was one of the fruits of German philosophy and is to be found in the earlier part of Hegel, **Phenomenology of Mind**. Marx, of course, gives a different significance to this distinction than does Hegel. The problem of how it is possible to move from ‘immediate’ consciousness to a true general or ‘mediated’ consciousness is the concern of Lukács’ major philosophical essay, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* in **History and Class Consciousness**, **op. cit.**, p.446.

55. **The German Ideology**, **op. cit.**, p.446.

56. **Ibid.**, p449.

57. For a comparison between Marx and Wittgenstein, see A. MacIntyre, *Breaking the Chains of Reason*, in E.P. Thompson (ed.), **Out of Apathy**, London 1960, p.234.

58. I use 'historicist' here in the traditional sense of a relativism which says that there are no general criteria of truth or falsity, but that the correctness of ideas depends on the concrete historical situation in which they are put forward. This is, for instance, the sense in which the term is used by Gramsci. It is not to be confused with Karl Popper's use of it in ***The Poverty of Historicism*** as a term of abuse to refer to virtually any general account of history.

59. **Theories of Surplus Value**, London 1951, p.202.

60. **Theories of Surplus Value**, Vol.1, Moscow n.d., p.279.

61. **ibid.**, p.291.

62. **The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte in Collected Works**, Vol.11, p.103. It is nonsense for post-Althusserians like Gareth Stedman Jones to claim that a Marxist approach involves an attempt to 'decode ... political language to read a primal and material expression of interest', **Language of Class, op. cit.**, p.21.

63. Antonio Gramsci, *Avriamento allo Studio della Filosofia del Materialismo Storico* in **Materialismo Storico** (Turin 1948), translated in **The Modern Prince**, London 1957, pp.66-67.

64. **Materialismo Storico, op. cit.**, p.38.

65. **ibid.**, translated in **The Modern Prince, op. cit.**, p.67.

66. As he himself later admitted. V.I. Lenin, **Collected Works**, Vol.6, p.491.

67. Note his comment in 1905, 'The working class is instinctively, spontaneously, social democratic ...', quoted in Chris Harman, *Party and Class* in Tony Cliff *et al.*, *Party and Class*, Bookmarks, London 1996.

68. Georgi Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History*, **op. cit.**

69. Leon Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution**, London 1965, *Preface* to Vol.1, p.18.

70. **ibid.**, *Introduction* to Vols.2 & 3, p.510.

71. **ibid.**, *Preface*, p.8.

72. **ibid.**, *Introduction*, p.511.

**73. ibid., p.9.**

**74. ibid., Vol.1, p.334.**

**75. ibid., p.302.**

**76. ibid., p.343.**

**77. ibid., p.343.**

**78. ibid., p.339.**

**79. ibid., p.343.**

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