

Part Four

The Object of *Capital*

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and for having rushed into empiricism. By locating accurately *the site of Marx's silence*, we can put the question which contains and coincides with this silence: precisely the question of the *differential nature of the abstractions* which scientific thought works on in order to produce new abstractions at the end of the labour process which are different from the previous ones, and, in the case of an epistemological break like the one between Marx and the classical economists, radically new.

Some time ago I tried to stress the necessity of thinking this difference by giving *different* names to the different abstractions that occur in the process of theoretical practice, carefully distinguishing between Generalities I (initial abstractions) and Generalities III (products of the knowledge process). No doubt this was to *add* something to Marx's discourse: but in a different respect, I was merely *re-establishing*, i.e., *maintaining* his discourse, without yielding to the temptation of his *silence* I *heard* this silence as the possible weakness of a discourse under the pressure and repressive action of another discourse, which takes the place of the first discourse in favour of this repression, and speaks in its silence: the empiricist discourse. All I did was to *make this silence in the first discourse speak, dissipating the second*. The reader may think this a mere detail. Certainly, it is, but, when rigour is lacking, the more talkative and self-important discourses which deport Marx the philosopher entirely into the very ideology that he fought and rejected depend precisely on this kind of detail. We shall soon see examples of this, where the non-thought of a minute silence becomes the charter for non-thought discourses, i.e., ideological discourses.

studies in the history of learning to suspect that we must look in quite different directions from the empiricist one. But in this decisive investigation, Marx himself has provided our fundamental principles (the structuration and articulation of the different practices): From which we can see the difference between the ideological treatment of a theoretical silence or emptiness, and its scientific treatment: the former confronts us with an ideological *closure*, the latter with a scientific *openness*. Here we can see immediately a precise example of the ideological threat that hangs over all scientific labour: ideology not only lies in wait for science at each point where its rigour slackens, but also at the furthest point where an investigation currently reaches its *limits*. There, precisely, philosophical activity can intervene at the level of the life of the science: as the theoretical vigilance that protects the openness of science against the closure of ideology, on condition, of course, that it does not limit itself to speaking of openness and closure in general, but rather of the *typical, historically determined structures of this openness and closure*. In *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin constantly recalls this absolutely fundamental requirement which constitutes the specific function of Marxist philosophy.

## Chapter 4

### The Errors of Classical Economics: Outline of a Concept of Historical Time

I now turn to my second example, in which we shall be able to size up the same problem, but in a different way: by examining the kind of criticism Marx made of the classical economists. He had many detailed criticisms of them, and one fundamental one.

I shall only discuss one of the detailed criticisms, one which concerns a point of terminology. It challenges the apparently insignificant fact that Smith and Ricardo always analyse 'surplus-value' in the form of *profit, rent and interest*, with the result that it is never called by its name, but always disguised beneath other names, that it is not conceived in its 'generality' as distinct from its 'forms of existence': profit, rent and interest. The style of this accusation is interesting: Marx seems to regard this confusion as a mere inadequacy of language, easy enough to rectify. And, in fact, when he reads Smith and Ricardo, he re-establishes the word absent behind the words that disguise it, he translates them, re-establishing their omission, saying precisely what they are silent about, reading their analyses of rent and profit as so many analyses of general surplus-value, although the latter is never named as the internal essence of rent and profit. But we know that the *concept of surplus-value* is, on Marx's own admission, one of the two key concepts of his theory, one of the concepts marking the peculiar difference between him and Smith and Ricardo, with respect to problematic and object. In fact, Marx treats the absence of a *concept* as if it were the mere absence of a *word*, and this is not the absence of just any concept, but, as we shall see, the absence of a concept that cannot be treated as a concept in the strict sense of the term without raising the question of the problematic which may underlie it, i.e., the difference in problematic, the break that divides Marx from Classical Economics. Here again, in articulating his criticism, Marx has not thought what he is doing to the letter — since he has reduced the absence of an organic *concept*,

which has 'precipitated' (in the chemical sense of the term) the revolution in his problematic, to the omission of a *word*. If this omission of Marx's is not stressed, he is reduced to the level of his predecessors, and we find ourselves back in the continuity of objects. I shall return to this point.

The fundamental criticism Marx makes of the whole of Classical Economics in texts from *The Poverty of Philosophy* to *Capital* is that it had an ahistorical, eternal, fixed and abstract conception of the economic categories of capitalism. Marx says in so many words that these categories must be historicized to reveal and understand their nature, their relativity and transitivity. The Classical Economists, he says, have made the conditions of capitalist production the eternal conditions of all production, without seeing that these categories were historically determined, and hence historical and transitory:

Economists express the relations of bourgeois production, the division of labour, credit, money, etc., as fixed, immutable, eternal categories ... Economists explain how production takes place in the above-mentioned relations, but what they do not explain is how these relations themselves are produced, that is, the historical movement which gave them birth ... these categories are as little eternal as the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products (*The Poverty of Philosophy*, MECW 6, pp. 162, 166).

As we shall see, this critique is not the last word of Marx's *real* critique. It remains superficial and ambiguous, whereas his *real* critique is infinitely more profound. But it is surely no accident that Marx often went only halfway with his real critique in his declared critique, by establishing the only difference between him and the Classical Economists as the non-historicity of their conception. This judgement has weighed very heavily on the interpretation not only of *Capital* and of the Marxist theory of political economy, but also of Marxist philosophy. This is one of the strategic points in Marx's thought — I shall go so far as to say the number one strategic point — the point at which the theoretical incompleteness of Marx's judgement of himself has produced the most serious misunderstandings, and, as before, not only among his opponents, who have an interest in misunderstanding him, but also and above all among his supporters.

All these misunderstandings can be grouped round one central misunderstanding of the theoretical relationship between Marxism and history, of the so-called radical historicism of Marxism. Let us examine the basis for the different forms taken by this crucial misunderstanding.

In my opinion, this basis directly concerns the relation between Marx and Hegel, and the conception of the dialectic and history. If all that divides Marx from the Classical Economists amounts to the historical character of economic categories, Marx need only historicize these categories, refusing to take them as fixed, absolute or eternal, but, on the contrary, regarding them as relative, provisional and transitory, i.e., as categories subject in the last instance to the moment of their historical existence. In this case, Marx's relation to Smith and Ricardo can be represented as identical with Hegel's relation to classical philosophy. Marx would then be Ricardo set in motion, just as it is possible to describe Hegel as Spinoza set in motion — i.e., historicized. In this case, Marx's whole achievement would once again be that he Hegelianized Ricardo, made him dialectical, i.e., that he applied the Hegelian/dialectical method to thinking an already constituted content which was only separated from the truth by the thin partition of historical relativity. In this case, we should fall once again into schemata consecrated by a whole tradition, schemata that depend on a conception of the dialectic as method in itself, regardless of the content of which it is the law, irrespective of the specificity of the object for which it has to provide both the principles of knowledge and the objective laws. I shall not insist on this point as it has already been elucidated, at least in principle.

But I should like to point out a different confusion which has neither been denounced nor elucidated, and which dominates the interpretation of Marxism now, and probably will for a long time to come: I mean expressly *the confusion that surrounds the concept of history*.

To claim that classical economics had not a historical, but an eternalist conception of its economic categories — that, to make these categories adequate to their object, they must be thought as historical — is to propose *the concept of history*, or rather *one particular* concept of history which exists in the ordinary imagination, but without taking care to ask questions about it. In reality, it is to introduce as a solution a concept which itself poses a theoretical problem, for as it is adopted and understood it is an uncriticized concept, a concept which, like all 'obvious' concepts, threatens to have for theoretical content no more than the function that the existing or dominant ideology defines for it. It is to introduce as a theoretical solution a concept whose status has not been examined, and which, far from being a solution, is in reality a theoretical problem. It implies that it is possible to borrow this concept of history from Hegel or from the historian's empiricist practice and import it into Marx without making any difficulties of principle, i.e., without posing the preliminary critical question of the effective content of a concept which has been 'picked

up' in this naïve way; as if it went without saying, when, on the contrary, and before all else, it was essential to ask what *must* be the content of the concept of history imposed by Marx's theoretical problematic.

Without anticipating the paper that follows, I should like to clarify a few points of principle. I shall take as a pertinent counter-example (why it is pertinent we shall soon see) the Hegelian concept of history, the Hegelian concept of *historical time*, which, for Hegel, reflects the essence of the historical as such.

It is well known that Hegel defined time as '*der dauernde Begriff*', i.e., as the concept in its immediate empirical existence. Since time itself directs us to the *concept* as its essence, i.e., since Hegel consciously proclaims that historical time is merely the reflection in the continuity of time of the internal essence of the historical totality incarnating a moment of the development of the concept (in this case the Idea), we have Hegel's authority for thinking that historical time merely reflects the essence of the social totality of which it is the *existence*. That is to say that the essential characteristics of historical time will lead us, as so many indices, to the peculiar structure of that social totality.

Two essential characteristics of Hegelian historical time can be isolated: its homogeneous continuity and its contemporaneity.

(1) The homogeneous continuity of time. The homogeneous continuity of time is the reflection in existence of the continuity of the dialectical development of the Idea. Time can thus be treated as a continuum *in which* the dialectical continuity of the process of the development of the Idea is manifest. On this level, then, the whole problem of the science of history would consist of the division of this continuum according to a *periodization* corresponding to the succession of one dialectical totality after another. The moments of the Idea exist in the number of historical *periods* into which the time continuum is to be accurately divided. In this Hegel was merely thinking in his own theoretical problematic the number one problem of the historian's practice, the problem Voltaire, for example, expressed when he distinguished between the age of Louis XIV and the age of Louis XV; it is still the major problem of modern historiography.

(2) The contemporaneity of time, or the category of the historical *present*. This second category is the condition of possibility of the first one, and in it we find Hegel's central thought. If historical time is the existence of the social totality we must be precise about the structure of this existence. The fact that the relation between the social totality and its historical

existence is a relation with an *immediate* existence implies that this relation is itself *immediate*. In other words: the structure of historical existence is such that all the elements of the whole always coexist in one and the same time, one and the same present, and are therefore contemporaneous with one another in this present. This means that the structure of the historical existence of the Hegelian social totality allows what I propose to call an '*essential section*' (*coupe d'essence*), i.e., an intellectual operation in which a *vertical break* is made at any moment in historical time, a break in the present such that all the elements of the whole revealed by this section are in an immediate relationship with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence. When I speak of an '*essential section*', I shall therefore be referring to the specific structure of the social totality that allows this section, in which all the elements of the whole are given in a co-presence, itself the immediate presence of their essences, which thus become immediately *legible in them*. It is clear that it is the specific structure of the social totality which allows this essential section: for this section is only possible because of the peculiar nature of the unity of this totality, a 'spiritual' unity, if we can express in this way the type of unity possessed by an expressive totality, i.e., a totality all of whose parts are so many '*total parts*', each expressing the others, and each expressing the social totality that contains them, because each in itself contains in the immediate form of its expression the essence of the totality itself. I am referring to the structure of the Hegelian whole which I have already discussed: the Hegelian whole has a type of unity in which each element of the whole, whether a material or economic determination, a political institution or a religious, artistic or philosophical form, is never anything more than the presence of the concept with itself at a historically determined moment. This is the sense in which the co-presence of the elements with one another and the presence of each element with the whole are based on a *de jure* preliminary presence: the total presence of the concept in all the determinations of its existence. That is how the continuity of time is possible: as the phenomenon of the concept's continuity of presence with its positive determinations. When we speak of a *moment* of the development of the Idea in Hegel, we must be careful to observe that this term reduces *two meanings* to one: the moment as a moment of a development (which invokes the continuity of time and gives rise to the theoretical problem of periodization); and the moment as a moment of time, as the present, which is never anything but the phenomenon of the presence of the concept with itself in all its concrete determinations.

It is this absolute and homogeneous presence of the determinations

of the whole with the current essence of the concept which allows the 'essential section' I have been discussing. This is what in principle explains the famous Hegelian formula, valid for all the determinations of the whole, up to and including the self-consciousness of this whole in the knowing of this whole which is the historically *present* philosophy – the famous formula according to which *nothing can run ahead of its time*. The present constitutes the *absolute horizon* of all knowing, since all knowing can never be anything but the existence in knowing of the internal principle of the whole. However far philosophy goes it can never escape the bounds of this absolute horizon: even if it takes wing *at dusk*, it still belongs to the day, to the today, it is still merely the present reflecting on itself, reflecting on the presence of the concept with itself – tomorrow is in essence forbidden it.

And that is why the ontological category of the present prevents any anticipation of historical time, any conscious anticipation of the future development of the concept, any *knowledge* of the *future*. This explains the theoretical difficulty Hegel experienced in dealing with the existence of 'great men', whose role in his reflection is therefore that of paradoxical witnesses to an impossible conscious historical forecast. Great men neither perceive nor know the future: they divine it as a presentiment. Great men are only clairvoyants who have a presentiment of but can never know the imminence of tomorrow's essence, the 'kernel in the shell', the future in invisible gestation in the present, the coming essence being born in the alienation of the current essence. The fact that there is no knowing the future prevents there being any science of politics, any knowing that deals with the future effects of present phenomena. That is why no Hegelian politics is possible strictly speaking, and in fact there has never been a Hegelian politician.

I have insisted on the nature of historical time and its theoretical conditions to this extent because this conception of history and of its relation to time is still alive amongst us, as can be seen from the currently widespread distinction between synchrony and diachrony. This distinction is based on a conception of historical time as continuous and homogeneous and contemporaneous with itself. The synchronic is contemporaneity itself, the co-presence of the essence with its determinations, the present being readable as a structure in an 'essential section' because the present is the very existence of the essential structure. The synchronic therefore presupposes the ideological conception of a continuous-homogeneous time. It follows that the diachronic is merely the development of this present in the sequence of a temporal continuity in which the 'events' to which 'history' in the strict sense can be reduced

(cf. Lévi-Strauss) are merely successive contingent presents in the time continuum. Like the synchronic, which is the primary concept, the diachronic therefore presupposes both of the very two characteristics I have isolated in the Hegelian conception of time: an ideological conception of historical time.

Ideological, because it is clear that this conception of historical time is merely a reflection of the conception Hegel had of the type of unity that constitutes the link between all the economic, political, religious, aesthetic, philosophical and other elements of the social whole. Because the Hegelian whole is a 'spiritual whole' in the Leibnizian sense of a whole in which all the parts 'conspire' together, in which each part is a *pars totalis*, the unity of this double aspect of historical time (homogeneous-continuity/contemporaneity) is possible and necessary.

Now we can see the pertinence of this Hegelian counter-example. What masks from us the relationship that has just been established between the structure of the Hegelian whole and the nature of Hegelian historical time is the fact that the Hegelian idea of time is borrowed from the most vulgar empiricism, the empiricism of the false obviousness of 'everyday practice' which we find in a naive form in most of the historians themselves, at any rate in all the historians known to Hegel, who did not pose any questions as to the specific structure of historical time. Nowadays, a few historians are beginning to pose these questions, and often in a very remarkable way (Lucien Febvre, Labrousse, Braudel, etc.); but they do not pose them explicitly as a function of the *structure of the whole* they are studying, they do not pose them in a truly conceptual form: they simply *observe that there are* different times in history, varieties of time, long times, medium times and short times, and they are content to note their interferences as so many products of their intersection; they do not therefore relate these varieties as so many *variations* to the structure of the whole although the latter directly governs the production of those variations; rather, they are tempted to relate these varieties, as so many variants measurable by their *duration*, to ordinary time itself, to the ideological time continuum we have discussed. The Hegelian counter-example is therefore relevant because it is representative of the crude ideological illusions of everyday practice and of the practice of the historians, not only of those who do not pose any questions, but even of those who do pose some questions, because these questions are generally related not to the fundamental question of the concept of history, but to the ideological conception of time.

1 Hegelian philosophy has even been called a 'speculative empiricism' (Feuerbach).

However, we can retain from Hegel precisely what masks from us this empiricism which he had only sublimated in his systematic conception of history. We can retain this result produced by our brief critical analysis: the fact that *the structure of the social whole* must be strictly interrogated in order to find in it the secret of the conception of history in which the 'development' of this social whole is thought; once we know the structure of the social whole we can understand the apparently 'problem-less' relationship between it and the conception of historical time in which this conception is reflected. What we have just done for Hegel is equally valid for Marx: the procedure that has enabled us to isolate the theoretical presuppositions latent in a conception of history which seemed to 'stand by itself', but which is, in fact, organically linked to a precise conception of the social whole, can be applied to Marx, with the object of constructing *the Marxist concept of historical time* on the basis of the Marxist conception of the social totality.

We know that the Marxist whole cannot possibly be confused with the Hegelian whole: it is a whole whose unity, far from being the expressive or 'spiritual' unity of Leibniz's or Hegel's whole, is constituted by a certain type of *complexity*; the unity of a *structured whole* containing what can be called levels or instances which are distinct and 'relatively autonomous', and co-exist within this complex structural unity, articulated with one another according to specific determinations, fixed in the last instance by the level or instance of the economy?<sup>2</sup>

Of course, we still have to define more exactly the structural nature of this whole, but this provisional definition is sufficient for us to be able to forecast that the Hegelian type of co-existence of presence (allowing an 'essential section') is incompatible with the existence of this new type of totality.

This peculiar co-existence was already fully designated by Marx in a passage from *The Poverty of Philosophy* (MECW 6, pp. 166-7) which deals with the relations of production alone:

The production relations of every society form a whole. M. Proudhon considers economic relations as so many social phases, engendering one another, resulting one from the other like the antithesis from the thesis, and realizing in their logical sequence the impersonal reason of humanity. 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, however, he has not yet made his dialectic movement engender. When, after that, M. Proudhon, by means of pure reason, proceeds to give birth to these other phases, he treats them as if they were new-born babes. He forgets that they are of the same age as the first ... In constructing the edifice of an ideological system by means of the categories of political economy, *the limbs of the social system are dislocated*. The different limbs of society are converted into so many separate societies, following one upon the other. How, indeed, could the single logical formula of movement, of sequence, explain the body of society, in which all relations co-exist simultaneously and support one another?

It is all here: the co-existence, the articulation of the limbs 'of the social system', the mutual support of the relations between them, cannot be thought in the logical formula of movement, of sequence, of time. If we bear in mind the fact that the 'logic' is, as Marx shows in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, merely the abstraction of 'movement' and 'time', which are here invoked directly, as the origin of Proudhon's mystification, we can see that it is essential to reverse the order of reflection and think first the specific structure of the totality in order to understand both the form in which its limbs and constitutive relations co-exist and the peculiar structure of history.

In the 1857 *Introduction*, discussing capitalist society, Marx insists once more that the *structure of the whole* must be conceived before any discussion of temporal sequence:

The point is not the historic position of the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Even less is it their sequence 'in the idea' (Proudhon) ... Rather, their articulation (Gliederung) within modern bourgeois society (*Grundrisse*, pp. 107-8, translation modified).

This establishes a new point of importance: the structure of the whole is articulated as the structure of an *organic hierarchized whole*. The co-existence of limbs and their relations in the whole is governed by the order of a dominant structure which introduces a specific order into the articulation (Gliederung) of the limbs and their relations.

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others (*ibid.*, pp. 106-7).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and 'On the Materialist Dialectic' in *For Marx*, op. cit., pp. 87ff., and 161ff.

Note a crucial point here: this dominance of a structure, of which Marx gives an example here (the domination of one form of production, e.g., industrial production over simple commodity production, etc.), cannot be reduced to the primacy of a *centre*, any more than the relation between the elements and the structure can be reduced to the expressive unity of the essence within its phenomena. This hierarchy only represents the hierarchy of effectivity that exists between the different 'levels' or instances of the social whole. Because each of the levels is itself structured, this hierarchy represents the hierarchy, the degree and the index of effectivity existing between the different structured levels present in the whole: it is the hierarchy of effectivity of a structure dominant over subordinate structures and their elements. Elsewhere, I have shown that in order to conceive this 'dominance' of a structure over the other structures in the unity of a conjuncture it is necessary to refer to the principle of the determination 'in the last instance' of the non-economic structures by the economic structure; and that this 'determination in the last instance' is an absolute precondition for the necessity and intelligibility of the displacements of the structures in the hierarchy of effectivity, or of the displacement of 'dominance' between the structured levels of the whole; that only this 'determination in the last instance' makes it possible to escape the arbitrary relativism of observable displacements by giving these displacements the necessity of a function.

If the type of unity peculiar to the Marxist totality really is of this kind, several important theoretical consequences follow.

In the first place, it is impossible to think the existence of this totality in the Hegelian category of the contemporaneity of the *present*. The co-existence of the different structured levels, the economic, the political, the ideological, etc., and therefore of the economic infrastructure, of the legal and political superstructure, of ideologies and theoretical formations (philosophy, sciences) can no longer be thought in the co-existence of the Hegelian *present*, of the ideological present in which temporal presence coincides with the presence of the essence with its phenomena. And in consequence, the model of a *continuous and homogeneous time* which takes the place of immediate existence, which is the place of the immediate existence of this continuing presence, can no longer be regarded as the time of history.

Let us begin with the last point, for it will make us more sensitive to the consequences of these principles. As a first approximation, we can argue from the specific structure of the Marxist whole that it is no longer possible to think the process of the development of the different levels of the whole in *the same historical time*. Each of these different 'levels' does

not have the same type of historical existence. On the contrary, we have to assign to each level a *peculiar time*, relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the 'times' of the other levels. We can and must say: for each mode of production there is a peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way by the development of the productive forces; the relations of production have their peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way; the political superstructure has its own history ... ; philosophy has its own time and history ... ; aesthetic productions have their own time and history ... ; scientific formations have their own time and history, etc. Each of these peculiar histories is punctuated with peculiar rhythms and can only be known on condition that we have defined the *concept* of the specificity of its historical temporality and its punctuations (continuous development, revolutions, breaks, etc.). The fact that each of these times and each of these histories is *relatively autonomous* does not make them so many domains which are *independent* of the whole: the specificity of each of these times and of each of these histories — in other words, their relative autonomy and independence — is based on a certain type of articulation in the whole, and therefore on a certain type of articulation with respect to the whole. The history of philosophy, for example, is not an independent history by divine right: the right of this history to exist as a specific history is determined by the articulating relations, i.e., relations of relative effectivity, which exist within the whole. The specificity of these times and histories is therefore *differential*, since it is based on the differential relations between the different levels within the whole: the mode and degree of *independence* of each time and history is therefore necessarily determined by the mode and degree of *dependence* of each level within the set of articulations of the whole. The conception of the 'relative' independence of a history and of a level can therefore never be reduced to the positive affirmation of an independence *in vacuo*, nor even to the mere negation of a dependence in itself; the conception of this 'relative' independence defines its 'relativity', i.e., the type of *dependence* that produces and establishes this mode of 'relative' independence as its necessary result; at the level of the articulation of component structures in the whole, it defines that type of dependence which produces relative independence and whose effects we can observe in the histories of the different 'levels'.

This is the principle on which is based the possibility and necessity of different *histories* corresponding respectively to each of the 'levels'. This principle justifies our speaking of an economic history, a political history, a history of religions, a history of ideologies, a history of philosophy, a history of art and a history of the sciences, without thereby evading, but

on the contrary, necessarily accepting, the relative independence of each of these histories in the specific dependence which articulates each of the different levels of the social whole with the others. That is why, if we have the right to constitute these different histories, which are merely differential histories, we cannot be satisfied, as the best historians so often are today, by *observing* the existence of different times and rhythms, without relating them to the concept of their difference, i.e., to the typical dependence which establishes them in the articulation of the levels of the whole. It is not enough, therefore, to say, as modern historians do, that *there are* different periodizations for different times, that each time has its own rhythms, some short, some long; we must also think these differences in rhythm and punctuation in their foundation, in the type of articulation, displacement and torsion which harmonizes these different times with one another. To go even further, I should say that we cannot restrict ourselves to reflecting the existence of *visible* and measurable times in this way; we must, of absolute necessity, pose the question of the mode of existence of *invisible* times, of the invisible rhythms and punctuations concealed beneath the surface of each visible time. Merely reading *Capital* shows that Marx was highly sensitive to this requirement. It shows, for example, that the time of economic production is a specific time (differing according to the mode of production), but also that, as a specific time, it is a complex and non-linear time — a time of times, a complex time that cannot be *read* in the continuity of the time of life or clocks, but has to be *constructed* out of the peculiar structures of production. The time of the capitalist economic production that Marx analysed must be *constructed* in its concept. The concept of this time must be constructed out of the reality of the different rhythms which punctuate the different operations of production, circulation and distribution: out of the concepts of these different operations, e.g., the difference between production time and labour time, the difference between the different cycles of production (the turnover of fixed capital, of circulating capital, of variable capital, monetary turnover, turnover of commercial capital and of finance capital, etc.). In the capitalist mode of production, therefore, the time of economic production has absolutely nothing to do with the obviousness of everyday practice's ideological time; of course, it is rooted in certain determinate sites, in biological time (certain limits in the alternation of labour and rest for human and animal labour-power; certain rhythms for agricultural production), but in essence it is not at all identified with this biological time, and in no sense is it a time that can be *read immediately* in the flow of any given process. It is an invisible time, essentially illegible, as invisible and as opaque as the reality of the total capitalist production

process itself. This time, as a complex 'intersection' of the different times, rhythms, turnovers, etc, that we have just discussed, is only accessible in its *concept*, which, like every concept is never immediately 'given', never legible in visible reality: like every concept this concept must be *produced, constructed*.

The same could be said of political time and ideological time, the time of the theoretical (philosophy) and the time of the scientific, let alone the time of art. Let us take an example. The time of the history of philosophy is not immediately legible either: of course, in historical chronology we do see philosophers *following one another*, and it would be possible to take this sequence for the history itself. Here, too, we must renounce the ideological prejudice of visible succession, and undertake to *construct the concept of the time of the history of philosophy*, and, in order to understand this concept, it is absolutely essential to define the specific difference of the philosophical as one of the existing cultural formations (the ideological and scientific formations); to define the philosophical as belonging to the level of the *Theoretical* as such; and to establish the differential relation of the Theoretical as such firstly to the different existing practices, secondly to ideology and finally to the scientific. To define these differential relations is to define the peculiar type of articulation of the Theoretical (philosophical) with these other realities, and therefore to define the peculiar articulation of the history of philosophy with the histories of the different practices, with the history of ideologies and the history of the sciences. But this is not enough: in order to construct the concept of the history of philosophy it is essential to define in philosophy itself the specific reality which constitutes philosophical formations as such, and to which one must refer in order to think the mere possibility of *philosophical events*: This is one of the essential tasks of any theoretical attempt to produce the concept of history: to give a rigorous definition of the *historical fact* as such. Without anticipating this investigation, I should like to point out that, in its generality, the *historical fact*, as opposed to all the other phenomena that occur in historical existence, can be defined as *a fact which causes a mutation in the existing structural relations*. In the history of philosophy it is also essential, if we are to be able to discuss it as a history; to admit that *philosophical facts, philosophical events of historical scope*, occur in it, i.e., precisely *philosophical facts* which cause real mutations in the existing philosophical structural relations, in this case the *existing theoretical problematic*. Obviously, these facts are not always *visible*, rather, they are sometimes the object of a real repression, a real and more or less lasting historical denegation. For example, the mutation of the dogmatic classical problematic by Locke's empiricism is a philosophical event with historical



scope, one which still dominates idealist critical philosophy today, just as it dominated the whole of the eighteenth century. Kant, Fichte and even Hegel. This historical fact and above all the length of its range (and in particular its importance for the understanding of German idealism from Kant to Hegel) is often suspected; its real profundity is rarely appreciated. Its role in the interpretation of Marxist philosophy has been absolutely decisive, and we are still largely held prisoner by it. For another example, Spinoza's philosophy introduced an unprecedented theoretical revolution in the history of philosophy, probably the greatest philosophical revolution of all time, in so far as we can regard Spinoza as Marx's only direct ancestor from the philosophical standpoint. However, this radical revolution was the object of a massive historical repression, and Spinozist philosophy suffered much the same fate as Marxist philosophy used to and still does suffer in some countries: it served as damning evidence for a charge of 'atheism'. The insistence of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century establishment's hounding of Spinoza's memory, and the distance every writer had ineluctably to take with respect to Spinoza in order to obtain the right to speak (cf. Montesquieu), are evidence both of the repulsion and the extraordinary attraction of his thought. The history of philosophy's repressed Spinozism thus unfolded as a subterranean history acting at *other sites* (*autres lieux*), in political and religious ideology (deism) and in the sciences, but not on the illuminated stage of visible philosophy. And when Spinoza re-appeared on this stage in German idealism's '*Atheismusstreit*', and then in academic interpretations, it was more or less under the aegis of a *misunderstanding*. I think I have said enough to suggest what direction the construction of the concept of history in its different domains must take; and to show that the construction of this concept incontestably produces a reality which has nothing to do with the visible sequence of events recorded by the chronicler.

We have likewise known, since Freud, that the time of the unconscious cannot be confused with the time of biography. On the contrary, *the concept of the time of the unconscious must be constructed* in order to obtain an understanding of certain biographical traits. In exactly the same way, it is essential to construct the concepts of the different historical times which are never given in the ideological obviousness of the continuity of time (which need only be suitably divided into a good periodization to obtain the time of history), but must be constructed out of the differential nature and differential articulation of their objects in the structure of the whole. Are more examples necessary to convince us of this? Read Michel Foucault's remarkable studies in the 'history of madness', or the 'birth of the clinic', and you will see the distance between the elegant sequences

of the official chronicle, in which a discipline or a society merely reflect its good conscience, i.e., the mask of its bad conscience — and the absolutely unexpected temporality that constitutes the essence of the process of constitution and development of those cultural formations: there is nothing in true history which allows it to be read in the ideological continuum of a linear time that need only be punctuated and divided; on the contrary, it has its extremely complex and peculiar temporality which is, of course, utterly paradoxical in comparison with the disarming simplicity of ideological prejudgement. An understanding of the history of cultural formations such as those of 'madness' and of the origins of the 'clinical gaze' (*regard clinique*) in medicine, presupposes a vast effort not of abstraction but *in* abstraction, in order to construct and identify the object itself, and in order to construct from this *the concept of its history*. This is antipodal to the empirically visible history in which the time of all histories is the simple time of continuity and in which the 'content' is the vacuity of events that occur in it which one later tries to determine with dividing procedures in order to 'periodize' that continuity. Instead of these categories, continuity and discontinuity, which summarize the banal mystery of all history, we are dealing with infinitely more complex categories specific to each type of history, categories in which new logics come into play, in which, naturally, the Hegelian schemata, which are merely the sublimation of the categories of the 'logic of movement and time', no longer have more than a highly approximate value, and even this *only on condition that they are used approximately (indicatively) in accordance with their approximate nature* — for if we had to take these Hegelian categories for adequate categories, their use would become theoretically absurd, and practically either vain or disastrous.

This specific reality of the complex historical time of the levels of the whole can, paradoxically, be tested experimentally by trying to take an 'essential section' through this specific and complex time, the crucial experiment of the *contemporaneity* structure. A historical break of this kind, even if it is applied to a break in a periodization sanctioned by the phenomena of a major mutation either in the economic or the political order, never produces a 'present' with a structure of so-called 'contemporaneity', a presence that corresponds to the expressive or spiritual type of unity of the whole. The co-existence which can be observed in the 'essential section' does not reveal any omnipresent essence which is also the present of each of these 'levels'. The break 'valid' for a determinate level, political or economic, the break that would correspond to an 'essential section' in politics, for example, does not correspond to anything of the kind in the other levels, the economic, the ideological, the aesthetic, the philosophical

or the scientific — which live in different times and know other breaks, other rhythms and other punctuations. The present of one level is, so to speak, the absence of another, and this co-existence of a 'presence' and absence is simply the effect of the structure of the whole in its articulated decentering. What is thus grasped as absence in a localized presence is precisely the non-localization of the structure of the whole, or more accurately, the type of effectivity peculiar to the structure of the whole on its 'levels' (which are themselves structured) and on the 'elements' of those levels. What the impossibility of this essential section reveals, even in the absence it shows up negatively, is the form of historical existence peculiar to a social formation arising from a determinate mode of production, the peculiar type of what Marx calls the development process of the determinate mode of production. And this process, too, is what Marx, discussing the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*, calls the type of *interweaving of the different times* (and here he only mentions the economic level), i.e., the type of 'dislocation' (*décalage*) and torsion of the different temporalities produced by the different levels of the structure, the complex combination of which constitutes the peculiar time of the process's development.

To avoid any misunderstanding of what I have just said, I think it is necessary to add the following comments.

The theory of historical time which I have just outlined allows us to establish the possibility of a history of the different levels considered in their 'relative' autonomy. But we should not deduce from this that history is made up of the juxtaposition of different 'relatively' autonomous histories, different historical temporalities, living the same historical time, some in a short-term mode, others in a long-term mode. In other words, once we have rejected the ideological model of a continuous time subject to essential sections into presents, we must avoid substituting for this idea another which, although different in style, in fact surreptitiously restores the same ideology of time. There can therefore be no question of relating the diversity of the different temporalities to a single ideological base time, or of measuring their *dislocation* against the line of a single continuous reference time, remaining content, therefore, to think these dislocations as backwardnesses or forwardnesses *in time*, i.e., in the ideological reference time. If we try to make an 'essential section' in our new conception, we find that it is impossible. But this does not mean that we are dealing with an *uneven section*, a stepped or multiply toothed section in which the forwardness or backwardness of one time with respect to another is illustrated in temporal space in the way that the lateness or earliness of trains are illustrated in the SNCF's notice-boards by a spatial forwardness or backwardness. If we were to accept this, we should relapse, as even the

best of our historians usually do, into the trap of the ideology of history in which forwardness and backwardness are merely variants of the reference continuity and not the effects of the structure of the whole. We must break with all the forms of this ideology if we are to be able to relate the phenomena *observed* by the historians themselves correctly *to their concepts*, to the concept of the history of the mode of production considered — and not to any homogeneous and continuous ideological time.

This conclusion is absolutely crucial if we are to establish the status of a whole series of notions which have a major strategic role in the language of this century's economic and political thought, e.g., the notions of *unevenness of development*, of *survivals*, of *backwardness* (in consciousness) in Marxism itself, or the notion of *underdevelopment* in contemporary economic and political practice. Where these notions are concerned, therefore, we must be thoroughly precise as to the meaning we can give this concept of differential temporality, for they have far-reaching consequences in practice.

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In order to respond to this point we must once again purify our concept of the theory of history, and purify it radically, of any contamination by the obviousness of empirical history, since we know that this 'empirical history' is merely the bare face of the empiricist ideology of history. This empiricist temptation is enormous, but it is as highly borne by the ordinary man and even the historian as the inhabitants of this planet bear the weight of the enormous layer of air that crushes them. In view of this, we must clearly and unequivocally see and understand that the *concept of history* can no longer be empirical, i.e., *historical* in the ordinary sense, that, as Spinoza has already put it, *the concept 'dog' cannot bark*. We must grasp in all its rigour the absolute necessity of liberating the theory of history from any compromise with 'empirical' temporality, with the ideological concept of time which underlies and overfles it, or with the ideological idea that the theory of history, *as theory*, could be subject to the 'concrete' determinations of 'historical time' on the pretext that this 'historical time' might constitute its object.

We must have no illusions as to the incredible power of this prejudice, which still dominates us all, which is the basis for contemporary historicism and which would have us confuse the object of knowledge with the real object by attributing to the object of knowledge the same 'qualities' as the real object of which it is the knowledge. The knowledge of history is no more historical than the knowledge of sugar is sweet. But before this simple principle can finally assert itself in our consciousness, we

shall no doubt need a whole 'history'. We must therefore be content for the moment to clarify a few points. We should indeed be relapsing into the ideology of a homogeneous-continuous/self-contemporaneous time if we related the different temporalities I have just discussed to this single, identical time, as so many discontinuities in its continuity; these temporalities would then be thought as the backwardnesses, forwardnesses, survivals or unevennesses of development that can be assigned to this time. In fact, despite any denegations, this would be to institute a reference time in the continuity of which we should measure these unevennesses. On the contrary, we must regard these differences in temporal structure as, *and only as*, so many objective indices of the mode of articulation of the different elements or structures in the general structure of the whole. This amounts to saying that if we cannot make an 'essential section' in history, it is only in the specific unity of the complex structure of the whole that we can think the concept of these so-called backwardnesses, forwardnesses, survivals and unevennesses of development which *coexist* in the structure of the real historical present: the present of the *conjuncture*. To speak of differential types of historicity therefore has no meaning in reference to a base time in which these backwardnesses and forwardnesses might be measured.

This amounts to saying that, on the contrary, the ultimate meaning of the metaphorical language of backwardness, forwardness, etc., must be sought in the structure of the whole, in the site peculiar to such and such an element of such and such a structural level in the complexity of the whole. To speak of differential historical temporality therefore absolutely obliges us to situate *this site* and to think, in its peculiar articulation, the *function* of such an element or such a level in the current configuration of the whole; it is to determine the relation of articulation of this element as a function of other elements, of this structure as a function of other structures; it obliges us to define what has been called its *overdetermination* or *underdetermination* as a function of the structure of the determination of the whole, it obliges us to define what might be called, in another language, the *index of determination*, the *index of effectivity* currently attributable to the element or structure in question in the general structure of the whole. By *index of effectivity* we may understand the character of more or less dominant or subordinate and therefore more or less 'paradoxical' determination of a given element or structure in the current mechanism of the whole. And this is nothing but the theory of the conjuncture indispensable to the theory of history.

I do not want to go any further with this analysis, although it has still hardly been elaborated at all. I shall restrict myself to drawing two

conclusions from these principles, one of which concerns the concepts of synchrony and diachrony, the other the concept of history.

(1) If what I have just said has any objective meaning, it is clear that the synchrony/diachrony opposition is the site of a misconception, since to take it for a knowledge would be to remain in an epistemological vacuum, i.e., — ideology abhorring a vacuum — in an ideological fullness, precisely in the fullness of the ideological conception of a history whose time is continuous-homogeneous/self-contemporaneous. If this ideological conception of history falls, this opposition falls with it. However something of it remains: the aim of the epistemological operation of which this opposition is an unconscious reflection, precisely this epistemological operation itself, once it has been stripped of its ideological reference. What the synchrony aims at has nothing to do with the *temporal* presence of the object as a *real object*, but on the contrary, concerns a different type of presence, and the presence of a *different object*: not the temporal presence of the concrete object, not the historical time of the historical presence of the historical object, but the presence (or the 'time') of the *object of knowledge of the theoretical analysis itself*, the presence of *knowledge*. The synchronic is then nothing but the *conception* of the specific relations that exist between the different elements and the different structures of the structure of the whole, it is the *knowledge* of the relations of dependence and articulation which make it an organic whole, a system. *The synchronic is eternity in Spinoza's sense*, or the adequate knowledge of a complex object by the adequate knowledge of its complexity. This is exactly what Marx is distinguishing from the concrete-real historical sequence in the words:

How, indeed, could the single logical formula of movement, of sequence, of time, explain the body of society, in which all economic relations co-exist simultaneously and support one another? (*The Poverty of Philosophy*, MECW 6, p. 167).

If this is really what synchrony is, it has nothing to do with simple concrete temporal presence, it concerns the knowledge of the complex articulation that makes the whole a whole. It is not that concrete co-presence, but the knowledge of the complexity of the object of knowledge, which gives the knowledge of the real object.

If this is the case for synchrony, similar conclusions must be drawn where diachrony is concerned, since it is on the ideological conception of synchrony (of the contemporaneity of the essence with itself) that the ideological conception of diachrony is built. There is hardly any need to

show how diachrony admits its destitution in those thinkers who assign to it the role of history. Diachrony is reduced to the sequence of events (*à l'événementiel*), and to the effects of this sequence of events on the structure of the synchronic: the historical then becomes the unexpected, the accidental, the factually unique, arising or falling in the empty continuum of time, for purely contingent reasons. In this context, therefore, the project of a 'structural history' poses serious problems, and a laborious reflection of this can be found in the passages devoted to it by Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*. Indeed, by what miracle could an empty time and momentary events induce de- and re-structurations of the synchronic? Once synchrony has been correctly located, diachrony loses its 'concrete' sense and nothing is left of it either but its epistemological use, on condition that it undergoes a theoretical conversion and is considered in its true sense as a category not of the concrete but of knowing. Diachrony is then merely the false name for the *process*, or for what Marx called the *development of forms*.<sup>3</sup> But here too we are *within knowledge*, in the process of knowledge, not in the development of the real-concrete.<sup>4</sup>

(2) I now come to the concept of historical time. To define it strictly, one must accept the following condition. As this concept can only be based on the complex and differentially articulated structure in dominance of the social totality that constitutes the social formation arising from a determinate mode of production, it can only be assigned a content as a function of the structure of that totality, considered either as a whole, or in its different 'levels'. In particular, it is only possible to give a content to the concept of historical time by defining historical time as the specific form of existence of the social totality under consideration, an existence in which different structural levels of temporality interfere, because of the peculiar relations of correspondence, non-correspondence, articulation, dislocation and torsion which obtain, between the different 'levels' of the

3 Cf. Part One, section 13.

4 To avoid any misunderstanding, I should add that this critique of the latent empiricism which haunts the common use of the *historical* concept of 'diachrony' today obviously does not apply to the *reality* of historical transformations, e.g., the transition from one mode of production to another. If the aim is to *designate* this reality (the fact of the real transformation of structures) as 'the diachrony', this is merely to apply the term to the historical itself (which is never purely static) or, by making a distinction within the historical, to what is *visibly* transformed. But once the aim is to think the concept of these transformations, we are no longer in the real (the 'diachrony') but in knowledge, in which — in so far as the *real* 'diachrony' itself is concerned — the epistemological dialectic that has just been set out comes into play: the concept and the 'development of its forms'. On this point cf. Balibar's essay below.

whole in accordance with its general structure. It needs to be said that, just as there is no production in general, there is no history in general, but only specific structures of historicity, based in the last resort on the specific structures of the different modes of production, specific structures of historicity, which, since they are merely the existence of determinate social formations (arising from specific modes of production), articulated as social wholes, have no meaning except as a function of the essence of those totalities, i.e., of the essence of their peculiar complexity.

This definition of historical time by its *theoretical* concept is aimed directly at historians and their practice. For it should draw their attention to the empiricist ideology which, with a few exceptions, overwhelmingly dominates every variety of history (whether it be history in the wide sense or specialized economic, social or political history, the history of art, literature, philosophy, the sciences, etc.). To put it crudely, history lives in the illusion that it can do without *theory* in the strong sense, without a theory of its object and therefore without a definition of its theoretical object. What acts as its theory, what it sees as taking the place of this theory, is its *methodology*, i.e., the rules that govern its effective practices, practices centred around the scrutiny of documents and the establishment of facts. What it sees as taking the place of its theoretical object is its 'concrete' object. History therefore takes its methodology for the theory it lacks, and it takes the 'concrete' of the concrete obviousness of ideological time for its theoretical object. This dual confusion is typical of an empiricist ideology. What history lacks is a conscious and courageous confrontation with one of the essential problems of any science whatsoever: the problem of the nature and constitution of its *theory*, by which I mean the theory within the science itself, the system of theoretical concepts on which is based every method, and every practice, even the experimental method and practice, and which simultaneously defines its theoretical object. But with a few exceptions historians have not posed history's vital and urgent problem, the problem of its *theory*. And, as inevitably happens, the place left empty by scientific theory has been occupied by an ideological theory whose harmful influence can be shown in detail precisely at the level of the historian's methodology.

The object of history as a science therefore has the same kind of theoretical existence and occupies the same theoretical level as the object of Marx's political economy. The only difference that can be established between the theory of political economy, of which *Capital* is an example, and the theory of history as a science, lies in the fact that the theory of political economy only considers one relatively autonomous component of the social totality, whereas the theory of history in principle takes the

complex totality as such for its object. Other than this difference, there can be no distinction between the science of political economy and the science of history from a theoretical viewpoint.

The opposition often suggested between the 'abstract' character of *Capital* and the supposedly 'concrete' character of history as a science is purely and simply a misunderstanding, but one which is worth discussing, for it has a special place in the realm of the prejudices which govern us. It is true that the theory of political economy is worked out and developed by the investigation of a raw material provided in the last resort by the practices of real concrete history; it is true that it can and must be realized in what are called 'concrete' economic analyses, relating to some given conjuncture or given period of a given social formation; and these truths are exactly mirrored in the fact that the theory of history, too, is worked out and developed by the investigation of a raw material provided by real concrete history, and that it, too, is realized in the 'concrete analysis' of 'concrete situations'. The misunderstanding lies entirely in the fact that history hardly exists other than in this second form, as the 'application' of a theory ... which does not exist in any real sense, and that therefore the 'applications' of the theory of history somehow occur behind this absent theory's back and are naturally mistaken for it ... if they do not depend (for they do need a minimum of theory to exist) on more or less ideological outlines of theories. We must take seriously *the fact that the theory of history, in the strong sense, does not exist, or hardly exists as far as historians are concerned*, that the concepts of existing history are therefore nearly always 'empirical' concepts, more or less in search of their theoretical basis — 'empirical', i.e., cross-bred with a powerful strain of an ideology concealed behind its 'obviousnesses'. This is the case with the best historians, who can be distinguished from the rest precisely by their concern for theory, but who seek this theory at a level on which it cannot be found, at the level of *historical methodology*, which cannot be defined without the *theory* on which it is based.

On the day that history also exists as theory in the sense defined, its dual existence as theoretical science and empirical science will pose no more problems than does the dual existence of the Marxist theory of political economy as theoretical science and empirical science. On that day, the theoretical imbalance between the banal opposition of the abstract science of political economy and the supposedly 'concrete' science of history will disappear, and along with it all the religious dreams and rituals of the resurrection of the dead and the communion of saints which, one hundred years after Michelet, some historians still spend their time celebrating, not in the catacombs but in today's public places.

I have one more word to say on this subject. The present confusion between history as theory of history and history as supposed 'science of the concrete', history trapped in the empiricism of its object — and the confrontation of this 'concrete' empirical history with the 'abstract' theory of political economy, give rise to a significant number of conceptual confusions and false problems. It could even be said that this misunderstanding itself *produces* ideological concepts, whose function it is to *fill in the gap*, i.e., the vacuum, between the theoretical part of existing history on the one hand and empirical history on the other (which only too often is existing history). I do not want to discuss each of these concepts one by one, another book would be necessary to do so. I shall point out three of them as examples: the classical oppositions: *essence/phenomena*, *necessity/contingency* and the 'problem' of the action of the individual in history.

According to the economicist or mechanistic hypothesis, the role of the *essence/phenomena* opposition is to explain the non-economic as a phenomenon of the economic, which is its essence. In this operation, the theoretical (and the 'abstract') is surreptitiously substituted for the economy (since we have its theory in *Capital*) and the empirical or 'concrete' for the non-economic, i.e., for politics, ideology, etc. The *essence/phenomena* opposition performs this role well enough so long as we regard the 'phenomena' as the empirical and concrete, and the *essence* as the non-empirical, as the abstract, as the truth of the phenomenon. The result is to set up an absurd relationship between the theoretical (the economic) and the empirical (the non-economic) by a change in partners which compares the knowledge of one object with the existence of another — which is to commit us to a fallacy.

The *necessity/contingency* or *necessity/accident* oppositions are of the same kind and have the same function: to fill in the gap between the theoretical part of one object (e.g., the economy) and the non-theoretical part, the empirical part of another (the non-economic, in which the economy 'asserts itself': the 'circumstances', 'individuality', etc.). To say, for example, that *necessity* 'asserts itself amid the contingent' gives and diverse circumstances, etc.', is to set up an astonishing mechanism in which two realities with no direct relationship are compared. 'Necessity', in this case, designates a *knowledge* (e.g., the law of determination in the last instance by the economy), and the 'circumstances' *what is not known*. But instead of comparing a knowledge with a non-knowledge, the non-knowledge is put into parenthesis and the *empirical existence* of the unknown object (called the 'circumstances' or contingent givens, etc.) is substituted for it — which allows the *terms to be crossed*, achieving a

fallacious short-circuit in which the *knowledge* of a determinate object (economic necessity) is compared with the empirical existence of a different object (the 'circumstances', political or otherwise, amid which this 'necessity' is said to 'assert itself').

The most famous form of this fallacy is found in the 'problem' of the 'role of the individual in history' ... a tragic argument which consists of a comparison between the theoretical part or knowledge of a determinate object (e.g., the economy) which represents the essence of which the other objects (the political, the ideological, etc.) are regarded as the phenomena — and that fensively important (politically!) empirical reality, individual action. Here again we are dealing with a short-circuit between crossed terms which it is illegitimate to compare: for to do so is to compare the knowledge of one definite object with the empirical existence of another! I do not want to insist on the difficulties which these concepts put in the way of their users, who cannot escape them in practice except by questioning critically the Hegelian (and more generally classical) philosophical concepts which are fish in the water of this fallacy. But I should like to signal that this false problem of the 'role of the individual in history' is nevertheless an index to a true problem, one which arises by right in the theory of history: the problem of the concept of the *historical forms of existence of individuality*. *Capital* gives us the principles necessary for the posing of this problem. It defines for the capitalist mode of production the different forms of individuality required and produced by that mode according to functions, of which the individuals are 'bearers' (*Träger*), in the division of labour, in the different 'levels' of the structure. Of course, even here, the mode of historical existence of individuality in a given mode of production is not legible to the naked eye in 'history'; its concept, too, must therefore be *constructed*, and like every concept it contains a number of surprises, the most striking of which is the fact that it is nothing like the false obviousnesses of the 'given' — which is merely the mask of the current ideology. The concept of the variations in the mode of historical existence of individuality opens the way to what is really left of the '*problem of the role of the individual in history*', which, posed in its familiar form, is a false problem, false because unbalanced, theoretically 'hybrid', since it compares the theory of one object with the empirical existence of another. So long as the real theoretical problem has not been posed (the problem of the forms of historical existence of individuality), we shall be beating about in the dark — like Plekhanov, who ransacked Louis XV's bed to prove that the secrets of the fall of the *Ancien Régime* were not hidden there. As a general rule, concepts are not hidden in beds. Once we have, at least in principle, elucidated the specificity of the

Marxist concept of historical time — once we have criticized as ideologies the common-sense notions that encumber the word '*history*', we can better understand the different effects that this misunderstanding about history has had on the interpretation of Marx. An understanding of the main confusions *ipso facto* reveals to us the pertinence of certain essential distinctions which have often been misconceived, despite the fact that they appear in so many words in *Capital*.

*In the first place*, it is clear why the mere project of 'historicizing' classical political economy leads to the theoretical impasse of a fallacy in which the classical economic categories, far from being thought within the theoretical concept of history, are merely projected onto the ideological concept of history. This procedure resists to us the classical schema, once again linked with the misconception of Marx's specificity: all that Marx did was to seal the union of classical political economy on the one hand, and the Hegelian dialectical method (a theoretical concentrate of the Hegelian concept of history) on the other. But this leads directly to the forging of a pre-existing and exoteric method onto a predetermined object, i.e., to the theoretically dubious union of a method defined independently of its object, whose agreement with its object can only be sealed against the common ideological background of a misunderstanding which marks Hegelian historicism as much as economic eternalism. And it follows that the two terms of the eternity/history opposition derive from a common problematic, Hegelian 'historicism' being only the historicized counter-connotation of economic 'eternalism'.

But, *in the second place*, we also see the meaning of the still undisclosed debates about the relation between economic theory and history in *Capital* itself. These debates have lasted until today largely under the influence of a confusion between the status of economic theory itself and that of history. When, in *Anti-Dühring*, Engels writes that 'Political economy is ... essentially a historical science,' because 'it deals with material which is historical, that is, constantly changing' (MECW 25, p. 135), he touches the exact spot of the ambiguity: the word '*historical*' may either fall towards the Marxist concept or towards the ideological concept of history, according to whether this word designates the *object of knowledge* of a theory of history, or, on the contrary, the real object of which this theory gives the knowledge. We have every right to say that the theory of Marxist political economy derives from the Marxist theory of history, as one of its regions; but we might also think that the theory of political economy is affected even in its concepts by the peculiar quality of real history (its 'material' which is '*changing*'). Engels rushes us into this latter interpretation in a number of astonishing texts which introduce history (in the

empiricist-ideological sense) even into Marx's theoretical categories. I am referring particularly to his insistence that Marx could not produce real scientific definitions in his theory because of the properties of his real object, because of the moving, changing nature of a historical reality which in essence rebels against any treatment by definitions, whose fixed and 'eternal' forms can only betray the perpetual mobility of historical development.

In his Preface to Volume Three of *Capital*, Engels, quoting Fireman's criticisms, writes:

They rest on the misunderstanding to the effect that Marx seeks to define where he only explains, and that one can generally look in Marx for fixed, cut-and-dried definitions that are valid for all time. It should go without saying that where things and their mutual relations are conceived not as fixed but rather as changing, their mental images, too, i.e. concepts, are also subject to change and reformulation; that they are not to be encapsulated in rigid definitions, but rather developed in their process of historical or logical formation. It will be clear, then, why at the beginning of Volume One ... Marx takes simple commodity production as his historical presupposition, only later, proceeding from this basis, to come on to capital ... (*Capital*, Vol. 3, p. 103).

The same theme recurs in the preparatory notes for *Anti-Dühring* (MECW 25, p. 601):

To science definitions are worthless because always inadequate. The only real definition is the development of the thing itself, but this is no longer a definition. To know and show what life is we must examine all forms of life and present them in their interconnection. On the other hand, for ordinary purposes, a brief exposition of the commonest and at the same time most significant features of a so-called definition is often useful and even necessary, and can do no harm if no more is expected of it than it can convey.

Unfortunately, these texts leave no room for ambiguity, since they go so far as to designate quite precisely the site of the 'misunderstanding' and to formulate its terms. All the characters in this misunderstanding are on stage here, each playing the part ascribed to it by the effect expected of this theatre. We only have to change their places for them to admit the role that has been assigned to them, abandon it and begin to speak to a quite different text. The whole misunderstanding in this reasoning lies in fact in the fallacy which confuses the theoretical development of concepts with the genesis of real history. But Marx carefully distinguished

between these two orders, when, in the 1857 *Introduction*, he showed that it was impossible to institute any one-to-one correlation between the terms which feature in the order of succession of concepts in the discourse of scientific proof on the one hand, and those which feature in the genetic order of real history on the other. Here Engels postulates precisely such an impossible correlation, unhesitatingly identifying 'logical' development and 'historical' development. And with extraordinary honesty he points out the theoretical precondition for this identification: the affirmation that these two developments are identical in order depends on the fact that the necessary concepts of any theory of history are affected in their conceptual substance, by the properties of the real object. 'Where things ... are conceived ... as changing, their mental images, the concepts, are also subject to change and reformulation.' In order to be able to identify the development of the concepts and the development of real history, he therefore had to identify the object of knowledge with the real object, and to subject the concepts to the real determination of real history. In this way, Engels applies to the concepts of the theory of history a coefficient of mobility borrowed directly from the concrete empirical sequence (from the ideology of history), transposing the 'real-concrete' into the 'thought-concrete' and the historical as real change into the concept itself. Given these premises, the argument is bound to conclude that every definition is unscientific: 'to science, definitions are worthless', since 'the only real definition is the development of the thing itself, but this is no longer a definition'. Once again the real thing has been substituted for the concept and the development of the real thing (i.e., the real history of concrete genesis) has been substituted for the 'development of forms', which was explicitly described, in the 1857 *Introduction* as well as in *Capital*, as occurring exclusively in knowledge and concerning exclusively the necessary order of appearance and disappearance of concepts in the discourse of the scientific proof. Need I demonstrate that Engels's interpretation contains a theme we have already encountered in his answer to Conrad Schmidt: the theme of the original weakness of the concept? If 'to science, definitions are worthless', it is because they are 'always inadequate'; in other words, the concept is in essence at fault, and this fault is inscribed in its very conceptual nature: his awareness of this original sin forces him to relinquish any claim to define the real, which 'defines' itself in the historical production of the forms of its genesis. If the question of the status of the definition, i.e., of the concept, is posed from this starting-point, there is no alternative but to confer on it a role which is quite different from the role it claims theoretically: a 'practical' role, good enough for 'ordinary purposes', a role of general designation without any theoretical function. Paradoxically, it is

not without interest to note that Engels, after beginning by crossing the terms implied in his question, is led to conclude with a definition whose meaning is crossed, too, i.e., dislocated (*décalé*) with respect to the object it is aimed at, since in this purely practical (ordinary) definition of the role of the scientific concept he also gives us the starting-point for a theory of one of the functions of the *ideological* concept: its function as a practical allusion and index.

This is where we are led by ignoring the basic distinction Marx was careful to draw between the object of knowledge and the real object, between the 'development of forms' of the concept in knowledge and the development of the real categories in concrete history: to an empiricist ideology of knowledge, and to the identification of the *logical* and the *historical* in *Capital* itself. It should hardly surprise us that so many interpreters go round in circles in the question that hangs on this definition, if it is true that all problems concerned with the relation between the logical and the historical in *Capital* presuppose a *non-existent* relation. Whether this relation is imagined as one which brings the terms featured in the two orders of development (the development of the concept; the development of real history) into *direct* one-to-one correspondence; or whether the same relation is imagined as one which brings the terms of the two orders of development into *inverse* correspondence (the basis for the theses of Della Volpe and Pietranera analysed by Rancière in this volume), there remains the hypothesis of a relation *where no relation exists*. Two conclusions can be drawn from this error. The first is simply practical: the difficulties encountered in the solution of this problem are serious ones, indeed insurmountable ones: if it is not always possible to solve a problem that does exist, we can rest assured that it is never possible to solve *a problem that does not exist*.<sup>5</sup> The second is theoretical: an imaginary solution is required for an imaginary problem, and not just any imaginary solution but *the* imaginary solution required by the (imaginary) posing of this imaginary problem. Every imaginary (ideological)

5 We are indebted to Kant for the suspicion that *problems which do not exist* may give rise to massive theoretical efforts, and the more or less rigorous production of solutions as fantastic as their object, for his philosophy may be broadly conceived as a theory of the possibility of the existence of '*sciences without objects*' (rational metaphysics, cosmology and psychology). If it so happens that the reader does not have the heart to tackle Kant, he can consult directly the producers of '*sciences without objects*': e.g., theologians, most social psychologists, some 'psychologists', etc. I should also add that in certain circumstances, the theoretical and ideological conjuncture may make these '*sciences without objects*' produce or contain, during the elaboration of the theory of their supposed 'objects', the theoretical forms of existing rationality: e.g., in the Middle Ages, theology *undoubtedly* contained and elaborated the forms of the theoretical then in existence.

posing of a problem (which may be imaginary, too) in fact carries it in a determinate problematic, which defines both the possibility and the form of the posing of this problem. This problematic *rears* as its mirror-image in the solution given to this problem by virtue of the mirror action peculiar to the ideological imagination (cf. Part One); if it is not in fact found directly as such in the aforesaid solution, it will emerge elsewhere, openly, when it is explicitly in question, in the latent 'theory of knowledge' which underlies the identification of the historical and the logical: an *empiricist* ideology of knowledge. It is no accident therefore that we see Engels literally precipitated by his *question* into this empiricist temptation, nor that, in a different way, Della Volpe and his pupils support their thesis of the *inverse* identification of the historical and logical orders in *Capital* by arguing a theory of 'historical abstraction', which is a higher form of historicist empiricism.

To return to *Capital*, the effect of the mistake I have just pointed out, which postulates the imaginary existence of a non-existent relation, is to make a *different* relation invisible, a relation which is legitimate because it exists and is established by right between the theory of the economy and the theory of history. If the first relation (theory of the economy and concrete history) was imaginary, the second relation (theory of the economy and theory of history) is a true *theoretical* relation. Why has it remained until now, if not invisible, at least opaque to us? Because the first relation had the advantage of 'obviousness', i.e., of the empiricist temptations of the historians who, reading pages of 'concrete' history in *Capital* (the struggle for the reduction of the working day, the transition from manufacture to modern industry, primitive accumulation, etc.), felt in some sense 'at home' in it and therefore posed the problem of economic theory as a function of the existence of this 'concrete' history, without feeling any need to pose the question of its status. They gave an empiricist interpretation of analyses of Marx's which, far from being historical analyses in the strict sense, i.e., analyses sustained by the development of the concept of history, are more the half-finished materials *for a history* (cf. Balibar's paper) than a real *historical* treatment of those materials. They used the presence of these half-elaborated materials as an argument for an ideological concept of history, and therefore posed the question of this ideology of 'concrete' history for the 'abstract' theory of political economy: hence both the fascination of *Capital* for them, and their unease before a discourse which seemed to them to be 'speculative' in many places. The economists had much the same reaction, torn between (concrete) economic history and (abstract) economic theory. Both hoped to find in *Capital* what they sought, but they also found something else which they had not



'sought' and which they therefore tried to *reduce*, by posing the imaginary problem of the relation, one-to-one or otherwise, between the abstract order of concepts and the concrete order of history. They did not see that what they had *found* did not answer their question but a quite different question, which, of course, should have given the lie to the ideological illusion of the concept of history which they had brought with them and projected into their reading of *Capital*. They did not see that the 'abstract' theory of political economy is the theory of a region which, as a region (level or instance), is an organic component of the object of the theory of history itself. They did not see that history features in *Capital* as an object of theory, not as a real object, as an 'abstract' (conceptual) object and not as a real-concrete object; and that the chapters in which Marx applies the first stages of a historical treatment either to the struggles to shorten the working day, or to primitive capitalist accumulation, refer to the theory of history as their principle, to the construction of the *concept* of history and of its 'developed forms', of which the economic theory of the capitalist mode of production constitutes one determinate 'region'.

One word more on one of the current effects of this misunderstanding. In it we have one of the origins of the interpretation of *Capital* as a 'theoretical model', a formula whose use can, *a priori*, always be seen as a symptom, in the precise clinical sense of the word, of the empiricist misunderstanding about the object of a given knowledge. This conception of theory as a 'model' is in fact only possible on peculiarly ideological conditions: firstly that the distance separating theory from the empirical concrete is included *within* theory itself, and secondly, equally ideologically, that this distance is itself conceived as an *empirical* distance, and hence as belonging to the concrete itself, which one then has the privilege (i.e., the banality) of defining as what is 'always-richer-and-more-living-than-theory'. No doubt this proclamation of the exalted status of the superabundance of 'life' and 'concreteness', of the superiority of the world's imagination and the green leaves of action over the poverty of grey theory, contains a serious lesson in intellectual modesty, healthy for the right (presumptuous and dogmatic) ears. But we are also aware of the fact that the concrete and life may be the pretext for facile chatter which serves to mask either apologetic ends (a god, whatever his plumage, is always lining his nest with the feathers of the superabundance, i.e., 'transcendence' of the 'concrete' and 'life') or mere intellectual laziness. What matters is precisely the use made of this kind of endlessly repeated commonplace about the concrete's surplus of transcendence. But in the conception of knowledge as a 'model', we find the real and the concrete intervening to enable us to think the relation, i.e., the distance, between

the 'concrete' and theory as both *within* theory itself and *within* the real itself, not as in a real outside this real object, knowledge of which is produced precisely by theory, but as *within this real object itself*, as a relation of the *part* to the *whole*, of a 'partial' part to a superabundant whole (cf. Part One, section 10). The inevitable result of this operation is to make theory seem one empirical instrument among others, in other words, to reduce any theory of knowledge as a model directly to what it is: a form of theoretical pragmatism.

We have therefore obtained, with the last effect of this mistake, a precise principle of understanding and criticism: it is this establishment of a relation of one-to-one correspondence in the real of the object between a theoretical ensemble (the theory of political economy) and the *real* empirical ensemble (concrete history) of which the first ensemble is the knowledge, which has given rise to misconstructions where the question of the 'relations' between 'Logic' and 'history' in *Capital* is concerned. The most serious of these misconstructions is the blinding effect of the question: it has sometimes prevented any perception that *Capital* really does *contain* a theory of history which is indispensable for any understanding of the theory of the economy.

## Chapter 5

## Marxism Is Not a Historicism

But this brings us to one last misunderstanding, of the same breed but perhaps even more serious, for it does not only involve our reading of *Capital*, or Marxist philosophy, but also the relationship between *Capital* and Marxist philosophy, hence the relationship between historical materialism and dialectical materialism — i.e., the meaning of Marx's work as a whole — and, lastly, the relationship between real history and Marxist theory. This misunderstanding stems from the oversight which sees in Marxism a historicism, and the most radical historicism of all, an 'absolute historicism'. This claim presents the relationship Marxist theory has with real history in the form of the relationship between the science of history and Marxist philosophy.

I should like to suggest that, from the theoretical standpoint, Marxism is no more a historicism than it is a humanism (cf. *For Marx*, pp. 219ff); that in many respects both historicism and humanism depend on the same ideological problematic; and that, *theoretically speaking*, Marxism is, in a single movement and by virtue of the unique epistemological rupture which established it, an anti-humanism and an anti-historicism. Strictly speaking, I ought to say an a-humanism and an a-historicism. But in order to give these terms all the weight of a declaration of rupture which, far from going without saying, is, on the contrary, very hard to accept, I have deliberately used this doubly *negative* formula (anti-humanism, anti-historicism) instead of a simple privative form, for the latter is not sufficiently imperative to repel the humanist and historicist assault which, in some circles, has threatened Marxism continuously for the past forty years.

We know precisely what were the circumstances in which this humanist and historicist interpretation of Marx was born, and what recent circumstances have reinvigorated it. It was born out of a vital reaction

against the mechanismism and economism of the Second International, in the period just preceding and, above all, in the years just following the 1917 Revolution. In this respect it has real historical merits; just as the recent renaissance of this interpretation after the Twentieth Congress's denunciation of the dogmatic errors and crimes of the 'Cult of Personality' has real historical sanction, though in a somewhat different way. This recent reinvigoration is merely a repetition and usually a generous or skilful but 'rightist' misappropriation of a historical reaction which then had the force of a protest that was revolutionary in spirit, although 'leftist'. It cannot therefore provide the norm with which we judge the historical significance of its former state. The themes of a revolutionary humanism and historicism emerged from the German Left, initially from Rosa Luxemburg and Mehring, and then, after the 1917 Revolution, from a whole series of theoreticians, some of whom, like Korsch, were lost later, while others, like Lukács, played an important part, or even, like Gramsci, a very important part. We know the terms in which Lenin judged this movement of 'leftist' reaction against the mechanistic conventionality of the Second International: he condemned its theoretical fables and its political tactics (cf. *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*), while recognizing that it did then contain authentically revolutionary elements, for example in Rosa Luxemburg and in Gramsci. One day we shall have to illuminate this whole past. Such a historical and theoretical study is indispensable if we are to distinguish rightly in our present itself between the real and ghostly characters, and if we are to establish on indisputable bases the results of a critique which was then conducted amidst the confusions of a battle in which the reaction against the mechanismism and fatalism of the Second International necessarily took the form of an appeal to the consciousness and wills of men, to *make* the revolution at last which history had given them to make. When this has been done, we may perhaps be a little clearer about the paradoxical title of a famous article in which Gramsci celebrated 'The Revolution against *Capital*', proclaiming brutally that the anti-capitalist revolution of 1917 had had to be made *against* Karl Marx's *Capital* by the voluntary and conscious action of men, of the masses and the Bolsheviks, and not by virtue of a Book in which the Second International read the fatality of the advent of socialism as if in a Bible.<sup>1</sup>

1 Gramsci: 'No, the mechanical forces never predominate in history; it is the men, the consciousnesses and the spirit which mould the external appearance and always triumph in the end... The pseudo-scientists' natural law' and fatal course of events has been replaced by man's tenacious will' (from a text published in *Rivista*, 1957, pp. 149–58, quoted by Mario Tronti in *Studi Gramsciani*, Rome: Editoria Riunita, 1959, p. 306).

Even without this scientific study of the conditions which produced the first, 'leftist' form of this humanism and historicism, we are equipped to identify in Marx what was used to authorize this interpretation, and obviously cannot but justify its recent form in the eyes of contemporary readers of Marx. We shall not be astonished to discover that the same ambiguities in formulation which fostered a mechanistic and evolutionist reading have also authorized a historicist reading: Lenin has given us enough examples of the common theoretical bases of opportunism and leftism for us not to be disconcerted by such a paradoxical coincidence.

I have referred to ambiguous formulations. Here too we have stumbled on a reality the extent of whose effects we have already registered: Marx did *produce* in his work the distinction between himself and his predecessors, but — as is the fate of all inventors — he did not think the *concept* of this distinction with all the sharpness that could be desired; he did not think theoretically, or in an adequate and advanced form, either the concept or the theoretical implications of the theoretically revolutionary step he had taken. Sometimes, for want of anything better, he thought it partly in borrowed concepts, particularly Hegelian ones, introducing an effect of dislocation between the semantic field of origin from which he borrowed his concepts, and the field of conceptual objects to which they were applied. At others he did think this difference for itself, but only partially or as an indicative outline, as an obstinate search for equivalents,<sup>2</sup> without succeeding in directly formulating the original and strict sense of what he was producing in the adequacy of a concept. This dislocation, which can only be revealed and reduced by a critical reading, is *objectively part of the text of Marx's discourse*.<sup>3</sup>

This, rather than any tendentiousness on their part, is the reason why so many of Marx's inheritors and supporters have produced inaccurate estimates of his thought, while claiming, text in hand, that they remain true to the letter of what he wrote.

Here I should like to go into some detail in order to show on which particular texts it is possible to base a *historical* reading of Marx. I shall not discuss Marx's Early Works or the texts of the Break (*For Marx*, p. 34), for it is easy to prove it with them. There is no need to do violence to texts

<sup>2</sup> Here we need a full study of his typical metaphors and their proliferation around a centre which it is their mission to focus as they cannot call it by its right name, the name of its concept.

<sup>3</sup> The fact and necessity of this dislocation are not peculiar to Marx but common to every scientific founding moment and to all scientific production generally: a study of them is part of a theory of the history of the production of knowledges and a history of the theoretical the necessity for which we feel here also.

such as the *Theses on Feuerbach* or *The German Ideology* which still reverberate profoundly with humanist and historicist echoes, to make them pronounce the words demanded of them: they pronounce them of their own accord. I shall discuss only *Capital* and the 1857 *Introduction*.

The texts of Marx's which can be used to support a historicist reading of Marx can be grouped under two heads. The first of these concerns the definition of the conditions in which the object of any historical science is given.

In the 1857 *Introduction*, Marx writes:

In the succession of the economic categories, as in any other historical, social science, it must not be forgotten that their subject — here, modern bourgeois society — is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality; and that these categories therefore express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence, and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject (*Grundrisse*, p. 106).

This can be compared with a passage in *Capital* (Vol. 1, p. 168):

Reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development. Reflection beings *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the proceeds of development ready to hand.

Not only do these texts suggest that the object of all of the social and historical sciences is an evolved object, a result, but also that the activity of knowledge which is applied to this object, too, is defined by the present of this given, by the current moment of this given. This is what some Italian Marxist interpreters, reverting to a term of Croce's, have called the category of the 'contemporaneity' of the 'historical present', a category that defines historically and defines as historical the conditions for all knowledge concerning a historical object. As we know, this term contemporaneity can contain an ambiguity.

Marx himself seems to recognize this absolute condition in the *Introduction* a few lines earlier than the text referred to above:

The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and only under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself ... it always conceives them one-sidedly. The Christian religion was able to be of assistance in reaching an objective understanding

of earlier mythologies only when its own self-criticism had been accomplished to a certain degree, so to speak, *δυναται* [potentially]. Likewise, bourgeois economics arrived at an understanding of feudal, ancient, oriental economics only after the *self-criticism of bourgeois society had begun* (*Grundrisse*, p. 106).

To sum up: every science of a historical object (and political economy in particular) applies to a given, present, historical object, an object that has evolved as a result of past history. Hence every operation of knowledge, starting from the present and applied to an evolved object, is merely the projection of the present onto the past of that object. Marx is here describing the retrospection which Hegel had criticized in 'reflective' history (*Introduction to the Philosophy of History*). This inevitable retrospection is only scientific if the present attains the science of itself, criticism of itself, its self-criticism, i.e., if the present is an 'essential section' which makes the essence *visible*.

But here the second group of texts come in, and this is the decisive point at which we might speak of a historicism in Marx. This point concerns precisely what Marx calls in the text above, 'the quite specific circumstances' of a present's *self-criticism*. In other words, in order that the retrospection of the self-consciousness of a present should cease to be subjective, this present must be capable of self-criticism, in order to attain the *science of itself*. But what do we find if we examine the history of political economy? We find thinkers who have merely thought *within the limits of their present*, unable to run ahead of their times. Aristotle: with all his genius he could only write the equation: 'x objects A = y objects B' as an equation, and declare that the common substance in this equation was unthinkable since it was absurd. What prevented him from going further?

*Aristotle himself was unable to extract* [literally, 'read from': *herauslesen*] this fact, that, in the form of commodity-values, all labour is expressed as equal human labour and therefore as labour of equal quality, by inspection from the form of value, *because* Greek society was founded on the labour of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labour-power (*Capital*, Vol. 1, pp. 151-2).

The present that enabled Aristotle to make this brilliant intuitive reading, simultaneously prevented him from solving the problem he had posed.<sup>4</sup> The same goes for all the other great inventors of classical political

<sup>4</sup> This is not untrue, of course, but when this limitation is directly related to 'history' there is once again a risk of merely invoking the *ideological* concept of history.

economy. The Mercantilists merely reflected their own present, making their monetary theory out of the monetary policy of their time. The Physiocrats merely reflected their own present, outlining a general theory of surplus-value, but of natural surplus-value, the surplus-value of agricultural labour where the corn could be *seen* growing, and the surplus unconsumed by a corn-producing agricultural labourer could be *seen* passing into the farmer's granary: in doing this they were merely formulating the *essence of their present*, the development of agrarian capitalism in the rich plains of the Paris Basin which Engels lists: Normandy, Picardy and the Ile-de-France (*Anti-Dühring*, MECW 25, p. 233). Even they could not run ahead of their times; they only acquired knowledges in so far as their times offered these knowledges to them in a *visible* form, had produced them for their consciousness: in sum, they described what they *saw*. Did Smith and Ricardo go any further, did they describe what they *did not see*? Did they run ahead of their times? No. If they attained a science which was more than the mere *consciousness* of their present, it was because this consciousness contained a real *self-criticism* of this present. Why was this self-criticism possible at this point? The logic of this essentially Hegelian interpretation tempts one to answer: they attained science itself in the consciousness of their present because this consciousness was, as a consciousness, its *own self-criticism*, i.e., a *science of itself*.

In other words, what distinguished their living and lived present from all the other *presents* (of the past) was that, for the first time, this present produced in itself *its own critique of itself*, and that it therefore possessed the historical privilege of producing the science of itself precisely in the form of a self-consciousness. But this present has a name: it is the present of *absolute knowledge*, in which consciousness and science are one and the same, in which science exists in the immediate form of consciousness, and truth can be *read* openly in the phenomena, if not directly, at least with little difficulty, since the abstractions on which the whole historico-social science under consideration depends are really present in the real empirical existence of the phenomena.

Immediately after his discussion of Aristotle, Marx says:

The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion. This however becomes possible *only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour*, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities (*Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 152).

The production of commodities must be fully developed before the *scientific conviction* emerges, *from experience* itself, that all the different kinds of private labour (which are carried on independently of each other, and yet, as spontaneously developed branches of the social division of labour, are in a situation of all-round dependence on each other) are continually being reduced to the quantitative proportions in which society requires them (Vol. 1, p. 168).

The belated scientific discovery that the products of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development (Vol. 1, p. 167).

This historical epoch of the foundation of the science of Political Economy does seem here to be brought into relationship with experience itself (*Erfahrung*), i.e., with the straightforward reading of the essence in the phenomenon. Or, if you prefer, the sectional reading of the essence in the slice of the present seems to be brought into relationship with the essence of a particular epoch of human history in which the generalization of commodity production and hence of the category commodity appears simultaneously as the absolute condition of possibility and the immediate given of this direct reading from experience. In fact, in the 1857 *Introduction* as well as in *Capital*, Marx says that the reality of labour in general, of abstract labour, is produced as a phenomenal reality by capitalist production. In some sense, history has reached the point and produced the exceptional, specific present in which *scientific abstractions exist in the state of empirical realities*, in which science and scientific concepts exist in the form of the visible part of experience as so many directly accessible truths.

See how this is expressed in the 1857 *Introduction*:

[T]his abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental (*geistige*) product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality (*in der Wirklichkeit*) has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form. Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society — in the United States. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economies, namely the abstraction of the category 'labour', 'labour as such', labour pure

and simply, become true in practice (*wird praktisch wahr*). The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurable ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth (*praktisch wahr*) as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society (*Grundrisse*, p. 105).

If the present of capitalist production has produced scientific truth itself in its visible reality (*Wirklichkeit, Erscheinung, Erfahrung*), in its self-consciousness, and if therefore its self-consciousness, its own phenomenon, is therefore its own self-criticism in act (*en acte*) — then it is perfectly clear why the present's retrospection of the past is no longer ideology but true knowledge, and we can appreciate the legitimate epistemological primacy of the present over the past:

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc. (*ibid.*)

We need take only one more step in the logic of absolute knowledge, think the development of a history which culminates and is fulfilled in the present of a science identical with consciousness, and reflect this result in a justified retrospection, to be able to conceive all economic (or any other) history as the development, in the Hegelian sense, of a simple, primitive, original form, e.g., value, immediately present in commodities, and to read *Capital* as a logico-historical deduction of all the economic categories from one original category, the category of value, or even the category of labour. Given this, the method of exposition in *Capital* would coincide with the speculative genesis of the concept. And this speculative genesis of the concept is identical with the genesis of the real concrete itself, i.e., with the process of empirical history. We should thus be dealing with an essentially Hegelian work. That is why the question of the starting-point becomes of such critical value, for everything may depend on an incorrect reading of the first chapter of Volume One. That is also

why any critical reading must, as the exposition above has shown, elucidate the status of the concepts and mode of analysis of the first chapter of Volume One, if it is not to fall into this misunderstanding.

This form of historicism may be regarded as a *limit-form*, in so far as it culminates and destroys itself in the negation of absolute knowledge. As such, it may be regarded as the common matrix of the other, less permanent and often less visible, though occasionally more 'radical', forms of historicism, because it provides us with a way to understand them.

As proof of this I shall take some contemporary forms of historicism, forms in which the work of certain interpreters of Marxism, particularly in Italy and France, is steeped, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. It is in the Italian Marxist tradition that the interpretation of Marxism as an 'absolute historicism' has the most pronounced features and the most rigorous forms: allow me to dwell on this for a few moments.

This tradition goes back to Gramsci, who inherited it largely from Labriola and Croce. I shall have to discuss Gramsci, therefore. I do not do so without profound misgivings, fearing not only that my necessarily schematic remarks may disfigure the spirit of this enormously delicate and subtle work of genius, but also that the reader may be drawn against my will to extend to Gramsci's fruitful discoveries in the field of *historical materialism*, the theoretical reservations I want to formulate with respect only to his interpretation of *dialectical materialism*. I ask therefore that this distinction be kept carefully in mind, for without it this attempt at a critical reflection will trespass beyond its limits.

First of all, I should like to draw attention to one elementary precaution: I shall refuse to take Gramsci immediately at his word on every occasion and on any pretext or text; I shall only consider his words when I have confirmed that they have the function of '*organic*' concepts, concepts which really belong to his most profound philosophical problematic, and not when they simply play the part of a language entrusted either with a polemical role or with a function of 'practical' designation (designation either of an *existing* problem or object, or of a *direction* to take, in order best to pose and solve a problem). For example, it would be completely unfair to Gramsci to dub him a 'humanist' and 'absolute' 'historicism' on a first reading of a polemical text such as this famous note on Bukharin (*Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*, Milan: Einaudi, 1948, p. 159):

There is no doubt that Hegelianism is (relatively speaking) the most important of the philosophical motivations of our author [Marx], also, and in particular, for the reason that it attempted to go beyond the traditional

conceptions of idealism and materialism in a new synthesis which undoubtedly had a quite exceptional importance and which represents a world-historical moment of philosophical enquiry. So when the *Manual* [of Bukharin] says that the term 'immanence' in the philosophy of praxis is used in a metaphorical sense, it is saying nothing. In reality the term immanence has here acquired a special meaning which is not that of the 'pantheists' nor any other metaphysical meaning, but one which is new and needs to be made precise. It has been forgotten that in the case of a certain very common expression [*historical materialism*] one should put the accent on the first term – 'historical' – and not on the second, which is of metaphysical origin. The philosophy of praxis is *absolute* 'historicism', the *absolute secularization and earthiness of thought, an absolute humanism of history*. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world.

It is only too clear that these 'absolute' 'humanist' and 'absolute' 'historicism' statements of Gramsci's are primarily critical and polemical in meaning: their functions are, first and foremost: (1) to reject any metaphysical interpretation of Marxist philosophy, and (2) to *indicate*, as 'practical' concepts,<sup>5</sup> the site on which the Marxist conception should be established and the direction it should take in order to break all ties with the previous metaphysics: the site of 'immanence', of the 'down-here' which Marx himself opposed as '*diesseits*' (down-here) to transcendence, the beyond (*jenseits*) of classical philosophies. This distinction is featured in so many words in one of the *Theses on Feuerbach* (the second). However, we can already draw one first conclusion from the 'indicative-practical' nature of these two concepts which Gramsci combines in one and the same function (humanism, historicism): a restricted conclusion, it is true, but a theoretically important one: if these concepts are polemical-indicative, they indicate the direction in which an investigation must be begun, the kind of domain in which the problem of the interpretation of Marxism must be posed, but they do not provide the *positive concept* of this interpretation. In order to be able to judge Gramsci's interpretation we must first of all bring to light the positive concepts in which it is expressed. What does Gramsci mean by 'absolute historicism'?

If we go beyond the purely critical aims of his formulations, we immediately find a first *positive sense*. By presenting Marxism as a historicism, Gramsci is stressing an essential determination of Marxist theory: its practical role in *real history*. One of Gramsci's constant concerns is the

5 In the sense defined in *For Marx*, pp. 242ff.

practico-historical role of what, adopting Croce's conception of religion, he calls the great 'conceptions of the world', or 'ideologies': theoretical formations which are capable of penetrating deep into men's practical lives, and hence of inspiring and animating a whole historical epoch, by providing not only the 'intellectuals' but also and above all 'ordinary' men, with both a general view of the course of events and *at the same time* rules of practical conduct.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, the historicism of Marxism is no more than the consciousness of a task and a necessity: Marxism cannot claim to be the theory of history unless, *even in its theory*, it can think the conditions of this penetration into history, into all strata of society, even into men's everyday lives. This perspective enables us to understand a number of Gramsci's expressions; where, for instance, he says that philosophy must be concrete, real must be history, that the real philosopher is simply the politician, that philosophy, politics and history are absolutely one and the same.<sup>7</sup> This perspective enables us to understand his theory of intellectuals and ideology, his distinction between individual intellectuals, who can produce more or less subjective and arbitrary ideologies,

6 Assuming Benedetto Croce's definition of religion as a conception of the world which has become a norm of life, since norm of life is not understood in a bookish sense but as a norm realized in practical life, the majority of men are philosophers in so far as they work practically; a conception of the world, a philosophy is implicit in their working practice' (Gramsci: *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*, Milan 1948, p. 21).

7 But at this point we reach the fundamental problem facing any conception of the world, any philosophy which has become a cultural movement, a "religion", a "faith", any that has produced a form of practical activity or will in which the philosophy is contained as an implicit theoretical "premise". One might say "ideology" here, but on condition that the word is used in its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life. This problem is that of preserving the ideological unity of the entire social bloc which that ideology serves to cement and unify' (*ibid.*, p. 7).

The reader will have noted that the conception of an ideology which is 'implicitly' manifest in art, law, economic activity and 'all the manifestations of individual and collective life' is very close to the Hegelian conception.

7 All men are philosophers' (*ibid.*, p. 3).

8 Since all action is *political*, can one not say that the real philosophy of each man is contained in its entirety in his political action? ... Hence the reason why philosophy cannot be divorced from politics. And one can show furthermore that the choice and the criticism of a conception of the world is also a political matter' (*ibid.*, p. 6).

9 If it is true that every philosophy is the *expression* of a society, it must react on that society and determine certain positive and negative effects; the precise extent to which it reacts is the measure of its historical scope, of the extent to which it is not an individual "elucidation" but a "historical fact" (*ibid.*, pp. 23-4).

10 The identity of history and philosophy is immanent in historical materialism ... The proposition that the German proletariat is the heir of classical German philosophy contains precisely the identity between history and philosophy ... (*ibid.*, p. 217). Cf. pp. 232-4.

and 'organic' intellectuals or the 'collective intellectual' (the Party), who ensure the 'hegemony' of a ruling class by carrying its 'conception of the world' (or organic ideology) into the everyday life of all men; and to understand his interpretation of Machiavelli's *Prince*, whose heritage has, in new conditions, fallen to the modern Communist Party, etc. In all these cases Gramsci is merely expressing a necessity which is inherent in Marxism, not only practically, but *consciously* and *theoretically*. Hence the historicism of Marxism is no more than one of the *aspects* and *effects* of its own theory, correctly conceived, no more than its own internally consistent theory. A theory of real history, too, must, as other 'conceptions of the world' have already done, pass into real history. What was true of the great religions must *a fortiori* be true of Marxism itself, not despite but because of the difference between it and those ideologies, because of what is philosophically new in it, since this *novelty* is that it includes in its theory itself the practical meaning of that theory.<sup>8</sup>

However, as the reader will have realized, this last sense of 'historicism', which refers us to a theme within Marxist theory, is still very largely a *critical indication*, designed to condemn all 'bookish' Marxists, all those who hope to reduce it to one of the 'individual philosophies', destined never to achieve any hold on history — and even all those ideologists who, like Croce, return to the unfortunate tradition of the intellectuals of the Renaissance, wishing to educate the human race 'from above', without engaging in political action and real history. The historicism Gramsci affirms means a vigorous protest against this aristocratism of theory and of its 'thinkers'.<sup>9</sup> The old protest against the bookish phariseism of the Second International ('The Revolution against *Capital*') is still echoing here; this is a direct appeal to 'practice', to political action, to 'changing the world', without which Marxism would be no more than the prey of bookworms and passive political functionaries.

Does this protest necessarily contain a new theoretical interpretation of Marxist theory? Not necessarily; it may simply develop one of the essential themes of Marx's theory in the practical form of an absolute reminder: the theme of the new relationship between 'theory' and 'practice' which Marx installed *within his theory itself*. We find this theme in Marx in *two places*: in historical materialism (in the theory of the role of ideologies and the role of scientific theory in the transformation of existing ideologies) on the one hand, and, on the other, in dialectical materialism with

8 What corresponds here to the concept of 'historicism', in this interpretation, has a precise name in Marxism: it is the problem of the union of theory and practice, more particularly the problem of the union of Marxist theory and the workers' movement.

9 Gramsci, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

respect to the Marxist theory of theory and practice and their relationship, in what is commonly called 'the materialist theory of knowledge'. In both these cases what Marx vigorously affirms and what is at stake in our problem is Marxist *materialism*. Hence the stress Gramsci lays on the 'historicism' of Marxism, in the very precise sense we have just defined, is *in reality* an allusion to the resolutely *materialist* character of Marx's conception (both in historical and dialectical materialism). But this *reality* leads on to a disconcerting comment which contains three aspects, each of which is as disturbing as the next. (1) Whereas it is precisely *materialism* which is at stake, Gramsci declares that in the expression 'historical materialism' one should put the accent on *the first term* — "historical" — and *not the second, which*, he says, 'is of *metaphysical origin*'. (2) Whereas the materialist stress involves not only historical materialism but also dialectical materialism, Gramsci hardly ever speaks of anything but historical materialism — indeed, he suggests that the term 'materialism' inevitably sounds 'metaphysical'; or perhaps more than sounds. (3) It is clear that Gramsci makes the expression 'historical materialism', which designates only the scientific theory of history, bear a double sense: it means *simultaneously* both historical materialism and Marxist philosophy: hence Gramsci tends to make the theory of history and dialectical materialism coincide within *historical materialism alone*, although they form two distinct disciplines. Obviously I am not basing these remarks or drawing this last conclusion on the authority of the single sentence I am analysing, but on that of very large number of Gramsci's other arguments,<sup>10</sup> which confirm it unambiguously and so give it a conceptual meaning. I believe that here we have a new sense of Gramsci's 'historicism', one that can no longer be reduced to the legitimate use of a polemical or critical indicative concept — but

10 Cf. e.g.: 'The philosophy of praxis derives certainly from the immanentist conception of reality, but it derives from it in so far as it is purified of any speculative aroma and reduced to pure history or historicity or to pure humanism ... Not only is the philosophy of praxis connected to immanentism. It is also connected to the subjective conception of reality, to the extent precisely that it turns it on its head, explaining it as a historical fact, as the "historical subjectivity of a social group [class]", as a real fact, which presents itself as a phenomenon of philosophical "speculation" and is simply a practical act, the form of a concrete social content and the means of leading the ensemble of society to shape for itself a moral unity' (*ibid.*, p. 191).

Or again: 'If it is necessary, in the perennial flux of events, to fix concepts without which reality cannot be understood, one must also, and it is indeed quite indispensable, fix and recall that reality in movement and concept of reality, though *logically* they may be distinct, *historically* must be conceived as an inseparable unity' (*ibid.*, p. 216).

Echoes of Bogdanov's empiricism are obvious in the first text; the second features the empiricist-speculative thesis of all historicism: the identity of the concept and the *real* (historical) object.

one which must be regarded as a *theoretical interpretation* affecting the very content of Marx's thought, and one to which our criticisms and reservations must therefore apply.

Finally, as well as his polemical and practical use of the concept, Gramsci also has a truly 'historicist' conception of Marx: a 'historicist' conception of the theory of the *relationship between Marx's theory and real history*. It is not completely accidental that Gramsci is constantly haunted by Croce's theory of religion; that he accepts its terms, and extends it from actual religions to the new 'conception of the world'; Marxism; that he ranges these religions and Marxism under the same concept as 'conceptions of the world' and 'ideologies'; that he so easily identifies religion, ideology, philosophy and Marxist theory, without calling attention to the fact that what distinguishes Marxism from these ideological 'conceptions of the world' is less the (important) formal difference that Marxism puts an end to any supra-terrestrial 'beyond', than the distinctive *form* of this absolute immanence (its 'earthliness'): *the form of scientificity*. This 'break' between the old religions or ideologies, even the 'organic' ones, and Marxism, *which is a science*, and which must become the 'organic' ideology of human history by producing a *new form of ideology* in the masses (an ideology which will depend on a science this time — *which has never been the case before*) — this break was not really reflected by Gramsci, and, absorbed as he was by the necessity and the practical conditions for the penetration of the 'philosophy of praxis' into real history, he neglected the theoretical significance of this break and its theoretical and practical consequences. Hence he often tends to *write under the same head* the scientific theory of history (historical materialism) and Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism), and to think this unity as a 'conception of the world' or as an 'ideology' basically comparable with the old religions. Similarly, he tends to think the relationship between Marxist *science* and real history according to the model of the relationship between an 'organic' (historically dominant and active) *ideology* and real history; and ultimately to think this relationship between Marxist scientific theory and real history according to the model of a relationship of *direct expression*, which does give a fair account of the relationship between an organic ideology and its age. It is here, it seems to me, that the disputable principles of Gramsci's historicism lie. It is here that he spontaneously rediscovers the language and theoretical problematic indispensable to every 'historicism'.

Starting from these premises it is possible to give a theoretically historicist sense to the formulae I referred to at the beginning — for, given the whole underlying context I have just indicated, they also take on this sense in Gramsci — and if I now go on and try to draw out their implications as



rigorously as I can in a short space, I do not do so as an attack on Gramsci (who had too fine a historical and theoretical sensitivity not to keep every distance when necessary) so much as to make *visible* a latent logic, knowledge of which can help us to understand certain of their theoretical effects, whose occurrence would otherwise remain a riddle, whether in Gramsci's own work, or in the works of certain of those inspired by him or comparable with him. So I shall be expounding a *limit-situation* here, too, just as I did with respect to the 'historical' reading of certain passages from *Capital*, and I shall be defining not so much any particular interpretation (Gramsci, Della Volpe, Colletti, Sartre) as the *field* of the theoretical problematic which haunts their reflections and which emerges from time to time in certain of their concepts, problems or solutions.

To this end, and with these reservations, which are not merely stylistic, I shall now take the statement that Marxism must be conceived as an '*absolute historicism*', as a symptomatic thesis which will enable us to bring a whole latent problematic to light. How are we to understand this statement in our present perspective? If Marxism is an absolute historicism, it is because it historicizes even what was peculiarly the theoretical and practical negation of history for Hegelian historicism: the end of history, the unsurpassable present of Absolute Knowledge. In absolute historicism there is no longer any Absolute Knowledge, and hence no end for history.

There is no longer any privileged present in which the totality becomes visible and legible in an 'essential section', in which consciousness and science coincide. The fact that there is no Absolute Knowledge — which is what makes the historicism *absolute* — means that Absolute Knowledge itself is historicized. If there is no longer any privileged present, all presents are privileged to the same degree. It follows that historical time possesses in each of its presents a structure which allows each present the 'essential section' of contemporaneity. Nevertheless, the Marxist does not have the same structure as the Hegelian totality, and in particular it contains different levels or instances which do not directly express one another. Therefore in order to make it susceptible to the 'essential section' these levels must be linked together in such a way that the present of each of them coincides with the presents of all the others: i.e., they must all be 'contemporaneous'. Thus reorganized, their relationship will exclude the effects of distortion and dislocation, which, in the authentic Marxist conception, contradict this ideological reading of a contemporaneity. Hence the project of thinking Marxism as an (absolute) historicism automatically unleashes a logically necessary chain reaction which tends to reduce and flatten out the Marxist totality into a variation of the Hegelian totality, and which, even allowing for more or less rhetorical distinctions,

ultimately tones down, reduces, or omits the real differences separating levels.

The symptomatic point at which this reduction of levels shows its face — i.e., hides behind the cover provided by an 'obviousness' which betrays it (in both senses of the word) — can be defined precisely: in the status of scientific and philosophical *knowledge*. We have seen that Gramsci was so insistent on the practical unity of the conception of the world and history that he neglected to retain what distinguishes Marxist theory from every previous organic ideology: its character as *scientific* knowledge. Marxist philosophy, which he does not clearly distinguish from the theory of history, suffers the same fate: Gramsci relates it to present history as its direct expression; philosophy is then, as Hegel intended (in a conception readopted by Croce) 'the history of philosophy', and, in short, *history*. As all science and all philosophy are at bottom real history, real history itself can be called philosophy and science.

But how can one think this double radical affirmation in Marxist theory and create the theoretical conditions which will permit its formulation? By a whole series of conceptual slides (*glissements*), whose effect is precisely to *reduce* the distance between the levels which Marx had distinguished. Each of these slides is all the less perceptible because attention has not been paid to the theoretical distinctions registered in the precision of Marx's concepts.

In this way, Gramsci constantly declares that a scientific theory, or such and such a category of a science, is a 'superstructure'<sup>11</sup> or a 'historical category', which he assimilates to a 'human relation'.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this is to attribute to the concept 'superstructure' a breadth Marx never allowed, for he only ranged within it: (1) the politico-legal superstructure, and (2) the ideological superstructure (the corresponding 'forms of social consciousness'); except in his Early Works (especially the 1844 *Manuscripts*), Marx *never included scientific knowledge in it*. Science can no more be ranged within the category 'superstructure' than can language, which as Stalin showed escapes it. To make science a superstructure is to think of it as one of those 'organic' ideologies which form such a close 'block' with the structure that they have the same 'history' as it does! But even in Marxist theory we read that ideologies may survive the structure that gave them birth (this is true for the majority of them: e.g., religion, ethics, or ideological philosophy), as may certain elements of the politico-legal superstructure in the same way (Roman law!). As for science, it may well

11 Cf. Gramsci's astonishing pages on science in *Il materialismo storico*, pp. 54–7.

<sup>12</sup> But in reality science, too, is a superstructure, an ideology (p. 56).

12 Ibid., p. 160.

arise from an ideology, detach itself from its field in order to constitute itself as a science, but precisely this detachment, this 'break', inaugurates a new form of historical existence and temporality which together save science (at least in certain historical conditions that ensure the real continuity of its own history — conditions that have not always existed) from the common fate of a single history: that of the 'historical bloc' unifying structure and superstructure. Idealism is an ideological reflection of the temporality peculiar to science, the rhythm of its development, the kind of continuity and punctuation which seem to save it from the vicissitudes of political and economic history in the form of a historicity and atemporality: in this way it hypostasizes a real phenomenon which needs quite different categories if it is to be thought, but which *must be thought* by distinguishing between the relatively autonomous and peculiar history of scientific knowledge and the other modalities of historical existence (those of the ideological and politico-legal superstructures, and that of the economic structure).

The *reduction* and *identification* of the peculiar history of science to the history of organic ideology and politico-economic history ultimately reduces science to history as its 'essence'. The collapse of science into history here is no more than the index of a theoretical collapse: a collapse that precipitates the theory of history into *real* history; reduces the (theoretical) object of the science of history to real history; and therefore confuses the object of knowledge with the real object. This collapse is nothing but a collapse into empiricist ideology, with the roles in this presentation played by philosophy and real history. Despite his enormous historical and political genius, Gramsci did not avoid this empiricist temptation in his attempt to think the status of science and above all that of philosophy (for he is little concerned with science). He is constantly tempted to think the relation between real history and philosophy as a relation of expressive unity, whatever mediations may be responsible for the maintenance of this relation.<sup>13</sup> As we have seen, for him, a philosopher is, in the last instance, a 'politician'; for him, philosophy is the direct product (assuming all the 'necessary mediations') of the activity and experience of the masses, of politico-economic praxis: professional philosophers merely lend their voices and the forms of their discourse to this philosophy of 'good sense', which is already complete without them and speaks in historical praxis — they cannot change it substantially. Gramsci spontaneously rediscovers, as an opposition indispensable to the expression of his thought, the very formulations which Feuerbach used

in a famous text of 1839 which opposed the philosophy produced by real history to the philosophy produced by philosophers — the formulations opposing praxis to speculation. And Gramsci's intention to retain what was valuable in Croce's historicism is expressed in the very terms of Feuerbach's 'inversion' of speculation into 'concrete' philosophy: he proposes to 'invert' Croce's speculative historicism, to set it back on to its feet, in order to make it into Marx's historicism — in order to rediscover real history and 'concrete' philosophy. If it is true that the 'inversion' of a problematic retains the same structure as that problematic, it is not surprising that the relationship of direct expression (given all the necessary 'mediations') between real history and philosophy conceived by Hegel and Croce recurs in the inverted theory: precisely the relationship of direct expression Gramsci is tempted to set up between politics (real history) and philosophy.

But it is not enough to reduce to a minimum the distance within the social structure between the specific site of theoretical, philosophical and scientific formations on the one hand and political practice on the other; that is, the site of theoretical practice and the site of political practice — it is also essential to provide a conception of *theoretical practice* which illustrates and consecrates the proclaimed identity of philosophy and politics. This latent requirement explains some new conceptual slides, whose effect is once again to *reduce* the distinction between the levels.

In this interpretation, theoretical practice tends to lose all specificity and to be reduced to *historical practice* in general, a category which is made to include forms of production as different as economic practice, political practice, ideological practice and scientific practice. Nevertheless, this assimilation poses critical problems: Gramsci himself recognized that absolute historicism threatens to run aground on the rock of the theory of ideologies. But he himself provided the arguments for a solution when he compared the *Theses on Feuerbach* with a phrase of Engels's (history as '*industry and experiment*'), by proposing as his model a practice which is capable of uniting all these different practices within its concept. The problematic of absolute historicism *required* that this problem be solved: it is no accident that it has usually given this empiricist problem a solution which is empiricist in spirit. The model may, for example, be that of *experimental practice*, borrowed not so much from the reality of modern science as from a certain ideology of modern science. Colletti has taken up this hint of Gramsci's and maintains that history, and even reality itself, have an '*experimental structure*', and therefore that in essence they are structured like an experiment. If real history on the one hand is declared to be '*industry and experiment*' in this way — and if all scientific practice on the other

13 On the concept of 'mediation' see Part One, section 18.

is defined as experimental practice, it follows that historical practice and theoretical practice have one and the same structure. Colletti pushes this comparison to its extremes, and suggests that history includes in its being, just like science, the moment of *hypothesis* which is indispensable to a presentation of the experimental structure, in Claude Bernard's schemata. As history is constantly anticipating itself in living political action (in the predictions of the future indispensable to any action) it is thus hypothesis and verification in action, just like the practice of experimental science. This identity of essential structures makes it possible to assimilate theoretical practice *directly, immediately* and adequately to historical practice — and the reduction of the site of theoretical practice to that of political or social practice can then be based on the reduction of these practices to a single structure.

I have taken Gramsci and Colletti as my examples: This is not because they are the only possible examples of theoretical *variations* on a single theoretical invariant: the problematic of historicism. In no sense does a problematic impose absolutely identical variations on the thoughts that cross its field; a field can be crossed by quite different paths, since it can be approached from many different directions. But to come upon it means to submit to its law, which produces as many different effects as there are different thoughts which come upon it: however, all these effects have certain identical features in common: the features of the problematic they have come upon. To give a paradoxical example, we all know that Sartre's thought in no sense derives from Gramsci's interpretation of Marxism: it has quite different origins. However, when he came upon Marxism, for his own peculiar reasons Sartre immediately gave a historicist interpretation of it (although he would undoubtedly refuse to call it that), declaring that the great philosophies (he cites Marx's philosophy after those of Locke and Kant-Hegel) are '*unsurpassable until the historical moment whose expression they are has been surpassed*' (*The Problem of Method*, London 1965, p. 7). Here once again we find, in a form peculiar to Sartre, the structures of contemporaneity, expression and the unsurpassable (Hegel's 'no one can run ahead of his time'), which *for him* represent specifications of his major concept: *totalization* — but which nevertheless realize the necessary conceptual effects of his encounter with the structure of the historicist problematic, in the form of specifications of this concept which is peculiar to him. These are not the only effects: we are not surprised to see Sartre using his own means to rediscover a theory of 'ideologists' (*ibid.*, pp. 7–8) (who give a great philosophy common currency by their commentaries, transferring it into men's practical lives) in many respects very close to Gramsci's theory of organic

intellectuals;<sup>14</sup> nor are we surprised to see Sartre make the same *necessary reduction* of the different practices (the different levels distinguished by Marx) to a single practice: for him, for reasons related precisely to his peculiar philosophical origins, it is not the concept of experimental practice, but the concept of 'praxis' as such, which is responsible for the unity of practices as different as scientific practice and economic or political practice, at the price of innumerable mediations (Sartre is the philosopher of mediations *par excellence*: their function is precisely to ensure unity in the negation of differences).

I cannot develop these very schematic comments. But they will serve to give some idea of the implications necessarily contained in any historicist interpretation of Marxism, and of the particular concepts this interpretation *has* to produce in order to solve the problems it poses for itself — at least when it aims, as is the case with Gramsci, Colletti or Sartre, to be theoretically demanding and rigorous. This interpretation can itself only be thought on condition of a whole series of reductions which are the effect of the empiricist character of its project on the order of the production of concepts. For example, only on condition that it reduces all practice to experimental practice, or to 'praxis' in general, and then assimilates this mother-practice to political practice, can all practices be thought as arising from 'real' historical practice; can philosophy, even science, and hence Marxism, too, be thought as the 'expression' of real history. The result is to flatten even scientific knowledge or philosophy, and at any rate Marxist theory, down to the unity of politico-economic practice, to the heart of 'historical' practice, to '*real*' history. In this way one reaches the result required by all historicist interpretations of Marxism as their theoretical precondition: the transformation of the Marxist totality into a variant of the Hegelian totality.

The historicist interpretation of Marxism may lead to one last effect: the practical negation of the distinction between the science of history (historical materialism) and Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism). In this final reduction, Marxist philosophy loses in practice its *raison d'être*, to the advantage of the theory of history: dialectical materialism disappears into historical materialism.<sup>15</sup> This is clearly visible in Gramsci, and in most of his followers: not only do they have serious reservations about the *word* dialectical materialism, but also about the *concept* of a Marxist philosophy defined by a peculiar object. They think that the mere idea of

14 Gramsci even gives Sartre's distinction between philosophy and history in so many words (*Il materialismo storico*, op. cit., p. 197).

15 The same structural causes can give rise to the opposite effect: with Sartre, we can say just as easily that the Marxist science of history *becomes* philosophy.

a theoretically autonomous philosophy (autonomous in its object, theory and method), i.e., one which is distinct from the science of history, tips Marxism back into metaphysics, into the restoration of the Philosophy of Nature, for which Engels was supposedly responsible.<sup>16</sup> Since all philosophy is history, the 'philosophy of praxis' can, as a philosophy, only be the philosophy of the philosophy—history identity, or of the science—history identity. Deprived of any object of its own, Marxist philosophy loses the status of an autonomous discipline and is reduced, according to Gramsci, quoting Croce, to a mere 'historical methodology', i.e., to the mere self-consciousness of the historicity of history, to a reflection on the presence of real history in all its manifestations:

Separated from the theory of history and politics, philosophy cannot be other than metaphysics, whereas the great conquest in the history of modern thought, represented by the philosophy of praxis, is precisely the *concrete historicization* of philosophy and its identification with history (Gramsci: *Il materialismo storico*, p. 133).

This historicization of philosophy reduces it then to the status of a historical methodology:

To think of a philosophical affirmation as true in a particular historical period (that is, as the necessary and inseparable expression of a particular historical action, of a particular praxis) but as superseded and rendered 'vain' in a succeeding period, without however falling into scepticism and moral and ideological relativism, in other words to see *philosophy as history*, is quite an arduous and difficult mental operation ... [Bukharin] does not succeed in elaborating the concept of the philosophy of praxis as '*historical methodology*' and of that in turn as 'philosophy', as the only *concrete philosophy*. That is to say he does not succeed in posing and resolving, from the point of view of the *real dialectic*, the problem which Croce has posed and has attempted to resolve from the *speculative point of view*.

These last words bring us full circle: we have returned to Hegelian historicism 'radicalized' by Croce, which only needs to be 'inverted' to change from speculative philosophy into 'concrete' philosophy, from the speculative dialectic into the real dialectic, etc. The theoretical undertaking which interprets Marxism as a historicism does not escape the *absolute limits*

within which this 'inversion' of speculation into praxis and of abstraction into the concrete has been performed since Feuerbach: these limits are defined by the empiricist problematic, sublimated in Hegelian speculation, and no 'inversion' can deliver us from them.<sup>17</sup>

In the different theoretical reductions indispensable to the historicist interpretation, and in their effects, we can therefore clearly see the basic structure of all historicism: the contemporaneity which makes possible a reading in essential section. And of theoretical necessity we can also see this structure imposed willy-nilly on the structure of the Marxist totality, transforming it and reducing the real distance between its different levels. Marxist history 'relapses' into the ideological concept of history, the category of temporal presence and continuity; into the politico-economic practice of real history, by flattening the sciences, philosophy and ideologies into the unity of the relations and forces of production, i.e., in fact, into the *infrastructure*. Paradoxical as this conclusion may seem — and I shall doubtless be attacked for expressing it — it must be drawn: from the standpoint of its *theoretical problematic*, and not of its political style and aims, this humanist and historicist materialism has rediscovered the basic theoretical principles of the Second International's economic and mechanistic interpretation. If this single theoretical problematic can underlie policies of different inspiration, one fatalist, the other voluntarist, one passive, the other conscious and active — it is because of the scope for theoretical 'play' contained in this ideological theoretical problematic as in every ideology. In this case, this kind of historicism can be opposed politically to the theses of the Second International by conferring on the infrastructure the most active qualities of the political and ideological superstructure, in a compensating crossed connection. This transfer of qualities can be conceived in different ways: e.g., by endowing political practice with the qualities of philosophy and theory (spontaneism); by attributing to economic practice all the active and even explosive virtues of politics (anarcho-syndicalism); or by entrusting to political consciousness and determination the determinism of the economic (voluntarism). In other words, if there really are

<sup>16</sup> These last words bring us full circle: we have returned to Hegelian historicism 'radicalized' by Croce, which only needs to be 'inverted' to change from speculative philosophy into 'concrete' philosophy, from the speculative dialectic into the real dialectic, etc. The theoretical undertaking which interprets Marxism as a historicism does not escape the *absolute limits*

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gramsci's critique of Bukharin, and Colletti's introduction to Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, now in *Marxism and Hegel*, London: Verso, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> A moment ago I spoke of the peculiar origins of Sartre's philosophy. Sartre thinks with Descartes, Kant, Husserl and Hegel, but his most profound thought undoubtedly comes from *Pollitzer* and (paradoxical as this juxtaposition might appear) secondarily from Bergson. But *Pollitzer* is the Feuerbach of our time: his *Critique des fondements de la psychologie* is a critique of *speculative psychology* in the name of a *concrete psychology*. Sartre may have treated *Pollitzer's* themes as 'philosophemes': he has not abandoned his inspiration; when Sartre's historicism inverts the 'totality', the *abstractions* of dogmatic Marxism, he is also 'repeating' in a different place and with respect to different objects an 'inversion' which, from Feuerbach to the Young Marx and *Pollitzer*, has merely *conserved* the same problematic behind an apparent critique.

two distinct ways of identifying the superstructure with the infrastructure, or consciousness with the economy – one which sees in consciousness and politics only the economy, while the other imbues the economy with politics and consciousness, there is never more than one *structure* of identification at work – the structure of the problematic which, by reducing one to the other, *theoretically* identifies the levels present. It is this common structure of the problematic which is made visible when, rather than analysing the theoretical or political *intentions* of mechanism–economism on the one hand and humanism–historicism on the other, we examine the internal logic of their conceptual mechanisms.

Allow me one more comment on the relation between humanism and historicism. It is only too clear that a non–historicist humanism is perfectly conceivable, as is a non–humanist historicism. Of course, here I always mean a *theoretical* humanism and historicism, considered in their function as *theoretical foundations* for Marxist science and philosophy. To live by ethics or religion, or by that politico–ethical ideology known as social–democracy, it is enough to erect a *humanist but non–historicist* interpretation of Marx: all that is required is to read Marx in the ‘light’ of a theory of ‘human nature’, be it religious, ethical or anthropological (cf. Fathers Calvez and Bigo, and Monsieur Rubel, as well as the social–democrats Landshut and Mayer, the first editors of Marx’s *Early Works*). It is child’s play to reduce *Capital* to an ethical inspiration, whether or no one relies on the radical anthropology of the 1844 *Manuscripts*. But, inversely, it is just as easy to imagine a *historicist but non–humanist* reading of Marx: if I understand him correctly, Colletti’s best efforts tend in this direction. To justify this historicist non–humanist reading of Marx it is necessary to refuse, as Colletti does, to reduce the Forces of Production/Relations of Production unity, which constitutes the essence of history, to the mere phenomenon of a human nature, even a historicized one. But let us leave these two possibilities at this point.

It must be said that the union of humanism and historicism represents the gravest temptation, for it procures the greatest theoretical advantages, at least in appearance. In the reduction of all knowledge to historical social relations a second underhand reduction can be introduced, by treating the *relations of production* as mere *human relations*.<sup>18</sup> This second reduction depends on something ‘obvious’: is not history a ‘human’ phenomenon through and through, and did not Marx, quoting Vico, declare that men can know it since they have ‘made’ all of it? But this ‘obviousness’

depends on a remarkable presupposition: that the ‘actors’ of history are the authors of its text, the subjects of its production. But this presupposition too has all the force of the ‘obvious’, since, as opposed to what the theatre suggests, concrete men are, in history, the actors of roles of which they are the authors, too. Once the stage–director has been spirited away, the actor–author becomes the twin–brother of Aristotle’s old dream: the doctor–who–cures–himself; and the *relations of production*, although they are the real stage–directors of history, are reduced to mere *human relations*. Is not *The German Ideology* stuffed with formulations about these ‘real men’, these ‘concrete individuals’, who, ‘with their feet firmly on the ground’, are the real subjects of history? Do not the *Theses on Feuerbach* declare that objectivity itself is the completely human result of the ‘practico–sensuous’ activity of these subjects? Once this human nature has been endowed with the qualities of ‘concrete’ historicity, it becomes possible to avoid the abstraction and fixity of theological or ethical anthropologies and to join Marx in the very heart of his hair: historical materialism. This human nature will therefore be conceived as something produced by history, and changing with it, while man changes, as even the Philosophers of the Enlightenment intended, with the revolutions of his own history, and is affected by the social products of his objective history even in his most intimate faculties (seeing, hearing, memory, reason, etc. Even Helvetius claimed this, and Rousseau too, in opposition to Diderot; Feuerbach made it one of the main articles of his philosophy – and in our own day, a horde of cultural anthropologists have adopted it). History then becomes the transformation of a human nature, which remains the real subject of the history which transforms it. As a result, history has been introduced into human nature, making men the contemporaries of the historical effects whose subjects they are, but – and this is absolutely decisive – the relations of production, political and ideological social relations, have been reduced to historicized ‘*human relations*’, i.e., to inter–human, inter–subjective relations. This is the favourite terrain of historicist humanism. And what is its great advantage? The fact that Marx is restored to the stream of an ideology much older than himself, an ideology born in the eighteenth century; credit for the originality of a revolutionary theoretical rupture is taken from him, he is often even made acceptable to modern forms of ‘cultural’ anthropology, and so on. Is there anyone today who does not invoke this historicist humanism, in the genuine belief that he is appealing to Marx, whereas such an ideology takes us away from Marx?

But this has not always been the case, at least not *politically speaking*. I have said why and how the historicist–humanist interpretation of Marxism came to birth in the portents and in the wake of the 1917 Revolution.

<sup>18</sup> This surreptitious practice is common to all the humanist interpretations of Marxism.

Its significance then was that of a violent protest against the mechanism and opportunism of the Second International. It appealed directly to the consciousness and will of *men* to reject the War, overthrow capitalism and make the revolution. It rejected absolutely anything, *even in theory*, which might defer or stifle this urgent appeal to the historical responsibility of the real men hurled into the revolution. In the same movement, it demanded the *theory of its will*. That is why it proclaimed a radical return to Hegel (the young Lukács and Korsch) and worked out a theory which put Marx's doctrine into a directly *expressive* relationship with the working class. From this period, too, dates the famous opposition between 'bourgeois science' and 'proletarian science', in which triumphed an idealist and voluntarist interpretation of Marxism as the exclusive product and expression of proletarian practice. This 'left-wing' humanism designated the proletariat as the site and missionary of the human essence. The historical role of freeing man from his 'alienation' was its destiny, through the negation of the human essence whose absolute victim it was. The alliance between the proletariat and philosophy announced in Marx's early texts was no longer seen as an alliance between two mutually exclusive components. The proletariat, the human essence in revolt against its radical negation, became the revolutionary affirmation of the human essence: the proletariat was thus *philosophy in deed* and its political practice philosophy itself. Marx's role was then reduced to having conferred on this philosophy which was acted and lived in its birthplace, the mere form of *self-consciousness*. That is why Marxism was proclaimed 'proletarian science' or 'philosophy', the direct expression, the direct production of the human essence by its sole historical author: the proletariat. Kautsky's and Lenin's thesis that Marxist theory is produced by a specific theoretical practice, *outside* the proletariat, and that Marxist theory must be '*imported*' into the proletariat, was absolutely rejected — and all the themes of spontaneism rushed into Marxism through this open breach: the humanist universalism of the proletariat. *Theoretically*, this revolutionary 'humanism' and 'historicism' together laid claim to Hegel and to those of Marx's early texts then available. As for its *political* effects, some of Rosa Luxemburg's theses on imperialism; the disappearance of the laws of 'political economy' in the socialist regime; the Proletkult; the conceptions of the 'Workers' Opposition', etc.; and in a general way the 'voluntarism' which deeply marked the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the USSR, even in the paradoxical forms of Stalinist dogmatism. Even today, this 'humanism' and 'historicism' find genuinely revolutionary echoes in the political struggles waged by the peoples of the Third World to conquer and defend their political independence and set out on the socialist road.

But these ideological and political advantages themselves, as Lenin admirably discerned, are offset by certain effects of the *logic* that they set in motion, which eventually and inevitably produce idealist and empiricist temptations in economic and political conceptions and practice — if they do not, given a favourable conjuncture, induce, by a paradoxical but still necessary inversion, conceptions which are tainted with reformism and opportunism, or quite simply revisionism.

Indeed, it is a peculiarity of every *ideological* conception, especially if it has conquered a scientific conception by diverting it from its true meaning, that it is governed by 'interests' beyond the necessity of knowledge alone. In this sense, i.e., on condition that it is given the object of which it speaks without knowing it, historicism is not without theoretical value, since it gives an adequate description of an essential aspect of all *ideology*, which takes its meaning from the *current* interests in whose service it is subjected. If the *ideology* does not express the total objective essence of its time (the essence of the historical present), it can at least express the current changes in the historical situation reasonably well by the effect of slight internal displacements of accent: unlike a science, an ideology is both theoretically closed and politically supple and adaptable. It bends to the interests of the times, but without any apparent movement, being content to *reflect* the historical changes which it is its mission to assimilate and master by some imperceptible modification of its peculiar internal relations. The ambiguous example of the Vatican II '*aggiornamento*' is a sufficiently striking proof: the effect and sign of an indisputable evolution, but at the same time a skilful adjustment to history, thanks to an intelligently handled conjuncture. Ideology changes therefore, but imperceptibly, conserving its ideological form; it moves, but with an immobile motion which maintains it *where it is*, in its place and its ideological role. It is the immobile motion which, as Hegel said of philosophy itself, reflects and expresses what happens in history without ever running ahead of its own time, since it is merely that time *caught* in the trap of a mirror reflection, precisely so that men will be *caught* in it too. That is the essential reason why the revolutionary humanism of the echoes of the 1917 Revolution can serve today as an ideological *reflection* for various political or theoretical preoccupations, some still related to this origin, others more or less foreign to it.

This historicist humanism may, for example, serve as a theoretical warning to intellectuals of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois origin, who ask themselves, sometimes in genuinely tragic terms, whether they really have a right to be members of a history which is made, as they know or fear, outside them. Perhaps this is Sartre's profoundest problem. It is fully

present in his double thesis that Marxism is the 'unsurpassable philosophy of our time', and yet that no literary or philosophical work is worth an hour's effort in comparison with the sufferings of a poor wretch reduced by imperialist exploitation to hunger and agony. Caught in this double declaration of faith, on the one hand in an idea of Marxism, on the other in the cause of all the exploited, Sartre reassures himself of the fact that he really does have a role to play, beyond the 'Words' he produces and regards with derision, in the inhuman history of our times, with a theory of 'dialectical reason' which assigns to all (theoretical) rationality, and to every (revolutionary) dialectic, the unique transcendental origin of the human 'project'. Thus in Sartre historicist humanism takes the form of an exaltation of human freedom, in which by freely committing himself to their fight, he can commune with the freedom of all the oppressed, who have always been struggling for a little human light since the long and forgotten night of the slave revolts.

The same humanism, with some shift in accent, can serve other causes, according to conjuncture and needs: e.g., the protest against the errors and crimes of the period of the 'cult of personality', the impatience to see them dealt with, the hope for a real socialist democracy, etc. When these political sentiments want a theoretical basis, they always look for it in the same texts and concepts: in one of the theoreticians who emerged in the great post-1917 period (that is the reason for all these editions of the young Lukács and Korsch, and the passion for certain ambiguous formulations of Gramsci), or in Marx's humanist texts: his *Early Works*; in 'real humanism', in 'alienation', in the 'concrete', in 'concrete' history, philosophy and psychology.<sup>19</sup>

Only a critical reading of Marx's *Early Works* and a thorough study of *Capital* can enlighten us as to the significance and risks involved in a *theoretical* humanism and historicism, for they are foreign to Marx's problematic.

The reader will probably remember the point from which we set out on this analysis of a misunderstanding of history. I pointed out that the way Marx thought of himself might emerge from the judgements in which he weighs the merits and faults of his predecessors. At the same time, I suggested that we had to submit Marx's text not to an immediate reading, but to a '*symptomatic*' reading, in order to discern in the apparent continuity of the discourse the lacunae, blanks and failures of rigour, the places where Marx's discourse is merely the unsaid of his silence, arising in his

19 Cf. *La Nouvelle Critique*, nos. 164, 165, etc.

discourse itself. I uncovered one of these theoretical symptoms in the judgement Marx himself gave of the absence of a concept in his predecessors, the absence of the *concept* of surplus-value, which (as Engels puts it) Marx 'generously' treated as no more than a matter of the absence of a word. We have just seen what happens when another *word*, the word 'history', arises in the critical discourse Marx addressed to his predecessors. This apparently full word is in fact theoretically an empty word, in the immediacy of its obviousness – or rather, it is the ideology-fulfilment (*plein-de-l'idéologie*)<sup>20</sup> which surfaces in this lapse of rigour. Anyone who reads *Capital* without posing the critical question of its object sees no malice in this word that 'speaks' to him: he happily continues the discourse whose first word this word may be, the ideological discourse of history, and then the historicist discourse. As we have seen and as we understand, the theoretical and practical consequences are not so innocent. In an epistemological and critical reading, on the contrary, we cannot but hear behind the proffered word the silence it conceals, see the blank of suspended rigour, scarcely the time of a lightning-flash in the darkness of the text: correctively, we cannot but hear behind this discourse which seems continuous but is really interrupted and governed by the threatened interruption of a repressive discourse, the silent voice of the real discourse, we cannot but restore its text, in order to re-establish its profound continuity. It is here that the identification of the precise points of weakness in Marx's rigour is the same thing as the recognition of that rigour: it is his rigour that shows us its weaknesses; and in the brief moment of his temporary silence we are simply returning to him the speech that is his own.

20 This example can, by analogy, be compared with that of the symptom, the slip of the tongue and the dream – which is, for Freud, a 'wish-fulfilment' (*plein de désir*). [Cf. Louis Althusser: 'Freud and Lacan', *New Left Review* 1/55, May-June 1969, p. 61, n.6.]