

*Marxism and the Theory  
of Praxis*

A critique of some new versions  
of old fallacies

by

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## THE PROMISE OF PRAXIS—AN END TO POSITIVISM?

## (i) "Non-Practical Thinking" in Contemporary Positivism

Theory and practice: the two must unite! This cry of protest is to be heard everywhere today by those who find their interest in philosophy and society sabotaged and sidetracked by the scholasticism and "academicism" of much of official philosophical thought and by many of the attitudes and postures adopted in the social sciences.

Some even regard the term "science" as a dirty word, for "science" today is often taken to mean theory without practice, facts without values, technical knowledge without human consideration. Science, we are told, can only be concerned with "means": what actually happens to knowledge is somebody else's concern. Indeed so extreme has this "agnosticism" become, that Marx's famous dictum has been explicitly turned on to its head so that one social scientist has written that "the function of science is to understand and interpret the world, not to change it".<sup>1</sup> It is scarcely surprising, then, that much academic social science seems pointless and trivial—a body of work more concerned with methodological technique than with serious social criticism.

A leading U.S. sociologist once described his "conceptual framework" as "non-practical theory" and, ironically, he had a point: for learned works on "pure theory" are unlikely to assist in solving social problems, while the professional desire to be "value-free" often means in practice robbing work of its *value* for society. The attempt to keep value judgments out of social science is simply a back-handed way of supporting the *status quo*.

Fewer and fewer people today take seriously the claim that it is possible to be "impartial" (i.e. *indifferent*) towards the class-divided society in which we live. Indeed, it was precisely this cloak of "neutrality" which thousands of natural and social scientists in the U.S. used to try to conceal their complicity in the slaughter, bombing and defoliation which the Americans and their South Vietnamese puppets practised in Vietnam. Radicals like Noam Chomsky have courageously

<sup>1</sup> Heinz Eulau, *The Behavioral Persuasion in Politics* (New York, 1963), p. 9.

matter, then, argues common-sensical realism, it must be all the same: between the musician and nightingale there is only "a difference in organisation". But it is precisely this *difference* in organisation which gives consciousness its own distinct, qualitative identity: which makes consciousness the consciousness of distinctively human practice, endowed with a property which no other mode of existence of matter possesses: the material ability to rationally reflect matter. Common sense thinks mechanically: because the brain is material, it concludes that it responds to its environment as "passively" and purposelessly as appears the case with all other forms. If consciousness is the "same" as matter, how then can it be different?

It is characteristic of the entire crudeness of "common sense" . . . that where it succeeds in seeing a distinction it fails to see a unity, and where it sees a unity it fails to see a distinction,<sup>98</sup>

and this of course is brilliantly said. *Either* thinking is absolutely identical with all other forms of material activity, *or* it is a self-explaining miracle. Praxis theory naturally enough is too "adventurous" to accept the first: so that in place of the first, it puts the second. Turning common sense inside out, it throws out the realism, but adheres to the naïveté, so that the implicit one-sidedness and subjectivism of mechanical materialism is brought proudly to the fore. It is the theoretical creativity of praxis which rules the world!

"Naïve realism" is not transcended by accepting its assumptions and then standing them on their head. If it is naïve to think that consciousness is "simply" being (without its own properties), so too is it naïve to imagine that being is simply consciousness (i.e. without any material properties at all). Praxis theory, in rejecting the theory of reflection, rejects the strengths of mechanical materialism with its *attempt*, inconsistent as it was, to understand matter, and instead inherits, builds upon and unthinkingly glorifies all its most pivotal weaknesses.

It does not even stand up to the criticisms of common sense.

<sup>98</sup> Marx's review, *Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritische Moral*, cited by Schmidt, op. cit., p. 50.

## 6

## BASIS AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

The well-known Marxist analysis of base and superstructure follows on directly from the question discussed in the last chapter, namely the primacy of material being to the human consciousness which reflects it. This link between epistemology and social theory is forged quite explicitly in Marx's famous Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where, elaborating upon a position already expounded in *The German Ideology*, Marx explains how men as social producers enter into productive relations which correspond to a given stage in the development of their productive forces; these relations form a social basis to which correspond legal and political superstructures, and are reflected in definite forms of social consciousness. Being determines consciousness, so that consciousness "must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production".<sup>1</sup> It is clear then that the Marxist theory of history rests foursquare upon the premises of dialectical materialism, and that unless one accepts the materialist theory of reflection the entire thesis of historical materialism, so admirably expounded in the Preface, simply falls to the ground.

Lenin makes this clear in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* when he stresses that reflection theory holds *both* for dialectical materialism and historical materialism, and adds—a famous comment—that

from this Marxist philosophy, which is cast from a single piece of steel, you cannot eliminate one basic premise, one essential part, without departing from objective truth, without falling prey to bourgeois-reactionary falsehood.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that when we come to explaining social history the materialist theory of reflection no longer holds is self-evidently absurd, because of course it is precisely in the context of society that the dialectical materialist concept of consciousness becomes relevant. The fact that Marx in the Preface above expounds reflection theory in terms of human society does not mean that the primacy of being to

<sup>1</sup> Preface to the *Critique*, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Lenin, op. cit., p. 306.

consciousness does not hold as a universal philosophical truth: it does, and it holds whether we think of material being as being socially mediated or "purely natural".

This, however, does not go down well with the theorists of praxis. Avineri argues, for example, that

Marx never said that "being determines consciousness", but that "social being determines consciousness"<sup>3</sup>

and to all who can free themselves from non-scholarly "partisanship" it must be obvious that "these are two entirely different statements". Why? Because, says Avineri, according to Marx,

"productive forces" are not objective facts external to human consciousness. They represent the organisation of human consciousness and human activity. . . . Consequently, the distinction between "material base" and "superstructure" is not a distinction between "matter" and "spirit" (as Engels in his later writings would have it) but between conscious human activity, aimed at the creation and preservation of the conditions of human life, and human consciousness which furnishes reasons, rationalisations . . . for the specific forms that activity takes.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, we can reject dialectical materialism and yet still preserve the distinction between basis and superstructure, but now in an authentically "dialectical" way which accords with the teachings of praxis.

But the argument that "conscious human activity" is involved in productive forces does not in any way undermine the materialist distinction between matter and spirit, for the primacy of being to consciousness has never been taken by Marxism to mean that human production can take place independently of human thought. On the contrary, Marx makes it perfectly explicit (in the famous passage about the bee and the architect in *Capital*, for example) that human production is both physical and mental, while Engels, in a brilliant but somewhat neglected (in the West) tract on the *Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, argued that labour could only become human when, as the product of its development, men developed the capacity to speak and to think.

The reaction of labour and speech of the development of the brain and its attendant senses, of the increasing clarity of consciousness, power of

<sup>3</sup> Avineri, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

abstraction and conclusion, gave both labour and speech an ever-renewed impulse to further development.<sup>5</sup>

Once men have become distinct from apes, there can be no doubt that their development of tools requires the complete co-ordination of all mental and manual faculties. So there is no question of arguing that because ideological superstructures reflect a material base, that human production can take place without human thought.

All human activity is conscious activity. It cannot possibly be anything else. When Marx insists that being (whether social or natural) is independent of the consciousness which reflects it, what he is getting at is *not* that human production occurs without thought, but that what happens in the world of production occurs independently of what people may happen to think is happening. In other words, a social base is not external to thought *as such*, it is external to thought *as an interpretation* of what is going on. For this reason, productive forces are indeed objective facts beyond human consciousness, because it is crucial to be able to distinguish between what conscious human activity is *in fact* doing and what conscious human activity (through its ideologists) may imagine is the case. The position is really quite simple.

Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

It requires the sophistry of a praxis critic to imply that because we cannot judge a social transformation by its consciousness, that therefore such a transformation is supposed to occur without any human consciousness being involved at all. The distinction between matter and spirit is not (and no serious Marxist has ever argued that it was) an *absolute* one. It is intended only as a *relative* distinction, so that reference to a social basis as material emphasises that it is independent not from consciousness as such (in any absolute sense), but from the particular way in which people imagine it, consciousness in the relative sense, i.e. as it relates to people's subjective beliefs, visions, ideals, fancies, conceptions, etc.

Avineri's praxis version of the base/superstructure analysis which merely distinguishes between "conscious human activity, aimed at the creation and preservation of the conditions of human life" and "human consciousness which furnishes reasons", smudges therefore the crucial distinction which Marx makes between society as it *really* is and society

<sup>5</sup> *Dialectics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> Marx's Preface to the *Critique*, op. cit., p. 21.

as it may *appear* to people at any given time. As it stands it is powerless to free the scientist from "the illusion of the epoch", and the latent idealism of Avineri's ambiguous formulation is made perfectly explicit in the work of a praxis writer who followed Weber rather than Marx, and argued that historical materialism was materialist only in name because

the economic sphere was, in the last analysis, in spite of occasional denials of this fact, a structural interrelationship of mental attitudes. The existent economic system was precisely a "system", i.e. something which arises in the sphere of the mind (the objective mind as Hegel understood it).<sup>7</sup>

Because human production is *conscious* production, therefore, says Mannheim, it only occurs in the mind. Certainly this argument is absurd, but it confirms the point which Lenin makes in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, that it is impossible to think about philosophy consistently unless one ascribes historical priority to the world of matter or to the world of mind. To try to defend a distinction between basis and superstructure, as Avineri does, *without* embracing either a materialist or an idealist theory of reflection simply cannot be done, for all it leaves us with is an idealist muddle.

The inability to grasp the relationship between dialectical and historical materialism, to understand the way in which reflection theory expresses itself in social terms, has created great confusion over the question of basis and superstructure, and nowhere is this confusion more clearly seen than over those celebrated letters which Engels wrote towards the end of his life in which he sought to clarify the materialist conception of history:

Just as the adversaries of Marxism have construed Marxism as mechanical rather than dialectical, so too, unfortunately, have some of its "friends", and in a letter to Schmidt (5/8/1890) Engels warned against those for whom historical materialism serves "as an excuse for not studying history",<sup>8</sup> the arid, one-sided belief that because the economy is ultimately decisive in determining the course of history, that the superstructure can have no causal role to play. The "fatuous notion", as Engels describes it, that "because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them *any effect upon history*".<sup>9</sup> Among the more recent proponents of this "fatuous notion" have been Frankfurt

<sup>7</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (Routledge, 1960), p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 496.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 542.

theorists like Erich Fromm who see in Engels' comments a recognition on his part of

the failure to pay enough attention to the power of ideas in their theory of historical materialism. But it was not given to Marx or to Engels to make the necessary drastic revisions.<sup>10</sup>

But this is a most garbled version of what in fact Engels said. Engels conceded both in his letter to Schmidt (27/10/1890) and in his letter to Mehring (14/7/1893) that he and Marx, in their *general* expositions of historical materialism, had been chiefly concerned in stressing against those who denied it, the overriding importance of economic forces. This emphasis had resulted in a certain neglect of form for content: in other words, the *principle* had been stressed rather than the difficulties and complexities which are inevitably involved in the "concrete analysis of concrete conditions". But this imbalance was in no way the fault of the theory itself, which had never suggested or implied that "only economics matter", and the misunderstanding had arisen only in the minds of those who had simplistically misread the theory in its most general formulation.

Theory can only really be grasped when it is practically applied, and, as Engels adds emphatically,

when it came to presenting a section of history, that is, to making a practical application, it was a different matter, and there no error was permissible.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, to really understand historical materialism we must look not merely to the general theory, but to how it works out in practice; and it soon becomes clear to anyone who reads Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, for example, or Engels' *Peasant War in Germany* that the economic basis cannot for a minute exist "on its own", but is itself moulded and shaped by the politics and ideas of the period. Indeed, the absurd and senseless notion that only the base matters can only arise because commentators persist in trying to abstract historical materialism from the living process of history. Put into a concrete context and applied, it soon becomes obvious that the economic basis only exists *at all* because it is related to the superstructure above it. Base and superstructure form an inextricable *unity*, and the difficulty in understanding this arises from the same mechanistic thinking which we encountered before. If something is

<sup>10</sup> *The Sane Society*, p. 266.

<sup>11</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, p. 500.

different, then it cannot be the same, and if it is the same, then it cannot be different. The fact that we can differentiate basis from superstructure, the fact that we point to the ultimate primacy of one over the other, does *not* mean that the two are not, at the same time, part and parcel of the same social totality—that “whole vast process” which, as Engels put it, “goes on in the form of interaction”. The separation, in other words, between basis and superstructure (like the distinction between being and consciousness) is an *analytical* or epistemological one, intended to *explain* the component parts of a social reality which can only exist *as a whole*. In the real world of course no separation of this kind can be made at all, as would be immediately obvious to anyone who actually tried to abstract the forces of production from the framework of property relations, or to abstract the relations of production from the legal system, State apparatus and world of culture which these relations necessarily presuppose. We can only understand through abstraction—an abstraction which reveals that between the basis and superstructure there is both unity and differentiation. There is *interaction* between the component elements, but within this causal cut and thrust there is the ultimate *primacy* of one over the other.

Yet even some of the more diligent commentators on Marxism find this point difficult to grasp. Bottomore and Rubel, commenting on Marx’s increasingly well-known *Grundrisse*, argue that

at no point in his discussion of material production does Marx use such expressions as “in the last analysis” or “ultimate factor”. In these manuscripts he is far from expounding the kind of monist determinism from which Engels found it difficult to extricate himself when, after Marx’s death, he was obliged to concede the deficiencies of the materialist conception of history as (in his account) he and Marx had formulated it in their various writings.<sup>12</sup>

Now it is true that Marx writes in the *Grundrisse* that “production, distribution, exchange and consumption are not identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity”.<sup>13</sup> Are we, however, to conclude from this sentence that Marx, unlike Engels, did not regard material production as the factor ultimately decisive in the understanding of history? We must read on . . .

production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. The process always

<sup>12</sup> *Intro.* to *Karl Marx, Selected Writings*, eds. Bottomore and Rubel (Pelican 1963), p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Grundrisse*, trans. Nicolaus (Pelican, 1973), p. 99.

returns to production to begin anew. That exchange and consumption cannot be predominant is self-evident. Likewise distribution as distribution of products; while distribution of the agents of production is itself a moment of production. A definite production thus determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as *definite relations between these different moments*.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, while “*in its one-sided form*, production is itself determined by the other moments”, when looked at as a whole “production predominates”. It serves as that self-same “ultimate factor” which Bottomore and Rubel ascribe to a struggling Engels, and confirms the simple point which Engels was making in his letters, that within the interacting organic whole there must of necessity be *priority*. If this is “monistic determinism”, it is monistic determinism not because production is not itself “in its one-sided form” determined by the other moments, but because, when all is said and done, “production predominates”—the ultimate but certainly not the only determining factor.

“What these gentlemen all lack,” writes Engels in exasperation, “is dialectics. They always see only here cause, there effect. . . . As far as they are concerned, Hegel never existed.”<sup>15</sup> How apposite is the comment in describing the critics and commentators of historical materialism today! What they lack is a dialectical understanding of the unity of opposites: an analytical distinction between basis and superstructure is taken to mean the rejection of society *as a whole*; a determinism of superstructure by base is assumed to imply the absence of any interaction between them. The insistence on differentiation *within* unity can only be “mechanistic” and “positivist”, for after all it is concerned with explaining reality as it really is. Nothing very much remains of praxial man and his abstract creativity. . . .

The rejection, then, by praxis writers and their ideological allies of dialectical materialism, with its crucial distinction between the dialectics of thought and being, extends itself to the rejection of historical materialism with its distinction between base and superstructure. But it is not simply that the theorists of praxis deem historical materialism “mechanical”, thus demoting the “creativity” of ideas in importance, it is held that the distinction between base and superstructure does serious violence to reality. Instead of reflecting life as it develops, historical materialism, it is alleged, suffocates it beneath its alienated abstractions and results in precisely the dogmatism it purports to avoid.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 507.

Arch-critic in this regard is Jean-Paul Sartre who devotes a good deal of his Introduction to the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* (translated as *Search for a Method*) to attacking this “dogmatism” of the contemporary and classical Marxists. I turn to consider his arguments in a little more detail.

(i) *Sartre's Critique of "Idealist Marxism"*

As far as Sartre is concerned, “idealist Marxism” has the incorrigible habit of conceptualising events *a priori*. Concrete events and real historical people are forced “terroristically” into prefabricated moulds, so that the “particularities” of history are liquidated in the process. “The lazy Marxist puts everything into everything”, complains Sartre—real men become mere symbols of the Marxist’s myths and analysis boils down to “the bureaucrat’s practice of unifying everything”. But who are the lazy Marxists whom Sartre has in mind?

One of them certainly seems to be Engels, for Sartre draws his reader’s attention to Engels’ letter to Starkenburg (25/1/1894), where Engels elaborates his view that all societies are governed by necessity, “the complement and form of appearance of which is *accident*”.<sup>16</sup> Take the case, Engels says, of the great man in history—that such and such a man is found at a particular time is pure chance. Cut him out and a substitute will be found, at least in the long run. “If a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled his place.” Accidents, in other words, play their role in history, but only as the particularised configurations of necessity. The further away a particular sphere is from necessity—i.e. economic necessity—and the closer it approaches the realm of ideology and personality—i.e. “accident”—the more zig-zag will be the curve which links the two spheres.

But if you plot the average axis of the curve, you will find that this axis will run more and more nearly parallel to the axis of economic development the longer the period considered and the wider the field dealt with.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, no matter how remote the world of “genius” and ideology appears from the world of necessity, its independence is ultimately illusory, and despite the complex and accidental configurations of its forms it follows in the long run the path of economic progress.

Now this argument greatly incenses Sartre: it involves, he protests, a liquidation of particularity, “an arbitrary limitation of the dialectical

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 549.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 550.

movement, an arresting of thought, a refusal to understand”.<sup>18</sup> It points to Engels’ inability to accept or to understand the existence of the unforeseeable—“the unthinkable changes of birth”—and his insistence on contemplating “a universality limited to indefinitely reflecting upon itself”.<sup>19</sup> Marxism, that is to say, is afraid of *life*—a life which can only be understood without a *prioristic* abstract schemas which arbitrarily subordinate some elements to others—a life which men themselves constitute in the course of their praxis—a life which will restore into “the universality of concepts”, “the unsurpassed singularity of the human adventure”.<sup>20</sup> Marxism, in short, can only become humanly relevant if we “reconquer men within Marxism”.

What is the validity of such a criticism? In what sense can it be said that Marxism is a *prioristic*? It is certainly not true that Marxism seeks to impose prefabricated moulds upon reality in the manner Sartre contends. Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* place especial emphasis upon the fact that the premises from which historical materialism begins are “the real premises”—that is to say, “men, not in any fantastic isolation or rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions”.<sup>21</sup> And there are a good many passages elsewhere in their writings which establish the same point. Not least in this regard are the above-mentioned letters of Engels themselves, in which Engels warns (in the letter to Ernst, for example, 5/6/1890), that

the materialist method turns into its opposite if it is taken not, as one’s guiding principle in historical investigation, but as a ready pattern according to which one shapes the facts of history to suit oneself.<sup>22</sup>

A real understanding of history can only spring from the concrete investigation of its realities: how then can it be said by Sartre that Marxism is “limited to indefinitely reflecting” upon its own universals?

What Sartre is getting at, it appears, is this: historical materialism is a *universal* theory which asserts a set of relationships between basis and superstructure which apply *regardless* of given circumstances. In other words, the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production exists, of necessity, in *all* societies, and forms, again *without* exception, the material basis upon which the various

<sup>18</sup> *Search for a Method*, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>21</sup> *German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 493.



superstructures arise. Marxism, in other words, as a science "liquidates" the possibility that things might be otherwise, and thus to a praxical Sartre, for whom mankind makes the world what it is as it goes along, this *universal* theory necessarily jumps the gun. How do we *know*, he protests, that the economic basis of a society always determines its superstructure? We should rather examine each particular situation itself in order to determine

in each case whether the action or the work reflects the superstructural motives of groups or of individuals formed by certain basic conditionings, or whether one can explain them only by referring immediately to economic contradictions and to conflicts of material interests.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, what Sartre seems to be saying is that at times historical materialism is relevant and at other times it is not. The base *may* determine the superstructure, but then again, it may not. Indeed, it may even happen that neither factor is the crucial one, and instead psycho-analysis with its concern with the conditioning of individuals as a series of unique events will reveal the key to the situation. What is required, says Sartre, is "a supple, patient dialectic" to meet every contingency: whether such a "dialectic" is materialist, idealist or psycho-analytical will all depend.

Now it is true that every theory, including Marxism, can degenerate into dogma; but what Sartre is in effect arguing is that Marxism, because it is a *universal* theory of history, is for this reason alone, dogmatic. And this is absurd. Marx states quite explicitly in his Preface to the *Critique* that "the general conclusion" at which he arrived and which became "the guiding principle of my studies" was the "outcome of conscientious research carried on over many years". It was not the product of some kind of arid metaphysical introspection, worked out in abstraction from those "particulars" of living history which Sartre claims to prize so highly. The fact that Marxism has been derived from a "concrete analysis of concrete conditions" does not make it any the less universal for that reason: in fact quite the contrary is true. Marx's *certainty* as to the universality of certain contradictions is the product of a truly encyclopaedic grasp of historical fact, and the *a prioristic* manner in which Marx presents his theory, does not mean that it is abstract or dogmatic, but rather that it has been thoroughly and systematically worked out. Indeed, since Sartre is clearly unable to differentiate scientific theory from the mere momentary impressions

<sup>23</sup> Sartre, op. cit., p. 42.

which the observer has of the outside world, it is worth-while elaborating this last point a little further.

In the famous Preface to the *Critique*, for example, Marx is able to set out the theory of historical materialism in an *a prioristic* manner because he has worked out the theory as a whole. Thus he can pin-point the crucial importance of the relations of production into which men enter, explain how in conjunction with the forces of production these form the economic basis of society, and why the real source of all social revolution is to be found in the antagonism between relations and forces of production. In other words, each theoretical conclusion stems from the one *prior* to it, so that the theory is presented logically and in a manner which shows how the process develops. The ease with which the theory can now be assimilated should not mislead the reader into believing (as Sartre appears to do) that a theory can be actually *worked out* in the same *a prioristic* way in which it is finally presented. That each premise logically reveals itself to the investigator one by one! In fact, of course, exactly the opposite is likely to be true. The *basis* from which the theory starts will only be discovered where the investigation begins to end, so that as Marx points out in his valuable discussion on method, "the real point of origin" appears

in reasoning as a summing up, a result. . . .<sup>24</sup>

The explanation for the paradox is this: the practice of acquiring knowledge follows a path diametrically opposite to its subsequent theoretical presentation. In practical investigation one begins by probing the chaos of apparently unrelated facts all around, having to start off with only "a very vague notion of a complex whole". Gradually historical depth and an inner, apparently hidden causality is brought into the open, so that the "complex whole" can be increasingly *explained*. Simple basic definitions become possible (the product of much preliminary empirical work), and from these initial concepts other aspects of the system can be worked out so as to approximate more and more to that social whole which, in practice, is where the investigation began. Thus although, as Marx comments, "it would seem to be the proper thing to start with the real and concrete elements, with the actual pre-conditions",<sup>25</sup> in fact *science* cannot begin with the concrete world in its totality, for that is the object which, in its diversity and complexity, it needs to explain. Science must move

<sup>24</sup> *Critique of Political Economy*, Appendix I, p. 206. This is also reproduced as the introduction to the *Grundrisse*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

from the abstract to the concrete, it must begin with the simple and move to the complex, so as to actually reveal to the reader *how* stage by stage, "premise" by "premise", the historical development of the social formation took place.

In this respect it can be said therefore that the simpler category expresses relations predominating in an immature entity or subordinate relations in a more advanced entity; relations which had already existed historically before the entity had developed the aspects expressed in a more concrete category. The procedure of abstract reasoning which advances from the simplest to more complex concepts to that extent conforms to actual historical development.<sup>26</sup>

*Capital* is itself of course a superb example of this rational and historical *a priori*ism at work, for we see how Marx begins with the value form of the commodity—the economic cell of bourgeois society—and proceeds to explain that while the commodity is simple in reality, it is extremely difficult to properly explain, and indeed, as the "first premise" to the understanding of capitalism, has evaded the human mind for over two thousand years. Yet once the commodity as the cell form has been abstracted from its ramifications and interconnections and thoroughly explained then the other aspects of capitalism to which it relates, historically and logically—exploitation, the division of labour, economic crisis, international trade, etc.—fall into place and can be rendered intelligible. The theory, in other words, moves from the abstract to the concrete, thus inverting in its scientific presentation the natural sequence of discovery which *appears* to move from the concrete to the abstract. In this way it is able to explain that concrete world from whose initially mystifying impressions the investigator necessarily begins.

The fact then that Marxist theory expresses itself universally and in an *a priori*istic manner does not and cannot mean that it has not been derived from a most thorough-going investigation of the real world. Indeed, the contrary is true: the universality and *a priori*ism of Marxism points not to its abstraction from reality, but to its *concreteness*. Here Lenin is correct when he asserts in the *Philosophical Notebooks* that genuine laws of science, while abstract *in form*, are in substance necessarily more concrete than any of the particular aspects they contain. Historical materialism as a theory of science is abstract in form only because it is concrete in essence, and it is essentially *concrete* because, as Marx puts it in the *Critique*, "it is the synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects".<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

Sartre's attack then on the universality of Marxist theory is basically misconceived. It is true that Marxism may be (and not infrequently has been) *misapplied* in a dogmatist manner so that real men dissolve "in a bath of sulphuric acid"; but to argue that Marxism is dogmatic solely because it is a universal theory which can be expounded in an *a priori*istic manner is quite wrong. It is wrong because, as we know, the founders of Marxism meticulously derived the general from the particular. But the Sartrian critique is also wrong because it fails to grasp the really rather simple point that *every* theory rests upon its universals, and without premises which hold universally no rational judgment is possible. If Marxism is dogmatic simply because it is (or can be) formulated systematically, then so too is every other theory, and we are back where we started.

It is of course true that Sartrian existentialism as expounded in *Search for a Method* does indeed *appear* to be shorn of system and universality, and is as a result astonishingly eclectic and incoherent. The world it presents is a world in which it seems that ideas may be of primary importance on some occasions, material forces predominant on others, while the individual's environment may be all-significant on yet other occasions still. A world governed by mutually obstructing causal forces is simply a chaos which defies rational understanding, for if Sartre means what he says, then for every idealist explanation of an event there is an antithetical materialist and psycho-analytical counterpart. The evolution of man, the transformation of society, the origin and role of classes, the impact of personality . . . each is to be explained by that "supple and patient dialectic" which, when it comes down to it, also embraces its opposite! Instead of moving closer to reality, we would simply see the world dissolve into a kaleidoscopic chaos where "nothing is but what is not", a world without any *real* meaning at all. In place of practice in any meaningful sense of the term, all we would have is subjectivist impotence; and if in the Sartrian world nothing is prior or subordinate to anything else—"the levels of an act do not represent a dull hierarchy"<sup>28</sup>—then there are no *real* causes and not surprisingly,

the consequences of our acts always end up escaping us, since every concerted enterprise, as soon as it realised, enters into relation with the entire universe. . . .<sup>29</sup>

How then can we possibly know what lies beyond the subjectivist world of intention and will, i.e. the truth? And the answer is of course

<sup>28</sup> Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

that *we can't*. As far as Sartre is concerned, we are condemned to remain the prisoners of our own relativism, able only (like poor King Lear) to "take upon the mystery of things"—the mere victims of chance. The *praxis* which preens itself in theory as a revolutionary concept grappling with reality, proves in practice to be no more than an obscurantist veil which prevents us from knowing anything outside of our own helplessness. In fact *praxis* appears to have nothing to do with reality at all: stripped of its ideological grandeur, it turns out to be sheerest mystification.

Thus knowing is a moment of *praxis*, even its most fundamental one; but this knowing does not partake of an absolute Knowledge . . . it remains the captive of the action it clarifies, and disappears along with it . . . man is the product of his product.<sup>30</sup>

I have argued throughout that all science rests upon the distinction between appearances and reality—upon this, the whole of dialectical and historical materialism depends. And yet of course it is precisely this distinction which is smothered by Sartre's contention that knowing remains "the captive of the action it clarifies and disappears along with it": indeed, Sartre himself dismisses the materialist distinction between intention and event as "petit-bourgeois", arguing that the "general import" of an action and its individual signification "are equally objective characteristics".<sup>31</sup> But how can this be? How can there be no difference between what different people imagine is the truth and what in fact *is* the truth, particularly as *opinions* about the truth will inevitably differ?

The truth is that even Sartre's stubborn relativism breaks down in practice when he offers (as soon or later every writer must) a *judgment* of events. Do we condemn—an example he gives—the insurgents at Kronstadt who rose in rebellion against the Bolsheviks or do we support them? Sartre's answer is all revealing: while we may admit that the condemnation of the insurgents at Kronstadt was *perhaps* inevitable,

. . . at the same time this practical judgment (the only real one) will remain that of enslaved history so long as it does not include the free interpretation of the revolt in terms of the insurgents themselves. . . .<sup>32</sup>

Now this answer borders on absurdity, but not quite. Merely to say that one practical judgment (the condemnation) must include its direct opposite (the support) can only lead to outright mystification and

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

intellectual paralysis. Sartre pulls back from the brink of total nihilism, and smuggles in, in order to salvage a modicum of meaning from amidst a chaos of probabilities and mutually embracing antitheses, the concept of a *practical* judgment which is "the only real one". But what, may we ask, is the source of this practical judgment which is the only real one? It can only derive from an absolute reality beyond the mind: and yet Sartre insists that knowing *praxis* "does not partake of an absolute Knowledge"; if the judgment of the revolt by the insurgents themselves is a partial or incorrect one, then this means that there is a distinction between appearance and reality, the very distinction which is supposedly "petit-bourgeois". The simple truth is that Sartre, in order to make himself intelligible, must substantially modify in practice the very notion of relativist *praxis* which he espouses in theory, accepting the same "dogmatic" yardstick of reality for which he reproaches the Marxists. And further. What is true in this particular instance of the Kronstadt rebels, is also evident in his theory as a whole: it contains, amidst a welter of eclecticism, ambiguity and "qualifications", its *own* set of universal principles, its own "abstract schema", indeed its own "a priorism" even though this is nowhere set out in a systematic and readily intelligible manner. It is true, that unlike historical materialism, Sartre's universal theory bears only the most haphazard and accidental correspondence to the facts of reality, but it exists nevertheless.

Although Sartre claims that, unlike Marxism, he has "an open mind" and switches from materialism to idealism and idealism to psychoanalysis as the occasion suits him, the fact is that beneath this eclectic appearance there is a hidden set of priorities, schemas, determinisms and principles which emerge with little probing. What are those "shame-faced" first principles upon which Sartre's version of Marxism rests? Central is the *universality* of the individual—the real *absolute* of Sartre's relativistic universe. Though Sartre claims that, like Marxism, he believes only in men and the real relations between men, he argues that in fact the *relations* between men are mere "collectives" which are only superficially real. They are simply abstractions "parasitically" dependent upon the real actions of men. Now this argument certainly resembles Marxism in so far as it postulates a basis and a superstructure, and a sense of priority between them which is universally true. The only problem is that the content of the two theories is a trifle different. Whereas for Marx, the individual acquires his social reality from the relationships into which he enters

(independently of his will), for Sartre it is not the individual who is a secondary appearance, it is his social relationships. As far as Marx is concerned,

individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class interests.<sup>33</sup>

But for Sartre, it is class which is abstract—a mere “reified” construct which shackles that deeper human reality which is of course the praxical individual, an individual who is, whether Sartre likes it or not, the core of a theory which is quite as “universal” as Marxism is (in its form), but whose “schemas, priorities, a priorisms” defy rational understanding, obstruct historical prediction and make an objective evaluation of reality well nigh impossible. We object to this theory not because it is “schematic” or “prefabricated”: our objection is that it simply reflects uncritically the illusions of a social strata within bourgeois society well known for its ideological frenzies and atomistic acts of faith. It can scarcely rival historical materialism in its ability to explain the real world.

I come back, therefore, to a point which has already been made in the discussion on philosophy and the dialectics of nature, the point of *substance* in every theory. For the real question is not whether a theory “explains everything”, has “schemas”, is “metaphysical” (i.e. universal), for as we have already seen, all theories are by their nature abstract and concrete, particularistic and universal. The real question is: do these theories correspond to the real world? Whether historical materialism is true or not does not depend upon whether it is “open-minded” or “supple” and “patient” in its dialectical formulations: it depends upon whether it reflects reality more correctly than its rivals; and irrationalist or anarchist attacks on theory as such cannot serve as a substitute for the answer to *this* question. Indeed, these attacks do not even *begin* to make an impact on the truth of Marxism, for they simply contradict their very substance by virtue of the fact that they can be made at all. It takes a universal theory to disprove one.

But this simple point will not satisfy our praxis critics of historical materialism: as far as they are concerned, it is not merely the “priorities” of basis and superstructure which make the theory dogmatic, it is also its claim to relate to the *whole* of human society as far as we have been able to understand it.

I turn, therefore, to consider the question:

<sup>33</sup> Preface to *Capital*, I, op. cit., p. 10.

(ii) *How “Historical” is Historical Materialism?*

As far as Schmidt, Petrovic and Lukacs are concerned, Marx’s theory of history is vulgarised if it is considered to apply universally to all human society. Schmidt, for example, argues that, despite its suggestive hints to the contrary, the famous analysis as presented in the Preface to the *Critique* should not be construed as expounding a *universal* law of social motion, but should rather be understood as sketching a dialectic which relates to a fully developed *bourgeois* society, and extends to pre-bourgeois society only in so far as exchange relations are anticipated in it.<sup>34</sup> Lukacs agrees. Because pre-capitalist societies do not possess the “independence”, “cohesion” and “immanence” in their economic life which we associate with capitalism, the categories of historical materialism cannot really apply. They are relevant only under capitalism, and only the “vulgar Marxist” considers them “eternally valid”.<sup>35</sup> And Petrovic poses the question to his reader: did Marx imagine that the formula of the Preface extended to “all so-far-known and all now-predictable history”, or was he of the view that his analysis was transient and “restricted in time”?

At first glance, the question may seem improper. There is no apparent temporal restriction in any of the above-quoted texts of Marx and his adherents, and in his famous text Marx says quite plainly: “The *general* conclusion at which I arrived . . .”<sup>36</sup>

But like his colleagues, Petrovic is certain that there is “more” to Marx’s position than meets the eye. For now it would seem that just as the dialectic must be ousted from the world of nature where it was illicitly inserted by Engels and Lenin, so too must its role in society be carefully circumscribed. Praxis theory talks a good deal about the Dialectic, but when it boils down to its operation in practice, the enthusiasm of the praxis theorists wanes, and they demand that this unruly ferment must be kept within the confines of bourgeois society and only extended into the past in the most cautious and guarded manner.

Indeed, Lukacs’ aversion to historical materialism’s “vulgar Marxism” is even more restrictive than that of Schmidt or Petrovic, for he insists that pre-capitalist society has no social dialectics. For what are dialectics? They are, Lukacs tells us, the unity of theory and practice, of

<sup>34</sup> Schmidt, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>35</sup> Lukacs, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>36</sup> *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, op. cit., p. 94.

subject and object, and this means that not only can they not arise in nature, but dialectics have no place in societies which have not developed an abstract concept of subjectivity, and whose members therefore do not see themselves as *subjects* in the abstract individualistic sense. As long as commodity production exists only at the fringes of society, people do not see themselves as producing, distributing and exchanging *as individuals*, and hence the conception of subjectivity which comes to prevail in bourgeois society has yet to arise. "The particular aspects of the economic process," writes Lukacs, "remain separate in a completely abstract way,"<sup>37</sup> and only under capitalism, when the economic elements "interact dialectically", is there real evidence of a separation between basis and superstructure, and that contradiction between the forces and relations of production upon which this analytical separation rests.

In Lukacs' view, then, historical materialism not only arises out of capitalism: it only *relates* to capitalism, so that its *theoretical* genesis coincides with the practical creation of those social facts which give it validity. The dialectic, says Schmidt, "must become absorbed in the actual writing of history if it is not to decay into an empty schema",<sup>38</sup> and this presumably means that it can only create its own theoretical categories as it develops the concrete historical conditions to which these categories apply.

To anyone familiar with Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, this position will be readily seen to reflect the weaknesses of the "old master" without his strengths. For Hegel's philosophy, unlike the dialectics of praxis, is about history *as a whole*, in its objective entirety. It does not confine itself to any one of the stages. On the other hand, Hegel's philosophy of history is also a history of philosophy, and hence Hegel argues that until settled economic conditions and developing agriculture give a people the opportunity to reflect upon life, they lack a *philosophical* consciousness and therefore have no history.<sup>39</sup> Philosophy, therefore, must have an "immaculate conception", for until there is *conscious* historical creativity there is no historical creativity at all. And not for the first time, praxis theory seizes upon the subjectivist

<sup>37</sup> Lukacs, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>38</sup> Schmidt, op. cit., p. 171.

<sup>39</sup> "The periods—whether we suppose them to be centuries or millennia—that were passed by nations before history was written among them—and which may have been filled with revolutions, nomadic wanderings and the strangest mutations—are on that account destitute of *objective* history, because they present no *subjective* history, no annals." *The Philosophy of History*, p. 61.

weaknesses of Hegel and brushes aside his objectivist strengths. The *theory* of historical materialism is somehow deemed to create the concrete historical conditions to which, therefore, it must exclusively apply.

Lukacs quotes Marx:

in all forms of society where landed property predominates, the natural relation is paramount. In those where capital is predominant, the social, historically created element prevails,<sup>40</sup>

and concludes from this that, because "the natural relation is paramount", historical materialism, which after all relates to society, cannot therefore apply. Pre-bourgeois society is "nature-like and unhistorical", as Schmidt puts it, and therefore lacks the dialectical "self-creativity" which only comes to light under capitalism where relations are no longer "determined by nature, but *set up* by society".<sup>41</sup> It is indeed difficult to imagine a more childish misreading of the words of Marx. Marx after all begins the above-quoted sentence by saying that "in all forms of *society* where landed property predominates, the natural relation is paramount" . . . (stress mine), so that when he goes on to contrast the "natural relation" with "the social, historically created element", it is surely obvious that he is contrasting *appearances* and not reality. The "natural relation" of men under feudalism and slave society is an *illusion*, but it is an illusion based upon the historically undeveloped social facts which therefore conceal from man that *he* is the creator of these social facts. It requires a sophisticated praxis theorist to believe that because these relations appear natural rather than specifically social, that in fact they *really* are. Lukacs and Schmidt, like their Young Hegelian predecessors, are well and truly entrenched in the "illusion of the epoch", and it is therefore quite appropriate that Schmidt should take exception to what he sees as the erroneously "universalist" formulation of historical materialism in *The German Ideology*, for it is precisely against these praxis absurdities that Marx and Engels' polemic is directed. It is after all in *The German Ideology* that Marx and Engels make their famous comment that

men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence . . . ,

<sup>40</sup> Lukacs, op. cit., p. 233.

<sup>41</sup> Op. cit., p. 178.

so that as they proceed to elaborate the implications of the point,

the social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they appear in their own and other people's imagination, 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.<sup>42</sup>

We are, in other words, only interested in what people *think* they are in so far as it helps us get at *the truth*.

Now it is true, as I shall argue in greater detail in the next chapter, that the pivotal insights of historical materialism could only have arisen initially under capitalism where the system's dramatic transformation of nature through technology—its “continual revolutionising of the means of production”—daily impresses upon us the creativity and ingenuity of mankind and their ability to increasingly remould nature in their own image. But it is a ludicrous *non-sequitur* to argue that because scientific insights arise as the result of capitalism, that *therefore* they can apply only to capitalism; for indeed, if this were so, historical materialism would be unable to explain the nature of capitalism at all. Capitalism is *only* intelligible to us because we are able to relate it historically to the societies which preceded it, and to the society which will develop on its ruins. It is moreover no answer to this objection simply to extend Lukacs' thesis, as Schmidt does, to embrace pre-bourgeois society in so far as exchange relations are anticipated in it, for then the question arises: how do these exchange relations themselves arise? How can we explain the development of civilisation (i.e. private property, commodity production and the State) unless primitive communism is itself *dialectically* intelligible? Indeed, will we not *uncritically* embrace as the truth the illusions which these earlier societies had about themselves unless we are able to examine them in the light of a *universal* theory of social progress?

This problem emerges clearly in Petrovic's critique of historical materialism where he argues—somewhat more broadly than Schmidt or Lukacs—that man's essence as tool-maker relates only to the period of civilisation. After all, he says, Marx in his exposition of historical materialism, in the *Preface*, refers to *legal* and *political* superstructures in his analysis and he obviously cannot mean that *these*, for example, existed in primitive communism or will continue to exist in the classless society of the future. The State and its laws are limited to those historical epochs in which private property, the division of labour and

<sup>42</sup> *The German Ideology*, p. 37.

the production of commodities predominate, and if the phenomenal forms of the superstructure which Marx mentions are transient, why shouldn't the *entire* analysis on basis and superstructure be similarly transient, and exclude from its point of reference man's earliest societies along with those which are to come? In fact, claims Petrovic, these limitations on the scope of historical materialism were accepted not merely by Marx, but even, on occasions, by Engels himself; and he proceeds to argue that in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* Engels actually endorses the view that under primitive communism biological factors predominated over material ones, so that it is only with the transition to class society that historical materialism, with its stress on economics as the basis of society, comes into its own. Even Engels, it seems, harboured a certain yearning for that “supple dialectic” of the praxis school.

What is the passage which Petrovic has in mind? In his Preface to the first edition of the *Origin* this is what Engels says:

according to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools requisite therefore; on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social institutions under which men of a definite historical epoch and of a definite country live are conditioned by both kinds of production. . . .<sup>43</sup>

Now this comment is not entirely satisfactory and according to an unnamed Soviet commentator whom Petrovic cites, Engels' words are a trifle inexact because they *could* be taken to imply (by someone anxious to distort historical materialism) that there is a dualism of the social and the sexual, and that sexual relations have a social significance independent of the mode of production; and indeed this is precisely what Petrovic contends. He argues that Engels allows for a biological determinism in primitive communism, so that only under civilisation does historical materialism proper fully apply. (It is perhaps worth noting that Engels' “inexactitude” is not specifically delimited to primitive society and it is itself intended universally, but that is by the way . . .)

How shallow and misleading Petrovic's interpretation of Engels' words really is becomes clear from the sentence which follows shortly after the passage cited above where Engels remarks (the words are also quoted by Petrovic):

<sup>43</sup> *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow, n.d.), p. 6.

the less the development of labour, and the more limited the volume of production and, therefore, the wealth of society, the more preponderatingly does the social order *appear* to be dominated by ties of sex<sup>44</sup> (stress mine).

In other words, the importance of sex ties in primitive society is the product *not* of biology, but of material production, and the domination of sexual considerations is an *appearance* occasioned by the limited volume of production and the low development of human labour. Of course primitive peoples *imagine* that it is the sacred ties of the gens—the ties of blood—which ultimately matter; but there is no reason why (like Petrovic) we should accept these historically inevitable but necessarily naïve *illusions* as the truth of the matter. Certainly Engels didn't: the content of his classic work is profoundly materialist and, outside of the passage which Petrovic managed to "find", there is no ambiguity in his analysis at all. When he describes, for example, the transition from mother right to father right which occurred in the early period of barbarism, he makes it perfectly clear that this dramatic transformation in family structure was brought about by an accumulation of property which gave men a more important status in the family than women. It had nothing to do with sexual reproduction *as such*, but only with woman's role as child-bearer as it was affected by the changing relations of material production. As long as the extremely primitive economy of hunting and food-gathering continued, the household production of women remained crucial and enabled women to enjoy a dignity and respect that disappeared as agriculture and the domestication of animals became the order of the day. Wealthy men accumulating property outside the household were no longer prepared to tolerate a system of inheritance which prevented them from leaving property to their own children. The development of productive forces had rendered the matrilineal relations cumbersome and outmoded—a fetter on further development. The old system had "to be overthrown and it was overthrown",<sup>45</sup> and in a way which admirably confirms, in historically specific terms, Marx's *general* theory of historical materialism as outlined in the famous *Preface*. How in fact could we even begin to understand this process if the materialist analysis of basis and superstructure did not apply to primitive society? The fact that there were not as yet (although the germs of this development can be clearly seen) specifically legal or political superstructures does not alter the key importance of that basic and

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

universal contradiction between the forces and relations of material production, in terms of which the emergence of laws and the State can alone be explained.

Just as we can only explain the past scientifically if we understand that historical materialism applies universally, so too, as we move to the other end of the development of human history as we have so far known it, are we only able to have some idea of that future society already nurtured within the womb of capitalism if here, too, historical materialism has something to say. And yet, just as praxis theorists reject the relevance of historical materialism to the past, so too do they dismiss its validity for the future. Petrovic argues, for example, that with the transformation of men into "lords of nature", the ultimate importance of material production will no longer hold. In "the humanistic vision of the non-alienated free being of praxis"<sup>46</sup> men will at last be truly free! Of course, it is true that as socialism develops and begins to transform itself into classless communism, important changes will occur (as of course they are *already* occurring in those countries which are taking the socialist road). The division of labour begins to disappear and with its disappearance go our exploitative illusions about the divine autonomy of the world of ideas. And here the much maligned theory of reflection has a vital role to play in freeing man from idealist illusions which developed with the birth of civilisation itself. But does the fact that the blindfold will be removed from our eyes mean that the basis and superstructure *itself* will disappear and that the forces of production will cease to come into contradiction with production relations? This may of course happen in that ecstatic "vision of the non-alienated free being of praxis" where presumably anything is possible, but as far as Marxists and the real world are concerned, the development of classless society is merely the *beginning* of a real human history. The contradiction between productive forces and production relations must of necessity remain, but now in non-antagonistic form so that, as Marx puts it, social evolutions will cease to be political revolutions, and the immutable force of change, the *mors immortalis*, can take place in a rational, peaceful and controlled manner.

Indeed, the utopianism of the praxis position becomes quite explicit in Alfred Schmidt's comments on this subject. Under class society, notes Schmidt, the distinction remains between economic basis and ideological superstructure: "the classless organisation of society will also have material production at its base. Marx expressly retained this concept."<sup>47</sup> But what will happen to the superstructure? That, says

<sup>46</sup> Petrovic, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>47</sup> Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

Schmidt, will simply disappear. In a footnote he angrily declaims that nothing indicates better the "complete failure of the so-called Marxists in the communist countries" to understand Marx's theory than naïve talk of "socialist ideology" or socialist superstructure.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, these "so-called Marxists" are actually concerned with what Marx himself has to say (and not with what some fictional "praxis Marx" has to offer), and they are aware not merely of the elementary distinction between socialism and communism (which Schmidt appears to have missed), but of the fundamentally and militantly anti-utopian character of Marxism itself. It is almost beyond belief that someone who poses as a Marxist scholar (a praxical Marxist of course) can actually refer, as Schmidt does, to socialism as "the realised utopia" which must decide, in its own practice, whether ideology will disappear or religion will be reborn. If Schmidt seriously believes that communism is intended to be a utopia, a world of timeless perfection, then he has not even *begun* to understand what Marxism as scientific socialism is all about. And yet, of course, as Gloucester says of Lear, there is even reason in madness, logic in confusion, and sense in the absurdities of Alfred Schmidt. For his utopianism follows quite logically from the praxis position. If man, through his abstract and idealist praxis, is the creator of the universe, then he can do as he likes. Why not? Up until now, his activity has been fashioned by material forces, but in the "realised utopia" who can be sure? Fourier believed that when communism was "realised" the lions would lie down with the lambs and the sea would be turned into lemonade so as not to taste unpleasant to man. Once praxical man ascends the throne of the universe, the laws of nature can be turned on their head: now the superstructure will mould the base in its own image and at last ideas will rule the roost. Since all reality emerges from the fiery aethers of creative praxis, who can possibly say? It is perfectly logical for praxis theory, in rejecting "dogmatic" historical materialism with its "vulgar" base and superstructure, to substitute an exciting utopia all of its own: but why on earth should this misty idealism and these school-boy dreams be ascribed to the science of Karl Marx?

It is true that in their discussions on historical materialism both Schmidt and Petrovic do concede that Marx does *appear* to be saying in the celebrated *Preface* that the analysis of base and superstructure applies universally. And for once we have encountered an appearance which is a correct reflection of reality. Marx meant precisely what he said: "in the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230 (footnote).

into definite relations" . . . not solely in bourgeois society, or in commodity producing society, but in *every* society in so far as we have been able to understand it. He makes this point perfectly clear in *Capital I*, where he takes the opportunity of answering one of his critics who takes particular exception to the theses of the *Preface*. His critic protests that while the theory of historical materialism may hold for our own time where in a capitalist society material interests appear to predominate, it cannot be true for the middle ages where Catholicism ruled or in classical Athens and Rome where politics reigned supreme. These objections have a familiar ring. What is Marx's reply? That these criticisms are a timely reminder that what is historically specific to capitalism should not be "dogmatically" universalised? That the dialectics of historical development only take place when commodity production presents subject and object as readily identifiable antinomies? Marx considers the criticisms and noting, by the way, that neither Catholicism nor politics are unknown outside the periods in which they allegedly "reigned supreme", adds drily:

This much, however, is clear, that the middle ages could not live on Catholicism nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains that here politics and there Catholicism played the chief part. For the rest, it requires but a slight acquaintance with the history of the Roman republic, for example, to be aware that its secret history is the history of its landed property.<sup>49</sup>

We come back once again to our old friend, the unity of opposites. The fact that capitalism is a quite *specific* social system and has many features which are peculiar to it, does not mean that there are not *also* basic laws of development which it shares with all other social formations. Unity and difference presupposes one another. There is no contradiction between the fact that in *all* societies there is tension between the forces and forms of production, which in turn creates the division between basis and superstructure, and the fact that in each social formation this *universal* law of motion must work itself out in a highly specific, concrete, particularistic manner. Indeed, to deny this "unity of opposites" neither rescues a theory from "universality" (as we saw in the case of Sartre) nor does it somehow guarantee a theory's "concreteness". In fact, as far as praxis theory is concerned, the opposite is true: in the place of an explicit and systematically worked out unity of the general with the particular, all we find is an abstract "creativity" which is so unpredictable in its varying relationships to

<sup>49</sup> *Capital*, I, op. cit., p. 82.



the external world—it may be religiously conceived, biologically governed, psycho-analytically manipulated, etc.—that all we can say about its mystifying relativism is that it never changes. The world of the relative is only intelligible if it has an *absolute* basis to its own relativity; but whereas praxis theory ends up as the mystified victim of this dialectical law of opposites, Marxism is able to *consciously* explain it. Historical materialism, as the systematic application of materialist dialectics to society, harmoniously unites universality with concreteness. Precisely because it is a universal theory of society, it enables us to concretely evaluate each social formation in the light of its own specific reality: it is “dogmatic” and “mechanistic” to the praxical sceptic only because, as the most advanced social theory of our time, it passionately seeks to approximate to the objective truth.

## 7

## IS MARXISM DETERMINISTIC?

As far as the praxis theorists are concerned, “determinism” is a word of abuse: it represents the very antithesis of that freedom and creativity for which, they believe, the “authentic Marx” really stands. Determinism summarily expresses all that is stifling and “bureaucratic” in the Marxist “orthodoxy”—all that is inimical to the “humanist vision”.

The objections to the determinist view seem quite straightforward: determinism insists that the universe, including of course man, is subject to laws of motion which operate with the force of necessity and independently of the human will. How then, asks an angry Coulter, can human freedom be possibly realised if a “mechanistic-materialist” analysis reduces man to the “mere predicate of the movement in external events”—events which trigger “pre-determined responses” thereby denying man his role as *creator*?<sup>1</sup> Freedom and creativity can have no place in the deterministic universe. Petrovic put the praxis case thus:

no matter how exactly we may formulate and systematise these laws, it seems legitimate to pose the question to what extent the idea of the inevitable, exceptionless general laws of every being can be reconciled with Marx's idea of man as a free creative being of praxis. If all that exists is subjected to dialectical “laws”, how can man be exempted? And if man is not exempted, how can we speak of his freedom and creativity?<sup>2</sup>

If the activity of men is governed by laws which operate independently of their intended will, then, argues Sartre, such men are “entirely determined by prior circumstances”, the mere “sum of conditioned reflexes” and the passive product of external forces.<sup>3</sup> If we are to “reconquer men within Marxism”, it is not only the dialectic in nature, the theory of reflection and the basis/superstructure analysis which must go: Marxism must be freed from these inexorable laws of motion—for it goes without saying, that the “dialect is not a determinism”.<sup>4</sup>

On the surface of things, the matter seems cut and dried: one cannot be a revolutionary and an activist if at the same time one is chained to determinism. There is, however, only one problem. The comments and

<sup>1</sup> Coulter, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> Petrovic, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.